

A FIDDLER *for the* ABBEY



ELSIE J. OXENHAM

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A FIDDLER FOR THE ABBEY

BY
ELSIE JEANETTE OXENHAM

ILLUSTRATED BY Margaret Horder

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TO
ALL THE FRIENDS I HAVE FOUND
THROUGH THEIR FRIENDSHIP AND MINE
WITH
THE ABBEY GIRLS

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CHAPTER ONE

NEWS FOR DANCERS

“Jenny-Wren, how triumphant you look!” Joan bent over her friend.

Jen chuckled. “Well, Joan, haven’t I something to exult about? Look!” and she showed two fair-haired babies on her arm. “Haven’t I been clever?”

“Beautiful babies, Brownie! You have, indeed. You may well be proud of them.”

“You’ll tell the girls, won’t you? Tell them Chris and Barney send their love, and some day they’ll dance with the Hamlet Club.”

“Now, Jenny-Wren!” Joan stood gazing down at her with laughing eyes. “Chris might be Christine and Barney might be anything. Are they little boys or little girls?”

“*Joan!*” Jen’s tone was shocked. “Didn’t you say I looked triumphant? Of *course* they’re boys! Christopher and Bernard.”

“Then you’ve been given your heart’s desire. I am so glad, my dear! You do deserve it, after the way you nursed Kenneth for a year, to say nothing of your courage in going away with him to Africa.”

“Yes, I think I deserve it. Tell everybody I’m very proud and happy, Joan.”

“I will. Are their names official?”

“Rather! I wanted saints, like all the other boys. Kenneth likes Christopher, because he’s the saint of travellers; he always has St. Christopher on his car. I like Bernard, because he founded the Cistercians and they built the Abbey. So these little lads are Chris and Barney.”

“They’re jolly names. I’ll give their love to the Hamlet Club.”

“Go now, before the Club stops dancing,” Jen urged.

Joan had reached the door, when Jen called to her. “I say, Joan! The next one’s to be Francis Patrick.”

Joan bent over her again. “Jenny-Wren, what do you mean?”

“Our next boy’s to be Francis Patrick. We love St. Francis, but we don’t like the name for everyday use, so we shall call him Patrick, and he’ll be Pat Marchwood.”

“*Jen!* Your twins are only an hour old! How can you talk about another?”

“Joan, haven’t you *any* faith?” Jen reproved her. “If these two had been girls, I’d have given up hope of the six boys I’ve always wanted. We had three boys and two girls; two more girls would have spoiled everything. But as these two are boys, that makes five, and I’m quite certain sure the sixth will come along some day. And he’s to be Francis Patrick.”

“Jenny-Wren, you’re incorrigible! You’re never satisfied!” Joan scolded.

As she turned to the door again she heard Jen’s laugh and her appeal to the nurse. “Nurse dear, shove the kids into the cradle. I shall want them presently, but now I’m going to sleep. Two more boys! Of course we’ll have Number Six some day!”

The Hamlet Club was dancing in the Abbey barn; a special party to greet a bride and bridegroom. As Kenneth, Jen’s husband, ran Joan along the lanes in his car, the bells of the Abbey clashed out a noisy welcome.

Kenneth grinned. “What a din! Is that for our two?”

“I expect it’s Jock Robertson celebrating your Chris and Barney,” Joan agreed. “He’s great with those bells; he loves clashing Michael and Cecily! Jen has been telling me about Francis Patrick.”

“She’s determined to have those six boys. She’s been talking about them ever since Andrew came, eleven years ago. I’m glad for her sake that these two are boys; she’d have been upset if she’d had girl twins. I didn’t care; I’ve been teasing her by talking about Christobel and Bernardette! Or perhaps Christine and Barbara. I like little girls, and there are so many jolly sets of girl twins in the clan—Joy’s, and Maid’s, and the countess’s doubles. But we’re all right, with Rosemary and Katharine, though they aren’t twins. I was ready to welcome either girls or boys, but Jen wasn’t. She was desperately keen to have two boys.”

“She’s the only one of us to manage it; she’s very proud of herself. Will you come and be congratulated?”—as the car drew up at the gate-house of the Abbey.

Kenneth laughed. “No, thanks. I’ll go home, in case Jen wants me. Tell Jock Robertson he’s made quite enough row with those bells, even for twin boys.”

When the excitement caused by Joan’s news had died down, and the bridal couple had escaped from the rings of “Sellenger’s Round” and fled to the Abbey for sanctuary, the party drew to its close. “The Circassian Circle” was announced as the last dance, but before the fiddler struck up “The Irish Washerwoman,” an expectant silence fell, for the Countess of Kentisbury stood on a chair and had evidently something to say.

“More thrills?” murmured the ex-Queen of the Club to the reigning Queen. “What’s up now?”

Rosamund smiled down at her. “Just another party, Marigold. Girls of the Hamlet Club—and friends! You’ll remember that I asked you to come to Kentisbury last June, to dance in the quadrangle; and you’ll remember what happened to the weather?”

A laugh went round, for the evening of the party had been a series of thunderstorms, after several days of heavy rain, and the Kentisbury dance had had to be cancelled.

“The quad was under water,” the countess went on. “I’ve never seen it like that before or since. I was sorry I couldn’t ask you again, but there were too many engagements, and then we went off to Scotland. Don’t you think we could try once more before the winter? If we get a fine October—and we do, very often—would you come one afternoon and dance on the lawn? We’ll say the third Saturday in October; perhaps by then Jenny-Wren could bring the new babies to show you. What do you think?”

A cheer went up. The Hamlet Club thought well of the idea.

“I really would like to have my party before the winter,” Rosamund added. “The quad is very sheltered; so long as we don’t have cloudbursts it should be all right. I may be able to do something for you that I couldn’t have done in June. If I ask her nicely perhaps nurse will let you see the tinies, as well as Big Twins. She wouldn’t let them go to parties in June; they were far too little and tender. She kept them wrapped in cotton-wool—yes, really, I mean it—for the first month or two. But they’re all right now, and you shall see them, and the rest of my crowd, if you’ll be very quiet and not terrify them. *Can* you be very quiet, by the way?”

A laughing protest arose. “Oh, Lady Kentisbury! We won’t breathe,” said Queen Jean. “We’re dying to see your tiny twins!”

“Then we’ll call that arranged; the third Saturday in October, and we’ll give you tea. Music, thank you, Margia! Am I dancing this with anybody?”

A dozen hands were held out, as she jumped from the chair. “With me, Queen Rose!”

“With Marigold,” Rosamund said firmly, and took the ex-Queen’s eager hand.

The third turn of the dance brought the countess to the reigning Queen as a partner. “Do you want to see my tinies so much, Queen Jean?” she asked. “They are rather nice.”

“Oh, Lady Kentisbury!” Jean burst out. “I want to help you with them! If I go for training when I leave school, will you have me as one of your nurses some day? It’s the dream of my life!”

Rosamund gazed at her with kind thoughtful eyes. “Of course I will. I’d love to have the Rosemary Queen to look after my little Rose girls; they all have Rose names, you know—Rosabel and Rosalin, Rosanna and Rosilda. Be quick and get through college, for I’m going to need you. Agatha will be getting married soon, and a nice young man has been looking at Hyacinth in a very particular way. She’s far too young, but by the time you can come to us she may feel ready to leave me. So hurry up with your training!” and then Queen Jean passed on to the next partner, her face radiant.

As the circle broke up and the rush for coats and shoes began, the violinist came to Rosamund, looking troubled. “Did you mean what you said one day, about having somebody who could play for the Club? For I’m afraid”—and she paused.

Rosamund looked at her keenly. “What’s the matter, Margia? Yes, I’ve two cousins who are dancers and fiddlers, and they’re quite ready to help. Are you going away? We’d like to have you at our party.”

Margia’s troubled look deepened. “Don’t say anything to anybody, please. I’ve not felt well for some time, and my doctor wants me to go into hospital for observation. It may not mean much, but he can’t say yet. So I’m going to London next week, and I may be away some time. I didn’t know there was a party coming.”

“I’m terribly sorry!” Rosamund exclaimed. “Don’t worry about the music; Virginia and Nanta will see to that. But I’m sorry about you, Margia. I hope you won’t have any serious trouble.”

“I don’t want an operation, if it can be helped,” Margia admitted.

“I’ll tell the others quietly, later on; not here. If it should mean that, you must come to Kentisbury to be nursed afterwards. We’d love to have you. I shall expect you, so remember! Now I really must go. Good luck, Margia!”

“I know; the tinies will be needing you,” Margia smiled. “Many thanks, Queen Rose! I won’t forget.”

CHAPTER TWO

ALL ABOUT ATALANTA

"I want to confer!" The countess rang up her best friend on the telephone. "Will you, and Joan, and Mary-Dorothy come here? Bring the babies, and they shall play with mine."

"No, you come here," Maidlin Robertson said promptly. "We're half-way between you and Mary-Dorothy; if it's your conference you ought to come part of the way. Come to tea tomorrow. I'll ask the other two. Why this sudden need, Ros?"

"I want advice from the clan. I'll talk to Jen when I go to see her and the boys. Will you have us all? That's good of you, Maid."

"We're the half-way house. The Pallant is the place for clan-conferences. Can't you tell me what it's about?"

"Nanta. My youngest new niece."

"Oh! Lady Rosalind?"

"That's her official description, but she prefers her baby name. She's Rosalind Atalanta; Nanta for short!"

"What's the trouble? When are we going to see her?"

"At the party; she and Virginia will play for us."

"I thought she was just a schoolgirl. Can she play for a party?"

"She's sixteen and a half. Her music's excellent; that's part of the trouble."

"I should have thought it was a thing to be glad about! Tell me tomorrow, then. Bring as many little girls as you like, and I'll ask Joan to bring her Jill. Marjory and Dorothy shall have a party too."

"Have you given up calling them young Joy and little Rose?"

"We're trying to break ourselves of it. They're fourteen months old—big girls. It's time they were given their grown up names."

Rosamund laughed. "I'll bring Rosabel and Rosalin; they like your garden. Hyacinth shall come to look after them. We'll leave the boys and the tinies with nurse and Agatha."

"I'll tell Nesta. She'll like to see Hyacinth again."

They had all, in their time, been Queens of the Hamlet Club, which had kept folk-dancing alive in the Wycombe school, and had caused so many lasting friendships among the girls. Joan had been the Fifth, or Violet Queen; her cousin Joy, Lady Quellyn, who was in New York with her husband and children, had been the Fourth, or Green Queen. Nesta, now nurse to Maidlin's twin girls, Marjory Joy and Dorothy Rose, had been the Seventh, or Silver Queen; Rosamund, the countess, was the Tenth, or Rose Queen. Jen had followed her as the Beech-Brown Queen; and Maidlin had been Queen Primrose. Hyacinth, now helping at Kentisbury Castle as one of the young nurses to the six small children, had been the Eighteenth Queen; the present Queen, Ginger Jean, from the colour of her red-gold Scottish pigtail, or Rosemary, from the powder-blue and green of her train, was the Twenty-third Queen. A hope was being cherished by them all that the Queen next May-day would be Joan's daughter, Janice, or Jansy.

Rosamund had been the one to discover that these friends among the Queens had been trained as children's nurses, and had pounced on Hyacinth eagerly to help her with her crowd of small people, at the same time suggesting Nesta, who was older and much more experienced, to help Maidlin, and another, Queen Bee or Beatrice, the Eighth Queen, to go to

New York with Joy. The countess's own need for help was great, for her nursery included a baby stepbrother, Roderick, just three years older than her son and heir, Hugh, Viscount Verriton. Hugh was now two and a half years old; fifteen months after his arrival had come twin girls, Rosabel and Rosalin. Then, to the amusement of everybody, two more little girls had been born, less than a year after the first pair. They had come too early and had been very small and frail; Rosamund was wont to say that she had wept when she saw them first. Now, thanks to the care of their nurses, at six months old they were normal healthy babies and were gaining in weight and strength so quickly that it was evident their mother's name for them, "my tinies," would soon have to be forgotten. To other people they were "Rosamund's boarding-school," "Rosamund's Double-Two," or "Ros's Foursome." But, while admitting that she ought to have had another boy for family reasons, the countess was secretly delighted that they were all girls, and was very proud of her quartette of daughters.

Joy, in New York, had twins, too, big girls of eleven years old. The only one in "the clan" to have twin boys was Jen, Lady Marchwood of the Manor, and she was not likely to let anyone forget the importance of Christopher and Bernard.

Joan came to the conference next day, bringing Baby Jill, who was two months younger than Maidlin's little girls and three months younger than Rosamund's elder pair. The garden of The Pallant stretched in coloured terraces up a steep hillside, the banks aglow with asters and chrysanthemums; but close to the house at the foot of the slope was a sheltered lawn, and here Jillian was put down to play with Marjory and Dorothy—a red-haired mite with two dark little people, very like their half-Italian mother.

A car drew up at the gate and set down Mary Devine, Joy's secretary and the close friend of everybody. She was considerably the oldest of "the clan," the writer of several books for girls, and she was godmother to Maidlin's Dorothy Rose and to Rosamund's youngest daughter, Rosilda Mary.

"Come away, Mary-Dorothy! We expect Ros any minute. I don't know what her trouble is, but she seems to want to talk to us," Maidlin said.

"She seems to think I may be able to help, but in what way, I don't know," Mary remarked. "What a picture those three babies make together!"

"Here comes Rosamund," said Joan. "Now we shall add two little yellow-heads to the picture, to make it complete."

Rosamund and Nurse Hyacinth each carried a curly-haired twin in a blue frock. "Dump them here with the rest, and you run away and have a chat with Nesta, Hyacinth. We'll call you when we've had enough of the infants," the countess said. "How are you all? Good of you to come, Mary-Dorothy; I know you're busy. How's the new book going?"

"Not too badly, but it will be all the better for an afternoon's pause. I wanted to see my godchildren playing together," Mary smiled.

"Most likely they'll fight. Rosabel's becoming a bit of a bully, because she's the eldest of four, and Rosalin gives in to her. I have to keep an eye on them. Hugh and Roddy don't exert their authority yet, unfortunately. Hugh is too busy admiring Roddy, who is all that is perfect in Hugh's eyes—he looks on Roddy as a man, I think. And Roddy, not knowing he's an uncle, is yet quite like one in his attitude to Hugh; they're really rather nice together. But they both ignore the small girls, as being beneath their notice; and Rosabel tries all the time to get her own way. She needs watching! It's good of you to have us, Maid."

"The Pallant always welcomes family conferences. We'll have tea, and then you shall tell us about your worries," Maidlin decided.

“What a picture your dark little girls are in those goldy frocks!” Rosamund exclaimed. “Have you cut up your dancing dress into smocks for them?”

“No, but I found some more of the same material. They are so pleased! They like the vivid colour,” Maidlin smiled.

“And Jill in green. With my blue babies, what a lovely group they make!” the countess said.

“Now what’s the trouble, Ros?” Maidlin demanded presently.

“It’s my Nanta,” Rosamund explained. “She’s a darling and I love her, but I’m not happy about her. You know the story, don’t you, Mary?”

“Isn’t she the youngest of the new nieces who have come home from America?”

“Yes, Rosalind Atalanta. We’re persuading her to be known as Rosalind; it is her name, and we can’t introduce her to the world as Lady Atalanta! At school she was always Rosalind; they said Atalanta was outlandish, and I quite agree. But her baby name is Nanta, and she likes it better than Rosalind for home use, though she’s sixteen now.”

“All the same, it is a baby name, and she should be growing up,” Joan observed.

“She doesn’t want to grow up. She’s trying not to do it,” Rosamund said bluntly. “That’s part of the trouble.”

“I was like that,” Maidlin remarked. “I tried not to grow up, until Jen talked to me; and then Joan made me see that growing up could be fun—more fun than being just a baby.” She smiled at Joan, who was picking up Jill after a tumble on the grass. “Can’t you make Nanta believe that too?”

“There’s more in it than that. Nanta’s whole life centres round two things, music and Virginia. She’s quite unbalanced over music; and Virginia is being married in the spring.”

“It seems a bleak prospect for Nanta,” Joan said.

“Music is a good outlet for her,” Maidlin suggested.

“What is she going to do when her sister marries?” Mary asked. “They must have some plan.”

“Their plan is that Nanta is to live with Virginia. But it won’t work.”

“It doesn’t sound very wise,” Joan said dubiously. “A young sister-in-law—what does Virginia’s future husband say about it?”

“Gilbert loves Nanta and wants to have her. She’s the image of Virginia three years ago; the baronet says he’ll have two of his wife! Virginia’s marrying a nice young baronet, Gilbert Seymour, of Summerton, in Wiltshire; a lovely place. I drove down to see it, with Virginia, when the engagement was announced.”

“Then what’s the trouble? It sounds very suitable, so far,” Mary began.

“So far, yes, Mary-Dorothy. You’re cautious; there’s a snag, as you’ve guessed. Virginia is to have a young sister-in-law too; Gilbert has a little sister who will be eighteen in January, but is still rather an infant, in some ways. She has to live with them; she can’t be turned out of her home, at that age. Gilbert wants her to stay, and he thinks it will be so jolly for her to have Nanta’s company. Like any other man, he only sees as far as the end of his own nose. He’s a very nice boy, and Virginia’s in luck; so is he, for that matter—she’s an extremely nice girl. But it just won’t work for Nanta and Mya to live together.”

“That is a snag, certainly,” Joan agreed.

“What did you call the new girl?” Mary asked.

“Novelist! Always after new names! I remember how you sat up when I said your godchild was Rosilda Mary. She’s Annamaria, known as Mya; or sometimes, now, as Anne-

Marie.”

“Oh, I like Anne-Marie!” Maidlin exclaimed.

“What a name!” Joan laughed. “The novelist is thinking it over. What do you feel about the situation, Mary-Dorothy?”

“It depends on the girls. It might be a very happy thing for both of them.”

“It might, but in this case it won’t,” Rosamund said. “Anne-Marie is vigorous and full of life and domineering; she loves Nanta, and she’s ready to take her to her heart and boss her completely. Nanta is dreamy and full of music; Mya won’t understand. If Nanta goes to Summerton, she won’t be able to call her soul her own. She’ll be run by Mya; she’ll give in, for the sake of peace; and she’ll retire inside herself and build a secret life and live in it.”

Mary sat up. “She mustn’t do that. She must be rescued from Annamaria. I see your problem, Ros. How can we help?”

“I thought you’d see it. All Nanta’s tendency is to dream; she’ll wilt before Mya’s energy, and her real life will be lived in secret.”

Mary spoke quickly. “You were right to ask me, Rosamund. This is a thing about which I know a little. You were too young to understand; only fifteen, and Maidie was fourteen; but when I came to the Hall I was doing just that. Life was too difficult; not too strenuous, as Nanta may find it with Anne-Marie, but too monotonous, too dull. I was a typist in a London office, and we rarely had any interesting work to do; it was all mere routine. I lived with Bidy, who was much younger and who had her own circle of friends and her own interests; the pictures, boys, and so on. My mind wasn’t being properly used, so I went inside and lived my life in a dream world. I made up strange romances, and my thoughts were on them all the time. Your Nanta will do the same, to escape from life with Anne-Marie.”

The other three were looking at her with interest and sympathy, unheeding the five babies who crawled and tumbled on their rugs, trying to chase a large coloured football.

“I never knew that, Mary-Dorothy,” Rosamund exclaimed. “Of course you understand, and you can help.”

“But you aren’t like that now, Mary,” Maidlin said.

“What woke you out of your dreams, Mary?” Joan asked. “What is Rosamund’s cure for her Nanta?”

“New interests,” Mary said decisively. “Jen and Joy took me to the Abbey, and they made me dance, and I met Ros and Maidie, and everything was different, new and healthy, and happy and exciting. I went on dreaming, of course; it’s part of me. But the dreams were healthier, of things I could do and so make them real; I’m talking of waking dreams, not sleeping ones, you know. I dreamt of dances, and Jen made me begin to teach, and so I used that dream. I dreamt of Jen and Joy and of how I could help them, in return for all they’d done for me; then I became Joy’s secretary and that dream came true. Jen set me thinking of writing in earnest, and I dreamt of books I’d write some day; and then I started—”

“And the books came true.” Her three friends spoke together.

“Thank you for telling us, Mary-Dorothy. It makes you much more interesting,” Maidlin said sedately.

Mary laughed at the idea. “Maidie, how silly! But do you see what I mean about new interests for little Nanta?”

“Oh, rather! You’ve rubbed in your meaning by telling us your own story,” Rosamund agreed. “But Nanta’s a musician and a dancer already; it must be something different for her.”

“New friends,” said Joan. “Someone who will be more suitable than Anne-Marie. Someone she can look up to, in place of her sister; not a person who will overwhelm and crush her.”

“And a fuller life; more outside things to think about,” Mary added. “Couldn’t she go to school again, if she’s only sixteen? School would mean plenty of new interests and no time for dreaming.”

“School is what she needs, but she won’t hear of it; Virginia has tried to make her go back. Nanta doesn’t want to grow up, but she doesn’t want to be a schoolgirl.”

“Her mind seems in rather a muddle,” Joan observed. “I shouldn’t worry her about growing up; she sounds to me too old already. Another year of school would be the best thing for her.”

“If she’d only go!” Rosamund said gloomily.

There was a pause, while everybody stared at the babies and thought about Nanta.

Maidlin spoke suddenly. “Turn her over to Marigold, Ros.”

Rosamund rose dramatically and swept up her daughters into her arms. “Big Twins, we’ll go home to our tinies; the conference is over! Maid has said the last word. Why didn’t I think of that? Turn her over to Marigold—yes, of course! There’s nothing else to do. Thank you very much for coming, everybody! Thanks for solving my problem, Madalena! So simple, when you happen to think of it. Turn Nanta over to Littlejan-Marigold—yes, it shall be done. I’ll go home and think out how to do it!”

“Ros, don’t be so silly!” Maidlin cried laughing, and pushed her into her chair again. “Put down those poor babies and talk sense. The conference isn’t by any means over yet.”

“But you’ve said the one thing that matters. Why didn’t I see it for myself?” Rosamund groaned.

CHAPTER THREE

PLANS FOR EVERYBODY

"There are still points to be solved," Joan said firmly. "It isn't time to go yet, Rosamund. How are you going to hand Nanta over to Marigold?"

"Speak again, Maid!" Rosamund commanded. "How is it to be done?"

Maidlin gave her a smile from the depths of her black eyes. "I don't know, Ros. Can't you think that out for yourself?"

"I should wait till after your party at the Castle," Mary remarked. "Isn't Nanta going to play? Perhaps she and Marigold will find one another without your help. That would be quite the best way."

"Oh, good, Mary-Dorothy!" Rosamund cried, and she put down her daughters on the rug again. "After the ball, Big Twins! Don't be beaten by young Joy or little Rose!—oh, sorry, Maid! I mean Marjory or Dorothy!—Without any more fooling, I do thank you all very much. I feel better about my Nanta now. Marigold is exactly the type to fascinate her, and she'll be very good for her. I'll bring them together somehow, if they don't manage it for themselves."

"How do they fit, as regards age?" Joan asked.

"Marigold will be sixteen at Christmas. Nanta will be seventeen in March. But Marigold is *much* older than Nanta!"

"Marigold is extremely wide awake," Mary said. "But she won't domineer over your Nanta."

"No, she's full of understanding and sympathy. She's the right one for Rosalind," Maidlin remarked. "But if they could make friends naturally that would be best."

"Yes, we can't do anything till after the party. I do hope it's fine!"

"When is the big sister to be married?" Joan asked.

"In the spring. She won't be twenty till March. Her baronet is twenty in December; they're a very young couple, but they're desperately in earnest and terribly much in love. Virginia has demoralised Gilbert," Rosamund laughed. "He'd planned to have a year at an agricultural college, to learn how to manage his estate. Now he thinks it will do to run in to Bristol for lectures, so that he can live at home and have Virginia."

"Couldn't Nanta live with you at Kentisbury?"

"We'd love to have her, and the others too. The twins come between Nanta and Virginia—Amanda and Araminta. But there's nobody at the Castle to be the friend Nanta needs. I'm classed among the ancients!—her aunt-by-marriage and the mother of five. I'm no use."

"No, she'll look on you more as a mother," Joan laughed.

"I couldn't be the mother of a sixteen-year-old! I'm only twenty-nine," Rosamund protested.

"But why does Nanta need anybody, if she has twin sisters, who must be only a year older than herself?"

"Because, Mary-Dorothy, Mandy and Minty aren't a mite of use to her—as they'd say themselves," Rosamund retorted. "Mandy's crazy for horses and Minty for boats; they come to us to learn to ride, and we send them down to the sea to go sailing, but neither has time for Atalanta and she wouldn't listen to them, if they had. She adores Virginia, and she ignores Mandy and Minty. It must be somebody outside the family. She's going to lose Virginia,

though neither of them has faced up to the fact yet; it's bound to happen, and it's right and natural that it should. Nanta must find somebody new; no other sister could take Virginia's place."

"I don't understand," Mary said. "Are they living with you at the Castle?"

"No, Mary-Dorothy; they're all four living in a cottage in a funny new village, about twenty miles from us. The girl who built the village has had a riding accident and is recovering slowly; while she has to be out of things Virginia is trying to take her place, keeping everything together and carrying on all the stunts Mrs. Dering had started."

"How very sporting of Virginia!" Joan commented. "And Nanta backs her up, while the other two play about with boats and horses?"

"They help a little; Virginia sees to that. But Nanta is there all the time, and she takes solos at concerts, and plays for country-dancing, and helps a friend in a little sweet-shop which is the centre for village gossip. Nanta's invaluable at Rainbows, I fancy. But all that will have to stop when Ginny marries—I mean Virginia! The twins call her Ginny."

"It's ugly," Mary said.

"Hideous, Mary-Dorothy! But families are like that. You can't expect names like Virginia and Atalanta to be used every day!"

"Hasn't Virginia a rose-name too?" Maidlin asked. "And the twins?"

"Amanda Rose and Araminta Rose. Ginny is Virginia Rosemary, and Nanta is Rosalind Atalanta. Virginia wants to be married from her cottage, but I'm urging her to come to the Castle. She owes it to Gilbert to have a Kentisbury wedding; his friends will come, and after all she is an earl's daughter! It's not as if the village was her home; they've only lived there for a year or two. And it's not far; the village folk can have a coach and come to the wedding."

"Yes, she owes it to her baronet to be a Kentisbury bride," Joan agreed. "What will the village do without her?"

"Mrs. Dering will be well enough to take charge by that time. The twins and Nanta must come to us; for a while, at least. Virginia really mustn't try to take her family into her new life with her! She and the baronet must be left alone, except perhaps for Anne-Marie. I can't let Nanta go to live with that child; her vivid personality would quite swamp my quiet Rosalind. But we won't plan for her till after the party. I really would like to go home soon, Maid."

"The tinies needing you?" Maidlin smiled. "Then we'll call Hyacinth and Nesta and Lindy, and they shall give these big little girls their tea."

"Any news of Margia?" Joan asked, when the children had been carried off to the nursery.

"Not time yet," Rosamund explained. "She only went to hospital on Monday. I rang up to ask, but they had nothing to say; she's to be under observation for some days. I shall drive in to see her soon."

"Let us know your date, and we'll all go on different days," Maidlin said. "She must have a succession of Hamlet Queens to visit her. We can't let her feel forgotten."

"I know Cicely and Miriam want to go. They were her first friends," Joan assented.

Rosamund went off presently with Nurse Hyacinth and the little girls, who at fifteen months old were known as "Big Twins," to distinguish them from "the tinies." She paid her promised visit to Jen a few days later, but this time left the children at home.

"No rose-buds, Rosamunda?" was Jen's cheerful greeting.

"Not one. I'm having a holiday. I want to give all my attention to your boys. Oh, Jenny-Wren! Aren't they beautiful children? You do have lovely big babies!"

“Everybody says they’re fine boys,” Jen agreed. “For twins, they’re quite large. And they are so good!”

“Then they’re healthy and normal. Seven children, Brownie! Aren’t you greedy?”

Jen’s blue eyes gleamed with mischief, the eyes which were repeated in each of her five boys. “There’s Francis Patrick still to come.”

“Joan told us. If you talk about him too much, you may get Frances Patricia and that will be a blow.”

“Then we’ll need to go on and have a ninth. Did Joan tell you these boys’ full names? Christopher George and Bernard David.”

“Joan didn’t tell us that. Why George and David? I don’t like George, and David is the same as Joy’s elder boy.”

“We shan’t ever use David; and we loathe George. But I want to have all the ‘Knights of the British Isles,’ as the Folk Play says,” Jen explained. “We began with Andrew; if we stick in George and David as second names, we can finish with Patrick.”

“Oh, that’s the reason for Patrick, is it? I wondered, for there’s nothing Irish about you and Kenneth.”

“Chris will probably be frightfully bucked to be St. George, and when I’m really mad with him—as I’m sure to be at times, if he’s like all the rest—I shall call him sternly *George!*”

“He’ll wilt and be a good boy at once. What are you going to do with them all when they grow up? Some of them can marry Maid’s and my twins, of course, or Joan’s small girls.”

“Only if the girls are prepared to live in the colonies. We shall send several boys to Kenya, to build up the British Empire,” Jen said firmly.

“Oh! Yes, you could do that. Rosabel would do excellently in the colonies! She’s becoming a vigorous forceful personality. Some horrible people say she’s like me! Now Hugh is a gentle little boy, so far, quite like his father, and Rosalin is going to be the same, I think. We might send Rosabel to build up the Empire! Kenneth still owns that estate, doesn’t he?”

“Shamba is the word! Oh, yes! He’s put in a good manager, but he’s holding on to the shamba. I hadn’t realised how much of Ken’s heart is given to Kenya until that trip last winter. He loves the country, and though he can never live there again he’s hoping to send some of his boys to lead a wild life and help to develop the country.”

“A good idea,” Rosamund commented. “I can’t plan for my crowd, but I expect the younger British peerage will all want to marry them, if your boys don’t. They’re going to be four handsome Kanes.”

“You won’t have any difficulty, unless they don’t like the husbands you find for them. We’re coming to your party, so be sure to have a fine day.”

“Oh, good! I do want you to be there. That last party in the barn was so lonely without you, until Joan came and told us about Chris and Barney. That cheered us up wonderfully.”

“I’m sure it did.” Jen grinned at her happily.

CHAPTER FOUR TWO AT SUMMERTON

The two girls who faced one another in the library at Summerton were alike in one way only. They were both very determined.

Annamaria was small and neat, like her Italian mother, with dark eyes and prettily-waved black hair. Atalanta was taller, blue-eyed, with long yellow plaits hanging to frame her face. Both girls had square set chins and looked resolute and defiant.

"I think you're mean," Mya complained. "You're my visitor; you ought to do what I want."

Nanta took her violin from its case. "I don't see that. You ought to ask me what I want to do. I'm sorry, Anne-Marie, but I've been out with you all afternoon and I must practise. Please let me stay at home tonight! Virginia will go with you and Gilbert."

"But I can't leave a visitor alone!"

"You can, if the visitor has work to do. I've told you I'm playing at the Rainbows concert on Tuesday, and this is Saturday and I haven't touched my fiddle today. I can't let Virginia down. You must let me have an hour to work."

"I'm sure you can play the old thing well enough! It's jolly decent of Gil to take us to the circus!"

"I hate circuses," Nanta said briefly.

Mya stared at her. "Why on earth—? You are odd! Everybody likes a good circus!"

"I don't. I'm sorry, Mya, but I hate them."

"Why?" Mya leaned her elbows on her knees and gazed at her inquiringly.

Atalanta reddened. "The trapeze turns and the people up on high ropes make me feel sick."

"You could shut your eyes."

"I'd have them shut all the time. I don't like performing animals either. I hate to see dogs and horses doing tricks!" Nanta burst out.

"Gosh! But you like dogs and horses," Mya cried.

"That's why. They're beautiful creatures; I don't like to see them doing silly things to make people laugh."

"What an oddity you are!" Mya protested. "The tricks are marvellous, and they show how clever horses and dogs can be when they're properly trained."

"I don't call doing tricks in a circus proper training for beautiful animals," Nanta said stoutly. "And the men who trained them may have been cruel."

"Oh, they aren't! They'd never get them to do anything by being cruel! I'm certain sure of that."

"I'm not sure. Anyway, I don't like seeing animals perform." Nanta began to tune the violin.

"You really won't come?" Mya demanded.

Nanta shook her head and put the fiddle to her shoulder to test the strings. "I was out with you all afternoon at the Flower-Show. Isn't that enough?"

"And you didn't enjoy it a scrap!" Mya flung at her. "You only went because you felt you had to!"

“I did enjoy it—a little.”

“Don’t you like flowers either?” Mya cried, exasperated.

Atalanta coloured again. “I don’t care awfully much for those huge curled chrysanthemums and dahlias. They’re lovely, in a way; but they’re unnatural, so exaggerated. It’s all part of the same thing, Anne-Marie. The animals doing tricks make me feel uneasy and sort of ashamed; and I felt rather like that when I saw those enormous heads. They’re forced on, for people to stare at. It doesn’t seem quite fair. Just because I like flowers—and dogs and horses—I don’t like to see them made fools of.”

“You are an idiot!” Mya cried, astounded.

“Very likely. But I can’t help it. I don’t want two things that will make me feel queer in one day. Now if you don’t mind, I’d like to do a little work.”

“I think you’re a rotter! You’re a great disappointment to me!” Mya cried.

“Sorry,” Nanta said briefly again, and began to play.

“Oh, Virginia!” Mya exclaimed, as the door opened and her future sister-in-law came in. “Do talk to Nanta! She won’t go to the circus with us!”

“I heard the fiddle. Practising, Nanta?”

“I must, because of Tuesday.” Nanta paused and looked at her imploringly. “I needn’t go to the circus, need I?”

“She’s saying frightful things about performing dogs and horses, and she didn’t like those gorgeous flowers this afternoon,” Mya grumbled.

“Tell me, Anne-Marie,” Virginia suggested. “Nanta shall tell me afterwards, if there’s any need.”

“There isn’t,” Nanta said simply. “You know how I feel.”

“Oh, of course, you’ll take her side, Virginia!” Mya cried. “You’ll always say she’s right!” And she flung away from them. “I’m going to change and go with Gil, whether you two come or not!”

“I’m coming with you, Anne-Marie,” Virginia called after her.

She glanced at her sister. “Four is a much better party than three. But I do understand, Nanta; and it doesn’t matter so much at a circus.”

“I stuck to Mya all afternoon and let you and Gilbert go off alone to look at flowers and things,” Nanta urged. “And I don’t play the Romance at all well yet, Virginia. I don’t want to let you down.”

“Put some work into the quartette, too. I wish you and Mya hit it off better.”

“We might, if we liked the same things,” Nanta said grimly. “And it isn’t only that. She was ghastly at the Flower-Show. She kept meeting people she knew, and she would introduce me to everybody. ‘My friend, Lady Rosalind.’ ‘This is Lady Rosalind Kane; her sister, Lady Virginia, is going to marry my brother.’ I was sick of it in ten minutes, and she kept on for two hours.”

“Poor Rosalind!” Virginia said, with real sympathy. “Mya can’t understand how much we dislike it. She’s intrigued by the ‘Lady’ business at present, but she’ll get over it, Nanta.”

“It’s hateful until she does. I’m the only one of us who’s had to change her name,” Nanta groaned. “You, and Mandy and Minty, have kept yours.”

“All the same, Aunt Rosamund is right. You couldn’t tell people you were called Lady Nanta, and you don’t want to be Atalanta all the time. Rosalind is your first name! But you’re having rather much of it from Anne-Marie, I know. Stay at home and practise, Nanta. I’ll make it all right with her and Gilbert.”

And Virginia went to dress, despair in her heart.

“We shall have to make some new plan. It’s going to be quite impossible for those two to live together; they’re too different. I did want to have Nanta with me! And she has always thought we’d live together, even if I married. But it won’t do; I see it more plainly every day. Mya jabs on Nanta continually, and she thinks Nanta is quite abnormal. Nanta could go to Kentisbury; Aunt Rosamund has said she would have her. But I don’t know what she’d say to the idea. Perhaps some new way will open for her. Mya brought the impossibility of it home to me by talking about ‘taking sides.’ We can’t have that sort of thing going on all the time! Of course, I agree with Nanta and I always shall, though I may not show it. She’s learnt her opinions from me. How could I help thinking as she does? But Anne-Marie won’t see that. ‘Taking sides’—how terrible! We couldn’t live in that atmosphere. I can’t have our new life ruined before it starts!” And she went to the circus in anything but a festive frame of mind.

CHAPTER FIVE

DANCING AT THE CASTLE

A car dashed through the big gateway into the Castle grounds. Signalled to stop by a park-keeper, it drew up under the trees, and two girls tumbled out breathlessly, followed more quietly by Mary Devine.

“We had a breakdown and Frost had to fiddle with our inside—the car’s inside, I mean,” cried Queen Marigold, as the man, who knew her well, saluted and smiled. “Why must we get out here?”

“No cars in the quadrangle today, missy; leastways, only one,” the man explained.

“Oh! Well, I suppose that’s sensible. Who’s the one?”

“Lady Marchwood from the Manor, Miss Joan. I have orders to let her drive right in.”

“Is she really coming? Oh, good! Come on, Mary-Dorothy; don’t you hear the fiddle? It’s not far to walk. You come after Jansy and me. Come on, Jan! We’re terribly late.”

They raced up the drive, across the drawbridge, where a lone lion frowned on one side and a unicorn glared on the other, and under a great arched gateway.

“Oh!” gasped Jansy. “Oh, how lovely it looks!”

“I’ve seen the quadrangle often enough,” said Marigold, who was quite at home at the Castle, “but I’ve never seen it look like that before.”

A long oval of grass, bordered by a sweep of gravel, lay within the walls of the Castle. On three sides were massive buildings with battlemented tops and rows of big windows; on the fourth was the round Norman keep, looking down on the Castle from rising ground and crowned by a pole which carried the Kentisbury banner. Facing the keep was a huge doorway; at the side was another, leading to the State apartments, the banqueting-room, and the great King’s Hall, where receptions were held.

The weather had been kind, and the sun had shone for several days. The afternoon was fine, and in that sheltered place it felt more like July than October.

The lawn was covered with girls in dancing frocks of every colour. The long lines broke into whirling rings and then reformed again, in stars of four.

“‘First of April.’ Come on, Jan!” and Queen Marigold ran to the end of a line.

Queen of the Club until last May-day, she was known as Marigold, from her choice of colour and flower, but her name was Joan Fraser, with a nickname of Littlejan; she was the daughter of a very great friend who lived in Ceylon, but who, in her late teens, had been one of a trio with Joan and Joy when they were schoolgirls. Queen Marigold was named after Joan Raymond, and Joan’s eldest daughter was called for Littlejan’s mother, Janice, though she was generally known as Jansy. During term Marigold and Jansy lived with Mary Devine at the Hall, in Joy’s absence in New York, to be near school; but in holidays Marigold was much at the Castle with Rosamund or at Jansy’s home in Sussex.

Both wore green dancing frocks, short and full and loose. Marigold had bobbed, dark wavy hair; Jansy’s red curls, worn in two plaits for school, were hanging loose on this occasion.

The dance came to an end when the two had moved up only one place, and Littlejan groaned.

“Bad luck! Can’t we have it again? Who’s playing?”

“You shouldn’t have been late,” said slow-spoken Scottish Ginger Jean, the reigning Queen, whose dancing frock was palest blue.

“Couldn’t help it. D’you suppose I’d miss a minute of a party, if I could choose? I must explain to Queen Rose,” and Marigold dashed off across the lawn to find the countess.

“Oh, Lady Kentisbury, what a lovely party! It’s so pretty!” she cried, and poured out her story of disaster by the way.

“Hard lines, Marigold! But you’ve only missed one little dance. Have the next with me; it’s ‘Way to Norwich’.”

“I’d love it! Thank you just awfully much! How do you manage the music? I was afraid the fiddle wouldn’t be loud enough, but we heard it right down the drive.”

“Amplified; loud-speakers,” and Rosamund nodded towards two great horns mounted on a van, close to the castle wall.

“Oh! But it’s not records?” They were in the middle of “The Way to Norwich” by this time.

Rosamund clapped her partner’s hands vigorously, turned away, and presently met her again. “No, fiddle. She’s playing just inside. You go and look.”

“Who is it? It’s jolly nice to dance to!”

“Yes, perfect. She’s shy; she’s rather glad to hide inside.”

The dance ended. Rosamund bowed and Littlejean bobbed a curtsy. Then she ran towards the amplifying van and crept to the window.

With a gasp of surprise, she gazed at the girl bending over a violin to tune it, her long hair hanging in two yellow plaits to frame her face.

“She’s no older than I am!—or not much. Gosh! Isn’t she like the countess? She must belong to the family. I wonder if she’d speak to me? Lady Kentisbury said she was shy. She’s going to play again. I must have a look at the programme; I can’t miss anything more!”

The girl raised her fiddle and softly played a tune.

“‘Old Mole’! I’ll have to go!” and Littlejean raced away to find a partner. “But I shall speak to her presently.”

She found herself in a set with Rosamund and Maidlin as middle couple. “Lady Kentisbury, who is that pretty girl with the violin? She’s frightfully like you.”

“Sorry the likeness is so frightful,” Rosamund mocked, as she made an arch and Littlejean ran under it. “She’s my niece, Rosalind Kane. The M.C. is her big sister, Lady Virginia.”

Marigold’s eyes swept round the quadrangle and found a tall girl in blue, who stood on a little platform directing the party. Her hair was rolled up in plaits over her ears, but otherwise she was very like her fiddling sister.

“Another one!” Littlejean marvelled. “Why haven’t I seen them before?”

“I’ll tell you afterwards,” the countess retorted. “Be careful of your hey! Don’t spoil our set!”

Littlejean chuckled and gave her mind to the dance. But when it had been repeated and everyone was breathless, she demanded an explanation.

“You haven’t seen them because they’re doing a spot of good work in a village and they refuse to come and live with us in luxury and idleness,” Rosamund told her.

“How jolly decent of them! What sort of work?”

“Taking care of everybody; not letting people quarrel; keeping things going. Virginia is mothering the village. There are two more; twins, of course. Every family of Kanes has at least one set of twins. Over there, talking to Joan; those tall dark girls.”

“Gosh! They aren’t in the least like the others!”

“No, they’re like their Virginian mother. They come from Virginia, in the United States.”

“I’d like to speak to the one that’s about my age. Do I call her Lady Rosalind? May I?”

“Oh, please do, Marigold!” Rosamund said, with enthusiasm.

“Oh—look!” Littlejan cried. “Here’s dear Lady Jen!”

A big car came slowly under the great stone gateway, and tall Jen leaned out, bareheaded and with waving yellow curls, blandishing her wooden pipe in welcome.

There was a wild rush of dancers to greet her. “Oh, Lady Marchwood! Have you brought the babies? Oh, let us see!”

“Gently, then!” Jen admonished them. “Be a procession, two by two, but you needn’t dance the Helston Furry. Come past very quietly and you shall see Chris and Barney. They’re too young to take any notice of you; if you don’t scare them, it will do them no harm. Off you go, Rosemary!” and she opened the door to let a small dark child slip shyly out.

Stepping down from the car, Jen took the babies from their nurse and held them as the Hamlet Club filed past. They slept peacefully, and none of the exclamations over the curly yellow heads disturbed them.

“What darlings! What tiny pets!” said someone sentimentally.

“Not tiny at all,” their mother retorted. “They’re very fine children and as good as gold.”

Rosamund and Maidlin and Joan came up to give their greetings. Littlejan, who had been one of the first to see the twins, went round to the other side of the car and held out her hand to Rosemary.

“Come and dance with me! You must have one with Queen Jean too. The next is ‘Speed the Plough’; do you know the hey? I’ll take care of you.”

“I’ll pipe the new dance for you presently,” Jen announced. “But I’d better do it near those big horns. The pipe carries a long way, but it might be faint on the edge of the circle.”

The ring of small sets of four was forming when another interruption took place. Rosamund had gone indoors, to the room from which the fiddle music had come, and now her voice rang out, amplified by the loud-speakers and heard clearly all over the quadrangle.

“Hamlet Club friends! If you’ll stand just where you are, you shall see my whole family. Don’t rush; don’t frighten them! You’ll all have a fair chance. When they’ve settled down you can creep up for a closer look. But don’t scream at them; they’re not used to it.”

From the big door opposite the keep came Nurse Hyacinth, herself a Queen and a dancer, and wearing a dancing frock, leading two yellow-haired boys in white suits, one five and a half, and one two and a half years old. They stared solemnly at the crowd of girls in coloured frocks; then Roddy, the elder, waved his hand, and little Hugh at once did the same. With delighted grins, the dancers pulled out handkerchiefs and waved in return, and the children broke into chuckles of amusement.

As Hyacinth led them to the lawn, the second nurse, Agatha, carried out Big Twins and settled them in a waiting pram, and wheeled them after the boys. They were sixteen months old now, sitting up and taking a keen interest in the proceedings.

The Hamlet Club gave a subdued cheer of joy and waved their handkerchiefs again, and Rosabel and Rosalin waved their hands in excited response. Then the head nurse carried out “the tinies,” in a wicker basket-cot, and the whole family made their way into the middle of the ring. The dancers, grasping the idea, let them pass, all eyes on the last pair of very small people, lying close together in their basket; then they pressed forward to see them more clearly.

Rosamund came swiftly across the lawn to stand in the midst of her family. "Roderick Geoffrey—my very young brother! Hugh, Lord Verriton; quite a big boy now. Rosabel and Rosalin, our big twins; Rosanna and Rosilda, our tinies. Their father is looking on proudly from a window; he was too shy to come and stand in the ring with us. Aren't they a lovely little crowd? You may have a good look, if you're very quiet; and then they'll go and watch from a distance. Don't wake the tinies! They sleep a great deal; they're still rather behind most babies of six months old, though they're getting on splendidly now."

Eagerly, but very quietly, the groups of four crept past the baby basket, with whispered exclamations over the two little fair heads on the pillow and the tiny hands lying on the coverlet. Then the Club passed on to the pram, where the blue-clad, blue-eyed small girls laughed back at them and made incoherent remarks in reply to the greetings.

"They're saying a lot, but I don't know what it's all about," Queen Jean remarked.

"They like your pretty frocks," said Nurse Agatha.

Hugh was old enough to be shy and hid his face in Hyacinth's pink skirt, but Roddy knew his own mind and he was bored by big girls. He broke through the crowd and raced off to the grass verge under the Castle walls, where his scooter was waiting, and began a little game on his own.

"How ungracious!" Rosamund said. "He's had enough of you and he doesn't mind saying so. Take the babies away, Nanny, and let Big Twins play on the rug. Hugh will want his turn with that scooter! As the tinies are asleep, you and Agatha will be able to manage. Hyacinth, my dear, come and have a dance with me. And then all your friends will want you."

The President of the Hamlet Club went to the children's corner to speak to her goddaughter, Rosalin Cicely, who was called after her. As the dance ended, Rosamund came towards them and was greeted by a shout from Roderick.

"What a lot of big girls, Mother!"

"Yes, Roddy, isn't it fun?" and Rosamund's hand touched his curly head gently.

The President's eyebrows rose. "But I thought—"

"May I have 'Dressed Ship' with you, President?" the countess interrupted her. "Do you like our music?"

"It's excellent. I like both your music and your M.C. The new cousins are definitely useful," said the President, understanding that the subject was to be changed.

As they went to the head of a line, she said, "I'm sorry I was tactless, but why does Roddy say Mother? I thought he was to call you Rosamund? You're not his mother. Won't you have trouble presently?"

"I'm his adopted mother," Rosamund said calmly. "And Rosamund is rather a mouthful for five years old. It's all right, President; I know we said at first that he should call me Ros, and he turned it into Yoz or Yozzie. But when Hugh came along and learned to say Mummie and Daddy—and he'll say Father and Mother as soon as he can manage them—it was altogether too difficult to have Roddy calling me by my name. Hugh copies him in everything; all that Roddy does is perfect, in his eyes. I should have had him and all the little girls calling me Ros! It was too hard to explain; even Roddy couldn't have understood, at that time. He accepted Mummie and Daddy quite easily; with Nurse and Agatha teaching Hugh to say Mummie it seemed natural to him to say it too. And now, with Big Twins talking all the time, it's more than ever necessary."

"I see that. But you'll have to explain some day. Won't Roddy ask why Hugh is Lord Verriton and the small girls are Ladies, and he isn't anything, although he's so much older?"

"I'm expecting the question any time now. Roddy's a clear little thinker; when it occurs to him I shall explain. If he can ask the question, he'll be able to understand the answer. And Roddy *is* something; he has quite a good title of his own. He's Uncle Roderick to all the little ones. I shall make it seem a very important thing to be. Hugh isn't an uncle!"

Cicely laughed. "You'll do it! Probably you're right. I was puzzled for a moment. You're lucky to have Roddy! He's company for Hugh, with all those little sisters."

"Roddy's invaluable; he restores the balance of the family. He means more to Hugh than either of them can understand. I shall tell him how useful he has been to us. I don't expect any trouble from Roddy; probably he'll be much intrigued to hear I'm his big sister as well as his adopted mother. He belongs to us twice over—three times, for he's Daddy's cousin as well. All the little ones belong to us only once."

"Merely your real children! What an original way to look at it! Roddy will be much impressed by his own importance," said the President.

"Without needing to be told his really important place in the family, as the heir to Kentisbury for three years, until Hugh came and turned him out," Rosamund added.

The invitation, "We'll give you tea," had been strenuously argued by everybody. The Hamlet Club felt they were too big a crowd for one household to feed, even if it were a Castle. A compromise had been reached, and the girls had brought "eats," while urns of tea and jugs of lemonade and orangeade were brought from the Kentisbury kitchens. Picnic parties took possession of the sunny nooks and sheltered corners in the Castle walls; drinks were fetched and parcels of food produced, and everyone was soon very busy.

The countess, her particular friends, and the M.C., Lady Virginia, went indoors for tea. Jen Marchwood carried her boys in to give them a little quiet attention and then joined the rest in the drawing-room. The Castle babies were taken away for nursery tea, with Maidlin's little girls and Joan's small children, but all came out again later to enjoy the sunshine, except the tinies, who were carried off to bed by Nanny.

Littlejan Fraser lay at full length on a rug in the sun. "What a marvellous party! Isn't Queen Rose an angel? I say, everybody, do you know that super-fiddle-playing was all being done by a kid not much older than we are? She hasn't put her hair up yet; long yellow plaits—I saw her. Ginger Jean, come and talk to me! I've had an idea."

Jean dropped on the rug beside her. "What's up, Marigold?"

"She's called Lady Rosalind; the countess is her aunt. I don't know if we'd dare, but listen, Jean!" and the Marigold and Rosemary Queens put their heads together and whispered energetically.

CHAPTER SIX

LITTLEJAN MEETS LADY ROSALIND

“Queen Rose is going to M.C.,” Littlejan announced, from her seat on the rug. “What’s become of Lady Virginia? She did it jolly well.”

“Lady Marchwood’s taking Chris and Barney home, so we won’t have Rosemary for a partner any more,” said Ginger Jean. “She’s a jolly little dancer for seven years old. She’s always on the beat.”

“I noticed that. If it’s five steps down the middle, Rosemary takes five steps; if it’s eight slips in a ring, she slips eight. People aren’t all so particular.”

“Not at seven years old,” Jean added.

Littlejan rose. “‘Durham Reel’; I can’t bear to miss that. Perhaps the next won’t matter so much,” and she held out her hand to Jean. “Let’s have one together. We’ve danced with other people all afternoon; we’ve been frightfully good and queenish.”

Jean laughed. “Marigold, what a dreadful word!”

Littlejan slipped away at the end of the dance, without waiting to be tempted by the next one. She raced to the music-window behind the loud-speakers and peered in.

Virginia was playing over “Haste to the Wedding,” a smile on her lips as she remembered that soon it might be played for her. Her young sister stood by her, hesitating.

“Go on, Nanta! Go and dance,” Virginia scolded gently.

“What did she call her? It wasn’t Rosalind!” Littlejan wondered.

She went quickly to the door. “Would you have it with me? Your playing’s simply marvellous and you’ve given up the whole afternoon. Do come and have a dance!”

“There, Nanta! You can’t refuse that kind invitation. Please make her go!” Virginia turned to Littlejan. “You’re last year’s Queen, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I’m Marigold. I have another name as well,” Littlejan admitted.

“Marigold suits you. Your colouring is so vivid. Run along, Nanta! They’re waiting for me,” and Virginia raised her fiddle and began to play.

Littlejan held out her hand. “Do come! We needn’t dance, if you don’t care about it, though your sister’s music is as gorgeous as yours. But I could just bear to miss this one; there are so many like it. I say! Would you come to the top of the keep and peep down at the party? It will look quite marvellous from there.”

Lady Rosalind’s blue eyes lit up. “What a wonderful idea! I’d like that.”

“Come on, then. The next dance may be one I simply can’t bear to miss.”

She led the way out, along the gravel drive, and in by a small door, which showed a flight of steep old steps, twisting in a spiral inside the wall. The girls raced up at full speed, but soon had to slacken off, for the staircase was dark, lit only by narrow window-slits at intervals, and the steps were high and narrow.

“You know the way, then?” Lady Rosalind asked.

“Oh, rather! I’ve been here a lot. It’s odd that I’ve never seen you, but the countess says you don’t live here. What did your sister call you? It wasn’t Rosalind.”

They came out on a round terrace, open to the sky. A still narrower ladder led up a small central tower, and Littlejan dashed to this. “Shall we go right to the top? Do you get giddy?”

“No, but I think it will look prettier from here, and we’ll hear the music better. The people will be such tiny spots, if we go any higher.”

“Oh, right! I daresay you’re more sensible than I am,” Littlejan conceded. “Look! Queen Rose has seen us,” as Rosamund waved to them. “I guess she’d like to come up here too, but she can’t disappear and let the party run itself.”

They hung together out of one of the openings in the battlements and gazed down at the long lines of dancers, breaking continually into swinging couples.

“How lovely it looks! It was a marvellous idea of yours!”

“What do they call you?” Littlejan pleaded. “Must I say Lady Rosalind all the time? Isn’t there something else?”

“Please don’t. I hate it; we all do. I’m Nanta. I only really like people who call me Nanta.”

“Then I’m going to do it, from this minute onwards! But what does it mean? Is it a baby nickname?”

“I suppose it is. My name’s Rosalind Atalanta; I was called Rosalind at school, but I was Atalanta at home, and it was turned into Nanta. Virginia’s only three years older than I am, and Mandy and Minty only one; when I was born they were still babies and Atalanta was too hard, so they called me Nanta.”

“I shall call you Nanta,” Littlejan proclaimed joyfully.

“Please do! All that ‘Lady’ business is so silly. We can’t get out of it; our father *was* the Earl of Kentisbury, though only for a few days, and he never knew about it. He was on his way home when he died. But he had been the earl for a week, and that makes us Capital-L Ladies for all our lives. We didn’t want it, but we can’t help ourselves.”

“Capital-L Ladies! What a good way to put it! But if you don’t like it, it must be rather a nuisance.”

“A hateful nuisance. But there’s nothing can be done; it is our name. Aunt Rosamund said she couldn’t introduce me to people as Lady Atalanta; it sounded so odd. Rosalind is my first name, and it’s a family name, so when she and Uncle Geoffrey asked me to use it, I felt I had to do it. But they call me Nanta when nobody else is there.”

“I like both your names. Nanta is sweet, but Rosalind is pretty too. I’m plain Joan Fraser; isn’t it dull, after yours? They call me Littlejan, because it was my father’s name for me when I was small, and Mrs. Raymond, my godmother, is Joan. I’m like my mother, whose name is Janice, so Father called me Littlejan.”

“But aren’t you a Queen?” Nanta’s blue eyes smiled at her. “Virginia called you Marigold. You’ve plenty of names.”

“Marigolds were my flower when I was crowned and my train was orange. We’ve a new Queen now; I’m only Ex. She’s Jean, the Rosemary Queen.”

“My sister’s second name is Rosemary, but we call her Virginia. Look! It’s ‘Gloucestershire Three Meet.’ Can you bear to miss it?”

“Just, if you’ll talk a little longer. I love it, but I’d like to see it from up here. The rings will be so marvellous.”

Nanta agreed, and they hung over the battlements, her long yellow plaits drooping, to watch the changes from lines to big rings and then to small revolving rings.

“Jolly fine!” Littlejan said. “I say, I want you to do something for us, but I don’t quite dare to ask you.”

Nanta laughed with her blue eyes again. “To play for you at another party?”

“That’s getting warm. I’ll tell you later. Would you have a dance with me? I’m quite sure you dance, because of the way you play.”

“Oh, yes! Virginia makes everybody dance. There’s ‘Picking Up Sticks’ on the programme and this looks like it,” as sets of three couples began to form.

“I love ‘Sticks’! Will you?”

“Rather!” said Rosalind, and they raced down the steep steps to find a place in a set.

“I said Virginia made everybody dance,” she said, at the end. “But it doesn’t always happen. She couldn’t make Mya dance.”

“Mya? What an odd name!”

“It’s short for Annamaria, all in one word.”

“It needs shortening,” Littlejan grinned. “Who is she?”

“She likes to be called Anne-Marie. She’s Gilbert’s sister, and Virginia and Gilbert are being married soon. We went to stay with them at Summerton, in the holidays; Mya’s seventeen, and she’s at boarding-school.” Nanta’s face clouded. “We told her about folk-dancing, but she said she didn’t like it. She thinks it’s a thing for school-children and the Women’s Institute.” Her eyes swept over the gay scene on the Castle lawn and she looked at Littlejan and laughed.

“What an ass!” Marigold said frankly. “But perhaps she’s never seen real country-dancing, done properly like this. I guess you didn’t get on too well with her, did you? Jolly awkward, if your sister’s marrying her brother!”

“Virginia has always said I could live with her, if she ever got married. But I don’t want to live with Mya. We think differently about everything. She wanted me to cut off my hair and have it waved, because it’s so much smarter. I said I wouldn’t; Virginia has never had hers cut and people say we’re alike. I want to look like her. But Mya said I was a baby.”

“You’re the image of your sister, and you’re like the countess too. It would be a pity to spoil the likeness; and you’ve such pretty hair. Mya sounds a bit of a bully,” Littlejan hinted.

“She’s older than I am. She wanted me to do whatever she said. We didn’t suit one another at all. I’m terribly worried about what’s going to happen when Virginia’s married.”

“I wouldn’t live with a newly-married couple, if I were you. I should stay here; the countess is sure to ask you, and it’s so beautiful.”

“It is a lovely place. But I don’t know; I don’t want to lose Virginia.”

“Perhaps something else will turn up. What about your other sisters?”

“I think they’ll come here. Mandy’s mad on horses and Minty’s crazy about boats.”

“You do have odd names in your family! I’d like to talk to Mandy; I’m keen on riding. Oh, ‘Epping Forest’! Will you?”

“I’d love to. Thank you very much. May I be woman? I like to bob, not to bow.”

“I’m used to being man,” Littlejan admitted. “As Queen, I so often have to help people who don’t know very much, and it’s better to be the man. But you dance beautifully. We’ll go into this ring; here’s Jean, to be your corner man; she’s our new Queen. Ginger Jean! This is Rosalind Kane, who played for us all afternoon. Queen Rose is her Aunt Rosamund.”

“Awfully sporting of you, and your music’s lovely,” said Jean cordially, taking Nanta’s hand and linking up the ring. “I suppose your pretty sister’s playing now? She seems to have disappeared.”

“As to that, they’re exactly alike,” Littlejan grinned.

“She’s playing in there. She loves playing for dancing,” Nanta said, as the dance began, and the ring swung round to the left.

CHAPTER SEVEN

NANTA IS NEEDED

"Come into a corner, with Nanta and me, Jean!" Littlejan commanded, as they honoured their partners for the last time.

"Why? And what did you say? It wasn't—"

"Well, with Rosalind, then! Her little name is Nanta, short for Atalanta. She's Rosalind Atalanta Kane."

"Gosh!" said Jean, with a laughing look at Nanta.

"I'd rather be called Nanta, please. I don't like the other," Rosalind said firmly.

"It sounds much more homelike. Do you know what Marigold wants us for? I can guess, I think."

"She said she'd tell me later."

"We'd better go after her. She always gets what she wants."

"I don't mind it in her," Nanta said to herself. "I hated it in Mya. I wonder why?"

Littlejan had dropped on the rug which the babies had forsaken. They had gone indoors to bed, and Maidlin and her little girls had driven away.

The sun still shone into the corners, but the party was drawing to its close. Littlejan warned off several girls who would have joined them, and spoke hurriedly and earnestly.

"Go away! This is a consultation of Queens. Jean, wouldn't it be marvellous if Rosalind would help us?"

"It would be super if Nanta would help." Jean's eyes twinkled.

"How lovely of you!" Nanta cried. "Please, what do you want me to do?"

Littlejan leaned forward eagerly. "Two years ago, at half-term, we had a week-end of dancing at school, with a teacher from town, and we learned all sorts of new dances. Last year we had it at Christmas, because Mrs. Thistle had a new baby and she couldn't leave her in October. And this year she's gone and done it again; Tazy Rose is only a month old, so Mrs. Thistle can't come and teach us till the Christmas holidays. As it happens, it's rather a good thing, for we've a lot of new members, chiefly little kids, and they don't know very much. At parties, they're hauled through longways dances and they sit out things with figures, and they never learn anything properly. So Jean and I thought, when we heard about Mrs. Thistle—"

"It was your idea," Jean put in. "I've heard the girls call it the Marigold School."

"We thought, what about having a school on our own, on half-term Saturday and Monday, and inviting the new people, and really teaching them 'Goddesses' and 'The Old Mole,' and 'Newcastle' and 'Sticks'? They'll never learn them at parties! We have practice evenings, but we've not had many this term and it's the beginning of the school year, and we've rather a lot of new members." She paused for breath.

"It's a kind idea, and it will help the Club," Nanta said. "Who will teach the new people? You two Queens?"

"We didn't mean that, when we suggested it. We hoped the seniors would help. But most of them had made plans for the week-end before they heard our idea, and they didn't want to change them, unless—well—"

"Unless they were going to get something out of it," said matter-of-fact Jean. "They'd have come to learn new dances, but they can't be bothered—"

“It isn’t only that!” Littlejan protested. “Ever so many of them have made really important plans. Several are going away for the week-end, and there’s a picnic arranged by the upper forms for the Saturday; a long day out in the woods. None of them can come, but it doesn’t matter. Jean and I can do it all right, and young Jansy’s going to help. She’s nearly thirteen and she teaches jolly well. On the Monday night we’ll have a party for our class, and we’re going to ask the countess and Aunt Joan—that’s Jansy’s mother—to come and M.C. for us. But we haven’t any music.” And she eyed Nanta doubtfully. “We’ve been frightfully worried. Would we dare to ask you to play for us?”

“I should think perhaps you could risk it,” Nanta said solemnly. “Who usually plays for you? She’s ill, isn’t she? Aunt Rosamund said so, when she asked Virginia to play today.”

“And Virginia asked you to help. Lucky for us she did! We’d never have dared to ask her. Miss Lane has played for the Club for years, ever since it started; but she’s in hospital having an operation, and it will be a long while before she can play for us again. There are other people, but one of them’s in Switzerland, where her mother is ill, and the other one, Mrs. Marchwood, has a tiny baby girl, even littler than Mrs. Thistle’s, so she can’t come either. She calls it Marilyn Rose; isn’t it pretty? Her own name’s Maribel, and her first little girl is Marigold, like me.”

“What pretty names! I’ve heard about all the babies called Rose. Is this one named after Aunt Rosamund too?”

“Only partly,” Littlejan explained. “Mrs. Marchwood’s best pal at school was Rosalind, and she always called her Rose, so she and the countess are the new baby’s godmothers. Mrs. Marchwood can’t play for us, and we can’t find anybody else. We might get a pianist, but we’re used to dancing to the fiddle, and we like it best. If you would, it would be just too wonderful for words.”

“I’d love it,” Nanta said promptly. “When is it to be?”

“A fortnight from now. You are a sport! Let’s go and ask somebody, shall we?”

“Let’s join in ‘Meeting Six’ first,” Nanta cried, with laughing eyes. “There are three of us; I’ll be the man in the middle, with two Queens for my partners. Virginia plays ‘Pop goes the Weasel’ so beautifully.”

“Oh, good! Come on! Yes, the music’s lovely. Here’s Jansy with two partners, looking for another three. Jan, have us in your set! Are Susan and Sally your women? Then that’s all right!”

Red-haired Jansy and the fair little girls from the farm beside the Abbey ran to meet them as the music started. The short dance was gone through three times, and was repeated. Then Virginia struck up “Sellenger’s Round,” and the big ring filled the quadrangle.

As the dance began, Rosamund, who had helped the circle to form, slipped away and disappeared.

Littlejan chuckled. “I know where Queen Rose has gone,” she said to Nanta, as they set to the centre together. “She saw us on that tower and she’s rushed up to have a look. I’d go too, but I want to dance this, as it’s the last one.”

Nanta glanced at the keep. “Yes, she’s there, with Mrs. Raymond. It must look lovely from so high up.”

“She got there in time for the second figure. She knows what she’s about,” Queen Marigold grinned.

When Joan and Rosamund came down from their perch, it was to find a cheering crowd surging towards the loud-speakers in search of their M.C. and musician.

“Tell Lady Virginia to come out, Nanta. And you come with her, of course,” Littlejan cried.

“I’ll send her,” Rosalind said firmly, and ran indoors to find her sister.

Virginia came out, carrying her fiddle, and bowed, with laughter in her eyes. Then she stepped back to the microphone, and her voice rang across the quadrangle.

“Girls of the Hamlet Club, thank you very much! I’m glad to have met a Club that dances so beautifully and enjoys it so much. It’s been a pleasure to play for you, and I hope you’ll give me another chance later on. Now, please, three cheers for Lady Kentisbury, to thank her for this delightful party!”

Rosamund came out on to the lawn as the shouts died away, and she seized her chance of revenge.

“Girls, three cheers for Lady Virginia and Lady Rosalind, with warmest thanks for all their help today!”

“Lady Kentisbury!” Under cover of the cheers Littlejan and Jean caught the countess. “May two Queens speak to you?”

“Two Queens may, but they must be quick. I have to say goodnight to everybody.”

“You ask, Marigold,” said Jean. “You can put things so neatly.”

“Please, may we borrow Rosalind?” Littlejan cried.

“No words wasted about that! Oh, please do, Marigold!” Rosamund said, as she had said before, and with equal fervour. “I’ll love to lend her to you. What do you want her to do?”

“To play for us at half-term.”

“But I thought you couldn’t have dancing because Mrs. Thistle is too busy with Tazy Rose?”

“And Mrs. Marchwood with Marilyn Rose,” Jean added.

“We’re going to have a week-end school for beginners. Jean and Jansy and I are going to run it; but we hadn’t any music. Nanta will tell you; we’ve told her all about it.”

“Marigold, what a splendid idea!” Rosamund exclaimed.

Littlejan drew her aside. “None of the seniors will take on the job, and as we only want to teach the new people ‘Goddesses’ and ‘The Old Mole,’ we can do it quite well. They’ll be all little kids. We want you and Auntie Joan to run a party for us on the Monday night. It’s frightfully good of Jean and Jansy, for they meant to go home to their people for the long week-end. Jean’s a weekly boarder at school, you know, and it’s the same for Jansy at the Hall. This is the only long week-end in the term, and they’re giving it up and staying away from home for the sake of the Club. It’s really terribly decent of them.”

“And what about yourself? Aren’t you giving up some long days of riding on Chestnut?” Rosamund challenged, her eyes kind and sympathetic. “You knew we’d ask you, I hope? You could have all Saturday and all Monday, and I’d ask Mandy and Minty and young Tansy to ride with you. It seems to me it isn’t only Jean and Jansy who are giving up the week-end to the Club.”

“Oh, well! I couldn’t ask them to stay and then go off and ride Chestnut myself!”

“You could not. It’s very sporting of all three of you. And you want Rosalind to play for you?”

“Terribly much. She says she’ll like it. But she wants us to call her Nanta, Lady Kentisbury.”

“We want her to be Rosalind. Help her to get used to it, Marigold! And if you introduce her to new people, do it as Rosalind Kane. It is her name and she must use it. She can’t go on

being Baby Nanta for ever.”

“I didn’t think of that. Nanta’s a lovely name! But I will remember. All the same,” the ex-Queen protested, “I tried to get rid of my baby name and nobody would help me. People still call me Littlejan, though I’m nearly sixteen.”

“I agreed with you from the first that you ought to have a more grown-up name,” Rosamund said promptly. “I called you Joan-Two, didn’t I? But now you’re Marigold, with a name you have won for yourself. I must run, or people will be slipping out without proper goodnights and good wishes. I’ll talk to Virginia about Nanta, Marigold. She’d better stay at the Hall for the week-end, with you and Mary-Dorothy.”

“And Jansy and Jean! We aren’t going to leave Jean at school all alone,” Littlejan explained. “Mary-Dorothy says she may come; it will be sport for all of us.”

“How kind and understanding of Mary-Dorothy!”

“Oh, rather! But then she always is, isn’t she? Tell Lady Virginia we really do need Nanta very badly,” Marigold pleaded.

“You must run too. You’ll be keeping poor Mary waiting,” Rosamund warned her.

“Thanks for a simply marvellous party! And for letting the girls see your boys and Big Twins and the tinies; and for bringing Nanta and Lady Virginia to meet the Club!” and Marigold raced away to find Mary and the car.

CHAPTER EIGHT

FRIENDSHIP BY PHONE

Virginia looked interested when she heard the new plan.

“What a splendid idea! Nanta can play anything they’ll want for their beginners. Shall I go too? Then they could have more than one class; beginners and intermediates.”

“Oh, no, Virginia! You mustn’t do that!” Rosamund exclaimed, in a shocked tone.

“But why not?” Virginia asked, surprised. “Those schoolgirls are bricks, and I’d like to help them. Wouldn’t it be even better, if I went as well as Nanta?”

“It’s a kind thought, but it would be a great mistake,” Rosamund said earnestly. “Rosalind must go alone and stand on her own feet. She’ll need to do it when you marry; let her start now and begin doing things on her own. It will be less of a shock when you have to leave her.”

“Oh! I hadn’t thought of that,” Virginia admitted.

“I suppose she’s never done anything entirely by herself in her life? She’s always had you behind her?”

“She went alone to be the assistant in Margery Paine’s sweet-shop at Rainbows; but I wasn’t far away. But Nanta has been to school—not boarding-school, though. I wanted her to have a year as a boarder, when we left Edinburgh, but she nearly made herself ill with worrying, so I gave in and let her go to a day-school in London instead. And when we went to Rainbows she just stayed at home.”

“And devoted herself to music and you, and helped in a shop, and was grown-up at sixteen. It will do her all the good in the world to be with jolly schoolgirls again, and Joan-Two and Ginger Jean and Jansy are a particularly friendly set. Let her go alone, Virginia; she’ll enjoy it, once she’s started.”

“I expect you’re right, Aunt Rosamund.” Virginia gave her young aunt-by-marriage the amused smile with which she always acknowledged the relationship, for there were only ten years between their ages and it seemed very much less at times.

So it came about that Nanta went alone in the smaller Kentisbury car, feeling nervous and shy and secretly a little hurt that no one had offered to go with her. Her Aunt Rosamund was the greatest possible friend of everybody at the Hall; surely she could have come for a cup of tea and to be company! But Rosamund had gone in the other direction in the big car, and Virginia had gone with her, after showering good wishes on Nanta.

Feeling rather desolate, Rosalind gazed at the road before the car and thought hard, to console herself, about the girls who had asked her help. She had liked them all, especially Queen Marigold; she was eager to do her share in their plucky effort for their Club. Once she had met them again all would be well; but at the moment her imagination ran riot and she was lonely and unhappy.

“It’s a lovely house,” she conceded, as the car ran out of the double avenue of beeches, a glory of gold and russet with a bright red carpet of newly-fallen leaves beneath. “I expect Marigold will come to meet me. I don’t know Miss Devine yet. I’m sure she’s nice, from her books; but I’d like to see somebody I know. I don’t want to have to go to that big door and ring the bell. I’d have to give my name as Rosalind Kane, I suppose. Oh, I hope I shan’t need to do that! Surely one of them will come out to meet me!”

But there was no sign of Marigold, or Jean, or even of Jansy Raymond. Nanta's heart sank, and she nerved herself for the ordeal of announcing the name she disliked so much.

The door stood open to the sunshine of the November afternoon. It looked welcoming, but there seemed to be nobody about.

Then, as Nanta went shyly up the steps to the terrace, Mary Devine came hurrying out.

"I am so sorry! I was drowned deep in a story, and I only came to the surface when I heard the car. Come away in!" And to the chauffeur—"Please go round to the garage before you start for home. Frost is there, and he'll see that you have some tea."

She took the small suitcase and led the way in, and Nanta followed, carrying her violin, great relief in her heart that no announcement of her name would be necessary.

"The girls aren't back from school," Mary explained. "They should be home by this time, but a sudden meeting of the Sports Committee was called and they had to be there. As Marigold and Jean are both Queens a good deal depends on them. So I was told to welcome you and give you tea; and there I go, dreaming over a story, and forget all about you! Can you possibly forgive me?"

"But you remembered just in time!" Nanta smiled shyly. "Do you get dreadfully worked up about your books? I think they're marvellous."

Mary's return smile was shy too. "That's very nice of you! I forget all about time when I'm writing and it just rushes along, and before I've any idea of it the tea-bell rings or the programme I wanted on the wireless has gone. And I can't be trusted with a coal fire; I always let them go out. We'll have a cosy tea together, and the girls can have theirs when they come."

She rang for tea and made Nanta sit in the corner of a big oak settle, at a round table close to the fire. The table was old, almost black; the china was willow ware, deep blue and white; the flowers on the table were golden chrysanthemums, little garden ones. Nanta thought of the haughty curled darlings at the Flower-Show and laughed.

Mary was eyeing her with delight. "You really are just like Rosamund, when I first saw her! She was fifteen, with long yellow plaits, like yours. You don't think I'm rude to call her Rosamund, do you? We never think of her as Lady Kentisbury. She lived with us for years. What's the joke?"

Nanta told about the Show, and the circus, and Mary laughed. "I do agree with you entirely—both as regards the flowers and the performing animals. Anne-Marie must have thought you very odd!"

"She thinks I'm mad," Nanta said simply.

"I don't! I loved your music at the party. It was a real joy to dance to. It must be wonderful to be able to give so much pleasure." Mary handed her a cup of tea.

"Oh!" Nanta cried. "How can you speak about my fiddling? Think of all the fun your books give to everybody!"

"They give me a lot of fun first. I only share them with other people. If they weren't fun for me I think you'd find them rather dull."

Nanta gazed at her, fascinated. "How interesting you are, Miss Devine!"

"I'm glad you think so, Lady Rosalind," Mary retorted.

"Oh, please!" Nanta protested. "I do hate it! Didn't Queen Marigold tell you? Please call me just Nanta!"

"Then you must play fair and call me Mary-Dorothy, as everyone does."

"I wouldn't dare!"

"Then you'll have to be Lady Rosalind, I'm afraid."

Nanta stared at her. "Really? Do you mean that?"

"I do," Mary said firmly. "If you must be formal I must be formal too."

Nanta sighed happily. "That's marvellous! I'll be called Nanta, please, Mary-Dorothy."

"That's nice of you. It sounds more friendly. I'll drop your 'Lady,' if you wish, but I'd like to call you Rosalind sometimes. All the Kentisbury rose-names are pretty, but yours is one of the nicest. It's a shame not to use it."

"Do you really feel like that?" Nanta asked gravely.

"Oh, yes, I mean it. It would be too hard not to be allowed to use such a pretty name sometimes."

Nanta surrendered. "Please call me anything you like, Miss—I mean Mary-Dorothy."

"Are we going to be friends?" Mary looked at her hopefully over the tea-pot.

"I think so! I hope so! Oh, please! I know you have heaps of friends, but I'd like to be one too."

"One of the nicest things about friends is that you can't have too many of them," Mary said. "There's always room for more."

"I suppose that's true!" And before Nanta realised it she was telling all about the new village at Rainbows, and Virginia, Mandy and Minty, and Margery and her sweet-shop and her huge cat, the Pouffe.

Mary was a good listener. "It's like reading a new story, to meet a whole fresh set of characters, through your descriptions," she said. "Oh! What was that?"

A crash somewhere in the kitchen regions made her start up. Before she could go to make inquiries there came a hurried call from a maid.

"Oh, Miss Mary, please come! Cook ran into Daisy as she was carrying a tray, and Daisy has cut her hand and cook's having a spasm."

"You'll excuse me, I know. I'll come, Gladys," and Mary fled to the scene of the accident.

Nanta sat dreaming by the fire. Mary's welcome had made her feel completely at home. Soon the girls would come and they would make plans for tomorrow. Perhaps they would have some music. In this house there would be no difficulty about practising.

The telephone rang, and went on ringing wildly. Nanta looked round anxiously, but no one came to answer the call; evidently cook's spasm or Daisy's wound was serious.

The noise could not be allowed to go on. She did not like the telephone, but she had used it. Perhaps she ought to ask if she could take a message.

Valiant, but diffident, she took up the receiver. "Yes? Miss Devine is engaged at the moment. Could you ring again presently? Or could I give her a message?"

A cheery friendly voice responded. "This is very intriguing! Who is speaking? It's somebody I don't know—at the Hall! Most extraordinary! And such a pretty soft voice! I've heard somebody else speak like that, but I can't think who it was. Who is it?"

"Nanta—I'm sorry! I mean, Rosalind Kane. Who are you, please? I must tell Miss Mary."

"Rosalind? Oh, my dear, I'm delighted to meet you!" the friendly person assured her. "No, I know you don't like your name; Rosamund told me. But I like it. I hope I'll see you very soon. I simply loved your playing at that party; it was all I could do not to join in, and I'd been told not to dance. I was only there on condition I merely looked on. Isn't Marigold home from school yet? I want to speak to her."

"She had to stay for a meeting. Please—"

"Oh, well, you'll do. You'll give her a message from me, won't you? Tell her I'm coming along to help on Saturday, so that she and Jean can have a dance. I can't say what time I'll

come, but I'll do my best to run round during the morning and teach a dance for her, and I'll bring—”

“Please, I must know who you are,” Nanta interrupted the flow of chatter firmly. “I’m sorry to be rude, but I must know who it is that’s coming.”

A laugh came over the wire. “Oh, my dear, you’re too right! I’m dreadful, really. Tell them Jen Marchwood will come on Saturday, sometime, to help.”

“Lady Marchwood, who played that lovely silvery pipe?” Nanta cried, her face, and her voice, lighting up. “Oh, that will be marvellous! Will you play for us? And will you let me see your pipe?”

“If I play, you must dance,” Jen Marchwood said promptly. “It will be a rest for you; you ought to have a dance now and then. I hope you brought dancing shoes?”

“Virginia said I’d better have them. I’d like to dance to that pipe. I wanted to, when you played for them at the castle. It was the prettiest music I’d ever heard.”

“Please consider I’ve thanked you with a beautiful curtsy! Why didn’t I speak to you at the party? You didn’t come to tea with us, though your sisters did.”

“I had tea with the babies. There were a lot of them, so I went to help.”

“Raymonds and Robertsons and Roses! And my Rosemary and Mike and Katharine. Nice of you to lend a hand! But are you sure it wasn’t really that you were shy of the crowd?”

“It was that,” Nanta confessed. “There were such a lot of people.”

“They weren’t just people. They were dancers,” Jen scolded. “And you’d been playing for them, leading them all. They’d have liked to thank you. I know who it is who speaks like you; your twin sisters, Mandy and Minty. Your eldest sister has an English voice, but you three haven’t.”

“We think Virginia copied Father, when she learned to talk, but the twins had a Virginian nurse and they copied her,” Nanta explained.

“And you copied the twins?”

“I suppose so. I was too little to understand. I’d have copied Virginia, if I’d known.”

“It’s the only thing you aren’t like her in. What a dreadful sentence! Don’t tell Mary-Dorothy. I like your soft Southern talk; it’s unusual and quite fascinating. I’m glad to have made friends, even if it’s only by phone, and I hope I’ll see you soon. I’m sure you dance beautifully; you couldn’t help it, when you play like that. Goodbye!”

“How are your little boys?” Nanta cried.

“Oh, lovely—beautiful—perfect! And angels for goodness—at present. It will be a different story some day. Give Marigold my message and Mary my love.”

CHAPTER NINE

NANTA FINDS THE ABBEY

Mary hurried back from the kitchen. “Was that the phone? I couldn’t leave cook, and Gladys was bandaging Daisy’s hand. Did you answer? Thank you so much! Who was speaking?”

“Lady Marchwood, the one who plays the pipe for dancing. She sounds so nice,” Nanta said.

“Jenny-Wren, from next door. Did you tell her who you were? But wait one moment, while I ring up the doctor. Daisy’s hand must be attended to properly.”

She came back presently. “Tell me about Jen. Oh, that’s good of her! Can she really manage to help? The girls will appreciate it. Now, Nanta, would you like to look at the garden, while you wait for them? I must stay here, because of the doctor, but you can wander about alone.”

“You want to go back to your story, don’t you?” Nanta smiled at her shyly.

“The story will have to wait, I’m afraid. I must see to Daisy, and we’ve sent Mrs. Spindle—that’s the cook—to lie down; she had a nasty fright. My story-girls will come back to me when I’m ready to go to them, but I must see to the real girls first.”

“It’s thrilling to hear you talk! Do you truly feel they’re real and that they’ll come when you want them?”

“When I go to meet them,” Mary agreed. “Now go and see the garden. There’s a path leading off among those bushes; wander down and see what you find. There’s a door, which is kept locked, but here’s the key.”

Much interested, Nanta took her advice, and leaving hat and coat with her violin she went out on to the lawn, which was ringed by great dull-red beeches, to look for the path about which Mary had been so mysterious.

Mary watched her go with amused appreciation. “What a nice child! And so pretty! That frock of deep delphinium blue is just right, with her eyes; the sort of frock Ros would have worn. And the gold embroidery is the finishing touch. I wonder if Lady Virginia made it? It will be a lovely frock for dancing; the skirt hangs so beautifully. It’s good of Jen to help. She will set Lady Rosalind free to have a dance.” And she went to look at her casualties.

The winding path led Nanta to an ancient door. The key turned easily, and she found herself in a peaceful little garden, crossed by a flagged path and bright with small yellow chrysanthemums, at which she smiled a greeting. Facing her stood a high grey building, with wide windows; the path led to an arched doorway, and a vaulted passage ran through the building to where a glimpse of sunlit green could be seen.

Entranced, but puzzled, Nanta followed her path and stood in another archway, looking at a square green lawn. On every side were grey walls and arched openings and empty windows.

“How pretty!” she murmured. “But it’s more than that—old and peaceful. Oh, I like it! I’d like to stay here. But what an odd place to find in a garden! I wonder what it is, and why it’s here?”

She wandered about, in and out of doorways, into dark slips of rooms without windows, into high bare white rooms. One of these was reached by worn stone steps, which twisted dangerously and needed care, and had a long row of narrow windows looking out on the

square patch of green; another, also reached by grey steps, was a great light hall, with the big windows she had seen from the flower garden. One tiny room which she found by accident had a window which was a perfect circle; another had a beautiful arched entrance with a small window on each side, and the windows had delicate pillars dividing them into two parts, while the back wall of the little chamber was broken away and showed a view of meadows and trees.

Nanta tiptoed down a sort of arcade, with a vaulted roof, on one side of the lawn, and looked through broken arched openings at the grass. She was in a new world of history and romance, for there was no mistaking the great age of these ruined walls and windows. Strangely enough, it was almost her first experience of this kind. In Edinburgh she had seen the Castle and Holyrood, but she had been at school and there had not been time for much sightseeing. There had been nothing like this in her old home in the States! At Rainbows everything was newly built; even the parish church had been restored out of all semblance of beauty. Never in her life had Nanta seen any place like this enchanted world in which, without any warning, she suddenly found herself.

"I want to know what it means, and who built it, and who lived here," she whispered again and again, as she went, unknowing, from refectory to dormitory, from cloisters to chapter-house or sacristy.

She was exploring some dark corners under the great upstairs hall when the sound of voices took her to the doorway. There had seemed to be nobody about; the whole place had been dead and empty. Now suddenly it was very much alive, and—undeniably—noisy.

"Where is she? Rosalind! Come out! Don't hide from us!" shouted a girl's voice. "Where are you, Rosalind?"

They came racing on to the garth, three of them, bareheaded and in blue school tunics and flying green girdles. Joan Fraser had a mop of dark curls, wildly tossed; Jean's long smooth plait was bright red-gold; Jansy, three years younger than Littlejan, had two short plaits of rich dark red.

"If you called for Nanta she might answer, Marigold," said matter-of-fact Jean in her slow way.

"Nan-ta! Nant-a! Which do you like best?" the ex-Queen's hail rang through the ruins.

Then, as Nanta appeared at the door of a tiny dark room, Littlejan broke into a broad grin. "I say! What have you been up to? Why did they put you in there? On your first visit, too!"

"I've been wandering round, and nobody put me anywhere. Oughtn't I to have gone in there? There's nothing to see," Nanta began, puzzled.

"Don't you know where you were? Those are the punishment cells, where they shut up people who broke the rules. I thought perhaps a ghost had caught you and shoved you in."

"With another ghost to watch her through a window-slit," Jansy chuckled.

"Do you know all about it? Please tell me!" Nanta begged. "Who were the ghosts? Who lived here? What is this lovely place?"

"Don't you know? Monks!" Marigold told her simply.

"It was a—a monkery," Jean grinned. "A nunnery for men."

"A monastery, with an Abbot. It's the Abbey, and it belongs to my mother," Jansy said proudly.

"Oh! But it ought to belong to everybody; a lovely old place like this."

"It's open to the public until six, or till dusk after September," Marigold explained. "But it's Aunty Joan's job to see that it's properly looked after. There's a caretaker; haven't you

seen her? It's just on closing time; we'd better go back to the house."

"But I want to know all about it! It's the most fascinating place I ever saw."

"We'll tell you, but not now. We haven't had our tea," Littlejan urged. "When Mary-Dorothy said she'd sent you into the Abbey, we hurled off our coats and rushed to find you."

"She didn't say anything about an Abbey," Nanta began. "She told me to go down the path and see what I'd find. It was a great surprise."

"How brutal of Mary-Dorothy! We'll take you round and tell you all about it on Sunday, if somebody else doesn't do it tomorrow while we're at school. You won't need to come till five. We felt it would be a pity to waste Friday evening, but school doesn't stop till four. We'll have two hours and I'll tell the class off for all the mistakes I saw at that party. There were quite a lot."

"I saw some of them," Nanta agreed.

"We're going to call you Nanta at home and Rosalind in public," Jean said, as they went back to the house.

"Must you? Why? Well, please leave out that silly 'Lady' business," Nanta implored.

"We won't bore you with it," Marigold promised kindly. "Lady Kentisbury told me to introduce you as Rosalind Kane. We must play the game."

CHAPTER TEN

LADY ROSALIND IN THE PANTRY

While the hungry girls made a very good tea, Rosalind asked questions about the Abbey and learned many things; that the monks had been Cistercians and had worn white robes and black head-dresses; that they had been a silent Order, talking only in the “parlour,” which was set apart for the purpose; that the great hall with the beautiful windows was their dining-room, where sermons had been read aloud while they ate herbs and vegetables, but no meat; that they had slept in the long empty room up the winding stair, each man with a window and a stone seat below it; that they had worked in the bare light day-room, opening off the passage which the girls called the tresaut; and that the dark cells she had explored had been the places of punishment for monks who disobeyed.

There was much to see underground also, she was informed, but she must have a guide to the tunnels, for fear she lost her way.

Then Mary came in from attendance on the doctor and told about the accident.

“You girls will have to help over the week-end,” she said. “Daisy mustn’t use her hand for the next few days, and cook has had a bad shock and will have to rest.”

“What sport! We invite Lady Rosalind for the week-end and then make her do the washing-up!” Littlejan cried.

“She can sit in the drawing-room and be My Lady, while we’re being the scullery-maids,” Jansy suggested wickedly.

“I believe Nanta knows all about washing-up,” Jean said placidly.

“Oh, I do! Mandy and Minty often do it, but if Virginia does the dishes, I always wipe for her,” Nanta exclaimed. “Please let me help! It will be fun.”

“We’ll be the washing-up squad, Mary-Dorothy. Two Queens and Her Ladyship will take charge of the pantry,” Marigold said. “But please give us plenty of hot water.”

“And what about me?” Jansy cried. “Don’t think you’re going to send me to bed, because I’m not as old as the rest of you!”

“She’s beginning to grow up,” Littlejan explained to Nanta. “She wants us to call her Janice. But she’s been Jansy for nearly thirteen years, so we don’t always remember.”

“You’ve only known me for two years. You can easily do it, if you try,” Jansy argued.

“Janice is pretty. It’s too bad to spoil it, now that she’s big,” Nanta agreed.

“Yes, but it’s my mother’s name; she’s called for Mother. I shall have to call her Jan,” Marigold said. “They call her Janice at school, since she was moved up. She’s frightfully brainy; she’s in quite a high form, for her age. All right, Janice! You needn’t throw anything at me.”

“Janice shall help to wash and dry until she breaks something. Then she’ll go to bed,” and Mary looked at Jansy.

“I’ll do the spoons and forks,” Janice said promptly.

Mary turned to Nanta. “We’ve given you a room to yourself. But if you’d rather be with Marigold, I can make up the second bed in her room.”

Nanta’s natural shyness returned for a moment. “I’d like my own room, thank you, if it’s just as easy.”

"You don't want too much of me," Littlejan remarked. "Ginger Jean said just the same, and Jan and I have separate rooms now, though we slept together at first. Mary-Dorothy believes in people having rooms to themselves. Oh, well! We can soon do something about it, if we find we want to be together. Mary-Dorothy will remember it's half-term!"

"What a threat, Marigold!" Mary exclaimed. "Don't spend the whole night paying visits."

The pantry was a lively place while washing-up was in progress. Jean and Nanta were quieter than the other two, but they were an appreciative audience, ready to applaud Littlejan's nonsense or Jansy's cheeky remarks.

"Are you feeling quite at home?" Jean looked at the visitor, after a time.

Nanta polished a bowl carefully. "Terribly much at home. It's fun; I love it."

Littlejan, wearing an overall of Mary's, laughed at her from the sink. "All the same, it's a dreadful way to treat a guest on her first evening."

"This guest likes it, thank you."

"We were going to raid your room, when you were in bed, to make you feel thoroughly one of us. We won't need to do it now."

"I'll be ready for you, since you've given me warning," Nanta retorted.

"Now let's have some music!" Marigold shook out her mop and hung it up. "That's beautifully tidy, scullery-maids. Lady Rosalind will please play to us in the library."

"Nanta will love to play to you. But haven't you homework for tomorrow?"

"Oh, yes! Stacks of it," Littlejan said cheerfully. "But I work better with a noise going on."

Nanta laughed. "How kind! I want to practise, so I'll provide the noise to cheer you on."

The girls worked steadily while she played. But presently Littlejan looked up. "I say, you *are* first-class! That's jolly fine. Do you play solos at concerts?"

"Only at Rainbows, for Virginia. I'm not good enough for anything else."

"I should think you're quite good enough for the Albert Hall," said Jean.

"You should play at the Proms." Jansy gazed at Nanta with eyes full of admiration.

"I want to hear more about Rainbows," Littlejan remarked, "but we'd better polish off this stuff first."

They fell to work again, and Nanta played on, ignoring them and practising industriously. But presently, with a gleam in her eyes, she broke into a country-dance without warning.

Three heads shot up. "Gosh! How you made me jump!" cried Marigold.

"What did you do that for?" Jean protested. "And what is it, anyway? I've danced to it often, but I'm frightfully slow at guessing tunes. It's got a step-and-honour—and skipping—"

"'Chelsea Reach'!" Littlejan and Jansy shouted together.

"Oh, yes! How daft! It was just coming; I'd have known in another minute."

"Let's have a competition for guessing tunes," Jansy suggested. "Nanta must play anything she thinks of and we'll write down the names."

"I shall guess one in five," Jean said mournfully.

"I didn't think you'd notice," Nanta remarked. "I didn't believe one of you was listening."

"Well, now you know. I can do two things at once quite easily," Marigold said haughtily. "But I'm only copying out notes," she added.

"I'm glad to hear it," Nanta retorted. "I was afraid your homework was being very badly done."

"My homework's all right; don't worry! But I'm not so sure about Jean's and Jan's. I believe they were listening with one ear, and that isn't good for homework."

“Don’t worry about us!” Jean echoed her words. “Dinna fash yersel’, lassie. We’re daein’ a’ richt, forbye.”

“Gosh!” Littlejan stared at her. “I didn’t know you could do that!”

“Say some more!” Jansy demanded.

“Hoots! Havers! Buckle to your wark, an’ let me gang ma ain gait, an’ dinna blether.”

“Jean Guthrie, I’d no idea you talked a foreign language,” the ex-Queen complained.

Jean laughed and buried herself in her books and could not be coaxed to say any more.

Mary came quietly in. “May I hear the music too? It’s delightful, Rosalind.”

Nanta lowered her fiddle. “Did we interrupt your work? I am sorry! Wouldn’t the girls in the story come to you?”

“I’ve put them to bed for tonight. I’m not even pretending to work, as I see some people are doing.”

“Oh, Mary-Dorothy!” Jean protested. “We’re working fearfully hard!”

Mary looked sceptical. “Please go on playing, Rosalind! Marigold, have you rung up the Manor to thank Jen for her kind offer?”

“Not yet. Would this be a good time? Or will she be feeding babies or something?”

“Quite a good time, I should say.”

Littlejan slipped out and presently came back to report. “She’ll come to school on Saturday morning, when she’s doing her shopping. It will be lovely to have her to help. She sent her love to you, Rosalind, and she’s coming along tomorrow morning, to show you the Abbey. You’re in luck; Lady Jen does it better than anyone else, except Aunty Joan. She does it best of all, but then it’s her Abbey.”

“How very kind! I’ll love that.” Nanta’s eyes lit up.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

TATTIE-BOGLES

Remembering Littlejan's hint, Nanta sat up in bed, expecting some visit or attack, and wondering, when it did not come, if she would rather have been in a room with one of the others, after all. She lay down at last, with a sigh almost of disappointment. Apparently there were to be no thrills tonight.

The door opened softly, and Queen Marigold whispered—"May we come in, Lady Rosalind?"

"Please will you have us, Nanta?" begged Ginger Jean.

Nanta switched on the bed-light. "Jean may come in. Lady Rosalind isn't receiving visitors."

Littlejan grinned. "Nanta dear, we didn't raid you because Jansy would have heard us, and she's only a kid; she needs her sleep. But we came as soon as we thought she'd be thoroughly settled down. You're going to tell us all about your weird Rainbows place."

She made herself comfortable at the end of the bed and Jean climbed up beside her. Jean's hair was loose and hanging in a red-gold mane on her shoulders; she shook it back and explained.

"Marigold made me do this. I feel like a tattie-bogle."

"A *what*?" Littlejan gave a subdued shriek.

"What's that, please?" Nanta asked humbly.

"Scarecrow, to you," Jean grinned.

"Oh! You're a very pretty one. It's a lovely colour."

"So is yours. You're exactly like Lady Kentisbury."

"You never saw her with her hair down," Nanta protested.

"No, but—"

"Rosalind, be a—a tattie-something too!" Littlejan commanded. "Those plaits look far too prim and neat for a midnight talk. Here's your brush; undo those tails and let us see how much you have. What's that awful word, Jean?"

"Tattie-bogle," Jean repeated, with amused eyes.

"Go on, Nanta! Be one too," Littlejan urged.

"I shall have to do it again," Nanta grumbled. "It makes me so hot." But she gave in to Littlejan's insistent demand and shook her plaits loose. "There! I'm sure that's bogle-ish enough for anybody."

"Jolly fine," Littlejan commented, eyeing her in delight. "I don't want to have a lot myself, but I like to look at other people's. They have to do the work. Now tell us about Rainbows! Why is it called that? Is it really all new?"

"Well, you are mean things!" whispered a stormy voice from the doorway.

"Gosh! It's the babe!" Littlejan groaned. "Go back to bed, Janice Raymond!"

"Likely, isn't it?" Jansy climbed on the bed beside Nanta. "There! A nice little square for four! You looked so—so unbalanced before; so uneven. Shall we do 'Parson's Farewell'?"

Jean chuckled. "I couldn't get through it, but I daresay you could. You've been dancing since before you could walk, haven't you?"

“Almost. What sights you two look! I’ll be another,” and Jansy unloosed the fat little plaits she wore for bed and shook out her dark red curls. “There! We are in a mess! Got anything to eat?”

Jean produced a box of chocolates. “Daddy gave it to me for—for emergencies. Help yourselves!”

“Lady Rosalind and me first,” Jansy demanded. “Her because she’s the visitor and me because I’m the youngest.”

“Because you’re talking most,” Nanta said. “Shove that in your mouth to keep you quiet. Jean’s a visitor too, isn’t she?”

“Not so much as you. I’ve stayed here before.”

“Tell us things, Rosalind!” Littlejan insisted.

“I shall end by liking that name, because so many nice people are using it,” Rosalind remarked.

Then she gave in, and talked of Rainbows and its young mistress and her riding accident; and of how Virginia was taking her place.

“That’s why we had to use our silly ‘Ladies.’ We ran away from our names at first and called ourselves just Rose; Virginia Rose, Mandy Rose, Minty Rose; and I was Nanta Rose. Nobody knew we were really called Kane or that the earl was our uncle, or that we were Ladies with a capital L.”

“But what fun!” Jean exclaimed. “People didn’t understand?”

“They were jolly pretty names,” Jansy said. “I shall call you Nanta Rose. It’s sweet.”

“But tell us the rest!” Littlejan commanded. “Did you turn yourselves into Ladies and Kanes for the sake of the village?”

“So that people would listen to Virginia. She isn’t very old, and she was afraid she wouldn’t seem important enough as just Miss Rose. But when she turned into Lady Virginia it was quite different.”

“It did the trick,” Jean said.

“She was a brick. You were all bricks! For I guess it’s a fag to have a title drop on you suddenly, unless you really want it,” Littlejan exclaimed.

“We hated it. But Rainbows was getting into an awful mess; the people were quarrelling and being slack, and we knew how bad Mrs. Dering would feel when she was better. Virginia seemed to be the only person who could do anything; she was teaching dancing and leading the orchestra already. When she turned into Lady Virginia people would listen to anything she said.”

“It was jolly decent of you all. I should think it was easier to be Nanta Rose than Lady Rosalind Kane,” Littlejan said.

“Much easier,” Nanta Rose sighed. “But, of course, Kentisbury is marvellous and we go there a lot. We love Aunt Rosamund and Uncle Geoffrey and all the babies, and Mandy has her horses and Minty goes sailing. Virginia has Gilbert and they’ll be married in the spring.”

“And what have you got out of it?” Jean handed her the chocolates. “Have another!”

“Thanks. I don’t quite know,” Nanta said, rather desolately. “I thought I was going to live with Virginia, but I don’t feel so sure about it now.”

“Because of the other girl; Anne-Marie,” Littlejan agreed. “I don’t think you’d like to have her always. Come and live with us!”

Nanta smiled wistfully, but shook her head.

The door opened again. “Long enough, girls, even for half-term! You have school tomorrow. I’ve given you half an hour.”

“Mary-Dorothy! How you made us jump! Have one?” and Littlejan held out the box.

“Did you hear us come?” Jean asked gloomily. “We thought we were so quiet, but even Jansy heard and came after us.”

“I heard, and I timed you. Half an hour is enough.”

“Oh, well, I am a bit sleepy. Perhaps you’re right, Mary-Dorothy,” Marigold conceded. “We’ll have another sitting tomorrow night, and I’ll tell Nanta Rose about all my different homes and my brothers at school in York. Alastair is as old as Jan, but Alan is only ten. Did you know Rosalind used to be called Nanta Rose, Mary-Dorothy?”

“No; it’s a pretty name, but I don’t want to hear about it tonight. Rosalind shall tell me tomorrow, when you’ve gone to school and she’s helping me to wash up. You will, won’t you, Rosalind?”

“I shall love it,” Rosalind assured her heartily.

CHAPTER TWELVE

QUEENS OLD AND NEW

“Tattie-bogles!” Littlejan grinned at the tidy pigtailed round the breakfast-table.

“You’re late, ex-Queen,” Jean said severely. “We ought to be early today, to see everything’s all right for tonight.”

“Why don’t you wear two plaits, like Nanta Rose and Janice?” Littlejan demanded.

“Why don’t you grow enough to have plaits, instead of just a mop?” Jansy jeered.

“Mine’s not a mop. It’s beautifully neat. What are you going to do until five o’clock, Rosalind? I hope you didn’t mind coming a day too soon? We felt we’d be so much more friendly, if we’d had you for a night. You could have come straight to school, but that seemed rather horrid.”

“Do you feel more friendly, Nanta Rose?” Jansy asked anxiously.

“After being a tattie-bogle!” Jean murmured.

Nanta laughed. “I’m glad I came last night. I’m going to wash up and dust, and do any other job I’m trusted with. Then I hope I’m going into Jansy’s mother’s Abbey with Lady Marchwood.”

“Call her Lady Jen. We all do,” Marigold said. “Righto! See you at school at five o’clock!”

Nanta’s programme worked out as she had expected. Jen came to the Hall about ten, calling from the terrace for Lady Rosalind, and Nanta went out to join her.

“I’m getting used to Rosalind, but I don’t like the other part,” she said with dignity.

“Then I won’t tease you. But Rosalind is so pretty, and so Kentisburyish—that’s a good word—that I must use it. Have they rung Michael and Cecily for you yet?”

“Michael and Cecily?”

“The Abbey bells. We always ring a greeting for our friends. Evidently they haven’t. I shall give a little tinkle on each, to let you hear their voices; we won’t alarm the neighbourhood by clashing them in earnest.” And she told how the bells had been found during the last few years.

“Oh, I like the sound of them!” Nanta cried, as she stood on the garth and heard Jen’s little tinkle.

“Yes, beautiful, aren’t they? They might so easily have been cracked, after being buried for centuries. They belonged to the church we have lost; come up to the refectory and see the pictures that show us how it used to look. My school pal and I found them, hidden away at the Manor. I didn’t guess then that the Manor was going to be my home! I remember saying it looked the sort of house that ought to have a big family of children. And I’ve given it seven! Isn’t that luck?”

“Have you really seven children?”

“Rather! But only five are at home. Rosemary is the eldest of the nursery crowd and she’s seven years old. The two big boys are at school in York, with Jansy’s brother John and Marigold’s two small brothers.”

“She said she’d tell me about them. She’s very fond of them; I could tell by the way she spoke.”

“Yes, she’s very keen on Alastair and Alan. She hasn’t seen much of them, for she’s been away at school. Her home was on a South Sea island till she was thirteen, and she was at school in Australia. Now her mother and baby sister have a new home in Ceylon; the father’s a sailor. Her mother was home in the spring, with the baby, Cecily Rose—called after the Abbey bell and the countess! Marigold was so proud and happy; she was rather sweet with Cecily. She hasn’t had much chance to be motherly, but she was, with that baby sister, and she is with her boys. Joan had them all in the holidays, and I hope to have the crowd another year. Joan is guardian to the boys, while they’re at school. The aunts in Scotland are elderly and one is an invalid; Joan is Marigold’s godmother, so she offered to be guardian to Alastair and Alan as well. They come to her in the holidays, and she’d be sent for if anything went wrong. But that isn’t likely; it’s a jolly good school and all our boys are very happy there. Now let’s do the Abbey in earnest!”

“It’s a wonderful old place,” Nanta said gravely, when they had explored the ruins both above and underground. “And you tell it all so beautifully. I’ve never seen anything in the least like it. It’s marvellous to see where the monks lived and worked, and their rooms, and their arrangements. I can imagine them going about and into the great church.”

Jen glanced at her. “The Abbey takes hold of some people and tells them things. Not everybody; some just say, ‘How quaint!’ and go away and forget. But others come back, and remember, and think. I believe it will take hold of you; you’re the sort it likes.”

Nanta flushed. “I’d like to be good enough to come often to this quiet place. I’d like to stay here altogether.”

“Oh, but people don’t stay for ever. The monks did, but the spell isn’t so strong, or is different, now. We come, and we love the Abbey, and it tell us things, and then we go away to do the things it has told us, in other places where we’re needed. It was like that for Joan—she thought she’d never leave the Abbey. And I—and Rosamund—and Maidlin particularly; we all felt the same. But we’ve gone to make new homes, and we’re all very happy and content, although we’ve left the Abbey. We come back, of course; I come often. But our homes and our work are somewhere else.”

“They’re beautiful homes,” Nanta said shyly. “Aunt Rosamund has been kind to us beyond all words. And we were so frightened of her before we knew her!”

Jen laughed. “That didn’t last long, I know! We’re very proud of Rosamund. She—and Maidlin, whom you know as Mrs. Robertson—have most truly taken the Abbey spirit into their new life. They’re both splendid hostesses.”

“Is that the Abbey spirit?”

“The monks welcomed all who were in trouble or needing help. The Abbey was sanctuary, a refuge, even for criminals. But we won’t go on talking about it; it’s a thing to try out for yourself. I must go home and nurse my twins. It is such fun to have two to feed and bath! Wander about for a while and then go back to Mary-Dorothy. Mary is the one who is always here,” Jen added, as she turned to the tresaunt. “The rest of us come, and learn, and go away. Mary-Dorothy stays, and when we come back she’s here to help and welcome us, waiting quietly till she’s needed. Good-bye for the present, and good luck to the Marigold School! I’ll come along tomorrow morning, plus my pipe,” and she waved her hand and went off down the dark tunnel, while Nanta turned back into the Abbey, full of new thoughts and hopes.

“Are you looking forward to the Marigold School, as Jen calls it?” Mary asked, as they sat down to another cosy tea by the fire, with the black old table, the blue china, and the golden flowers.

“Terribly much! I want to see how Marigold will get on. I suppose she’ll do most of the teaching?”

“I expect so. Jean is still shy, although she’s Queen, and Janice is rather young. Jansy is a good teacher; she was put up to teach a dance to the whole Club last September; Littlejan insisted on it, for reasons of her own. Jansy did very well, I was told, though I wasn’t there; it was the night Jen’s boys were born, and Joan and I were waiting for news. Littlejan will make Jansy help, for she wants her to get experience. But Marigold is the leading spirit; the school was her idea, and she brought in the other two to help. They’ll back her up, but she’ll do most of the work.”

“I’m very keen to see her teach,” Nanta said again. “And I always like playing for dancing.”

Frost drove her down to school presently, and she sat holding her violin and thinking what a pleasant finish this was to a very happy day. She really knew Jen Marchwood now; she had seen the Abbey thoroughly; and her friendship with Mary-Dorothy was growing. An evening’s dancing was the only thing needed to make the day perfect.

As they reached the school gates girls were coming out and going off in all directions. They looked curiously at the car, and then, recognising it, as it came to school every day, they looked at the girl with the violin and the yellow plaits and the pretty blue frock under the big coat.

“I say, Frost! Have you come to learn folk-dancing from Jansy Raymond?” asked one.

Frost grinned and touched his cap, and drove off into the town to enjoy himself for a couple of hours, before taking his school party home.

Nanta made her way in, colouring at the glances cast at her, just as Jansy came rushing out to meet her.

“We heard Frost toot. Sorry I was late! We’ve been having a quick tea, all of us who are staying. Did you have yours at home?”

“Yes, with Mary-Dorothy.” Nanta felt suddenly happy and protected by the warm welcome. “One of those girls asked Frost if he’d come to learn dancing from you,” she added. “Are you going to be teacher?”

“That was cheek,” Jansy said. “Oh, no! Marigold is teacher, but I’ll help by joining in and keeping the sets right. Did that girl say Janice to Frost?” she asked anxiously.

Nanta considered the matter. “No, I think she said Jansy.”

“They won’t remember,” Jansy sighed. “Here’s the hall; isn’t there a lovely lot of room for dancing? I’ll run and change; we want to wear our Hamlet Club frocks. It feels so much more like a real week-end school! You wander about and look at things. I’ll tell Marigold and Jean; they’re nearly ready.”

Nanta put down her fiddle and her cap and coat, and went to look at some big photographs, which had caught her eye as she entered the hall. Then her interest deepened into keen excitement, for she found herself gazing at her Aunt Rosamund, dressed in a long white gown and a rich dark train arranged about her feet, holding roses and wearing a starry crown of narcissus.

“How pretty she looks! This must be her picture as a Queen. She has two plaits just like mine; she’s about as old as I am, I think.”

She gazed long at the photograph, wishing it had been in colours. “That train was crimson; she told me she was the Red Rose Queen. I wonder if I know any of the others? Oh, yes! Here’s Lady Jen, next to her. How tall she was, even then! And little Mrs. Robertson, who has

the lovely voice. Two plaits again; thick black ones. Her train was yellow; she was the Primrose Queen. She looks very pretty too, but small, after Lady Jen.”

She wandered on, looking at Clover, Bluebell, Ivy, and Poppy Queens. Then she stopped to gaze again. “Why, it’s Hyacinth, the nurse at the Castle! And here’s the little forget-me-not blue Queen I saw at the party; Mirry, they called her. And—oh, here are Marigold and Jean, in their crowns and robes! How marvellous they look! What fun to see them as Queens!”

“Don’t you wish you could be a Queen too?” a voice asked behind her.

“Oh, Marigold! You look so jolly! I’d like to see a procession, with all the colours!” Nanta cried.

“It’s an extremely fine sight,” the ex-Queen said solemnly. “Come next May-day and watch the crowning. You’d see us in our full glory.”

“Who will be the next Queen?”

Littlejan cast a cautious look round and whispered, “I want young Jansy—Janice, I mean. Aunty Joan would be so pleased, and so would the other Queens. But don’t breathe a word to anybody. It’s only my idea.”

“It would please her mother,” Nanta agreed. “But isn’t she rather young?”

“She’ll be thirteen and almost a half. I was only a year more than that. Mirry was a year less. Jan would have Jean and me behind her. It would be quite possible.”

“It would be very nice,” Nanta assented. “But I suppose the Club has to choose? Do they like Jansy?”

“Quite a lot. I’m going to see that they like her a lot more before the choosing in April. That’s all I can do; I can’t push her at them or tell them to choose her. I have to be careful; if I force her on them, or if they think she expects to be chosen, then it’s all up. She’d have no chance at all.”

Nanta nodded. “You need to go slowly.”

“Jan isn’t expecting it, and that’s a good start. She had some row with her crowd; they said she was sure she’d be Queen, because her mother had been. She hadn’t dreamt of swanking, and it hurt her a lot; she came to me to be comforted, poor infant! The silly kids have forgotten, but Jan hasn’t, and she’s made up her mind they’ll never have her. Don’t say a word to anyone! Here she comes, with Ginger Jean; isn’t Jean pretty in that pale blue frock? It brings out all the colour in her hair. You go and see the other Queens; we shall start in a moment now. Hi, Jan! Show Rosalind your mother as a Queen. I must round up the rest of our lot.”

Jansy, in her green dancing frock, which was just like Littlejan’s, came flying across the hall. “Have you found the Queens? Which have you seen? From Aunty Ros to the end? Don’t Marigold and Jean look marvellous? Come and see the first Queens. Here’s the President; she wore gold. Here’s Aunty Joy; we’re living in her house, you know; she was the Green Queen—bright green.”

“When is she coming home from America?”

“Soon now. Their time in New York is up, but Sir Ivor Quellyn had planned a tour in Canada, and he’s going to Montreal and—oh, places like that! So Aunty Joy has gone with him, and the twins and the little boys are left at the house in New York with their nurse and their governess. I’ll show them to you in a minute. But first here’s Mother; her train was violet.”

“She does look nice!” Nanta said fervently.

“Yes, doesn’t she? You should come on May-day and see them all dressed up.”

“I’ve already been invited,” Nanta told her seriously.

“Of course, Littlejan would ask you. I hope you’ll come. You could play for the dancing.”

“Why don’t you call Jean by a Queen-name—as you call Littlejan Marigold?” Nanta asked.

“Oh, well! Jean’s Queen-name is Rosemary; the girls do call her by it, but it makes us think of Rosemary Marchwood at the Manor, so it’s only at school we call Jean Rosemary. And we rather like saying ‘Queen Jean,’ you know. Here’s Nesta, the Silver Queen; have you seen her?”

Nanta looked carefully at the picture of the Queen who carried honesty for her flowers and had silver circles painted on the dark edging of her glittering train. “I seem to know her.”

“She’s Aunty Maidlin’s nurse for her twins.”

“Oh, of course! They came to tea at the Castle when I was there. But how lovely to have another Queen as a nurse like Aunt Rosamund’s Hyacinth!”

“It’s because they’re friends; they went to the same college, and Nesta told Aunty Ros about Hyacinth. Look at this Queen; you’ve never seen her. Her train is all stripes; she’s Queen Bee, or Beatrice, or Beetle, and she’s in New York, as nurse to Aunty Joy’s little boys. And the next Queen to her, Wild Rose, is governess to the twins; she’s terribly clever, B.A.s, and all sorts of things. She’s Queen Barbara, and she’s the sister of the first Queen—but a lot younger, of course. Now Marigold wants to start, and she’ll need you, so come on! I’m going to dance; I can help by pulling beginners through.”

“No, Jan, don’t pull them through,” Littlejan called. “We want them to learn for themselves. But help where you see it’s needed. Now for it!” and she stepped up on to the platform, with slightly heightened colour.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN MARIGOLD TEACHES

"I say, everybody!" Littlejan began, and the girls crowding into the hall surged towards the platform. Most were in coloured dancing frocks, but a few had not brought their dresses, as it was to be only a two hours' class; these were in gym tunics, saying they would come in frocks on Saturday morning. They were nearly all juniors, but there were two, at least, as old as Jean—almost seniors; and they eyed Marigold with amusement and expectation.

"It feels frightfully odd to be up here," Littlejan proclaimed, "but I'm not going to apologise, for I think you want me to do it—"

"Hear, hear!" said one of the seniors. "Carry on, Marigold!"

"Nice of you to come, Tessa," the ex-Queen said promptly. "And Phyl too. We're glad to have you. You do want me to boss, don't you?"

"Oh, rather! Go ahead! We're sick of sitting out and watching you people. Can we do that 'Sticks' thing they had at the party?"

"And the one where you jump three times?" Phyl added.

"'Althea'! I hadn't thought of that. 'Sticks' is on our list," Littlejan began.

"You know the jumping one. You danced it with Queen Primrose," Phyl urged.

"Oh, I know it! But it's another thing to teach it. We'll see later on. For tonight I thought, if you didn't mind, we'd have some of the dances you did at the Castle, which you know already, and then, perhaps, 'Sticks' to finish with. You're making ghastly mistakes; did you know? I saw weird sights while we were dancing. I couldn't say anything at a party, but you'd like to get the dances right, wouldn't you? You don't want to go on doing wrong things all your lives."

"Oh, gosh, no! Tell us where we're wrong. I didn't know we were," Tessa confessed.

Littlejan grinned at her in a friendly way. "I guessed that. You don't want to be pulled up before the whole Club, but here, with just us, nothing matters and you won't mind. We'll soon get you right. We have the place absolutely to ourselves, except for the caretaker. Even the Head has gone away for the week-end; we're quite on our own. But before we start I want to tell you about our music. You've heard that Miss Lane is ill, and about Mrs. Marchwood's new baby? We were in a hole, but we've been rescued in a most frightfully lucky way. Do you remember the marvellous music at the Castle party? Well, we've borrowed part of it. This is Rosalind Kane; Lady Kentisbury is her Aunt Rosamund. She played for that party, and she's going to play for us."

A wave of colour swept into Nanta's sensitive face as the girls broke into clapping. "Can't you start, Marigold?" she begged.

"Yes, rather! But you had to be introduced. 'Haste to the Wedding,' please. Take your partners for a longways set! Rosalind and I watched this from the top of the keep, and though it looked marvellous there were funny things happening. I saw where you found it difficult and I can make it much easier for you. Janice, will you dance with Tessa, and Jean with Phyl? They mustn't stick together."

She watched two turns of the dance and then called to Nanta to stop.

"Yes! Well, you don't listen to the music very much yet. You'll find it will help; that's what the music's for. Listen to the tune; I'm going to make a noise on a certain beat. 'B'

music, please!”

With a funny little smile of understanding Nanta played the second strain of the music, and without being told gave a slight accent to the beat on which the teacher intended to make a noise.

Littlejan gave a loud stamp. “There! Did you hear that? Rosalind played it too; she knew what was wrong. You must start to skip back on that beat. None of you do it; you’re still turning the woman under your arm. It’s a strong beat, the first of a phrase. You mark it by starting your return journey on it. You’re late, and so you don’t get round the corner and you’re fearfully late in beginning your swing. You meet your partner about the third beat, instead of on the first. And the way to put the whole thing right and keep it all up to time is to go only five, or at most six, steps down the middle. You go right on and on for eight, and then you start to turn, and you can’t possibly get back in time. Now start again; the music will help you, if you’ll only listen. Five down the middle—it’s quite far enough. A nice easy turn, in three beats, and up the middle on the new first beat. Then round the corner, and meet your partner for the swing as the music starts again. Walk it just once to counting.”

She counted steadily as they walked the movement. Tessa and Phyl were looking interested; they were musical enough to appreciate the point, and, coming fresh to the school and the Club, they were very anxious to dance well.

“Now do it with the music,” Littlejan suggested.

“I say, Marigold, that’s much jollier!” Tessa cried, at the end.

“It fits the music now,” Phyl added.

“I knew you’d like it better. Now we’ll have ‘Meeting Six.’ There’s something in that I can tell you too. Rosalind and I danced it together, and our set was all right, but out of the corner of my eye I saw what was happening in other sets. Although it’s so easy, it isn’t always right.”

She stopped them presently. “If the women came to meet their man in the arming, instead of waiting for him to come and drag them in, you’d find it much easier. You make it an awful rush for the man. And the woman who has been armed needn’t stand still and go to sleep, and have to be wakened up by the man, when he comes back to her in four beats. Keep moving; keep on your curve, women. I don’t know how to put it into words. Do it with me, Jean and Janice. You know what I mean!” And she leapt from the platform and collected her assistants. “‘B’ music, please!”

“Oh, that’s quite different! I say, Marigold, is every single thing you tell us going to be easier?” Tessa cried.

“I should think so. The right way’s sure to be easier, because they’re folk dances, and they’ve been altered and polished by people for centuries, until the easiest way was found.”

“I see,” Tessa said, with interest. “Anything hard or awkward would be altered.”

“Probably, or left out. I’ll be frightfully disappointed if you don’t like the things I tell you, for I’ll think I must be wrong,” Littlejan confessed. “Now, everybody, try my way and see if it isn’t easier.”

“Heaps easier, and jollier too,” was the verdict at the end.

“It’s terribly kind of you to play for us, Lady Rosalind.” Tessa, less diffident than the younger girls, came up to the platform.

Nanta, flushing, spoke shyly. “I know you mean to be polite and correct, but I do hate being called that. Please let me be just Rosalind and forget the other.”

“May we? We didn’t dare,” Tessa exclaimed.

“I wish you would. I’d feel so much more at home. And I love playing; it’s kind of you to let me do it.”

“It’s awfully good of you,” Phyl said earnestly. “You’ve played a lot for dancing, haven’t you?”

“Oh, yes! My sister teaches, and I’ve been playing for her for some time now.”

“Why don’t you come to school with Marigold?”

Nanta smiled and shook her head.

But Tessa persisted. “You aren’t too grown up, are you? Your hair isn’t up yet. We’ve a Domestic Science course for people who have left, and some of them are quite grown up. It’s always useful to be able to make a pudding!”

“What a gorgeous idea, Tessa!” Littlejan heard the last words. “Rosalind, do think about it! Lady Kentisbury would arrange it with the Head, and you could live with Jan and me at the Hall!”

“Oh, no! Lady Quellyn will be bringing her family home. There wouldn’t be room.”

“Then we could be boarders, with Jean. It would be sport! You’ll think about it, won’t you?”

Nanta shook her head again, and began to tune her fiddle. “Is it ‘Sticks’ next? Give me nicer music before we go home, Marigold. I don’t really like the tune of ‘Sticks’ very much.”

Littlejan laughed. “It does go on and on. We’ll have ‘The Dressed Ship’ to finish; they ought to learn that properly.”

“That’s all right. It has a real tune,” and Nanta raised the violin and played “Picking Up Sticks” softly to herself, and then listened with interest as Littlejan put the complicated movements into words.

“I don’t believe I’d be much use as a teacher,” she said at the end. “You do it so well. I’d know what people ought to do, but I wouldn’t know how to say it.”

“It’s quite a different thing to recite a dance, as I’m learning tonight,” Littlejan said solemnly. “Of course, I can shout! You’ve such a soft little voice; you might not be heard. But it isn’t always easy to know how to put things. I have to leap down and show them what I mean.”

“I think your teaching’s splendid. I’ve watched Virginia, and you put it all just about as well as she does.”

“Let’s see what sort of mess I make of ‘Dressed Ship’! Tomorrow Ginger Jean must have a try, and I’m going to make Jan take a dance or two. She’s a good little teacher, and she puts things very clearly.”

The evening ended with a riotous “Circassian Circle,” and Nanta fiddled “The Irish Washerwoman” till she was worn out. Then, led by Tessa, there were ringing cheers for Marigold and Jean and Janice and the music, and everybody went home, looking forward excitedly to the morrow.

“And Monday!” Littlejan rolled into the car and lay exhausted. “Two whole days! But—gosh! Isn’t it fun?”

“I’ve enjoyed every minute of it,” Nanta assured them sedately.

“These lazy blighters must help tomorrow. I can’t keep on for ever.”

“Everybody loved it,” Jansy said sleepily. “I heard them talking. They say Marigold’s a jolly good teacher and the week-end’s going to be marvellous.”

“And it’s extremely useful for the Hamlet Club,” said Jean, in her slow matter-of-fact way.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WHISKED AWAY

“Golly, there’s a car at the door!” cried Jansy, as they drove up the avenue.

“Bother! I only want supper and bed,” Marigold groaned. “Who would come visiting at this time? It must be eight o’clock.”

“I hope it isn’t anybody come to whisk Rosalind away from us,” Jean began, looking anxious. “We simply couldn’t carry on without her.”

“What a ghastly idea! Oh, I hope nothing will happen to spoil the week-end!” Littlejan sat up, much perturbed.

There was a shout from Jansy. “It’s our car! And there’s mother on the terrace, waiting for us!”

“Gosh! What on earth can be the matter?” Littlejan began in dismay.

The car drew up and Jansy hurled herself out. “Mother! Is anything wrong?”

Joan, in a big travelling coat, put her aside gently. “I want Littlejan. Joan dear, we’ve come to take you to York. Alan is ill, and they fear appendicitis. They’ve wired for my permission to operate on the poor little chap.”

Her arm held Littlejan, who had swayed and nearly fallen. White from shock and fright, the girl clung to her. “Tell me again. I can’t believe it. Alan? But he’s so little! Oh, Auntie Joan! Say it isn’t true!”

“I’m afraid it is true, dear. I’m going to York; I feel your mother would wish me to be there. You’d like to come too, wouldn’t you?”

“Oh, yes! Oh, please, I must go! But—did you say an operation?”

“The school wired to ask my leave to operate,” Joan repeated, quietly and clearly.

Littlejan looked up at her piteously. “Did you—what did you say? Oh, must they do it? He’s just a baby!”

“I wired—‘*Operate if necessary to save child’s life*,’” Joan said steadily. “I had another telegram—‘*Operating at once. Can you come*?’”

“Then—then he’s very bad?” Littlejan whispered.

“I’m afraid so. But it may save him. An operation saved Rosemary Marchwood when she was very ill; and she was only three years old.”

Littlejan hid her face in Joan’s fur coat and swallowed hard several times, and Joan held her tightly and felt her shoulders quivering.

“We ought to hurry, dear,” she said presently. “We must leave London at midnight. Jack’s going to drive us to town and put us in the train, and then he’ll come home, in case he can do anything to help here.”

Littlejan looked up, her face white and drawn. “You said they were going to do it at once. Suppose when we get to York—”

“There will be all the more need for us to be there,” Joan said firmly. “Think of Alastair, left all alone!”

“Oh, poor Alastair! He’ll be feeling so bad. Oh yes, let’s go! Can we start at once?”

“As soon as you’ve dressed and had supper. Run up and have a good hot wash; it will refresh you. Then put on your warmest frock and change those thin stockings; we’ve a night journey before us. Mary-Dorothy has everything ready in your room, and supper is waiting.”

"I can't eat anything, but I'll put on warm things. And what about packing?" Littlejan asked brokenly.

"Our dear Mary has packed your case. You aren't going to York unless you eat something," Joan assured her. "So you'd better make up your mind to it."

Littlejan shook her head and turned to the door. She caught sight of Jean's startled face and stopped.

"But how can I go away? Our class—I've promised all those girls! I can't let them down! Oh, Aunt Joan, what must I do?"

"Jean and Jansy will manage without you; or if they can't they'll tell the girls and send them home."

"They mustn't do that! Jean, you must carry on. You can do it, if you try," Littlejan insisted. "I'll never forgive you, if you let us down, Jean!"

Jean stared at her hopelessly. "We can't have the class without you. We'll tell everybody; they'll understand."

"You can't spoil it like that—!"

"Joan, go and dress," the elder Joan said, quietly but with authority in her voice.

Littlejan rushed upstairs, almost breaking down. "You can't, Jean! You can't!" she flung over her shoulder. "It would be horrible! You must go on with it, Jean!"

Jean looked at Mrs. Raymond in despair. "It wouldn't be the same. She's been splendid tonight, teaching beautifully, and everybody's gone home looking forward to tomorrow. If I tell them I'm going to teach now—oh, I couldn't bear to see their faces! They'd be so horribly disappointed. And I couldn't do it, anyway."

"If you go feeling you can't, of course you won't be able to," Joan retorted. "They have to trust you as a teacher, if you're to do any good. I wish you were two years older, Jansy! You know all the dances they're likely to want, inside out; but we can hardly ask you to take Littlejan's place. You'll help Jean, won't you, Rosalind?" and she looked anxiously at Nanta. "I'm as sorry as Marigold is to disappoint the girls, but she must come with me. Her mother would wish it."

"I'll do anything I can," Nanta said gravely. "But I feel sorry for Jean. She'll find it dreadfully hard. I think it might be better to tell the girls the class must be put off. Marigold made such a wonderful start tonight. They're expecting so much now."

"I'm sorry," Joan agreed. "But in a case like this there's no help for it. Jansy, run up and help Littlejan; there may be something you can do. Fasten her frock; do up her shoes. When she starts to dress she'll find how shaky she is. Jean, my dear, listen to me!" and she talked to Jean, earnestly and urgently.

Littlejan was, indeed, in difficulties because her fingers were trembling. Jansy rushed to her aid and unbuttoned the green frock, whispering words of comfort.

"We'll manage, Littlejan. We'll do it somehow. I'll help Jean, and we'll pull through. You mustn't even think about us; we'll be all right."

"Jansy, you angel!" Littlejan said unsteadily. "You do think I ought to go, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, rather! I'd want to go if it were John. Give John my love, and don't worry about the class. Please, Littlejan! We'll have Nanta Rose, and you know what a help she'll be. Promise you'll forget all about us!"

"I can't do that. I don't want to forget; I'll be thinking about you. If I think about Alan for all those hours in the train I shall go off my head. I'm frightened, Jan! He's so little, and mother's so far away."

“But you’re here. That’s why you’re going, isn’t it?” Jansy said wisely. “You’re the nearest person to Alan, for those old aunts in Scotland don’t know him and even mother’s only his guardian. Alastair will want you terribly badly. Remember how Rosemary had the same thing done when she was only three and how she’s all right again; keep thinking about that, Marigold!”

“You’re a real comfort, Jan! I’ll try to remember Rosemary,” Littlejan promised, as she hurried to the bathroom.

Downstairs Mary Devine was preparing a tempting supper. Littlejan found it hard to begin, but having started found herself very hungry. Joan had already had a meal, so she forced herself to talk cheerfully to Mary and Nanta, and refused to allow any discussion of the unfortunate week-end school.

“Jean and Jansy know your programme and they’ll do their best, Marigold,” she said. “Jean and I have had a talk while you’ve been upstairs, and she won’t let you down. Don’t try to give last-minute instructions; these two know what they have to do quite well.”

Jean said nothing, but kept her eyes on her plate. Jansy and Nanta glanced at her anxiously, but saw that Joan meant what she said and that talk of the morrow would not be allowed.

Jean brought the box of chocolates and handed it to Littlejan. “You’ll be glad of them in the train. We won’t want them,” she said. “We won’t be tattie-bogles tonight. We shall go to bed.”

Jansy thrust a packet of peppermints into the ex-Queen’s hand. “Some people don’t like them, but I do, and they’re very warming,” she said, in an elderly tone. “Eat them in the dark, when it’s chilly, Marigold.”

Then the car rushed away into the night, and the deserted three looked at one another and then at Mary.

“Bed!” Mary said. “At once!”

“As for tomorrow,” Jean remarked, “we may know what we have to do, as Mrs. Raymond said. The trouble is, we don’t know how we’re going to do it.”

“We’ll do it all right!” Jansy cried valiantly. “I’ll help, if you’ll let me. I know just one thing—we can’t let Marigold down.”

“Or all those girls,” Nanta added. “But it will be terribly odd without her. I feel like one of an army that’s lost its leader.”

“To think that it’s Littlejan who has been whisked away from us!” Jean groaned.

“Off to bed, all of you!” Mary commanded. “Jean, my dear, don’t look so gloomy! Once you start you’ll feel better; I’ve been through it and I know. It’s only the first few minutes that are so hard, and the time before you start. Don’t, please, lie awake all night worrying.”

“You know you’re always all right in the play, once you’ve started, Jean!” Jansy grasped this helpful idea eagerly. “It will be just the same, won’t it, Mary-Dorothy? She’ll be all right once she gets going.”

“I’m sure it will be just the same,” Mary agreed. “Jansy has given you a good thought to take to bed, Jean. You’ve acted in the Folk Play several times, and you’ve always done well. You’ll do just as well tomorrow.”

“It’s different,” Jean said heavily. “I can’t put things into words as Marigold did. I know the dances, but I can’t say them.”

“I can! I’ll tell you what to say!” Jansy cried. “Come and tell Nanta Rose about being St. Andrew in the play! I’m Dame Dolly, Rosalind, and Marigold is the Fool; she makes a

gorgeous Fool.”

But Jean shook her head and would not be comforted. She knew that her thoughts came slowly and her words more slowly still, and she was convinced that the task facing her was beyond her.

“You mustn’t think of yourself,” Joan Raymond had said. “That’s hopeless from the start. You must think of the class and how much they’re going to enjoy themselves, and of the dances and how beautiful they are, and of how you’re going to have the privilege and the honour of being the first teacher to give those girls ‘The Old Mole’ and ‘Goddesses.’ I envy you the chance! The first time of a beautiful dance is always a joyful moment for everybody. You ought to feel you’re in luck, Jean!”

But Jean had shaken her red-gold head, and though she remembered the words and appreciated the ideas, she dreaded the ordeal of the first few moments too greatly to be able to see beyond them.

She went to bed in very low spirits, looking white and tired, and would not talk to Jansy or Nanta.

Mary watched her go, feeling anxious. “She’ll lie awake worrying. She’s a shy quiet child, and it’s too much for her. I wish I could help, but the girls don’t know me; it would alter the whole affair if I butted in, and Littlejan might not like it. Besides, I’m needed here; I can’t leave everything to Gladys, and Susan Spindle won’t be fit for much for a day or two. No, I can’t push into a school affair. If Jean really can’t manage, they must send the girls home. Marigold would be disappointed, but she’s likely to have other things to think of for the next few days, poor child! Oh, I hope the little chap will pull through!”

The telephone rang, about half an hour after the girls had gone upstairs. Mary took the call, thinking it might be from Jen or Rosamund.

An unknown man’s voice spoke urgently; a Scottish voice.

Mary listened in dismay, and then ventured a remonstrance, but he would take no denial.

“Very well. I’ll tell her,” she said at last, and put down the receiver.

“That settles it! There’s no hope now; even Marigold will see that. Perhaps it’s just as well. I don’t really believe Jean would have been a success. At least this news will give her a better night. I’m glad her father didn’t wait till the morning. She has nothing to worry about now.”

And she went up to Jean’s room, relieved for her sake but disappointed for Littlejan’s and Jansy’s.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

IDEAS FROM MARY-DOROTHY

“Jean, my dear, are you awake?” Mary whispered.

After a pause Jean answered—unwillingly, it seemed. “Yes, Mary-Dorothy. Do you want me?”

Mary switched on the light. “You silly girl, you’ve been crying.”

“Not about tomorrow.” Jean defended herself. “I was thinking about Marigold. She’ll feel so bad in the train, and when they get near York and she wonders about the operation, and if—if—well, she’ll feel just terrible. I think a lot of Marigold.”

Mary closed the door softly and came to sit on the bed. “I don’t want to wake Jansy. Yes, Jean dear, I know. But we can’t help Littlejan, except by praying that she may be strong and brave, whatever happens.”

“Would that help? I’d like to do something. And—and I will try, tomorrow, to please her. I know how keen she is.”

“I’m sure it will help, if you pray for her. And she’s with Joan, you know. Joan will be very good to her, and Littlejan will be all the stronger for this terrible time. But as for tomorrow, don’t worry about that any more. We aren’t going to ask it of you, after all. I came to tell you, so that you could go to sleep.”

Jean gazed at her, round-eyed. “What’s happened? I heard the telephone. I thought perhaps it was more news.”

“It was your father, speaking from Worthing. Your brother and his wife are arriving early tomorrow, on their way to Southampton and their ship for the East. They have only three more days in England, and your mother wants you at home. Your father is calling for you in the car at ten tomorrow morning.”

“Ten!” Jean sounded dazed. “But our class starts at ten!”

“The class will have to be given up. Jansy must go and tell the girls about all these disasters.”

“Oh, gosh!” Jean said slowly, and lay thinking it over. “Marigold won’t like it,” she said at last.

“She’ll see there was nothing else to be done. I begged your father to let you stay till the evening, or even till midday, but he said it was impossible. Your mother wants you quite early.”

“Then I can’t—I won’t have to—” Jean began.

“You won’t need to face the ordeal, after all. I’m glad for your sake, though I’m sorry for the girls. It will be a big disappointment, but there’s no help for it. Now you’ll go to sleep, won’t you? You must be very tired.”

“Yes,” Jean admitted. “Thanks for telling me.” Suddenly she flushed. “If only I could have done it, and kept things going for Marigold, how bucked I would have been! But I was so frightened.”

“I saw you were. Perhaps it would have been too hard. Now go to sleep, dear.”

“Will you tell Jansy and Rosalind?”

“Not if they’re asleep. The morning will be time enough.”

She looked into Jansy's room, but found her sleeping soundly. Jansy was healthily tired out, and though she was grieved and troubled for Littlejan she knew there was nothing to be done—or she would have done it gladly. She was easy in her mind about the morning's class; she would help Jean, who would rise to the occasion, and all would be well. So Jansy went comfortably to sleep, and Mary did not disturb her.

Nanta was awake, however, and she answered Mary's whisper at once. "Is there more news, Mary-Dorothy?"

"Yes, but not from York." Mary sat by the bed and told her what had happened.

"Oh!" Nanta lay thinking it over. "I don't believe Jean would have done it well," she said at last. "And I'm sure she thought she wouldn't."

"Yes, she had no confidence in herself, and that's a bad start. It's a pity about the class, but no one could have foreseen disasters like these."

"Mary-Dorothy, why do such things happen?" Nanta shot the words at her suddenly.

"Have you been lying puzzling over that old old question? It's as ancient as the world, Rosalind. People have asked that since time began."

"And they haven't found the answer?" Nanta said slowly. "That's what you mean?"

"We shall never find the answer, in this world. We may understand some day. Sooner or later everybody asks the question. Either disasters just happen or they are sent by God."

"Yes, Mary-Dorothy." Nanta gave her a quick shy look. "Which do you think is right?"

"I think things just happen, and that it's share and share alike, for good people and bad. Things come as part of the machinery of the world, and we don't know why, or how to avoid them. The Bible says so, doesn't it? 'Rain on the just and on the unjust.' But I am very sure of one thing, Nanta dear."

Nanta gave her a smile of thanks for the friendly name. "Please tell me!"

"When troubles come, God is there, whether we have been trying to serve Him or not, ready to help us, if we will take His help, and that makes things easier to bear. They may even be good, in the end, if we have come to know Him better and to trust Him more. And if we are among those who trust Him, then when trouble comes we know He is there and we turn to Him at once for comfort. If we haven't trusted before, we have to find out that He is there; but some people know it already."

"I see," Nanta said, much interested. "I do like your ideas! Where do you find them?"

"Think a moment, Rosalind! If troubles came only to those who rebel, and those who serve were always free and happy, what would happen?"

"People would be good for what they would get."

"Exactly. And so the rain—which was a blessing in a hot country, you know—falls on good and bad alike. But when the rain happens to be trouble, God's friends call upon His help at once."

"I wonder if Marigold will think of that? I'm very keen on her, Mary-Dorothy."

"I'm glad; she's worth being keen on. Marigold will be all right; she has Joan, and she couldn't have anyone better. Joan has comforted people before now; Jen told me how much she helped her, two years ago, when she was frightened about her husband. Now, Rosalind, you must go to sleep! It's very late."

"It will be easier now. Thank you, Mary-Dorothy. I was worrying about things."

"Don't worry any more. You'll go to school with Jansy in the morning, won't you? She must go to tell the girls and send them home."

"I'll back her up all I can. Perhaps they could have a dance or two that they know, instead of going away at once."

"That would be a good plan; they'd like it. Goodnight, Rosalind!"

"Thank you, Mary-Dorothy. I'll take something home with me, when I go away from here."

"You mean, something to think about?" Mary asked, pausing at the door. "I'm glad."

"An idea," Nanta said seriously. "That's always worth while. Must I go home tomorrow? I won't be needed now."

"Won't you stay for the week-end, to cheer up Jansy and me? We'd be very lonely."

"I'd love to stay," Nanta cried. "Thank you so much!"

"Of course, you must stay. I hope you'll play to us again, even though the Club won't need you."

"Oh, I will!" Nanta assured her fervently.

When Jean appeared at breakfast in her school tunic, Jansy greeted her with an indignant shout. "*Jean!* Where's your dancing frock? You'll have to change after brekker, and it's a waste of time. What are you playing at?"

"I'm not dancing today. I'm going home," Jean said, rather gloomily. "I'm going to be whisked away from you too. I'm sorry now; perhaps it would have been fun. But I can't do anything about it. Did you know, Nanta?"

"But why? How? What do you mean?" Jansy cried, as Nanta nodded.

Jean told briefly of the late phone call. "Father's coming at ten o'clock. I'll have to go."

"Gosh!" Jansy gazed at her in dismay. Then she whirled round. "Nanta Rose, what are we going to do?"

"Go to school and send the girls home, I suppose. I'll stand by you, Janice. I'll help you to explain."

"Thanks," Jansy said, in a very small voice. "Oh, what rotten luck! How upset Littlejean will be!"

Mary came in, from answering the telephone. "That was Joan, speaking from York. There's better news; Alan has come through the operation safely and is doing well. It was only just in time to save his life. He isn't out of danger yet, but they're much more hopeful now. Joan is very glad they are there. Poor Alastair isn't very big; just Jansy's age, you know; and he was heart-broken and bewildered. He's clinging to Littlejean as if she is all he has left in life. Your John is all right, Jansy, and glad to see his mother; and Jen's boys are quite well."

"Oh, good!" Jansy said, but she sounded much subdued.

"Did Mrs. Raymond say anything about Marigold?" Nanta asked gravely. "How did she get through the night?"

"I'm thankful to say she slept after a time; she was tired out with her exciting evening. Joan made her talk about her class, and Marigold grew gradually quieter and at last fell asleep."

"That was jolly for her," Jean said. "The journey wouldn't seem so long."

"I'm thankful to say Marigold was still asleep when they reached York, and before Joan woke her she had caught sight of the headmaster, who had brought his car to fetch them, and she guessed from his face that the report was hopeful. So she was able to wake Marigold with good news."

"Oh, that was marvellous!" Nanta cried. "And Marigold escaped that dreadful last hour when they were coming nearer to York all the time; she'd have been counting the minutes till

they heard if Alan was—”

“Was still alive,” Mary agreed. “I dreaded the agony of that hour of suspense for her. She was spared it, and we may be very thankful. I’m afraid Joan had to bear it; there was no escape for her. But Joan is strong and has had more experience than Marigold.” Her eyes met Nanta’s, full of meaning.

“Mother always keeps calm. I’ve heard people say so. She doesn’t get worried or upset,” Jansy remarked.

“Or she doesn’t show it,” Mary suggested. “Now, girls, breakfast! Mr. Guthrie will be coming for Jean and she must be ready. And you others must go and send the poor disappointed dancers home.”

“You’ll bring the fiddle, won’t you, Nanta Rose?” Jansy asked pathetically. “Perhaps they’d like to have one dance, or two. You could play the ones we did last night. It would be practice for them.”

“I’ll take the fiddle, and I’ll help in any way I can,” Nanta said heartily.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE SCHOOL IS SAVED

“Shall I ring up Jenny-Wren and tell her not to call at school?” Mary asked, as Frost came round with the car. “You’ll have started for home before she’d get there, won’t you?”

Jansy, looking very downcast, exclaimed, “But she might come in time, and then we could have her pipe and Nanta Rose could dance. Don’t stop her, please, Mary-Dorothy! The girls will wait, if they think she’s coming.”

“I do want to hear that pipe again,” Nanta said wistfully.

“Oh, very well! She’s going to town for shopping, and it isn’t much out of her way,” Mary agreed.

“If Jen doesn’t ring me, I won’t tell her what has happened,” she decided. “She’d feel she must rush to help and she really hasn’t time. I expect she’ll be too busy with Chris and Barney even to talk, at this time in the morning.”

As Frost drove down the beech avenue another car raced up to the house.

“That will be the Guthrie man pig,” Jansy said sadly. “That’s the last of Jean till school starts on Tuesday, and then you’ll go away, Nanta Rose. We won’t be all together again. It is rotten luck! Wasn’t last night fun?”

“I’m afraid we’d miss Marigold dreadfully, if Jean had been still here,” Nanta said. “As you and I are left on our own it’s all so different that perhaps it won’t feel quite so bad. Do you know what I mean? I’m not sure that I know myself.”

“I do know, though.” Jansy had grasped her thought. “It’s all so different that we can’t possibly pretend it’s the same. If Jean had been here it would have been the same, but without Littlejan, and we’d have had to try to carry on, and we’d have missed her all the time.”

“That’s what I meant,” Nanta admitted. “It was clever of you to guess.”

“As it is, everything’s gone smash and we may as well get used to the idea.”

Nanta gave her a curious look, but not for worlds would she have spoken what was in her mind. If the suggestion came from the class she would back it with all her might, but it must not come from her.

“The girls will understand, when they hear what has happened,” she said. “It’s being what you might call a disastrous week-end, isn’t it? What dances did Marigold mean to take today?”

“I’ve got her list—just to make us feel a little more miserable,” Jansy groaned. “She was going to start with ‘The Old Mole’ and then ‘Goddesses’; we’d promised those two. Then, if we were getting on all right, she thought she’d try ‘Newcastle’ and ‘Hey, Boys.’ They need a lot of learning. Then for longways, ‘Spaniard’ and ‘Maids Morris’ and ‘Childgrove’; she’s keen on all those. And she was going to ask if there was anything they were particularly keen on.”

“They asked for ‘Althea’ last night,” Nanta reminded her. “Do you know it?”

“Oh, rather! We’ve done the squares for four a lot at home, when we couldn’t get bigger sets. We often have a dance when we’ve anybody to play, or if Auntie Primrose will sing for us.”

They were still talking of dances and of Marigold’s plans—Jansy mournfully, Nanta with interest—when they reached school.

“I don’t know when we’ll be ready to go home, Frost,” Jansy said. “Could you come back in half an hour or an hour?”

Frost decided that he could. He understood their disappointment and sympathised deeply, but agreed with Jansy that with the two big girls gone the remnant could not hope to do much.

“Come and get it over!” Jansy said gloomily, and she led the way indoors.

The hall was already busy with girls in gay frocks, all eager excitement for their dancing week-end.

“Here’s Lady Rosalind and the fiddle! Now we’re all right!” cried Phyl.

“Where’s Marigold, Jansy?” Tessa shouted.

“Marigold’s gone. Jean’s gone. Everybody’s gone,” Jansy proclaimed.

“*What?* Jansy, what do you mean? Rosalind, is she mad?” and the crowd closed in on them.

“No, she’s all right. We’re the miserable remnant that’s left,” Nanta explained. “We’ve had a night of disasters. Marigold’s in York, and Jean’s on her way to Worthing. Get up on the platform, Janice, and tell everybody the sad story! You can’t do it in this crowd. Those at the back can’t hear.”

Jansy protested, but the girls agreed, and she was hustled up on to the platform, where, only last night, Littlejan had held sway.

“There! Now you’re clear of the mob and you can tell us what’s happened,” Tessa commanded. “Quiet, everybody, if you want to hear.”

Jansy took a long breath and plunged at full speed into her story. The girls heard her in silence, and the silence continued when she came to a stop.

“Then we can’t do anything?” Phyl asked at last. “We’ll just have to go home?”

“Oh, we *can*!” A wail arose from the juniors.

“Everybody will rag us on Tuesday, if we don’t have the school, after all,” somebody shouted.

“Not when you tell them what happened. Nobody would,” Nanta said quickly.

Tessa spoke up. “We needn’t go home just this minute. We could practise those dances we did last night, if you’d play for us, Rosalind.”

“Of course I will. It’s a very good idea,” and Nanta opened her case, a little smile playing about her lips; things were going as she had hoped. Perhaps all would yet be well. But the idea must come from the girls, and Phyl and Tessa were the leaders.

“No, you stay up there and watch us, Jansy Raymond,” Phyl cried, as Jansy leapt down to find a partner. “There should be somebody to tell us where we go wrong. We’d like to try ‘Sticks,’ too; we were arguing about it when you came in.”

“But I want to dance!” Jansy argued.

“You must do what will help most,” Nanta pointed out. “It’s what Marigold would want. You’ll do anything to please her, Janice—you know you will.”

“Well, they’re to call me Janice, then!” Jansy raged. “If they’re going to spoil my dancing they might at least do that! You always remember!”

“Yes, they ought to do that. Tessa, she’ll watch and tell you if you go wrong,” Nanta said. “I can’t do it while I’m playing, and there ought to be somebody. But do remember to call her Janice. It’s only fair.”

Tessa grinned. “Right! I hate being called Tess, so I can sympathise. But don’t start calling me Theresa! Janice, if you’ll really keep an eye on us we’ll do any mortal thing you want.”

“Oh, all right!” Jansy grumbled. “But I’d rather dance. Well, be careful of that lead down the middle. You know how Marigold went on about it.”

Nanta was playing “Haste to the Wedding,” softly but enticingly.

“Whoops! Let’s have an hour, anyway, with Jansy Raymond as M.C. Oh, sorry! Janice, I mean!”

“Please be careful!” Janice said haughtily.

“That all right?” Phyl asked, at the end.

“Not too bad. Much better than it was,” Janice retorted. “But it’s frightfully hard to look on.”

“Couldn’t we try ‘Sticks’?” Phyl pleaded. “We’re not sure of the second figure.”

“Oh, well!” Jansy resigned herself to her fate. “Let’s see it, then! I’ll take care of you!”

There was a laugh, for she looked small standing on the big platform.

“I suppose what they say is true, and you’ve been dancing since before you could walk?” Tessa asked.

“Nearly,” Jansy admitted, with a laugh. “But not quite before I walked, you know.” Suddenly she assumed her mother’s teaching manner. “Sets of six, please. Let’s see how much you remember.”

The girls laughed again and sprang to form sets. Jansy watched their efforts with widening eyes, and at the end of the second figure she called to Nanta to stop, and let herself go, as the sets ended in wild confusion.

“Awful! Simply awful! What a ghastly mess! Even the first figure was a scramble, but you had some idea of what you were supposed to be doing. I don’t believe you had any idea at all in the second figure. I think you’d better walk it, and I’ll tell you what it ought to be.”

Meekly the class walked the movements under her direction, while Nanta, nursing her violin, watched with delight and understanding.

“How clearly she puts it! Jean couldn’t have done it; she might even have muddled them more. Jansy not only knows, but she can say what she knows. This is going to be fun! I’m beginning to be not so sorry that Marigold was whisked away from us!”

“Now let’s have the music. And, I say, don’t skip the crossings in the first figure. It’s running step,” Jansy said, far too much interested to remember the astounding fact that she was teaching.

The dance began again, and above the tune rose her clear little voice—“Running, everybody! No skipping in this figure. Start again, please, Nanta Rose!”

“She forgot Rosalind,” Nanta grinned.

Then, suddenly, Jansy was shouting—“Stop! Stop! I *will not have* those crossings skipped!”

The girls stared up at her. “She was dancing with rage,” Tessa told Littlejan, when she described the scene later on.

“It looks awful! Tessa, you skipped the whole figure, and Phyl too. And I’d *told* you, ever so many times,” Jansy wailed.

“Oh, sorry!” Tessa said awkwardly. “I didn’t know I was doing it wrong.”

“It’s a very skippy tune,” Phyl ventured.

Nanta smiled and waited to hear what the small teacher would say. She knew what Virginia would have said.

“Yes, it is,” Jansy admitted. “But—don’t you see? You skip all through the other two figures. You can’t do the whole dance alike; there’d be no contrast. You want differences in

the figures; a quiet one to start with, and then working up the excitement in the middle and at the end.”

And Nanta smiled again, well satisfied.

“What a good idea!” Phyl exclaimed. “I see it now. I’ll never skip that first figure again!”

“Please don’t! It looks so dreadful,” Jansy begged. “I say, everybody, I’m sorry I yelled at you, but I had told you at least four times.”

“You were completely justified in yelling,” Tessa said solemnly. “And it made a big impression on us. I’d no idea you could shriek and dance with rage like that. None of us will ever skip that figure now. May we try again?”

“Please do,” Jansy said humbly, much ashamed of her outburst.

“Am I being very awful, Nanta Rose?” she asked, under cover of the music.

“No, it’s all right. They like it, but don’t overdo it,” Nanta murmured. “And if you could manage not to call me Nanta Rose in public, I’d be glad.”

Jansy grew scarlet. “I’m sorry. But it is so pretty. I’ll try to remember to call you Rosalind.”

“Was that better, Janice?” Tessa called.

“Much better. It looked jolly fine. It’s a lovely dance when it goes smoothly,” Jansy said. “I sort of hate to see it messed up. Do you remember the last figure?”

“The sheepskin hey,” Phyl said promptly. “We can do that. It is skipping, isn’t it?”

“Rather!” Jansy gave her a friendly grin. “You couldn’t get round unless you skipped. Oh, jolly good! Yes, you do know that. You can’t very well forget it, once you really know it, but people are sometimes careless and go to sleep in the middle, and then of course it ends in a mess. Now what about going all through?”

“That was good,” Nanta said, at the end. “Now they’d better have a rest.”

“Frost will be coming soon.” Jansy glanced at the clock. “I suppose we’d better all go home. It’s been rather fun, hasn’t it?”

“I don’t think they’ll let us go home,” Nanta observed. “Look at Tessa whispering to Phyl! They’re up to something. They’ll ask for something else.”

Jansy gave her a startled look. “But—”

“I say, Janice!” and Tessa came forward. “Couldn’t you carry on? You know all the dances, and you put things so plainly.”

Jansy stared at her, her colour rising. “Do you mean, do another dance before you go home? We could have ‘The Old Mole.’”

“We aren’t going home,” said Phyl, coming up to the platform. “We’re going on with the school, till Monday night, and you’re going to teach us all the dances on Marigold’s list.”

Nanta in the background watched with interest, as Jansy’s face blazed in incredulous delight.

“You don’t mean that you’d let me teach, really in earnest? Would you put up with me? I say! *Wouldn’t* Littlejan be pleased? We could have the school, after all!”

“You think she ought to carry on, don’t you?” Tessa looked at Nanta.

“Of course I do. I’m sure she can do it. I was hoping you’d think of it, though I couldn’t suggest it,” Nanta said heartily.

“Nanta Rose, how lovely of you!” Jansy cried.

“Then you will? And we can have the school?” Tessa gave a shout.

“I’d simply love it!” Jansy gave an answering shout. “But I never dreamt you’d put up with me! I don’t feel half good enough.”

“Tell us things as we go along,” Phyl urged. “Like that about why the first figure mustn’t be skipped. We saw it as soon as you said it, but we’d never have thought of it for ourselves. We like to be told the reason for things.”

“You teach jolly well,” Tessa added, looking down at her in an appreciative way. “You make it so clear.”

“Oh, that’s mother! I’ve watched her teaching—not only the Club, but her W.I. classes. She takes me with her in the holidays; she says—‘It may be useful to you some day, and I may need you to make up a set.’ I’ve seen how she explains things.”

“You’ve picked up a lot from her. Give us something new—that ‘Old Mole’ thing! We’ll love you for ever, if you’ll save us from having to give it all up and go home.”

Jansy, radiant, sprang to the desk and rang the bell.

“Take your partners for ‘The Old Mole’! Sets of six, longways; like in ‘Picking up Sticks.’ Play the tune, please, Nanta Rose!”

“The school is saved!” Tessa said dramatically. “I say, Janice! The Club’s motto—‘To be or not to be.’ We’ve answered the question today, haven’t we?”

Jansy laughed delightedly. “Rosalind and I came thinking the class was not to be, but it’s going to be, after all. Good idea, Tessa!”

“We’re living up to our motto. It’s very much ‘To be’.” And Tessa ran to find a place in a set.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

JANSY'S DAY

Jansy, teaching "The Old Mole," glanced at Nanta, as something in the music caught her attention. Presently she called to the girls to stop.

"We'll go as far as that, from the beginning. There are some things I want to tell you; you asked me to tell you things! In the corner movement, go forward to meet your corner person quietly and fall back more quietly still; then swoosh across and change places. The crossing is the big thing; the meeting is just to prepare you. It's the same in the arches; a quiet forward and back and a big cross-over. Don't make it all the same."

"That's rather jolly. May we try it?" asked musical Phyl.

"That's the sort of thing we like to know," Tessa added.

"Yes, but it's not my idea," Jansy said honestly. "I've heard mother teach it like that, but I'd forgotten. Rosalind played it for you, just like that, and it reminded me. Will you let them hear what I mean, Nanta Rose?" and she looked at Nanta.

"They'll all be calling me that, if she goes on," Nanta murmured, as she played the tune quietly and put in the strong accent on the last two phrases.

"Oh, I see! I'm afraid I wasn't listening," Phyl admitted. "That makes it much easier."

"What is it you call Rosalind?" Tessa demanded. "You've got some private name for her."

"There's one other thing," Jansy said hurriedly, as Nanta gave her a reproachful look. "When you're doing arches, don't swing up your arms in the first bit, the forward and back. Just let them do what they want to do; they won't go away up to your heads! Lead forward naturally, and then raise your arms when you come to the arch. There's some point in it then."

Tessa grinned. "Right you are! I do like to know the reason for things. Shall we try it?"

"We don't want to see waving arms all over the place," Jansy retorted. "But we do want to see the arches. Let's go as far as the lines, and remember those points. The next bit's rather hard; you'll need to walk it. It's like a hyphen, between the first and second halves of the dance."

Under the compelling impulse of Nanta's playing, the phrasing of the dance began to appear, and Phyl was loud in her delight.

"It really does help when you play it like that," she said, coming to the platform to thank Nanta. "I feel we're dancing to the music; expressing it, you know."

"You do feel that in 'The Old Mole,'" Nanta assented. "I love playing it for a class who respond."

"What does Jansy Raymond call you?" Tessa asked.

"You'd better call her Janice, or she may go home in a rage," Nanta remarked.

"I'm sorry. I'll remember. But do tell us your other name!"

"It's only a silly thing I've been called sometimes."

"A nickname? Tell us, Rosalind!" Tessa coaxed.

"Nanta Rose," the victim said desperately.

"Oh! But where do you get Nanta from? Not Rosalind Rose?"

"That would be heavy," Nanta retorted. "I'll tell you later—perhaps. Janice wants to talk to me; about the next dance, I expect. You'd better go and rest, or you'll be dead by the afternoon."

Jansy caught her arm and drew her to the back of the platform. "Have I let you in for something? Were they teasing?" she asked anxiously. "I was afraid I had; I'm sorry. But this is important, Rosalind. Do they really want to go on all day? For Frost's waiting; I heard him toot on the horn. We must send him home."

"And he must tell Mary-Dorothy not to expect us. You'd better ask them, but I'm sure they want you to stay."

Jansy rang the bell on the desk. "It feels fearfully cheeky, but it's the only way to get them quiet. Hamlet Clubbers! Do you really want to stay till six, as we planned at first? For our car's outside and we must send it home."

"We'll send it home!" There was an eager shout. "Oh, yes! We're going on; it's great sport! Please carry on, Janice!"

"I'll tell our man, then. I want to send a message. Rosalind, there's another thing; Frost can wait a minute longer. What are we going to do for lunch and tea? We didn't expect to need any grub. The girls have all brought theirs," Jansy said, in a hurried undertone.

"If we don't eat, we shall both faint during the afternoon," Nanta agreed. "Shall we take round a plate and ask for a sandwich from each of them?"

"We'd do fairly well," Jansy grinned. "There are twenty of them! No, we'll rush out to the dairy at the corner. It's a jolly place; I've often been, and mother used to go when she was at school. The people know all about us. Have you any money?"

"Not a penny. I never expected to need any. Could we borrow from Tessa? It's no worse than going round begging for bread."

Jansy giggled. "Oh, Nanta Rose! It sounds like somebody in the street, with a hat! No, I'll borrow half a crown from Frost. Will that be enough for two of us?"

"Jansy! You can't ask the chauffeur for money!"

"He's not just the chauffeur. He's a real pal, and he's been at the Hall since I was born, more or less. Of course I can ask him! He's a great friend of mine." And Jansy was gone, pulling on her big coat and racing across the playground in her dancing slippers.

"Frost, we're going back to our first plan. Will you come for us at six? Please tell Mary-Dorothy the girls wanted us to carry on; she'll understand. And—oh, Frost! Could you lend me half a crown? We didn't expect to need any lunch, and we'll have to go out to that little shop."

Frost, all one broad grin, fumbled in his pockets.

"Well now, Miss Jansy, if I haven't come out without a penny! Isn't that bad luck?"

Jansy eyed him in an agony of suspense. "Frost, you're pulling my leg, aren't you?" she pleaded. "You couldn't come out penniless; men always have money! If you really haven't any, we'll need to take round a plate and beg for sandwiches from the girls."

Frost shouted with laughter at this sad picture, and tucked two half-crowns into her hand. "There's her little ladyship too. One half-crown isn't enough. Will that do?"

"Oh, I love you, Frost! That's marvellous! I'll give it back to you tonight. Thanks just awfully much!" Jansy cried, radiant.

Frost grinned and touched his cap and drove away, and Jansy ran back to the hall, her wealth wrapped carefully in her handkerchief. She laid it beside the bell and whispered loudly, "Five shillings, Nanta Rose! He shrieked with laughter, but he was pleased. We'll be able to buy cakes for tea."

"I was looking forward to going round with a plate, begging for sandwiches," Nanta murmured.

“These people have rested long enough. I’m going to ask if they’d like to do ‘Althea,’” Jansy said defiantly.

“Don’t you think we ought to stick to Marigold’s programme?”

But Nanta’s remonstrance was lost. Jansy, striking the bell, addressed her class, as they sprang up, eager to start again.

“Somebody said something last night about ‘Althea’; that’s the dance with the three jumps instead of the set and turn single. It’s not on Marigold’s list, but she put at the bottom—‘Anything specially asked for.’ I know ‘Althea,’ and if I find I can’t put it into words, I can come down and show you what I mean. Would you like to do ‘Althea’?”

“Oh, rather! It looked different, and ever so jolly,” cried more than one would-be dancer.

“Right! Then squares for four, please. Turn your sets this way, everybody; shoulders to the platform, not backs; that’s right. This is what you do, instead of set-and-turn,” and Jansy demonstrated the hop and swing across of the free foot and the three little springs off both feet at once. “Now practise that. Jump on to the right foot first, or it will all go wrong; your right toe must be in front for the jumps. Watch that again; I’ll do it with the music. Thanks, Nanta Rose!”

Nanta played the first phrase. “Everybody in the room heard her that time. She’s a brat,” she said to herself, but could not protest to the enthralled Jansy and the delighted class.

At the glass door Jen Marchwood stood watching. “Pretty kid! She has a lovely step and movement. But what’s the meaning of this? Mary-Dorothy said Jansy and Rosalind had come to send the girls away, when I rang her up. This looks extremely like a class! Surely Jansy hasn’t taken on the Marigold School?”

“Now try that, everybody, and I’ll tell you if you’re doing it nicely.” Jansy’s voice rang out, though she was a little breathless.

“I say! What fun!” and Jen kept well out of sight and settled down to watch. “People told me how well she taught at that party, the night the boys were born; I was sorry to have missed it. Apparently I’m to have a demonstration all to myself. She’s going round criticising and advising; doing it kindly, too, by the way they look. Nobody seems to mind being told off, and there are two quite large girls over there. Oh, I can’t interrupt this! She’s back on the platform; I must see the first figure!”

She watched and listened in delight as Jansy gave clear simple directions, and made her class listen to the tune and walk the movements.

“I love Rosalind’s playing,” Jen whispered. “They can’t help dancing well to such music. Now they’re going to try it.”

“No, *no!*” Jansy was shouting above the violin. “The first time you honour across the set; you’ve lost your partner! If you’d think a second, you’d see why. Only two people have crossed over and they weren’t a couple, so the person next to you now is another man or another woman. You don’t want to honour anybody of your own sex! It would be silly. Tessa, you’re dancing as a man; you’ve crossed over, and that’s another man beside you. Honour the woman you changed places with—the hops and jumps are the honour, in this dance. Then when your partner crosses to you, you must honour her. Do you see that?”

“I do, now you’ve explained,” Tessa grinned. “I didn’t realise this small person was a man. Oh, I don’t want to waste honours on another man!”

“And Phyl, being your woman, doesn’t want to waste honours on a woman, who has crossed over to her side,” Jansy pointed out.

“Certainly not!” Phyl said promptly. “This is a man opposite to me? Then I’ll jump at him. Couldn’t we wear something to show what we are?”

“Half of us might have come in gymmies,” somebody suggested.

“No, you must remember,” Jansy said severely. “We used to wear bonnets when we were women, but I don’t suppose anyone remembered to bring one. *I* didn’t! It would be a great help in ‘Althea’. Now try it again, and remember whether people are men or women.”

This time the figure went smoothly, and Jansy went on to the second, with its solo for first and then second couple, and threw in a word of explanation in passing as to how to tell which was first couple in a square for four.

“Remember that. You’ll find it useful, when you do ‘Lady in the Dark’,” she said.

At the end of the dance Jen pushed open the door and stalked in. “What’s all this? I thought the school was to be given up?”

“Aunty Jen!” Jansy hurled herself from the platform, scarlet and shy. “We forgot you said you’d come. Oh, I say! We could have borrowed from you! We needn’t have begged five bob from Frost, after all!”

This red herring was not enough to draw Jen from the trail. She put aside the reference to Frost for future questioning, and demanded explanations.

“What’s going on here? You seem to be teaching these people.”

“They asked me,” Jansy cried. “None of us wanted to go home!”

“We begged her to take the school instead of Marigold, Lady Marchwood.” Tessa spoke up. “She’s doing it awfully well. You don’t mind, do you?”

Jen eyed her. “I don’t know you. Are you new?”

“New this term, like all of us. We’re fearfully keen to know as much as the rest of the Club, but we want to learn things properly, not be pulled through at parties, without knowing what we’re doing, or why we’re doing it.”

“Sensible people!” Jen commented.

“Janice tells us why,” Phyl added. “She always has reasons for the things she says.”

Jen turned and looked at Jansy. “And how does she know all the reasons?”

Jansy flushed. “I’ve heard mother tell people why to do things, and it seemed sensible. They’re more likely to remember.”

“Much more likely. Jansy Raymond, you’re a brick!” Jen said solemnly.

Jansy grew scarlet. “It’s really mother who’s taking the class. I only tell them what I’ve heard her say.”

“All the same, you’re a brick and very plucky,” Jen insisted. “Are you going to carry on all day?”

“And on Monday,” Tessa exclaimed.

“We might find somebody to help on Monday—”

“Oh, but we want Janice! We’re used to her now!” There was a chorus from the class.

“And you like being taught by her?” Jen asked.

“Rather! We’re having a marvellous time.”

Jen laughed. “Then nobody must butt in. Janice, I take off my hat to you and Rosalind. By the way, people, don’t forget that you’re in luck. Your music is quite beautiful, and it helps your dancing no end. You’re having a good start from Lady Rosalind. Now I can’t stay very long. Would you like one dance to my little pipe?”

“Oh, please!” A shout went up, led by Nanta.

“Rosalind and Jansy must dance. I’m sure they’re pining to join in.” Jen stepped up on to the platform.

“I’m dying to do ‘The Old Mole.’ I’ve been playing it all morning,” Nanta confessed.

“Has Jansy been teaching ‘The Old Mole’? Good for her! Jansy, could they do ‘The Old Mole’ for Rosalind? And you’d like to dance yourself?”

“I’ll sit out!” There were instant offers from every side.

“We’ll have it twice,” Jen announced. “You two large people sit out the first time. You’re old enough to learn a lot by watching, now that you know the movements. Then you shall go in and two of the kiddies shall rest. Jansy, if you and Rosalind would be second women in different sets you could help the rest, and it’s an honourable position, in ‘The Old Mole.’”

“I know. I made Phyl and Tessa be second women. They thought I was mad, because their men were littler than they were, but they saw the point afterwards.”

Jen gave her a glance of amused respect and then looked at the class. “You should stick to Jansy as a teacher. She knows all the useful tips.”

“We want to stick to her!” the class responded gaily.

“Even if she does dance with rage at times,” Nanta remarked.

“Oh?” Jen raised her brows. “What were they doing to make her do that?”

“Skipping the crossings in ‘Sticks.’ I’d told them four times and they still went on skipping. I couldn’t bear it.” Jansy defended herself sturdily.

Jen laughed. “I forgive you! Now, everybody, ‘The Old Mole!’”

“I’m afraid they’ll mess it up,” Jansy said doubtfully. “They need the movements called out, and you can’t do it while you’re piping.”

“I can *not*! You’ll call for your set and Rosalind for hers, and the middle set must listen to both of you. Dancers! Introduction; go to men’s wall, and women’s. Then corners, arches four times, and corners home to places. Lines figure—the hard one; be careful there. Men’s hey, women’s hey, everybody’s hey twice and cast off twice. Skip all the last half of the dance. Ready?” and the tune rang out from the wooden pipe.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

NANTA ROSE AND THE SCHOOL

The class crowded round to examine the pipe, Nanta in the forefront. Jen sat on the edge of the platform and explained and demonstrated. Then she piped “We won’t go Home till Morning” and “Butterfly,” which the girls had danced at parties, and insisted on seeing “Ruffy Tufty.”

“What other dances are on your programme, Jansy?” she asked.

“‘Goddesses’ and ‘Newcastle’ are the important ones; and some longways.”

“Think you can manage ‘Newcastle’?”

“I’m sure I can,” Jansy said valiantly.

“Good for you! I should leave out the heys of ‘Goddesses.’ You’ll only muddle your class, after ‘The Old Mole’. What about ‘Hey, Boys’? That’s a useful dance.”

“Oh yes! That was on the list. Littlejan said they might ask for things too; and they asked for ‘Althea’.”

“You did it jolly well. But what’s this about borrowing money from Frost?”

Jansy reddened. “He’s nice; I knew he wouldn’t mind, and he didn’t. He roared with laughter and lent me twice as much as I’d asked for. We didn’t bring any lunch, as we never meant to stay all day. We knew we couldn’t carry on without anything to eat.”

“We were going to take round a plate and beg for bread. One sandwich from each of the class,” Nanta said. “I was looking forward to it, but Janice thought of Frost and she said the dairy would be better.”

“I asked him for half a crown, but he said we’d better have five shillings, because of her little ladyship.” Jansy grinned at Nanta. “He thinks Rosalind needs a lot.”

“Frost’s a lamb, and a treasure. Mind you pay him back quickly. I’ll stand you your lunch; yes, I’d like to. You mustn’t be out of pocket, after being so noble to the class. Settle up with Frost, and I’ll give you the five bob tomorrow. Now I must go; my babes will be howling for their lunch. Do you know what I’d like more than anything? One little dance to Lady Rosalind’s fiddle. Her music’s so delightful, and I didn’t dance at that party. What do these people know?”

“‘Haste to the Wedding’; ‘Meeting Six’. We’ve done them both this morning. Marigold taught them last night,” Jansy said breathlessly. “Nothing will go wrong in those two. Oh, dance with me, Aunt Jen!”

Jen smiled at Nanta, who nodded and took up her violin. “May I have the pleasure, Miss Raymond?”

When the two dances were over she went off, waving her hand gaily, and the class settled down to further practice of “Althea” and then to learn “Goddesses.”

When Jen’s family, large and small, were fed and happy, she rushed to the telephone and called up the Hall.

“Mary-Dorothy! I know you’re puzzled; Frost couldn’t tell you very much. My dear, Jansy’s taking that class, and she’s doing it beautifully! She might be her own mother; Joan always was rather special as a teacher and Jansy’s just her over again. All Joan’s little ways; her very voice and tone! It was priceless to watch. Except when she danced with rage, as they assure me she did, when they insisted on skipping the first figure of ‘Sticks’; I’m quite certain

Joan never did that! Jansy hasn't learned Joan's calm restraint yet, but she's very young! And they're all so thrilled and happy. They won't have anybody butting in to help on Monday; Jansy's to do it all—it's to be her school. Rosalind is backing her up and playing beautifully, and she looks so bright and jolly; she's enjoying every minute of it. I wish she'd go back to school for a term or two! It would do her all the good in the world. She looks years younger already; she grew up too early. I believe her big sister wanted her to have another year, but she couldn't persuade her. But about the Marigold School! Jansy has taught them 'The Old Mole,' and taught it really well. I could see that when they danced it to the pipe. And she'd plunged into 'Althea,' because somebody asked for it. I wish I was eleven and eligible for the class!"

Mary asked a question, and Jen grinned at the telephone.

"They'd thought of that, before I arrived. They hadn't a penny between them, so they'd borrowed half a crown from Frost, and he made them take five shillings, so that there would be enough for her little ladyship. Isn't he a dear? But he always has been. They'll go to the dairy, where Joan used to lecture me for my good when I was Jansy's age. They'll be all right there, and they'll take in cakes for tea; the school is giving them an urn of tea, and cocoa at lunch for all who want it. Our two will have milk and eggs, and a quiet half-hour away from the crowd; I'm glad about that, for I really think it's rather much for them. If Jansy doesn't sleep at night you must give her hot milk and an aspirin, and she can sleep all tomorrow. She's terribly thrilled, of course. I envy her; *I* never did anything like this when I was under thirteen! Now I'm going to tell the thrilling tale to Maid and Rosamund. They know about Littlejan and Jean being whisked away, I suppose?"

"I told them and said Jansy and Rosalind had gone to school to send the girls home," Mary replied.

"And to say the school was off. It's anything but off! I'll tell them it's very much on!" and Jen presently called up the Castle and The Pallant to tell her story over again.

"Now you'd better have lunch," Jansy said firmly to her class. "I'm sure Rosalind is done in with all that hard fiddling, and I'm not feeling too bright myself. We didn't bring any eats, as we only meant to stay for an hour, so we're going to race round to the dairy; but we won't be long."

"Oh, stay and have some of ours! We've heaps!"

Nanta smiled into her fiddle-case, as Jansy replied airily,

"The dairy will be better. We'll have tea with you. Thanks all the same! Come on, Nanta Rose!"

"They want to know why you call me that," Nanta said reproachfully, as they went out together. "You shriek at your class for not remembering, but you aren't too good at it yourself."

"I am sorry!" Jansy said contritely. "But there's so much to think of today. I've left out half the things I ought to have told them."

"You've told them quite enough about those dances. They couldn't remember any more. I think it's a mistake to say too much."

Jansy glanced up at her. "You've watched Lady Virginia teaching. Am I doing it properly? I'm trying to be like mother."

"You're doing it beautifully," Nanta assured her. "It's just right. But don't overdo it. Don't overload their poor minds!"

"I see. No, I won't. Thanks, Nanta Rose!"

Nanta grinned, but kept back any further protest. "The kid has enough to think about. I mustn't overload her mind, either," she said to herself. "Do you know what I'm going to do, Janice? I want to run across to that paper-shop and buy two newspapers, and we'll read while we eat. It will rest our tired minds, and our voices. I'm sure your throat must ache! We won't talk at all."

"Oh, good idea!" Jansy cried. "Bring me something with Births, Deaths, and Marriages! I like to read the names of the new babies. Sometimes you can find little stories, like two sisters getting married on the same day, or a husband and wife dying close together. I always think that's rather nice for them; the one who was left behind would feel so lonely. Sometimes there are sad stories, like a mother having a baby in one column and dying in the next, and you wonder what the father will do. And I like the ones that say—'A brother for Mary and Ann and Jane.' It's so nice for them to have a boy at last. Here's one of dear Frost's half-crowns."

They ate their lunch in silence, and at the end Jansy proclaimed, "I've had a lovely rest! I'm quite ready to start again. What about you, Nanta Rose? Can you go on fiddling?"

"Oh, rather! I can always go on playing."

"Then let's choose a bag of cakes for tea, and some chocolate, and scoot back to school. They'll be waiting for us."

"What's the chocolate for? You can't treat the whole crowd on one half-pound packet!"

"I'm not going to treat them. They ought to treat us. The chocolate's for Frost," Jansy explained. "He's very fond of chocolate, and he was so extremely kind in obliging us with the five shillings."

"Oh, I see! It's a good idea," Nanta agreed, much amused.

Tea, after two more happy hours, with "Hey, Boys" and "Newcastle" as new work, was a jolly meal. Tessa presided at the urn, refusing to let Jansy do anything but rest; and Phyl brought cups of tea to her and Nanta.

"We're frightfully grateful to you two," she said earnestly. "We'd have felt horribly flat if we'd had to go home."

"It's been fun, if you people don't mind. It's nice of you to put up with me," Jansy said, colouring a little.

"Marigold will be pleased," Nanta remarked. "She was terribly disappointed at having to go away, and when she hears about Jean she'll just—"

"Foam at the mouth," Phyl suggested. "I hope they'll tell her at the same time what a heroine Janice has been."

Tessa came from the tea-urn. "Now tell us why Janice calls you that odd name, Rosalind! Nanta Rose, wasn't it?"

Nanta flushed, but spoke out sturdily. "Have you any other name besides Theresa?"

"I don't like being Theresa," Tessa laughed, seeing the point, "and my second name is worse. It's Julia, and I loathe it with all my heart."

"Then you'll understand," Nanta said. "My second name is Atalanta."

"Gosh! Really? Rosalind Atalanta?"

"That's it. My sisters aren't much older than I am, and when I was a baby they could only say Nanta. I was never called Rosalind till I went to school. Nanta Rose is a sort of nickname, made out of both my names. Janice can't remember it's only meant for home."

"Oh, but it's so pretty! I agree with Janice," Tessa said.

"I thought perhaps it was for the countess, like all the Rose babies that are scattered about the countryside—Dorothy Rose and Shirley Rose and Jillian Rose," Phyl suggested.

“No, it isn’t my real name. Don’t use it too much, please. Now and then I can bear it, but you ought to call me Rosalind. Aunt Rosamund is very anxious for me to get used to it. I didn’t like it at first,” Nanta admitted. “I wanted to go on being just Nanta. It’s very odd, but since I came here—since last night—I don’t mind so much. Nanta does seem a kiddy name. I wouldn’t like all of you to call me that.”

“But Nanta Rose is fascinating!” Tessa insisted.

“I like Rosalind,” said Phyl. “I say, won’t you think in earnest about coming to school? How old are you?”

“Seventeen in March.” Nanta’s face was thoughtful.

“Just right for the Cookery Class! Oh, do come! We’d like to have you!”

“We’d feel Lady Kentisbury had come back to us,” Tessa remarked.

“I don’t know,” Nanta said slowly, a far-away look in her eyes. “My eldest sister—Virginia, who was M.C. at that party—is being married in the spring, and we haven’t decided yet what’s going to become of me. It might be possible, if I was very keen.”

“You’d like to come to school with us!” Phyl hinted. “Tessa and I aren’t Cookeries yet; we’re only just sixteen. But we mean to go in for it next year, so if you came for the two-year course we’d be together for part of the time.”

“Aunt Jen can tell you about it, Rosalind,” said Jansy encouragingly. “She was a Cookery for a little while.”

“Perhaps I’ll talk to her,” Rosalind said gravely. “What are we going to do after tea?”

“Longways, to have a rest from figures, and some of the easy little things that we’re always having at parties; these people haven’t learnt them properly. ‘Pleasures of the Town’ and the ‘Yorkshire Square Eight’; things like that.”

The last hour’s dancing was very gay and carefree, and Jansy flung herself from the platform and joined in, as soon as she saw they were sure of the movements.

“I’ve been dying to dance all day,” she assured the rest. “But I didn’t dare, in those hard dances. You needed me to call out all the time.”

“It is a shame,” Phyl cried, seeing this side of the matter suddenly. “Your own dancing has been spoiled!”

“Only postponed,” Jansy retorted. “I shall dance all through the party on Monday night. You’re quite sure you want me to go on teaching on Monday?”

“Oh, rather! Don’t let us down now!”

“All right! I won’t,” Jansy laughed happily.

“We can have the party, then?” Tessa asked. “I was afraid perhaps as Mrs. Raymond couldn’t be here—”

“Mother isn’t our only M.C., though I will say this for her, she’s a jolly good one,” Jansy said. “We’ll ask the countess to come, and perhaps some of the others.”

At sound of a horn outside she called “last time” hurriedly, and ran to Nanta. “Be quick, Nanta Rose! We mustn’t keep Frost waiting again; he’ll think he’s spending all Saturday at the school gate!”

They packed up and raced away, followed by farewell shouts of thanks.

“See you on Monday!” Jansy waved her hand. “Oh, Frost! We had a lovely lunch—poached eggs on toast, and coffee, and cream buns—and all thanks to you! You were so kind!”

“Was it a good lunch to dance on, Miss Jansy?” Frost asked, as he drove cautiously through the traffic and then sped away towards the hills.

“We weren’t dancing, worse luck! Lady Rosalind’s been playing for us all day; and there was nobody to teach, so I had to do it.” Jansy tried to speak carelessly and to keep the elation out of her voice.

“Did you now?” He looked at her with amused respect.

“They were mostly little kids. Two were big, but they were awfully sweet to me. We’ve had a marvellous time and done heaps of work, but I haven’t had much dancing. All the same, I’m as tired as if I’d danced all day; it’s very odd!” Jansy said, in a tone of surprise.

“I don’t think it’s odd. You were dancing with them all the time, in your mind,” Nanta said. “I could see that.”

“Perhaps I was. Frost, this is for you,” and Jansy produced the packet of chocolate. “Because you were so frightfully kind and helpful. And thank you again, very much indeed, from both of us.”

“Thank you, Frost,” Nanta said sedately.

“Thank you very much, Miss Jansy. Thank you, my lady,” Frost said, touched and amused.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

MARY-DOROTHY'S NEW BOOK

"Bravo, Jansy!" Mary met them in the doorway, with welcoming light streaming out to greet them. "Jen told me of your great adventure. How did it go, Rosalind?"

"Really well, Mary-Dorothy. She teaches beautifully; I know, for I've watched Virginia teaching."

"They seemed quite happy," Jansy said, trying not to sound too elated.

"I'm sure they were happy, and very grateful to you both. Now would it be a treat to tumble into a hot bath and then have supper in bed, and after it an hour with a book?"

"May I really read in bed? I'd love it!"

"For this once," Mary told her. "I'll lend you the proofs of my new book, if you'd like to have them."

"Oh, whoops! How gorgeous! You are kind, Mary-Dorothy!"

"Run along and get into a dressing-gown and have your bath, and I'll see about the rest of the programme. Will you do the same, Rosalind? Or will you have supper with me downstairs?"

"I'll do that, thank you, Mary-Dorothy."

"Good! I've been alone all day. I'll be glad to have company and to hear your story of the adventure."

"And then I shall help you to wash up," Nanta added. "I'm tired, but not very tired."

"Not too tired to tell me about how clever Jansy has been." Mary smiled.

"No, not too tired for that," and Nanta smiled back at her.

The phone rang as they were finishing supper. Mary was shut in with it for what seemed a long while; then she hurried to the room where Jansy lay in luxurious ease, propped up with pillows and deep in the story, only the light over the bed switched on, the excitements of the day forgotten.

"Jansy, your mother wants to speak to you. Come quickly; here are your slippers."

Jansy leapt out of bed. "Mother? Where is she?"

"In York, of course. You'll hear her all right; her voice is very clear."

Jansy rushed to the telephone. "Mother! Oh, Mother dear, how nice of you! How is Alan?"

"Doing well. Mary has just told me what you've been up to; my dear, how simply splendid!"

"Are you pleased?" Jansy's voice had a touch of shyness.

"I'm delighted! It was very plucky; I'm proud of you. Did you enjoy yourself?"

"Oh, rather! Yes, Mother, I did; it was fun. And they seemed to like it."

"Then you did the job well. Congratulations! I shall have a grown-up daughter in no time!"

"Mother, it was you who took the class, really, not me. I only said everything I thought you would say."

"I shall tell Littlejan the story and she'll speak to you tomorrow. I've sent her to bed early, for she had a bad time last night, so she had better not hear anything so thrilling till the morning. Now this call is going to cost me a small fortune, so I'll ring off. Are you feeling rested, and very happy?"

“Yes, rather, frightfully fit and jolly. Thank you so much, Mother. I’ll feel better still, now I know you’re pleased.”

“I’m delighted, and very proud,” Joan said again. “Go back to bed and sleep well, and have a good rest tomorrow.”

“Oh, I will! Give my love to Marigold. Goodnight!”

“Wasn’t that lovely of mother!” Jansy turned to Mary, with shining eyes. “Mary-Dorothy, your new story’s marvellous! I’m enjoying it no end!”

“Off you go, back to bed,” Mary said laughing.

Sunday was a quiet restful day. Jansy refused to have breakfast in bed, so she went to church with Nanta, and in the afternoon they put on big coats and lay in the November sunshine in the Abbey and shared Mary’s galley-proofs, Jansy tossing the long slips to Nanta as she read them.

Mary, writing a letter to her married sister in France, watched them with amusement.

“That book may or may not be a success; it may be good or it may not; but it has served one useful purpose even before it’s published. It’s been worth writing for today alone. Those girls have forgotten all about dancing and music, and are completely refreshed and rested. I am so glad! And I’m glad Jen has been good and hasn’t come to talk it over with them, as she wanted to do. It’s much better for them not to think about their class at all.”

The girls had not quite forgotten, however, and when Mary had gone to see about tea Jansy laid down the story and looked at Nanta.

“Is it fair to interrupt? You look so buried!”

“I’ll go on with it later. It’s so exciting to read a book before anyone else has seen it; I never saw one in these long strips before. And I love to see the corrections Mary-Dorothy has made. It’s a jolly story. What do you want to say?”

“Isn’t it odd to think we’ve another whole day of that game tomorrow?”

“You’re looking forward to it, aren’t you?”

“Enormously! Do you think we’d dare to do ‘Boatman’? I love it so much!”

“I don’t see why not. I love playing ‘Boatman’; it’s a beautiful tune. It’s no harder than ‘Newcastle,’ and they learned that all right. They’ll skip the heys, and then you’ll dance with rage again.”

“No, I shall rub it in before they start that it isn’t a skipping dance, and you’ll play the tune and they’ll see it for themselves.”

“With luck, they may see it,” Nanta admitted. “You’ll go over the dances they did yesterday, won’t you?”

“Oh yes!” Jansy said promptly. “And we must have them at the party. Mary-Dorothy’s talked to Auntie Jen and Auntie Rosamund and they’re both coming, to M.C. in turn. And perhaps your sister will come, to play for the party, so that you can dance.”

“I’ll like that,” Nanta agreed. “What else will you do?”

“‘Merry Merry Milkmaids’; that’s easy, and we have it so often at parties.”

“You choose jolly dances,” Nanta said, with approval.

“I choose ones I think I can teach, without making a muddle of them.”

“You won’t make any muddles,” Nanta said calmly. “You put things awfully well and clearly.”

“That’s mother,” Jansy explained. “She’s really very useful to me.”

Nanta laughed and picked up the story again. “Now let me go on with Mary-Dorothy’s new baby!”

Jen rang up just before Mary called the girls in for tea. “Joan’s address, please, Mary-Dorothy; I’m sure she left it with you. I won’t phone her, as she’s in somebody else’s house and there’s illness; but I must write and congratulate her on her daughter. Do you remember Littlejan’s plans for next May-day?”

“About Jansy? I do, Jenny-Wren.”

“This will help them on enormously. Don’t you think so?”

“I’m sure of it. We shall see Jansy crowned before very long.”

“And wearing lobelia blue! She’ll look lovely. If only she doesn’t swank at school about having taken this class! That would ruin her chances for ever.”

“I don’t believe she’ll swank. She’s rather shy of talking about it.”

“Could we warn her not to put on side?”

“No, Jen, don’t do it. Leave it to her own good sense. If she’s silly enough to be conceited she isn’t ready to be Queen.”

“Spartan!” Jen cried. “You won’t even give her a hint?”

“I’m sure Joan would rather we didn’t. It’s better to leave it to Jansy herself.”

“And perhaps let her ruin her chance of ever being Queen?”

“Jenny-Wren, if Jansy wants to swank and keeps it in because we’ve warned her and she wants to be chosen, the girls will see through it. Even if they didn’t and she became Queen she wouldn’t have a happy reign, because she wouldn’t have been really fit for the job. She’d give herself away, and there would be trouble.”

“I see. Perhaps you’re right, as usual, Mary-Dorothy. We won’t warn her, then. But I hope she won’t make an ass of herself now, when she’s done so well.”

“I don’t think she will. I’m not worried about her.”

“How is Lady Rosalind?”

“Very well and happy. They’re both in the Abbey, reading the proofs of my latest, the one that’s dedicated to Rosilda Mary at the Castle.”

Jen laughed. “How thrilled those babes will be, when they can understand! This year’s is dedicated to Dorothy Rose at The Pallant, isn’t it?”

“‘To Dorothy Rose and her twin sister, Marjory Joy.’ Maid begged me not to leave Marjory out. So I must do the same with Rosilda’s and add—‘And her twin sister, Rosanna Maidlin.’”

“Such intriguing dedications! The kiddies will burst with pride. Thanks for Joan’s address! Give the girls my love and say I’ll try to run down for half an hour tomorrow morning, to let them have a dance. It’s not fair they should miss it all.”

“It’s good of you. They loved your piping yesterday.”

“I’m glad to be able to help. They’re little sports,” and Jen rang off and went to write to Joan.

There was another ring during the evening, and Mary called Jansy to the telephone. “Littlejan wants you, Jansy.”

“Oh, good!” Jansy ran to take the call. “I say, Marigold, how are you? And how’s Alan?”

“Alan’s getting on slowly and I’m all right now, but I felt rotten at first. Jan, Aunt Joan’s told me. It’s simply marvellous! You and Rosalind are bricks! I’m sorry about Jean, but she didn’t really want to do it. I’m sure you’re a better teacher than she’d have been. I’m thrilled to the very limit to think they’ve had our school, after all. Tell me about it, and what dances you’ve done. You can have one minute to do it in.”

Jansy rattled off her list of dances, and her plans for the morrow. “The girls seem to like it, Marigold. Tessa and Phyl have been so nice to us.”

She heard Littlejan’s whistle of appreciation. “Good work, Jan! Oh, *good* work! Exactly what the Club needed. Did you really tackle ‘Althea’? And ‘Newcastle’? Oh, bother!” as the signal went. “Goodbye! Good luck to you! You’re a perfect angel, Jan!”

“I’m a perfect angel,” Jansy said demurely, coming back to her place at the supper table.

The girls went off to school on Monday morning in the highest spirits. “*So* different from Saturday!” Jansy exulted. “We came sadly to send them home. Now we’re going on, and I know I can do it. It’s a marvellous feeling!”

Mary refused to give them sandwiches, but provided money for their lunch. “The dairy is a much better plan. You want to get right away from your class for an hour. If you’re with the crowd you’ll chatter the whole time. Buy newspapers again, Rosalind, and let Jansy hunt for family stories; it’s a fine idea.”

“I found boy and girl twins on Saturday,” Jansy said. “They were called Peter and Pauline. Perhaps their mother had wanted Peter and Paul. Mixed twins are nice! Nobody in our crowd has had their twins mixed.”

“Your mother should do it,” Nanta suggested. “She’s the only one without twins.”

Jansy grinned. “Mother can’t have any more boys, because she doesn’t know any more nice boy-names beginning with J. There are Job and Jeremiah and Jacob and Joe, but she doesn’t seem to like any of those. We can’t have Julian, as we’ve Jillian already.”

“See what you find today,” Mary said. “Good luck to you! Jen’s bringing me to the evening party, and I’ll come home with you and Frost.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

LOBELIA FOR JANSY

So far was Jansy from being conceited over her success that she was utterly taken aback by what happened at the evening party. She was happy and elated, indeed, but there was no sign of undue pride in her, and she was quite unprepared for surprises.

The morning was as enjoyable as Saturday had been. Jen came for a short time, and chortled with joy when told she was to play "The Boatman." Jansy and Nanta joined in, helping the sets by the very quality of their dancing and by calling reminders of the movements. After a peaceful lunch-hour there were simpler dances and a good deal of revision, and then a quiet rest after tea. Several girls who lived in the town rushed home for a few minutes before the evening party, Phyl and Tessa among them; but the others were content to chat and sit still, and wait until the Kentisbury car drove up, and Rosamund and Virginia came in, followed immediately by Jen and Mary from the Manor car.

"Here we are, everybody!" Rosamund took charge. "I hear you've been having a simply marvellous time with your new teacher," and she smiled at Jansy.

"It's been fun for all of us," Jansy said, growing red with embarrassment and shyness.

"She's done it jolly well, Lady Kentisbury," Tessa ventured.

"I'm sure she has. I'm not in the least surprised. Now we'll let her have some dancing, for a change. I know what it means to take a class; one can't join in very much. Lady Virginia has come to play for you, so that your musician can dance too. I'm sure you're very grateful to Rosalind for her help."

"Hear, hear!" Jansy led the shout that went up.

Rosamund laughed and called for a longways dance, "The First of April."

Tessa held out her hand to Jansy. "Please have it with me, Teacher!"

Phyl was begging Nanta for a dance, and Rosamund turned to her violinist.

"How jolly Rosalind looks! It's just what we hoped for. Being with girls again has done her all the good in the world. Couldn't you send her back to school?"

"I begged her to go, but she wouldn't hear of it. I don't know if she has changed her mind." Virginia was tuning her violin. "It would be good for her, but she'd find it difficult to settle down to maths and French again. Her French isn't any too good, and her maths just aren't there at all."

"Poor Rosalind! Dreaming all the time of 'Chelsea Reach' and 'Nonesuch'!"

"More likely of Mozart and Beethoven. Country-dancing has only become important since she left school and settled at Rainbows."

"Maths and French never were very important, I suppose?"

"Not in the least. Quite useless trifles." Virginia raised her violin.

The girls were all gazing at her; she was so very like their Rosalind, except that her yellow plaits were coiled over her ears. She was dressed in white; her likeness to the countess was very noticeable.

"Have 'April' with me, Mary-Dorothy?" Jen begged, and they took their places in a line.

"I find 'The First of April' rather hard work. I'm not as young as you, Jenny-Wren," Mary said. "Go gently in those wild rings, for my sake!"

"I will, granny," Jen mocked. "Don't be an ass! You dance as well as any of us, when you want to."

"I want to dance at Jansy's party."

"It is Jansy's party, of course," Jen assented. "It's a wonderful programme, with all these figure dances. The child has taught her class well."

"Your frock does just what I hoped, Nanta," Virginia said, at the end of "The Old Mole." "It swings beautifully when you set and turn single." She had been watching her sister's bright face with delight.

"I feel like dancing tonight," Nanta said happily.

"I can see that. You've done a good job of work for these jolly Hamlet Club girls."

"Jansy did the work. I just enjoyed myself," and Nanta took Phyl's offered hand for "Hey, Boys."

It was in "The Boatman" that Jansy, dancing with Nanta, realised that several of her class were missing. Phyl and Tessa were not in the hall, and several juniors had vanished also.

"They can't all have funk'd 'Boatman,' the rotters!" she said.

"Perhaps they've been taken ill," Nanta suggested, laughter in her eyes.

"Not seven of them at once!"

"We don't know what they had for lunch," Nanta pointed out. "Oh, here they are! Then they did funk 'Boatman'! No, perhaps they didn't; they're up to something. Flowers for the M.C.! What a nice idea!"

The great bouquets of brown and gold chrysanthemums, bought by parents during the day and fetched from home at tea-time, were not for the people on the platform, however. As the music came to an end, Tessa stepped forward bravely, at the head of a little procession. Flushed with a great effort, she made her first public speech.

"Janice, we're all tremendously grateful to you. Please take these flowers and other things—you and Lady Rosalind—with our very warmest thanks and love. Rosalind, we thank you very much too."

"Oh, gosh! How awful!" Jansy, scarlet with embarrassment, disappeared behind Nanta.

"Come out!" Nanta commanded. "Who's funking now? Tessa, that's very kind, and we thank you all very much." She was flushed and shy, but she had a dignity which reminded the girls that Lady Kentisbury was her aunt, and which was totally lacking in poor Jansy.

Quite overcome, Jansy took her flowers and muttered words of thanks. "Awfully nice of you, but you shouldn't have done it. I've had as much fun as anybody."

Phyl held out her bouquet to Nanta. "Thank you for playing those lovely tunes so beautifully, Nanta Rose."

"It's been a pleasure to see you dance to them," Nanta said courteously, rather daunted by the keen interest she could feel in all parts of the hall. "Thank you so much."

Tessa thrust forward two juniors, each holding a large box of chocolates. "Please take these, as well as the flowers. We really want you to have them."

Dumb with surprise, Jansy took her box. Nanta received hers with a country-dance bob by way of thanks. Two more juniors were going to the platform with flowers for Rosamund and Virginia. The last, a tiny girl, ran up to Jansy and pressed a few sprays of lobelia into her hand.

"A buttonhole for you to wear; we know you like them, but we couldn't make a bouquet of them."

"Oh, how nice of you!" Jansy found her tongue at last. "My favourite colour! They're all over in our garden. Where did you find them?"

"I discovered a few in a sheltered corner," Tessa explained. "I heard somebody say they were rather special flowers of yours. Shall I pin them on your frock? They'll look pretty on that green."

Jen, standing near, shot a keen look at Tessa. In what connection had she heard that lobelia was a "rather special flower" with Jansy? Was there any hidden meaning in the choice?

But Tessa's face was guileless and merely friendly as she pinned on the flowers, and Jansy, radiant and deeply touched, saw no significance behind the gift.

"They're such a lovely blue. I'm so fond of them," she said. "They're just like the ones in our garden, with white eyes. The blue's so blue and the white is so very white. Thank you frightfully much for thinking of them!"

"Those won't fall off," Tessa assured her. "Thanks awfully for our jolly half-term! Now put down your things and we'll go on with the party. You can't dance hugging that box."

"It's a gorgeously big one. If I'm not at school tomorrow, you'll be able to guess why. Look, Aunt Jen! Aren't they marvellous? Do you see my lobelia?"

"Your badge of honour," Jen said solemnly. "Put your treasures on the platform and come and do 'Newcastle' with me!"

"Are you coming home with us, Rosalind?" Rosamund asked, when refreshments were being handed round.

Nanta looked up quickly. "Oh, not tonight! Please, Aunt Rosamund! Please, Virginia! Let me have tonight with Jansy!"

"That's reasonable," Rosamund commented. "We could send the car for you tomorrow."

"Let us have her for a few days," Jen suggested. "I want her to come to tea at the Manor, but she's been too busy so far."

"And I'm reading Mary-Dorothy's new story," Nanta added. "You couldn't ask me to go away and leave it! It's on long slips of paper, so she couldn't lend it to me."

"I couldn't lend my galley-proofs," Mary assented, amusement in her eyes.

"I haven't finished them, so they mustn't go away!" Jansy protested.

"Do you need me for the concert tomorrow night?" Nanta asked anxiously.

"Not urgently," Virginia admitted. "Miss Daniels can lead in the Mozart; she's pining to do it."

"It would be only kind to give Miss Daniels the chance," Jen remarked.

Virginia laughed. "She won't do it as well as Nanta would, but nobody who will be there will know that."

"Then let us keep Nanta for a day or two," Jen said promptly. "While Jansy is at school she can come and play with Rosemary and Mike and Katharine, or she can go into the Abbey."

"I can help Mary-Dorothy to wash up," Nanta said, her eyes full of amusement.

"You seem to have made yourself very much at home!" Virginia exclaimed.

"No, they did it; made me feel at home, I mean. May I stay?"

"If they'll have you, you may. Thank you very much, Miss Devine."

"We love having Rosalind with us, and we've lost Marigold," Mary pointed out. "Jansy and I would be very lonely without either Rosalind or Jean."

"You seem to be called by a variety of names!" Virginia turned to her sister. "Did I hear Nanta Rose just now?"

"That's Jansy's fault. The girls asked what it was she called me. I've asked them not to say it too often, Virginia."

“You should discourage them,” Virginia said, and looked at Rosamund for orders.

“You and I are going to dance, and Jen and Rosalind will take over,” Rosamund said. “Come and have ‘Milkmaids’ with me.”

“Couldn’t we have ‘Haste to the Wedding’ for Virginia?” Nanta looked shyly at Rosamund. “I’d love to play it for her.”

“No, please!” Virginia cried.

“Yes, most certainly!” Rosamund exclaimed. “It’s a good thought, Rosalind. ‘Haste’ with me, for your wedding, Virginia. It’s all right; the girls won’t know.”

“They know very well,” Virginia remarked, as the dance began. “I see grins on every side.”

“Those mean good wishes,” Rosamund told her. “I’m glad Nanta thought of it.”

“Look, Frost!” Jansy cried, when she ran out to the car, almost hidden behind her chrysanthemums. “Look—for me! Lady Rosalind has some too. Will you have room for all our things? I’d better come in front with you, and let Mary-Dorothy and Rosalind sit behind with the flowers.”

“The floral tributes,” Mary said. “I’ll nurse your bunch. Shall I hold your chocolates too?”

“No; thank you *very* much!” Jansy mocked. “Frost and I will keep the chocolates. Look, Frost! Aren’t they marvellous? Have one!—have a lot! Rosalind will feed Mary-Dorothy out of her box. And look at my lobelia buttonhole! That was given to me too. Wasn’t it nice of everybody?”

“Very nice, Miss Jansy, but it’s no more than they ought,” Frost said firmly, as he accepted a chocolate with a grin.

“Oh, I don’t know about that!” Jansy protested, slightly shocked.

“Would you like to take tomorrow in bed, Jansy? You must be very tired,” Mary suggested, as they reached home.

“But there’s school, Mary-Dorothy!”

“You could take a holiday. You’ve had a hard-working week-end. I could phone the Head.”

“Oh, no, please! I couldn’t do that! I’d loathe it!” Jansy cried, in real distress. “Think how everybody would shriek!”

“Just as you like. We’ll see how you feel in the morning,” Mary said. “You’ve earned a rest, if you want it. I think you’re more tired than you realise.”

“I don’t want a day in bed, like an old lady!” Jansy said fervently. “I must be early at school tomorrow, for a very special reason.”

“Oh? What’s the reason?”

“I want to tell Tessa and the others not to say too much to the rest of the school. I don’t want everybody ragging me.”

“You can’t stop them talking,” Mary said. “They’ll have to know. People won’t rag you; they’ll be pleased.”

“I don’t want them making a fuss; I’d feel awful. If I’m not there, Tessa can say what she likes.”

“You’re shy,” Nanta remarked. “You ought to be proud. You’ve done a lot for the school.”

“I don’t want to be ragged about it,” Jansy said again. “So get me to school early, please, Mary-Dorothy!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE HEAD GIRL AND JANICE

“Where’s Jansy Raymond?” The word went round the school next morning.

“I hope we didn’t kill her yesterday,” Tessa exclaimed.

“What did you do to Jansy? And where’s Marigold?” asked the head girl, Olivia. “How did your tiny school go?”

“There wasn’t any school, worse luck!” said the Queen, coming in at that moment.

“Oh, wasn’t there?” Phyl mocked. “You are behind the times! Wait till you hear what happened!”

“Tell us, then,” Jean retorted. “How could you have—you don’t mean that Jansy took the class?”

“We do,” Tessa assured her. “We mean just that. Jansy—Janice, I mean!—was shoved up on to the platform and she did awfully well. We had a marvellous week-end.”

“Gosh!” said Jean, wide-eyed. “They might have rung up and told me! Where is Jansy?”

“Not come yet. I hope it hasn’t been too much for her,” Tessa began.

“Tessa, tell me about this!” Olivia spoke in a peremptory tone. “Where are Marigold and Jansy? Why doesn’t Jean know what happened? She was to help at your class! And what’s this about Jansy teaching?”

Tessa told briefly of the disasters which had fallen on the week-end school and of how Jansy had come to the rescue. “And I say this, everybody! We couldn’t do better than have her for the next Queen. She’d be a very jolly one.”

“She’s much too young, Tessa!” Olivia remonstrated.

“She’ll be thirteen and a half by next May, and she’s a good year older than her age. Look at the form she’s in! They’re all over fourteen. She takes a good place in it, too. And what she doesn’t know about the dances isn’t worth bothering over.”

“When she teaches she’s just her mother over again,” Phyl remarked.

“She swanks about her mother,” said somebody.

“She doesn’t! But if she did, it would be rather nice of her. A mother’s a sensible thing to swank about. But Jansy doesn’t swank. She had every chance to do it during those classes, but she never did once. She’s not thinking about being Queen,” Tessa insisted. “You know her form told us she had said she’d choose lobelia, if she was Queen? We gave her a buttonhole of it last night, and she was pleased because it’s her favourite flower, but she never thought of it as a Queen’s crown; anyone could see that. She was quite natural and—and innocent about it.”

“I’m sure she isn’t thinking about being Queen,” Jean remarked. “I hope she isn’t ill. She must have been fearfully tired.”

“I’d like her to be Queen, too,” said Phyl.

“Let’s see first if she swanks about this teaching business,” Olivia commanded. “She has something to swank about now. She was a sport to rise to the occasion like that. Don’t say anything to her about the Queen stunt! See if she puts on side about the week-end.”

Tessa laughed. “She won’t. We know her a lot better than we did last week!”

The gong called them to the hall for prayers, and they went to classes much puzzled by Jansy’s absence.

She appeared as the eleven o'clock break began, and rather shyly explained her late arrival, in answer to the questions hurled at her from every side.

"I didn't wake till after nine, and the rotters never came near me. And I'd specially said I wanted to be early today! Mary-Dorothy rang up the Head and said I was still asleep and she didn't want to wake me, and the Head said it was quite wise and she'd better let me have my sleep out. I was furious when I found how late it was."

"Hard lines!" Phyl said laughing.

"Jolly sensible of the Head and Mary-Dorothy." The Queen made her way through the crowd. "Jansy, you might have told me!"

"I never thought about it," Jansy said frankly. "We were a bit tired on Sunday, and we knew we'd see you today. What's the hurry? You can hear anything you want now, but there's nothing much to tell. We had the school. That's all."

"That's all!" The head girl looked down at her in amusement. "How did you like being teacher?"

"It was fun! They were all little kids except Phyl and Tessa, Olivia. It was easy."

"Phyl and Tessa enjoyed themselves no end, and they know a lot more than they did," and Tessa began to laugh. "I *will not have* those crossings skipped! Oh, Jansy, you were funny!"

"She fairly hopped with rage," said Phyl.

"You're mean!" Jansy shouted. "I had to make you hear, and I'd told you about four times! You don't know how awful you looked!"

"We know now. We won't ever do it again," Tessa promised hurriedly, to soothe her.

"How's Rosalind?" Phyl asked. "Can't you make her come to school?"

"She's too busy. She's going home to help Lady Virginia to get married."

"You were terribly sporting to take on the job, Jansy," said Wendy, who was in her form. "I wouldn't have liked to do it."

"We shall see you on the platform again," Daphne teased. "What did it feel like to be up there? You're such a spot!"

"I'd rather have been dancing. But I couldn't do both."

Shirley, in her form also but older than herself, eyed her with new respect. "It was jolly decent of you. Tessa says you taught awfully well."

"I wish I'd seen her," Daphne sighed. "Can't we stick her up there and make her do some more?"

"Teacher Jansy!" Shirley mocked. "She'll be teaching the whole Club next."

"She's done it once already," Wendy remarked.

Olivia and Jean, Phyl and Tessa, were watching Jansy's enraged face and waiting for an explosion.

It came. "You are idiots!" Jansy flamed out in anger. "There's nothing to rag me about! I had to do it. I couldn't help it—"

"We're not ragging!" Wendy said hastily.

"We think it was most enormously plucky of you," Shirley cried.

"And jolly clever," Daphne added. "I couldn't teach anybody anything for a thousand pounds, and I'd be scared stiff up on that platform. You were a frightful sport; that's what we think."

"Then stop thinking it!" Jansy raged. "What else could I do? We'd invited the school; we couldn't let them down! And they asked me; they made me do it! You don't suppose I *offered* to take the class, do you? They stuck me up there and told me to carry on. I couldn't help it!

For goodness' sake, stop talking and forget all about it! I don't want to hear the word 'class' again!" and she pushed her way through the crowd and raced off to claim her milk and biscuits, in spite of her very late breakfast.

Olivia looked at Tessa and laughed. "Not much swanking there! You were right about that."

"If anything, she's shy," Tessa agreed.

"Let the matter drop, girls," Olivia advised, authority in her tone. "Jansy doesn't want to talk about it. Don't tease her! We can't forget how well she rose to the occasion, but we needn't fuss over her and worry her."

"She wants to be called Janice," Phyl said. "We might do that much for her."

"Try to remember, you lot in her form—Wendy and Daphne and Shirley, and the rest of you. It's only fair, if she really wants her proper name. She's shown us she isn't an infant any longer." And Olivia made a point of addressing the victim as Janice often and as publicly as she could.

"What's Nanta Rose doing, left at home all alone?" Phyl asked next morning. "Is she still with you at the Hall?"

"She was at the Manor most of yesterday, playing with the children. She likes Rosemary," Jansy said. "She told me that Rosemary's just like she is, quiet and rather shy. Nanta Rose thinks they're going to be friends."

Phyl laughed. "Rosemary's only seven! Rather young for Nanta Rose!"

"We ought not to call her that, but I like it. She was going home today, but she had a letter from Marigold, begging and praying her to stay till the end of the week. They're coming back on Friday, as Alan's going on well, and they're bringing Alastair for a few days' holiday; he's had a horrid time—a really nasty shock, Littlejan says. Mother's going to nurse him up, and as soon as Alan can travel he'll be sent home all the way in an ambulance, with his nurse, and mother will take care of him. So Marigold will be back at school next week, and she wants to have Rosalind for the week-end. We rang up the Castle, and the countess said she would make it all right with Lady Virginia."

"Can't we see her again? Bring her with you one day! She could watch the Cookeries making soup and puddings."

"I don't believe she'll come, but I'll ask her," Jansy promised.

Nanta shook her head, when the invitation was given. "No, thank you. But if anybody asks me I'll come to the next crowning. If your violinist still isn't better perhaps I could play for the dancing."

"I'll tell the girls you've offered. We'll keep you to it," Jansy vowed jubilantly.

Littlejan sprang from the car when it arrived on Friday night and fairly flung herself on Jansy. "Tell me all about it! I want to hear every single thing!"

Frost had driven to town to meet the train, after fetching Jansy from school, so that Joan and Alastair, met by Jack Raymond, could go straight home, instead of coming round by Whiteways to take Marigold to the Hall.

"It would have been more sensible for them to come here and pick you up, Jan," Littlejan grinned. "Your mother wants you for the week-end. But, of course, she knew that wouldn't do at all. I want you for tonight! You'll have to go tomorrow. Is Rosalind still here? Oh, good! We'll talk all night, and Mary-Dorothy mustn't come and stop us!"

"You and Nanta Rose will talk all the week-end," Jansy observed. "Tell us about York, and about the journey."

Littlejan had much to say of York; the walls, the old gates and streets, the Merchant Adventurers' beautiful Hall, and most of all the Minster. She had to tell of the school, the boys, the sanatorium, and the headmaster's house and family. But her story had to wait.

"There's no hurry about all that. I'll give you a geography lesson some other day; a personally conducted tour! But now I want to hear about our school. Jan, you were frightfully noble, to take on a job like that! I do think you were splendid, a perfect brick. Of course, you could do it all right; I never doubted that for a second. But I didn't think you would."

"She couldn't help herself," Nanta said. "Tessa and the rest insisted. Janice had no choice."

"I don't want you to make a fuss," Jansy grumbled. "It just happened to go all right."

Littlejan gave her a quick understanding look. "Have they been ragging you at school?"

"Not ragging, but they were a bit silly. I soon stopped them."

"Tessa will tell me what happened," Littlejan said to herself. Aloud she remarked, "You can't blame them, but if you choked them off they'll soon forget."

"I choked them off all right, and Olivia helped."

"Olivia? Did she deign to take an interest? You have caused a sensation!" Littlejan mocked.

"She asked how I liked being teacher. I think she told the rest not to rag me, for they were better after that, but I didn't hear what she said, for I was fed up and I dashed away to fetch my milk and biscuits."

"I shall have to hear about this!" Marigold thought. "There's been some sort of fuss. I wonder what people said? I'll get it out of Tessa.—Now, Jan, sit down there and tell me every single thing, while I eat a huge supper!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

NANTA DECIDES

"It's time you heard our plans, Nanta," Virginia said, on the evening of Nanta's return. They were seated in the tiny sitting-room of Periwinkle Place, the cottage at Rainbows, the room into which the front door opened; in this November weather a heavy blue curtain hung over the door and a fire blazed on the red brick hearth tucked into one corner.

Nanta was feeding the fire with fir cones from the park.

"When is it to be—your wedding, Virginia?"

"In March; on your birthday, if you like. I shall be twenty the week before. There's a great deal to do in a short time; I want your help, and Mandy and Minty will help too. They sew really well, and I want to make most of my own things. I'm to be in white, and you and the twins, as bridesmaids, will wear blue. You'll like that?"

"It sounds pretty," Nanta admitted. "I knew you'd want a blue wedding."

Virginia glanced at her. "Roddy is going to be my page and carry my train; his first public function! He'll be six years old. Aunt Rosamund is giving you girls your frocks; she insists on doing it, and she's told us where to go for them in town."

"It's to be a big wedding, then?"

"At Kentisbury. It's only fair to Gilbert and Mya; their friends must come. Nanta, I'd like Mya to be a bridesmaid, too, to pair with you. You won't mind?"

Nanta, chin in hand, gazed at the fire. "I'd rather it had been just us. But she's going to be your family; yes, it's only fair. I don't hate Anne-Marie, you know. It's only that we like different things."

Virginia leaned forward and spoke eagerly. "I've been thinking about you two. Mya is leaving school next July, and will spend the winter with her Italian cousins and have lessons in singing; her voice is quite good, though it's not startling. She may stay in Italy for a year, if she enjoys it. That will make things easier, Nanta. And Anne-Marie is sure to marry! She's very good-looking, in her dark Italian way, and she's good company; she goes out a lot and meets people. She'll have a home of her own before long."

Nanta braced herself for a decisive step. "Virginia, I'd like to go to school again. Have we enough money?"

"Oh, bravo, Nanta! Splendid! I do think you're sensible!" Virginia cried in delight. "My dear, I'd like it for you better than anything! Oh, yes, we can afford it! And once I'm married Gilbert will expect to look after you. But there's enough in your share of father's money."

"I thought there must be, for you wanted me to go before," Nanta said. "But I couldn't say anything to Marigold till I'd asked you."

"You want to go with Marigold?"

"To her school. They have a two-year course for seniors, in cookery and housework; Lady Jen told me about it—she went to it for a while. They don't take you till you're seventeen; Littlejan thinks she'd like to have a year, but she's not sixteen till Christmas. I could go next May, after you're married."

"If you have another year at school, or two years, if you like, you'll find yourself much more able to hold your own with Anne-Marie; and if she has a year or so in Italy she'll broaden her mind and realise you aren't the only person who doesn't think as she does. By the

time you meet again—if Mya hasn't married an Italian cousin!—you'll find you get on quite well together.”

“I don't think I ought to live with you and Gilbert,” Nanta said, colouring. “Littlejan says she wouldn't live with newly-married people. It's not right.”

“Gilbert and I would like to be alone together for a while,” Virginia admitted. “Later on, in a year or two, I may be glad of your help.”

Nanta glanced at her. “If you have a little girl, you'll need to call her Nancybell, to please Gilbert, won't you?”

“It's their family name,” Virginia assented. “Mya had a sister called Nancybell, but she died. If we should have a little girl she'd be Nancybell Rose.”

“That's pretty. I hope you'll have her. And I could come and help you.”

“You'd be her godmother, of course. But that's a long way off,” Virginia said laughing. “About this school idea, Nanta! Would you live with Littlejan and Jansy?”

“I hope so, but we might not be at the Hall. If Sir Ivor and Lady Quellyn and her twins, and the little boys and their nurse, all come home, there might not be room. They have a few boarders at the school; the Queen, Jean, is one of them. Perhaps we could go there.”

“Has Marigold been planning it with you?”

“She asked me to come, and so did some of the others. They've invited me to go to see the crowning on May-day, and I've said I'll play, if they need me. Littlejan thinks Jansy will be the next Queen, especially after the way she taught that class. She says lots of the girls would like to have her, but nobody must say anything to Jansy. She's not expecting it.”

“She'd be a very young Queen,” Virginia objected.

“She's sometimes rather old for her age. And Jean and Marigold will be there to help, if she needs them.”

“Yes, she'd have two ex-Queens to stand by her. You sound interested in the school, Nanta.”

“I like the girls, and I like the Hamlet Club. It has fine ideas behind it.”

“‘To be or not to be’; Aunt Rosamund told me.”

“It means to choose rightly, when one has to make a choice. It's to help the girls to remember. They don't talk about the motto, but it's there. I'd like to belong to the Club.”

“You must certainly go to the school!” Virginia said. “We'll ask Aunt Rosamund to approach the Head. But the summer term would do, wouldn't it, Nanta? I need you till March. I want you very badly.”

“I don't want to go away from you. But if you're going away from me, I must do something new too,” Nanta said bravely. “I couldn't just stay at Kentisbury and think about you and be miserable.”

“Oh, please don't do that! I can't be married, if you're going to be miserable!” Virginia cried.

“I want you to get married, because I know you want it. I hope you'll be very happy.” Nanta's grave eyes were fixed on the fire. “But I must do something, or I shall miss you terribly.”

“You've thought it out carefully,” Virginia ventured.

“In the Abbey—yes,” Nanta assented. “I had plenty of time. Mary-Dorothy let me go in there alone; it was a good place to think. Lady Jen, from the Manor, said the Abbey told things to people; I think perhaps it told something to me. I thought a lot in there, about you, and me,

and all that's going to happen. What are Mandy and Minty going to do when you're married? They won't live here, will they?"

"Oh, no! We must give up this house. They'll stay at the Castle, but perhaps not for very long. Minty's great friend is young Sir Richard Grayson, the yachtsman; I shouldn't wonder if she marries him and his yachts presently! And Mandy's pal is Charles Harvey, whose father keeps the big riding-school in Kentisbury town."

"But what luck, if Mandy marries horses and Minty marries boats!" Nanta cried, wide-eyed.

"Not luck at all. It's Aunt Rosamund. She invited Richard Grayson to meet Minty, because Minty's crazy about boats; and she threw Mandy and Charles together, in every way she could. Mandy will love Charles and his horses even more than she'd love Charles alone."

"Then Mandy will get out of being Lady Amanda and be Mrs. Harvey?"

"Oh, no! We don't escape by getting married," Virginia said grimly. "She'll be Lady Amanda Harvey."

"But—but he—" Nanta began.

"They'll be Mr. Charles and Lady Amanda. She's an earl's daughter and marriage won't alter it. The only way to get out of her title would be to marry a higher one. If she married an earl or a duke or a prince she'd no longer be Lady Amanda."

"Then if I marry Mr. Brown, I shall still be Lady Rosalind?"

"Lady Rosalind Brown and Mr. Brown," Virginia said laughing.

"I shan't ever get married," Nanta said firmly. "I don't see any point in it. I'd have liked to be Mrs. Brown."

"I'm afraid there's no hope of it, Nanta dear."

Nanta sighed. "Bother! Oh, bother! Then it's no use getting married!"

"Wait till you see some use in it! There is point in getting married, but it's not just to lose your title. That's yours for life. The only place you can expect the title to be ignored is school. You won't find your cookery mistress stopping to call you Lady Rosalind when your cakes are burning in the oven."

"That's another reason for going back to school. If I can have two years before I have to be Lady in earnest, it's worth while."

"You'll be Lady-in-earnest wherever you are." Virginia smiled at her. "It would take a lot to make you Lady-not-in-earnest."

"Do you mean I'm stodgy? Heavy?" Nanta asked gloomily.

"Not a bit, my child. But you've been too serious for your age. To tell the truth you seem a good deal younger since this visit to the Hall."

"Only in some ways." Nanta looked grave. "I've had to get used to the thought of losing you. That was very ageing."

"Oh, Nanta dear!" Virginia broke into a laugh. "It won't be as bad as you think. And you do want me to be happy, don't you?"

"More than anything. I think that's what has been so difficult."

"My dear, what *do* you mean?"

"Wanting you to be happy more than wanting you for myself."

"Oh!" Virginia looked at her closely. "Learning to put my happiness before your own? Yes, that might be rather ageing, I suppose. I love you for it, Atalanta! But in other ways being with those jolly girls has made you seem younger."

Nanta grinned. “We had a midnight feast for my last night. Mary-Dorothy caught us at it and made us go to bed.”

“I’m very glad to hear it! Both about the feast and that you were caught. I’ll tell Aunt Rosamund your plans and ask her to arrange it with the Head.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

QUEEN GARDEN TO THE RESCUE

Rosamund heard Nanta's decision with delight and promised to make all arrangements. Virginia was much at Kentisbury now, discussing plans and frocks and the future, and often the twins went with her for their beloved riding, though Minty's sailing could only be done on the sheltered reaches of the river or in harbour waters, at this time of year.

Nanta, learning to ride a little reluctantly, went with them for her lessons from Ferguson, but only really enjoyed her outings on Saturdays or during the Christmas holidays, when Littlejan came from the Hall to go out on her pony, Chestnut, and they all rode together in the park. The countess rode well, and she led the party of girls through the woods and out on to the hills, with Ferguson in the rear keeping a watchful eye on Rosalind. Little Roddy was learning to ride also, on a very decrepit pony who had been pensioned off for years; but he was not allowed to go out with his elders.

Marigold often came back to the Castle for tea before driving home to the Hall, and everybody sat round the fire in riding kit; and this gave a chance for the growing friendship between her and Rosalind to develop and for plans to be made for the summer term.

"You'll have Olivia, our present head girl, as a Cookery with you," Littlejan said. "She's changing over from ordinary work at Easter, but she'll still be head; it makes no difference. You'll like her, and she knows all about you. She was thrilled by the way you and Jan ran that week-end."

"It was all Jansy. Do you really think she'll be the next Queen?"

"I do, but don't tell her. I say! You could be her maid—if you would! What fun! But perhaps you'd rather not? People usually want to be in the procession."

"Considering that Jansy hasn't asked me and that she isn't chosen yet, we needn't worry about that," Nanta said firmly. "I think I'd rather watch the procession than be in it. Will Lady Quellyn and the twins be home?"

"Oh, rather! We expect they'll come for Christmas. The Canadian tour is over and they're packing to come home."

"It's not a nice time to travel," Nanta observed.

"I should think the Atlantic will be gruesome," Littlejan agreed.

The evening post was brought in and the letters were handed to the countess. She glanced at them and picked up one.

"This is from Joy. I may be able to tell you when she'll arrive, Marigold. I wonder why she has written to me?"

She glanced at the letter and then with a startled exclamation began to read more carefully.

"Oh, poor Joy! How things do happen to her! And so unexpectedly! This is really hard luck!"

"I hope she's not ill again," Littlejan began, for Joy's serious illness the year before had frightened all her friends.

"Not Joy herself, but Stripey has been taken ill; Beatrice—Queen Bee—who is nurse to the little boys. They fear it's typhoid and that's a long business. We shan't have Joy home for Christmas, I'm afraid."

“Can’t she send the nurse to hospital?” Virginia asked, puzzled. “Surely Lady Quellyn needn’t give up her journey because her nurse is ill?”

“Oh, but Joy won’t leave Bee!” Rosamund explained. “She took her to New York; she couldn’t come home and leave her behind!”

“But the girl would be well looked after, and she could come when she recovers. If Lady Quellyn has planned to have Christmas at home—” Virginia began.

“Excuse me one moment! I’ll see what Joy says about future plans.” Rosamund was hurriedly skimming through the letter.

“Just as I thought,” she said presently. “Joy won’t leave Bee alone in New York. Beatrice broke down and wept at the thought, but even without that Joy says she couldn’t have left her. Bee will have to go to a nursing-home, but if Joy’s there she can send her flowers every day, and go to see her when she’s getting better. It will make a big difference to Beatrice.”

“And Lady Quellyn will alter all her plans for her nurse-girl?”

“Beatrice is a Hamlet Club Queen, and a friend, as well as Joy’s nurse. None of us could desert another Queen. You don’t understand all that it means to be one of our Queens; but it’s something more and closer than friendship. We shan’t see Joy till Beatrice is well enough to travel. Marigold, you may find Mary-Dorothy has heard from Joy, but if not you must tell her. Joy and the children are staying in New York. Ivor has to come home for some engagements, so you’ll have him at the Hall for a time, but he’ll go back to fetch the family later on. Barbara Honor is there with Joy, but the twins are her job and Joy is left with no nurse for the babies. She can get help for a week or two, but she wants us to send her someone to take Beatrice’s place, if possible. Rosalind, could you fetch Hyacinth to me?”

“Will you send Hyacinth to New York?” Littlejan exclaimed.

Rosamund shook her head and waited till the youngest of her three nurses appeared.

“Hyacinth, when you came to me there was someone else, another ex-Queen, who would have liked to come, but she couldn’t leave her job. Do you happen to know what she is doing now? And who was she?”

“Gracie Gray; the Queen before me, my lady,” Hyacinth said eagerly. “The Gray Queen, who had the wonderful flower-border to her train, all the flowers of all the earlier Queens painted on it. We used to call her the Garden Queen, or Queen Garden.”

“I remember; a lovely train. Where is she now?”

“I heard from her yesterday. We were at college together, but she was a year senior to me. She’s on holiday, and she asked if I could meet her in Brighton one day next week. I was going to ask if I could be spared.”

“Is she out of a job? Lady Quellyn wants somebody to go to New York to help her; Bee—Stripes—is ill. Would Gracie Gray take on the job?”

“I think she’d love it! She said how lucky Strikey was to get such a chance.”

“Have you her address? Then go and phone a wire, asking her to come to see me tomorrow, and say it’s urgent.”

“She’s in a hotel in Brighton. I don’t know their number, but they must have the phone,” Hyacinth suggested. “I could wire to her to ring—”

“To ring us up at once. Yes, that’s better. We can tell her more by phone. Run along and get in touch with her, my dear, and call me when she rings. I’ll speak to her myself.”

Hyacinth hurried away, and Rosamund said gravely, “I hope we are able to help Joy. And I do hope Bee’s illness has no complications. It’s—well, rather urgent—that Joy should be home by March. Not because of your wedding, Virginia! She has her own reasons for wanting

to be home in the early spring. All this is very unfortunate; things always seem to happen to Joy at the wrong time!"

"It's very good of her to stand by the girl," said Virginia.

"Joy couldn't do anything else; it would never occur to her to leave Bee alone among strangers. Marigold, there's your car. Tell Mary-Dorothy I'll ring up and let her know what we arrange for Joy."

"I'm quite sure you'll find some way to help." Littlejan had been listening with keen interest.

"Oh yes! If Queen Garden can't go we'll send someone else, but Joy and Barbara and Beatrice would be greatly intrigued if another Queen joined them. Gracie Gray will go, unless she has taken a new job; she'll be as pleased as they will. I'm glad I thought of her."

The next evening brought a cheerful call to Mary from the Castle. Gracie Gray would go to New York and she could start almost at once. There was no need for worry on Joy's account, as Gracie was trained and experienced; the little boys would be well looked after, and Joy would be free to cheer Beatrice with constant visits.

"So the Hamlet Club has come to the rescue again," Mary said, when she passed on the news to Jen. "But I don't envy the Garden Queen. Crossing the Atlantic in December will be no joke."

"Fairly grim, I'm afraid. She's a plucky child," Jen agreed. "How I hope Stripey gets over it quickly! Joy must, simply must, be home by March!"

"We'll hope all will go well," Mary said doubtfully. "But if they're kept in New York too long I hope she won't attempt it. It would be better to stay there than to risk anything."

"So we're still not to be a united clan for Christmas!" Jen sighed. "Bother poor old Stripes! She was in my form and I loved her; we called her Beetle in those days. I love her still, but I wish she'd resisted that typhoid germ! We really thought we were to have Joy and the twins for Christmas at last!"

Rosamund invited a house-party for the Christmas holidays, but was firmly though gratefully told she had enough to do with her boys and her double sets of twins, without taking in schoolgirls as well. She had hoped to have Marigold and all four girls from Rainbows, as well as Tansy, the housekeeper's niece and Marigold's chum. But Virginia and her sisters insisted on having their last Christmas as a family together in their cottage, and Littlejan chose to go home with Jansy and spend the holidays with Joan's children and her small brothers. Alan was going on well but still needed care, and she wanted to be with him as much as she could. She came to Kentisbury to ride with Tansy, and the countess went out with them, and with her nieces when they came over from Rainbows. Mary Devine, housekeeping for Sir Ivor at the Hall, was given a rest from schoolgirls for a few weeks, and vowed she would be glad when the holidays were over.

Rosamund would not be entirely balked, however, and she insisted on filling her Castle with girls for one night, and drove them all to London in the Kentisbury cars, to hear Maidlin sing in "The Messiah," in the Albert Hall. Mary-Dorothy and Jen and Kenneth were there also, and it was a real family festival and an event never forgotten by any of the party.

"Maid's voice gets better and better," Rosamund said happily, as one after another thanked her for the very great treat.

The Christmas dance-school was to be held at the end of the holidays, and a formal invitation came to Rosalind, asking her to be the accompanist for the week-end, as Margia Lane, though recovering slowly, was not strong enough yet for the task.

“Would you like to do it?” the countess asked, when she heard the suggestion. “You’ll be paid, of course; it’s a regular engagement. Oh, yes! The Hamlet Club must pay its way. That November time was a friendly arrangement between you and Marigold and Jean, but this is different. With Virginia’s wedding coming off you’ll be glad of a nice little cheque.”

Nanta flushed. “I could use it to buy her present. I’d like to feel I’d earned the money for it.”

“That’s a lovely thought! What will you give her?”

“Something to wear,” Nanta said eagerly. “She hasn’t many pretty things. A little blue brooch, a really good one, perhaps. Will you help me to choose?”

“With the greatest pleasure! Go ahead and earn your cheque and then we’ll see.”

The school began with the annual performance of the Folk Play, and Marigold put on her motley and pranced about as the Fool, while Jansy became Dame Dolly, in a huge sun-bonnet. The first Doctor, ex-head-girl Alison, came back to play her part, with the present head, Olivia, as St. George and Jean as St. Andrew, and there was much excellent fooling which reduced Nanta to helpless laughter.

“You are silly people!” she almost sobbed, at the end.

“Aren’t we? We made you laugh, anyway,” Marigold retorted.

Mrs. Thistle came to teach new work and complimented the Club on the improvement in their dancing, especially as there were so many new and young members. As she said it, she smiled at Jansy, who grew scarlet and disappeared behind Tessa.

“I don’t know what people needed to tell her for!” she grumbled. “It’s time it was all forgotten.”

“It’s not forgotten. Don’t you think it!” Tessa retorted cheerfully.

Nanta was introduced as Rosamund’s niece, Rosalind Kane. When she had played for two dances, Mrs. Thistle called to her.

“Your music’s delightful! Do you want a job? Or are you a titled bloke, like the Rose Queen?”

Nanta laughed out. “I am, but I don’t like it, please. I’m not ready for a job yet; I’m coming to school after Easter, to learn to make puddings.”

“Good for you! If you ever want a job, let me know. I can find you plenty of this sort of work.”

“Thank you very much,” Nanta said sedately.

The closing party of the school was shadowed for the Queens by grievous news from America. Beatrice, seemingly on the way to recovery, had had a bad relapse and was once more very ill. Joy was anxious and unhappy, though greatly helped by Queen Garden and Barbara.

“She won’t get home in time,” Jen said gloomily. “They won’t let her travel.”

“I’m very much afraid of it,” Rosamund agreed. “It’s a great disappointment, and I’m afraid she’s feeling very bad about it. But she’ll be quite all right in New York, and her safety is the first thing, after all.”

“At this rate none of them will be home for May-day, and Jansy’s procession—if it *is* Jansy’s!—will be a very poor one. Green, Striped, Wild Rose, Strawberry and Garden Queens all in New York! They’d better meet and celebrate on their own. They could have a dinner and do the Helston Furry round the table,” Jen chuckled.

“Joy’s hands will be too full for the Helston Furry for some time,” Rosamund said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

QUEEN JANICE

“Jean and I have invited the Hamlet Club to the barn, for a half-term party.” Marigold spoke on the telephone to Joan Raymond, one day in February. “It’s on Saturday week. You’ll come, won’t you? We particularly want you to be there.”

“I’ll come, because I like parties,” Joan promised. “But why do you want me so particularly?”

“We like to have you there. Everybody’s coming; the countess and Lady Jen and Maidlin and the President. We want to have a lot of old Queens, and we hope you’ll M.C. in turn.”

“We might do that much for you,” Joan responded. “Is Rosalind going to play?”

“Some of the time, but we want her to dance, so Lady Virginia will come too. There’s still nearly a month before she gets married.”

“We’ll all come, if those two are going to play. Their music is a great attraction. But what is the party for, Littlejan?”

“Half-term. I told you. Thanks so much! Goodbye!” and Marigold rang off.

“Aunty Joan’s suspicious,” she chuckled. “But somebody else isn’t and that’s all that matters. Aunty Joan will talk to the others, but that won’t do any harm.”

Joan did, indeed, discuss with the rest of the Queens the meaning of the sudden invitation, but none of them knew any more than she did.

“If they’re going to choose the new Queen and it’s to be Jansy, of course they’d want to make sure you’d be there,” Rosamund pointed out.

“It’s much too early to choose the Queen!” Joan protested.

“I fancy they’ve made up their minds. They may be finding it hard to keep the secret. Has Jansy any ideas on the subject?”

“I’ve seen no sign of any. Nobody would expect the Club to choose the Queen in February.”

“Oh, well, we shall know at the party! Have you heard any more from Joy?”

“Nothing definite, but she won’t be able to come home as soon as she’d hoped. She’ll be all right, of course, but it’s very disappointing. Gracie Gray is a treasure and Joy is grateful to you and Hyacinth. Beatrice is improving, but very slowly.”

“Poor old Joy! She does have hard luck! But she comes through in the end.”

“We shall have her home by May or June. I’m going to ask the President to drive round by Margia’s and bring her to this party. Margia isn’t strong enough to play yet, but she’ll like to be at a party again, and I want her to meet Rosalind and Lady Virginia. She’ll enjoy their music.”

“What a very Joan-like idea! Good for you! I’d go myself for Margia, but the President is much nearer.”

“Oh, yes! It will be easier for Cicely than for any of us. Boys, twins, and tinies all right?”

“Splendid!” Rosamund laughed and rang off.

The countess was living a quiet, healthful life, with plenty of riding and driving, with dancing whenever any offered, and with many friends coming to the Castle. Her husband’s health was good and he seemed stronger than for some years, so her mind was at rest concerning him, for the time, at least. The children were well, the babies growing fast, Big

Twins trotting about and having a great deal to say, though not everybody could understand their attempts. Lord Verriton was a sturdy youth of three, and Roderick, at six years old, was not yet asking the awkward question—"Why have the other children Lords and Ladies in their names, when I'm just Roddy Kane?" It must come, Rosamund knew, but so far he was content to call the parents who had adopted him mother and daddy and not to worry about family history. Rosamund was so well and strong that she was beginning to grudge the two years' rest from babies which the doctors had decreed. She wanted another boy, and her friends doubted if she would be as patient as they wished.

"We shall have the Honourable Geoffrey-Something coming along before Big Twins are three years old," Jen remarked, when she and Joan met at Maidlin's house to discuss the coming party.

"He's to be called Geoff, if they have another boy," Maidlin said, handing out cups of tea. "It's long enough now since little Geoff died; people will like to hear the name again. If they have a girl, she'll be Rosella."

"If they have a girl, they'll have two," Jen mocked. "All Rosamund's daughters come double."

"I hope they'll have another boy, but it won't be just yet. Rosamund is still being good and obeying her doctors."

"Little Geoff will come along some day, I expect. He'll round off the family nicely," Joan said.

The countess was shown in, wearing riding kit. "I remember the first time I rode over to see Joan. I wasn't used to it, and I had to give in and send for the car to take me home. That was the day I met our Marigold. I kidnapped her and her mother and took them home with me. Well, Joan, are we going to congratulate you on a daughter Queen, after this party?"

"I know no more than you do," Joan assured her. "Marigold won't say a word."

"Then it's Jansy, for certain," Rosamund retorted.

There was a good muster of Abbey Queens in the barn for the half-term party, and it was evident from Marigold's suppressed excitement, as she and Jean welcomed the guests, that something was going to happen. Her dark eyes were unusually bright and she was eager and radiantly happy. Jean, a senior of seventeen by now, was quieter and more matter-of-fact, but she too looked full of secrets.

"What a tall girl you are, Queen Rosemary!" the countess said. "When do you go to college? I shall need you in my nursery as soon as your training is over. Agatha's young man won't wait much longer."

Jean's eyes brightened. Her great hope was to go to the Castle as under-nurse when her college course was completed.

"How kind of you to remember!" she exclaimed. "I'm leaving in July and starting college in the autumn."

"Good! I shall try to keep Agatha till you're ready. What are you and Marigold going to spring on us tonight?"

"You'll know very soon," the Queen smiled.

"Will you make a speech when you abdicate in May?" Rosamund teased.

"No, Lady Kentisbury," Jean said firmly. "I don't make speeches."

"Not even tonight? You are the reigning Queen, after all."

"Marigold can make the speeches," Jean retorted, and turned to welcome the President and Miriam and Margia.

"If it's Jansy, she's quite unconscious of it," Jansy's mother remarked, as she danced "Speed the Plough" with Jen.

Rosamund, standing on a chair to M.C., heard and nodded. "Jansy is happy and carefree and not expecting anything. I wonder—! Isn't Marigold a brat to keep us in suspense like this?"

"There's no suspense about young Janice," Jen grinned, as she and Joan stood neutral at the top of the set.

"You can come up here presently. I want to dance. Virginia's music always sets my feet going," Rosamund said.

"You shall have your turn," Joan promised. "Margia's enjoying it. I knew she would."

Then Jen led her away to visit the next woman and bob her curtsy, and the top place was taken by Littlejan and Maidlin.

"Tell me, Marigold!" the countess coaxed.

But Marigold only shook her head and laughed.

After the fourth dance, however, Joan was gently removed from the M.C.'s chair by the ex-Queen. "May I come up there, godmother?"

"Oh, please do, Marigold! But why this startling mode of address?" and Joan made way for her.

"I don't know. I just felt like it. I think I'm a bit excited tonight."

"You certainly are!" Joan glanced at her goddaughter's bright eyes and glowing face. "And doesn't it make her look pretty?" she said to herself.

Virginia's music came to a stop, at a hint from Rosamund. The dancers turned to gaze at Littlejan, all expectant, only one astonished.

"Whatever's up? What's Marigold doing?" cried Jansy.

"Girls! And Hamlets!" Marigold's voice rang out clearly. "The Club has asked me to tell you something. We've decided about the new Queen; we made up our minds ages ago; and we think she might as well know. We want Jansy Raymond, and we'll try to call her Queen Janice —"

"Me?" An astounded voice pealed out. "But—but I thought they didn't want me!"

"We all want you," Littlejan assured her. "Girls!—" and she led three hearty cheers.

Jansy had run to her mother. "Mother! Do they really mean it? I didn't know!"

"They seem to mean it very definitely," Joan assured her. "Won't that be fun, Janice? Two Queens in our house, an old one and a young one!" And she took Jansy's hand and led her out on to the cleared floor.

Virginia took the hint and struck up "Sellenger's Round," and Marigold leapt from her perch and ran to join in the ring with Rosamund. Nanta, bright-eyed, gave her hand to Jean; Phyl and Tessa made a couple; and with Jen and Maidlin these eight formed a small ring round the new Queen and her mother. The rest of the Club made a big circle round them and danced boisterously in their honour.

Jansy, overcome, hid her face in Joan's grey frock. Then she drew herself away, her eyes suspiciously bright, and bobbed curtsys to the ring, as the arms went up in the second figure.

"Shall I slip out and leave you alone?" Joan asked.

"Yes, Mother. Thank you for helping! I'm all right. I was only so much surprised."

Joan smiled and slipped through the crowd as the couples linked arms. Taking a place beside Jen and Maidlin, she danced the last figure without a partner; and Jen, setting to Maidlin the first time, turned from her at the repeat and honoured Joan instead.

At the end of the dance it was discovered that the new Queen had made her way through the setting couples and the ring was empty. They looked round for her and found her standing on the chair.

“Good for Jansy! Well done!” said Rosamund, as silence fell.

Jansy spoke out bravely. “Hamlet Clubbers, thank you very much indeed. But are you sure you really mean it? I didn’t think anybody wanted me. When the time came I was going to vote for Tessa, because she’s been so nice to me.”

“Me!” said Tessa. “Jolly of you! But they wouldn’t have me for Queen. I’m not an outstanding person in the Club!”

“I’m quite sure I’m not,” said the new Queen.

“Oh, yes, you are! ‘I *will not have* those crossings skipped!’” Tessa mocked.

“Tessa! You are mean!” Jansy thundered, scarlet and ashamed. “Can’t you ever forget?”

A shout of delighted laughter had gone up, and was repeated at sight of Jansy’s confusion.

Joan interposed. “Don’t rag her, Tessa. She was perfectly right. If you were really skipping the crossings of ‘Sticks,’ she couldn’t allow you to go on.”

“No, but she was so funny, when she danced with rage! Oh, we didn’t mind! We were frightfully much obliged to her; and we’ve never done it again! She made a real impression on us,” Tessa explained.

“Have you any more to say, Janice?” Joan asked. “Or shall we go on dancing?”

“Only thank you all very much again. And it’s still a long time till May; you’ve been in a great hurry this year! If you change your minds before the end of the term I shall quite understand,” Jansy said pluckily, as she sprang down from her perch.

“We’d decided, and we were afraid somebody would say something to you, so we thought we’d better tell you,” Littlejan explained. “We shan’t change our minds. Come and dance ‘Sticks’ with me, in a set with Tessa and Phyl. Then you can see what step they use in the first figure!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE JANSY-OF-THE-DIAMONDS

“I’m glad to have danced for you, Janice,” Nanta said, as they met presently in a longways set. “But now I’m going to play for your party; Virginia must have some dancing. You’ll be a jolly Queen. I’m so glad, Jansy!”

“Nice of you,” Jansy said fervently. “I’ll try.” And presently she refused partners and went to sit on the floor at Nanta’s side as she fiddled.

“Nanta Rose!” she said, at the end of a dance. “I don’t like to ask you—it seems fearful cheek! But you’re coming to school in May. I suppose you wouldn’t be my maid, would you? I’d rather have you than anyone, and it would please everybody. They’d like you to be in the procession.”

Nanta looked down at her happily. “That’s lovely of you, Jansy! But I want to see the procession. Will I see it properly, if I’m in it?”

“Oh yes! It won’t spoil it for you this year. You can watch the procession; all the row of Queens will go up on to the platform for Jean’s abdication; you can slip out while she’s being crowned with forget-me-nots by Marigold. You’re not needed till she comes to fetch me. Somebody else will see that I look all right; Mother will be there, you know. And I don’t have a crown to be put straight; the first time I go in, to be made Queen, I don’t have anything on my head.”

“It sounds very thrilling. I’m longing to see it. But I was to play for the dancing, Jan!”

Jansy looked up at her and laughed. “You can do that too. We want you to play. When I’m safely dumped on the throne, you can go on playing.”

“Are you nervous of the crowds and all the fuss?”

“Oh no! I’ve been seeing coronations as long as I can remember. I’ve been mother’s maid since I was quite young. At first I used to think I’d be Queen some day, because she’d been one; it seemed natural to be like mother. The Abbey twins and I used to talk about being Queens, because our mothers had been. But when I came to school everybody took me in hand and taught me different. I don’t think I swanked; I never meant to. I soon learned that you aren’t chosen unless you earn it. But I can’t see that I’ve earned it, even now.”

“You rescued the Hamlet Club when it was in a difficulty,” Nanta pointed out.

“What else could I have done, Nanta Rose?”

“You could have funked it and sent the girls away.”

Jansy shook her head. “I’d have been afraid of Marigold. Once they’d asked me, I had to do it.”

Jen, as M.C., called for “The Durham Reel,” and Nanta played the tune. “Aren’t you going to dance, Queen Janice?”

“No, I’ve had enough. There’s too much to think about. Mother!” as Joan came up to them. “Did you know?”

“I did not, Janice. We’ve all been trying to find out from Marigold what the party was about.”

“I thought it was just for half-term. Mother, I’ve asked Nanta Rose to be my maid.”

“Asked whom, Jansy?”

“Rosalind. It’s cheek, I know, but I want her.”

“And is Rosalind going to maid you?” Joan smiled at Nanta, as the riotous dance ended.

“I’ll be proud to do it,” Nanta said simply.

“Oh, good!” Jansy cried. “Thank you very much, Rosalind! Marigold, Rosalind is going to be my maid. Isn’t that nice of her?”

“Cheers!” said Littlejan. “We shall have Rosalind for Queen next.”

“That would be the very old following the very young,” Nanta retorted. “Jansy is very young to be Queen. By next year I’ll be far too old.”

“What colour would you choose, if you were Queen?” Jansy asked. “They know all about my blue.”

“Lavender,” Nanta said promptly. “You haven’t had a Lavender Queen, and there ought to be one. But I’ll be eighteen, and that’s too ancient.”

“Lady Jen was nineteen or twenty,” Littlejan remarked. “I suppose you know you’ll be called Lob or Sapphire, Jan?”

“Don’t make it Sapphira, that’s all!” Jansy grinned. “I don’t mind being Queen Lob.”

Margia Lane came to them. “I hear your train is to be deep blue, Jansy. Aren’t you the Lobelia Queen? Will you have a white border, with lobelia painted on it?”

Jansy looked up quickly. “Will you be able to do it? Oh, I’m glad! I was afraid it might be too much work. I didn’t want anybody else to do my train.”

“I wouldn’t like anyone else to do it, after all these years!”

“I’m terribly glad! But I don’t want a white border, please. It would look like a bandage, and it would spoil my blue.”

“I don’t think it would! But it shall be as you like. A rich blue train, lobelia blue, with a white lining; it will look very regal. But where am I to put your flowers? They won’t show on a blue robe. May I put a few white diamonds—diamond-shaped stars, as on playing-cards—here and there along the edges of the train, with a spray of lobelia in each? That wouldn’t look like a bandage!”

Jansy’s eyes were bright. “It sounds lovely. Yes, please, I’d like that. I’ll be Jansy-of-the-Diamonds. No one else has had diamonds.”

“I thought you were to be Jansy-Sapphire,” Nanta said. “Gilbert is giving the bridesmaids sapphire pendants on silver chains, because we’re wearing blue. May I wear mine at the coronation?”

“Oh, please do, Nanta Rose! You’ll need a white frock and a blue girdle. You will look pretty!”

Nanta laughed. “Blue is my favourite colour, and Virginia’s. What luck that I should be maid to a blue Queen!”

“Make Jansy’s train long, Margia,” Jen said, coming up to them. “She’s only a spot at present, but she’ll shoot up suddenly, now that she’s thirteen, mark my words! A short train would look terrible.”

“I’ll be careful of that,” Margia promised. “What about your picture, Jansy—my private present to the Queen? Will you have part of the Abbey?”

“Oh, yes, please!” Jansy said eagerly. “Could you possibly sit right inside the cloisters? Or would it be too dark?”

“Do you want the cloisters? It sounds gloomy,” Margia suggested.

“I want the broken edges of the cloister windows, to make a frame for a little view of the garth—the bright green showing through the dark frame.”

“That’s original! I’ll do the garth, with the door and windows of the chapter-house, framed in the tracery of the cloisters,” Margia promised.

“Oh, marvellous!” and Jansy’s face shone with delight.

The head girl, Olivia, came to give her congratulations, and then made way for others and turned to Nanta.

“I hear you’re coming to the Cookery school. That’s jolly good news! I’m starting in May, so we’ll be new together.”

“Thank you. I’m looking forward to it,” Nanta said, with the unconscious dignity which was so like Virginia’s and which reminded the girls of Rosamund.

“We shall have Rosalind to play whenever we want her, if she comes to school,” Jansy remarked.

“You’re in luck,” Jen told her.

“And she’s going to be my maid,” Jansy announced to the girls who were crowding up with good wishes.

“Oh, that’s jolly decent! Good for Rosalind!”

Nanta raised her fiddle and began to play “The Merry Merry Milkmaids,” and there was a rush to form sets.

“The Abbey has found a very nice fiddler! If she comes to live at the Hall, we shall have plenty of little dances, in this barn, just for the family!” Jen said solemnly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

JOY'S AMERICAN CHILDREN

The Queens were dressing for Jansy's crowning. The procession could not be complete, as the Green, Striped, Strawberry, Wild Rose, and Garden Queens were in New York, but cabled good wishes had come from them to the new little Queen, and everyone realised their absence could not be helped.

Rosamund and Hyacinth came in, and were greeted by the President and Miriam with eager questions. "Any word from Joy? Don't you expect news about now?"

"Any time now," Rosamund assented. "I'm glad Gracie Gray is there to help, for though Stripes is nearly well again she can't be fit for much yet. But with Queen Garden they'll pull through. What a poor little line of Queens for Janice!"

"Where's Joan?" Jen called across the room. "Has she made away with our Queen-elect?"

"I expect Jansy's started measles," the President said grimly.

"Oh, my dear, don't suggest it!" Jen cried. "Joan's been watching her for the last three weeks, to make sure she didn't go near any infection!"

"She was quite well last night," the Primrose Queen said, hearing the remark as she came in with Nesta, the Silver Queen. "I rang Joan up and asked her, knowing Jansy's little ways."

"Are young Joy and little Rose all right?" asked the President, looking at the back view of her golden crown of daffodils in a hand-mirror.

"Quite, but we call them Marjory and Dorothy now," Maidlin said with dignity. "Honesty takes great care of them."

"No little brother coming yet?"

"Not yet," Queen Primrose smiled. "Perhaps some day."

"I say, Maid, I've had an idea!" Rosamund drew her into a corner. "You know we're going to marry Hugh to one of your twins?"

Maidlin's black eyes laughed at her. "I know you're going to try. But Hugh may prefer Joan's Jillian."

"We'll make Roddy marry your second girl and she'll be aunt to her own twin-sister."

Maidlin stared at her and then went off into a peal of laughter. "Oh, Ros! How silly you are!"

"What's the matter with Primrose?" the President asked severely. "She doesn't often shriek like that."

"Only Rosamund talking rubbish," Maidlin retorted.

"It isn't rubbish; it's fact," Rosamund said haughtily. "I'm sure Marjory will love to call Dorothy Aunty."

"I'm sure she won't! Do you manage to remember that Roddy is uncle to Lord Verriton and all the little girls?" and Maidlin smiled at Nanta, who was waiting shyly in a corner, nursing her fiddle.

"*All* the little girls! It sounds as if there were a dozen!" Rosamund grumbled.

"There will be, if you go on at this rate," Jen mocked.

Nanta smiled back at Maidlin. "Roddy doesn't seem like an uncle. Wasn't he good at the wedding?"

“It was a very pretty wedding,” Maidlin said. “Virginia looked lovely, and you four made a pretty blue background for her. I hear from Rosamund that you may have another before very long—a double wedding, for your beautiful dark sisters, who don’t look in the least like your sisters.”

“We don’t know yet, but we hope it’s going to happen,” Nanta admitted.

“Where have they gone for the honeymoon?” the President asked.

“We’ve lent them Vairy Castle, in Scotland,” Rosamund explained. “We’re turning it into Honeymoon House. Geoffrey and I went there; Maid and Jock had three weeks after they’d been to New York; now Virginia and Gilbert are staying there. The local people are thrilled by all these nice young couples. I wonder who’ll be the next?”

“I suppose you’ll live at the Abbey when you come to school next term?” the President looked at Nanta. “Jolly for them to have a fiddler on the premises!”

“That depends on Lady Quellyn,” Nanta said gravely. “She doesn’t know me yet, and she may not have room.”

“True, very true!” Cicely agreed. “Marigold, how well your flowers suit you! Isn’t it early for marigolds?”

Littlejan, wearing her orange crown at last, since tonight the forget-me-nots would be Jean’s, explained. “Aunty Joan forced them on in her greenhouse, and some lobelia for Jansy to carry.”

“You look rather well in them,” the President said, with careful moderation.

“We mustn’t give the very young exaggerated ideas,” she murmured to Jen, as she turned away. “But Marigold’s growing into something rather choice.”

“Yes, Jandy Mac will be proud of her elder daughter. Oh, here’s Joan! Bringing Jansy safe and sound, but a little shy,” Jen exclaimed. “Don’t be scared, Janice-of-the-Diamonds-and-Sapphires! What a beautiful train!”

“I love the blue,” Jansy said, drawing it round her to show it off. “And my dear little bits of lobelia in my diamonds. Look what came from Kentisbury this morning! Aunty Ros is kind!” and she showed a tiny sapphire brooch pinned to the front of her long white gown.

“Everybody!” Joan cried, as she came in, wearing her violet train and crown, for she had dressed and had robed Jansy while they talked to the headmistress. “News from Joy, at last! All’s well, and they’ll be home in June.”

“And—and—tell us, Joan!” There was a shout as the Queens turned to her.

“Madeline Rose is doing well, and she’s a little Abbey girl,” Joan said, with amused eyes. “Elizabeth and Margaret are nearly off their heads with pride and delight. Ivor spoke to me on the phone, just as we were starting.”

“A girl? Oh, good!” Rosamund cried.

“Only one?” Maidlin smiled. “I thought perhaps Joy would have twins again.”

“But how lonely!” Jen mocked. “One poor little lone lass? Where’s her other half? Fancy Joy letting down the family reputation like that!”

“I’m glad she’s another Abbey red-head,” said the President.

“I’m glad there is only one!” Rosamund remarked. “I don’t want anybody to equal my record. I hope no one will have double twins but me.”

“Even if Joy has twins again, she won’t equal your record,” Joan said calmly. “No one but you has had four daughters in a year. Joy’s girls belong to different families, in any case; two big Marchwoods and one small Quellyn.”

"It does sound lonely," Maidlin admitted. "The boys will have to be very good to the one small Quellyn girl."

"I expect she'll be completely spoilt—though I hope Joy will manage better than that," Joan laughed. "You're evidently to be godmother, and Rosamund too."

"Oh, yes! That was promised a long while ago," Maidlin agreed. "How proud Joy will be of her big family!"

"Joy and her American children!" Jen shook her head reproachfully. "Richard was a little American. I wouldn't have minded if Joy had had two! I don't care how many of you people have twin daughters—Ros can have a third set, if she likes—so long as nobody has twin sons but me. But I do think Joy might have called her Jane. Then I could have been a godmother as well."

"Madeline Rose Jane? Oh, Jenny-Wren—no!" Maidlin cried.

"Your turn may come. Joy will probably have another girl before she's satisfied," Rosamund said.

"Then she must be called Jane Gwyneth—no, there'll be a Gwyneth at Plas Quellyn some day, if I know our Robin! Then Jane Myfanwy—or Jane Dilys; that would do—Dilys Jane. Ivor should name one of his own daughters, look you, and Dilys is a ferry pretty small name, whateffer. Why not, intee?" Jen said, in what she imagined to be a strong Welsh accent.

"Now it's quite certain we won't be able to live at the Hall," Nanta whispered to Littlejan. "There won't be room for us. We shall have to be boarders with Jean."

"Oh, I don't know!" Marigold said hopefully. "We might be rather useful. There'll be heaps to do."

"There are plenty of nurses." Nanta looked gloomy.

"Couldn't you slip out and start fiddling?" Littlejan suggested. "They'll talk for hours about Madeline Rose, and the poor Hamlet Club doesn't know what's happening. Go and set them dancing with 'Haste to the Wedding,' Rosalind!"

"Ought I? Isn't it rather rude?"

"Not a bit. It's rude of these Queens to forget the Club. You know the way; stand where I showed you, just below the platform. Play the tune and start in earnest as soon as they make the lines. If we don't appear, go on to the second dance; I gave you the list. Honestly, Rosalind, it's the only thing to do. Nothing else will stop this baby-chatter."

"Please, Nanta Rose!" Jansy begged. "I want to get it over."

Nanta could not resist the appeal. She slipped out with her violin, and they heard the music begin.

"Jenny-Wren, you aren't Welsh!" the President was protesting.

"No, but I haf heard our Robin say it. I shall tell Joy that some day she must have Dilys Jane and that I shall be her godmother."

"Hadn't we better go to the hall, President?" Joan asked. "They're dancing; they'll be wondering where we are."

"I forgot this was a coronation and not an Abbey reunion on Joy's account," the President admitted. "Yes, we've kept them waiting too long, but they'll understand when they hear there's a new little Abbey girl. Lead the way, White Queen! Rosamund, how marvellously your Rosalind plays for dancing!"

"You should hear her play Mozart and Beethoven," the Rose Queen rejoined, as she took her place in the line behind Nesta. "Dear, dear! How odd this feels! I'm used to having Wild

Rose in front of me and then Stripes between her and Honesty. Have you been cherishing those silver pennies all winter, Honesty?"

The Silver Queen admitted it. "I gathered them last autumn. I suppose your roses are forced on?"

"More or less. We can usually produce a rose or two."

"Having four rose-buds of your own on the premises!" Jen mocked, taking her place behind Rosamund. "I hope Lady Rosalind will be duly impressed. I must say I think we're rather a fine-looking lot."

"But we can't leave our new little Queen alone," the President said, pausing in the doorway, "and her maid is being the music out there. Jansy will run away, or swoon, or have measles, if she has nobody with her."

"I won't, President! Oh, I won't!" Jansy cried, flaring up at once.

"I'll stay with Jansy." Mary Devine had been waiting quietly till she was needed. She had shown no surprise at the news of the American baby, for Joan, at Ivor's request, had rung up the Hall just before leaving home.

"Bless you, Mary-Dorothy Devine! Always there when we need you!" the President said fervently.

"The White Queen is waiting for you, President. Janice will be all right now," Mary assured her.

Jansy gave her a smile of thanks. "I'm not really frightened, and I don't feel in the least like measles, but it's nice to have somebody to talk to, and it's nice that the somebody is you, Mary-Dorothy."

Cries of "The Queens!" had brought Nanta's music to a pause. She had been coached by Littlejan and knew what was expected of her. She laid her violin in its case on the floor below the platform, and slipped to the door. A chair had been left for her; she stepped on to it and watched the proceedings over the heads of the crowd. Those nearest smiled at her and made kind remarks about her music; she thanked them shyly, her eyes on the procession.

Gravely approving, she saw the long row of Queens mount the platform, saw Jean kneel to receive her forget-me-not crown from Marigold, saw her bow to the cheering crowd and refuse to make a speech. Then Jean went down the hall again with great dignity, to fetch the new Queen, and Nanta fled through the corridors to find Jansy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

QUEEN LOB

“Did it look nice, Nanta Rose?” Jansy gave her a brave smile.

“Beautiful. Jean makes a lovely Queen; her dark green and powder-blue are so pretty, and the forget-me-nots look just right with them. Is there anything I have to do for you?”

“No, I’m all right, thanks. Mary-Dorothy took care of me,” Jansy explained, as Mary slipped away to find her seat and watch the crowning.

“Your train’s a glorious colour and it suits you,” Nanta said warmly.

“Nice of you to cheer me up! I’m not frightened; not really. Here’s Jean-Rosemary at last. Oh, Jean, that crown does look lovely!”

“Come on, Queen Janice!” said Jean. “You’re gey bonny, my lassie, and you’re no’ blate. That means shy,” she added kindly.

Jansy laughed and followed her out into the hall, the blue train held up by Rosalind.

“Carry it nicely, Nanta Rose,” said the new Queen. “The hall’s always dusty when they’ve been dancing.”

“I’ll be very careful,” her maid promised.

On the platform the Queens watched them come. Joan’s eyes were satisfied; her girl had made good in the school and she was proud and happy.

“Pretty kids!” the President said. “Joan, your daughter looks lovely. Was that blue her own choice?”

“Oh yes!” Joan smiled. “She loves the colour. She’s quite prepared to be called Queen Lob.”

“It’s a real old-fashioned Victorian posy of lobelia. Did you make it for her? I thought so. Rosamund’s tall niece is pretty too, with those thick yellow plaits.”

“Rosalind and Jansy are great friends,” Joan said. “That week-end school brought them together in a very special way.”

“Jansy was a little brick over that. Nice for the Abbey to have a fiddler of its own!”

The Queens rose to welcome Jansy, who curtseyed to them and to the school, and then knelt to be crowned with white narcissus by Jean. As she took the empty central throne, with her mother on one side and the ex-Queen on the other, a shout of welcome went up again from the school. Nanta knelt and drew the blue robe forward and arranged it round the Queen’s feet, and Jansy, starry-eyed as her crown, looked down and thanked her.

“Now, Nanta Rose, please play for us some more. I’ll find it terribly hard not to dance!”

“You couldn’t dance in all this!” Nanta laughed up at her.

“No, but soon we’ll have a party and mother will undress me and I’ll have one dance before we go home.”

Nanta left her in state and took up her fiddle again. She began to play “The Irish Washerwoman,” and the Club seized partners and romped into “The Circassian Circle.”

“All this,” Rosamund remarked, as she watched the dancing, “is very good for the school. I’m glad it’s still going on and is likely to go on under Jansy’s rule. It means so much to us when we were here—the Club, and the motto, and the friendship, and the dancing.”

“It’s meant so much to us all along, and it does still,” Maidlin added.

“I hope it will go on for another twenty years and mean as much to our girls, when they’re ready for it. I shall send Rosemary to school soon,” Jen said.

“Yes, you live near enough. But mine won’t come here,” Rosamund observed. “We live too far away for a daily journey, and besides—no, we shan’t send ours here.”

Jen glanced at her. “I suppose not. I’d board them for you and send them down in the car, but I expect you and Geoffrey will have other ideas. Will it be Roedean? Or Cheltenham?”

“Roedean would be convenient; it’s fairly near us. But it’s rather far ahead,” Rosamund laughed. “Even Big Twins haven’t been running about for very long! We shall have a good governess for the four, for some years, and Maid’s little girls will join the Castle schoolroom, we hope.”

“I hope so, too,” Maidlin agreed. “This would be too far for ours to come every day.”

“We shall try to bag Barbara Honor, when Joy brings her home; or at least in a few years,” Rosamund said. “I’d like to have my girls trained by a Hamlet Club Queen. Joy’s twins must go to school now; they’re twelve years old. I’ve no doubt Babs Honor has taught them well, but they need school. We’re going to talk to Wild Rose as soon as we have the chance. Later on we may send all the little Roses to Roedean; or perhaps Wood End would do. I’d like them to go there; they’ve made a good job of several girls, Tansy Lilloco, for one.”

“And Robin!” Maidlin reminded her.

“If Joy doesn’t need Gracie Gray, the Garden Queen, I shall ask her to come to us,” Rosamund went on. “We shall lose Agatha before long; Lilac is coming presently, but we can do with still more help. Hyacinth would be greatly intrigued to have both Lilac and Queen Garden to work with! Come and change for the party, Maid; we’ll show those husbands of ours, hiding in the corner, that we aren’t such old ladies, after all!”

Margia Lane had been watching the crowning and the procession of Queens, whose robes she had designed and decorated. Now she came to Nanta and placed a chair beside her.

“Will you lend me your fiddle? I’ll be very careful; I’m quite sure it’s a treasure. You ought to dance in Jansy’s honour. The Queens have gone to change.”

Nanta handed her the violin. “I’d love to dance for Jansy-Sapphire-Lob! Are you sure it won’t be too much for you?”

“Not if I sit to play. I prefer to stand, but I’m not strong yet. What shall we have to start the Queen’s party? You choose!”

“‘Boatman,’” said Nanta. “Or ‘Althea.’ They’ll like those.”

“What a nice choice! I know you’re a dancer, by the way you play.”

“Oh yes!” Nanta agreed, and went to ask Tessa for a dance.

Jansy came running out in her green dancing frock, all signs of her high position laid aside, except the sapphire brooch from Kentisbury and the Queen’s silver medal, with its inscription—“Queen Janice was crowned by the Hamlet Club as its twenty-fourth Queen—” and the date.

“With me, Nanta Rose!” she cried. “I’m so glad you’re having a dance!”

“Miss Lane’s music is lovely,” Nanta said, as they took the head of a line for “The Spaniard.” “The Hamlet Club’s been lucky to have her all these years. Does she dance herself?”

“Hardly ever, but I have seen her join in. Nanta Rose, I want to say something, but it seems fearful cheek.”

“Go ahead!” Nanta said, her eyes laughing at her small partner, as she turned her with both hands.

“You’re a new girl, aren’t you?” Jansy asked earnestly, as Nanta led her down the middle.

“Very much so,” Nanta assented in real amusement.

They parted, to cast round the second couple, but met again in a moment in the ring.

“It’s part of my job now to look after new girls and make them feel at home. If ever there’s anything I can do—tell you who people are, or introduce you to anybody you like the look of—you will tell me, won’t you?”

“I’ll come straight to you for help! It’s a very kind thought, Janice-of-the-Sapphires-and-Diamonds!”

“Lob!” Jansy grinned. “I know I’ll be called Queen Lob.”

“A dear little name for a nice little Queen,” Lady Rosalind assured her.

[The end of *A Fiddler for the Abbey* by Elsie Jeanette Dunkerley (as Elsie J. Oxenham)]