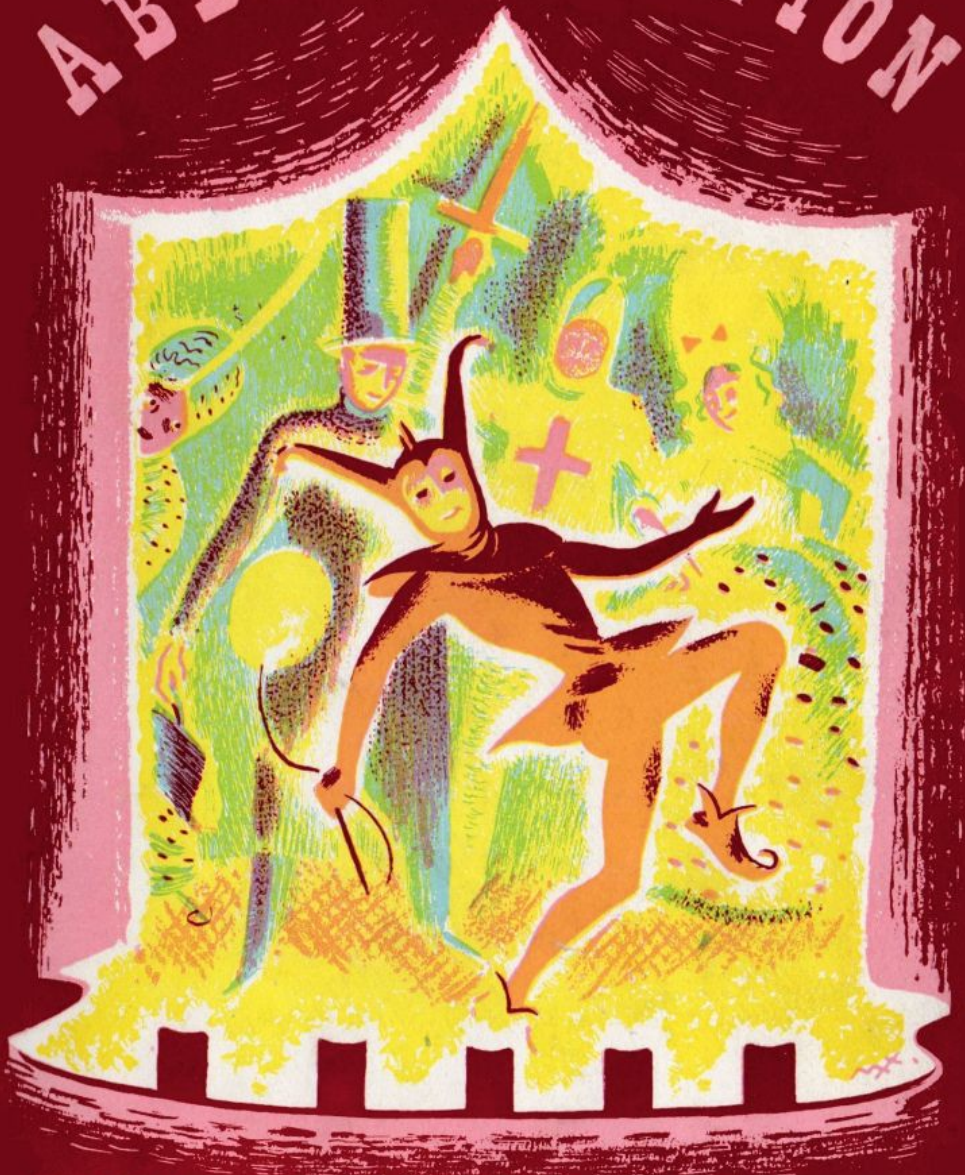


AN ABBEY CHAMPION



ELSIE JEANETTE OXENHAM

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AN ABBEY CHAMPION

BY
ELSIE JEANETTE OXENHAM

ILLUSTRATED BY Margaret Horder

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TO
ALL WHO HAVE TOLD ME THEY HAVE
FOUND FRIENDS IN THE ABBEY GIRLS

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CHAPTER ONE

NEWS FOR JOAN AND JANICE

“Oh, Joan! Oh, I am so sorry!” Janice looked up from a letter.

“What’s the matter, Jandy Mac? Don’t say it’s bad news! Something always happens to take you away when you come to stay with me,” Joan exclaimed.

“It’s good news, but the result’s the same,” Jandy said ruefully. “I shall have to go home. Poor Littlejan! She was counting on telling me about school; and I did want to be here for Maidlin’s wedding!”

“But those will both happen in a fortnight! You can’t go as soon as that!”

“I’m afraid I must, if I can get a berth. This letter’s from my husband; he’s been given an appointment which we’ve been hoping for. He’ll be working between Ceylon and Australia; not among the Islands any more. We’ll need to live in Ceylon; and the appointment takes effect at once. Alec can’t possibly move house and two small boys without my help!”

“Oh, Jandy, I am sorry! I don’t want to lose you. And you’ll have to give up your Island home,” Joan added.

“I’ve lived in Samoa for fifteen years. Ceylon is lovely, and it’s halfway to England. I’ll be able to come and see you all much more easily.”

Joan’s face lit up. “You must come back often and have a look at Littlejan. You’ll be able to watch her growing up.”

“I don’t see why not. Ceylon is a very different story from Samoa.”

“You must time your next visit so that you’ll meet Joy.”

“I hate to go without seeing her, after living in her house like this,” Janice said.

“It is hard to have to go, when Joy will be home in a week! Perhaps you won’t be able to get a berth, and then you’ll stay to meet her, and to hear about Littlejan at school, and to see Maid married!”

“I’ll ring up the shipping company. Then we’ll know.” Janice went to the door which led to the house.

The ’phone rang, and she turned to Joan. “Shall I answer and bring you the message?”

“No, I’ll come. Keep an eye on baby for me.” Joan went to the telephone.

Janice returned to her chair, glancing at fair-haired Jimmy as she went. He was only three months old, and he still slept for many hours each day.

She sat gazing over the lawn. If she went at once and had a quick run to Sydney, she might join a ship for the Islands without a long delay. The move to Ceylon and the new life attracted her greatly; and she would be halfway to England. Surely it would be possible to come to see her girl during her four years at school! Littlejan—who was called after Joan Raymond but had had to accept her baby nickname because of the confusion inevitable with two Joans under one roof—was thirteen and a half, and was to be left in Joan’s care when her mother had to go away.

Joan, tall and brown-eyed and with dark red hair in thick plaits wound round her head, had left her house in the hands of builders and was taking charge at the Hall, the beautiful home of her cousin, Joy, while Joy was in New York, where her husband, Sir Ivor Quellyn, was directing a famous orchestra. Joy had taken her baby son with her; but her twin daughters, Elizabeth and Margaret, had remained at the Hall, with Joy’s secretary and friend, Mary

Devine, and her ward, Maidlin. They were nine years old and it was a whole-time job to cope with them. Joan's return to her old home had been most helpful, especially to Maidlin, whose recent engagement was taking much of her time.

"I suppose Joy is starting about now," Janice thought, as she gazed at the delphiniums below the terrace. "Joan says she'll arrive just in time. I hope she doesn't run it too close! Maidlin would be terribly upset if Joy missed her wedding."

"Jan!" It was Joan's voice in the doorway.

Janice ran to her. "Oh, Joan dear, what's the matter?"

Joan sank into a chair. "I'm sorry. I'll be all right. It's Joy. She's ill—she can't come home. Ivor doesn't know if—if she'll get over it——"

"Joan!" Janice whispered. "As bad as that? Oh, poor Maidlin! She'll want to put off the wedding!"

"It will break her heart. They were to start to-day, but Joy had an attack of pain, and, fearing it might trouble her on the journey, she sent for the doctor. He sent her to a specialist, who insisted on an immediate operation. It was done yesterday; Joy lived through it, but she's terribly ill. Ivor still doesn't know how things will go. And—oh, Jandy! There's a tiny baby—another boy!"

"Oh, poor Joy!" Janice exclaimed. "But the baby is alive, Joan?"

"Like Joy—only just. Ivor doesn't think they'll save him." Joan paused, exhausted and almost breaking down.

"A second boy? If they live, how proud Joy will be!"

"She said to me that as she hadn't managed to have twin boys, to match the girls, the next best thing would be to have them as near in age as possible, only a year between them," Joan said, her voice breaking. Then she sat up. "This is silly! But it was a shock. Jan, if Joy lives, she'll be an invalid for months, though she'll be strong again in time. She'll want the twins; they must go to her as soon as Ivor knows for certain that she's going to live."

"Oh!" Janice said slowly. "Yes, of course, she will want them. She can't come to see them now."

"We won't tell them, until we know about Joy, but we must see that their things are ready to be packed quickly. How we shall tell them, if we lose Joy, I can't imagine." Joan's face set in anxious lines. "I couldn't do it, Jan!"

"We may not need to tell them," Janice said quickly. "They may only need to know that she has been ill and wants to see them. Stick to that, Joan."

"Yes! We'll say nothing, until we know. I think we won't tell them about the baby. If he doesn't live, they needn't hear anything about him for years. If he's all right, he'll be a lovely surprise when they reach Joy."

"I'm sure that's wise. But how are they to go? Has Sir Ivor any plan?"

"He's trying to find friends, who could take the children. He wasn't coming with Joy; there's a Festival of Music and he had to stay. He hopes to find someone going from London for the Festival."

"I see. But would anybody who didn't know the twins be willing to take on the job? I wouldn't like it myself."

"It would be terribly hard for them to be sent away with strangers. Ivor wants Lindy to go, to look after them."

"Oh, that's a good idea! The nursery governess; she manages them so well. But she's only seventeen, Joan."

“She can only do it, if they’re in charge of grown-up friends. But if Ivor can find the right people, Lindy will be the greatest possible help. We must tell her; she won’t say too much to the children.”

“I know what I’d do, if I were Maidlin,” Janice remarked.

Joan glanced at her. “I should do the same. But we can’t suggest it to her.”

“Will Dr. Robertson bring her back from town? They’re buying furniture for the bungalow, aren’t they?”

“Yes. And they had to see Maidlin’s lawyers. As she has had no father since she was fourteen, they have been her trustees and—with Joy—her guardians. They’re very fatherly and she never minds going to see them. Jock will bring her home. Oh, Jan, I’m glad you’re here! But—I’d forgotten; what about your plans?”

“Ought I to leave you in all this trouble?”

“My dear, you mustn’t lose the chance of a berth! I shall feel better when I’ve talked things over with Jack. He’s very comforting! And Jen will be home in a few days.”

Janice nodded. Joan’s husband, Jack Raymond, spent much time watching the progress of the alterations, but he would not leave Joan alone once he knew about the trouble. He was quiet and shy, but absolutely dependable, and Joan relied on him and rested in his steady strength. And Jen, the friend of her schooldays, lived next door and would be home from Yorkshire very soon. Joan would have plenty of friends to stand by her.

“You’ll be all right, but I wish I didn’t need to go,” she said. “I’ll see what can be done about a berth.”

She went indoors, and Joan sat staring down at her sleeping baby and thinking of Joy and her new tiny son.

CHAPTER TWO

NEWS FOR LITTLEJAN

Janice came gravely from the telephone. "They've a berth on Friday night. I said I'd ring again when I'd thought it over. They can't promise another chance for a fortnight."

Joan looked startled. "The day after to-morrow? Could you be ready?"

Janice was an experienced traveller. "I could be ready, and it's better to get a parting over quickly. It will haunt Littlejan till I've gone. But this trouble makes me hesitate. I want the latest news of Joy."

"We'll wire you at each port," Joan promised. "And we may know more by Friday. I think you should go, Jan."

"I'd have liked to help you. There's so much to do; Lindy to prepare, as well as the twins. I shall have to give every minute to my packing."

"You must, of course. I shall have heaps of helpers. Go and make sure of that berth, Jandy Mac!"

Reluctantly Janice returned to the telephone. "If only it hadn't happened just at this moment!" she said to herself. "Everything we want—Alec and I—but at the wrong time. The next thing is to break the news to Littlejan."

She went back to Joan, who greeted her with a shadowy smile. "Go and pack, Jandy Mac! I'll tell Littlejan what you're doing, and she'll come flying to you to ask what I mean."

Janice was getting to work when the sound of voices on the lawn took her to the window. Joy's nine-year-old twins, Elizabeth and Margaret, came first, with Joan's daughter Jansy—called Janice, after Janice herself. All three were so much alike that they might have been sisters, with dark red hair; bobbed in the case of the twins, but reaching in curls to the shoulders of ten-year-old Jansy, who wore a blue school tunic, while the twins were in smocks of their mother's favourite green. Following them were Jandy's daughter Joan,—or Littlejan, as her father called her—and Lindy Bellanne, known as Miss Belinda when she was playing nursery governess to the twins. Lindy was seventeen, with yellow curls hanging round her face; Littlejan had dark brown hair like her mother's and wore it short and wavy, as did Janice herself; they were much alike, and Littlejan had been born before Janice was twenty, so already, at thirteen and a half, she was a very good companion for her youthful mother.

Janice sighed. "Poor Littlejan! But she'll be happy at school, and she's very fond of Joan. I'm sorry Lindy's going away; she's been a real pal for Littlejan. Poor Joy! She's having a stormy passage through life. Joan's has been so smooth and placid."

And, thinking of the cousins who were so much alike in appearance and so very different in temperament, she went back to her suit-cases and trunks.

"Mother!" The door was flung open. "Auntie Joan says—oh, you *are* packing! Are you going back to Scotland? Can I go too? But what about school? And the wedding? You can't go away *now*!"

"Not Scotland, Littlejan. Home, to Father and the boys, on Friday night." Janice closed the door.

"Home? The day after to-morrow? And I won't see you again till I'm grown up?" Joan faltered, turning white. Then, with a gallant effort to be brave, she straightened and stiffened

and tried to speak steadily. "What has happened, Mother? It must be something big, to make you go in such a hurry. Father isn't ill, is he? Or the boys?"

"No, no, dear,—nothing like that," Janice said hastily. "I'll tell you about it and you shall read Father's letter."

She sat on the window-seat, and Joan crept to her, making no more protest or outcry. She was trembling, and Janice put her arm round her, while she told of the new post, which meant promotion, and the new home in Ceylon, which would make visits to England so much easier.

Joan quivered. "I see," she agreed unsteadily. "It's better, for everybody. But I did want to tell you about school, and the Hamlet Club!"

"You'll write me lovely letters, and I'll come back and watch you dancing with the Club," Janice promised. "That's a good girl, Littlejan. I know you'll be brave and not make it more difficult for me. Dear, I just hate leaving you, even though everybody here is so kind!"

Joan shot a quick glance up at her, and then hid her face on her mother's shoulder. "Oh, Mother! But Father must need you frightfully badly. We mustn't think about us—you and me. Aren't you sorry to miss the wedding? Maidlin's such a dear!"

Janice looked grave. "I'm afraid poor Maidlin will have a sad wedding. Littlejan, Aunt Joan has just heard; the twins' mother is very ill, perhaps dying; she can't possibly come home for months. The twins and Lindy are to go to her at once."

Joan stared at her. "To New York? Then I shan't have even Lindy. Say it again, Mother! I don't believe it yet."

"I don't think any of us can quite believe it," Janice said sadly, and she told the story.

"How simply ghastly for everybody!" Joan whispered. "They all love Lady Joy so much! Oh, Mother, we don't matter, when such an awful thing may be going to happen!"

"That's how I feel," Janice assented. "And since I have to go, it seems better to go quickly. No one will think of anything but Joy for the next few days."

"Aunty Joan will." Joan's instant response showed how completely she had come to understand and trust Joan Raymond, who would be her guardian when her mother had gone. "She won't forget about us, and she'll know how we feel."

"I'm sure that's true. Now, Littlejan, here's something for you to think about. You remember Captain Raymond's promise——"

"Mother! Uncle Jack!" Joan protested, in shocked reproof.

"Yes, Uncle Jack; I'm sorry. He hasn't finished my pictures of you."

"The Book of Littlejan," Joan said proudly. "He's going to do one very big one. He'll need to send it after you."

"To Ceylon; and I'll send you pictures of our house and the boys. He and you must choose the subjects for the last four pictures. But I'd like *you* to choose which one shall be the enlargement; choose a nice one, for I want it framed to hang on the wall."

"It should be one of me alone," Joan said thoughtfully, as she worked under her mother's orders. "Or would you rather have me and the twins—or me with Lindy—or with Jansy?"

"No, you alone, I think. Shall it be you in the green dance-frock? Or on Chestnut in your breeches?"

"It's hard to choose! But I sort of feel I shall say me in the Hamlet Club frock, Mother. I'm looking forward so much to joining the Club. Oh, I did want to tell you about it!"

"I know, Littlejan. But think of the long letters you'll write!"

"Letters aren't the same," Joan groaned. "Oh, all right, Mother darling! I'll think about you and Father and the boys, all together again; but it's rotten for me!"

“There are worse things than our troubles,” Janice reminded her.

CHAPTER THREE

MAIDLIN'S INHERITANCE

Janice and Littlejan, coming down to tea, found Jack Raymond just arrived from his daily inspection of the new building.

Joan's face lit up in relief, and she drew him into the library, throwing a word to Janice as she went:

"Carry on with tea, please, Jandy Mac. We won't be long."

"Now Joan will feel better," Janice remarked, and she went to the round table and began to pour milk into cups.

Lindy Bellanne came to help. "Shall I carry cups? Oh, but nobody's ready for cups!"

"They'll come in a moment and then you shall help. And—Miss Belinda! Comfort Littlejan for me! She's been very plucky, but she's had a bad blow. You've heard I have to go?"

"Yes, I'm sorry. I'll do what I can, Mrs. Fraser. But I may not be here, you know."

Janice looked at her quickly. There was a ring of suppressed excitement in Lindy's voice, and her eyes were like stars.

"You'll like going to New York?"

"It's the biggest thrill I've ever had! I'd do my best, even if I hated the idea, because they've been so good to me here and I love them all so much. But I'm terribly keen to see America, and I love Lady Joy. Oh, she must get well! Once we hear she's all right I shall be thrilled to the limit."

"That's splendid!" Janice said heartily. "And Sir Ivor Quellyn will help you with your music. You won't waste your time."

"I shall ask Lady Joy to write new songs for me to sing. We aren't going to tell the twins yet," Lindy added.

"I'm sure that's wise. They'll be terribly excited, once they know."

"They'll need new coats; they've grown out of the green ones they had last winter." Lindy spoke in a maternal tone.

Janice smiled. "Tell Mrs. Raymond to dress them in brown."

"Their hair—yes, brown would be perfect. Here comes Mrs. Raymond. I'll talk to Littlejan, shall I?"

"Please do. I'm sorry you won't be here to stand by her."

"I'm sorry, too. But she'll be all right, Mrs. Fraser. Littlejan's a jolly good sort, and she has a lot in her."

"I hope so. I think so." And Janice turned to Joan, holding out a cup of tea, with a smile.

"Thank you, Deputy." Joan looked happier now that she had her husband's sympathy and support.

"I hear we're losing you, Mrs. Fraser. About those photos!" Jack Raymond had lost his shyness with Janice at last. He quietly put aside the tragedy overhanging the Hall and plunged into the question of the pictures he had promised to make of Littlejan.

The nursery governess carried a tray, with two cups of tea and a plate of buttered scones, to a window where Littlejan stood gazing out at the lawn. "Pull up that table and we'll have tea on our own! Have you heard what's going to happen to me?"

Joan drew the table to the window-seat, and gave her the ghost of a smile. "You're going to America. Are you pleased?"

"Thrilled to the bones. I must write to Nan; my sister, you know. I've heard what's going to happen to you. I'm sorry, Joan-Two."

Joan nodded. "But we knew it was coming. It's only a little sooner than I expected. Don't let's talk about me. Lindy, it's awful about Lady Joy. I haven't seen her, but I know how much they all care. Tell me about her!"

"The image of the twins; and of Jansy and Mrs. Raymond, of course. She looked lovely on May Day, when she wore her green train and a crown of flowers and was a queen again."

"I wish we could have been here in time for May Day. I'd love to see a crowning."

"You'll see one next May. I don't suppose I shall be here," Lindy said wistfully. "I was to be Miss Maid's maid. She'll need to find somebody else. Perhaps she'll ask you, if you've joined the Club."

"That would be marvellous! I shall join as soon as I get to school."

"This news is going to be a dreadful shock to Miss Maid," Lindy said gravely. "To be married without Lady Joy to give her away will seem just impossible to her."

"It is hard on her," Joan agreed. "Is this Dr. Jock's car? Who will tell her?"

"Mrs. Raymond, I expect. I wouldn't like the job," Lindy said soberly.

Dr. Robertson's car drew up before the terrace steps. Tall, red-dy-fair, ten years older than his bride, he opened the door and helped her out. Maidlin, laden with parcels, ran up the steps, while he turned to gather more of her purchases and bring them after her.

She stood in the doorway, a small neat Italian, with big black eyes and coils of black hair under a red cap, radiant with the new happiness of the last few weeks.

"Oh, Joan, such dreadful news! Poor Jock's had the most ghastly shock; he isn't sure if he'll marry me now! He's thinking it over."

"Maid dear, what are you talking about?" Joan looked from her dancing eyes to Jock's laughing face. "I can't believe you've had bad news while you both look like that."

"A joke," Jack Raymond said, without a smile.

"He said it," Maidlin protested. "It's those lawyers, Joan. But if Jock throws me over, I can earn a decent living by singing; at least, he thinks I could. My Italian estates; by my grandfather's will, if I marry a foreigner—that is, not an Italian—they go to the Church. He hated the English, especially when my father had married an English girl! He wasn't going to have any English people owning the Ravarati estates!"

"Maid!" Joan exclaimed. "All the money too?"

"There's a little, that the lawyers saved before I came of age; they had eleven years and they put away all that wasn't needed for me. Of course, my grandfather didn't mean me; he never knew about me. But if any of his grandchildren married foreigners, the estate passed to the others, and if there were none left, it went to the Church. I'm the last grandchild, and the cousins—rather distant cousins—don't have a chance."

"Their only chance was for one of them to marry Maid and keep the money in Italy," Jock Robertson added.

Maidlin's dark eyes laughed at him. "They tried. They did their best. *Will* you marry an almost-penniless lady?"

"She isn't a scrap upset." Jock turned to Joan.

"So it seems. But, Maid, you must be a little bit sorry?" Joan asked soberly.

“Not a bit. It’s always been a worry to me. The Church will use it much better than I could have done. I’d far rather settle down with Jock at The Pallant, when it’s built, than be responsible for that big place in Italy. Is there any tea left, Joan? We had tea on the way home, but we might manage another. Tell her of the jolly place we found, Jock!”

“You’re always finding jolly places, to give you an excuse for private teas together,” Joan commented.

“Oh well! We had to talk over this horrid blow.” A smile glimmered in Maidlin’s eyes. “Jock’s first remark was—‘Oh, good!’ When I asked what he meant he began to tease and say he only wanted to marry me for my fortune, and as I was no longer an heiress he’d have to think it over.”

“I don’t want my wife to have vast estates on the Continent,” Jock said promptly, as Maidlin ran upstairs. “I wouldn’t have asked her to give it up, but if it gives her up that suits me. I said—‘Oh, good!’ and I meant it.”

“Jock!” Joan Raymond went to him quickly. “We’re in great trouble. Maid will discover it as soon as she comes down. You must be ready to comfort her.”

His face set in stern lines. “What has happened? Is it one of the children?”

“For a wonder—no. It’s Joy, in New York.” And Joan told her story.

Jock stood gazing at the stair, up which Maidlin had vanished. “Is there any more, or is that all you know?”

Joan hastily told the plans suggested by Sir Ivor Quellyn. “Lindy is eager to go. But Ivor must find someone to take care of them all.”

“Yes. I’d like to tell Maid myself. Do you mind?”

“I’ll be grateful! But are you sure? It’s rather brave of you.”

“We’ve decided to go through life together. There must be rough places as well as smooth. I hate having to tell her, but I can’t leave it to anyone else—now.”

Joan gave him a quick look. “Maid would rather hear it from you. You come before even Joy, now.”

“But Lady Joy runs me very close. Mrs. Raymond, would I dare to ask Maid to marry me at once? Then we could escort the twins and Miss Belinda.”

Joan’s face lit up. “It’s what I should want to do, in her place. Ask her, Jock! She’d love to go to Joy.”

“It means giving up the excitement of a big public wedding. I don’t want it, but Maid—she doesn’t want it either, but she’s rather well-known as a singer. Ought I to allow her to dodge the publicity? What about the newspapers?”

“Talk it over with her,” Joan advised. “She’s a little frightened of the publicity and the crowds. I think she’d be glad to dodge. Ask her, Jock! Take her into the Abbey; it’s almost closing-time, so you’ll be quiet.”

“Maid will have a bad shock. Don’t send for more tea; I’ll ask her Aunt Ann to give us tea in the Abbey. Here she comes; now for it!”

CHAPTER FOUR TELLING MAIDLIN

Maidlin had been to speak to the twins at nursery tea.

She came down the wide steps and green dancing fairies waved to her from the gallery.

Jock Robertson went to meet her. "Maid, my dear, I want you——"

"Don't you always want me?" Then she saw his look. "Jock! There's something wrong. Tell me, Jock?"

"I'm going to tell you." His face was set. "Come into the Abbey, Maid."

Maidlin's frightened eyes swept round the hall. "Joan! What is it? The children are all right; then it's Joy. Tell me, somebody!"

Jock's arm went round her, and firmly he half-led, half-carried her into the garden. "Come, dear!"

Maidlin gave him a piteous look of terror. Then she went, quietly but quickly, across the lawn, and through the old gate into the Abbot's garden. "Now, Jock! Is Joy dead?"

"No, Maid. Not as bad as that." He led her to the stone seat facing the refectory windows, among the late roses and pansies.

Maidlin sank down, shaking all over. "Tell me! I can't bear it."

Jock told her, quickly and simply. "It's terrible anxiety, Maid, but she may still recover. That's right, dear!"

She clung to him, trembling. "Oh, Jock! Why——?"

"We mustn't ask why," he said, very gravely. "No one can answer that question. Try to believe that she'll be given back to us, Maid."

Maidlin looked up. "What about—about Richard?"

"Richard?" Jock asked, stunned. "I never heard of him."

Maidlin hid her face on his shoulder again. "There was to be a baby, and if it was a boy he was to be called Richard. Has he—is he——"

"He's born, dear. Whether they'll be able to save him it's too soon to say. He's so very tiny and—and new. But he's alive, Maid."

"Joy wanted him so much," Maidlin said brokenly. "Jock, she must get better, if there's another baby to look after!"

"We'll hold on to that. Now I want to talk about plans, Maid."

"Plans?" Maidlin said drearily. "What can we plan? There's nothing to do but wait for more news. Oh, I see what you mean! Joy won't be here. To be married without Joy! How can I bear it, Jock?"

"We could put it off. But it would mean waiting for months; perhaps a year. We could be building our house. I'll wait, if you wish it, Maid."

Maidlin looked up at him quickly again, an understanding look which read his thoughts. "No. It wouldn't be fair to you. You don't want to wait."

"I do not! But I don't want to ask anything of you that's too hard to bear."

"I don't want to wait a year," Maidlin admitted. "I belong to you, all but just—that. We'll go on with it, Jock. But tell them—tell Joan—it must be very quiet. I couldn't bear crowds and a fuss while Joy is so ill. We can have a quiet wedding, with only friends there, can't we?"

“Difficult, if we stick to the date we’ve announced,” Jock explained. “You’re a celebrity; crowds will come to see ‘the little Ravarati’ marry a Britisher. But if we changed the date and ran away, we could dodge the public.”

Maidlin flung back her head and gazed at him. “Could we? Oh, Jock, a quiet, homely time, with just Joan and the twins—could we have that?”

“And our friend the Countess? And Lady Marchwood from the Manor?”

“Oh, Jen and Rosamund, of course. And Rachel and Damaris, because they’re my cousins. But not reporters and people who don’t matter.”

Jock’s arm tightened round her. “Maid, Joy wants the twins to go to her, in charge of Miss Belinda. Ivor’s trying to find friends to escort them. If you and I were married very quietly, one day next week, instead of in a fortnight, we could be the elderly couple who would chaperone the party. We’d go to New York for our honeymoon, instead of to Scotland; we can go there later, for a holiday. You would see Joy, as soon as she’s ready for visitors; and young Richard Quellyn. What do you say?”

“Oh, Jock, let’s do it!” Maidlin’s face was ablaze. “Take the twins to Joy—oh, yes! But can we? How can we arrange it, Jock?”

“A paragraph in *The Times*, saying—‘Owing to the serious illness of Lady Quellyn in New York, the wedding of’—you and me—‘took place very quietly on’—the date we fix. The photographers shall come; that will soothe the fashion magazines, and you’ll have pictures of your lovely gown to show to Joy; and of your bridesmaids. Then ’phone calls to a few special friends, who will be pledged to secrecy till it’s all over.”

“Only Ros and Jen. They’ll have to know about Joy at once.”

“And those nice Queens who sat on the platform with you last May Day. You can’t let them down.”

“Yes, the Hamlet Club Queens,” Maidlin assented. “Will it really be possible, Jock? I’d far rather have it that way, but people know you. It doesn’t seem fair to let you be married almost as a secret. Think of all your singing pupils! The Lady So-and-sos who have been sending you gold cigarette cases and silver brushes and things! And your orchestras; I didn’t think we could dodge them all.”

Jock threw back his head and laughed. “My poor little presents! What about your own? Maid, we feel alike. We’ll have a quiet wedding and run away; and, if all goes well, when you’ve been a married lady for a fortnight you’ll be thanking Lady Joy for giving you such a good excuse.”

“Oh, if only——!” Maidlin clasped her hands and gazed up at the high beautiful Perpendicular windows. “I can be ready whenever you like,” she said presently. “My gown’s finished and so are the twinnies’ little frocks.”

“I’ve bought the ring,” he assured her triumphantly. “I’ll see the Vicar and do the public business.”

“Yes. But—Jock! If all doesn’t go well——” She looked up at him with eyes suddenly clouded.

“Will you ask me to wait for months, Maid? Or will we go ahead—very quietly, of course?”

“We’ll go on with it.” Maidlin’s voice was brave but unsteady. “But we won’t build The Pallant. I shall have to live at the Hall and bring up the twins. You see that, don’t you, Jock? If the twins lose their mother I must take her place; I shall feel they belong to me. And they must

be brought up in her old home. Ivor can go where he likes with the little boys, but I must have the twins.”

Jock looked sober. “It shall be as you wish, my dear. But wouldn’t Mrs. Raymond want the children? Or the cousins at the Manor? Or the Countess?”

“Everybody would want them. But I must have them—even if it meant not being married till they are grown up. All the others have families already; and any of them would take the twins away from the Hall. Joy wouldn’t like that.”

“We won’t put off our marriage for ten years,” Jock said firmly. “Even if we start without a house of our own and with a nine-year-old family, we’re going to be married next week. But it hasn’t come to that yet.”

“I can’t believe it will happen. I’d like to go back and talk to Joan. It was nice of you to tell me yourself, Jock. I’m sure you didn’t like doing it.”

“I promised to ask your Aunt Ann to give you tea in the Abbey.”

“I’d rather talk to Joan. How soon do you think we’ll hear from Ivor again?”

“In a day or two. Lady Joy will surely take a turn for the better.”

“It will be very hard to wait,” Maidlin said wearily. “We are unlucky in our weddings! Joy couldn’t go to see Jen married; the twins were only a week old. And Jen couldn’t be at Rosamund’s wedding, because Rosemary was having her appendix out that day. Now Joy has to miss our wedding.”

“And yet all those marriages have turned out remarkably well.” Jock smiled down at her. “Can’t you trust that ours will do the same?”

“Oh, I know it will!” Maidlin cried. “And we’re going to start well, for we may be going to see Joy in a week or two. I can’t quite believe that!”

“Plus Miss Belinda and the children.”

“People won’t know we’re a newly-married couple, on the voyage, if we have a family with us,” Maidlin said thoughtfully.

Jock’s laugh rang out again. “Maid dear! How can I be grave and sympathetic, when you say such things? Do you really believe that anyone could take you for the mother of nine-year-olds?”

“I’d have had to be married at sixteen and have had the twins in a year,” Maidlin admitted, the ghost of a smile in her dark eyes. “Do the children know about Richard?”

“Mrs. Raymond isn’t going to tell them until we know if he lives. They needn’t hear about their mother either, at present.”

“No, better not.” Maidlin’s face grew sombre again. “We’ll surely know in a day or two.”

And, looking burdened, she went back with Jock to the house.

CHAPTER FIVE BECAUSE OF RICHARD

“Richard?” Joan looked at Maidlin in amusement. “I had no idea his name was chosen. And you’ve known for two months and not said a word?”

“I always think of him as Richard. Joy told me, to comfort me; I was so much upset when she said goodbye. But she never meant him to be born in America. Will he be an American, Joan?”

“I’ve no idea. If America claims him, Ivor will have to naturalise him as a British subject.”

Jock was consulting Jack Raymond on the question of the altered plans, while Joan and Maidlin sat together, watching while Lindy played ball with the twins and Jansy on the lawn. Maidlin had heard of the change in Janice’s future, and understood that Littlejan could not bear to let her mother out of her sight, so was making an excuse of the packing to keep close to her upstairs.

“Richard!” Joan said again. “It goes well with Quellyn. They’ll be David and Dicky, I suppose.”

“Not Dick; Richard. Joy doesn’t like names cut down. You know how cross she is if anyone calls the twinnies ‘Betty and Peg.’ ”

“I’d forgotten. But why Richard, Maid? It isn’t a Welsh name. I asked her if her next boy would be Owen or Llewellyn, but she just laughed.”

“It is rather Welsh,” Maidlin said. “Richards and Pritchard are Welsh names, and Pritchard must be Ap Richard, I suppose. It was Ivor’s father’s name, and Joy liked it. She’s keen on Ivor’s Welsh side.”

“Yes, it intrigues her. Well, Maid, if you’re quite sure about the new plans, I’ll ring up Jen and Rosamund. They ought to have warning, just in case——” Joan’s face clouded.

“I don’t believe we shall lose Joy,” Maidlin said. “It may be silly and I can’t give reasons for it, but I feel sure that she’ll come back to us, because of Richard.”

“To bring him up? I’m afraid, Maid dear——”

“I know. Mothers do die and leave tiny babies to other people. But I mean something different. If Joy had been going to die, I don’t believe Richard would be alive. Because he’s been born all right, I think we’re meant to know that Joy will be all right too.” Maidlin gave Joan a steady, resolute look.

“And I was so much afraid for you!” Joan said, marvelling. “I thought you’d break down and be an extra trouble to us. Maid, that’s a beautiful idea and we’ll cling to it for all we’re worth. Little Richard shall be our message of hope.”

“And of trust,” Maidlin added. “Joan, it isn’t fair you should do it all. I’ll talk to Rosamund; we must speak about to-morrow night.”

“Her dinner-party at the Castle. She’ll let you off, Maid.”

“But I’m to sing to her guests; and Jock is to play his viola. We can’t spoil her programme. I’ve been looking forward to singing for Ros; if the news is no worse, I shall go through with it. I don’t suppose I shall sing as well as usual, but Ros will understand and she’s the one who matters.”

“I expect you’ll sing better than usual,” Joan said. “Rosamund will appreciate your courage, Maidie. I’ll tell Jenny-Wren; she’s coming home in a few days.”

Maidlin sat watching the twins and thinking of all the present crisis might mean to them—to Lindy Bellanne—to herself.

Joan came back and stood beside her. “Jen’s coming to-morrow. I begged her not to alter her plans, but she isn’t needed there and she says she can’t bear to be so far away. I promised to phone the moment there was news, but she insists on coming.”

“I thought she’d feel like that,” Maidlin assented. “She’ll want to say goodbye to Jandy Mac, you know. I’ll speak to Ros.” And she went to the telephone.

“Ros dear—Joy is ill in New York,” she said quietly. “An operation—very bad. Ivor doesn’t know yet”—and she caught her breath, her composure giving way suddenly.

“Maid! Oh, my dear! Surely we aren’t going to lose Joy!” Rosamund almost sobbed.

“I don’t believe it; I can’t. There’s Richard; I believe he’s a message to tell us she’ll get well.”

“Richard? Maid, what are you talking about?”

“The baby, Ros—a new one; David’s little brother.” And Maidlin told all they knew.

“Oh, poor Joy!” Rosamund groaned. Then she asked sharply, “Did Ivor say any more? Is it—something that may return? If they save Joy now, will it happen again before long?”

“No! Not that, Ros.” Maidlin’s voice was firm. “Ivor said to Joan that the thing they had to take away was very bad, but quite harmless, and there was no fear of its coming back. She’ll be strong and well again, but it will take a long while.”

She heard Rosamund’s deep breath of relief. “Might be worse, then, Maid—if she lives.”

“I believe she’ll live. About to-morrow night, Ros.”

“Yes? I can’t ask you to sing, with this on your mind. Everybody will understand.”

“If Joy’s holding her own, I’d like to sing. May I leave it that way?”

“Will you? I do want you and Jock, but I’d never ask it of you just now. You’re a brick, Maid.”

“Jock and I will come about tea-time, all being well. We’ve made new plans, and we want to tell you. We’re going to make an excuse of Joy’s illness to dodge the crowds, and be married next week. Then we can take the twins and Lindy to Joy.”

“What a marvellous plan! But it won’t be too private? You’ll let us be there?”

“I must have you and Jen, of course. Joan will give me away, but I want you too. I need my ‘Matron of Honour’ to hold my hand!”

“I’m proud to support you! But, Maidie, *how* we shall miss Joy! Are you heartbroken, my dear?”

“Nearly, but if Joy’s going to live I can bear anything. We’ll tell you all about it to-morrow. We may have more news by then.”

“Should have. Ring me up instantly, if you hear any more, Maid!”

“I promise.” And Maidlin rang off and went to talk to Jock about the new plans.

CHAPTER SIX

THE TWINS ARE DIFFICULT

“But why?” Elizabeth demanded next morning, pushing back her bobbed red curls and staring up at Joan. “Why do we need to buy winter coats in the summer, Aunty Joan?”

“I’m not sure yet that you will need them. But I want to see last year’s coats on you, so that we’ll know,” Joan explained.

“But why?” Margaret chimed in truculently, resenting the interruption to their play-lessons with Miss Belinda. “Mother’s coming soon. Why can’t she choose our coats?”

“We want to see David enormously badly,” Elizabeth added. “Will he be able to talk yet, do you think?”

“He’ll be trying to talk and trying to stand up, I expect. Very well, twinnies. I thought you’d like to go to town and choose coats, but it can wait.”

Elizabeth wavered. “It’s always fun to go to town, Twin. What d’you think? Did Mother ask you to see about our coats, Aunty Joan?”

“Would we go to a shop and have ices?” Margaret shouted. “Mother always takes us for ices when we go shopping.”

“We might manage ices,” Joan agreed. “Elizabeth, do you think I’d bother about your coats unless I knew your mother wanted it?”

Elizabeth regarded her thoughtfully. “No, I don’t suppose you would. Such a fag for you! Why should you worry about our clothes?”

“Exactly! I have Jansy and John and the babies to look after. Isn’t that plenty?”

“Rather! All right, Aunty Joan. Thank you for bothering,” Elizabeth said sedately.

“Will we go to-day to get the coats? You won’t forget the ices, will you?” Margaret insisted.

Joan smiled down at her. “Perhaps to-morrow. I’m seeing to Jansy’s school clothes to-day. But I’d like to see last year’s coats, girlies. You may not need new ones.”

“Mother said we would. Our legs stick out of our old green coats,” Elizabeth explained.

“That sounds like new ones. Would you like brown coats this time?”

“I’d like a red coat,” Margaret said instantly. “Brown’s dull.”

Elizabeth was gazing at Joan with puzzled eyes. “Didn’t Mother say what you were to buy? It’s very odd, I think! Did she ask you to choose our coats, Aunty Joan?”

“Not exactly, Elizabeth,” poor Joan admitted. “But I think it would please her. It would save her trouble, wouldn’t it?”

“Mother likes taking trouble over us,” cried Margaret.

“I think we’ll wait till Mother comes,” Elizabeth said, with dignified decision. “It doesn’t seem fair to buy coats when she isn’t here; she might not like what we chose. She wouldn’t let Margaret-Twin have a red coat; I’m certain sure of that. Peggy’s tried to get one, often and often. Thank you very much, Aunty Joan; it’s very kind of you, and we’ll tell Mother you tried to save her trouble. But we don’t want you to be bothered, and Mother always chooses our things, so we’d better wait for her.”

“Her tone was definitely firm,” Joan said to Maidlin, when she told the story. “I was completely helpless. I sent them back to Miss Belinda, who was giving them a geography lesson on the Atlantic Ocean; Lindy is really very bright! They’ll understand about the coats

when they hear about the journey. I daren't say or do any more till I can explain. Elizabeth's logical mind was too much for me. I hadn't realised she could think so clearly."

"She reasons things out; she always has done," Maidlin agreed. "We've treated them as babies too long; they aren't infants any longer."

"They've behaved like babies," Joan said grimly. "It's time they grew up a little."

"I believe Elizabeth would see that, if it were put to her," Maidlin began.

"Perhaps when they hear about their mother they'll steady and be responsible people," Joan said hopefully. "A little mild anxiety might not be a bad thing for them. You ought to go back to bed, if you're really going to sing for the Countess to-night, Maid; you look worn out. Haven't you slept at all?"

"Not very much," Maidlin owned. "I'll rest in the afternoon, before Jock comes. There's the 'phone!" She turned suddenly white. "Perhaps it's Ivor, with news."

Joan went quickly to the telephone, to end the suspense. "It's Jock, Maid. Here you are," she said, in a moment.

Maidlin ran to take the receiver. "Jock! Maid speaking."

She listened intently and scribbled some words on the pad. "Oh, that's marvellous! You are good, Jock! I believe it will be all right. We'll talk about *The Messiah* this afternoon. I'd like to do it. No, not much; I was thinking about Joy, and the twins, and us. Yes, I will, if you want me to. I'll be ready about three, then. Thanks more than words can say!"

She came to Joan with the pad in her hand. "It's better news; not very much, but good as far as it goes. Jock cabled to Ivor this morning; he had to tell him our new plan. He said: '*How is Joy? Maid and I will bring twins.*' He's just had Ivor's answer—'*Excellent. Joy slightly stronger. Child also. Maid must sing Messiah. Will ring to-night.*' So Joy's holding her own, and Richard too. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Oh, Maid, that's splendid!" Joan exclaimed. "We can have hope now. And Ivor's bagged you for his Festival! I wonder what he's done with his contralto? She won't like being ousted!"

"Perhaps she wasn't chosen. If Joy's better I'll be glad to sing. Jock begged me to go to bed, Joan, and I promised to do it."

"Run along and have another sleep. You'll be fresher for the evening." And Joan, much relieved, went to find her husband and then to tell Janice and Littlejan that the news was more hopeful.

CHAPTER SEVEN FOR ROSAMUND

"This is good of you, Maid!" Rosamund spoke with real gratitude as she led Maidlin and Jock in for tea at Kentisbury Castle. "You don't know how much I appreciate your coming at such a time. Any news since this morning's cable?"

"Ivor will talk to Joan during the evening, and Joan will ring us up at once." Maidlin smiled at her bravely. "I wanted to come. I was so glad when you asked me to sing. I want to change my programme, Ros. Do you mind?"

"Not in the least. What do you want to sing?"

"'O rest'—from *Elijah*. It will fit my feelings."

Their eyes met. Rosamund said quietly, "Mine also. I'd like it better than anything. You are brave, Maid! Now tell me about these new plans!"

Maidlin glanced at Jock, who was deep in talk with the Earl, and smiled again. "Jock's like a schoolboy. He keeps forgetting about Joy and going off his head with relief because we're not having a fashionable wedding; I didn't know he disliked the idea so much. I knew he wasn't keen, but I accepted what he said; that it wouldn't be playing the game for us to have a quiet wedding. I believe he was really thinking of me. We've both seized the excuse, and nobody is to know till it's over, except the family and the Hamlet Club Queens. Jock particularly wants them to be told."

"I like your Jock more and more. Oh, he's right! You couldn't let down the Queens! Now tell me all about it; and about Jandy Mac. Must she really go to-morrow? Where does she join her ship? Poor Joan-Two! I'm sorry for her."

"She's being very plucky. Jandy goes from Southampton. Jack Raymond will run her down in the car on Saturday morning; it was to be Friday night in London."

"Then couldn't they start a little earlier and bring Joan-Two and have an hour here, to say goodbye to Kentisbury? We'd like to thank Jandy Mac once more for helping to save our boy; she was so brave! We'll send Joan-Two out on Chestnut, to take up her thoughts. Tansy hasn't gone to Wood End yet and she's thrilled about her smock and breeches. Tell Joan to leave Joan-Two with us for the week-end; the excitement of Tansy and the ponies will help her."

"That's a kind idea," Maidlin said warmly. "As soon as we know for certain that we're going to New York, the Hall will be in a whirl. Four outfits to prepare!—for Lindy and the twins as well as mine."

"The twinnies don't know yet?"

"No. Poor Joan tried to make a start, but Elizabeth was too much for her." And Maidlin told of Elizabeth's firm stand on the subject of coats.

Rosamund laughed. "Miss Marchwood knows her own mind, and she's loyal to her mother." She looked sober, and changed the subject. "You must see my youngster before you go to change; your room's ready for you. Here comes tea; now perhaps Jock and Geoffrey will condescend to join us."

As Maidlin, in her white dinner frock, came from the room which was always kept for her in the Castle, her face was grave, for there had been no call from Joan, and it was half-past eight. Saying truly that she could not eat a large meal before singing, she had begged for a

light supper alone with Jock, and Rosamund had gladly spared her the ordeal, which she must face herself, of making conversation with people who had no understanding of the situation.

Going down to the drawing-room with Jock and his viola, Maidlin was heavy-hearted and felt not at all like singing. As, presently, her beautiful voice rang out in the solo with which she had delighted the Albert Hall—"O rest in the Lord. Wait patiently for Him"—Rosamund knew what she was feeling and was grateful for the courage which had not shirked this duty. It had been the Countess's dream for months to have Madalena di Ravarati to sing to her guests, when she filled her dining-hall, to return the invitations sent to her on her wedding to the Earl. Much as she regretted the circumstances in which the event took place, she would have been deeply disappointed if Maidlin had seized the excuse of Joy's illness to cancel the engagement.

A man-servant bent over the Countess and murmured, "The 'phone, My Lady. From the Hall."

Rosamund slipped out, hoping Maidlin had not seen, and that she had not betrayed herself by turning white.

"Jock's there. He'll stand by Maid," she said to herself, as she hurried to the telephone room.

"Rosamund speaking. Is it Joan? What news?"

"Better; really good, Ros. The doctors are hopeful now, both of Joy and the baby. Ivor has told her Maid will bring the twins, and she's delighted. Joy sends her love, and apologies to Maid, and she hopes it will be a happy wedding. She's looking forward to seeing the bride and bridegroom, and, of course, the twins. And Ivor had no contralto for *The Messiah* and is overjoyed to know he can have Maid. Tell Jock that Joy says she hopes he will allow his wife to sing in New York."

Rosamund laughed, in delighted relief. "Maid will go pink. I *am* thankful! Maid's singing 'O rest in the Lord,' or I'd call her. I've begged her to stay the night, but she won't hear of it."

"Maid won't have a minute to spare between now and next Tuesday. She had better come home and be ready to begin her preparations to-morrow."

"I'll send her off in good time. She's singing wonderfully, Joan. Her voice is exquisite to-night. I am so proud of her!"

"That's because she's feeling so deeply. I knew she'd sing well, if she sang at all," and Joan rang off.

Rosamund returned to the great drawing-room to find Maidlin, flushed and shy, receiving thanks and congratulations.

"Get hold of her for me!" Rosamund said to Jock Robertson. "There's news at last—good news!"

Jock made his way through the crowd. "Maid, my dear, the Countess wants you. All's well," in answer to her instant look of frightened appeal.

She caught his arm. "Jock! Really?"

"Truly! It's good news. Don't look like that, dear!" for Maidlin had grown white.

"I'm all right." She gave a tired laugh. "Let me go to Rosamund! I must hear all about it."

Jock, longing to hear the details himself, nobly stepped into the breach, and, leaving her to follow Rosamund from the room, tuned his viola and held the guests spellbound. It was a much-appreciated treat, for they knew him as conductor of orchestras and choirs and teacher of singing; to hear him as a soloist was a surprise, and "Violetta" was much enjoyed.

“A case of illness,” he said, in answer to a question, when he paused. “In the family—yes. The Countess and Miss di Ravarati have been very anxious, but the report to-night is good.”

“The news of Joy’s illness will be public presently, and then they’ll understand,” he said to himself, as he took up the viola again.

“Maid dear, you *must not* cry!” Rosamund scolded gently. “I want Joy’s little songs. You can sing them happily now. What will happen to your voice if you weep?”

“I won’t do it, Ros.” Maidlin lay trembling in her arms. “It’s the relief; I’ve been strung up tightly all day and all last night. You’re sure Joy will be safe now?”

“Unless she has a relapse, and they’ll guard against that. As for Ivor, you seem to be an answer to prayer. He’s lucky to get you.”

“I’ll enjoy it. But I ought to go home, Ros. Could I do all you want and then hurry away?”

“I think you should. Go to bed at once! Then you’ll be ready for wedding preparations.”

“I’m almost ready. But I want to help Lindy and Joan with the children.”

“If you’ll drink this”—and Rosamund offered her a glass—“I’ll let you go back to sing Joy’s songs, and then you shall go home.”

“Oh, but I want people to hear Jock play!”

“Jock has played. You’ve missed a treat,” said Jock from the door. “So people say; I wouldn’t say it myself. May I hear the news?”

“There’s a message for you. Joy wants to know if you’ll allow your wife to sing in New York?”

“Oh, Ros! She didn’t say it?” Maidlin cried.

Jock threw back his head and shouted. “I fancy my wife will please herself. When she’s Mrs. Robertson, we shall see what she does about it. It sounds as if Lady Quellyn was feeling better.”

“I’m sure she’s better.” Rosamund spoke with deep gladness. “Let’s finish this little matter of singing and then you shall take Maid home. Ready, Maid?”

“Quite ready, Ros. I’ve been given my heart’s desire.”

Rosamund looked at her. “While you were singing the very words. What a beautiful thought! Now come and sing Joy’s songs.”

“How wonderfully Miss Madalena sings Lady Quellyn’s music!” said a lady sitting near the piano, as Jock took up another song. “People say she sings them better than anyone else.”

“That’s natural, isn’t it?” Jock assented gravely, his tone very much that of the serious conductor of orchestras, not of the schoolboy Jock whom Maidlin had called to life.

“How is Lady Quellyn? Does she enjoy New York?”

“Oh yes, I think so!” Jock placed his music and glanced at Maidlin.

“I suppose we shall see the Quellyns at the wedding?” the talkative lady persisted, when the song was ended.

“Perhaps not; certainly not Sir Ivor. He can’t leave New York till the Festival is over.” Jock gathered up the music. “Now I must take my little lady home. It has been a trial for her to sing to-night, and she is tired out.”

As he drove Maidlin under the great portcullis of the Castle and over the drawbridge, he broke out, “No more public appearances for you until we’re safely married, my girl! I’ve had to parry most difficult questions. ‘How is Lady Quellyn? I suppose we shall see her at the wedding?’—with an arch look at me! How would you have liked that, Miss di Ravarati?”

“Not at all. I am sorry, Jock! What did you do?”

“Hedged somehow; *I* don’t know! The news of Joy’s illness will leak out; the American papers will print something and we’ll be deluged with questions. The sooner you’re Mrs. Robertson and saved from a public wedding the better.”

“I think so too,” Maidlin said quietly.

CHAPTER EIGHT

JEN TAKES CHARGE

The door of the Hall stood open, welcoming light streaming out. Tall, curly-headed Jen—Lady Marchwood, from the Manor—came running down the steps and caught Maidlin in her arms.

“You poor lamb! Your wedding spoiled! But Joy’s safe now, dear, so you’ll be happy, won’t you?”

“Jenny-Wren, how nice of you to come!” Maidlin clung to her. “Oh, I am happy to-night! I want Joy terribly badly, but so long as we haven’t lost her that’s all that matters.”

“And you’re going to see her in a fortnight! Won’t it be marvellous?” Jen comforted her craftily.

“Too wonderful for words. I can’t believe it.”

“Almost worth getting married for! And when there’s somebody as nice as your Jock thrown in——!”

Jen, in her most motherly mood, was settling Maidlin in a big chair and pressing sandwiches on her. “Are you dead with tiredness? Joan will be down in a minute; she’s seeing to young Jim’s supper. Fetch the coffee, Lindy Bellanne; it’s all hot and waiting. Jandy Mac asked you to excuse her, Maid. She was tired out with packing, and she’s gone to bed with Joan-Two. They’re sleeping together for the last few nights, poor dears! Well, Jock, was it very marvellous? Rosamund said Maid’s voice was exquisite.”

“I agree,” he said. “I’ve never heard ‘O rest in the Lord’ sung better, even for the Queen in the Albert Hall.”

“Did you sing that, Maid?” Jen gave her a quick look of understanding. “Of course, you would put your whole heart and soul into it, and when you do that, you’re worth hearing. Ros must have been proud of you.”

“I think she was pleased,” Maidlin assented.

“I want to hear your plans,” Jen said briskly. “He’ll tell me; you rest and feed. Now, Jock! A quiet wedding on Tuesday morning, with only us and the Queens there; nice of you to want them! After that——?”

“I imagine the Queens are among Maid’s best friends; that’s why. And they looked such a jolly lot of girls. I suppose they couldn’t come in their crowns?”

Maidlin’s hidden smile glimmered in her dark eyes. “Silly! Perhaps you’d like us to dance the Helston Furry round the church?”

Jen rocked with laughter. “What a picture! No, not robes and crowns; just twins and cousins and Jansy as bridesmaids, and Rosamund as Matron of Honour. I like that idea, Maid; your best pal! But after the wedding? You ought to have a few days by yourselves, to feel really married before you sail. Your bungalow isn’t furnished, is it?”

“Not nearly ready. Besides, Maid would have to wash up, and I couldn’t allow that. We shall go to a hotel for a few days. There isn’t time for Scotland; that can come later. We aren’t going to stay in New York! We deposit the twins and Lindy Bellanne; Maid sings ‘He shall feed His flock’; we kiss Lady Quellyn and Richard; and then we come home.”

“Are you keen on an unknown hotel, Maid?”

“Not a bit, but it seems the best thing to do, Jenny-Wren.”

“Not in London,” Jock remarked. “Someone would be sure to recognise Maid. That’s what comes of marrying a public personage. We’ll find somewhere quiet in the country; in Maid’s Lake District, perhaps.”

Jen spoke eagerly. “If you’ll postpone the Lake District, would you care to use the Manor? I shall be here, helping Joan with the outfits; the maids are there and they’ll do everything for you. You won’t need to think of a single thing, and you’ll be entirely on your own. We won’t even ring you up, unless a twin falls down a well or gets lost; and they won’t do anything mad once they’ve heard about New York. Would that appeal to you, Maid? A quiet, homely few days with every comfort, and nobody to disturb you. You can amuse yourselves by racing about the country in the car and finding nice tea-shops for outdoor meals; it’s one of Jock’s gifts, I know. But make the Manor your home till it’s time to sail; then come here and all start off together, with Henderson to drive you and bring back our big car.”

Maidlin looked at Jock, her eyes eager. “I’d like it. It would be so simple; no strangeness or hunting for hotels.”

Jock gave his big jolly laugh. “We’ll drive away in the opposite direction and have a long day of picnics, and then we’ll creep back at dusk, and nobody will dream of looking for us so near home. Lady Marchwood, you’re a brick and a genius. We’ll accept your very sporting offer with many thanks.”

“Make my house your own,” Jen said hospitably. “No one shall know you’ve been there till you’re on the ocean. You’ll have service from my good girls such as you’d never find anywhere else, if you’ll consent to be their bride and bridegroom! They’ll love to call Maid ‘Madam.’ They won’t pry on you, and they’ll keep the secret till you’ve sailed. They’ll be so proud and pleased! You two will play about and amuse yourselves; and as soon as you’ve disappeared on your honeymoon we shall all sit down and address envelopes.”

“Envelopes, Jen? Oh, Jock’s printed notices! It’s too bad to leave all that work to you!” Maidlin protested.

“Owing to Lady Quellyn’s illness, the marriage has taken place very quietly,” Jock chanted. “They’ll be ready by Tuesday. It feels dangerous to have them printed before the marriage *has* taken place; as if something would be sure to happen to stop it. But we must let everybody know at once; all those invited guests we’re going to dodge!”

“Don’t be superstitious!” Jen scolded. “Those notices are going out as soon as you’re safely married. Littlejan Fraser and I are going to address the envelopes. Young Jim asleep, Joan?”

Joan came quietly in. “Sound asleep,” she smiled. “Maid, I’ll repeat every word Ivor said, though I think I told all the points to Rosamund. He’ll cable in the morning, and if the news is still good we’re to tell the twins. The doctors say that if Joy and Richard hold on till then, they’ll feel fairly happy about them.”

“I can’t get used to Richard! He’s been rather a shock!” Jen said, as she poured out a cup of coffee for Joan.

CHAPTER NINE

A PROMISE FROM THE TWINS

“D’you mean you thought perhaps Mother wouldn’t get better?” Elizabeth leaned on Joan’s knee and stared up at her with alarm in her brown eyes.

“I mean just that, Elizabeth.”

“Would Mother have been ill always?” Margaret stared too, puzzled and unbelieving.

The distress in Elizabeth’s eyes deepened. “That doesn’t happen, Twin. People get better or they go right away. Did you think Mother might be dead, Aunt Joan?”

Joan’s arm held her tightly. “For one day we thought so, Elizabeth. But she’s better now. Don’t look like that.”

“Mother couldn’t be dead!” Margaret shouted. “We’d never see her again, if she was dead!”

“Hush, Margaret! She isn’t going to die now.”

“Were you afraid of that?” Elizabeth was trembling.

“We were, ‘Lizabeth. But it isn’t going to happen. You can say ‘Thank you’ to God in your prayers, for giving Mother back to us.”

“We’d better do it now. I couldn’t believe Mother wouldn’t be here.” Elizabeth drew herself out of the circle of Joan’s arm. “Twin, come and say ‘Thank you’ because we’ve still got Mother.”

“There’s one other thing I’d like you to say, Twins.” Joan’s hand checked Elizabeth and drew Margaret to her knee. “Ever so many times you girls have frightened us all, because you didn’t think. You remember the night you went into the Abbey in the dark? And the fire you made in the shed? And the time Margaret fell down the well in the old church? What about you both getting buried in that tunnel, when Littlejan was hurt? And when Margaret fell out of the tree on to Miss Belinda? All those silly things were because you didn’t think, and quite often it was other people who were hurt, because they tried to help you.”

The twins looked at one another and stirred uneasily.

“Don’t want to remember all those horrid things,” Margaret muttered.

“Why are you reminding us of being silly, Aunt Joan?” Elizabeth demanded. “We’re sorry. We’ve said so.”

“Yes, but you forget. It’s time you began to think. All those silly things have frightened your mother very badly and have given her a lot of bother. You’re going to say ‘Thank you’ because she hasn’t been taken from you. Couldn’t you promise not to do any more things that would worry her?”

“I see.” Elizabeth looked grave. “If we promised we’d have to remember, wouldn’t we?”

“I hope you’d try to be careful, and not keep secrets and do dangerous things just for fun.”

“I think we ought to do it,” Elizabeth decided.

“But won’t we be able to have any more fun?” Margaret looked dubious. “Will we need to be stodgy and good, like grown-up ladies?”

Joan laughed. “Lots of fun, girlies! You won’t be grown-up for a very long while! But you can have fun without hurting other people. You haven’t heard yet about the wonderful thing that’s going to happen to you, now at once!”

“What’s going to happen?” Margaret leaned on her knee and gazed at her, as Elizabeth had done a moment before.

“What about going on a big ship to New York to see Mother?”

“Are we going?” Elizabeth hurled herself on Joan. “Will we see Mother soon? And David?”

“Oh, goody! Oh, marvellous-lovely-beautiful!” Margaret broke away and began to dance. “Oh, gosh and goodness! That will be really fun, Twin!”

“But who’ll go with us?” Elizabeth’s eyes grew anxious. “We couldn’t go alone. Are you coming too, Aunty Joan?”

“I wish I could, Twinnies. But it would mean taking Jennifer and Jim, and they’re too little. Miss Belinda will go with you, and you must be very good and do everything she tells you. Aunty Maid and Uncle Jock are going too, so you’ll be well looked after. Aunty Maid is going to sing in New York.”

“We shall be a nice little family on the ship,” Elizabeth commented. “Is it really going to happen, Aunty Joan? When can we go?”

“We have to get you ready. You’ll need to take lots of clothes.”

“Is that why you wanted us to have new coats?” Elizabeth’s eyes brightened. “Did you know we were to go on the ship?”

“That was the idea. Now you know why your mother can’t choose the coats for you. You’ll need them on the boat.”

“Why didn’t you tell us yesterday?”

Joan looked sober. “Because your mother was still very ill. I didn’t want to frighten you. We only heard this morning that the doctors were sure she would get well.”

Elizabeth leaned on her knee and stared up at her again. “Thank you for not frightening us. Were you frightened?”

“I was, Elizabeth; very badly frightened. But it’s all right now.”

“It was very nice of you,” Elizabeth decided. “You’re kind, Aunty Joan.”

Margaret continued her joy-dance round the room. “Going to see Mother! And David too. Oh, lovely!”

“We’ll be very good girls,” Elizabeth promised, her feelings deeply stirred. “It will be fun buying new coats now,” she added. “We’ll know they’re for wearing on the ship.”

“And you’ll remember about the ices?” Margaret paused in front of Joan, after a triumphant pirouette.

“Oh, Margaret!” Joan laughed. “I won’t forget the ices.”

“We aren’t forgetting about saying ‘Thank you,’ because we’ve still got Mother,” Elizabeth said gravely. “Twin, come upstairs and say it now. Upstairs is the proper place.”

“I think the old church, in the Abbey, would be a properer place,” Margaret began. “But I don’t like going near that well.”

“Not near the well, I think,” Joan agreed. “Run along then, Twins, if upstairs is the proper place.”

“Must we promise what you said, Twin?” Margaret asked anxiously.

“I’m afraid we must.” Elizabeth’s tone was firm. “Aren’t you glad that Mother’s still here? At least, in New York. And that you’re going to see her? Well, then!”

“Oh, all right!” Margaret sighed. “But it seems a pity.”

“You’re going to promise and you’re going to keep your word. And I’m going to see that you do it,” Elizabeth said tartly. “You need somebody to look after you. It’s a good thing there

are two of us; that's what I think."

"Do you think the promise will be any good?" Lindy asked doubtfully, when Joan told the story. "They'll forget when some idea occurs to them. They're very little."

"They may forget. I dare say they will." Joan smiled at her. "But it will be a real shock to Elizabeth when she finds she has forgotten. She's very much in earnest. She'll try harder, and in time she'll remember. I hope it will be some help."

"I expect we shall all be thankful to you," Lindy said fervently.

CHAPTER TEN

GOODBYE TO JANDY MAC

Littlejan Fraser stood in the great doorway of Kentisbury Castle, gallantly waving goodbye, as the car bore her mother away. Everyone, including Janice herself, had insisted that it would be a mistake for Littlejan to go to Southampton, and Joan-Two had agreed, though rather wistfully.

The Countess's invitation had been a real help, however. She liked the Castle, where she had stayed before, and the housekeeper's niece, Tansy, was her friend. Littlejan rejoiced that she would see her again before they went to different schools, and she looked forward to riding with her on the mounts the Earl had given them—her own pony, Chestnut, and Tansy's fine young horse, Black Boy.

Tansy had not appeared during the hour in which Janice had broken her journey for coffee with Rosamund. Now, as Joan-Two stood forlornly on the steps, it was not the Countess who came to speak to her. A hand was thrust through her arm and a voice said urgently, "Let's have a ride! You're staying till to-morrow, aren't you? Look at me! How do you like my school kit?"

Joan whirled round. "Tans! Oh, you look marvellous! I wish I could go to Wood End too. Perhaps I'll have a year there before I go to Ceylon."

Tansy wore the khaki smock and breeches, and soft hat on her black curls, which were the uniform of the gardening and housekeeping school to which she was going in the following week.

"Come while I'm still there," she said. "But you're keen on this Wycombe place, aren't you? My Lady and Miss Maid were there. I saw them being Queens last May Day."

"Lady Jen and Auntie Joan and Lady Joy were Queens too. Yes, I want to go. I'm going to join the Hamlet Club the minute I arrive."

"You'll have a marvellous time. I saw the Club dancing; I'd have liked to belong. Come and find Ferguson; he's taking us out this morning. My breeches are just right for riding Black Boy."

"I'll slip in and change; my kit's still here." And Littlejan dashed upstairs to find her riding breeches and jersey.

"Now tell me everything," Tansy commanded, as they rode in the park under Ferguson's watchful eye. "I know Miss Maid's being married on Tuesday and that it's a secret. I wouldn't breathe a word of it to anybody but you. I heard her sing on Thursday night; My Lady let me creep into a corner to listen. It was absolutely marvellous! Dr. Robertson's in luck. How is Lady Joy?"

"Getting on well now. I'm going back to the Hall to-morrow afternoon; there's heaps to do. My job is to play with the twins while Lindy does her packing. I'm telling them about ships and what they'll have to do."

"You know all that," Tansy assented, for it was only three months since Joan-Two had come from Australia. "I expect they're thrilled, aren't they?"

"To the limit. They're so thrilled that they're being marvellously good."

"That won't hurt them!" Tansy mocked. "I suppose everybody's off their heads with busyness at the Hall?"

"It is rather like that," Joan admitted. "But they aren't off their heads; they know what they want to do. Aunt Joan keeps calm whatever happens."

"Mrs. Raymond? Yes, I suppose she does. But I thought Lady Marchwood from the Manor might get all worked up and rush about madly, doing bits of things that don't matter."

"Oh, she isn't like that!" Joan cried. "She flies at things and she talks a lot, but it's all sensible and she doesn't make any muddles. She's being an enormous help to Aunt Joan and Maidlin."

"Are there to be many visitors in the house?"

"Almost nobody. Miss Mary will come the night before the wedding. She was to bring Lady Jen's two boys and Jansy's brother John, but they wouldn't come." Joan grinned. "They said weddings weren't in their line and they sent their love to the bride, but they wanted to stay on the moors. Everybody laughed a lot, and Maidlin begged off for them. I want to see Miss Mary; I've been reading her books. And Maid's cousins will come from London, but only for the day, for the dancing one has rehearsals and ballets; she can't be away from town for a night."

"I wouldn't like her job! My Lady took me to see her dance; she was lovely, but it looked hard work and she has to be always at it."

"She's taking a holiday for the day, but she has to dance at night. I want to see her too," Joan said. "She hasn't been to the Abbey for a week-end while Mother and I have been there. Doesn't the Abbey have a lot of interesting people belonging to it?"

"They do interesting things," Tansy agreed.

When Littlejan went to say goodbye to the Countess before the car carried her home, there was deep gratitude in her eyes. "Thank you so much for letting me come! It's made things much easier."

Rosamund looked at her in amusement. "I'm glad, Joan-Two. Did Tansy help?"

"Ever so much. We had a lovely supper all by ourselves; it was nice of you to know that would be fun. And we talked in bed and Miss Lillico didn't come in to stop us; you'd planned that for us, hadn't you?"

"I thought one night wouldn't matter, however long you talked. I didn't want you to lie awake and think, and I couldn't allow anybody to cry herself to sleep in my house!"

"I might have done it," Joan said honestly. "But I'm trying not to feel bad, and Tansy helped a lot by talking last night. Mother wanted to go, so it would be silly to cry."

"Very silly, and not fair to her. You're too brave and sensible to do it, Joan-Two; but we may as well make it easier for you."

"You arranged everything beautifully," Joan said earnestly. "I was thinking about you before I went to sleep; after we'd stopped talking. May I tell you?"

"Please do!" Rosamund smiled at her as she nursed her baby, Hugh, Lord Verriton.

"Isn't he getting big? He's a lovely boy. I thought how you use your huge house to do nice things for people. You were kind to Mother and me when we arrived; you were a real fairy-tale Countess and you rescued us when we were in a hole, didn't you?"

"I rather thought I kidnapped you. I'm glad and proud if you feel like that about my Castle."

"And now you've been marvellously kind to me. You're like the Abbey crowd; they're always doing things to help people."

"But I am one of the Abbey crowd! I lived there for years, you know."

“Yes, well, you’ve brought away something, haven’t you? You do the same sort of things that they do.”

Rosamund laughed, but her eyes were bright. “Joan-Two, thank you! That’s a real tribute, and I appreciate it. I want to do just that; keep the Abbey spirit here in my Castle, although I’ve left the Abbey itself. If you feel I’ve begun to do so, it makes me proud and happy.”

“Oh, I do! I’m sure you’re doing it. Tansy thinks so too.”

“Does she indeed? It’s very nice of you both. Now you ought to go and help in the bustle at the Hall. Come again some Saturday morning, for another ride on Chestnut! I’ll see you at the wedding!”

“Nice girl!” she said, as Joan kissed her and went off, taking Tansy with her to have a look at the Abbey. “Fancy having the courage to say all that to me! We’ve had to lose Jandy Mac, but we’ve kept a big part of her in her daughter. We’re going to appreciate Joan-Two. She seems to have a real understanding of the Abbey and our feeling for it. She must have sensed it for herself, for it’s a thing no one would talk about to her. That shows how sensitive and understanding she is. Joan told me how she said the new bell, Cecily, was like the voice of the Abbey; a beautiful idea, I thought. I’m really glad Jandy Mac has left us her girl! She’s a plucky child, too; I hope we shall see her here often. Chestnut is a good bait, and I may be able to arrange for Tansy to bring Black Boy from Wood End, so that they can ride together. I think I’ll ride with them; they’d be good company, and I need more practice. But Joan-Two must make a start at school, and find her feet in the Hamlet Club—as a member and as a dancer. She may be rather good for the Club; it needs some stiffening!”

CHAPTER ELEVEN
CECILIA RINGS FOR MAIDLIN

Jen woke Maidlin on her wedding morning with a kiss. "Sleeping like a pretty baby! Here's your cup of tea; I wanted to be the one to bring it to you. My deepest sympathy, Maidie!"

Maidlin lay and looked up at her. "How horrid of you, Jenny-Wren! Is being married so dreadful? What about you and Ken?"

"No, I mean it. It's raining."

"Oh, I see. I thought you meant me and Jock. But we've been needing rain, Brownie, and it has been so hot. I don't think I mind. People will mostly come in cars, and it may clear by the afternoon. What sort of rain is it?" She slipped out of bed and went to look at the drenched lawn and trees.

Jen leapt after her and wrapped her in her pink dressing-gown. "You shall *not* start your married life with a bad cold! Come back to bed and drink your tea, you daft child!"

Maidlin snuggled down in bed again. "It's beautiful rain, soft and gentle; just what was needed. The garden looks so happy; it's been thirsty for days. I'm glad it's having a drink. The world will be much fresher for Jock and me to run about in. We're going to concentrate on the Cotswolds, so that we'll have a definite honeymoon to look back on. I'm going to tell Jock the names of the villages with morris traditions and he'll find them on the map."

"Field Town, Longborough, Sherborne, Bledington," Jen chanted. "What a good idea! My poor honeymoon was a week in London, before Ken went off to Kenya and left me behind. Who is it?" at a knock on the door.

"May I come in? This has just come, and Auntie Joan wants Maidlin to have it at once." Littlejan came in with a cable.

"From Joy!" Maidlin said quietly, before she opened it. "I knew she'd be one of the first. *'Every good wish. Best love. Come quickly. Joy. Ivor.'* That's nice! Now I shall feel she's with us to-day."

"There's another, but it's a long way second best," Joan-Two ventured. "From Mother, from her ship, Maid."

"How kind of Jandy Mac!" Maidlin exclaimed. "More good wishes! We ought to be very happy."

"There are telegrams from all sorts of people," Littlejan went on. "But you're to have them with your breakfast. The cables are just the beginning."

"Just to go on with." Maidlin smiled at her. "Thank you for bringing them, Joan-Two. Tell Joan-One I shall be down for breakfast, if I can get rid of Jenny-Wren. I don't want to stay in bed, but with somebody as large as Brownie sitting on me it's hard to move."

"Ungrateful hussy!" Jen removed herself hurriedly. "Yes, you'd better get up. You still have things to put in those trunks for New York. I'm afraid we can't pick primroses for you, as we did on your coronation day, but I'll go and see that your flowers are all right, if they've arrived."

"You and Rosamund made me feel I was twins. Tell Joan-Two how you put two primroses in my shoes, in everything I touched, and on my plate at breakfast. You and Ros were silly, Jenny-Wren!"

“Have it your own way, since you’re a bride,” Jen said haughtily. “Come along, Joan-Two! We’ll leave the bride to dress.”

“I’m going to help Miss Mary.” Littlejan spoke with shy importance. “You and Auntie Joan will stand by Maidlin, and Lindy will keep the twins and Jansy out of the way; but Miss Mary wants somebody to help in lots of little ways, and she’s asked me.”

The pride in her voice touched Jen. She glanced down and said warmly, “Mary’s bagged you, has she? Very wise of her! Are you going to be Mary-Dorothy’s pal, when we all go and leave you and Joan?”

Littlejan coloured. “I couldn’t ever be good enough. But she said last night that perhaps I’d cheer her up when Maid and the twins go abroad. That was just her way of being nice, of course, but I do like her very much.”

“Oh, I don’t know! Mary-Dorothy will miss the twins, after nine years of them, and she’ll miss Maidlin still more. And you’re bound to miss your mother, though you’re being a sport and not saying anything about it.” Jen smiled at her. “You and Mary may very well comfort one another. Mary-Dorothy says she’s afraid of girls, but she really likes them, as you can tell from her books. If I were you, I should make use of Mary when Lindy Bellanne leaves you. Joan has Jack to talk to, hasn’t she?”

Littlejan nodded. “And Baby takes up a lot of her time.”

There had been no chance to make friends with Mary Devine, when she arrived late at night from Jen’s Yorkshire home. She came laden with messages to Maidlin from everybody at The Grange, where Jen’s husband, Sir Kenneth Marchwood, was slowly recovering from the effects of his motor accident in June. His children were there, to keep him company, with Joan’s elder son John; Mary, bringing the latest news of them, had barely had time for a word with Littlejan.

“I didn’t know your mother, so you must tell me about her. Shall we be friends when all these people have gone away?”

“Oh, please! I’d like that!” Littlejan, fresh from reading Mary’s schoolgirl stories, had given her an adoring look of shy admiration.

With Maidlin’s wedding on their minds, there had been no time for more, but a warm little feeling of expectation had been left in Littlejan’s heart.

The cousins from London—Rachel the Writer and Damaris the Dancer—were met at the station by the car and driven straight to the church, because Damaris could spare so little time from her work in town. As Maidlin’s only near relations, except her old aunt in the Abbey, they were to be bridesmaids; they joined the procession in the porch, nodding greetings to Rosamund, Mary, Jen, and the children.

The church was filled with old school friends, for several of the invited Queens had brought chums in their cars. The Head, Miss Macey, was there, and more than one mistress who had taught the bride in the old days. The village had discovered what was going on, after an astounded realisation that this wedding was taking place a week too soon; and all who could leave their work had crowded to the church, including many of Maidlin’s Camp Fire Girls.

She came at last, in a burst of watery sunshine, with Joan and Jack Raymond as her escort, wearing wreath and veil, and a wonderful shimmering gown of silk, with golden patterns interwoven and used with skill and great effect in the making up. At sight of her Rosamund caught her breath, and stared at the dress; and Littlejan heard her murmur—“Amazing Maid! I’ll have something to say to her presently!” It seemed to Littlejan that during the ceremony

the Countess could not take her eyes off the wonderful gown, and she wondered if she would dare to ask why it had given her such a thrill.

The twins, Jansy, and the cousins wore primrose yellow, with touches of springlike green. The twins and Jansy had flowers on their red hair; the twins carried the white train, while Jansy came behind, with a stern schoolgirl eye fixed upon them. Rachel, dark, and Damaris, very fair, wore hats wreathed in flowers. Rosamund, in a gown of golden brown and wearing her Kentisbury pearls, came last; as Joan's dress was green the church seemed full of colour, and the growing sunlight made the picture complete.

"How like Maidie to want colour!" the President of the Hamlet Club murmured to her friend, the mother of the new Queen. "But she's had to deny herself pink, with four Abbey redheads in her retinue!"

"Look at Dr. Robertson's face!" Miriam whispered. "He didn't know she could look like that!"

"It's the veil," Cicely Everett agreed. "She does look rather lovely. What marvellous material she's found for her gown! When she moves there's the most fascinating shimmer of gold."

"Shot with gold. It's beautiful," Miriam agreed. "The pattern reminds me of something, but I can't think what it is."

"I wonder where she found it. I shall ask her," Cicely vowed.

The sun had conquered and was shining in earnest as Maidlin came out on Jock's arm. For a few minutes she held a reception at the church door, and questions were asked, sympathy was showered upon her because of Joy's absence, and good wishes came from everybody for the trip to New York.

"I want a word with you, Madalena Robertson!" Rosamund hinted.

Maidlin, crimson at this first use of her new name, said hurriedly, "Not here, Ros. Were you pleased?"

"I've been in tears of joy," Rosamund assured her.

Then Jock steered Maidlin to their car. "We'll be back from New York quite soon, and then we shall be at the Hall for some time, while we are building our house. We hope you'll all come and see us there, and Maid will tell you about Lady Quellyn. Thank you very much for coming!" and they drove away, followed by cheers and shouts of congratulation.

Though the secret had been kept in the village, the mistress of the inn had been warned, and a wedding lunch was ready for anyone who wanted it. Jen went across the green, on which they had danced so often round the maypole, and acted as hostess, welcoming those who cared to stay; then she drove back to the Hall to the family luncheon party, to find Maidlin and Jock just sitting down, after a chat with Cicely and Miriam, Miss Macey and Margia Lane, who had been given special invitations to come to the house.

Lindy sat at one small table between the twins, to keep an eye on what they ate, for they were used to plain food and with a voyage so soon to come it was important that they should keep well.

"It doesn't matter a scrap if I'm ill!" Jansy said happily, and prepared to enjoy herself.

"What about school next week?" Lindy demanded. "Come and sit with us, and don't be silly, Jansy."

"Jansy, be careful!" said her headmistress, overhearing Jansy's rash remark.

"Oh, bother!" But Jansy obeyed reluctantly.

Littlejan, feeling rather lonely, went up to Rachel Ellerton. "Thank you for being so kind to Mother, when you met her in London and gave her breakfast."

"Are you Mrs. Fraser's girl?" Rachel turned to her eagerly.

"My dear Ray, you can see that! She's the image of Mrs. Fraser." Damaris gave Joan a keen look.

"Yes, I see it now. She called you some queer name. What was it?"

"My name's Joan, but I expect she called me Littlejan." The victim gave her a rueful grin. "Everybody does it, and of course it is difficult for people, when they call Mrs. Raymond Joan. I'm called after her, and Jansy is called Janice after Mother."

"What relation does that make you to Jansy?" Rachel asked seriously.

"Adopted cousin, I think. You write stories, like Miss Mary, don't you?"

"Sometimes, but I've a long way to go before they'll be as good as Mary's."

"Where's your mother? I haven't seen her anywhere," Damaris asked.

"In the Mediterranean. She had to go home in a hurry. She was sorry to miss the wedding. But she sent a cable," Joan said bravely.

Rachel had seen the momentary flicker in her eyes, and she realised how lonely a small girl might feel, in the midst of the family rejoicings, when she had expected to share them with her mother.

"Come and sit with Damaris and me!" she coaxed. "We don't know many people. We come from Cumberland, and although we're Maid's cousins we don't know all her friends."

"We know our friend the Countess," Damaris remarked, as they sat down at a little table. "We're living in her town house, and she sends us hampers of grapes and strawberries. We love Lady Kentisbury! Doesn't she look jolly in that gorgeous gown?"

"Aunty Joan says it's the colour she chose for her first country-dance frock." Joan spoke with importance. "Doesn't Maidlin look lovely?"

"She's wearing a simply marvellous gown. I've never seen anything like it before," Rachel said.

"I suppose I'm the only person here who's annoyed because the wedding was private," Damaris wailed. "I'm all for publicity! I hoped some reporter would say: 'Among the retinue of beautiful bridesmaids, small and large, was Mary Damaris, the well-known dancer, cousin of the bride.' I've a good mind to send it myself, once the news leaks out! And, of course, he'd have mentioned Ray too—'The gifted young writer, Rachel Ellerton.' It's too bad of Maid to get married quietly! She's a public character!"

"It's been much jollier," Rachel asserted. "Nobody here but friends. It's been a lovely happy wedding. Where are they going, Joan? Isn't there a week before they sail?"

Rosamund, sitting at the next little table, heard the question. "That's the world's great secret, Rachel, my dear. Nobody outside this house knows, except me, and we're pledged to secrecy. I see you've made friends with Joan-Two."

"Is that you?" Damaris looked at Joan, who coloured and laughed.

"It's my name for her. Some day you shall see her at Kentisbury on a chestnut pony." Rosamund knew that the reference to Chestnut would bring a gleam to Joan's eyes.

"She didn't know people and neither did we, so we joined forces," Rachel explained. "And we're losing Maidlin, and she's lost her mother, so we're consoling one another."

"You don't seem unhappy," Rosamund retorted. "How did we look in church, Joan-Two? Were we a beautiful colour-scheme?"

“You all looked marvellous, and your frock was just the right background for the rest,” Joan assured her.

“I meant it to be. I wanted to wear the blue one that I had for the Queen’s garden-party, but it didn’t fit into the picture.”

“Lady Kentisbury, may I ask you something?”

“You may ask, Joan-Two. Whether I’ll answer or not is another matter.”

“Why did you look so queer when you saw Maidlin’s dress? And why did you keep staring at it? It is quite marvellous, of course!”

“I’m sorry I looked queer and still more sorry I stared! Because I wove the material.”

“On that weird loom? But didn’t you know?”

“I did not. We had a fearful accident and the dress-piece had ink spilt over it, just as I was finishing it. I was heartbroken; I nearly swooned! We felt it would be impossible to have it cleaned well enough for her to use it; I’d hoped she’d have it made into a frock for her first big concert. I wove her another piece, a blue one, and she claimed the damaged one as well. I was stunned to see it appear as her wedding-dress! Oh, listen! There’s Cecilia, in the Abbey! Oh, good! She was to ring for weddings, wasn’t she?”

Over the clatter of plates and the talk and laughter came the deep contralto of an old bell, sounding her one note in honour of the bride. Maidlin raised her head and listened, with deepening colour. Her eyes sought round the room, found Joan Fraser, and smiled at her.

“Why did she look at you?” Damaris demanded. “She looked for you and then she grinned.”

Joan had coloured too, at the sound of the bell. “They all forgot. They haven’t had Cecilia for a wedding before. I happened to think of her, and I whispered to Maid, when they came back to the house—‘Aren’t you going to ring Cecily?’ She looked quite startled; I could see she’d forgotten. Dr. Jock said—‘What’s that? Oh yes, rather! We can’t be married without Cecily!’ And he told me to run to the Abbey and ask Maid’s Aunt Ann to get a man to ring the bell. They’d have been sorry afterwards, if they hadn’t rung Cecilia.”

“Gosh, yes! They’d never have forgiven themselves!” Damaris exclaimed.

“What a good thing you thought of it!” Rachel added.

“Joan-Two calls Cecilia ‘The Voice of the Abbey,’” Rosamund said. “It would have been a terrible mistake if the Abbey hadn’t raised its voice for Maidlin.”

“They’d have had to have the wedding all over again. Jolly good lunch,” Damaris said. “I’m eating too much, and Ray’s giving me warning glances. She thinks I’ll be a heavy Goose-girl to-night. Who cooked these luscious dishes? Not Mrs. Spindle, I bet!”

Joan-Two grinned. “It was a fearful problem! Everybody knew Mrs. Spindle wasn’t good enough, but nobody could bear to tell her so. Aunty Joan says she’s soft towards Mrs. Spindle, because of things that happened long ago. No one wanted to hurt her feelings, so they thought they’d need to have an outsider send in the stuff. Then Lady Jen came, and she said *she* wasn’t soft where Susie Spindle was concerned! She went to her and said straight out that Miss Bellanne, Lindy’s sister, would expect to cook the wedding breakfast, as she’s to be Maid’s cook and housekeeper, and Mrs. Spindle could either work under her or take a few days’ holiday. Mrs. Spindle cried, and Lady Jen told her not to be childish, so she shut up and stayed to help. Anne Bellanne raced back from Cheshire and took charge, and this beautiful lunch happened. She has all sorts of certificates for cooking, Lindy says. Maidlin’s in luck to have her for The Pallant.”

“We seem to be in luck, too,” Damaris laughed. “What names for programmes!—Belinda Bellanne! Anne Bellanne!”

“You’ll see Lindy’s name outside the concert halls,” Joan-Two observed. “Her voice is lovely already. But when you go to see Maidlin, Anne Bellanne will cook your meals.”

“I shall go often to The Pallant, if this lunch is a sample of her cooking!” Damaris proclaimed.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“TRIUMPH” IN THE BARN

“Now, Maid! How did you do it?” Rosamund had followed Maidlin, when she went to change her dress.

“I did hope you’d be pleased! I took the piece to the people who made your lovely gown, and asked them what they thought. They saw the places where the stain had been; the cleaners had got it out, but it didn’t look right, so I’d put it away and not used bits of it, as I thought of doing at first. They said it would be a thousand pities not to use it and asked if they might try what they could do. They used some process on it and then arranged the material so that the damaged parts didn’t show; it’s marvellously done. It won’t wear for ever, as such wonderful handwoven stuff should do, because all the work has weakened it; but you don’t wear your wedding-dress every day!”

“I’m thankful you’ve had the use of it, after all,” Rosamund said fervently. “And I’m proud that you were married in my frock!”

“Nothing else would have given me the same feeling,” Maidlin admitted. “Jock says I must take it to New York, for Ivor’s Festival. I think it will last for one concert or two.”

“I’m prouder than proud! You’re lovely in it, Maidie!” Rosamund surveyed her happily.

“Help me out of it. Aren’t you my supporting Matron? What’s this?”

Someone was thumping on the door. Rosamund went to reply, and found Jen there.

“Has Maidie taken off her finery? Then don’t let her. We want her in the barn. Put some decent shoes on her and bring her along; those satin slippers are no good on damp grass. I’m determined she shan’t catch cold to-day! We’re going to have a little party for her. Margia will play on Red Cecily’s old fiddle. It’s a sudden idea of mine; quite impromptu!”

“Quite crazy!” Rosamund exclaimed. “How many people have you to dance? You won’t get a set. And how can we dance in these ceremonial garments?”

“Joan and me, Cicely and Miriam, you and Maid, the twins——”

“Not me, Brownie.” Maidlin spoke with quiet firmness. “I can’t dance without Jock. I can’t leave him out of anything to-day.”

“He likes to watch you dance,” Jen urged.

“Another day I will. Not to-day, Jenny-Wren.”

Jen looked down at her and saw that nothing would move her.

“Then you can sit with him and be The Presence; the Lord and Lady, and we’ll honour you and dance up the room to you. Come on, Maid! You haven’t got to catch a train. Just for half an hour! You ought to have a dance for your wedding!”

“But what about our clothes, you mad thing? We aren’t dressed for dancing,” Rosamund protested.

“We’re going to do ‘Hunsdon House,’ and ‘Oranges and Lemons.’ Nice and quiet and slow,” Jen retorted. “And ‘Triumph’; I’m dying to do ‘Triumph’ for Maid. Be a sport, Ros-Countess! We shan’t spoil our frocks with any of those stately things.”

“Shall we give in to her, Maid?” Rosamund raised her eyebrows. “It’s for you to say; this is your day.”

“I think it would be fun,” Maidlin said simply. “Jock and I will look on. I really wouldn’t dare to dance in this frock.”

“Perhaps you’d better not,” Rosamund conceded. “You and Jock can be Queens of the May. But have you ten people without her, Brownie?”

“Sure. Mary-Dorothy will love to do ‘Triumph’ for Maidie, and Joan-Two and Miss Belinda can be hauled through; they only need to go where they’re put, if they dance as women. Rachel dances too, doesn’t she? And Jansy’s quite good. Fling that train over your arm, Maid! I’ve sent the rest racing to the barn.”

“I’d have liked to see Madam President racing across the lawn in her wedding garments!” Rosamund mocked. She gave her arm to Maidlin. “Come, bride! Let me support you to your barn! Doesn’t Mary Damaris condescend to do country-dances?”

“She says she’d point her toes and be a bad example. She watches with a funny little grin, as if she found the dances very odd, after her ballet work. But I expect she and Rachel will have to rush back to town,” Maidlin explained.

She smiled at Jock, who had heard the plan and was waiting for her. “We’re not to be allowed to vanish in peace just yet. Do you mind?”

He gave her his arm, as Rosamund laughed and surrendered her place to him. “We aren’t in a hurry. Are you going to dance in that amazing frock?”

“I wouldn’t dare. It won’t stand very much, and I’d like to wear it in New York. Besides—you won’t be dancing.”

“I’ll give you up to your pals for half an hour. I love to see you dance.”

“Another time,” Maidlin said happily. “To-day you can watch Jen; she’s a lovely dancer. So are Joan and Rosamund; and Miriam and Cicely! The best dancers of the Club are here. It will be worth watching, though they aren’t thinking about that. Jen says we’re to be the May Queens.”

Jock laughed and led her carefully through the Abbey.

“I want to dance ‘Never Love Thee More,’ so that we can face up and honour Jock and Maidie,” Jen was proclaiming, as they reached the tithe-barn. “But I don’t think the bride would like the suggestion in the title.”

“We’re proof against suggestions of that sort,” Jock assured her, as he placed a chair for Maidlin. “My wife isn’t afraid I’ll never love her more.”

The twins rushed to her and arranged her train round her feet, as the maids-of-honour did at coronations. “There! Pretty, Aunty Maid!”

“Thanks, Twinnies. That’s very pretty,” the bride smiled at them.

“Tell me where you found that marvellous frock, Mrs. Robertson!” the President of the Hamlet Club demanded.

“Ask the Countess,” Maidlin retorted. “There isn’t another like it in the world. I’m very proud of it.”

“Is it really hand-woven, and by Rosamund?” Cicely’s eyes widened.

“That’s what it reminded me of!” Miriam exclaimed. “The patterns are like those on the frocks Joy and Jen used to wear.”

“True, O White Queen! They are like our frocks. Take your partners for ‘The Triumph’, if you please!” Jen took on the duties of M.C. “‘Triumph,’ for Jock and Maidie!”

Each pair of ‘men,’ leading a woman up the middle of the set under a triumphal arch of linked hands, smiled at the newly-married couple, and Maidlin bowed gravely in response, with heightened colour.

“Most embarrassing!” Jock murmured. “Much worse than being presented to the Queen! Can’t we get away soon by ourselves?”

“In a few minutes. It’s pleasing them so much and they’re such special friends. You don’t really mind, do you?”

“No, but I want you all to myself.”

“You’ll have plenty of me presently; too much.”

“Not possible. What are they doing now?”

“ ‘Hunsdon House.’ Watch the twins! Margaret’s being the man, of course.”

The twins, with mischievous eyes, were exaggerating their honours, bowing and curtsying whenever they met their partners, Elizabeth holding out her primrose skirt to the fullest width and sinking almost to the ground, Margaret flourishing an imaginary hat and displaying a very new wrist-watch, Jock’s gift, of which she was immensely proud.

Maidlin smiled. “Little monkeys! They aren’t supposed to do that, as they know quite well. But it’s tempting; I always want to do it myself. The others merely bob, or give a little nod; do you see?”

“They may be monkeys, but they’re very pretty,” Jock said. “I shall be proud of our large family on our voyage! What is it now?”

“ ‘Speed the Plough.’ See them reminding the twins? ‘Pass left, turn right! Pass right, turn left!’” Maidlin quoted. “It’s another gentle dance.”

“I want a cup of tea after all this!” Jock proclaimed. “It’s time you and I were on our travels, if we’re to get home to-night.”

Maidlin called to Rosamund, who was standing neutral at the top of the set, with Joan Fraser as her woman.

“Ros, Jock and I must go. If you want to undress me, can you slip away? I must have somebody to take me out of this frock.”

Rosamund said a word to Littlejan. “Scoot to the village, Joan-Two, and say—‘They’re dancing in the barn!’ to everybody you meet. Someone’s sure to come and it will make better sets.” And they withdrew from the dance, to the indignation of the next couple moving up the set, who had expected to be visited by them and instead found themselves standing out as neutrals.

It was only when Rosamund had conducted the bride and groom back to the Hall that she stopped and wailed, “And we never danced ‘Sellenger’s’ round you! Oh, Maid, come back for five minutes! Be a sport!”

“Not if I know it!” Maidlin’s deep smile glimmered in her dark eyes. “Jock would simply hate it. I hoped you wouldn’t think of it. I was trying to get away before it occurred to you or Jen.”

“I’m an ass!” Rosamund said ruefully. “What a chance we’ve missed! We’d have swept you both into the circle, if we’d only thought of it!”

“You can go back and be a maypole, if you like. But I’d rather you’d attend to your duties and undress me,” said the bride. “Be very careful, Ros! I love my gown, and I want to sing *Messiah* in it, in New York.”

“I think it’s been a happy wedding, in spite of Joy, Maidie?” Rosamund asked, helping her gently out of her dress.

“A very happy wedding, Ros dear!” Maidlin smiled at her. “Please tell Joan, and Jen, and Anne Bellanne, and everybody that I thank them all very much.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LITTLEJAN AND THE HAMLET CLUB

There was a tap on the door of Mary Devine's study. She looked up from the proofs she was correcting. It was ten days since Maidlin's wedding, and the departure for New York was over. The twins and Lindy, in wild excitement, were on the Atlantic Ocean, and the newly-married couple would hand over their trust to Joy very soon. The Hall was strangely quiet, without Margaret's shouts and Elizabeth's firm protests—"Don't scream like that, Twin! People don't like it, and, anyway, you'll wake Baby Jim."

Not only Mary would have been glad to hear the voices and the scampering feet of the twins, but perhaps Mary missed them worst of all, after nine years in which they had seemed to fill the house.

"Come in!" she said, and wondered if Joan had come for a private talk. Jen, Rosamund and Maidlin had made a habit of doing it, but Joan had never come, having a husband with whom everything was shared.

Joan Fraser slipped in. "Miss Mary, may I talk to you?" She spoke with shy courage; the courage of desperation, Mary thought.

"Of course you may, Littlejan. But oughtn't you to be in bed? Sit here, and I'll light the gas fire."

Joan cuddled her feet in her dressing-gown. "I've been in bed. But I began to think, and suddenly I just had to come."

"I'm glad you came, if it was as bad as that," Mary said quietly. She fetched a pan and began to heat milk on the gas ring, and brought brown and gold pottery cups and a plate of biscuits.

Joan watched with fascinated eyes. "Are you really going to treat me? Like you used to do Lady Jen and the rest? Lindy told me they went to your room to talk, and she said she'd smelt coffee."

Mary smiled. "Would you rather have coffee?"

"You think milk would be better for me, don't you?" Joan asked shrewdly.

"It may help you to go to sleep. I want it for myself too. I don't need anything to keep me awake to-night. I was working too late; but I wanted to do just a little more."

"And I've interrupted you! Is that a new book?" Joan looked in awe at the long strips, decorated with marginal scrawls in red ink.

"Those are called galleys. It was time for me to stop. Are you missing Lindy very badly?"

"I am, rather. She was so sensible; I could ask her things."

Mary made no comment, but she marvelled inwardly that Littlejan, obviously wanting to ask things, should have come to her, and not have gone to Joan. Lacking in self-confidence even now, Mary found it amazing that a thirteen-year-old should choose to talk to her, and she hoped anxiously that she would be able to satisfy Joan-Two and give the help that was so evidently needed.

It had been apparent to everybody that something was wrong. Littlejan and Jansy had been at school for several days; Joan-Two's excitement had died down and she was very quiet. She said little at home, but showed none of the radiant enjoyment that would have seemed natural.

Jansy, questioned by her mother, said simply, "She doesn't like the Hamlet Club."

That explained everything—except the reason for Joan’s feeling. She had looked forward so intensely to joining the Club, which was one of the most important of the school’s activities and had played so large a part in the history of the Abbey Girls; if the Club had disappointed her, this reserve was just what was to be expected. She had not spoken of her trouble; she had merely withdrawn into herself and was thinking over the new position and adjusting to it slowly.

So far, Joan the elder had understood; the underlying reason had yet to be explained. She was waiting patiently for her namesake to speak, not teasing her with questions. Joan watched Littlejan and gave silent sympathy, but did nothing to force her confidence.

“She’s in trouble,” she said to Mary. “We’ll wait till she wants to talk about it.”

Was it possible, Mary wondered, and marvelled at the thought, that Littlejan was going to speak to her, rather than to Joan?

She poured out the milk and supplied her guest with biscuits. “Is Jansy asleep?”

“Yes. I didn’t wake her. What pretty things you have! Are they what Lady Jen gave you?”

Mary assented, wondering for how long Joan-Two would temporise. She evidently shrank from speaking out.

“Do you mind if I call you what the others do? I like the sound of it so much,” Littlejan pleaded. “Miss Mary-Dorothy would be heaps jollier than Miss Mary.”

Mary smiled at her. “I think it sounds dreadful. Leave out the ‘Miss,’ and it will go better.”

“Oh! May I? I’m only an infant, and they’ve known you such a long time, and you’ve written all those books——”

Mary laughed. “Miss Mary-Dorothy sounds all wrong, Littlejan. If I may call you that—and I like it; it’s all your own name and nobody else’s—you may call me Mary-Dorothy.”

“That’s marvellous! I feel so much more at home.” Littlejan sighed, and sat staring at the fire.

Mary watched her quietly and waited. But at last she thought it kind to help. “Are you going to bed without telling me, Joan-Two?”

Joan sat up with a jerk, shaking back her loose dark curls.

“No! I can’t bear it. I must talk to somebody.”

“I guessed that. But why not go to Mrs. Raymond?”

“I can’t. It’s about her old school, and the Club. It feels like criticising. I can’t say things about the Club to Aunty Joan.”

“I see.” Mary looked at her thoughtfully, with deepening respect. “Well, I’m quite outside the school. Is it easier to tell me?”

“I thought it might be. It’s the Club,” and Littlejan, having broken the ice, poured out her trouble. “I looked forward to it so much. I loved all I’d heard about the Club from Mother; it seemed so splendid, with the Queens, and the dances, and—and I thought the motto was *fine*! You know about the motto of the Club, Mary-Dorothy?”

“‘To be or not to be’—with the idea behind it of making the right choice at a crisis?” Mary’s eyes were bright with interest.

“Yes! It was meant to help us to choose properly, when the time comes. I’ve seen Mrs. Everett; she’s the President, and it was her idea. I think she’s marvellous. But the Club, Mary! The poor Hamlet Club!” It was a wail of distress, a real cry for help and comfort.

“Tell me about the Club, Littlejan. I’ve only seen them dancing.”

“They’re so little! So young, Mary-Dorothy! I thought there would be splendid Queens that I could look up to; Queens like Lady Jen and Maidlin and Lady Kentisbury must have

been! They simply aren't there. Last year's Queen has left; the Queen before her was a slacker and she might as well have left too. Mirry, this year's Queen, is a darling. She welcomed me beautifully, and took me to my form-room and told the girls that I came from the Abbey, and did everything she could to make me feel at home. At the party on Saturday she had the first dance with me; it was 'Haste to the Wedding,' so I knew it. She found me partners and chose dances that I could do; I don't know very many yet. She said how jolly my green frock was, just like Jansy's; she couldn't have done one other thing for me. I'm not grumbling about her; she's a good Queen and she does her job marvellously. But—but she's a year younger than I am!"—again that cry of distress. "Oh, Mary-Dorothy! Don't you see?"

"I do see," Mary said, with real sympathy. "We've wondered what was the matter; we saw there was something wrong."

"They're so little—so young!" Littlejan said again. "I'm one of the oldest in the Club. The seniors don't care. As for the motto, they've forgotten all about it. I asked one girl, and she said: 'Never heard of it. We just dance and have a good time.' That *isn't* the whole of the Hamlet Club, Mary!"

"No, there's something wrong," Mary agreed. "Do you know why the seniors are so slack?"

"I was frightfully cheeky and I asked Alison, the head girl," Littlejan confessed ruefully. "She used to belong to the Club, but she's given it up. Alison looked at me as if I was an insect, of course; but she was quite decent. She said: 'You're the little Australian in the Third, aren't you? The Club? Oh, I don't know. We got tired of it, I suppose. We kept having the same old dances, and there seemed more thrilling things to do. Perhaps we're a bit grown-up for country-dancing.' That riled me; I couldn't help it. I thought of all the lovely people here, *quite* grown-up!—and I said: 'The Countess of Kentisbury isn't too grown-up to dance—or Lady Marchwood—or Lady Quellyn—or Mrs. Raymond; or Maidlin, and she's a famous singer! They all seem to like it still.' She went rather red; and she said: 'Why don't they teach us some new dances, then? They seem satisfied to go on doing "Newcastle" for ever, world without end. They may enjoy dancing now and then, but they're too busy with babies and engagements to come and look after the Club. I used to belong and I liked it, but lately it's got into a rut; all right for the juniors, who haven't had so long of it, but stale for us. The kids are still thrilled by "Newcastle" and "Pop goes the Weasel," but we seem to have been doing them for years.' I asked her if people ever thought about the motto, and she said—'It's out of *Hamlet*, isn't it?' And that was all she had to say about it, Mary!" And Littlejan gazed at her with keen distress in her dark eyes.

Mary spoke quickly, with real sympathy. "I am so sorry, Littlejan. It has been a bad blow, and you were hoping for so much. I can't see the way through your difficulties, but I'm sure of your first step. Take that, and the next one may become clear. You must tell Joan; or you must let me tell her, but it would be better for you to do it yourself. She may be able to help."

"But it seems like criticising her and the others!" Littlejan urged. "I'd have to tell her what Alison said! How can I, Mary-Dorothy?"

"She ought to know, if there's that feeling in the school. Far from criticising, you'll be helping. You'd let her down badly if you knew and didn't tell her. Don't you see that?"

Littlejan stared at her. "No, I hadn't seen it like that. You do go right to the bottom of things! You really think I'd be letting her down if I didn't tell her?"

"Of course I do. She ought to know. She'll find a way to help."

Joan's chin dropped into her hand and she sat gazing at the fire. "I don't want to make a fuss and make everybody uncomfortable. They've been so marvellously good to me. How can I tell them they've been slackers to the Club?" Her curls fell across her hot cheeks. "Things had better stay as they are. If I don't say anything it will be all right and they'll go on being quite comfortable about the Club."

"Oh, you can't do that!" Mary cried, such conviction in her tone that Littlejan looked at her, startled.

"Why can't I? Nobody knows how I feel. And anyway, it's only me. What does it matter?"

"It isn't you at all; it's the Club," Mary insisted. "It matters for the sake of the school and all those girls. The Club helped the school, in the old days; it isn't helping now. You, as a newcomer, have seen it, and you've found the reason. The Club has forgotten its motto. Nobody has been interested enough to remind them of its meaning. You've hit on the truth. You can't let things slide and do nothing about it."

"I could," Littlejan argued. "I could clear out of the Club and go in for cricket. They like my bowling."

"I'm sure they do! But you wouldn't be satisfied. You've joined the Club, and the motto is your motto too. You can't turn it down."

Littlejan flung back her head and stared at her. "Mary-Dorothy, what do you mean? What has the motto—oh, I see!"

"I thought you'd see. 'To be or not to be'—and you have to choose what you'll do or won't do."

"Gosh!" Littlejan said very quietly. She gave Mary a long straight look. "You think this is a choosing-time for me?"

"Well, isn't it?"

"I suppose so." She turned to stare into the fire again.

Mary watched her gravely. "You needn't dread it, Littlejan. Joan couldn't be anything but kind and understanding."

"I know, but she might feel hurt, or think she had slacked, and I'd hate that. But I'll do it," and Joan-Two sat up. "I'll tell her. I shall say you made me do it, so that she won't feel I wanted to crit. her and the rest."

"Yes, tell her that," Mary agreed. "I don't know where it will lead you, but you must be a loyal member of the Club, and if you know why it is going downhill you must try to check it. The first step is to tell Joan."

"I'll tell her to-morrow. I'd better go to bed now."

"I hope you'll sleep." Mary smiled at her. "Don't lie awake thinking what you're going to say to Joan. You'll know all right when the time comes."

"I've a lot to think about, all the same," Littlejan said gravely. "Thank you for making me understand."

"That girl ought to be Queen of the Club some day," Mary said to herself, as she cleared away cups and plates.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JEN IN TROUBLE

Joan listened quietly, as Littlejan poured out her story. She was knitting a baby jacket and her eyes never left the pattern till Joan-Two had finished. Then she looked up.

“Did you hate very much having to tell me?” she asked, and smiled.

“Loathed it,” Joan-Two said fervently. “But Mary-Dorothy put it up to me.”

“There’s truth in what they say,” Joan said thoughtfully. “We have been busy with babies lately, and it’s right that we should be. The Club ought not to depend on us. But the Club needs help. There should be one person, at least, in the school keen enough to keep things alive. I wish you were a little older, Joan-Two! If you’d been there for a few years you’d do the job splendidly.”

Littlejan reddened. “I’m no use; I’m only a kid. I’m afraid there isn’t anybody.”

“I’m not so sure that you’re no use. Coming fresh, you see things as an outsider. You’ve been useful already. I’ll think about it, Littlejan. We’ll find a way to help.”

“If we could have some new dances,” Joan-Two suggested shyly. “It’s all right for me; they’re all new and I love every one of them. ‘Newcastle’ is simply marvellous, the way it works out at the end.”

Joan laughed and nodded. “And you’d never be tired of it? That’s how we feel; you must be a true dancer! But if the girls are feeling stale over ‘Newcastle’—well, they’re young and they like novelties,” she said tolerantly.

“Are there any new dances? Can there be?”

“Oh, yes! New ones are discovered, in country places, or in ancient books, or in America, from time to time. But we’ve been so fond of our old set that we haven’t troubled about them.”

“If the Club could learn the new ones, wouldn’t that help?” Littlejan asked eagerly. “Are they printed in books? How did you learn the dances, in the beginning?”

“I have to confess that we took them out of books, and quite often we took them wrongly.” Joan’s eyes gleamed with amusement. “Then we went to a dancing school, and we found out just where we were wrong. I’ll tell you about it some day; we had several shocks! I’m afraid we can’t go back to school again now, Littlejan.”

“But we must do something!”

“Oh, yes! The first step is plain enough. We must tell the President.”

“Mrs. Everett? She’s splendid, but I’m a scrap terrified of her,” Littlejan admitted.

“You don’t need to be. She’s always kind.”

“Oh, well, she’s a pal of yours! She wouldn’t mind, if you told her.”

“What about school? Work, I mean; how are you getting on?”

“All right. It’s odd to be starting new books and doing things in new ways. But I can keep up, if I work. I ought to be doing my prep. now.”

“I think you should get on with it,” Joan agreed. “The Hamlet Club is important, but it isn’t the first thing. Take a good place in class, and you’ll have a better chance to help the Club. The girls will feel that you count.”

“They do now,” Littlejan owned, reddening. “Because of cricket, you know. That rule has been changed, and we’re allowed to do both. But it’s an experiment, and if we slack at

lessons, the rule will be put back and we shall have to choose between games and dancing, as you had to do when you were at school. They like my bowling and they're going to put me in the second team next season. But if it comes to choosing I shall be a Hamlet."

"Make that plain to the rest. Then they'll work hard and there won't be any choosing," Joan advised. "I shouldn't wonder if it's rather a good idea. Carry on, Littlejan! When they know you better, you may be able to help the Club in earnest."

"You won't forget about the motto?" Littlejan ventured. "I like it most awfully; and I thought it was a marvellous idea. But they've forgotten."

The regret in her voice touched Joan. "We'll see what we can do. But the motto has never been a thing to talk about. We can't preach at the girls."

"Oh, that would be ghastly!" Joan-Two cried in horror. "I never meant that!"

"No. We have to find the way to do it without preaching. Let me think it over! There's no hurry."

"Can I speak to you, Joan?" It was Jen's voice at the door. She had gone back to her own home, when Jock and Maidlin had left, and had been busy preparing for the return of Kenneth and the children. In a few days she would go north to fetch them.

"Surely, Jenny-Wren. I thought it was time you came for a chat. Jen, is anything the matter?" Joan asked sharply.

Joan-Two turned to hurry away. From the doorway she caught a glimpse of tall Jen, on her knees beside Joan, and heard her cry—"Joan! I'm frightened! Comfort me, Joan!"

Littlejan closed the door quietly and crept away, to try to concentrate on algebra and French verbs. But what she had seen kept coming between her and the books and the attempt was not very successful.

"Poor Lady Jen! Something's wrong," she thought.

Joan's arms were round Jen. "My dear, what is it? Kenneth? Baby? The boys?"

"I'm an ass," Jen said brokenly. "It may be nothing. Ken, Joan; I've had the doctor's report. I made him promise to send me reports before I came away; I wouldn't have come, if it hadn't been for Joy and Maidlin. They aren't satisfied with Ken's progress; that's all, really all. He isn't getting on as fast as they'd like. The doctor feels as if there was something mysterious fighting against him, and he can't trace it. There may be nothing in it, but I'm worried, Joan. I'm going at once—to-morrow."

"It may be only a slight set-back, and he'll go ahead again in a few days, Jenny-Wren."

"I know. I keep telling myself he'll be all right. But he ought to be nearly well again, and he isn't, Joan. He isn't at all well. He wanted me to come here, and I wanted to get things ready for him; but I didn't like leaving him."

"You'll be with him by to-morrow night, dear."

"I wish I could be there to-night!"

"Take the car and go, then. Henderson would drive you; he's very careful. Or we'll lend you Frost."

"Oh, Henderson would do it! But do you think I ought to do that? I don't want to frighten them, and if I turn up in the small hours, it will seem like making too much of it. It might bother Ken."

"What did the doctor say? Was there anything definite, to give you an excuse for rushing home?"

"Ken had a bit of temperature, and there seemed nothing to account for it. That was all, but it seemed to confirm the idea that there might be something wrong, and the doc. doesn't

like it. It happened once before; his temp. went up suddenly and he was very limp; and there seemed no reason for it.”

Joan knit her brows. “It’s difficult, if the doctor doesn’t know what’s the matter. I think you should go. You’ll have a bad night, if you stay here.”

“I’d like to go,” Jen owned. She knelt by Joan’s knee, quivering all over. “Joan! If you knew how I rebel! I feel so wicked sometimes.”

“Tell me, Jenny-Wren. You’ll feel better.”

“All this trouble for Ken, just because a village woman didn’t keep her infant from running out into the road! It seems so unjust. Ken has always been good to everybody, and I’ve tried to be the same. Why should he have to lie there all summer, and suffer? I feel so bitter, and it’s not like me, Joan. It makes me feel rotten. But it’s so hard on Ken!”

Joan held her tightly. “You’re losing grip on your faith, my dear, and you’re usually so brave. Don’t think I blame you! I don’t see how you can help it. But you must get back to your own strong self. You may need all your courage presently. Jen, there’s not much one can say, but—think, dear! Suppose the children had been in the car! Suppose you had lost Andrew and Tony,—and—my John?”

Jen drew a long breath. “Joan—yes! I had forgotten. Oh, Joan, thank you!”

Joan held her in her arms. “Suppose Kenneth had been killed outright, or—or so injured that he could never move again? Suppose he had lived, but hadn’t known you? Suppose he’d never spoken to you again?”

Jen looked up, wild horror in her eyes. “You mean, so badly hurt that his brain had been gone and yet he’d lived and I’d had to see him lying like that? Oh, I’ll never rebel again! It might have been much worse! We’ve had a beautiful summer together, in spite of his illness; long, happy talks, till—it’s queer, Joan, but I’ve really felt I was getting to know Ken better than I’d ever done. I hadn’t thought it was possible. He’s shown me a deeper side that I hadn’t realised was there. And he might—you’ve shown me what he might have been! I’m sorry I was a baby.”

“I’m not sorry,” Joan said firmly. “You’ve been bottling up those feelings and that’s not wise. I’m glad you told me.”

“It’s wonderful to have you to talk to.” Jen gave a tired sigh. “I go to Mary-Dorothy, of course, and she always helps. If it had been only Joy who was here I should have gone to Mary now; sorry, but that’s true! You’re different; you’re you, and there isn’t another of you anywhere.”

“We’ve known one another for fifteen years. Jen, didn’t the doctor give you any idea what he was afraid of for Kenneth? Had he no theory about this temperature?”

Joan knit her brows, her eyes full of fear. “I didn’t understand. He said something about Kenya, where Ken lived for some years; about germs that might have been dormant, and this time of weakness might have given them the chance to develop.” She looked at Joan anxiously. “I didn’t know what he meant, but Ken got better, and I thought it had been a false alarm.”

“It might mean an illness,” Joan said soberly. “Could you bring him home—by ambulance, of course—so that you’d be near the rest of us? You must keep fit, Jen, in case you have to fight for Kenneth!”

Jen’s hands clenched. “I’ll fight till I drop! Ken won’t die for want of nursing.”

“And you won’t lose your faith in God’s goodness?”

“No, Joan-Queen, I won’t. I went to pieces for a moment, but it was only with fright. I’m sorry; I won’t do it again. You’ve helped a lot. I won’t say that Ken’s accident was cruel. It *was* an accident, and all accidents are cruel. God didn’t make it happen; I don’t believe that for an instant. But”—and her hands clenched again—“I could shake that woman who didn’t look after her baby!”

“Some of them have a terribly hard time,” Joan reminded her. “Probably several other kiddies, in an overcrowded kitchen; perhaps she was washing or cooking; and the baby escaped.”

“And Ken has had to lie helpless for months. You’re kind and gentle and you make allowances for people, but he isn’t your man! You haven’t had to see him having pain, and—oh! so tired of it, and yet being good and brave and never grouching! I’ve thought more of Ken this summer——” she paused and stared at Joan wide-eyed.

“And isn’t that worth while?” Joan asked quietly. “Pull yourself together, Jenny-Wren! You know Ken better than you did; you think more of him. Two good things have come out of your sad summer, and you found them for yourself. Don’t look on it as all bad! Be as brave as Ken!”

“I’m an utter ass,” Jen said humbly. “It’s true, Joan, and I won’t ever grouse again. I thought I’d seen every side of it and they were all bad; and instead, I’d only looked halfway. You’ve shown me the other side.”

“Go and speak to Henderson about running you back to-night. You’ll feel better when you’re on your way. Mary must go with you; yes, of course! I don’t need her, now that the great exodus has taken place, and you may want her. ’Phone me when you know what time you’re starting, and she’ll be ready.”

“That will be all the comfort in the world,” Jen said wistfully. “Mary-Dorothy stood by me once before, when I raced home because of Father’s illness, and Ken drove us through the night. Do you mind if I tell Mary what we’ve been saying, Joan? She’ll understand, and I must tell her why I’m frightened about Ken. I’m afraid I am still frightened, you know.”

“You can’t help that. It’s very alarming to think he may have an illness before him,” Joan agreed, deepest sympathy in her face. “Tell Mary, of course. Ring me up and say how you found him, won’t you?”

Jen kissed her and hurried away, still not too sure of herself, and Joan, looking grave, went to speak to Mary.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN FAMILY PLANS

"How much did you understand, Littlejan?" Joan asked, as she kissed Jansy and then her namesake good-night.

"Lady Jen is bothered about something, and it's rather bad. I don't know what's wrong," Joan-Two said.

"She's anxious about her husband. He isn't getting on well and she's afraid he may be ill again. She's gone, to be with him, and Mary has gone too, to keep her company in the car. I'm afraid you won't be able to consult Mary again for a little while."

"I only went to her because I didn't want to criticise you and the Club—to you, you know," Joan said shyly.

"I understand that. Doesn't this help to explain why we have seemed to neglect the Club? Each of us has some responsibility; it has to happen, once people marry and have families. Even before this accident, Jen had constant anxiety about Rosemary, who has never been strong. Rosamund has to watch her delicate husband, and has two babies on her hands. Joy has her duty to Sir Ivor, whose work takes him to all sorts of places. I live too far away to be any real use; it's just a chance that I'm here at present."

"And you have little babies too. I do see it," Joan-Two said earnestly. "It's all right, Auntie Joan. I've been thinking; you people can't run the Club for us. You've done your share; now we have to run it for ourselves. I'll make the girls see it too. You don't mind if I tell them about Lady Jen and Sir Kenneth? It isn't a secret, is it?"

"No, but don't say too much. Just tell them he isn't so well and she's had to hurry away to be with him."

"I won't gossip," Littlejan promised. "But if I hear anybody say she ought to do things for the Club, I must say something or burst."

"Don't burst," Joan said laughing. "Are you going to reform the Club single-handed?"

"I can't do anything, but I thought perhaps I could buck up Alison—she's the head girl, you know—to do it."

"That's not a bad plan. I've had an idea, too. I'll tell you about it presently."

"Mother, when are John and the other boys coming home?" Jansy asked, from her corner.

Joan looked at her thoughtfully. Jansy would have to know. She went and sat on her daughter's bed.

"If I tell you, Jansy, you mustn't lie awake thinking about it. I'm afraid you aren't going to see John, or Andrew and Tony, at present."

Jansy sat up. "But why not? Aren't they coming to school?"

"No, that's the point. We feel it's time they went to a school for boys, not just to Miss Macey's Kindergarten. Auntie Jen has always meant to send Andrew and Tony to the prep. part of a very good school in York; her brothers went there, and she wants her boys to go too; and Uncle Ken agrees with her. They're sending Andrew and Tony now, and we're going to send John with them. He's such pals with the other two and they get on so well together. He's sometimes difficult when he's alone with you; he needs to be with other boys. He's been like an only boy for all these years; it isn't good for him. So Father will go to York to see the school and make final plans. This new illness of Uncle Kenneth's makes it necessary to decide

things in a hurry. They may come back to the Manor, or they may stay at the Grange, as the doctors decide; but in either case they must send the boys away and have the house quiet.”

“The boys could come here,” Jansy urged. “It will be horrid not to see John till Christmas.” She looked very downcast at the prospect.

“Very horrid,” her mother agreed. “I don’t like it one bit; I want John to come home as much as you do. But you’re all growing up, and partings have to come. You knew John would need to go away to school; you’ll have to be a boarder yourself, when we go home, unless Maidlin and Jock will have you and Littlejan here. School’s important now for both you and John, and as you’re lucky enough to have your home in the country you must expect to go away. Ask Littlejan; she knows all about it.”

“It’s not so bad, Jansy,” Joan-Two said. “You have to get keen on school things and look forward to the hols.”

“I don’t mind; I’ll like it. But I wanted John to be here.”

“I’m sorry I shan’t see him and the other boys again,” Littlejan admitted.

Joan smiled at her. “We must have a meeting for you all at Christmas; a house-warming, for our new home. I must have John for Christmas! He and Tony are very small to be sent away to school, but it’s time for Andrew to go, so it seems a good plan for them all to start together. Aunt Jen says the school has several tiny boys, and the Matron is a sort of house-mother and is quite a lovely, kindly person. We’ll hear what Father thinks when he has seen the school; he’s going as soon as we know a little more about Uncle Ken. Father might be some help to Aunt Jen.”

“Is Uncle Ken very bad?” Jansy’s eyes widened. “I thought he was getting better?”

“We thought so too. We don’t know yet, but there’s something wrong. We may hear more in the morning. Now I want you girls to go to sleep, but perhaps you’d like to talk just for a few minutes. Would you?”

“Yes, please.” Jansy sounded subdued.

“May I get into her bed?” Joan-Two asked. “I’ll tell her about our boys. It’s much worse for me, Jansy. I haven’t seen them for two years, for Mother picked me up in Australia and brought me here; we didn’t go back to the island. Father called at Sydney and I saw him sometimes, but not the boys. It’s going to be years before I see them; that’s what comes of living on an island! They’ll have turned from babies into big boys. It’s nothing just to wait till Christmas!”

“Poor Littlejan! Or rather—brave Littlejan!” Joan smiled again. “But don’t you think your mother will bring the boys home to school? There’s no reason to take them to Sydney now. Just as easy to bring them to England!”

Joan-Two’s face lit up. “Then I’d see them! Oh, good! That would be marvellous! Perhaps the boys could see Chestnut!”

“I expect we could manage that, among us!” And Joan left the girls, with a warning not to talk too long.

“Jans, I’m going to tell you a game I had with our boys,” Littlejan whispered, putting an arm round the child; her extra three years made her feel much older than Jansy. “It’s queer!” she added. “I call Tansy at the Castle ‘Tans.’ If you’re Jans, short for Jansy——”

“But I’m not. I don’t like it. Jansy’s short for Janice already. There’s no need to mess it up any more.”

“Shall I call you Janice, now that Mother’s gone away and nobody can mix you up with her?”

"I like it better than Jans! You can say Jan, if you like. I've heard people call her Jan."

"Father does. That's why I'm Littlejan. But about the boys, Janice!"

"Tell me!" Jansy whispered. "I want them badly."

"I felt awful when I had to come away. Alistair is ten now; as old as you. Alan's only seven, so the game was chiefly with Alistair and it had to be rather easy at first. I sent them letters in secret languages, and they had to find the clue before they could read them. You know—in figures; 5 would mean A, and 3 would be B, and they had to guess. You can always find out from names; you read 'Joan' and 'Alistair' and 'Alan' and 'Mother,' and that gives you some figures to start with. Or letters where you only count every second or third word. All sorts of codes; I made them up and Alistair had to guess them and explain them to Alan. Mother helped, as the boys are so much littler than I am. They were terribly pleased, and I had fun making up the codes, and we all forgot about being lonely."

Jansy was jumping with excitement. "How soon can I start? You'll help, won't you? Andrew will help John and Tony; they'll love it! Oh, Littlejan, what a simply marvellous plan!"

"I'll make up one letter, to show you how to do it, and then you can carry on. I'm going to be rather busy at school; and I have to send letters home, as soon as I have the new address. Mother said the shipping company would send on letters. I shan't have time to make up codes; you must think them out for yourself," Littlejan said wisely.

Jen's 'phone call came early in the morning. "I'm glad I came," she said. "I found Ken in a high fever and the doctor badly worried. Ken knew me and it seemed to soothe him to have me there, and he's better this morning, almost normal. But the doctors want him in Sheffield. They're very keen to watch him and they believe they understand the case. The long journey home might do harm, so they've found an excellent nursing-home where he can be under observation, in a way he couldn't be out here on the moors. I can be with him all the time; they've promised that. There seems no reason for this erratic temperature, so they're talking again of some germ. Ken must have the very best care that's possible."

"Jenny-Wren, you know how sorry we are. We're thinking of you all the time. Can I do anything?"

"You can lend me your husband."

"To help you on the journey to Sheffield. You shall have Jack, Jen dear. He'll go to York, to interview the school, and then he'll come to you and you shall give him your orders. The sooner the boys are off your hands the better; Jack will take them to York for you. I'll send John's things by Jack, as far as I can, and the school must get whatever else he needs."

"Same with Andrew and Tony; I can't go shopping for them. The Matron will understand, when she hears the boys have been sent off in a hurry, and she's a dear. She'll do everything beautifully for them. John's intrigued to the limit, to hear he's to go with our boys; he was terribly afraid he was to be sent back to Miss Macey's—a girls' school, while Andrew and Tony went to a real school! He was in dreadfully low spirits over it."

"Poor John! That would have been a bad let-down! I'm glad we haven't failed him. Doesn't he show any sorrow at not saying good-bye to Jansy? She's fearfully upset."

"Not one scrap, I'm afraid. He's so relieved not to be left behind that he isn't grieving about anybody."

"That sounds like John. I'm sure it's best that he should go with Andrew and Tony. I was afraid I'd have trouble with Jansy; she has always bossed John, and he was beginning to resent it! But Littlejan has taken on the job, with real success. She's given Jansy a new idea,

which is to be a deadly secret from John at present; and Jansy's going about looking important and quite happy."

"Good for Littlejan! I like that child, Joan."

"I like her enormously. Some day I'll tell you about her and the Hamlet Club; it's interesting. She's going to be a leader in the Club before this term is over."

"A future Queen? Oh, Joan, do you think so? That would be wonderful—Jandy Mac's daughter!"

"I do think so," Joan said firmly. "I'm convinced she'll be Queen, if she goes on as she's doing at present."

"Queen Joan the Second! Another Abbey Queen! *Nice!*" Jen commented. "But I don't suppose she has any idea of it?"

"Not the slightest. Don't put it into her head! She's quite unconscious, and very humble."

"I won't let her dream of it through me," Jen promised, as she rang off.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN THE DEPUTATION

“You said you had a plan for the Club.” Joan-Two looked up at Joan Raymond.

They were sitting in the Abbey, below the chapter-house windows, while Jennifer and Baby Jim rolled on a rug in the evening sunshine. Opposite, in the shadows of the broken cloisters, Jansy was working out codes, a grin of delighted mischief on her face.

“It’s only an idea, and I’m afraid you won’t like it very much.” Joan smiled down at her namesake. “I want you to go to Broadway End and ask the President’s help. It’s her Club! I couldn’t make any real suggestion until she’d been consulted.”

“Me?” Littlejan cried in horror. “I should simply die! Tell Mrs. Everett there’s something wrong with her Club and that the girls say she’s neglecting it? Aunt Joan, how could I?”

“You needn’t put in the last bit. But Cicely’s excuse is as good as anybody’s. Six years after her first boy and girl she had another little boy, and he has always been weakly, and has given her constant anxiety. Just say that the Club wants new dances and ask how you can get them. Explain how to you, coming fresh to the school, the Club seems so young, and that the seniors say they aren’t interested because they are tired of our usual set of dances. The President will find a way to help.”

“I simply couldn’t!” Littlejan said fervently. “Couldn’t you ask her for us?”

“I could; but it would come far better from you. I know Cicely would appreciate it, if you went.”

“She’d think it frightful cheek,” Joan-Two groaned. “I don’t know why everybody thinks I’m the right person to find fault and make trouble!”

“I should rather say—to try to put things right,” Joan suggested. “Have you heard of John Hampden?”

“The Civil War man? Ship Money, and all that?”

“He lived near here; Hampden is among the hills, beyond Wycombe. He’s one of Mrs. Everett’s heroes, and it was in his life that she found her motto for the Club.”

“But I thought it came out of *Hamlet*! Wasn’t it a sort of pun on the name of the Club, the Hamlet Club?”

“It was, of course, though the name really referred to the hamlets among the hills in which so many of the first members lived. John Hampden could so easily have saved himself all that trouble; *he* didn’t want to stir up a fuss and have civil war in England! He wasn’t a soldier; he was a quiet country gentleman, and all he wanted was to go on living peacefully at Hampden. He could afford to pay the Ship Money tax. But he believed the tax to be wrong; and he knew more unjust taxes would follow unless somebody made a stand. He must often have asked himself, though not in those words—“To be or not to be?” He went ahead and did what he believed to be right. The President has always admired him. She happened to be staying near Hampden, and she was faced with a difficult choice; she met Margia Lane, our fiddler for the Club, and they talked it over. Cicely made the right choice and carried on bravely; and the Hamlet Club and the motto came out of it all, and she has been the President ever since.”

Joan-Two had listened with intense interest. She gave a thoughtful look round the quiet garth, and then gazed at Joan. “Do you want me to tell her I’m John Hampden?”

“Not quite that. I told you the story to show you that she’d understand. I want you to feel like John Hampden, leading a crusade to pull the Hamlet Club back to its old place in the school, so that it can help the girls again; and not merely like a person stirring up trouble.”

Joan-Two sighed, and stared down at the babies. Suddenly she looked up, her eyes alight. “We might have a deputation. I wouldn’t mind, if somebody else went too. Mrs. Everett would feel it was worth while if there were several of us. She doesn’t know me; I’m only a new girl.”

“She must have seen you at the wedding and at the parties in the tithe-barn; she knew your mother and she’d be told who you were. She’d see you in the family set of ‘Newcastle,’ when you and Jansy and the twins were the little green women; she’d be sure to ask who the fourth green girl was. Whom do you want for the deputation?”

“Alison, because she’s head, and Mirry, because she’s Queen.”

“And you, because it’s your idea. It’s quite a good plan,” Joan agreed. “Ask them to be the deputation, and I’ll send you all in the car. It can call for Mirry and Alison on the way. When you fix the day I’ll ring Cicely and ask if she’ll receive a deputation from the Hamlet Club.”

Joan-Two gave her a radiant look. “That will be a huge help. I’m frightfully keen, now. It will make all the difference to have the others there.”

“Get it planned at school, then. Jansy!” She called across the garth. “Time to go home; it’s turning chilly. Will you take Jennifer, Littlejan?”—as she settled the tiny child in her push-car. “I’ll carry Jimmy, and Jansy can put away the cushions.”

“I wanted my John Hampden to go alone,” she said to herself. “But it will answer the same purpose if she stirs up the rest with her deputation; they’ll realise she is the moving spirit, and that’s what I want.”

Littlejan went to school in high glee next morning, eager to tackle the Queen and the head girl. Mirry was the easier to reach, being in the form below her own.

“But what’s wrong with the Hamlet Club?” Mirry turned troubled blue eyes on her. “I thought it was all right and jolly.”

“I want to get the seniors back. It’s a junior thing; it ought to be for the whole school.”

“They’re too busy with exams.”

“That was last term. There aren’t any exams this term.”

“They say they’re too old.”

“That’s tosh. Mrs. Raymond isn’t too old. Doesn’t your mother still like dancing? She danced at the wedding.”

“It’s different. It’s—I don’t know how to put it—it was a big thing to her and her crowd. She’s often told me about it. It’s not the same for us; I don’t know why.”

“It could be the same. We only think about the dancing and nobody remembers what lies behind it, and so it’s not a real thing any more.” Joan-Two had hit on a truth and she uttered it bluntly.

“What lies behind the dancing?” asked the twelve-year-old Queen.

“Perhaps the President will tell us,” Littlejan retorted. “I can’t teach the Queen what her own Club means!” she said to herself, as she went in search of the head girl.

Alison looked at her in amusement. “How you do keep on, Littlejan Fraser! The Club’s all right for the kids, and we don’t want it. What’s the matter with that?”

“You used to like it,” Joan-Two said doggedly. “Couldn’t you like it again, if the President found us some new dances?”

“I doubt it. Perhaps we’re slackers, but you have to think such a lot in country-dancing; figures and all that. I like doing the easy ones, but I can’t be bothered with learning figures.”

“We could tell Mrs. Everett. She may know some new easy ones.”

“No, I’m not going,” Alison said definitely. “I couldn’t face Mrs. Everett and tell her it’s too much fag to remember dances. She’d look through me as if I was the grubbiest of insects. She can be a terrifying person, if she doesn’t approve of you.”

“You won’t come?” Littlejan asked, incredulously. “You’ll let Mirry and me go alone?”

“If you must go, you’ll need to go alone,” Alison assured her. “I shouldn’t think of going to the President to complain about the Club.”

“It’s not complaining. It’s to ask her to help,” Littlejan urged. “I’m sure she’ll be nice about it. I think perhaps she’ll be pleased.”

“I don’t! I should give up the idea. Can’t you be satisfied with cricket? Your bowling is A1.”

Deeply disappointed, Joan-Two went to report to the Queen. “I’d been thinking it was a pity the Club didn’t choose Alison for Queen. It might have brought her back and made her keen again. But it was a good thing they didn’t. She’s slack all round,” she thought.

Mirry looked at her in dismay. “Alison won’t go?” she faltered. “Oh, I say! Then I can’t go either. I’m sorry, Littlejan, but if the head thinks it’s a silly idea I can’t go on with it.”

“You won’t come?” Joan-Two stared at her.

“Not if Alison doesn’t. I’m frightfully sorry, but I simply couldn’t. It would seem like going against her, and she’s the head, Littlejan.”

Joan’s temper blazed up. “Then I shall go on my own. I’m not afraid of the President. Everybody says how jolly she is. But I think you’re slackers, and Alison’s the worst. I can understand you don’t want to get into a mess with her, but I do think she’s a rotter.” And she flung off to class, deeply perturbed and bitterly disappointed.

Her resolution still held when she reached home, and she went straight to Joan. “Those slackers won’t be a deputation. They’re scared of the President. I shall have to go alone.”

“They needn’t be afraid. But honestly, Joan-Two, I believe you’ll do the job better than they would. You really will go alone, then?” Joan eyed her keenly.

“Rather! I told them I should. I can’t go back on it now. Will you ask Mrs. Everett when she’ll see me?” Littlejan’s blood was up and her chin was in the air.

“That’s the spirit!” Joan said admiringly. “There’s no need to be nervous. The President will like you and you’ll like her. But I expect you’d rather get it over, so I’ll ask her to see you soon. Have you any plan for to-morrow afternoon?”

Joan-Two gave her a startled look. “To-morrow? Oh, well, the sooner the better! No, there was to be the last match of the season, but the ground’s too wet. They’ll try once more, next Saturday, but if it’s wet then the match will be given up.”

Joan nodded. “It’s late for cricket. You’ll have to see how you get on with hockey or netball. I’ll speak to Cicely.”

Joan-Two’s eyes followed her wildly. “I am scared, whatever they say. It’s rather awful; I never meant to go quite alone! I’m completely terrified; but I could never go back to school, if I funked now.”

“A deputation from the Hamlet Club?” Cicely Everett asked, amusement in her tone. “I’ll be delighted! Tell them to come to tea to-morrow. How many are there?”

“One,” Joan said solemnly. “It was to be three, but the other two have funked it. They’re afraid of you.”

“Little idiots! Who is the brave one?”

“Jandy Mac’s girl.”

“Oh?” Cicely’s interest quickened. “That’s quite a thrill. What does she want? Why are they sending her?”

“They aren’t. It’s her own idea entirely. They won’t back her up.”

“I’m more thrilled every minute! Send her to-morrow afternoon. But why isn’t she scared too?”

“I think she is. But she’s a brave child and she’s very much in earnest.”

“This is most intriguing! Tell her she shall have a lovely tea and see my curios from Ceylon.”

“That will warm her heart. Her mother’s moving to Ceylon, and it will be Joan’s home some day.”

“I can tell her all about it. We’ll have a great talk. Won’t you come with her?”

“Not this time, thanks. It would spoil everything if I were there. She must be a deputation all alone, I’m afraid.”

“Tell me what you mean by that!—but after I’ve seen her. What news of the bride and bridegroom?”

“We’re hoping for letters from New York any day now. They liked their cabins, and the ship.”

“And how is poor Jenny-Wren?”

“Kenneth is better, at the moment. How is Teddy?”

“Improving; for him, really very well.”

“Oh, good! You’ll be able to give your mind to the problem of the Hamlet Club!” And Joan rang off and went to give the invitation to Littlejan.

Joan-Two’s eyes widened. “She sounds terribly kind. Has she really been to Ceylon?”

“She’s lived there. She’s been going to Ceylon ever since she was at school. It was because she went that the Club had two Queens in its second year. Cicely had just been crowned when she had to go away. So this is the twentieth year of the Hamlet Club, but Mirry is the twenty-first Queen. The Club comes of age next year.”

“Wouldn’t it be marvellous if we could buck it up, and make it real again, for everybody, before it comes of age?” Littlejan’s face blazed in eagerness.

“It would. You’re going the right way to bring that about.” Joan smiled at her. “The first step is to get the President interested.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
THE PRESIDENT AT HOME

“Which shall we have first—Ceylon or the Hamlet Club?” the President asked gaily.

All Joan-Two’s fears had returned during the lonely drive-to Broadway End, with only Frost, the chauffeur, for company. He, thinking his passenger was shy and wondering why Mrs. Raymond had not come with her, and liking all small girls, tried to interest her in places and things they passed, but Joan-Two was burdened and did not respond as fully as she might have done at another time; and she had reached a point of acute nervousness when the car drew up before the great house. But her terror vanished as she faced the brown-haired lady whose eyes were alight with eager interest.

“Oh!” She gave a little gasp. “You do look kind! I needn’t have been so frightened.”

“You needn’t. I’m sorry it’s been such an ordeal. Come and have tea, and you shall choose what we’ll talk about.”

“The Club, please. I’d like to tell you why I’ve come. It seems such cheek to bother you,” Littlejan said humbly.

“Not cheek, if it’s anything to do with the Hamlet Club.” Cicely led her to a cosy room with a fire, and made her sit down and warm herself. “It’s chilly, isn’t it? We’ll have tea at once.”

She rang a bell and stood looking down at her guest. “Has anybody told you that you’re exactly like your mother?” she asked solemnly.

Joan-Two’s troubled face broke into a smile. “Everybody,” she said simply.

“I thought so. You’re Janice from Australia over again. You’re called after our Joan, aren’t you?”

“Yes, but people call me Littlejan, because I’m so like Mother. Father did it first, when I was born; and everybody’s gone on doing it ever since.”

“Even at school?”

“There were so many other Joans. There are two in my form, and one Jean.”

Cicely laughed. “I’m not surprised! But our Joan is a rather special Joan, isn’t she?”

“Oh, yes! I love her—and everybody at the Hall, and the Castle, and the Manor.”

“You’re lucky to come into such a happy circle; a new family ready-made.”

“I know how well off I am,” Littlejan said fervently. “But it’s more than happy, isn’t it? They’re all so kind. That’s because of the Abbey; they try to be like the monks; they welcome everybody and take care of them.”

Cicely gave her a quick look. “I think perhaps they do. Help yourself to hot scones. You like sugar, don’t you? Now tell me what’s the matter with the Club, and why you’re the only one to be troubled about it?”

“Aunt Joan says it’s because I’ve come to it fresh and seen it from the outside,” Littlejan said shyly.

Cicely nodded. “And you’re old enough to think over what you see. What did you find in the Hamlet Club?”

“No seniors!” Joan-Two broke into a flood of speech. “They’re all such kids! I was looking forward to it so much; Mother had told me about the Club. I expected to find it a big thing, for the whole school, with a splendid Queen, who made everybody do things. But the

Queen's younger than I am, in the form below me, and all the rest are juniors." Her voice showed how bitterly she had been hurt and disappointed.

Cicely eyed her keenly. "Do you know why it is? Have you tried to find any reason?"

"The seniors say they're tired of it; they keep on doing the same dances. Mirry's a very good Queen, so far as she can be, but only for the juniors. I wondered"—and Joan leaned forward eagerly—"if you could help us to find some new dances, easy ones that wouldn't need a lot of learning, without difficult figures? Then the seniors might come back. They say they used to like it, but they don't want to go on doing the same things over and over again."

"There's no need for that," Cicely remarked. "The Club has learned plenty of dances; if they've got into a rut and keep on doing 'Newcastle' and 'Haste to the Wedding,' it's just laziness, because they can't be bothered to rub up the ones they've forgotten. I could choose a programme the Club ought to know, which would have none of those dances on it."

"I'm sure you could, and, please, I don't want you to think I'm tired of any of the dances," Joan said anxiously. "Of course, I'm new; the rest keep on telling me that. I'd be quite happy to go on doing 'Peascods' and 'Hey, Boys' for ever, and I think 'Newcastle' is perfect."

"We feel like that, but apparently the Club doesn't. They want bucking-up, but I don't see who is to do it. I can't take on the job myself."

"Aunt Joan told me about your little boy," Joan ventured. "I hope he'll soon be better."

Cicely gave her a quick smile. "I believe he will; he's really stronger. But we're going to take him away to a warmer place for the winter; the doctors say it will give him a good start, now that he seems to be getting on top of his early troubles. I can't take on the Club. Joan can't do it; she'll be going home presently. We can't ask anything of Jen just now. Miriam has her hands full with her new baby. Countess Rosamund is always busy and she lives a long way off. It's difficult, isn't it? Let me think; and don't forget your tea! Help yourself to cake."

Littlejan watched her, with complete trust that a way would be found. "I knew she'd think of something," she told Mirry on Monday morning.

"You want to go to a School, as we did," Cicely said at last. "But the next is in London, at Christmas. We could send somebody, who would learn the new dances and come back and teach the Club, but that puts it all off till next term. There are new dances, and from what I've heard they're the sort the Club would like; easy to learn and very jolly to do. Rosamund went to one or two parties in town before she was married, and she brought back an occasional fresh dance and told us about others, and I sent for the new books. But I've never had time to teach the dances to the Club, and there seemed no hurry; I didn't know they were grumbling."

"Could we learn them out of the books?"

"We could, but I don't think we will. Suppose we ask a teacher from town to come and give them to the Club? What you want is a week-end School. I wonder if the girls would come?"

"What's a week-end School?" Joan-Two asked eagerly.

"A very usual way of learning folk-dancing; one of the newer ideas. In our case, it would be at half-term. We'd ask Miss Macey for the use of the school hall, and we'd start on Friday evening with a reception to meet the London teacher,—some dancing, and singing, and any of the Queens we could collect. Classes all Saturday, with off times for rest and meals, and—if possible—a show in the evening, with a team from town; some men to do morris and sword, and country with mixed couples. Then Sunday quiet; you'd all be very tired. More classes on Monday, and a big party at night. What do you think?"

“It sounds exactly right. And—oh, please!—could the Queens dress up?” Joan pleaded. “I’ve seen the pictures in the school hall, and they all look so jolly! We can’t have Lady Joy; but the rest of you could be there, and I’ve never seen a May Day! Couldn’t you come in your crowns?”

“It would certainly be a novelty for the person from town! But I don’t know whether we could rise to it. We’d need to persuade the Countess and Joan to come; and Jen, if Kenneth’s doing well. I dare say some of the later Queens would be willing; we’ll think it over. Would the girls give up half-term to dancing?”

“Some of them would love it. It would depend on Alison; she’s head girl. If she would come, the seniors would come too.”

“You’ll have to take on that job,” Cicely said briskly. “Ask Mirry to call a meeting of the Club. Then you must tell them what we propose and ask them to promise to come. If they’ll be there I’ll see about the teacher.”

Littlejan looked sober. “I can’t persuade the girls. They think I’m a nuisance, as it is.”

“If we can run a successful School, they’ll think you’re anything but a nuisance. They’ve no idea what fun it will be. And after the School is over, so that things won’t fall flat, you should revive the Folk Play.”

“What’s the Folk Play? I know you talk about Folk Dancing, but I never heard of a play.”

“You’d perform it at Christmas, before the whole school. Give Alison a big part—St. George, if she’s tall! That will win her heart. The play was done once by the Hamlet Club, but it was years ago—in Maidlin’s reign, I think. The present generation of girls won’t know anything about it.” And Cicely told of the old mumming play, really the sword dance play, found in small bits in different parts of the country, but nowhere complete.

“Sometimes you find the play, but no sword dance. More often the play has been lost, but the dance remains. I found a play in an old book for children, made up from all the different versions, and altered to make it suitable for girls to do; some of the words in the originals were weird, to say the least of it.” She went to a desk and rummaged in drawers and pigeon-holes; then drew out a few typewritten sheets. “If you like the idea, use it as a bait to pull in your seniors. Have a look at it while I run up to see how Teddy has taken his tea. Then we’ll have an hour in Ceylon.”

She returned to find Joan grinning over the manuscript.

“Mrs. Everett, what a weird thing! But it would be fun to do. I’d love to be the Fool—or Slasher—or the Doctor; he’s priceless!”

“He’s a very fine part. The Fool is really the Priest, you know.”

“The Priest?” Joan-Two’s eyes widened. “But why is he called the Fool?”

“The Fool—the simple man of the village—therefore the innocent and good man—and so the Priest. Doesn’t he marry St. George to the King of Egypt’s daughter?”

Littlejan grinned again. “Such a priceless wedding! Yes, of course, the Fool marries them. But how very odd!”

Cicely told of the death and rebirth of the year at mid-winter, acted in the death of one or more characters in the play and his being brought back to life by the comic doctor. “You always find the dead man who comes to life again, in every version. Other characters change or are forgotten; but the dying and coming to life are the heart of the play and can’t be left out. Sometimes it’s the Fool who revives the dead man, I’ve been told.”

“How marvellous!” Littlejan was drinking in the unfamiliar folk-lore breathlessly. “Oh, we must do the play! But the girls will have to know what it means. Could we possibly ask you to

come and tell them about it? And—oh, Mrs. Everett! There's something else."

Her voice dropped into such earnestness that Cicely looked at her curiously. "Tell me, then, Littlejan."

"The Club's motto. The girls have forgotten. I don't think Mirry knows; but wouldn't her mother tell her?"

"I'm sure she would, but Mirry's very small yet. Miriam may have decided to wait a while before saying much to her."

"That must be it, I think. But Alison's been in the Club, and all she could say was that it came out of *Hamlet*. They don't care about the motto. Couldn't you talk to them? Aunt Joan told me how you once preached a sermon to the Club, with Lady Jen for the text, when she'd been so frightfully decent about taking up cricket to help the school, when she cared about the dancing more than anything. Couldn't you come and preach to us again?"

"I could *not*!" the President said promptly. "I was young and cheeky, if I tried to preach to the Club, but I'm sure I never did. It's too bad of Joan to put it that way! I merely told the rest what a brick Jen had been and reminded them of the meaning of the motto."

"They need reminding now," Littlejan ventured.

"I'll think it over. But I'd like to feel the right time had come. I can't rush down to the Club and row them for forgetting the motto! We've never talked about it much. Now what about Ceylon? I've heaps of photos and curios."

"That will be marvellous! I am so glad I came!" Littlejan sighed happily.

"It pays to be brave," Cicely Everett laughed.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A MEETING OF THE HAMLET CLUB

“That’s a wonderful idea of the President’s.” Joan smiled at her namesake. “What a thrilling half-term! But I thought you were to go to Kentisbury?”

Littlejan gave a cry of dismay. “I forgot about Kentisbury! And Chestnut—oh, Aunty Joan, I forgot!”

“School and the Club are becoming more important to you. That’s right and normal, and I’m glad. But I’m afraid you’ll have to choose. You can’t ask the other girls to spend their half-term at school and not be there yourself.”

“If we have it some other week-end there’ll be only Saturday. We wouldn’t get anything like so much of it.” Littlejan looked very downcast. At last she gave herself a shake. “Chestnut will have to wait. I can’t let the President down, when she’s going to arrange it for us.”

“Or the Club. This may mean a new start and be a really big thing for the school,” Joan said, with her hopes for the future in her mind. “I’m sure you’re right. You must go to Kentisbury some other week, on a Friday after school, and stay till Sunday night. Rosamund will understand. She’ll come to have a look at your week-end School.”

“Oh, but we want her to be a Queen, and you and Lady Jen too, at the Friday night reception! Mirry must help the President to welcome the London person, but we want a procession of Queens as well.”

Joan laughed. “We shall really have to stop dressing up as schoolgirls, with our large families in the background!”

“I think it’s very important for you to come sometimes. Each of you means a year as Queen. It shows how old the Club is.”

Joan gave her one of her quick, appreciative looks. “Very true, Littlejan. A famous and old-established Club! I’ll come, if the others will, and we’ll look as impressive as we can.”

“That will be marvellous. I dare say I shan’t think much about Chestnut once we’ve started.”

“I’m sure you won’t! If the right person comes from town you’ll have such a good time that you won’t stop to think about anything.”

Queen Mirry met Littlejan rather nervously on Monday, remembering the temper that had blazed out for one moment. “Littlejan, I’m sorry I let you down. Mother says I did and that I ought to have gone with you and not cared about Alison. Did you go all by yourself?”

“Rather! I had a marvellous time.” Joan-Two’s face was bright, and the rest crowded round to listen. “A huge tea, and then I saw all the things the President has brought from Ceylon, where my mother’s going to live. I saw her little boy Dick, and her Cicely, who’s coming to school next term, and we went to the stables to see the horses, and I told her about my pony, Chestnut. Some day we’re going to meet and ride together; Mrs. Everett’s keen on riding.”

“Jolly decent!” said the slow-spoken Scot, Jean Guthrie, who was the head of Joan’s form, a tall girl with reddish-golden hair which had won her the nickname of Ginger Jean. “If you’re going to be pally with her you’re in luck. You were daft not to go, Mirry.”

“I know I’m in luck,” Littlejan admitted, with no idea of the comment Jen and Rosamund would make—“Luck! I should call it something else! Pluck, if you like!”—“Mrs. Everett’s a darling and she couldn’t have been kinder. She’s had the most marvellous idea for the Club. Mirry, she wants you to call a meeting, so that I can tell everybody about it.”

No teasing could draw any more from her. “If you want to know, you must come to the meeting,” she said sturdily, and it became imperative that the meeting should be held at the earliest possible moment.

Before the time came, however, the Hall was filled with excitement by the arrival of letters from America telling of the voyage—the delight of the twins in the great liner—the concert on board, at which Maidlin had had to sing and Jock to play, their identity having been discovered just in time—the first sight of the strange sky-line of New York. Maidlin wrote to Joan and Rosamund and Mary; Lindy sent to her sister and a special long letter to Joan-Two.

“They won’t mind if I write to you,” she began. “I feel bad about the way I had to let you down, just when your mother had left you. I hope you’ll chum up with Mary-Dorothy; she’s jolly to talk to, and she always helps.”

“Lindy doesn’t know I’ve had to lose Mary too,” Littlejan said to herself, as she devoured the closely-written sheets, which gave just those details about the twins and what they had said and done, that everybody was longing to hear. Miss Belinda’s letters to Joan-Two became famous in the family, and were read aloud and looked forward to eagerly.

“She tells you the right things, and such a lot of them,” Littlejan said. “It is queer how everybody’s had to go away and leave me and Aunt Joan to comfort one another!”

For Jack Raymond was in the north, inspecting John’s school and helping Jen in her journey to Sheffield.

“The next letters will be even more thrilling, for they’ll tell us about Joy and what the twins said when they saw Richard,” Joan-One commented, as they discussed the news together. “You must write and tell Lindy things too. When is the meeting to be? Maidlin will be as much interested as we are, and so will Joy, if she’s well enough.”

“The meeting’s to-morrow. It’s the seniors I’m bothered about,” Littlejan confessed. “It will make all the difference if they’re keen.”

She felt very nervous as she went to the Hamlet Club meeting after classes. Mirry and the juniors were all agog to hear what the President had suggested; but if the new plan were taken up only by the lower forms it would lose much of its importance to the school.

Her eyes widened as she entered the big classroom, for not only was Alison there, but the entire Sixth form seemed to have come as well. Joan-Two, given everything she could have desired in the way of an audience, felt a sudden sinking, and for one awful moment she thought she was going to be sick. It had not seemed a formidable task to tell the rather junior Hamlets of the President’s plan and she was keen enough to have been looking forward to doing it; but her heart failed and she shrank as she saw the crowded room.

“Gosh! Everybody’s here!” she gasped.

“Rather!” Alison teased. “We’ve come to hear your speech. You’ve been such a frightful nuisance, looking important and mysterious, that we want to know what it’s all about. Up you get on the platform and tell us the worst!”

“Won’t you take the chair, Alison?” Mirry pleaded.

“No fear! You’re in the chair, my child. Do call on Joan Fraser to explain! We’re dying of curiosity.”

Mirry, with an odd little air of dignity, but looking flushed and diffident, stepped on to the platform and stood beside the desk. "Please, Littlejan, will you tell us?" she asked.

"It's not a long speech to introduce the speaker." Alison grinned. "But it's adequate. It's exactly what we all want to say. Get it off your mind, Joan Fraser!"

Joan-Two, scarlet but gallant, and eager to have the ordeal over, stood beside Mirry and looked round the room. "I never did anything like this before," she said, a quiver in her brave voice. "I'm completely terrified and I want to run away. But nobody else can tell you, so I'll have to do it somehow. Can the people at the back hear? Or ought I to shout?"

"No, just speak like that. We can hear all right," she was assured from every corner.

"Don't be frightened!" Ginger Jean added, and there was an encouraging laugh and an outburst of clapping.

"Sporting kid!" Alison said. "I wouldn't have done it myself at her age. Fourteen, isn't she?"

"Not till Christmas," red-headed Jean replied. "But she's so frightfully keen on the Club. She'll do it all right."

"I wonder why she's so keen?" Alison murmured. "I suppose those Abbey people have put it into her."

Littlejan's speech was short, but fervent. She poured out the story of her visit to the President and of the suggestions for half-term. "All those first Queens say they never had such good times in their lives as when they went to the dancing schools. And the President says we can have one all for ourselves, here, if enough of us give in our names," she ended. "She'll go to London and find a teacher. We ought to send her a vote of thanks, but what she wants more is a long list of names."

The meeting broke into excited comment and discussion. Mirry, powerless to check the tumult, sat in the mistress's seat and made room for Joan.

"They'll have to talk about your idea; and, anyway, I can't stop them! What a jolly plan, Littlejan! I'd love it. I hope a lot will want it."

Joan-Two squeezed in beside her. "Isn't it rum to be up here? Girls, have you prepared your home-work? Alison, take two order marks for talking in class! I could do it quite as well as Miss Macey."

Mirry giggled. "You'd be a lovely teacher. You have made a mess of this meeting!"

Jean's voice rose above the hubbub, slow and calm, as usual, but penetrating and emphatic. "Sounds all right. Let's give it a trial!"

"But half-term! Isn't there a match?"

"No, it's scratched. I was going to fix up something else." This came from the games captain. "But do we want to spend the whole half-term at school? Don't we get enough of it?"

"This would be different. There'd be no rules, and we'd only use the hall," said Jean.

"We'd bring our food," Joan-Two said loudly. "If it's fine we could have picnics in the playground."

"It won't be fine," Alison told her. "You don't know our climate. November's not the best time for weather."

"It's sometimes lovely, Ally," said a friend. "We could cycle to the woods. Do we want to be cooped up in school?"

Alison pushed her way through the crowd. "May I address the meeting, Your Majesty?"

"If you can." Mirry gave her a shy grin.

“I’ll make them listen!” She thumped on the bell, and all the faces turned towards her in astonishment. “That’s better! This *is* a well-conducted meeting! Don’t you know that remarks ought to be addressed to the chair?”

“Oh, Ally! You were talking like anything yourself!” cried a Sixth-Former.

“And I’m talking now! Girls, this needs thinking about, but it’s quite a decent idea, and I shall come, if the plan goes through.”

“Oh, jolly good!” Joan-Two hugged the Queen excitedly. “It’s going to be all right!”

Alison gave her a friendly glance. “It ought to be. You’ve done your bit. You’ve made quite an impression on the President. She came to see me and told me I’d got to back you up. Fact! She rode over to our place; she looks jolly on her big brown mare. She’s got a way with her, hasn’t she? She witches you into doing what she wants.”

Joan stared at her wildly. “Mrs. Everett said that?”

“Rather! She said a lot more. She seems keen on you. Girls! It’s a toss-up. We may get lovely weather, but we can go to the woods on Sunday afternoon. If it’s wet we’ll be glad to have something to do. This plan’s a new idea and I vote we try it. If we don’t like it we won’t have another week-end School and we’ll all stay away on Monday, and Joan Fraser and the President and the London teacher can have classes by themselves.”

“One more! Then they can do squares for four!” shouted her friend in the audience.

“I shall be there,” Mirry said, with dignity.

“You’ll look funny doing ‘Argeers’ with the President!”

“And I shall be there,” said Ginger Jean. “I’m not going to miss it.”

“I’m ready to take names,” the head girl announced. “I’ll start the list with the Queen and Joan Fraser and Jean Guthrie and me. Give in your names, those who would like to take part in the experiment! We don’t want everybody; there’d be no room to dance; so don’t come unless you’re keen. But if you give in your names you must stick to it. We must know how many to plan for.”

Nobody wanted to be left out. The suggestion that there might not be room alarmed the waverers, and Alison was besieged by a clamouring crowd. She laughed, as she scribbled the names. “I guess the Lady President will be satisfied!”

Mirry and Littlejan, comfortably conscious that they headed the list, hugged one another again. “It’s all right! We’ll get our London person! I do hope she’s nice!”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

MRS. THISTLE

The Secretary's face fell when she heard the date of the week-end School. "Can't you change your day? I'm afraid it's going to be difficult."

The President had driven to town to make the arrangements. "We can't possibly change. It's the school half-term and all the plans are made," she urged. "What's the trouble?"

"A Staff Conference at Cecil Sharp house at that very time. I don't see—I wonder if Mrs. Thistle would do it? She isn't Staff, and she'd be ideal for your purpose."

"Mrs. Thistle?" Cicely echoed. "Is she as prickly as her name? Who is she?"

"I'm sorry; the name is Thistleton, but everybody calls her Mrs. Thistle. She helps us a lot; an excellent teacher, and well up in the newer dances. I don't know that I'd advise her for polishing for exam purposes, or trust her to get your crowd through 'Chelsea Reach' without tying them up in knots; but to give schoolgirls a jolly time with 'Durham Reel' and 'Kendal Ghyll' and 'Steam Boat,' nobody could be better; and I gather that's what you want."

"I don't know the new dances," Cicely confessed. "But the jolly time is all right. That's exactly what we want; after all, the girls are giving up their half-term to it. The jollier Mrs. Thistle can make her classes the better."

"There'll probably be a riot," the Secretary said grimly.

"Oh, good! Anything stodgy would kill country-dancing in the school, and it's been going on for twenty years."

"Tell Mrs. Thistle that. You'd better meet her and explain what you want. You'll have a rowdy time, if she lets herself go. She's one of our 'young marrieds,' with a nice house, not too far out; her husband does medical research work in town. Mrs. Thistle has two small boys; been married six years, and is now twenty-seven or so. She keeps open house for everything in the student line; young or old, boy or girl, rich or poor, they're all welcome at John-and-Mary's—that's the house. I don't know why; Mrs. Thistle and her husband are not called Mary and John. She runs a folk-dance group in her own neighbourhood and does teaching for us as well. She has been to several Vacation Schools; I believe the first was when she was sixteen. She taught sword dances to her school when she was head girl; and she has times when she still seems much more like the head girl than a staid married woman and the mother of two. But she's devoted to Rennie and Robin, and we are always hearing about them."

"She sounds a good sort. Does she really keep open house for lonely students? What a lovely idea!"

"She says it keeps her out of mischief. You'd better see her. I could ring her up." And she reached for the telephone. "Mrs. Thistleton? Out? Shall I see her at the House this evening? That will do, then. Thank you."

"Mrs. Thistleton will be here to-night; she comes to the advanced country class. I'll tell her what you want and ask her to arrange a meeting, if you'll give me your number."

"We were hoping you could spare a team of dancers, to give the girls a demonstration, on the Saturday evening. I suppose everyone will be too busy?" the President asked anxiously.

"We have a party, but it isn't till eight-thirty. What time did you want your show?"

"Early. Many of our girls live in the country and we don't want to keep them too late."

“Six o’clock? An hour’s show? Our people could get a quick train back to town and be a little late for the party. We’ll manage it, Mrs. Everett. We’d like to help in every way we can.”

“That’s very good of you. I’m looking forward to meeting Mrs. Thistle,” Cicely said cordially.

She called on Joan on the way home to tell the plans she had made.

“I like the sound of Mrs. Thistle! I believe she’s going to be just what we want. I shall ask if she has a car and beg her to come and see us, for tea or morning coffee.”

“Couldn’t you ask her to come here and you run over to meet her?” Joan suggested. “We’re nearer town, and my baby is younger than yours; and I have two tinies to your one!”

“And you have the Abbey! You know you love showing it to new people! Right! We’ll ask her here; but when she comes to take our School I shall entertain her then.”

“Mrs. President!” Joan-Two and Jansy arrived from school as the President was leaving, and Littlejan went eagerly to the side of the car. “I’ve had an idea. When may I tell you about it?”

The President’s brown eyes laughed at her. “What’s the matter with now, Joan Fraser? I like hearing your ideas, but I don’t like waiting. Jump in and we’ll talk for five minutes. Will that be long enough?”

Joan sprang into the car. “Heaps. It’s a very little idea. Mrs. Everett, the girls love the new plan; they’re getting very keen. They hope Miss Lane will play for us, and they say she’s been playing for the Club since it started. That’s nearly twenty-one years; I should think she’ll be glad to have some new tunes! Couldn’t she have a present from the Club? Mirry could do it; she’s quite good at making little speeches.”

“At the opening reception,” Cicely said thoughtfully. “It would be a jolly little ceremony. I like the idea, Joan Fraser. But we have given Margia presents, in the past; this ought to be different. What would you suggest?”

“A medal, like the Queens have!” Joan cried eagerly. “It could say: ‘Fiddler to the Hamlet Club for nearly twenty-one years,’ and she could wear it when she plays for us.”

“That would be original. I believe she’d like it. We needn’t say ‘nearly’; it’s quite twenty-one years since she began playing for us. The Club was born in the autumn; we danced in the October woods! But it was a secret; as far as the school is concerned it dates from the following April. I like your idea, Joan Fraser. Shall I see to it for you?”

“Yes, please. But let us all help. We want it to be from everybody.”

“The old Queens and former members as well. It will have to be a gold medal.”

“Oh, cheers! It will be different from the silver ones the Queens have.” And Joan slipped out of the car and ran to tell Jansy and Joan Raymond.

Mrs. Thistleton’s choice was for a morning visit. “I have so many people at John-and-Mary’s in the evening, and I’m out such a lot,” she wrote. “But I can quite well run down to you one morning, and it will be a help to talk over our plans. I’m very keen to do what you want, and I’m longing to see your Club.” And she signed herself “T. Thistleton.”

“She might have been a little more friendly!” Joan remarked. “Is she Theodora, Tabitha, or Thomasina?”

“Or Tansy!” Joan-Two suggested. “Oh, Aunt Joan, I want to see her! I hoped she’d come some evening!”

“She’s entertaining lonely students at John-and-Mary’s, in the evening. You’ll see her at the week-end School.”

“The girls are wild to know what she’s like. I told them her name, and they always call her Mrs. Thistle.”

“We shall have to ask her leave to do that,” Joan warned her.

The President drove over early on the appointed day, and while they waited for their guest she heard the latest news from New York and saw the newest letters from the twins. They had “simply shrieked with joy,” said Lindy, when shown the new little brother, and their letters were full of him and of David, who was trying to stand alone and “galloping all over the place on his hands and knees,” and whose odd little attempts at words intrigued his big sisters immensely.

“Were we like that?” they asked, and were assured that they had been just as funny and just as interesting.

To their great delight Richard was another Abbey red-head, not dark like David. “Just like us and Mother!” they said joyfully.

Maidlin wrote in keenest interest about the week-end School and promised to try to be home for it. “I’d like to learn the new dances quite as much as the Club would,” she said. “And Jock loves looking on. He enjoyed it so much last May Day that he keeps asking me to dance for him—as if I could do country-dances as solos! Ivor’s concert is next week, and after that we shall come home. I shall hate saying good-bye to Joy, but she’s getting stronger and she has all her children with her. And Jock wants to start on The Pallant.”

“The concert was a big success, according to the papers,” Cicely remarked. “Maidlin had a great reception.”

“We’ll make her sing to our School. The girls love to hear her, and she’s always willing,” Joan said. “Here, I think, comes Mrs. Thistle!” at the sound of a small car.

She went with the President to the terrace, as a tall girl sprang from the car and ran up the steps. She had yellow hair coiled over her ears in schoolgirl plaits, under a white cap, and her bright blue eyes were eager.

“I’ve come,” she announced, and looked at them expectantly.

Her hostesses stared at her wildly. The President searched her memory for a clue.

Joan knit her brows. “But we’ve seen you before——”

“Tazy Kingston, who shared our rooms at Cheltenham!” Cicely shouted. “T for Tazy! Why didn’t you tell us? Did you know? Oh, what fun to see you again!”

“Oh, I knew! Not your names, of course, but I’d heard too much about your Club, and the Queens, and the barn, to forget. You were always called The President. To me you’re still Cicely Hobart and Joan Shirley, but it was obvious you would both change your names soon. I was only sixteen; I don’t suppose I told you anything about Bill, did I?”

“Is Bill your husband?” Joan asked, with a laugh.

“Rather! He’s one of the best, but I didn’t know I was going to marry him, in those days. You haven’t changed much, in spite of families and things. I suppose you all have streams of offspring? That’s why you’re out of date with your dances, isn’t it? Will you really let me pull your Club together? I’m dying for the job. I’ll give them the best time ever,” she said earnestly. “They’ll be petitioning for a School at Christmas, before I’ve finished with them.”

“I’m sure they will!” The President agreed with her. “No one shall wrest you from us now! Even if your boys have measles or your house is burnt down, you must come.”

“Rennie and Robin aren’t showing any sign of measles, but I wouldn’t like to lose John-and-Mary’s,” Tazy said, taking a chair in the sunshine, while Joan rang for coffee.

"Why do you call your house by that odd name?" Joan smiled at her as she arranged cups on a small table.

"After our twin schools in Switzerland. Bill was cricket captain of St. John's and I was head of St. Mary's. But it really means that we want to be a home for every lonely John and Mary in London. I've an enormous family of Johns and Marys; I'm godmother to them all. What's your name, Joan Shirley? And how many infants have you?"

"Raymond. Four; the eldest is nearly eleven and is coming to your classes. I had Janice and John, quite close together, and then a rest for a few years. Then we started again with Jennifer, who is now fifteen months old, and Jim, who is just four months."

"Jolly little family," Tazy commented. "And you, Lady President?"

"Much the same, but I haven't an infant. Dick and Cicely were my start; then after a while I had Ted, who is now two."

"And what about the rest of your crowd? Joy, who was always taken for Joan's twin sister? And the little tall one who had the motor-cycle accident—Jen?"

"Jenny-Wren has beaten us all, with five bairns." Joan smiled. "She's not much older than you, but she married at twenty, and she's had her family without long gaps. She has three boys and two girls, and she insists that she wants two or three more boys and then she'll stop. She's even chosen their names; they're to be Simon, and Bernard, and Christopher."

"I hadn't heard that," Cicely laughed. "All her boys are saints, Tazy; Andrew, Antony, and Michael. The girls are Rosemary and Katharine."

"Gosh! I'd like to see her with them!" Tazy said yearningly. "Where does she live? I always liked your tall little Jen. She'll be a lovely mother!"

"You'll see her, if all goes well, but the two elder boys, and my John, are away at school." And Joan told of Jen's anxiety over Kenneth. "He's been very ill; Jen's been with him day and night. But we think he's turned the corner at last."

"Poor Jenny-Wren! What horribly bad luck!" Tazy said soberly. "It would do her all the good in the world to dance for a day or two and get refreshed and bucked up, if he's going on well. I say, you know, we ought to talk business!"

"There is no business," the President said firmly. "You want to come. We're determined to have you. What is there to discuss?"

"I know, but it seems weird that I should teach your Club! You've been dancing far longer than I have."

"Not lately," Joan assured her. "Both Cicely and I have our hands full. We can't possibly tackle the Club, or go to town to learn dances. You must know heaps that we've missed."

"You haven't done 'Morpeth Rant'?" Tazy's eyes snapped. "Or 'Dressed Ship'? 'Alderman's Hat'? 'Steam Boat'? 'Kitty's Rambles'? 'Pleasures of the Town'? Oh, my dears, what a time your Club's going to have!"

"I can believe it, now that I know who Mrs. Thistle is." The President laughed across at her.

"We were annoyed when you signed yourself 'T. Thistleton,'" Joan said. "We wondered if you were Thomasina or Theodora."

"I know it was rude, but I couldn't put 'Tazy'. I wanted to be a surprise. If I have a girl later on, I shall call her Theodora Thistleton; it sounds well."

"I hope you won't mind seeing the President and me, and possibly Jenny-Wren, wearing robes and crowned with flowers?" Joan asked. "For the Club is insisting that the Queens shall come in state to one of the functions."

Tazy's eyes danced. "But I shall love that! How many Queens can you muster?"

"Quite a respectable procession. The new little Queen is the twenty-first. I said it was time we older ones gave up, but, as our newest recruit pointed out, we're really important. We show what an old-established Club we are," Joan explained.

"Is that Joan-Two?" the President asked. "It sounds like her. You must meet her, Tazy. She's a real personality, and is entirely responsible for our week-end School."

"Then we owe her a good deal. And Joy? What about her?" and joyfully shelving business, they plunged into talk of the old days and of all that had happened since.

"You've called one of your boys after Sir Rennie Brown, the great doctor in Switzerland?" Cicely asked.

"Or after his son, who's been our pal ever since we were at school. When our first was born, he had such a grave, wise little face, like an elderly physician, that we hooted with laughter and shouted—'Rennie Brown!' We're both very grateful to Sir Rennie, so we called the boy after him. He doesn't look so professional now; he soon grew out of it! He's an extremely lively youth of four."

"I know that wise look on wee babies," Joan smiled. "And your friend, who was with you at Cheltenham?"

"She's married to Sir Rennie's son. She has one small girl, Margaret Karen; Margaret for Lady Rennie Brown and Karen for herself. Dearie me! It is fun to see you two again!" and Tazy looked from Joan to Cicely. "How I am looking forward to your School! What about music? Shall I bring a pianist?"

"Our music's all right. Our fiddler has played for us for twenty years."

"She should know how to cope with country-dance tunes! Is she really good? Or don't you like to hurt her feelings? Musical people are so difficult."

Cicely laughed. "Don't worry. She's quite good."

"Her playing's first class, Tazy," Joan said. "Our music's really lovely for dancing."

"Oh, right! Then we shall all enjoy it," Tazy said hopefully.

CHAPTER TWENTY
DR. AND MRS. ROBERTSON COME HOME

"The girls can't talk about anything but half-term," Jansy told her mother. "Littlejan gets mad because Alison will call it 'Joan Fraser's week-end School,' and the others do it too."

"It *is* Littlejan's School," Joan admitted. "I'm glad they realise they owe it to her."

"She calls it 'Mrs. Thistle's School.' We're dying to see her. Couldn't you go to her house on Saturday and take us with you?"

"I'm afraid not. The President and I are to go to John-and-Mary's to-morrow. She's teaching classes on Saturday. You'll see her soon, Jansy."

Jansy sighed. "Waiting's so difficult! Mother, the girls want to know if they're to wear tunics or dancing frocks?"

"What about tunics for classes and frocks for evenings? You could take your dresses and change at school. You may want to have playground picnics, and you'd be sorry to dirty your dance frocks. All the evenings are going to be party-ish, and you'd want frocks then."

"Oh, rather!" Joan-Two had joined them in the Abbey in time to hear Jansy's question. "We couldn't have a reception for Mrs. Thistle, or watch the London team, in tunics! I'm longing to wear my Hamlet frock again. You were a darling to give it to me, Auntie Joan! I feel like dancing the minute I put it on; it seems to get right into my legs."

Joan laughed. "That makes it well worth while to have a green frock! I believe Mrs. Thistle will like the Hamlet Club."

On one point everybody was anxious, but the minds of those at the Hall were eased on the night before the School began. A car raced up the beech avenue, hooting joyfully, and Jock lifted Maidlin out in triumph.

"Just in time," he said cheerfully, and dealt with the luggage, while she ran up the steps to meet Joan.

"Oh, it's nice to be home again! Does the School start to-morrow? We didn't want to miss it!"

"Welcome home, Jock and Maidie! Or shall I say—Dr. and Mrs. Robertson?" Joan asked, drawing her in.

"I'm used to it now." Maidlin gave her a swift smile from the depths of her black eyes. "What's this?"—as a small tornado swept down the stairs, and Joan-Two and Jansy, in pyjamas and dressing-gowns, hurled themselves upon her.

"People say they always used to be met by a rush of twins," Littlejan cried. "Mary Damaris said it at your wedding. Oh, Mrs. Robertson, Auntie Joan took us to see her dance! She's lovely; aren't you frightfully bucked that you belong to her? But such a funny kind of dancing! Jansy and I don't want you to miss the twins too much, so we thought we'd rush at you instead, Mrs. Robertson!"

"Tell us about the twins, and David and Richard, Mrs. Robertson!" Jansy added.

"I won't tell one single thing to any person who calls me that!" Maidlin vowed. "Now tell me—oh, thank you, Joan! We're frightfully hungry; but we wouldn't stop for a meal. Jock, here's a lovely supper ready for us."

"And we're ready for the lovely supper," he agreed. "We've heaps to tell, but not while we're so hungry."

"We'll tell, while you eat," Joan suggested. "Later you shall do your share. Jack and I are going home as soon as the week-end School is over. We're going to leave you in peace."

"Oh, you can't do that! *Please!*" Maidlin looked up in dismay. "Stay and take care of us, Joan! Jock and I want to furnish Step Down and go there for week-ends, to play at housekeeping before we start in earnest; and who will look after the Hall, and these schoolgirls, if you go?"

"That will need thinking about. We thought you'd want to be left alone."

"We aren't as bad as all that." Maidlin's hidden smile showed in her eyes again. "We feel quite old married people now."

"We need you badly," Jock urged. "If Maid has the responsibility of this place I shan't have any help from her in building The Pallant. Please stay and take care of us, and leave her free to give me a hand!"

"You talk as if you were going to dig the foundations together," Jack Raymond said.

"I hope the foundations are dug already. I want Maid's advice and opinion on all sorts of points."

"Joan won't forsake us. It would let us down too badly," Maidlin said firmly. "Please tell us! How is Kenneth?"

"Really better. Jen came home to-day, for a long week-end. She wants to see the School as much as you do—more, for Mrs. Thistle is an old friend."

Maidlin nodded. "Are we having a procession?"

"To-morrow night, to give the School a Hamlet Club send-off. You're singing, of course. To-morrow, for Mrs. Thistle; a friendly intimate function, we hope. On Saturday, for the London team; we must show them the best we have in the Hamlet Club! And on Monday, in an interval of the closing party. And we won't let you off once."

Maidlin's eyes widened. "It's a good thing we came in time, Jock."

"I'm all for it. You began your career when you were crowned by the Club and you sang your speech at them; you've told me about that. I'll choose your songs."

"Some of Joy's songs, as she can't be here; and some folk-songs," Maidlin decided. "Are we going to dress up, Joan? Jen and Rosamund too?"

"They'll come as Queens. Your primrose robe is pressed and ready and we've masses of chrysanthemums for crowns. You'd better wear white flowers, as you're a bride."

"No, please! Pale yellow, to match my train. I shall need a maid, as Lindy Bellanne can't be here. Littlejan Fraser, will you carry my train?"

Littlejan flushed. "I'll be proud," she said simply.

"That's nice of you," Maidlin smiled at her. "It won't interfere with your dancing. The maids are always allowed to join in. Will you wear a white frock and my green and primrose colours?"

"Oh, but—my green Hamlet Club frock——!" Joan-Two began in dismay. "It's much more dancey than my white one!"

"I think she and Jansy should wear their green frocks, as they're part of the School," Joan interposed. "Cicely agrees, so we've passed round word that maids-of-honour may wear dancing frocks. It will add colour to the procession."

"Littlejan's green will look jolly with my primrose," Maidlin admitted.

"And Jansy's green with my violet. In a November procession we can't expect to have all our May Day colours. Most people will have to put up with chrysanthemums or Michaelmas daisies. I'm having daisies myself, for my crown and bouquet, tiny ones like violet stars."

“Pretty,” Maidlin agreed. “Ros may manage November roses, from her greenhouses, if not from the garden. Is Tansy maiding her again?”

“No, she’s at Wood End School.” Joan-Two hooted with laughter. “Jan and I captured the two newest kids in the Club and told them they were to be maids for the Countess and Lady Marchwood, as they’re both so tall. The infants are frightfully bucked. They’re Susan and Sally Edwards, from Bell’s Farm; I do think Susan and Sally are jolly names!”

“Lovely names,” Maidlin assented. “That was a good idea, Joan-Two. Their father gave us the tithe-barn, didn’t he? I remember seeing Susan and Sally once.”

“They came to the Abbey, for lessons in dancing from Aunty Joan, and we joined in, so we got to know them. Their daddy’s terribly pleased that they’ll be in the procession!”

“I wonder Rosamund didn’t ask you to be her maid—or Jen.”

Joan-Two looked at the elder Joan, who smiled, but did not offer to help.

“Matter of fact, they both did,” Littlejan admitted. “But we all thought it would be jolly to have Susan and Sally, and we couldn’t split them; they’re twins, you know. They’re eleven, but they’re very small. I knew you wouldn’t have Lindy, so I thought perhaps—but, of course, I wasn’t sure——” She reddened and came to a stop.

“It was nice of you to trust me,” Maidlin exclaimed. “And you couldn’t possibly split twins! Has the Hall been dreadfully quiet? Have you missed Lindy badly?”

“Terribly!” Littlejan grinned at her. “But Jansy and I have done our best to make the quietness not so awful.”

“Not so noticeable,” Joan amended. “You two can do quite a lot in that line, when you try.”

“I made friends with Mary-Dorothy, instead of Lindy,” Littlejan went on. “But she had to go away with Lady Jen.”

“I was sorry to uproot Mary, when she had just settled down,” Joan said. “But Jen needed her badly.”

“But Mary-Dorothy is happier with Jen than with anybody,” Maidlin said. “You needn’t feel sorry, Joan. Mary loves us all, but she worships Jen. She just lights up at the thought of going to help her.”

“I believe that’s true, Maidie. You know her so much better than I do,” Joan said thoughtfully.

“If you want to be kind to Mary, send her to The Grange when Jen’s there. She loves the place. We all depend on Mary and send for her when we want help. I’m afraid I shall be tempted to do it too. I can’t do without Mary entirely.”

“Aunt Joan and Jansy and I were left alone,” Littlejan said. “Anybody who was my pal immediately vanished.”

“But we’ve had quite a good time together, haven’t we?” Joan demanded.

“Marvellous! And there have been other things; all the planning for the Club, and Mrs. Thistle turning up—though I haven’t seen her yet. And I’ve made friends with the President. I do love her!”

Maidlin gave her a quick look. “I’m sure you do. There’s nobody quite like her.”

“Alison says she’s got a way with her, and she witches you and you have to do what she wants. Alison’s the head girl, and she wasn’t keen on the Club; she was tired of it. But she’s keen on the week-end School now. The President charmed her into it, somehow.”

“That’s useful, if she’s the head,” Maidlin assented. “The President has charmed you too, I think.”

"She likes Littlejan." Joan smiled.

"I can't imagine why! In the Christmas Vac. she's going to invite me and Chestnut to Broadway End for a night, and we're going to ride together in Hampden Woods," Joan-Two said joyfully. "She was sorry the week-end School had spoiled my half-term at the Castle; I suppose somebody had told her." She looked doubtfully at Joan, who smiled again. "She wants to meet Chestnut," Littlejan added. "She understands exactly how I feel about him."

"Then Chestnut is still at Kentisbury? You haven't billeted him at Bell's Farm yet?" Maidlin asked.

"We thought he'd be happier with Ferguson. He knows the other horses there. And I haven't much time for riding during term; school's more thrilling than I expected, and I'm busier."

"School has a way of making one busy," Maidlin agreed. "How is the President's little boy?"

"Behaving well at present," Joan said. "So Cicely is free to enjoy Littlejan's week-end School."

"Aunty Joan! You're as bad as Alison!"

"Or as good," Joan retorted. "It is your School. You worried and pulled strings till you made the President find this way of giving your slack seniors new dances."

"I'm as keen on those new dances as any member of the Club," Maidlin admitted. "Do you know what Mrs. Thistle means to teach?"

"She talks of something called 'The Alderman's Hat,' " Joan laughed. "And 'Steam Boat' seems a great favourite; and 'The Pleasures of the Town.' They're out of the new books, and she raves about the tunes."

"The names are as fascinating as ever," Maidlin said happily. "It was hard to leave Joy and the children, but we had to be here for Mrs. Thistle."

"We have to start earning pennies to pay for The Pallant," Jock remarked. "I've put off my pupils for long enough, and Maid has several concerts ahead. Building houses and being married are expensive luxuries; we can afford them, if we work, but not on our private incomes. We both have jobs; we must get on with them."

"And I've let you down so horribly by losing my Italian fortune." Maidlin gave him her hidden smile. "Never mind! I'll work hard and sing whenever I'm asked, to make up for it."

"You won't sing whenever you're asked," he said firmly. "It wouldn't pay. You'll only sing for the best people and at the biggest concerts. We make an exception for the Hamlet Club."

Maidlin smiled at Joan. "I have to do what I'm told."

"You have to be looked after and your interests taken care of," Jock assured her. "Only the best for you! You'll have plenty of engagements. I'll see to that."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE
WELCOME TO MRS. THISTLE

The mistresses found it hard to control the girls on Friday afternoon. Curiosity about the new experience was growing, and those who did not belong to the Hamlet Club intended to crowd the big galleries and look on. School closed at four o'clock and most of the girls hurried home for tea and to change into white or dancing frocks; others, including Littlejan and Jansy, had tea with the boarders and dressed afterwards for the evening.

"I wish we could have gone home!" Jansy mourned. "They will have fun dressing up."

"They won't wear their crowns in the car, will they?" asked Mirry. "Mother and the President are bringing theirs and mine in a box."

"They might get them knocked about. We're to help them to put them on straight," Littlejan explained. "I'm aching to see the crowns and trains. It's rather marvellous to be in the procession at my first chance!"

"Would you like to be Queen?" asked one of the tiny maids-of-honour. "I think I'd be scared. I've heard the girls say you may be Queen some day."

Littlejan reddened. "That's a mad idea! I'd adore it; there's nothing to be frightened of. But I've come too late; there are heaps of girls who have been here for years. I'll never be Queen, but I would like to be really in the procession; I'm only doing it for somebody else to-night. Mrs. Robertson has her own maid, but she's in America just now."

"Any maids-of-honour here?" Alison came to the door. "Oh, crowds of you! Your Queens have come. They're dressing in the library."

"Come on! Now we'll see how they look!" Littlejan led a rush of maids to the robing-room.

"Oh! How absolutely marvellous!" she cried, and stood on the threshold, dazed by a blaze of colour—long white robes, velvet and satin trains, flowers in masses everywhere.

"You do look like a Queen!" Joan-Two shouted, at sight of the President in white and gold, crowned with golden flowers, very regal and splendid; and then, in a quieter tone—"Oh, my Queen's lovely! She may be little, but she is a beauty!" and she gazed wide-eyed at the Primrose Queen.

But there was no time for awestruck staring. The White Queen called her daughter and began to robe her in a blue train. "Be quick, Mirry. You should have been in here with us, not chattering with the rest. Here's your crown."

Joan came forward, her violet robe thrown over her arm. "Jansy and Littlejan, here are girdles for your frocks, to show which Queens you belong to. Violet for you, Janice; knot it loosely; it looks nice on your green frock." She handed Joan-Two a pale yellow cord. "You can take them off for dancing, if you prefer it. Here are your wreaths; we'll allow you to shed those too, but you must have them for the procession." And she arranged a garland of violet daisies on Jansy's red head, and placed a circle of small yellow chrysanthemums on Littlejan's dark curls.

"Gosh! I do feel an idiot! Fancy me, with flowers on my head!" said the new maid-of-honour.

"They're lovely with your dark hair, Littlejan. You do look pretty," Jansy cried.

Joan smiled. "You both look very nice. We'd better have a photo, Joan-Two, and send it to your mother, called 'The Maid-of-Honour.' Uncle Jack still has some to take, hasn't he?"

Littlejan nodded, nervously because of her unusual decoration, and gave a quick shy glance in the mirror Joan held up.

"Quite straight?" Joan asked briskly. "Does it feel firm? I've had a good deal of experience! Right! Then forget it, and think about your Queen."

"She's the loveliest of the bunch!" Littlejan burst out, and Joan smiled again.

"Has Mrs. Thistle come?" Jansy asked anxiously.

"She's with the Head. We haven't seen her yet."

"Gosh! We shall burst upon her like a lot of rainbows! She'll swoon with surprise and joy," Joan-Two remarked.

"Very likely," Joan said laughing.

"I'm the only one really entitled to wear autumn colours," a clear voice was saying haughtily. "You all mocked at my robe and called it dingy, but nothing could be more like the woods at the present moment." And Jen, very tall, yellow-haired, came in, wearing a beech-brown train decorated with "little yellow things that dance," golden leaves of elm and birch and poplar, and carrying a sheaf of autumn leaves.

"I protest!" cried the President. "I was the first to wear autumn colours," and she swept round her golden train to show the big brown leaves painted on it. "I always said you'd bagged my colours, Brownie."

"I forgot you," Jen admitted. "Yes, I withdraw; you were the first autumn Queen. But you vanished so soon that it's easy to overlook you."

"Just what I should have thought nobody could ever do," Joan commented.

"Overlook the President?" cried a new voice. "Never! Nobody could!" and Rosamund, crowned with red roses and wearing a crimson train, decorated with big white and yellow blooms, came to join Jen in looking for her maid.

"Here they are. They're terrified," said Littlejan. "This is Susan, and that one's Sally."

"They look very nice, and quite pretty enough." Jen smiled down at her small attendant. "Do you mind carrying a dingy brown door-mat, Sally? That's what they called my lovely beech train. How jolly your yellow frock will look beside it!"

"Don't be frightened! We won't hurt you," Rosamund said kindly. "Here's a red rose from my bunch. Pin it on your front; that's right, that's my badge. What a pretty yellow frock! It does look gay beside my crimson! And it matches your curls so nicely. Come along, Susan! Clever of you to have yellow hair! You might almost be my little girl. Perhaps people will think you really are mine!"

"Oh, no, Countess!" Jen mocked. "Susan's at least ten, and you're only twenty-seven!"

"I'm eleven," Susan ventured shyly, her face radiant at the great lady's friendly tone.

"Worse and worse! I'm afraid nobody will take her for my daughter. I did hope somebody would say what a nice little girl I had! Or two nice little girls; better still! You're a twin, aren't you, Susan? I'd like to have girl-twins!"

"Why this unseemly craving for daughters?" Jen demanded. "Boys are your duty. Aren't you satisfied with your son and heir?"

"Hugh is very jolly, but I want a girl. Carry my train nicely, Susan!" Rosamund took her place in the line, following Mirry's Aunt Barbara, the Wild Rose Queen.

Maidlin came after Jen, and Littlejan found herself in the procession, holding up the primrose train. Before she had time to be nervous they were walking along the corridor, led by

Miriam, the White Queen. The Golden President followed, and then came Joan, in her violet robe.

“Oh, lovely! What a lot of colours!” Joan-Two murmured, as she waited in the doorway.

Maidlin flashed back a smile at her. “Look at this! What do you think of Queen Beatrice?”

Following blue and silver Queens had come a short, cheerful person wearing a striped robe of several colours.

“I am looking,” Littlejan responded cautiously. “It’s a bit gaudy, isn’t it?”

“She’s Queen Bee; she was called Beetle at school. She was a good Queen, they say. Ready?”

Then a roar of welcome came from the galleries and from the Hamlet Club, and Joan-Two realised what a proud position was hers, for this was Maidlin’s first appearance since her marriage.

Very pink, but as self-possessed as if on a concert platform, the bride bowed and passed up the hall.

“Poor Maidie!” Joan said laughing, as she reached the platform. “But she had to get it over.”

As each Queen mounted the steps she made a curtsey to the Head and then went to her place, and her maid arranged her train in graceful folds around her. Beside Miss Macey, and included in the curtsey, stood a tall girl in a blue silk frock, with yellow hair coiled over her ears, her blue eyes wide with astonishment and delight, and already the crowd had discovered her and attention was diverted from the Queens.

“That must be Mrs. Thistleton! She looks terribly nice, but not a bit married.” The word went round the galleries.

Tazy responded to the curtseys with a country-dance bob, while Miss Macey smiled and bowed.

“Why this?” Tazy asked, as the greeting to Maidlin rang out. “Is this little Queen a special favourite? Oh, but I know her! Who is she? Wait—let me think! Isn’t it Madalena di Ravarati? I heard her sing in the Albert Hall.”

“Known to us as Maidlin. The school—and I—haven’t seen her since her marriage to Dr. Robertson. She only came home from New York last night.”

“I *am* surprised! I’d like to speak to her.”

“Her maid is the child who has been the moving spirit in all this—Joan Fraser, a small Australian who has just come to us. She insisted on having new dances, to bring back the wandering seniors.”

“Good girl! I must speak to her too. It’s a wonderful sight. You must be very proud of the Club. Oh, will she really sing to us? How marvellous!”

“A welcome to you, I expect.” Miss Macey smiled.

The Queens were all on the platform, at last. Maidlin rose from her place and came forward, dignified and quiet. Standing alone before the gay array she sang a little verse, without accompaniment, her eyes on Mrs. Thistle.

*“We give you our greeting,
At this our glad meeting,
To brighten our gloomy November!
You’ll teach us new dances,
You’ll give us new chances,
And all that you say we’ll remember!
Heartily now we all greet you—
Everyone’s longing to meet you—
But time is advancing, so let’s have some dancing,
To brighten this rainy November!”*

Jock listened, with a broad grin, standing with the Earl of Kentisbury and Jack Raymond. He had heard the words of the welcome song with hoots of laughter, but his wife had said, with dignity, “We always give a doggerel greeting to our guests and Queens.”

“Dog-greeting is the name for it,” he had agreed.

Tazy looked startled. “What is the tune? My hat, it’s ‘Green Garters’! Who made up the words?”

The President gave a conscious grin.

“I thought so!” Tazy murmured.

Maidlin was repeating her chorus.

*“Heartily now we all greet you!
Everyone’s longing to meet you!
With dances you bristle, so come, Mrs. Thistle!—
And share them with us this November!”*

She made a low beautiful curtsy, like the one she had made to the Queen in the Albert Hall, and went back to her place, and the Hamlet Club gazed expectantly at Mrs. Thistle.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO A MEDAL FOR MARGIA

Tazy stepped forward, but kept at the corner of the platform, so that she could face the Queens as well as the crowded hall.

“Girls of the Hamlet Club!” Her voice rang out unafraid. “I do thank you very warmly for this delightful welcome, and I congratulate the school and Miss Macey on the Club and on this marvellous display of colour and beauty in its Queens.”

A cheer rang out, and the Queens laughed back at her from under their flower-crowns.

“Especially I thank the singer for her charming greeting. I’ll do my best to deserve it. I’m not sure what name to call her, but perhaps Queen Madalena will be safe.”

There was a laugh, and Maidlin grew pink again.

“I’m looking forward to our School,” Tazy went on. “And I believe you are all feeling the same. As the weather is so kindly raining steadily, nobody will grudge giving up the holiday to dancing.”

Several of the audience looked self-conscious or gazed accusingly at Littlejan Fraser.

“I’ve a strong feeling,” Tazy said, “that speeches should wait till the last evening. Then if we don’t want them we can just forget them. Most likely we’ll be too busy for anything but a song from our singing Queen.” And applause broke out again. “We’re dancers, and we want to dance. So suppose we have a little party, of dances we know, and to-morrow at ten o’clock we’ll start on the new work. I assure you, I really am bristling with fresh dances! Will you do ‘Goddesses’ for me? I’d like to see your skipping.”

The girls looked at one another. Alison was pushed forward. Purple with embarrassment she blurted out, “They haven’t done it lately. We’ve forgotten it.”

“Forgotten ‘Goddesses’? Oh, my dears, what a mistake! You are missing heaps of fun! I am so sorry for you!”

The Hamlet Club sighed in relief and began to laugh. Every one of them had expected her to be indignant or scornful.

“Oh well, something else, then! What do you know? I really would like to see your skipping. What about ‘Ruffy Tufty’? You’ve not forgotten that, have you?”

In frozen horror the Hamlet Club stared at her. Not a Queen but raised her head with a jerk of dismay. Maidlin’s eyes were like saucers; the President looked actually frightened; Jen whistled under her breath; Rosamund stared accusingly at Cicely; Joan gazed steadily at the teacher who asked for skipping in “Ruffy.”

There was a long moment of stunned awful silence. Then a small voice from the platform cried—“She’s pulling our leg—all our legs! Look at her face! It’s a joke! She knows we can’t skip in ‘Ruffy!’”

The Club’s relief found vent in a shout of laughter, and the twinkle which Joan Fraser had seen in their teacher’s blue eyes became laughter also.

“Good girl!” Tazy said heartily. “You saw through me! Aren’t you the one who read the Riot Act till they had to send for me to keep you quiet? Girls!” she clapped her hands and silence fell, an amused but slightly reproachful silence. “Girls! Forgive me! I swear I won’t do it again. But you all looked so dreadfully solemn; I just had to do something about it. I really do know ‘Ruffy.’ I admit it was a leg-pull, but honestly it will be the last. I never saw anything

funnier than your frightened faces, and the alarm of your Queens, at the thought that they'd brought you a teacher who expected skipping in 'Ruffy Tufty'! Now, what will you skip for me? You—the bright maid-of-honour—you choose." Crimson at this public notice, Joan-Two stammered—"Would 'Flowers of Edinburgh' do?"

"Oh, you skip that? I like polka step myself; it's so much neater. Still, skipping's quite correct; we'll try the quieter step to-morrow. We can't do only new dances, or you'll be dazed and dithered. 'Flowers of Edinburgh,' please." She looked at Margia Lane, who was tuning her violin. "Aren't you going to dance, Maid-of-Honour?"

"I'm Joan." Littlejan looked at her Queen, then sprang up, and forgetting to take off her wreath and girdle, ran with Jansy to the end of a long line.

The first playing of the tune satisfied Tazy. This was the real thing, and her foot was tapping to the rhythm while she watched the dancing.

"Awfully hard on all of you!" She went across to Cicely and Joan. "How can you bear to sit out?"

"We've had to endure it so often," Joan said. "Tazy, you are a wicked woman! You gave us a terrible fright!"

"I ought to have warned you. But they looked in such deadly earnest. I couldn't bear it."

"All the same, it was risky," the President said severely. "If young Joan hadn't seen through you, you'd have had to tell them it was a joke, and they might never have trusted you again."

"Big Joan was suspicious; I saw it in her eye. But the small one spoke first. She's a jolly little dancer, and so is her partner, who is obviously your daughter, Mrs. Joan. Don't you get mixed in the Joans? What do you call the new one?"

"She's Joan-Two, or Littlejan; she's called for me. My Janice, or Jansy, is called after her mother. Joan-Two is the image of her mother; hence Littlejan," Joan explained.

"I like their dancing. They're very good." Tazy called 'last time,' and stepped to the front of the platform.

Warm and cheerful, the dancers waited for her comment. It was unexpected. "I say, I do like your frocks!" she said.

A laugh went round. The Hamlet Club knew the effect of their loosely-swinging dresses, in every brilliant shade and colour, upon those who saw them for the first time; gold and violet, deep blue and emerald, crimson, lemon, and pink, all mixed up together.

"I like your dancing, too," Tazy added, as if it were an afterthought, and the girls laughed again, but looked relieved.

"Now may I see 'Ruffy'?" Her eyes laughed back at them. "Your President threatens that you'll never forgive me; just to show her she's wrong, will you dance it for me?"

They would dance anything she liked, so long as they knew it. In a moment they were in sets of four, and Tazy was in their midst, turning alternate sets round, to face the platform instead of the windows. "That will give you plenty of room. Sure I haven't muddled you? Then right away!"

"Oh, *very* good!" she told them at the end. "You may have gone a little stale and forgotten some of your stuff, but you're real dancers and jolly good ones. Is it true that you've never seen Headquarters dancing, with men for partners? How you'll enjoy to-morrow night! Why don't you make these slackers dance with you?" Her eyes swept indignantly over the amused audience. "I soon made my husband dance, I can tell you!—though he's not what I call good. But I'm talking too much; I always do. Your fiddler—I love your music! That's why you

dance so well. You owe more to her than you know. She must make a horrible clash on her strings, to stop me. At school I was called Taisez-vous, which means ‘Shut up.’ My unfortunate name is Anastasia, and put shortly it’s Tazy; so Taisez-vous was my nickname, because I talked so much. There I go again! Oh, thank you!”

Margia, with mischievous eyes, had played a crashing discord. The Club shouted—“Oh, please go on! We like to hear you talk!”

“Certainly not! You’re going to dance ‘Newcastle,’ if you aren’t too bored. Everybody knows ‘Newcastle.’ Do you?”

The Club grinned and admitted that they did. Tazy took her place on the platform again and watched critically.

“Yes, I like that. You’ve been well taught. You can’t think what a relief it is to come to a class who are real dancers and who don’t need to be taught to set and side. There’s not a case of bad setting among you; ‘Ruffy’ showed me that. And not one of you made the lines badly in ‘Newcastle.’ I congratulate you!”

The Club, feeling much happier, dropped on the floor to rest and fan themselves.

“You’ll have to dust those jolly frocks,” Tazy observed. “Oh, I say! Something’s going to happen! So sorry!” and she retreated hurriedly to her corner.

Mirry was standing in front of her throne, waiting for a chance to speak. She held out a small blue case to Margia Lane.

“With thanks from us all, because you’ve played for us for so long,” she said simply.

“Oh, girls! And Queens! You shouldn’t! You know how much I love playing!” Margia exclaimed.

She drew out the gold medal, on its chain, with a cry of real delight as she read the inscription.

“Oh, that’s beautiful! Thank you all so very much! Look, Mrs. Thistle! I’m sure the Queens and the Club have seen it already.”

“Twenty-one years!” Tazy said. “They’ve been lucky to have you. Your music’s excellent; I am so glad to meet you! If you want a job, apply to me for a recommendation.”

“I belong to the Hamlet Club. I am proud!” and she hung the medal round her neck. “I feel like a super Queen!”

“Much more important to the Club than any of the Queens,” Rosamund told her.

“Wouldn’t you stand in the middle of the hall and let us dance ‘Sellenger’s’ round you?” Tazy asked. “Then let’s dance it in her honour, girls. For Miss Lane and her gold medal!”

After the dance Maidlin stood to sing “The Sleepy Song,” about the little sheep going over the hill; then a couple of Joy’s songs, and the story of Silvy, the Female Highwayman.

“This is a treat, indeed; and so unexpected!” Tazy whispered, sitting on Jansy’s cushion at Joan’s feet. “Can we have her every night?”

“We’ve told her we expect it. But we mustn’t tire her; she’s fresh from the voyage from New York.”

“She doesn’t look tired.”

“No, she’s too happy. She’s a changed girl these last few months. But Jock will glower at us if we work her too hard.”

“Why doesn’t he dance?”

“Because he likes watching her. He calls her a roseleaf in the wind; or thistledown.”

“Won’t some of you dance? I’m sure the Club’s best dancers are on the platform. It does seem too bad!”

"It's true, of course. But to-night is for the girls. I congratulate you," Joan said heartily. "You've taken them the right way. They're all very happy, and the School will be a triumphant success."

"I agree," said the President. "They told me at the House that it would probably be a riot, but you have them well in hand."

"What a shame! I must make them dance again," and Tazy called for "The Old Mole" and "Hey, Boys," and said kind words at the end of each.

"Don't you think we could have one little new dance?" she said persuasively. "I know this is a reception, not a class, but wouldn't you like something new to take away with you?"

The Club, and the Queens, broke into applause. Evidently they would like it very much indeed.

"Good!" Tazy said cheerfully. "Then make longways sets for 'Steam Boat.' It's priceless fun."

"Tazy, what a jolly little dance!" cried Cicely, as the Club, arm-in-arm in lines of four, walked down the hall and came backwards, with some giggles of amusement, to their places. "If I throw over my household cares and come at ten to-morrow, will you do it again and have me in your class?"

"I like the walking hands-across, to that jolly tune. I'm coming too." Joan had been watching carefully.

"You'll have us all in your class, if you know many more like that," Rosamund warned her.

Tazy had grinned when the Rose Queen mounted the platform, for they had met in Switzerland. Now she said solemnly, "I know heaps. I shall give them 'Spaniard,' and perhaps 'Mutual Love,' so that Joan can see her walking star again; and then I shall send you all home to bed. We shall be so worked up that we'll have to sing Queen Madalena's 'Sleepy Song,' to calm our minds. I was hoping you'd turn up. How's the son and heir?"

"Splendid. How are the Swiss people? I haven't heard of Karen for three years."

"She's Mrs. Rennie Brown, now, and Margaret Karen is a year old and a jolly kid."

"Oh, that's marvellous! Those days at the Platz seem so long ago."

"You've gone a long way since then," Tazy agreed. "I suppose I call you——?"

"Please don't. We forget all that here. I'm just Rosamund, or the Rose Queen."

"It must be quite a relief! Do come to-morrow, all you Queens! I believe we shall have a jolly time."

"I know we shall," the President assured her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE DANCING QUEENS

“You’d better rescind that order about frocks, Joan,” Rosamund said, under cover of the music of “The Spaniard.” “*We* can’t prance about in tunics!”

“I could, but I don’t intend to.” The President joined in. “Frocks, certainly, for everybody. We’ll announce it.”

“Oh, let them wear their pretties!” Tazy had overheard. “Nobody dances in tunics nowadays. I’m sure they’d rather wear their frocks, and the colours are so good.”

“We have dancing frocks, too,” the President told her. “We always wear them for parties.”

“Do you keep to your Queens’ colours? Are you always golden and Joan violet?”

“Oh no! How dull! As a dancer Joan wears pale grey and I have a deep Liberty red.”

Tazy glanced at her dark hair and eyes and Joan’s bronze plaits under her crown, and nodded. “And the others?”

“Jen wears blue, and Rosamund is often in blue too, though her first choice was golden-brown. You’ll see Maid in rose-pink; that’s why her husband calls her a rose-leaf.”

“I shall love to welcome you all to my classes!”

“It’s really important that we should come, for we’ll have to keep the Club up to the mark in these new dances,” Joan said virtuously. “They’ll spend hours arguing whether it’s running or skipping, unless one of us is there to keep them straight.”

“Sure we shan’t argue too?” Rosamund asked.

“Not if you’ve done them once and if you have the books,” Tazy said. “But I do think you were sensible not to dash into them with only the books! It’s so much better to have somebody to put you through them, even if you only do them once. I’ll see that you go through them more than once, and I’ll point out any snags you’re likely to find.”

“I shall have to go home during the day,” Joan warned her. “My boy’s only five months old. There are things Nurse can’t do for him.”

Tazy grinned at her. “These young mothers! We’ll do revision for the last half-hour; and you can run home to young Jim. After lunch, I’ll see ‘Milkmaids’ and ‘Goddesses’ and keep the class busy till you arrive for the new stuff.”

“That’s good of you,” Joan said warmly.

In spite of drizzle and mist, the Club met in high spirits next morning. Tazy had spent the night at Broadway End, meeting Dick Everett again and being introduced to Dickon, Cis, and delicate Baby Ted. She was as radiant with enjoyment as the girls, her eyes alight with amusement as she welcomed the Queens of the night before, now merely dancers in short full frocks.

Calling for a repeat of “Spaniard” and “Steam Boat,” Tazy threatened no more new dances if these had been forgotten. But the Hamlet Club were experienced dancers and they remembered well, and the Queens, dancing with their maids who had taken part the night before, picked up the dances easily.

Tazy called for ribbons, or girdles from tunics—“Because our hankies are so small. Handkerchiefs are correct, but we’d need big morris ones. We’ll use ribbons and make comfortable arches and you shall have ‘Kendal Ghyll.’”

The nursery-rhyme tunes amused Margia Lane; the skipping arches charmed the girls; and the vigorous dance reduced the Club to a state of exhaustion but great delight.

"I must be middle-aged and stout!" the President sighed. "I'm done in! I believe Tazy did it on purpose. What about you, Joan?"

"Panting and worn out, but very happy. Tazy, I love that!"

"You did it jolly well. We'll do it again——"

"Oh, not at once! *Please!*"

"On Monday," Tazy laughed. "I want to give you 'Soldier's Joy.' It's much quieter."

"Soldier's Joy" appealed to the Club and became a favourite at once. Tazy followed up her success with "The Alderman's Hat," which was nearly the riot that had been predicted. She calmed the class with "The Dressed Ship"; and then everybody found seats, on the floor, if necessary, and ate biscuits and drank milk, and talked.

"This is like old times—milk and biscuits in the quad at Cheltenham," Joan said.

Tazy nodded. "We had to have it, to remind us of those days. And the girls need a rest. I *think* they're enjoying themselves?"

"They're in the seventh heaven, and you know it. What do we do next?"

"Sing, for half an hour, with Queen Madalena leading us in folk-songs," Tazy said promptly. "We join in the chorus."

"Oh, good! Maid will do that for us."

"I'm not a man!" Maidlin protested, but consented to be the chanty-man in several songs of the sea.

"Now we'll dance again." Tazy called up her class. "You must have 'Durham Reel' and 'The Yorkshire Square'; and perhaps we might trust you with the 'Cumberland Square,' though that often does become a riot! You ought to do 'The Long Eight' and 'The Pleasures of the Town,' too; all simple, but very traditional, and so useful for parties."

Lunch, after another strenuous hour, was a picnic affair, in classrooms or in corners of the hall. Tazy wandered from group to group; the President, the Countess, Jen and Maidlin sat resting in one corner. The hall rang with chatter and laughter, while Joan went home, to tend her baby and be back in time for the next session.

The President looked up. "Joan running home to her baby? Must you go too, Countess?"

"Not necessary. Hugh's nearly nine months old and he's in good hands. I'm not needed."

"I wish somebody else in our crowd would have twins," the President said. "Then Joy would have to stop swanking with hers. Why doesn't Joan have two? Her father and Joy's father were twins, weren't they?"

"Joan's content with ones." Maidlin smiled at her. "Joy doesn't swank, President, though she's proud of her twins."

"I'll say she is! Two train-bearers last May Day! If somebody else had two we could say"—her eyes swept over the group of tired Queens—" 'You aren't the only one. There are Rosamund's twins coming along.' That would squash her nicely."

There was a shout of laughter, as the Rose Queen asked indignantly, with rising colour, "Why am I to be the victim? Have twins yourself!"

"You're easily the most suitable. Joan doesn't want them; Maidlin's too little and new to have twins; Jenny-Wren has too many already. You can——"

"I'll thank you to take that back, President!" There was a howl of wrath from Jen. "I haven't nearly enough yet. I'd love to have twins!"

“I won’t take it back. You have too many already,” the President said firmly. “Considering your age and your infantile behaviour at times, five is quite ridiculous; at least three too many. I won’t wish twins on to you as well. But Rosamund can afford it, with all her nurses and nurseries. Please think about it seriously, Countess!”

“To be honest, there’s nothing I’d like better,” Rosamund admitted. “I love girls; the best way to have a lot would be to have them two at a time. My husband was a twin. I may oblige you some day, Lady President.”

“Oh, but it’s your duty to have boys, because of the title,” Jen reminded her again.

“Rubbish! The title’s provided for, with both Hugh and Roddy. I’ve done my duty to the family. I wouldn’t mind another boy later on, but I do want some girls.”

“Kindly see to it as quickly as possible,” Cicely said haughtily. “Here comes teacher! What next, Tazy?”

“I thought we’d do ‘Twin Sisters.’ It’s a dear little tune. Why, what’s the matter?” as a laugh went round.

“The President has been issuing her commands, and you probably know that she always gets her own way. She’s just wished twins on to me,” Rosamund explained.

Tazy looked at her in amusement. “How extremely suitable! A Castle the size of yours has plenty of room for a large family. We’ve passed your little house on our way to the seaside. Jump up and dance ‘Twin Sisters.’ Perhaps it will bring you luck—if you want twin girls!”

“I’d adore twin girls!” Rosamund flung at her defiantly. “Be a twin sister with me, Maid! It may bring you luck too!”

“I don’t want twins, thank you, Ros. You can have them,” Maidlin said definitely, a touch of colour in her face.

“I’d love them!” Rosamund owned, under her breath.

The simple dances Tazy had proposed for the afternoon were well received, though the music came in for criticism.

“Haven’t they tunes of their own?” the President asked reproachfully. “Why must we dance to Scottish songs? It’s poaching! ‘The Durham Reel’ to ‘Hundred Pipers’, and ‘Yorkshire Square’ to ‘The White Cockade,’ and ‘Cumberland Square’ is surely ‘My love she’s but a lassie yet’?”

“Jock laughs at ‘Thady, you Gander,’” Maidlin remarked. “He says the dance is a version of the Scottish ‘Strip the Willow,’ and the tune is ‘There’s nae luck about the hoose.’”

“Your Scottish accent is improving since you married Jock, Maidie,” Jen told her.

“As for ‘Circassian Circle,’ the tune’s merely ‘The Irish Washerwoman,’” Rosamund said severely. “We knew that one before, of course.”

“‘Kendal Ghyll,’ this morning, went to ‘Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,’ and I *think* the other tune was ‘Mulberry Bush,’” Joan laughed. “Your first lot were better, Tazy. ‘Spaniard’ was a lovely tune, and so was ‘Dressed Ship,’ which seemed to sing—‘Turn the woman under!’ as you told us to do.”

“Those Apted dances have lovely music, but I expect for the old traditional things any tune would do. I suppose you and your crowd are soaked in Playford dances?” Tazy, perched on a desk, looked down at them.

“That’s about right. Lovely music there!”

“‘Chelsea Reach,’ ‘Never Love Thee More,’ ‘Nonesuch,’ and all the rest. Yes, well, I don’t want you to think I don’t know them or that I don’t prefer them to the ‘Durham Reel’! I love balanced figures, working out perfectly, and I love beautiful music; so I love the Playford

books. But you wanted something new and easy, so I've plunged into this other set of dances, and I hope it's what you want."

"Oh, it is!" they assured her. "Just exactly what we want and what the Club needs."

"I rather thought so. But don't let them forget their Playford dances and go all lazy and carefree."

Cicely laughed. "I'll see that they don't!"

"The dem. to-night will help," Tazy said. "They'll see what their dances really can look like."

She was right, for the dozen friends from town showed several of the simpler dances the Club had just learned, rather to their own amusement, and then gave a short programme of the most beautiful things they could find, perfectly timed and spaced, and brought ringing applause from the rainbow-coloured Hamlet Club, crowded against the walls, and from the rest of the school, in the galleries. The demonstration was the talk of members and outsiders for days, and was a revelation of what the dances could really be.

But Joan-Two went to Cicely on Monday, to ask with a touch of shyness, "Ought we to try to do those dances, President? Aren't we messing them up? I felt rather bad on Saturday. Seems to me we're playing about with them."

Cicely laughed down at her. "Go on playing about, then! You do it very nicely, Littlejan Fraser. You're a jolly dancer already. Are you enjoying your School?"

"We're loving it, and me—I!—most of all, because I'm not any newer than the rest. None of them know these dances, and I get on as well as any of them," Joan-Two burst out.

"You certainly do! I haven't seen you in difficulties so far."

"They all know so much more than I do about the old dances. I've simply loved this weekend."

"When everybody has been new to the dances together. We've enjoyed it too."

Littlejan gave her a shy look. "We thought you were having rather a good time."

Cicely laughed. "And you enjoyed the show on Saturday?"

"It was simply marvellous! I spent all yesterday writing about it to Mother."

"What a splendid way to show you'd enjoyed it! I merely wanted to cry with joy after my first dem."

"Because you were looking at something that was quite perfect; I felt rather like that. I thought it was horrible cheek for kids like us to do the dances," Joan-Two admitted.

"Don't worry! Mrs. Thistle likes the Club's dancing. She hopes we'll ask her to come again. We might have some morris. There hasn't been time in this School."

"We'd love that! Those men dancing morris terrified me."

"They were rather fierce, weren't they? You and I will never do it like that! But you must do morris, although the Club has let it slide lately."

"Make a longways set!" Tazy's voice rang out. "I'm going to give you something new, and I defy anybody to mix it up with anything else I've given you. First couples change places with their partners; men on women's side. Now listen to the jolly tune. It's 'Piper's Fancy.'"

"Tazy, what a lovely dance!" Joan cried, at the end.

"You did it beautifully, Joan-Queen," Tazy laughed. "I've still a few new things for you! We'll do 'Green Sleeves and Yellow Lace'; but first I want to see some of those we've done already, or we shall get tied up in knots at to-night's party. And I couldn't bear to go away without giving you the 'Morpeth Rant,'" and she turned to Cicely. "Joan will do it so prettily."

“Seems to like your dancing, Joan!” Rosamund remarked.

“I always did, and she’s as good as ever she was,” and Tazy watched with real pleasure as Joan danced her way under arches made by Rosamund and the President and the head girl.

Jock, looking on from the platform, laughed as his small pink wife dived under the raised arms of Jen, Littlejan, and Jean Guthrie. “Priceless fun to watch,” he said to the teacher. “How they all enjoy it!”

“Much better fun to do,” Tazy said severely. “Yes, it’s been a memorable half-term.”

“Thanks to that little green girl dancing with my wife, I believe.”

“So they say. They’re sure we shall hear more of young Littlejan.”

“You mean she’ll be a Queen some day?”

“They seem to think so.” Tazy turned to call “Last time.”

After a strenuous party she drove away, her car heaped with flowers and chocolates, to cries of—“Come again! We’ll have another School soon!”

She laughed and waved her hand, and raced away, back to John-and-Mary’s and her “neglected offspring,” as she called them.

“And that’s the end of that!” said the head girl, as they dressed to go home. “Satisfied, young Joan? It’s been your idea all through. I must say I thank you for it.”

“Hear, hear!” came from every corner, led by Ginger Jean.

“It was the President’s idea,” Littlejan said sturdily. “I’ve loved every minute of it. I wish it wasn’t over.”

“Things will go horribly flat now,” Jean groaned. “Nothing but swotting till Christmas!”

“I don’t see why.” Joan-Two looked mysterious.

Alison swung round. “Something more up your sleeve? Out with it, Littlejan Fraser!”

“They’re calling! Ask me to-morrow! The President gave me another idea, so that we shouldn’t feel too bad when Mrs. Thistle went away.” And Joan-Two fled, to hurl herself laughing into the car with Jansy and Joan.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR THE MOTTO OF THE CLUB

“Now, Littlejan Fraser, what did that hint mean?” Alison demanded next morning.

“Alison, will you be Queen next May Day?” Joan-Two pleaded. “It would be marvellous to have a senior as Queen.”

Alison looked at her in amusement. “My dear kid, I’m leaving in July; I may even go at Christmas.”

Joan pulled her into a corner, with a wail of distress. “You couldn’t desert us now! You’ve been such an enormous help; it’s made all the difference to have you; it brought in crowds of seniors. Oh, Alison, stay till July, at least; the Club will be much stronger by then! If you leave now we shall slump back into being just something for the juniors again. Oh, *Alison!*”

Really touched by her distress, Alison explained. “Dad says I may choose. But he and Mother are going for a cruise in March, and if I’ve left school they’ll take me with them.”

“You could go for cruises later,” Joan urged. “They’d give you another chance—for the sake of your education, you know.”

“I dare say, but this one sounds marvellous! And I’m not particularly keen on two more terms of school.”

“But you’re head! You ought to stay till the end of your year! Oh, don’t let us down, Alison!”

“I’m still hesitating,” Alison said seriously. “I’m in a sort of ‘To be or not to be’ state. I say! That sounds like the motto of the Hamlet Club!”

Joan-Two stared at her. “It *is* the motto! And that’s what it means.”

“What it means? What do *you* mean?”

“The motto’s to remind us to choose the right way, when it comes to ‘To be or not to be,’” Joan-Two said eagerly. “That’s what is behind it; the ‘Hamlet’ bit is just a joke, a pun on the name of the Club. Choosing rightly is what really matters, but everybody’s forgotten.”

“Then why do you know about it?” Alison demanded.

“Mother told me. She knew the Club years ago, when Aunt Joan was Queen. It was the President’s idea; she chose the motto, because she’d had to choose and it had been difficult. She did the right thing, and she’s always been glad, for the Hamlet Club came out of it.”

Alison looked thoughtful. “You sound a bit incoherent, but I’ll find somebody to tell me more about it. You think this is the time when I have to live up to the motto?”

“It happens to everybody,” Littlejan insisted. “Sooner or later everyone has to choose. The motto ought to help.”

“What about yourself? Oh, but you’re only an infant; a troublesome infant, I must say!” Alison said, with a laugh. “I’ll think about all this, Littlejan Fraser. The idea would appeal to Dad. He said I could go with them, if my duties as head permitted; he was tremendously bucked when I was chosen.”

“He’d be still more bucked, if you were Queen.”

“No, that’s not possible; I can’t stay past July. But if I’m here till May Day I’ll help the Club to find a good Queen.” Alison’s eyes searched Joan’s face curiously.

“Oh well, that will be something! Choose a senior; we do want a senior Queen!”

"I don't agree. Seniors have exams hanging over them. Mirry's too young; you want something between. Fifteen is about right; neither senior nor junior. As for my own plans, I'll think again and I'll remember the motto! Now, Joan-Two, this wasn't what you meant last night!"

"No; oh, no! It's a play, Alison; we'd give it at Christmas, and we'd ask Mrs. Thistle to come and see it, at a party. You ought to be St. George."

"St. George? A play?"

"The President gave it to me. It's a very old traditional thing; you'll think it's rot at first, but you'll find it isn't," and Littlejan thrust the manuscript into her hand. "There are eighteen parts, and we could have understudies, so it would take in a lot of girls. The parts are mostly very short, sometimes just a few lines. It wouldn't interfere much with school work; we'd rehearse in bits and only meet together at the end. We'd be village boys, boasting and stamping about and blustering. I think Mirry should be the King of Egypt's daughter; she'd make a lovely bride for you—St. George, you know! Read it, and see what you think!" and she raced away, as the bell rang for classes.

Alison put the typescript into her case. "Troublesome infant, indeed! If I stay on till May I'll see she's properly appreciated by the Club. But Madeira and Teneriffe sound terribly tempting! Oh, bother that motto! Bother the Hamlet Club and Littlejan Fraser!"

Joan-Two's thoughts were not on her work that morning. She joined in the eager discussion of Mrs. Thistle's classes during the dinner-hour, when the town girls went home, and was one of a deputation who caught the music-mistress and begged her to play some of the new dances, so that they could practise before afternoon school. But while she danced "Steam Boat" and "Twin Sisters," her mind was with Alison, meeting Slasher and the Turkish Knight and the Prince of Paradine for the first time, and laughing over the patter of the comic Doctor.

After school she went in search of the head girl and found Alison coming to look for her.

"Well, Littlejan Fraser, of all the wild mad things, this play of yours is the biggest rot I've ever read!"

"Oh, it isn't! Don't you see that it's a joke? A joke that would have to be done terribly seriously; everybody frightfully much in earnest and making awful idiots of themselves without giving away that they knew they were doing it?"

"I see that the kids will love slashing about with swords and killing one another and dying all over the place."

"Oh, awful sport! I'd love to be the Fool!"

"You ought to have first choice, as it's your idea. Not the Doctor? He's a gorgeous part."

"I'm not good enough. You want somebody very special for the Doctor; all that patter and quick talk. I'd like to be the Fool. The President told me about him; he's the Priest, really; he marries George and Sabra." And Joan repeated a little of what Cicely had told her.

"Interesting," Alison commented. "You'll have to make another speech to the Club and tell them all this. Did you say the play was once done here?"

"Yes, years ago, when Maidlin was Queen."

"That's a long while; everybody will have forgotten it. It would help to take off the flat feeling after the thrills of the week-end. It *was* sport, wasn't it?"

Littlejan agreed, exulting inwardly. "We've been doing some of the dances. Miss Howard played for us, but it wasn't like Miss Lane's music. Can we do the play, Alison?"

"I'd love to do that Doctor!" Alison's tone was hungry. "St. George is a very small part. I know he's important, but——"

Joan-Two, with a shout, seized her arm eagerly. "Oh, Alison, *do!* Oh, do be the Doctor! A very tall Doctor, in a high hat and a long black coat, with a little bag! *Can* you act, Alison? I wouldn't have dared to ask you to do a funny part!"

"I appreciate your respect for my high position, which made you suggest me for something grave and important! But what I want to do is the comic Doctor!" Alison said defiantly.

Littlejan danced down the corridor. "It will just make the play! You'll buck the whole thing up! Oh, Alison, you are a sport! But you couldn't leave at Christmas," and she came back to look earnestly into the head girl's face. "We'll want to repeat the play; once won't be enough. The whole thing turns on the Doctor. You couldn't go off on a cruise!"

"I don't believe I could." Alison gave her another queer look. "I really think I must see the Club through its troubles, at least as far as May Day. It's thanks to you, Littlejan Fraser. I'd almost decided to go to Madeira and Teneriffe."

"They'll still be there when you're ready to go, and the Hamlet Club will be saved. Oh, thank you, Alison! Now we'll make Mirry call a meeting and tell the Club about the play!"

"Yes, but who saved the Hamlet Club?" Alison demanded.

"You!" Joan-Two retorted, as she raced away to tell Jansy the news and later to pour out her hopes and joys, and no fears at all, to a very sympathetic Joan and Maidlin and Mary Devine.

"I'll be Dame Dolly," Jansy said instantly.

"You'll take what part is given you, my child. Perhaps they won't want you this time," her mother said. "You should repeat the play every Christmas, Littlejan."

"Oh, a lovely idea!" Littlejan cried.

Joan was rung up that evening by Alison. "Could you spare me a moment some day, Mrs. Raymond?"

"I'll do my best. I hear you're going to be the Doctor in the Folk Play?"

"I'd love to! But I want to ask you something else. Young Joan spoke about the Hamlet Club motto, and said Mrs. Everett had lived up to it. Might I hear the story, if it's not a secret?"

"It isn't a secret. I could tell you about Lady Marchwood's choice too. Suppose you meet me for coffee on Saturday; you live in Wycombe, don't you? I'll drive in and leave Littlejan and Jansy for netball practice. Are you needed at school?"

"Not on Saturday. It's a beginners' practice."

"Good! Be at Brown's at eleven, then."

"Thanks very much," and Alison rang off and waited eagerly for Saturday.

She listened in keen interest to Joan's stories of past Queens. "What jolly good sports!" she said warmly. "The Club ought to know. It would think more of these people when they turn up to dance. I suppose everybody comes against that motto in time? Young Joan's too young, but I expect her turn will come."

"She's not at all too young." Joan told how Littlejan, challenged by the motto, had gone alone to ask for help from an unknown and rather terrifying President.

"She was frightened, of course. She wanted me to go with her. But I felt it was better she should plead her own cause. She'll meet the motto many more times, I've no doubt, for she thinks and she's brave. But she certainly had to choose that time."

“Decent of the kid! Thanks for telling me,” and Alison thought over the matter much during the week-end.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE THE DOCTOR AND THE FOOL

"I feel simply terrible!" Joan-Two gasped. "I wish the Fool didn't have to start!"

"Everybody ready?" Alison, dressed in a long overcoat and high hat, cast a masterful look round her company. "On you go, then, Littlejan Fraser! You wanted to be the Fool!"

"I'd forgotten he had to go out first," Littlejan shivered.

Alison laughed. "All the Queens, and Miss Macey and Mrs. Thistle, are in the front row. Buck up, Jester! 'To be or not to be!'"

Littlejan glared at her, seized her bauble, which had a big bladder attached loosely to it, hitched up her scarlet and yellow tights, and strode out valiantly on to the empty stage.

*"'Good morrow, friends and neighbours dear,
We are right glad to meet you here——'"*

Her voice rang out bravely, steadying after the first rather quaky beginning, and Cicely Everett grinned at Joan at the old familiar words.

Littlejan, a gaudy figure in the fool's motley, called on the jolly mummers to come and join with her, and the knights and champions, the Doctor, the King of Egypt, and all the other characters, strode out and formed the circle, swords on right shoulders, left hand grasping the point of the sword in front, and all marched round singing the Mumming Chorus:

*"'And a mumming we will go, will go,
And a mumming we will go,
With a bright cockade in all our hats, we'll go with a gallant show.'"*

They marched off and Father Christmas appeared, to give his welcome and call in Dame Dolly—Jansy, in an enormous sunbonnet. She in her turn called on "One Fool and four knights from the British Isles" to come in and clear the way, and Littlejan, shaking her bells and—when she had nothing else to do—belabouring anybody within reach with her bladder on its stick, led in the champions, St. George, St. Andrew, St. Patrick, and St. David, four tall girls, wearing armour and carrying swords and shields.

Each in turn boasted of his prowess and fought his contest. George killed the terrifying Dragon—a proud product of the Art Class—and was married to Princess Sabra, the King of Egypt's daughter, by the Fool, who held outstretched arms above them as they knelt; Patrick slew Hector and the black Prince of Paradine; the King of Egypt called for a Doctor, and Alison, prancing in on a mock hobby-horse, to shouts of laughter from the hall, brought Paradine to life again with a few drops from his "little bottle of Elicumpane." Andrew fought and wounded Slasher, and the business with the Doctor was repeated, with much added boasting and patter; David wounded and then killed the Turkish Knight. The ring of knights was formed again and marched round in triumph, but was interrupted by the appearance of Saladin, who was challenged by St. George. The Little Page ran in and demanded the right to be the one to fight; he fell wounded and once more the Doctor was called for. Dame Dolly danced in, bobbing and bowing, and claimed the privilege of curing the boy; she led him away, and George fought and slew Saladin; Little Man Jack appeared and was hoisted on to George's shoulder and carried off in triumph; and the Fool called for "cheerful song and

dance” to abound. The mumming circle was formed for the last time, and everybody joined in a boastful song and marched round, linked together by their swords.

Then Margia broke into “Sellenger’s Round,” and the actors threw away their swords and became a big ring, which swept round and back and swung up to the centre. In the middle, by a process well known to the Hamlet Club, the Fool and the Doctor found themselves alone.

“Gosh! How horrible!” Littlejan gasped, and slashed at the advancing circle with her bladder.

“How did it happen?” laughed the tall Doctor. “I never expected to be a maypole! Join in the dance, Fool! Side with me, and then set towards those rotters!”

The dance ended in cheers and laughter, and the actors dropped breathlessly on the floor. The audience ran forward, politely asked the Queens and visitors to stand up, and placed their chairs on the platform or against the walls, so that the hall was cleared. Margia played “The Morpeth Rant,” Mrs. Thistle called a reminder of the movements and ran to the head of a line with Joan, and a riotous party began. The actors joined in, their costumes gradually coming to pieces; shields and cloaks fell from their shoulders and were kicked out of the way; helmets were flung aside; Dame Dolly pulled off her enormous cap, and Sabra’s wedding veil tripped her up and was thrown away. The Fool, slim and neat in doublet, hood, and long hose, was almost the only one to reach the end of the party intact, still tidy and feeling rather superior, as she surveyed the rest of the dishevelled mummers.

“Most of you look as if you needed the Doctor rather badly!” she observed.

“A triumphant success, Littlejan Fraser! I congratulate you!” the President said heartily.

“I don’t know when I laughed so much. I felt quite weak,” the Countess sighed. “I didn’t see the play last time; I was in Switzerland. It’s priceless fooling, and you all kept so solemn! Those wild, mad battles, and the dead bodies lying about all over the place and then getting up and walking out! And the ones that pointed downwards—what was it they said?”

Joan-Two grinned. “You mean Hector and Slasher. ‘Down yonder is the way. Farewell, I can no longer stay.’ Didn’t you like the Doctor?”

“Loved him every time. I must compliment the head girl; you were lucky to get her. Mrs. Thistle was rolling about with laughter,” Rosamund assured them.

“I’m exhausted!” Mrs. Thistle came up. “I was sore with laughing. You were behind all this, weren’t you, Jester? You must do it every Christmas, and I shall come to see it. But you ought to finish with a sword dance, not ‘Sellenger’s.’”

“We know, but we hadn’t time to get it good enough.” The Fool’s dark eyes, under the yellow and scarlet hood that framed her face, looked at her eagerly. “We want you to come for another week-end, after Christmas, and teach us a dance; then it will be ready for next time.”

“Is that a serious invitation?” Tazy looked at the President.

“Oh yes, please! They told me to ask you!” Joan-Two cried. “We loved the last time so much!”

“Quite serious,” the President agreed. “The one thing needed to finish off this evening is an announcement of the date. They’ll look forward to it all through Christmas.”

“Then they must give this priceless play again at the last-night party,” Mrs. Thistle said firmly. “I loved the bit where the King of Egypt came seeking his only son and heir, and Patrick, having just killed him, announced—‘He’s slain! That’s the worst of it!’ And Patrick’s threat—‘I’ll pierce thy body full of holes and make thy buttons fly.’”

“I liked St. George and Father Christmas,” said Joan, and quoted the words, “‘Carry away the dead, Father!’—‘Yes, I think he’s dead enough, Georgy.’ St. George as ‘Georgy’ is rather

splendid. And my Jansy loves proclaiming—“My head is big, my body is small. I’m the prettiest little jade of you all!”

“But it’s a greedy version,” Mrs. Thistle said. “Where did you find it? You ought not to have all the characters in one play, like this.”

“Ours is a very superior version, a mix-up of all the rest,” and the President explained how she had found the play in a children’s magazine.

“Oh well, that’s all right, and it’s a priceless version for acting, but don’t let the girls think it’s found anywhere in such a complete state! Has anybody in this school done any work since I was here before, Fool?” Mrs. Thistle asked severely.

“Oh, heaps!” Littlejan grinned at her. “Even I haven’t done so badly. The Head’s quite pleased; she said she wouldn’t expect too much from me, as it’s my first term in England and I’m only—er—adjusting myself to the climate, but now she says I’ve done jolly well, considering.”

“Considering the Folk Play, I presume,” Mrs. Thistle mocked. “I must say you don’t seem to be suffering much from the climate.”

“I like it.” Littlejan grinned at her again.

“Is it the legs, or are you growing tall? There seems to be more of you than there was at half-term.”

“It’s the legs. I haven’t grown out of my green frock!” And the Fool turned a neat somersault. “I don’t come to pieces, when I dance!”

“I think it must be the long legs,” Joan said, laughing. “She isn’t really much taller, Tazy.”

The play was the prelude to a riotous Christmas. The boys came back from school, John bringing Andrew and Tony with him, so that Jen’s home could be quiet for Kenneth’s long but happy convalescence, and Joan and Jack Raymond returned to their rebuilt house, taking Jansy and Littlejan and the babies with them. Maidlin and Jock were left to keep their first Christmas alone together, with Mary Devine strictly in the background to see to the housekeeping and leave them free to watch the rising walls of The Pallant or to spend days at Step Down, the cottage by the sea.

Boxes of gifts and many letters came from Florida, where Joy was convalescing slowly, having taken the twins and Lindy to escape the worst of the New York winter; they were living in sunshine and flowers, and enjoying life to the full. To Littlejan came also gifts and letters from Ceylon, with a hint which raised her to a high peak of joy. Her father’s voyages would now bring him to London occasionally and she might have a glimpse of him from time to time.

“Tell him we can always put him up, if he can spare a night,” Joan said, when she heard. “I’d love to meet Jandy Mac’s Alec!”

Christmas was followed, for Joan-Two, by a happy fortnight at Kentisbury, with Tansy and Chestnut for companions. Then she came back, to go with Joan and Jansy to the Hall, for the second performance of the Folk Play and the second visit from Mrs. Thistle, the week-end before school began.

“I’ve so *many* homes now!” she said happily.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX DAME DOLLY IN TROUBLE

Joan met Joan-Two at the door. "You're quite well, Littlejan? Then I'm sending you off to the Hall at once. Poor Jansy is very seedy, and I'm afraid she's in for chicken-pox."

"Gosh!" Littlejan sat on her suit-case and stared up at her. "Poor kid! Where did she get it?"

"You remember that party before Christmas?"

"At young Susan-and-Sally's; you sent us in the car. Did they have it at the party?"

"I've heard there was a case immediately afterwards. I'm thankful you've escaped, but Jansy always takes anything that comes near her. She has been poorly for a few days and now the spots are out and there's no doubt about it."

"I wouldn't take it," Littlejan explained. "I had it in Sydney and they said I was lucky to get it over, as people don't often have it twice. Poor kid! How sick she'll be feeling! Oh, I say! What about the play and the dance-school next week?"

"I've 'phoned to tell Alison that Jansy's understudy will need to do Dame Dolly. Jansy must miss the School, of course."

"Oh, poor brute! I am sorry! Isn't she feeling terribly bad?"

"She is, but we can't help it. Fortunately, the boys went off a week ago, so they are safe. I've kept Jennifer and Baby away from Jansy, so I hope she will be the only victim. I warned Rosamund to send you back if you showed any sign of illness, but she said you seemed remarkably well and she didn't want to spoil your visit, if she could help it."

"She didn't tell me. I am sorry for Jan! She'll be horribly lonely."

"I'm afraid she will, for I have Baby on my hands. I can't be with her all the time. But there's no help for it. Run up and see if I've packed everything you want. You won't go anywhere near Jansy?"

Very soberly Littlejan went upstairs. In the corridor she paused, her face full of deepest sympathy. From Jansy's room came the sound of sobbing, the tired, heart-broken sobbing of a sick and disappointed child.

"Poor infant!" she muttered, as she went on to her own room.

She glanced at the suit-case, then went to the window and stood gazing out at the wintry garden, the thought of that dreary sobbing tugging at her heart. A swift procession of pictures flashed through her mind; Mrs. Thistle and the School—the sword dance promised, to become a part of the play—new country-dances—the play on the last evening—herself as the Fool, acting about with her bladder and delighting the crowd, as she knew she would do. Then another series of pictures; Joan, who had been so kind, hampered by Baby Jim and Jennifer, harassed by having to choose between them and Jansy; Jansy left to a nurse, with nobody to play with her; herself almost certainly safe from the illness; and then a sudden thought of Miss Belinda, quarantining herself with the twins when they had measles, so that Maidlin should be free to go out with Dr. Jock. And as a last blow, the remembrance of her own understudy in the play, said by everybody to be "Jolly good, but not quite as good as Joan Fraser." Anne could play the part, and how she would enjoy doing it!

Littlejan's chin went up. This was a challenge and she must face it.

“‘To be or not to be!’—oh, bother! Poor old Jan! I can’t leave her to cry like that. Anne must be the Fool; I’ve had the fun of it once. As for the new dances—oh, well! The Club will have to teach them to Jan and me later on. But the School—and Mrs. Thistle! It was such gorgeous sport!”

She bit her lips, because for one moment they had quivered. Jansy’s heartrending sobbing flashed into her mind and stiffened her resolution.

“I’ll stand by the kid. Auntie Joan won’t like it, but I’m sure it will help her. I don’t see how she’s going to manage if I don’t.”

And, gallantly accepting the challenge, she turned and ran down the corridor before her heart failed her.

First to the nursery, and there, as she had hoped, she found Dame Dolly’s enormous sunbonnet in a drawer. She clapped it on her head, opened Jansy’s door, and limped in, as if she were a very old woman, reciting in a voice as cracked as she could make it:

“ ‘*Here comes I, little Dame Dolly,
Wearing smart caps in all my folly.
If any gentleman takes my whim,
I’ll set my holiday cap at him.
To laugh at my cap would be very rude—*’ ”

“Oh, you don’t do it like that! You dance, and bob about and bow!” Jansy shouted, sitting up in bed and glaring at her. “Dame Dolly wasn’t an old cripple!”

Littlejan flung off the huge bonnet. “Righto! You can give me a lesson in Dame Dolly, and I’ll teach you the Fool. My dear kid, what a sight you look! Between spots and crying, nobody would know you for Dame Dolly!”

“It’s mostly crying. I haven’t got many spots. Littlejan, you oughtn’t to be here!” Jansy shrieked. “Go away! You’ll catch it!”

“I’ve had it, thanks, and I am here.” Joan sat on the bed and gazed at her. “I’ve come to amuse you. I know I can make you laugh. Lie down and I’ll try, shall I?”

Jansy, tired with sobbing, lay and stared back at her. “I’ll love to have you. But does Mother know?”

“Not yet. There’ll be a rumpus when she finds me here. Is she very bad when she’s mad with you? I remember saying she’d be a good schoolmistress!”

“*Joan!*” Joan the elder stood at the door, her face filled with dismay.

Joan-Two looked back at her bravely and quoted Dame Dolly again.

“ ‘*Call not the Doctor for to make him worse,
But give the boy into my hand to nurse.
Rise up, my pretty page, and come with me,
And by kindness and kitchen physic, I’ll cure thee without fee.*’ ”

In spite of her illness and apprehension, Jansy chuckled. “Littlejan, you are awful!”

“Joan, what is the meaning of this?” Joan demanded, her face grim.

“I know. It’s awful of me. But I’m safe from the thing, and it will make it so much easier for you,” Joan-Two urged.

Joan Raymond closed the door and came and stood beside the bed. “I don’t deny that,” she said generously. “But I wouldn’t have had this happen for any fee Dame Dolly could name. What about school? Miss Macey won’t have you back now.”

“I’ll have to miss the first week or two. I’ll swot double to make up for it.”

“And what about the play, and the week-end School?”

Littlejan’s eyes fell, but not quickly enough. Joan saw, and knew what her decision had cost her.

“I’m not letting down the play. Anne will be a jolly good Fool; she’s dying to have the chance. You’ll send her my Fool’s suit, won’t you? As for the School, I can learn the new dances later on.”

“It’s not the same,” Jansy wailed. “You’ll miss all the fun, and you won’t see Mrs. Thistle.”

Her mother looked at Littlejan’s bent head, and said nothing for so long that Joan-Two looked up anxiously, to see what sort of storm was about to break.

“Oh, Aunt Joan, don’t look like that!” she cried sharply, at sight of the regret and respect mingled in Joan’s eyes. “I want to help, and it was going to be so awfully difficult for you. If Lindy could do it for the twins, why can’t I do it for Jansy? I don’t mind so awfully much, really.”

“Really and truly?” Joan asked quietly. “I’m sorry for all the fun you’ve given up, Littlejan, but I must be honest. If you keep well, it will be the most tremendous relief to me to have you here. I’m afraid you’ll have to stay now, so I must accept your help, with warm thanks. I ought to scold and be very angry, but I couldn’t bear to do it. Make your plans with Jansy, while I go and ’phone to Alison again.”

Joan-Two drew a long breath. “Jan, what a *lovely* mother to have! She’s nearly, almost, as nice as mine!”

Joan Raymond told the story to the head girl, and was not surprised by Alison’s shocked comment.

“How simply awful of the kid! Oh, Mrs. Raymond, it’s that beastly motto again!”

“I couldn’t say ‘beastly,’ but it probably is the motto, whether Littlejan really thought about it at the moment or not. Will you see the understudy? You’ll have time for a rehearsal. Littlejan says Anne is very good.”

“Oh, she can do the part all right! But the girls won’t like it. It will knock the bottom out of the play.”

“That would be absurd. You must see that it doesn’t,” and Joan rang off.

Jansy was soon well again, but with the period of quarantine to be lived through, Joan-Two had to work hard to keep her amused and happy. What would have happened if Jansy had been left to herself, with occasional visits from her mother, and only books and puzzles for company, Littlejan could not imagine. Deeply as she regretted all she had given up, she could not help being glad she was there, and Joan, after the first shock, was frankly grateful for her help.

On the evening of the second day Alison rang up.

“Everything arranged? Is Anne pleased?” Joan asked.

“I’m afraid nothing’s arranged. The Club flatly refuses to do the play, or have the School, without Joan Fraser. They say it must all be put off.”

“My dear! Can you put it off?”

“No. We want you to see to it for us, please. We don’t know how to get hold of Mrs. Thistle.”

Joan considered this new situation. “I’d better tell the President,” she said. “I’ll see what she thinks and ask her to ring you up.”

“Thanks very much. The girls are in earnest, Mrs. Raymond. They’re absolutely determined. We had a meeting of the Club, and I told them what had happened, and—well, I told them about the motto. It was out before I knew.”

“I’m very glad you did. It was the chance we’ve been looking for. What did the girls say?”

“Not much; hardly anything. But I could see how they felt. They think a lot of young Joan. Could we have her for Queen next May, Mrs. Raymond? Everybody would like it.”

“You couldn’t do better,” Joan said promptly. “But don’t let her guess. She’s very humble and it will never occur to her.”

“We’ll make it a surprise. I hope Mrs. Thistle can come later on!”

“That remains to be seen.” Joan said goodbye, and rang up the President.

She said nothing to the girls until the arrangements were complete. Then she met Littlejan on her return from her daily walk in the garden and fields.

“The Hamlet Club seem to like you, Littlejan. Do you know what’s happened? They won’t do the Folk Play without you to be the Fool; even Anne is quite determined about it. And they won’t go to Mrs. Thistle’s classes until you can go too. Did you know they cared about you as much as that?”

“Gosh!” Joan-Two stared at her. “Not really? But what do they want to do?”

“The President has put off everything for a fortnight, so that you and Jansy can be there.”

“But they can’t have a week-end once school starts?”

“No. They’ll be content with a day of dancing, for this time, and a week-end later on. Mrs. Thistle will come directly after tea on Friday and teach all evening and all Saturday, beginning early, about nine. The party and the play will be on Saturday evening. She’ll start you on the sword dance, and the President will go on with it, and Mrs. Thistle will run down for an evening later in the term, to see how it’s going.”

“They’re changing everything, just to have Jansy and me there?” Joan-Two looked at her, awed and incredulous.

“It’s not for Jansy’s sake. The whole Club has refused to have anything to do with it unless you’re there.”

“Idiots!” said Littlejan, crimson with embarrassment. “They’ve spoiled it for themselves. A week-end would have been much more fun.”

“So you won’t miss everything, after all. I’m very glad the girls have shown so much sense. Are you still practising the other parts of the play?”

“I love doing the Doctor! It might be useful, if Alison and her understudy failed us. We’re playing that Jansy’s my little sister; do you mind? I’ve always wanted a sister. Mother’s promised to do her best.”

Joan laughed. “In the meantime, I’m delighted to lend you Jansy. Not many elder sisters would have been as good to her as you’ve been.”

“Jan! Jan! You’re going to be Dame Dolly, after all, and I’m still the Fool!” Littlejan shrieked, rushing up to hurl herself joyfully on her fellow prisoner.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN
MRS. THISTLE COMES AGAIN

“It isn’t such a very dull term.” Joan smiled at her namesake as she packed school clothes, when the quarantine period was nearly over. Jansy and Littlejan were going back to the Hall on Maidlin’s invitation, to have a few more months as day-girls before perhaps becoming boarders in the summer, if Joy came home.

“We’d like to have them,” Maidlin said. “It will be such a comfort to Frost!” She referred to the chauffeur who had been with Joy for years. “He loves taking car-loads of girls to school; he calls himself ‘The School Bus.’ He’ll run in with Littlejan and Jansy each morning.”

“Dear Frost! I do adore him!” Joan-Two said fervently, when she heard of the invitation.

“Have you any ideas about the new Queen?” Joan asked, as the girls helped with the packing.

“I want Alison badly. It would be marvellous to have the head girl for Queen.”

“I don’t believe you’re right, Littlejan. The head girl has other duties. Haven’t you anyone else in your mind?” and Joan looked at her curiously.

“Alison thinks it should be somebody between senior and junior; someone about fifteen.” Jansy looked up from her job of sorting handkerchiefs. “This one’s really too old, Mother; look!”

“It’s disgraceful, Jansy! Have you been biting it? I agree with Alison. A midway person is best.”

“Then I shall vote for Jean. Don’t you think Queen Jean would sound nice?” Littlejan said.

Joan laughed. “Very nice. But it isn’t a good enough reason for choosing her as Queen. Do I know her?”

“She’s fifteen, and she’s head of my form. She’d be about right for Queen, but I don’t know if she’d like it. She’s one of the shy sort, unless she’s acting; she forgets to be shy once she starts. She was St. Andrew in the play; she fought with Slasher. She did it awfully well,” and Joan-Two began to recite Andrew’s lines, strutting about the bedroom:

*“‘I am St. Andrew from the North,
Men from that part are men of worth,
To travel south we’re nothing loth,
And treat you fairly, by my troth.
Here comes a man looks ready for a fray,
Come in, come in, bold soldier, and bravely clear the way.’”*

Jansy sprang up, scattering handkerchiefs, and threw herself into a warlike attitude. “I’ll be Slasher!

*‘I am a valiant soldier, and Slasher is my name,
With sword and buckler by my side, I hope to win more fame—’*

What a pity we haven’t any swords! I could have a lovely fight with Littlejan!”

“Get on with your job!” Joan said severely. “I remember Jean; is she really only fifteen? A tall, golden-haired Scot, isn’t she?”

“That’s being kind,” Littlejan grinned. “Some people call her Ginger Jean. Don’t you think she’d make a jolly Queen?”

“She might. But the others may have different ideas,” Joan said cautiously.

“I heard somebody say last term——”

“Jansy, pick up those handkerchiefs,” Joan commanded; and later she had a few serious words with Jansy, who, ashamed and repentant, promised not to breathe a word of what the girls had been saying.

They were released from quarantine on the day of Mrs. Thistle’s visit, and were driven to the Hall, to settle in their well-loved bedroom and prepare for the term, Joan going with them for one night, so that she could share in the new dances and meet old friends.

After early tea they changed into dancing frocks and drove to Wycombe, Joan and Maidlin looking forward to the evening’s enjoyment, the girls in the wildest spirits.

“It’s been very jolly, but I do feel I’ve been let out of prison! It will be fun to see people again,” Joan-Two proclaimed.

“You went to prison by your own choice.” Maidlin smiled at her. “But it was a brave choice, Littlejan.”

“I couldn’t help it,” Joan-Two whispered, under cover of the noise of the car. “If you’d heard Jansy crying, you’d have done it yourself. I couldn’t bear it.”

“Good girl! Joan has told your mother all about it. Wasn’t it nice of the Club to wait for you?”

“It was marvellous. I can’t think why.”

“I suppose they like you,” Maidlin said gravely.

“Jansy Raymond, you’re a menace to society!” Alison greeted them in the school corridor.

“I can’t help it!” Jansy cried wrathfully. “Why did Sally and Susan have diseases at their party?”

“I hope they’ll watch you when May Day comes round! We don’t want Littlejan Fraser to miss that.”

“Golly, no! We’ll put her in a glass case, for three weeks beforehand!” Joan-Two said, in horror.

“I’ve never spoiled a May Day yet!”

“Then you’ll probably do it this year,” Alison retorted.

“Here’s Littlejan! Here comes the Fool!” There was a shout from the hall, and Joan was surrounded by a delighted crowd. But their questions had to wait, for the President and Mrs. Thistle appeared and called them to order.

“We’ve such a short time that you’d better not waste any of it.” The President gazed severely at Jansy.

“Come along, Hamlet Club! We’ll forget our troubles and dance,” Mrs. Thistle called cheerfully. “Let me see how much you’ve forgotten. I’ve some jolly new work for you.”

She taught some figures of the Kirkby sword dance—“Not for the first time to schoolgirls!” she said, and told them how she had given the dance to the girls of St. Mary’s. She charmed the Club with new country-dances—“A Trip to Paris” and “The Way to Norwich” and “Northern Nancy,” from one book; “The Free Mason,” “The Comical Fellow,” “The Bishop,” and “The Touchstone” from another; and then, insisting on some “good old Playford,” revived “Nonesuch” and “Chelsea Reach” and “Lady in the Dark,” to Joan Fraser’s great delight.

"I like the new jolly ones, but I do love the old ones with lovely figures that work out so beautifully," Littlejan said.

"A mathematical mind," was Mrs. Thistle's comment. "Or perhaps geometrical; a strong sense of design! I agree with you, Fool Littlejan. I like them too."

"The Queens are taking it in turns to keep an eye on our dancing, and when Aunt Joan and the Countess come they always put in one with figures for me," Joan-Two said eagerly. "The Countess taught us 'Confess'; lovely! And Aunt Joan gave us 'Picking up Sticks.' I was thrilled to the limit! The President's going to take over now, as Aunt Joan has gone home, and the Countess doesn't want to—I don't know why."

"There'll be Jen Marchwood too. I hear she's bringing her husband home. You'll be well looked after!"

"Now I suppose everything *will* go flat! We can't find another Folk Play!" It was Littlejan who mourned this time, and Alison who came to the rescue.

"Not a bit of it! This term you begin to work for the summer exams and don't you forget it, Fool! *And* you learn the maypole dances and choose the new Queen."

"Alison, if you'd stay till Christmas, it would be worth while being Queen," Joan-Two coaxed.

"Can't be done, Fool dear. And you'd better have another Doctor. I might be able to come sometimes, but I couldn't promise."

"But you'll still belong to the Club! Nobody could be the Doctor but you!" Littlejan cried.

"You must have somebody else," Alison said firmly. "You can't depend on an old girl."

The plaiting of the maypole gave Joan-Two great joy, and she practised whenever called upon to do so. The President, back from the seaside with a much stronger Baby Ted, took charge of the Kirkby practices; and Jen, home at the Manor for a few days, at intervals, came to criticise country-dances and to teach "Maid in the Moon" and "Greenwood" and "Althea," to please Joan-Two.

To Littlejan's surprise, the Club ceased to discuss the question of the next Queen. "We don't say much about it," they explained. "We might be talking to the new Queen. We like it to be a shock to her."

Rather astonished, Joan-Two fell in with what she supposed to be the custom, and found that even Jansy would not talk about the next Queen.

"I dare say Jean would be quite all right," Jansy said carelessly. "It's not long now, Littlejan. We choose the Queen at the end of this term, so that she can decide on her colours and flowers and have her dress ready by May Day."

"Do all the Queens and the old members come to vote?"

"No, only the girls in the school. It doesn't matter to the Queens who is chosen, but it matters a lot to us. Mirry will get plenty of forget-me-nots; she's been a jolly good Queen, although everybody says she's rather young."

Littlejan laughed. "She's two years older than you! Oh well, it will soon be settled now!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT QUEEN JOAN THE SECOND

The meeting to choose the Queen was held, on the invitation of Maidlin, and of Joan, who motored over for one night, in the old tithe-barn belonging to the Abbey. The girls liked to come to the barn, cycling or motoring in parties through the lanes, conscious of a certain atmosphere in Abbey meetings which it was difficult to create in the school hall. They flocked in, wearing Hamlet Club frocks, for they would dance for the new Queen presently, and sat on big mats on the floor, gazing at Mirry, who, as reigning Queen, had to take charge of the proceedings.

Mirry, standing beside a big chair which represented her throne, said simply—"The head girl will address the Club"—and sat down.

"Mirry, you really are a model chairman!" Alison said laughing, as she made her way through the lines of seated girls and stood beside the throne. "Friends of the Hamlet Club, I ask for your ideas on the subject of the next Queen. Yes, Littlejan Fraser?"—for Joan-Two was the first on her feet.

Joan was no longer shy and her voice rang out eagerly.

"Everybody, please! If we all asked her perhaps we could persuade Alison not to leave in July, and she'd be a beautiful Queen. Do let's have her, if we can!"

Alison shouted with laughter. "How you do keep on, Joan Fraser!"

Joan glared at her. "It's not funny. It's a priceless chance to have a head girl and a Queen all in one. Everybody, Alison has been so marvellous in helping the Club. She's made all the difference. If she stayed till Christmas——"

"No!" Alison cut her short. "Sorry to interrupt an eloquent speech, but your plan's quite impossible. I'm leaving in July; I'm eighteen, and I'm needed at home, though you may not believe it. That's final, Littlejan Fraser. I never knew anybody so persistent! Sit down, and let somebody else speak."

"Then it had better be Jean Guthrie!" was Joan-Two's parting shot. "But you'd be tons better!"

In every corner girls were on their feet. Alison's eyes swept over them. "Have you all the same idea, or are we going to have several dozen candidates? Let's have it, then!"

"We want Joan Fraser. We want Littlejan!" A shout went up, and Jansy's shriek was the loudest of all.

"There, Littlejan Fraser! That's what happens to you for being a pushing, troublesome person!" Alison mocked. "Do shut your mouth! Jansy's going to fall into it!"

Joan stared at the girls, and slowly grew red, and then white. "You couldn't—want *me*?" she gasped.

"We do!" The Club answered delightedly, satisfied that they really had given the new Queen a shock this time.

Joan-Two went and stood beside Mirry's throne. "Do they really mean it?"

Mirry smiled up at her. "They decided ages ago. Jansy knew! You'll like it, Littlejan. It isn't hard."

"I'll *adore* it!" Joan-Two almost whispered. "But I *never* thought I'd be the Queen!"

She faced the Club, and silence fell, as the girls wondered if she would make a speech.

“Please, everybody!” It was her usual mode of address. “Please do think about it again! I can’t believe you really feel I would do. I’m still new.”

“But we know you extremely well!” Alison teased. “Look how you’ve made us dance to your tune all winter! Who bearded the President in her den? Who told us about the week-end School and the Folk Play? Who, in fact, was a downright nuisance till she forced the wandering seniors back into the Club? Joy Shirley was the newest member when she was chosen Queen, and they didn’t know anything about her; they took a fearful risk. We know a lot about you! You aren’t so new as all that.”

Joan glared at her again. “I’m not old enough. We decided to have an older Queen.”

“You’ll be fifteen before your year’s over,” Mirry pointed out. “I’m only thirteen now. And you’re older than your age, because you’ve travelled about; everybody says so. We all want you, Littlejan.”

“Will you be Queen Littlejan?” Alison asked.

“No, she’s Queen Joan the Second!” Jansy had heard and answered with a shout. “After my mother, you know!”

“I’ll be proud to be Joan the Second! But I still can’t believe it.” And Joan-Two stared at the Club with startled dark eyes.

Alison laughed and seized her arm and whirled her towards the clapping girls. Margia had been tuning her fiddle softly and now she struck up “Sellenger’s Round.” In a moment the Club was dancing round the new Queen, Alison and Mirry the last couple to join in.

Littlejan, a lonely green figure, drew herself up gallantly, and curtsied to each side in turn. Then she caught Jansy’s hand and dashed out of the ring.

“Come and tell Aunty Joan! It’s next best thing to telling Mother! Oh, how pleased Mother will be! Back in a minute, all you people! I’m not running away. But I must tell somebody!”

“You are glad, aren’t you, Littlejan?” Jansy panted, as they raced through the Abbey. “I knew they were going to do it—oh, for ages!”

“I never was so bucked before! But I don’t believe it! Oh, Aunty Joan, did you know? Isn’t it simply marvellous? Oh, you must have known!”

Joan and Maidlin had invited the President and Miriam, Jen and Rosamund, timing their arrival for a few moments after the meeting had begun, so a procession of former Queens met the Queen-elect on the garth.

“All right, Jansy?” Joan asked. “Then congratulations, Littlejan! We’re coming to dance in your honour.”

Littlejan’s eyes swept round the group of Queens. “Did you all come, just for that? How lovely of you! I can’t believe it; I’m not good enough to be a Queen like all of you!”

“As to that, time will show.” The President gave her a friendly grin. “But I shouldn’t wonder if you were a very good Queen.”

“If a slightly bossy one,” Jen suggested.

“An Abbey Queen again!” Maidlin smiled at her. “It’s ten years since I was crowned.”

“I know one person who will be very happy about it.” The Countess looked down at the new Queen.

“Mother!” Joan-Two gave her an eager glance. “I know. Won’t she be pleased?”

Maidlin said a word to Jock, following in the background. He nodded, and in a moment the Abbey bell, Cecilia, began to sound her golden note.

“For me?” Littlejan asked, awed.

“You remembered to have Cecily rung for us,” he reminded her.

The President held out her hand. "Joan the Second, we'll dance in your honour, and we'll come to your coronation on May Day."

"Nice child!" Rosamund did not want to dance, so she took possession of Mirry's throne, and watched Joan-Two's radiant progress through "Speed the Plough." Led by the President, she was presented to couple after couple, who gave their congratulations as they bowed or bobbed to her. "She'll do the job well. The first of the new generation of Abbey Girls; the eldest descendant!"

"I suppose she is. Jandy Mac will be proud." Maidlin, keeping her company as a sitting-out partner, smiled at thought of Jandy's happiness.

"Nice girls, all of them! I do like girls!" Rosamund's voice was wistful. "Shall we join in, Maid? It's very quiet; it wouldn't do any harm."

Maidlin smiled again and shook her head. "I promised not to dance. Jock's frightened. He says if I begin I'll forget and do too much."

"Oh well! Don't do anything to worry Jock!" Rosamund conceded, and they sat watching "The Twin Sisters" together.

"Our Joan-Two has moved on during her nine months at home," Rosamund remarked.

"I'm sure that's true. But in what way do you mean?"

"Last summer she was adoring Lindy Bellanne. Now I imagine she's being adored by Jansy. It's a big step forward."

"Jansy worships her, and no wonder. Not many girls would have done what Littlejan did for her," Maidlin agreed.

"It cost her something, I'm sure. She's a fine girl; she won't lead Jansy astray."

"Jansy looks up to her and copies her in everything. It's just what she has needed; an elder sister. Joan's so pleased; she says Littlejan is helping Jansy to develop along really good lines. She'll be a splendid Queen; the Club's in luck! And she'll give the new generation a grand lead; our Abbey children have something to live up to in their eldest member. I've had a letter from Biddy, Rosamund."

Rosamund looked at her quickly. Mary-Dorothy's young sister had been their close friend as a schoolgirl, but her French marriage had taken her out of the Abbey circle. Maidlin was godmother to her daughter, Madelon Marie, but did not see much of her now that Biddy's home was in France.

"Anything wrong, Maid?"

"Not wrong, but Mary-Dorothy's unhappy. Biddy's decided to join her Etienne in his Church."

Rosamund pursed her lips. "Roman Catholic? Mary will feel it makes a division between them; yes, she will be upset. I think it's rather a good thing."

"You think Biddy may be more settled?" Maidlin asked soberly. "I'm afraid she never cared very much. Perhaps Etienne has changed things for her."

"I think Bridget, as the only Protestant in a Catholic circle, would very soon not have cared at all," Rosamund explained. "With nobody to back her, she'd soon slide into carelessness. Her husband may keep her up to the mark, and she may grow into something real."

"It may be for the best," Maidlin agreed. "But it seems to take her farther away from us. And I'm sorry about Madelon Marie."

"Yes, you've lost your godchild, for Biddy will take the babe with her. You were very fond of Madelon Marie."

“Mary and I were so proud. She doesn’t belong to us any more.”

“Some day,” Rosamund glanced at her, “you may have something better than a godchild. Will you come to Joan-Two’s crowning? I will, if you will.”

“I didn’t think I would, but I’m so glad about Littlejan that perhaps—I’ll see, Ros.”

“An Abbey Queen! We all ought to be there,” Rosamund urged. “Have a new white frock, Maid! That will make you feel good. I shall need one myself.”

“I shall need to have a new frock, if I come at all.” Maidlin gave her the secret smile which hid in her dark eyes.

“You’ll come, to make a good procession for Joan-Two, and for Jandy Mac’s sake. I’ll be there, to hold your hand!”

“Thanks, Ros!” and Maidlin smiled again.

Joan Raymond handed a letter to her namesake, when the happy, if slightly riotous, party was over. “This came after you’d gone to the barn.”

“From Mother; oh, joy! I’m longing to write and tell her!” Joan-Two, still radiant, sat down to read the letter.

She looked up presently, with a cry of delight. “Father’s coming to London—in about a month! If he could be here, wouldn’t that be just perfect? For—you know——” she grew scarlet and shy.

“For your coronation. He’d like to see you crowned. You must try to arrange it with his dates,” Joan said. “It really would be extremely suitable, if he could be here!”

“I’ll write and ask him. Mother tells when he’ll be at Malta,” Joan-Two said happily.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE THE MARIGOLD QUEEN

Joan-Two's Easter holidays were spent in a state of blissful radiance. The hint that she might see her father put the final touch to her happiness.

"I want you for a week," Rosamund told her, before they parted in the barn. "Tansy and Chestnut and your breeches are waiting. Come soon; I'd like to have you as early in the holidays as possible."

"How jolly nice of you!" Littlejan sparkled.

"To be honest, I'm thinking of my own plans as well," Rosamund said, laughing. "The sooner the better!"

"You shall go at once," Joan agreed, when she was consulted. "You've a lot to do, but we'll manage it when you come back—unless your mind's made up already? In that case we could ask Margia to go ahead; she always decorates the Queen's train; it's her privilege. She's a painter by profession and a fiddler by accident, she says, and she's proud when she watches the procession, with all the robes she has designed. Have you any ideas about your colour, or your flowers, or your maid?"

It was the morning after the choosing, and they were sitting on the terrace, waiting till it was time for Joan to drive home and take Jansy and Joan the Second with her.

"Have red, Littlejan! You'd look nice in red," urged Jansy, who could never wear red herself.

Littlejan coloured. "I've been thinking, in the night. I couldn't sleep for joy," she said simply.

Her eyes ranged over the garden, a blaze of orange with Siberian wallflower in every bed. She went across the lawn, while Joan and Jansy watched her curiously, and brought back a head of glowing flowers.

"Could I have this? There's never been an orange Queen. Or is it too much like the President's gold?"

"What a lovely choice, with your dark eyes and hair!" Joan exclaimed. "An orange Queen! Oh, it's not like the President's! Hers is pure golden; this is much deeper. We've never had anything like it. You'll be positively startling in orange, Littlejan."

"But we can't call you Siberian Wallflower," Jansy protested. "We always have a nickname for the Queen!"

"Nor cheiranthus, which is the flower's real name," Joan said laughing. "Will you be Oranges and Lemons? Or is there some other flower that would do?"

Littlejan's eyes swept round the garden again, and once more she went down the steps and crossed the lawn. This time she brought two marigolds and laid them on Joan's knee. "That's the same colour, isn't it?"

"Exactly the same. A Marigold Queen! Oh, Littlejan, how pretty! We'll ring up Margia and ask her to come and talk it over, and we won't go home till after tea," Joan cried. "It's worth while waiting, to get things started. Maid will give us lunch—or we'll drive out and have a picnic! Then Margia can work on your train while you go to Kentisbury."

Margia came eagerly to hear the new plans. She looked at the dark eyes and curls of the Queen-elect and received her choice with enthusiasm.

“Bring me a marigold, Joan the Second. Now look! You see the brown centre?”

“Very dark brown, like velvet.” Littlejan waited eagerly.

“If you like the idea, I shall line your train with dark brown—as I lined Maidlin’s with pale green—and I shall turn up the end and sides to make a brown border to your orange—like Maidlin’s green border. Then I shall paint marigolds up and down the border, and—this is a new idea, for you—I shall scatter orange stars all over the brown lining, so that it won’t be too dark; small marigolds, that will show against your white gown, as you walk. This orange wallflower will make a lovely bouquet, with marigolds mixed in it; and when you’re through the stages of wearing a white crown and then forget-me-nots, your marigold wreath will look perfect on your dark hair. Do you like my plan?”

“It sounds quite marvellous! But won’t it be a lot of trouble—all those stars on the inside?”

“I’ll stencil those; it will be quick and easy. But I’ll paint the marigolds on the outer border.”

“Could you save me a scrap of the orange and brown stuff, from somewhere that wouldn’t show?”

“I’m sure I could. What do you want them for?”

“To send to Mother. Father may be here. Isn’t it wonderful?” Joan-Two’s eyes blazed joyfully.

“Oh, good! I remember your mother, when she was Joan’s maid, for one day,” Margia said. “She must certainly have patterns. What would you like for your picture? I always do one for the Queen.”

“Will you really give me a picture? What a lot of jolly things there are for the Queen! Might I have the Abbey barn? We’ve had such good times dancing there.”

“Nobody has had the barn yet. You helped to find it, didn’t you?” Margia was interested at once. “Shall I do the beautiful old doorway?”

“Oh, please! Then when I’m in Ceylon I can imagine I’m going in and we’re just starting to dance!”

“And you’ll find yourself humming ‘Steam Boat,’ or perhaps ‘Sellenger’s Round,’” Margia agreed.

“You’re taking a lot of trouble for Littlejan,” Joan observed, as she went with Margia to her car.

“I like that girl. And I love my gold medal, and I’m told she suggested it. She’ll be something rather special in the way of Queens, if I can manage it,” Margia said.

“What about your maid, Littlejan?” Jansy asked, as they drove home, leaving Maidlin and Jock alone, but deeply content, at the Hall.

“I’d like to have you,” Joan-Two said promptly. “But you’re a maid already. You don’t want to get rid of her, do you?” She looked at Joan.

“Do you want to desert me, Janice?”

“N-no,” Jansy hesitated. “No, Mother. I’ll stick to you.”

Joan laughed. “Some day, if anyone asks you again, I think you should forsake me and be maid to a reigning Queen, but not yet. She’s too young, Littlejan; you should ask somebody among your own set, who would help and with whom you could talk things over. What about the golden-haired Scot, who is not going to be Queen Jean, after all?”

“She might be Queen next year, when she’s used to being in the procession. I shall ask her,” Joan-Two agreed. “She was terribly nice to me last night. She really seemed to want me

for Queen; but they all did. I can't understand it!"

"She'll make a fine contrast to you," Joan commented. "Couldn't you ride over from Kentisbury and give her your invitation? She'd like to see Chestnut. Where does she live?"

"In Worthing; she's a boarder during term."

"Then ask the Countess to let you go one day."

"You may go anywhere you like, so long as Ferguson is with you," Rosamund said, listening to the plans with interest. "I'm not riding at present; but he'll go with you, and he won't let you overdo it. I like your choice," and she looked at the orange wallflower and marigolds which Littlejan had laid in her lap. "You'll be a gorgeous spot of colour in the procession."

"You don't think it's gaudy, do you?" Littlejan asked anxiously. "Jansy keeps calling me Oranges."

"She's only teasing. You'll be called Marigold, and in time Littlejan will be forgotten."

The golden-haired Scot, Jean, working in her garden near the sea, was suitably impressed when her future Queen rode up and hailed her over the hedge. "Jean! St. Andrew! Come and see my Chestnut! This is Tansy, on Black Boy. And Mr. Ferguson!" and Ferguson touched his hat gravely. "Jean, will you be my maid? I'd like to have you terribly much, but it seems rather cheek to ask you, when you're head of the form," Littlejan said humbly.

"Joan, I'll love it! I'd be terrified of being Queen, but the maid hasn't much to do. I'll help you in the background," Jean exclaimed.

"Right! I'm jolly glad. You'll need a white frock and a girdle of orange and brown," and Joan-Two pointed to a marigold. "I can always find my flower anywhere, and it's there nearly all the year round, Aunt Joan says."

"Queen Marigold? How pretty!" Jean cried.

"What would you choose, if you were Queen?"

"Lavender-blue; powder-blue," and Jean broke off a sprig of rosemary from the bush by the gate.

"A Rosemary Queen! Oh, that would be jolly! It's different from Mirry's forget-me-not blue; much softer," Littlejan said in delight. "Perhaps we'll have you for a Rosemary Queen some day!"

"Not likely! How nice you look in breeches, Littlejan!"

Joan-Two had swung down from her steed to find the marigold. "Isn't Chestnut a darling? The Earl of Kentisbury gave him to me. I stay at the Castle every holidays, so that I can ride with Tansy."

Jean gave Tansy a shy smile. "Weren't you Lady Kentisbury's maid at Mirry's crowning? I remember thinking how nice you looked wearing her red ribbons, with your black hair. Will you be there on May Day?"

"I don't know if My Lady's going," Tansy said. "She didn't mean to go this year, but as it's for Joan-Two, perhaps she will. She wants to see her crowned."

"She told me she'd come for the crowning, but not to dance," Littlejan added. "Thanks terribly much, Jean! I do want St. Andrew for my maid!" She was mounted again and Chestnut was stamping impatiently.

The girls waved their whips and rode away, and Jean watched admiringly and then went to tell the news to her mother.

"How have they managed to have different Queens for twenty-one years?" Tansy asked, as they rode through the lanes to Kentisbury. "There aren't twenty-one colours! I wish I'd made

a list when I was My Lady's maid!"

"I wondered about the colours, when I was choosing mine," Littlejan admitted. "Jansy helped me to make a list of the queens. First there was the White Queen, Mirry's mother; and the Gold Queen, the President. The Strawberry Queen went to America, so that left pink for somebody later on. Lady Joy was the Green Queen—bright green; and Aunt Joan is violet. Her maid, Muriel, was chosen, and wore blue; then there was a Silver Queen, Nesta, whose flower is a thing called 'honesty,' with silver pennies for its fruit; Aunt Joan showed me some in the garden. Its flower is purple, so the Silver Queen has purple bands on a white train and silver circles on the bands. Queen Beetle has a gorgeous train, all colours, and they call her Stripes; you must have seen her!"

"Oh, I did!" Tansy chuckled. "You couldn't make any mistake about her!"

"She was the eighth Queen. Mirry's Aunt Barbara was the Wild Rose Queen, with tiny pink roses on a cream train; then Lady Kentisbury wore crimson, with big white and yellow roses; Lady Jen had beech-brown, with cowslips and tiny yellow leaves; and Maidlin was the last Abbey Queen, in primrose and green—the twelfth Queen. After that they had repeats of some colours, but in different shades; clover-pink, dark ivy green, purple—the Heather Queen; and lilac and bluebell Queens; and a tall dark girl wore scarlet—she's called Poppy. After her there was a grey Queen, with flowers of every colour in her border—rather fascinating! And a hyacinth Queen, in shades of pink and blue and white. Mirry has forget-me-not blue, and then comes my orange. There's been nothing like it."

"Clever of you to find something new!" Tansy commented. "I'd like to see a full procession!"

"It can't happen, as Queen Strawberry is in America, and several others have moved away. But everybody who can turns up, and there's usually a long row of Queens, Mirry says. Jean will be the Rosemary Queen next year, if I can manage it. She'd be a lovely Queen, once she stopped being shy. She'll be used to platforms by the time I've done with her!"

"They'll call you an Abbey Queen too."

Littlejan flushed. "I'm not good enough for that. They've been such jolly Queens."

"Oh, I shouldn't think you'll be exactly a bad one!" Tansy mocked.

"Aunt Joan!" Littlejan began, the night before her crowning. "Why did you think the Club was going to choose me? You must have known, for you'd asked the other Queens to come. Or would you have asked them for anybody?"

"I might, Marigold."—Joan-Two gave her a swift laughing look.—"But I knew. I was quite sure."

"I want to know why. What made you expect it?"

"I was sure, from the time you went alone to see the President. I know you thought I was a little unkind, or that I didn't understand how frightened you were; but I had to make you go alone. It wouldn't have been at all the same if I'd gone with you. It made you a leader in the Club; a sort of champion, rather like one of the knights in the play, going ahead and clearing the way! I wanted the rest to know you were the one who had tackled the problem, and I made sure that they understood."

"You didn't tell them to ask me?" Littlejan looked up quickly.

"Of course not. There was no need. I knew I could leave it to them—and to you. Once you'd started to lead you would go on. But I told Alison how hard it had been for you and how brave you had been."

“Then the motto was at the bottom of it,” Littlejan said, after a thoughtful pause. “For that was why I went.”

“The motto helped, I’m sure,” Joan agreed.

“I didn’t know I was being a champion!” Littlejan grinned suddenly. “I was terribly frightened. I say, Aunty Joan! Shall I really be hung up in the school hall with all you people, and have a big picture to send to Mother? It’s too marvellous for words!”

Joan laughed. “Jandy Mac will treasure her portrait! There’s always one for the Queen’s mother, as well as for the school gallery of Queens. I wish they were in colour, but we can’t manage that.”

“Mother will know my colours, from the patterns I’ve sent her,” Joan-Two said happily.

Joan had been hesitating on one point. Now she made up her mind to speak out.

“Don’t worry any more about the motto, Marigold. The Club has had a reminder of the meaning. Alison told me she had spoken to them. Don’t ask me what she said, for I don’t know.”

Littlejan gave her a quick look. “When did Alison do it?”

“When she told them how you had stayed with Jansy, at Christmas; when the Club had the meeting and decided to put off everything.”

Littlejan looked thoughtful. “I’d like to know what Alison said. Oh well! If I don’t know I can’t worry!”

“Very wise!” Joan said laughing. “Don’t think about it any more!”

Welcomed as always by Maidlin and Jock, Joan had joined Jansy and Joan-Two at the Hall for the coronation, as her own home was too far away. An extra bedroom was ready, in case an important guest should arrive in time.

Littlejan, a prey to wild excitement on account of the morrow’s festivities, and to nervous anxiety for family reasons, sat on the terrace steps plaiting marigolds into a wreath. Suddenly the flowers went flying, and with a shout she raced across the lawn, as a taxi whirled up the drive and someone leaned out, waving a cheerful hand.

“Father! He’s come in time! Oh, *Father!*” and she was lifted into the car and disappeared.

“Isn’t that a happy thing for Queen Marigold!” and Joan went indoors to tell Maidlin, and to see that a meal was ready for the traveller.

CHAPTER THIRTY

THE CROWNING OF LITTLEJAN

“You’ll sit just there, on that spot.” Joan, in her long white robe and violet train, led the blue-eyed sea-captain to a particular chair under the gallery, at the back of the audience. “You can see every corner of the hall and the platform. It’s the place Janice had, when she saw us all for the first time, on the day I was crowned. So it’s right you should have it to watch your girl become the Queen.”

The big sandy Scot who had married Jandy Mac smiled and thanked her, and watched the gay scene with amused interest, while Joan threw her train over her arm and went to see that Jansy’s wreath of violets was put on properly.

In the dressing-room the usual greetings were being flung about among the Queens.

“House not ready yet, Maid?” the President asked.

“Not for another month.” Maidlin, in her primrose and green train and wearing a new white gown that gave her confidence, turned and smiled at her. “Jock keeps thinking of improvements and it’s better to make them before we move in. We’re very happy at the Hall, and we’re being useful, giving a home to Jansy and the new Queen, and we keep on going to Step Down for week-ends. We’re working hard at our garden at The Pallant.”

“I’ll say you are!” Rosamund joined in. “I often drive that way just to gaze at your show of arabis and aubretia and alyssum; white and yellow and purple all up your hillside—a blaze of colour! It’s a joy to everybody passing along that road.”

“That’s what we want it to be,” Maidlin said happily. “Later on there will be masses of red ramblers on the walls, and the rose terrace will be full of colour. And for the autumn there are chrysanthemums; we mean our hillside to cheer up the road all the year round.”

“Any news of Joy and the family?” Cicely asked.

“They’re coming about the end of July. We hope to be in our own house by then.” Maidlin’s colour rose, and she turned to speak to Rosamund.

“Nice of those two to come,” Cicely said. “I didn’t think we’d see them to-night.”

“They came for Littlejan,” Joan explained. “No one else would have been honoured by the Rose and Primrose Queens, but they wanted her to have a good procession, for her mother’s sake. And her father is here; she’s a proud and happy girl.”

“Jolly for Marigold! Here’s Jenny-Wren. All well, Brownie?”

The Brown Queen was radiant. “Better than well! I’ve brought Kenneth home and he’s stood the journey splendidly. He’ll be up and about quite soon, and we shall be ready for visitors.”

“Good! It’s been a dreadful year for you,” the President said sympathetically. “Has it aged you much, Jenny-Wren?”

“A little, perhaps. But I expect soon to be my usual merry self,” Jen said haughtily.

“As noisy as ever? We’ve missed your lively chatter. We’ll be glad to have our Brownie back.”

“You may get too much of me, now that Kenneth is no longer so heavily on my mind.”

“Here’s our new Queen,” Joan remarked.

“Oh, what a picture! She is pretty, Joan!” Jen murmured.

“Marigold, what a beautiful train!” the President exclaimed.

Littlejan, with uncovered dark curls, lifted her white robe and curtsyed. "I never wore a long dress before. It feels lovely for doing this!" and she followed her curtsy to the President with one to Joan and Rosamund. "Isn't my colour marvellous? I didn't know it would look quite so gorgeous," and she swept her orange train round and displayed it proudly. "Look at my marigolds! Isn't Miss Lane a dear? Do you see my stars? Nobody else has stars on her inside!"

"You don't seem in the least frightened, Marigold." The Primrose Queen smiled at her. "I was terrified. I thought I should be sick, and Mary had to stay to comfort me."

"I'm not frightened." The new Queen squared her shoulders gallantly. "I'm so bucked that they wanted me. And it's marvellous to know Father's here."

"That's the spirit!" Rosamund said. "There's nothing to be scared of; not in a gorgeous robe like that!"

Joan-Two flashed a laughing look at her. "It helps a lot," she admitted.

"Are Susan and Sally going to be our maids again?" Rosamund looked round. "I meant to have Tansy, but I was told maids must be from the school this time, so Tansy's come to look on. She had to see Joan-Two crowned! They went through a good deal together. Oh, yes, here are our maids! You are growing a big girl, Susan! What a pretty white frock! What about you, Maid?"

"Mine's called Angela. She's smaller than Susan and Sally." Maidlin smiled at bright-eyed Angela. "She's come complete with primrose wreath and girdle. She's a little dark angel, so my primroses suit her nicely."

"I thought of that when I chose her," Littlejan said. "My marigolds simply don't show on my maid; we've had to put leaves with them."

Ginger Jean laughed. "Mine's a pretty wreath, and the marigolds will look bonny on you when you wear them, Queen."

"Couldn't we start?" Littlejan pleaded. "Do take Mirry away and give her a decent crown! Those faded narcissus look so sad!"

"Queen Marigold commands," said the President. "Everybody ready? Then lead the way, White Queen! Your daughter has had a good reign and has done well for the Club."

From the doorway Littlejan and Jean watched the crowning of Mirry with her thick circle of forget-me-nots. Then she came to fetch her successor, and suddenly Joan gave a gasp, for the head girl stepped forward, the new crown of white starry flowers on an orange cushion with dark brown tassels at the corners. Inexperienced in the ceremony, Littlejan had not realised that her crown was not in sight and that a last surprise was to be sprung upon her.

"Queen!" said Maid Jean. "The head girl's going to carry your crown. It's never happened before."

"Alison! Oh, you can't!" Joan-Two cried.

"And why not? I know it's the custom to have a small crown-bearer, but you can have a tall one, if you can have a tall Doctor, and we mustn't separate the Doctor and the Fool. Don't keep the Club waiting, Marigold."

With dark eyes as starry as the flowers, Littlejan followed Alison and the crown, as Alison followed Mirry up the hall. A roar of welcome rang out, both for the orange robe and its wearer, and the sailor standing under the gallery laughed, but was deeply touched, as he treasured each moment for Janice in Ceylon.

"Her mother ought to have been here. Why do they want her for the Queen?" he asked of one of the dancers crowded in the gangway. "I'm her Dad. I want to tell her mother."

The gaily-clad girls were watching critically as Littlejan knelt and Mirry laid the starry crown on her dark hair.

"Because she bullies us and makes us do things." One of them glanced at the Queen's father and liked the look of him.

"But we like the things she makes us do," said another. "She has ideas, and she keeps on till she gets what she wants."

The sailor chuckled. "You like that?"

"We'd gone stale and everybody was slack. Marigold pulled us up and all sorts of jolly things have happened. She'll come to speak to you presently, when the maypole's over; the Queens always walk about and talk to their friends, so that people can admire the trains. Isn't Marigold's a lovely colour? Come on, everybody! It's the maypole now," and in a whirl of coloured frocks they were gone, to seize the orange, brown, white and blue ribbons and dance in the new Queen's honour.

"Good thing I'm here, or she'd have had nobody to speak to," Captain Alec remarked.

"Don't you think it!" A tall girl turned to him scornfully. "There's the Earl of Kentisbury; he gives her ponies and things; she's a great pal of his. And Captain Raymond; he dances with her at parties. And Dr. Robertson; she lives with him at the Hall. There are plenty who will congratulate Marigold!"

"Mere dads must keep in the background," murmured Alec Fraser, much amused.

Littlejan came straight to him, however, when the interval released her from her throne. "Father, isn't it marvellous? Do you like my long gown?" and she curtseyed. "And my train? Isn't the colour gorgeous?"

"I like the crown," he laughed. "I'm going to tell Mother every single thing. I hear you've found a new name; these lassies call you Marigold. You're gey bonny, my bairn."

"I don't suppose they'll ever call me anything else now. It's better than Littlejan, anyway."

"Well, lassie, in all this dressing-up and dancing don't forget your cricket! I expect to hear in every letter how many wickets you've taken. You won't be too busy for cricket, will you?"

"Rather not! I'm looking forward to it." Littlejan's eyes were as starry as her crown. "It's the first year a Queen has been allowed to play in matches. I mean to do them proud!"

"That's good. But don't forget the school books!"

"The Head will see to that. She says I work very well; she won't let me slack. Come and meet Lord Kentisbury, Father; he's a dear. Lady Kentisbury is the Rose Queen; you've heard about her. She and Primrose aren't going to dance, and I'd better not, either, though I hate looking on. The rest of the Queens will change and join in the dancing. Look at my medal! I'm Queen Joan the Second, the twenty-second Queen. This is the Club's coming-of-age year."

"It's a great day for you, my lassie." Her father surveyed her in proud amusement. "They've done well by you. See that you deserve it!"

"I'll try," and the Marigold Queen led him off and introduced him to her friends.

"Queen!" said Maid Jean, holding the orange velvet train carefully out of the dust of the hall. "Somebody wants you. You brought her to see me."

Littlejan turned quickly, as Tansy pushed through the crowd. "Tans! How jolly of you to come!"

"I say, you are all toggged up!" Tansy mocked.

Joan-Two grinned at her. "Don't you like my regal attire?"

“I shall describe you to Ferguson,” Tansy said solemnly. “Do you know what I heard My Lady say? ‘The Club will be safe now for three or four years, and then Jansy will be ready to take charge. Joan-Two will keep them up to the mark.’ Fact! She said it.”

“I’ll do my best, but they’re expecting a lot and I’m not really good enough,” Littlejan said humbly. “They call me an Abbey Queen. That means I’ve a good deal to live up to.”

“You’ll do it all right. You’ll keep them in order.” Tansy grinned back at her cheerfully.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE DAUGHTERS FOR EVERYBODY

A great honour came to the Marigold Queen at half-term. Jansy went home to spend the week-end with her mother, and Joan-Two had hoped to be invited to Kentisbury, to see Tansy and Chestnut. But the invitation, when it came, was to be introduced to somebody very different.

Maidlin was the first friend to see the Countess and her twin daughters. She took Littlejan with her in the car, and left her to wander round to the stables and discuss the wonderful news with Ferguson, while she went with the Earl to see Rosamund and her two yellow-haired babies. Then Littlejan was sent for and was allowed to hold them, to her everlasting delight.

Rosamund, radiant in the fulfilment of her highest hopes, proudly showed her little girls. "The President will be so pleased! Now Joy won't be able to swank any more."

"They're angels! I never saw such tiny ones before. Did you want to have two?" Littlejan asked. "You told me, a year ago, that you'd like to have Rosabel Joy."

"Fancy remembering that! This is Rosabel Joy; she came first. I lived with twin girls for seven years," Rosamund said. "It's only natural I should think of girls in twos! Yes, I wanted two, both girls, very badly. Didn't Mrs. Thistle teach us 'The Twin Sisters'? Here they are!"

Littlejan chuckled. "We'll tell her it's her fault. What's the littler one's name?"

"Rosalin Cicely. It's high time a Hamlet Club girl was called for the President."

"Oh, that's pretty! It is for the President, not for the Abbey bell?"

"Cicely, not Cecily," Rosamund said firmly.

"I suppose they're called Lady Rosabel and Lady Rosalin?"

"I'm afraid they are, but we can forget it. It's the rule that all our girls shall have rose names."

"Why didn't you call one of them for Maidlin?"

Rosamund's eyes met Maidlin's and she laughed. "Because we made a pact that we wouldn't. I've lived with the thought of Rosabel Joy for so long that I couldn't bear to change her, and we couldn't say Rosalin Maidlin, could we?"

"It doesn't sound right," Littlejan admitted. "Will you call them Joy and Cicely?"

"I think they'll be Rosabel and Rosalin, and the other names must be just compliments. People here will like it; they'll be pleased that we're sticking to the old custom."

"Lady Kentisbury, can you think of anything else besides babies?"

"I might manage it." Rosamund's eyes twinkled. "What do you want me to think about?"

"Jewels. That box of tiny ones you let me and Tansy play with."

"Yes, Marigold? I shall need all the sapphires, to make necklaces for two blue-eyed daughters."

"I suppose you will. I was going to ask you to give about three to the Hamlet Club," Littlejan confessed.

"This is very intriguing! Why does the Club want jewels? And must they be sapphires?"

"She has blue eyes, so I thought of sapphires."

"You're making me excited. Nurse will send you away, Joan-Two!" the Countess warned her.

"If you could tell us a little more, Marigold!" Maidlin suggested.

Joan the Second laughed. "We're having a leaving party for Alison, at the end of the term, and I want the Club to give her a goodbye present. She's been an enormous help during her year as head. I thought if we had three tiny stones we could have them put into a ring, and she could wear it when she comes back as an old girl. She'll come, to be the Doctor, whenever we do the play, if she possibly can. Perhaps we could find a ring in a shop, but you said you didn't need all your stones."

"Certainly Alison must have a Kentisbury keepsake ring! I'll be proud to find the stones," Rosamund said heartily. "But need it be sapphires? There's nothing blue about the Hamlet Club! Haven't I seen Alison wearing green for dancing? And the Club badge is a white cross on a green ground. Wouldn't emeralds do?"

"Lovely!" Littlejan cried. "Oh, beautifully! Will you really give us enough for a ring?"

"I'll be pleased to do it. You know where I keep the little stones," and Rosamund looked at the Earl, who was gloating over his daughters. "Will you find them and let her choose? Show me the ring before you present it to Alison, Marigold."

A month later Rosamund repaid the visit. Jock rang up from the Hall and invited her to come to see Maidlin and her baby girl.

"Having a family seems to suit you!" the Countess greeted him on the terrace. "You look very pleased with yourself! How are they?"

"Doing well—both of them." Jock's tone was deliberately careless, but the triumphant twinkle in his eyes was full of meaning.

Rosamund gave him a sharp look. "Both?—oh, Maid and the babe! Take me to her quickly, Jock! Why, Mary!" as they met on the stair. "It's not your birthday! Have you sold another book or been left a fortune?"

Mary's eyes were like stars, and she smiled. "We had a bad time for a day or two, and we're all relieved that Maid is so well now. Go and kiss her, Rosamund! She's looking forward to seeing you."

"And to showing you her latest." Jock opened the door.

"Oh, Ros! Ros, *look!*" Maidlin cried.

Rosamund ran and fell on her knees beside her. "Oh, Maidie, my dear! You've done it too! Why didn't you tell me? 'A little dark daughter,' Jock said. It's *two* little dark daughters! Are you all right? Then what fun, Maidie! Are you pleased? You said you didn't want two!"

Two tiny dark-eyed girls lay in the curve of Maidlin's arm. She looked down at them proudly.

"I was silly. I wouldn't be without either of them, and Jock is so pleased. He's quite daft about them, and he's so glad they're dark. He was afraid he'd have a sandy girl, as he was a sandy baby. They've big voices; he's sure they're going to be singers. Now that you've seen them we can tell everybody."

"Now we can begin to boast and swank," said Jock, looking on proudly.

"He's been so good, Ros! He's dying to put it in the papers and be congratulated by everyone, but he knew how much I wanted to tell you myself, so he waited till you'd seen them."

"I do appreciate it! Won't Joy be thrilled? You've cabled to her, I suppose?"

Jock's eyes twinkled. "I said—'Twins for us too. Maid has two daughters.'"

"I wish we could have made it a surprise for Joy," Maidlin said. "But it couldn't be kept out of the papers for so long. Too many people are keen on Jock."

“And on yourself,” Rosamund added. “I’d have liked to surprise Joy too, but anything we do is News and the papers would have got hold of it. Joy will find it difficult to think of you as a mother, Maidie; and as mother of two—well, she’ll hardly believe it. She’ll be in a terrible hurry to get home!”

“She’ll be here in a fortnight,” Maidlin said happily.

“I’m glad I had two! I’d have felt dreadful if you had beaten me. Let me hold them!” Rosamund held out her arms. “Oh, Maid! They’re the image of you! What tiny pets! But nobody would expect you to have large children. To have two is just too clever for words! It must be the influence of the Abbey, breaking out in a new way. The Abbey likes girls, and so all its girls come double.”

Maidlin smiled at sight of her daughters in Rosamund’s arms. “What a funny idea! I hope it won’t go on. Do you want more twins, in a year or two?”

“I wouldn’t mind. Perhaps one ought to be a boy next time. But you mustn’t do it again. We’ll have to stifle the Abbey. What are you going to call your family? Joy, of course; who else is to be honoured?”

“The elder one is Marjory Joy. Marjory is for Jock’s mother; we each chose one name. We want the little one to be Dorothy Rose; as we’ve had two, do you mind if I break our pact? Jock likes the names, and he’s very fond of you and Mary-Dorothy.”

“Is that why Mary-Dorothy looks as if she’d inherited a fortune? I met her outside, and I had to ask her what had happened; she didn’t tell me! I’ll be proud and happy, Maid,” Rosamund said, deeply touched. “I’ve found more old family names, so if I have another girl she’ll be Rosanna Maidlin.”

“Lady Rosanna! Oh, that’s pretty! Have her quickly, Ros!”

“Not for a year or two. My bunch of Kentisbury Roses must grow a little before we add to them. Feeling better about Bidy and Madelon Marie, Maid?”

“Oh, yes! I want Bidy to be as happy as I am. Now that she has her new little Marie-Rose it *is* better they should all belong to the same church.”

“Oh, much better!” Rosamund agreed. “Is Mary-Dorothy more reconciled?”

“She says it’s better too. She is so happy about our little Dorothy; she nearly cried, when we asked her to be godmother, with you. You will, won’t you, Ros?”

“I’ll be proud to share a godchild with Mary-Dorothy! Which is Dorothy Rose? Yes, I see. She’s *much* prettier than Marjory Joy!”

Maidlin’s smile glimmered in her happy eyes. “Mary’s going to take Dorothy Rose in place of Madelon Marie. She’ll love her as she did Bidy’s baby; she really lost Madelon when Bidy married again and took her to France.”

“Mary will be very happy, for she is so fond of you, Maid.”

“Mary has been very good to me, and she has helped me so much. She’s helped us all.”

“Our first girl is a princess. Marjory was the daughter of Robert the Bruce,” said Jock, watching with satisfaction as Rosamund nursed his babies.

“You ought to have had her palace ready for her,” Rosamund said severely. “Fancy letting Maid have her children in her old home!”

“I’m glad. It will be strange at The Pallant at first,” Maidlin said. “The house is ready; we shall go there presently. But Jock said I’d start doing things if I went, so we’d better wait.”

“How pleased the President will be!” Rosamund exclaimed. “This startling obedience to her commands!”

“It isn’t the President’s doing. I believe it’s what you said; we’re used to thinking of girl babies in twos.”

“Force of habit,” Rosamund agreed. “Or is it Mrs. Thistle’s fault, for making us dance ‘The Twin Sisters’?”

“Haven’t you heard?” Maidlin’s eyes danced. “The President rang up this morning. Theodora Thistleton has arrived; they are so pleased!”

“No! I hadn’t heard. She’ll be Theo Thistle when she goes to school.”

“She’s Theodora Karen, for the friend in Switzerland.”

Rosamund nodded. “Daughters for everybody, and very nice too. I’ve a lovely plan, Maid. Your Marjory—or Dorothy Rose!—shall marry my Hugh, and our grandchild will be Earl of Kentisbury.”

Maidlin’s rare laugh startled Jock into anxious enquiry.

“I’m all right! Ros is arranging for our grandchildren. She’s married Hugh to Marjory—or Dorothy Rose,” Maidlin explained.

“Extremely suitable!” Rosamund retorted. “Joy will feel like a grandmother when she sees you with a large family! You’ll have your hands full.”

“Oh, no! We shall adopt Belinda Bellanne,” Jock said. “I shall look after her voice and she’ll look after our daughters.”

“We shall have a good nurse,” Maidlin added. “If Lindy will come, with her sister, we shall be all right. Joy won’t need her, for the twins will go to school.”

“We shall have to stop calling Elizabeth and Margaret ‘the twins,’ ” Rosamund suggested.

“The Abbey Twins—the Castle Twins—the Pallant Twins,” said Jock.

“Yes, that would do. Oh, Maid, aren’t you proud?”

“Very proud and very happy,” Maidlin assented. “And longing to show the Pallant Twins to the Abbey Twins!”

“They’ll shriek with excitement. I’ll bring my Roses to show Joy, the moment she arrives.”

“Poor Joy! Four new babies!” Maidlin smiled.

“You’re tired, my dear. I’ll come to see Marjory Joy and Dorothy Rose again very soon.” Rosamund laid the babies beside her and kissed her. “I’m happier than I can say that you’re all right, Maid. Aren’t we both *rich*?” and she went to congratulate Mary on the godchild they were to share, and to meet Littlejan and admire the emerald ring.

“Everybody’s having babies; a regular procession. We shall have a junior Hamlet Club,” said the reigning Queen. “The girls are so pleased! This is the second time I’ve had to tell them about two new babies. They’re beginning to say—‘Anybody else had twins?’—whenever they see me.”

Littlejan’s final announcement of the kind was made on the night of Alison’s farewell party, and was an overwhelming surprise to herself. It was no surprise to Joan, who had come back to the Hall to prepare for Joy’s homecoming, since Maidlin’s hands were full with her babies. Captain Alec had said a word at parting, but no one had told Littlejan what was expected. Joan read the telegram and told the news to Maidlin, and then went through the Abbey to the barn.

Alison, taken completely by surprise, was gazing delightedly at her ring and trying to say adequate words of thanks, when Joan entered and called to Littlejan, who had made the presentation.

“Marigold, this has come for you.”

“A telegram? For me?” Joan-Two looked at it incredulously, and read it aloud. “‘Cecily Rose and Mother send love. Father’s girl. Both well.’ But what does it mean? Who is Cecily Rose?”

“It means you have a little sister in Ceylon, and she’s called Cecilia, for the Abbey bell, and Rose, for the Countess, who has promised to be her godmother.”

“Me? A sister?” Littlejan shouted. “It’s what I’ve always wanted! Girls!” She sprang on to a chair, and the Club gazed at her shining face and blazing eyes. “Girls! Another baby, and this time it’s mine! Yes, I mean it!” as a shout went up. “I’ve got a little sister in Ceylon; we had only boys before. She’s called Cecily, after the Abbey bell. Oh, don’t you think——?” and she looked imploringly at Joan.

“I do. Most appropriate,” Joan said firmly. “But before I ring Cecilia, tell me one thing. What does ‘Father’s girl’ mean? Aren’t you both Father’s girls?”

“It’s to tell me what she’s like. She’s red, like Father, not dark, like Mother and me. The boys are both like me, Mother’s boys, and I’m a Mother’s girl. Father will be so pleased!”

“You certainly are your mother’s girl! I’m very glad about Cecily Rose.” And Joan disappeared.

“Couldn’t we dance something for my sister? She’ll be so pleased, when she’s old enough to understand,” Littlejan pleaded.

Alison held out her hand. “With me, Marigold. Everybody, ‘Sellenger’s Round,’ for the Queen’s little sister!”

“What heaps we’ll have to tell Lady Joy and Lindy!” Littlejan, radiantly happy, cried as they danced.

“Listen!” said Alison.

Through the open door of the tithe-barn came the golden note of the Abbey bell, ringing for the new little Cecily in Ceylon.

“I am the luckiest girl!” Queen Marigold said happily. “Every single thing I’ve ever wanted, and more; lovely things I’d never dreamed of!”

“You’re having a jolly reign, Queen!” said Maid Ginger Jean.

[The end of *An Abbey Champion* by Elsie Jeanette Dunkerley (as Elsie J. Oxenham)]