

RACHEL IN THE ABBEY

*Elsie J.
Oxenham*



Illustrated by M. D. Neilson

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RACHEL
IN THE ABBEY

by
ELSIE JEANETTE OXENHAM

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CHAPTER ONE

THE RETURN OF BENEDICTA

“But it’s all different!” The girl, small and slight, with lint-white hair curling on her neck, ran to the Abbey wall and stood gazing, astounded. Where she remembered a green meadow, surrounding the beautiful old gate-house, there now lay a sea of flowers. By the gate-house itself stood tall white lilies and bushes of red and yellow roses; the gravel drive leading to the Abbey had borders of pansies and bushes of sweet-briar; against the grey walls were banks of blue and mauve delphiniums and rose and lemon lupins; a path winding among the flower-beds was edged with lobelia and marigolds, with bushes of lavender among them.

“It’s wonderful! But how have they done it?” the fair girl marvelled.

“You’re sure you like it?” Almost at her feet, on the other side of the low wall, a girl rose from her knees behind a big clump of yellow loosestrife. She had been weeding and her trug was full of grass and willow-herb.

“Oh! I didn’t see you,” cried the visitor, and eyed her in delight, for the gardener wore corduroy shorts and a green shirt, and her hair was covered with a green scarf.

“No, but I heard you,” she retorted. “You’ve evidently been here before.”

“Yes—oh yes! I stayed at the Hall for some months four years ago, and I slept in the Abbey for a few nights, in the little room that opens off the cloisters. I’m Benedicta Bennett.”

“Bene—? That’s an odd name!”

“Some people call me Ben, or Benneyben. I like Benedicta best. I’m not particularly blessed, at the moment, and I’m afraid I’m not really much of a blessing, but it is my name. There was no garden here four years ago.”

“There was no garden here one year ago. It was only started last spring.”

“Oh! Somebody’s worked jolly hard!”

“Me. I mean, I did it, with a little help and a lot of gifts of plants. Everybody gave me things.”

“Do you work here all the time?” Benedicta asked, wide-eyed.

“It’s a full-time job. The grass of the old meadow keeps coming through.” She held up her trug. “You see?”

“It will, of course. It will take a long while to get rid of it. What a lovely job! Caring for the Abbey garden! You don’t want an assistant, do you?”

“This is very sudden!” the gardener said solemnly. “Are you proposing to join me on the spot?”

“There’s nothing I’d like better. Nobody wants me very much and I adore the Abbey. I’d love to do something for it.”

“Why does nobody want you? Are you so bad to live with?”

“No, not that,” Benedicta said ruefully. “But there isn’t anybody left. My mother and father have died, and my only brother is married. I live with them and I love Gail, my sister-in-law; but she’s busy with the baby and I’m not needed.”

“Did you come to have another look at the Abbey? Oh, by the way, I’m Damaris Ellerton.”

“What a pretty name!” Benedicta felt something strange in the garden girl’s tone as she said her name and wondered what it meant. “Yes, I’ve been staying with my godparents, and

I'm spending a few days with cousins before going home to Gail and Jimmy. So I came to have a look at the dear Abbey. But I never expected to see a lovely garden!"

"I bet you didn't. You really do like it? I'm always a little afraid that people who used to know it will miss the meadow. It's all right for strangers; they always like it."

"Oh, I like it," Benedicta said earnestly. "It's a beautiful garden and a fascinating way to go to the Abbey, through banks of flowers. I'd like to see every corner of it, but I mustn't take up your time. I'll go on to the Abbey."

"Ray will take you round; Rachel, my sister. There are no tourists in there now."

"But where's Mrs. Watson? She was so kind, when I slept there. Has she gone away?"

"No—I mean, yes. She died last winter."

"Oh! I'm sorry. I suppose she was getting rather old?"

"She was," Damaris assented. "She was our aunt, so we took on the job. Rachel looks after the tourists and I do the garden."

"And you live in the Abbey and work for it all the time? Lucky you! Who thought of the garden first?"

"I did. *Moi qui vous parle*. It was my idea."

"I'm jolly glad you did. You've made a lovely place of it. And all in a year!"

"Less—six months. We came here in February. I was ill; I'd had an accident. We came as soon as I was well enough."

"You look all right now." Benedicta eyed her curiously.

"Oh, I'm very fit! I wasn't needed for the tourists and I had no job. I thought of the garden, and Mrs. Raymond gave me leave to try. She likes it. Are you going to see them at the Hall?"

"Not today," Benedicta said firmly. "I asked in the village who was at the Hall now, and they told me Lady Quellyn had just come home, this afternoon. I can't possibly butt in when she's only been here for an hour. Tomorrow morning I shall come to see her. I love Lady Joy and the twins! The woman in the village said there were a lot of new tiny children as well."

"Quellyn infants, three of them; David and Richard and a very new baby girl. I haven't seen them yet, but Lady Joy and the twins hurled themselves out of the car when they saw the garden and came rushing to look, with shrieks of joy," Damaris said solemnly.

"Didn't they know?"

"No, I begged that it should be a secret. They've been in New York for nearly two years. They knew we were living in the Abbey, but they weren't told about the garden. I wanted to hear what they said."

"And they liked it? I'm sure they did. Lady Joy likes anything beautiful."

"Yes, they liked it. If you're coming here tomorrow, where do you mean to sleep? Under a bush?"

"At the Music-School. I asked Miss Betty if she'd have me for one night, and she was very kind and said she had room for me. She remembered me quite well."

"She would, if you stayed at the Hall for some months. Why did you? Four years ago? That would be when we were in Italy."

"I've just come from Rome; my godfather lives there."

"I was studying in Milan," Damaris said briefly. "Why did you stay at the Hall for so long?"

"I had an accident in the Abbey. Lady Joy said I must stay till I was better. My mother was ill, so they kept me at the Hall."

“An accident in the Abbey?” Damaris raised her brows. “How did you manage that? It seems a fairly harmless place! Unless you fell out of a dormitory window, I don’t see what you could do that was at all dangerous.”

Benedicta reddened. “That’s exactly what happened. I fell through the door of the night-stair, at the end of the monks’ dormitory.”

Damaris stared at her. “What on earth did you do that for? Are you unsteady on your feet?”

“No. It wasn’t my fault. Are the twins all right? They’ll have grown a lot.”

“Elizabeth and Margaret? Other people in the family have twins too. Oh, they’re big girls now. Twelve, aren’t they?”

“They must be; they were eight when I saw them last. It will seem odd! I suppose they’re tall and leggy?” Her eyes were roving over the garden. “I like your rock plants! What lovely red stone you’ve found for the rockery in the corner!”

“I call that one Wirral; it’s made of Wirral stone. Oh, don’t you know the Wirral? It’s in Cheshire; that funny bit that sticks out, with the Mersey on one side and the Dee on the other. A friend told me about it and said the red stone would make a lovely rockery, so I sent for some. The other rockery, with the pink sedum all over it, is called Windermere, because the grey stone came from there. Our home’s really among the Lakes.”

“Wirral and Windermere! What fun!” Benedicta laughed. “I’d like to scramble over those red rocks. But I’ll go to see the dear Abbey first.”

“I’ll come along,” Damaris said. “I’ll introduce you to Rachel. She’s the Abbey Guide; I’m the Abbey Gardener.”

“I envy you both very much,” Benedicta said wistfully, as they went down the drive to the entrance.

CHAPTER TWO

CONSULTING RACHEL

“A tourist, Ray,” Damaris announced, as she unlocked the entrance gate.

There was no reply, and she looked round indignantly. “Where is the girl? This won’t do! If you were a real tourist you’d be kept waiting. I shall have to speak to the Abbey Guide.”

“But if I were a real tourist, I should have rung the bell, and it clangs so that you can hear it all over the Abbey,” Benedicta laughed. “Your sister hasn’t heard us, that’s all.”

“Very true. We didn’t ring the bell. Here goes!—no, we’ll go and surprise her. She’ll be in her workroom.”

She led the way to the gleam of green which meant the cloister garth. Benedicta followed eagerly, her eyes going from one well-loved spot to another—the beautiful wide windows of the refectory, the door and pillared windows of the chapter-house, the lancets of the monks’ dormitory above.

Damaris had turned from the garth into the cloisters. “Ray works in here.”

“The little room where I once slept? What a good idea! What work does she do? Oh, I hear a typewriter!”

“Rachel Ellerton, the celebrated authoress,” Damaris announced, as she opened the door.

“Idiot!” said the girl seated at the typewriter, as she took out her page. “Oh, am I wanted? I didn’t hear the bell.”

She rose quickly, a tall pretty girl with wavy dark hair cut short, wearing a white gown like a monk’s robe, hanging straight and smooth, with a loosely-knotted girdle. An embroidered gold badge on the breast proclaimed her—“Abbey Guardian.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Did you ring the bell?”

“My fault,” Damaris admitted. “We rang no bell. I brought the tourist in. She’s not a real one; she’s an old friend of the Abbey, come to have another look at it. Her name’s Benedicta Bennett.”

“I’ve heard of you from Mary-Dorothy.” Rachel turned to Benedicta. “How nice of you to come back!”

“Nice *for* me!” Benedicta corrected her promptly. “I’m longing to see the Abbey again. I once slept in this little room. You’ve made it very pretty.”

She looked round at the old grey walls, deep blue curtains to window and corner cupboard, blue coverlet on the bed and blue cloth on the table by the window. On the bed were piled cushions of every vivid colour—orange, green, gold, blue and scarlet.

Rachel saw her look. “Those are for the family, when they want to sit on the steps outside. It’s not good to sit on bare stone!”

“I remember. Don’t they brighten up this little room? Are you really writing a story? I’m sorry I’ve stopped you!”

“Only retyping a short thing that has been sent out and returned so often that it looked grubby,” Rachel said grimly. “I’ve made a few alterations and I’m going to send it out again, but I thought it might as well look clean and new. So much for Marry’s ‘celebrated authoress’ rubbish! Shall I take you round the Abbey, or would you rather wander about by yourself? I expect you know all the stories, and I’m sure you can be trusted!”

“Nice of you! I won’t cut my name on the wall of the chapter-house!”

“Oh, you know that old story? I’m sure you won’t.”

“You’d better go with her, all the same,” Damaris remarked. “She once fell out of the door of the night-stair, and smashed herself, and had to be nursed at the Hall. She might do it again.”

“I wasn’t alone when it happened,” Benedicta said, with dignity. “I’d never have done it if I’d been on my own.”

“Were you playing touch-last in the dormy?”

“Something like that.”

“I know the story,” Rachel exclaimed. “You saved Margaret-Twin from falling, but fell yourself. It was when the twins hid in the Abbey, in the dark, and everybody was hunting for them. Margaret was scared by an owl and rushed away, and you saved her just on the edge of the window. You couldn’t save yourself, and you fell and were badly hurt. Mary-Dorothy told me the story, when you were away at school, Marry.”

“Jolly fine!” Damaris eyed the embarrassed Benedicta, and then looked at Rachel, a look full of meaning.

“I couldn’t let the kid fall out. She might have been killed,” Benedicta protested. “Why did you look at your sister like that?”

“What did you do to yourself?” Damaris avoided the answer.

“Broke one arm and a rib and put things inside me all queer. And I banged my head and was concussed, but not for very long. Why did you——”

“Somebody’s coming.” Rachel cut her short. “No, not visitors; someone from the Hall. I heard voices.”

Damaris glanced through the window. “Two Queens and a maid of honour are crossing the garth. There’s a compliment for you, Benedicta Bennett!”

“May Queens, from that school where they dance? Who are they? I didn’t think there was anyone at the Hall old enough, or young enough, to be a May Queen,” Benedicta said. “Is it some of the grown-ups? They were Queens once. No, it’s girls,” as she looked out at the garth. “Who are they, Miss Ellerton?”

“Oh, Rachel, please! We’ll introduce you, unless you’d rather slip away into the Abbey?”

“The Abbey won’t disappear. I’d like to see these new girls.”

“I don’t know about ‘new,’” Damaris laughed. “Queen Marigold wouldn’t like that. As for Queen Lob, she almost belongs here.”

“Queen Lob? She couldn’t be called Lob!”

“She could, and she is. Lobelia-blue, you know. You saw the marigolds and lobelia on my path? That’s why; the Marigold and Lobelia Queens.”

“Oh! What a nice idea!”

The schoolgirls were in the doorway, and Benedicta drew back and watched and listened with interest.

“May two Queens and a maid consult the Abbey Guide?” The speaker was a girl of sixteen and a half, with a mop of dark curly hair; a second senior, some months older, was behind her; the third was a much younger girl, only thirteen and a half and small for her age, with dark red hair in two neat little plaits. All three wore the cotton frocks which were the summer uniform of the Wycombe school; the dark girl in green, the tall fair one in lavender, and the red-haired child in blue.

Benedicta’s eyes fastened on her and she grinned. “One person I know, anyway! And that biggest girl is like somebody. I know! She’s like the Countess of Kentisbury. I wonder who

she is?"

The tall girl had two long yellow plaits hanging forward on her breast and deep blue eyes. Benedicta, gazing at her curiously, remembered a picture she had seen at Kentisbury Castle during her schooldays, of the Countess as May Queen at school, with just such long plaits.

"What's up, Marigold?" Rachel was asking. "What can I do?"

The dark-haired girl spoke eagerly. "We want to know what you think. We've made up our minds, but we'd like to tell you about it. Mary-Dorothy says we're silly, but we think you'll understand."

"Why did you say that?" the elder girl asked. "Rachel knows now that it's something silly. She'll agree with Mary-Dorothy."

"She might not. She's a lot younger than Mary," the Marigold Queen argued. "And she'll think for herself, in any case."

"I certainly shall! What is it you've made up your minds to do?" Rachel demanded.

"To run away," Marigold said simply.

"But only to the Manor," the younger girl cried.

Rachel sat down and stared at them. "Are you all quite crazy?"

"Sounds mad to me," Damaris remarked.

"It isn't, really," Marigold pleaded. "We feel we ought not to be at the Hall, now that Lady Joy has come home. There's such a crowd, with Sir Ivor, and the big twins, and the two little boys, and the new baby, and the nurses, and I suppose the twins' governess is somewhere about, though we haven't seen her yet. They don't want three schoolgirls as well. The house is packed."

"Have you asked Lady Joy if she'd like you to go?"

"No, because she'd feel she had to ask us to stay. We want to save her the trouble. We thought we'd slip along to the Manor and be out of the way. Lady Jen has room for us."

Rachel frowned. "Do you mean that Lady Jen approves?"

"No, she says we're silly cuckoos," Marigold admitted reluctantly. "But she'll have us, if we're really keen."

"I should have thought the Manor was overflowing already," Damaris observed.

"Attics," Marigold said briefly.

"We're going to camp out in the attics," the younger girl explained. "It will be fun, Rachel!"

"And you want the fun of it," Rachel said ruthlessly. "That's what is at the bottom of your plan. I agree with Mary-Dorothy. Unless Lady Joy wants you to go, it's quite daft. You ought to ask her first."

"But she'll feel she has to say——"

"What do you think about it, Rosalind Kane?" Rachel looked at the tall girl.

"Then she is related to the Countess!" Benedicta said to herself. "Their name is Kane, and she has a rose-name, like all their girls. I wonder who she is?"

"I feel we ought to be boarders at school," Rosalind said. "I've always expected we should be, when the family came home. We must be in the way, now that the house is so full. But there's hardly a month left of the term; it isn't worth while going as boarders now. We shall all go away in the holidays, and next term I suppose we shall live at school. I thought perhaps, just for this month, we ought to go somewhere else."

"Yes, that's reasonable," Rachel acknowledged. "But not without asking Lady Quellyn, Rosalind."

“I don’t feel quite happy about that,” Rosalind admitted.

“Of course you don’t. It’s mad not to ask her,” Damaris declared. “I’m surprised at Littlejan Fraser, I really am.”

“Oh, Dammy!” Queen Marigold cried indignantly. “We thought you’d understand! I am disappointed in you.”

“You’re dealing with the crisis in the wrong way,” Damaris said severely. “It’s not for you to decide; it’s for Lady Joy. I should think again, if I were you.”

The three looked at one another. They did not want to give up their plan.

“We haven’t time to think. We’re going right now,” Marigold said defiantly. “We took our suit-cases to the Manor this morning.”

“Are your rooms really needed for the family?” Rachel asked.

“N-no,” Marigold admitted. “Mary-Dorothy has fitted in everybody without using our rooms. But they’ve no spare room now; not a corner to put any visitor. I’m sure we ought to clear out.”

The youngest girl poked her in the ribs. “Littlejan, there’s somebody else here; somebody new.”

Marigold whirled round. “I never saw anybody but Rachel. Who is it?”

And the three looked critically at the stranger.

CHAPTER THREE

THE STORY OF MARY DAMAYRIS

Benedicta stepped forward. “I know you, Jansy Raymond. You’ve forgotten me, but I danced with you at the Kentisbury wedding.”

“It’s Benneyben!” Jansy gave a shout. “Benneyben come back! Where’ve you been, all this time?”

“Oh, at home and other places! I’m sure you’re related to the people at Kentisbury Castle,” and Benedicta looked at the tall girl. “You’re so very like the Countess, and you have a rose-name, like all the girls in their family.”

“The Countess is her aunt,” Queen Marigold remarked. “She’s really Lady Rosalind, but she doesn’t like it, so we only Lady her when we want to be rude.”

“I call her Nanta Rose. That’s her baby name,” Jansy proclaimed.

“I like best to be just Rosalind, or Nanta.” Lady Rosalind looked at Benedicta. “My second name is Atalanta, and I was always called Nanta till we went to stay at the Castle a year ago, when Aunt Rosamund persuaded me to let them call me Rosalind. It seems all right there, with all the babies called Rose-something. I feel I belong to the family. But I don’t want to be called Lady. We’ve never been used to it, and we don’t like it. I’ve three sisters; I’m the youngest. That’s why I said ‘we.’”

Jansy, the red-haired small girl, poked Marigold again. “Littlejan, I’m sure we ought to be going to the Manor. Aunty Joy will miss us and ask where we are. We don’t want her to find us in the Abbey.”

“Right you are, Lob!” the Marigold Queen exclaimed. “We’ve consulted Rachel and she thinks we’re silly; it’s a terrible blow, but we can’t do anything about it now. I still think we’re doing the right thing, and I’m deeply disappointed in Ray and Damson. Come on, you two! Let us out, please, Rachel. We can’t go through the garden; we might be seen. We’ll sprint up the lane to the Manor.”

“I’ve a good mind not to let you go through,” Rachel said severely.

“I’ll push them out,” Damaris said. “They’re silly cuckoos, as Lady Jen said, but they’d better find it out for themselves. They won’t believe us. Come on, you donks!”

The three girls followed her, looking subdued.

“How crushing!” Littlejan moaned.

“I don’t understand the one you call Marigold.” Benedicta looked at Rachel, as the girls disappeared. “Who is she? She seems to have a lot of names! What does Jansy call her?”

“Littlejan. Her mother is a very old friend of Lady Joy and knew her when they were schoolgirls. She lives in Ceylon now, so Littlejan stays at the Hall with Jansy and they go to school together. She’s really Joan Fraser, called after Mrs. Raymond, her godmother. But as everybody calls Mrs. Raymond Joan it was too confusing, so young Joan has had to put up with her baby name. Her mother is called Janice, and she was so like her mother when she was born that her father called her Little Jan and the name has stuck. But at school she’s the Marigold Queen, wearing a gorgeous orange train, so she’s often called Marigold. She was a fine Queen, I believe, and now she’s standing by Jansy, who is the reigning Queen—Lob, for lobelia-blue, her colour.”

"She must look lovely in deep blue. But she's very small to be the Queen. She's exactly like the twins; I remember how much alike they were. You and your sister are just like one another, too."

"What's that?" Damaris stood in the doorway. "I'm like Ray? Not a bit of it!" and she whipped off the green scarf from her head and shook a shower of yellow curls about her face. "There, Miss Benedicta Bennett! Am I like Rachel?"

"Oh!" Benedicta cried, and gasped and laughed. "No, not a scrap! Your dark eyes put me wrong! Why do you hide those curls? They're so pretty!"

Damaris bowed. "I can't curtsy in these legs. Because the stuff gets in my way when I'm working. And there are other reasons. Ray, hadn't you better take her round the Abbey?"

Benedicta eyed her curiously. "It's odd, but I feel as if I'd seen you before—now that you've uncovered your hair. Have I met you anywhere?"

"Not that I know of," Damaris said, her tone offhand. "But it's possible you may have seen me." She looked at Rachel and gave a very slight nod.

Benedicta saw it. "What was that for?" she demanded.

"I'll tell you, as we go round the Abbey. Come along!" Rachel said firmly, as Damaris disappeared into their living rooms.

In the big refectory, where the sun streamed through the high wide windows and made patterns on the floor, Rachel leaned back against the table on which the Abbey books and parchments were spread.

"It's possible that you have seen Damaris before," she said. "She wants me to tell you; that was what she meant just now. She must like you rather a lot. I knew what it meant when she let her hair loose. That scarf is her disguise; it changes her looks, doesn't it?"

Benedicta was gazing at her in bewilderment. "It alters her altogether. Why does she do it? Is she trying to hide from people?"

"Yes!" Rachel drew a long breath. "She doesn't want to be recognised. She's Mary Damayris, the ballet dancer. Did you ever see her dance?"

"Gosh! Of course she is!" Benedicta cried. "I saw her as the 'Goose-Girl,' and as the Fairy in *Rainbow Corner*. She used to change parts with another girl, who had long golden plaits but no curls like Damayris——"

"Daphne Dale. She's married now."

"Damayris was wonderful. But she—oh, I remember! She had an accident, and then she disappeared. What happened? Oh, please tell me, Miss Ellerton!"

"She saved Daphne, but she was badly hurt herself. That was why she looked at me when I told her how you had saved Margaret Marchwood at the risk of your own life."

"It was what she'd done herself. Can't she dance any more?"

"She doesn't think she'll ever dance again. Antoine and Madame Roskova keep begging her to go back, but she says she can't get the right position, so it's no use. Her hip was injured; she can walk all right and she can work in her garden, but she can't dance," Rachel said gravely.

"How awful!" Benedicta's tone was full of tragedy. "How dreadful for her, when her dancing was so wonderful! She might easily have gone off her head with the shock. She must be very brave."

"She has been brave. It was a terrible shock, and I was afraid for her at first. But we came here, after our old aunt's death, and the quietness of the Abbey helped her. Then she had the

idea of making the meadow into a garden, and she was different at once. It was the garden that saved her.”

“I was in Rome when the accident happened, staying with my godparents,” Benedicta said. “I’ve been there for nearly a year. What, exactly, happened to Mary Damayris? The Italian papers didn’t tell very much, though they did mention that she had been hurt.”

“I’ll tell you more about it later. We’d better go on, if you really want to see the Abbey. It takes some time, and other tourists might come. If we aren’t interrupted, perhaps you’ll have a cup of tea with us; you can’t very well go to the Hall when Lady Joy has only just arrived.”

“That’s very kind of you,” Benedicta said, in deep appreciation, as they crossed the garden to the dormitory. “I’m staying in the village tonight, with Miss Betty at the Music-School. I’ll go to the Hall to see everybody tomorrow. I’d like to meet Mary-Dorothy again, and there’s Lady Jen at the Manor too.”

“And all her babies,” Rachel added. “She’ll want to show you her twin boys. Oh, then, there’s no hurry. You can see part of the Abbey now and come back tomorrow to do the rest. I hope it’s all right about those three girls,” she said, looking worried. “Lady Joy isn’t the best person to play tricks with. Littlejan didn’t mean it like that; she’s really in earnest in thinking they ought to move out. But Lady Joy may not see it as the girls do, and she has a quick temper. I hope she won’t say too much. Marigold is very sensible, but she might be upset.”

“I hope it will be all right.” Benedicta looked grave. “Oh, that’s an improvement!” she exclaimed, as Rachel touched a switch and flooded the dormitory stair with light. “It used to be so dark at this corner. But fancy electricity in the Abbey!”

“Mrs. Raymond had it put in a year or two ago. Our aunt found the passages and steps difficult, even with a torch, and it really wasn’t very safe. Our rooms are beautifully light.”

“We had to use torches.” Benedicta grinned in remembrance of certain incidents. “Do you live in Mrs. Watson’s little rooms? They used to be dark and rather dismal.”

Rachel laughed. “Come to tea with us, and you’ll see them! You must be entertained, on your return to the Abbey after—is it four years? They can’t do it at the Hall today, so it’s obviously our job. And we want you.”

“It’s terribly kind of you,” Benedicta said earnestly. “Please tell me! What can I say to your sister? I admire her most awfully, both as a dancer and because she has been so brave, but I don’t know how to tell her.”

“Oh, please don’t say anything! She’d simply hate it,” Rachel exclaimed. “She’s very sensitive; she’ll know you’ve heard the story. But she doesn’t want to talk about it. Please ignore it!”

“I’d feel the same myself. No one wants to be praised and sympathised with. But I’d have liked to say something.”

“She’d much rather you didn’t. Do you like people to talk about how you saved Margaret-Twin?”

“No, I hate it,” Benedicta admitted. “I won’t, then. But I think she’s been just marvellous.”

“She’ll know,” Rachel assured her. “You don’t need to tell Marry things like that—sorry, I mean Damaris! Marry is my baby name for her, as Jansy would say; what I was taught to call her when we were infants. I’m a year older than she is. I try hard to remember to call her Damaris, but Marry keeps slipping out. The girls at school used to call her Damson.”

“I suppose she doesn’t like to be called Damayris now?”

“Depends who says it. Those girls often call her Mary Damayris. Marigold—indeed, all three—have a sort of hero-worship for her; they don’t say anything, but you can see and hear

it, when they speak to her.”

“I know how they feel,” Benedicta said soberly. “She must have been most awfully plucky.—No, thanks! I don’t want to look down where the night-stair used to be! I’m not fond of that particular spot.”

“Then come and talk to Damaris while I put on the kettle,” Rachel said. “You can see the rest tomorrow morning.”

CHAPTER FOUR

TEA IN THE ABBEY

As they reached the garth Damaris came to meet them—a changed Damaris, wearing a green linen frock and with neatly combed hair. “Ray, I hope you’ve asked Benedicta Bennett to tea? The kettle’s boiling and I’ve cut bread and butter. As she’s an old friend of the Abbey we can’t let her go away unfed.”

“Oh, how kind!” Benedicta cried. “Your sister did ask me. She was going to put on the kettle.”

“Thought I wouldn’t think of it,” Damaris mocked. “But I did, and it’s all ready.”

Her dark eyes met Benedicta’s, as if to say—“Has Rachel told you? Do you understand and sympathise? Then let’s forget it!” Benedicta’s answering look told all she could never have put into words—“I think you’re perfectly splendid; an absolute heroine!” But no word was said, and Damaris turned quickly and led the way into the rooms which had been made, long ago, for the caretaker of the ruins, out of the old refectory of the lay brothers.

“Oh!” Benedicta gave a cry, as she had done when she saw the Abbey garden. “This is all different too! I like it much better! It used to be so dark, and the walls were faded pink. This is bright and gay and cheerful! How have you done it?”

The girls had been watching her expectantly. They smiled at one another, well-pleased.

“Mrs. Raymond did most of it—had the walls cleaned and new curtains and covers put in, when we came last February,” Rachel explained. “We were so much relieved! We were dreading those pink walls. We like it much better now.”

Damaris went to the tiny kitchen and came back with a round green tea-pot. “Sit down and tuck in!”

Benedicta’s eyes were busy. Sun was streaming through the long lancet windows that looked to the new garden; the curtains, of soft pink, blew gently in the breeze and—with the rose-patterned covers of chairs and couch,—were pretty against the grey walls. The table had a crimson cloth under the white one spread for tea; the fire-place was filled with a big jar of mixed flowers, blue and mauve and pink spikes; a bowl of red roses stood on the table; there were books on low shelves, and the open kitchen door showed gleams of vivid colour.

“The kitchen and bathroom are green and white,” Rachel said, seeing the direction of her look.

“My bedroom, at the far end, is green and gold,” Damaris added.

“And they all have the old grey stone as a background! I do like it,” their guest said earnestly. “Oh, pottery, like Mary-Dorothy’s! How lovely to have it! And such a pretty green!”—as her cup was handed to her.

“Lady Jen’s gift to the new house,” Rachel said. “She says she always gives pots to people, when she can find an excuse.”

“Do you have heaps of tea-parties, to show off all these lovely things?”

“We did, at first. February and March are peaceful months. Now, with tourists turning up and the garden to keep Marry busy, we haven’t so much time.”

“It’s terribly good of you to make time for me!”

“An old friend of the Abbey! We’re delighted, and I hope no tourists will come,” Rachel said. “It’s not like a Saturday afternoon. We may be left in peace.”

"I like your white dress." Benedicta had been eyeing the gown with its embroidered badge. "Do you always wear it when you show people round?"

"It keeps me neat and ready for visitors. I don't wear it for housework or washing up!"

"It's a marvellous idea!—Oh, I love your pictures!" Benedicta cried, catching sight of one and then another. "Why are they all of lakes and mountains?"

"Our real home is in the Lake District, on the fells," Rachel explained. "Here's Grasmere, with its island; this is Rydal Water, and here's the head of Ullswater, with more islands. This, over the hearth, is Grisedale Tarn, which is just above our farm; we often climbed up there. If you look down to Marry's bedroom you'll see a bit of Windermere."

"And they're all misty blue and brown and purple, and grey and green!"

"The lakes and fells are, you know."

"What's that awful place?" Benedicta demanded, dramatically throwing out one arm to point at a jagged mountain opposite the windows.

"The top of Helvellyn. That was one of our favourite walks."

"Gosh! Have you really been up there?"

"I wanted to dance on that edge," Damaris remarked. "But Ray restrained me, almost by force."

"I should think so! It looks frightening!"

"It isn't. Were you in earnest when you said you'd like to help me in the garden?"

"What's that?" Rachel asked. "Surely Benedicta Bennett doesn't propose to throw over all her friends at a moment's notice and come here to do weeding for you?"

"I'd just love to do it. As for friends, nobody wants me very much. I could come here, if I arranged it. I haven't anything real to do," Benedicta said, her voice sounding a little forlorn. "I love the Abbey. To work in its garden would be a fascinating job."

"Suppose you tell us?" Rachel suggested.

"You must have belongings. You can't be quite alone in the world," Damaris argued. "Oh, but you said—I remember! I'm sorry."

Benedicta looked at Rachel. "When I was almost sixteen—I'm nearly twenty now—I went to Wood End School, near Kentisbury; the Countess was very good to us. We learned a lot about gardening, as well as other useful jobs, and my plan was to look after our place in Devonshire; we had a London house as well. After Wood End I went to Swanley College, for real training in gardening, but I hadn't been there long when Father died suddenly. He had bronchitis and his heart gave out; we hadn't known it was weak. It was a terrible shock to Mother, who had never been strong after a bad motor accident. Things were difficult, and we gave up the Devonshire house and lived in London. Jim, my brother, had been in the business for a year or two, and he did his best and kept things going. It was all too much for Mother and she collapsed and went too. I stayed with Jimmy and his wife; I'm very fond of her. Then my godfather wanted me and I've been in Rome with him for nearly a year. I'm on my way back to Gail and Jimmy now, but it isn't like going home. They want me, and Gail says I can help her with the baby, but I haven't any real job and I've not had enough training to get a good one."

"You ought to go back to college and get a diploma," Rachel remarked.

"It costs a lot. Jim would try to manage it, but I don't like to ask him; he has so much to pay for. He wants me to have a dress allowance and live with them; college fees would be a very different thing. The business will be all right in time, but it's going to mean hard work and waiting."

“What about your godfather?” Damaris demanded. “He ought to send you to college.”

“He won’t do it. I talked to him, but he’s old-fashioned and he says girls should stay at home. The whole point of college would be to take a job afterwards; we’ve not much garden now. He hates the idea. He said he’d leave me something in his will and I needn’t worry about the future; but that till then it was my brother’s duty to take care of me and my place was at home with him. I’ve had to give in, but I don’t feel happy about it. I hate to dump myself on poor Jim, who is starting his own family, with little Penny. I expect quite soon it will be too much for me, and I shall throw up everything and take some sort of job, if it’s only as a housemaid or in a shop.”

“Seems a waste, if you like gardens,” Damaris observed.

“What did you call your little niece?” Rachel asked. “Did you, by any chance, say ‘Penny’, or did I dream it?”

Benedicta grinned. “Penelope Rose. Mother was Penelope, and Penny was born just after she died. I told Jim not to do it, for she’ll be called Penny Bennett at school, or perhaps even Pennybenny; but he and Gail were determined to call her for Mother.”

“Nice of your sister-in-law,” Damaris commented.

“Gail’s a dear and she loved Mother. I decided as soon as I heard Baby’s name that I must be Benedicta and have no more of Ben or Benneyben. Penny and Benney in one family wouldn’t do.”

“You had to insist, of course. But they may call her Rose, if that’s her second name. It sounds as if she had the Countess of Kentisbury for her godmother! There’s a whole crowd of babies called Rose after Lady Kentisbury.”

“Penny Rose is one of them,” Benedicta agreed. “Gail thinks a lot of Lady Kentisbury; she used to work for her. She took charge of our school tuck-shop, which belonged to the Countess when she was just Miss Rosamund Kane; and when Gail came here to the Abbey Lady Kentisbury was the first person who was nice to her and made friends. When Penny was born Gail wrote to Lady Kentisbury and asked if she might call her Rose, like all the other babies, of whom she had heard; and if there was room for one more godchild. The Countess said there was heaps of room and she’d love to be godmother to Gail’s first daughter.”

“Penelope Rose is very pretty,” Rachel said. “So are the rest of the tribe! Dorothy Rose, Cecily Rose, Shirley Rose, Jillian Rose, Marie Rose—those are some of them. And I believe the new baby at the Hall is called Madeline Rose.”

Damaris had been looking thoughtful. “If that’s how things are and you’ve nobody really depending on you, I don’t see why”—and she paused.

“I could come here!” Benedicta cried. “I could talk it over with Jimmy and Gail and then come back! They’ve both been to the Abbey; they’d see what a lovely job it would be. I’m sure they’d agree that it was sensible. Would you have me? You wouldn’t feel I was butting in? But you said you had help already.”

“The chauffeur digs for me,” Damaris said solemnly, “but he won’t weed, because he’s sure he’d pull up the wrong things. A boy from the farm helps too, and he does pull up the wrong things! He’s willing, but he doesn’t know much. I could do with an assistant who knows all about gardens.”

“Knows a little,” Benedicta amended. “Oh, do have me! I’ll do whatever you tell me and not have any ideas of my own—at least, I’ll ask you about them first! I won’t mess up your plans. I’d love to work for you—and for the Abbey!”

“There might be something good in it for both of us,” Damaris said, growing eagerness in her voice.

Benedicta and she looked at one another and then turned hopefully to Rachel.

CHAPTER FIVE

A KEY FOR BENEDICTA

“What about it, Ray?” Damaris demanded. “You’re the head of the firm.”

“I’m not the head of the garden! There’s a lot to be said for the idea. But I’m thinking—we haven’t any room. We’re cramped as it is.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t butt in on you here!” Benedicta exclaimed, with instant appreciation of Rachel’s feeling. “The Abbey is your place; I wouldn’t expect to live here. But I could find a room in the village, or at the Music-School. I’d come to work in the garden every day; it’s only five minutes’ walk.”

“Oh, if you’d do that——!” and Rachel’s face cleared. Without meaning to be in any way inhospitable, she had shrunk from the thought of a third person in the Abbey, however friendly. It was her place, and Marry’s; there was no room for a third. In the garden it was different.

“We’d feed you,” Damaris added. “We really haven’t a spare corner, but if you could sleep under a bush somewhere we’d see to your meals.”

“Not under a bush. With Mrs. Puddephat,” Rachel said. “She’s definitely a dear old thing and she has a jolly room and is glad to let it.”

“I shall go home tomorrow and talk to Gail and Jimmy,” Benedicta said jubilantly. “I’ll see Mrs. Puddephat before I go. *Could* anybody with a name like that be a dear old thing?”

“She’s one of the best,” Rachel assured her.

“Well, tell me! I must be able to tell Jim all about you. Do you really write stories?”

“I write them,” Rachel said grimly. “They aren’t always taken. But I go on trying.”

“Her stuff’s jolly good,” Damaris declared. “She’s done half a book, but it isn’t getting finished because she’s doing so well with her short things.”

“Thrilling!” Benedicta said warmly. “You are interesting, both of you! I shall love being with you!”

Rachel laughed. “You may not like us—who comes here?”

Voices sounded in the cloisters and at the parlour door appeared two girls of twelve, alike in every way, with deep brown eyes and dark red hair, bobbed and curly. One clasped a golden kitten to her breast; the other clutched a wriggling fluffy black one.

“You said there were cats in the Abbey,” said the younger twin. “We came to find them. They’re rather little!”

“But they’re very sweet.” The elder girl hugged the golden child. “What are they called?”

“Come in, Twins!” Rachel said. “The black kit is Miss Nigger, because she’s a girl; her grandmother once lived in the Abbey. The golden one used to be the Angel, but he isn’t nearly good enough to be an angel, so now we call him Golden Boy, or just Boy. Which of you is Elizabeth, and which is Margaret?”

“I’m Elizabeth. This is Margaret-Twin. Will you remember, do you think?”

“We saw Aunty Dam in the garden,” Margaret said. “We remember you quite well, Aunty Ray.”

“Clever of you! You haven’t seen me for a long while. Have you come to see the garden?”

“No, please,” Elizabeth said firmly. “Only you and the Abbey. We’re coming later, with Mother, to see the garden. But we wanted to see your cats. Twin, you know Mother says we’re

to stop calling people 'Aunty' now we're so big, unless they're real aunts like Aunty Joan and Aunty Jen. And she said most particularly that she doesn't like us to say 'Aunty Dam'."

"I'm glad to hear it. It's not a bit nice," Damaris protested. "If you call me that I shan't show you George. He's the hedgehog, and he lives in the garden, Benedicta."

The twins whirled round. "Who did you say?"

"It's a tea-party!" Margaret said. "We've interrupted. Oh, I say, we're jolly sorry!"

"No, we had finished——"

"It's Aunty Benedicta! I mean, it's Benneyben!" Elizabeth cried. "Benneyben come back! Nobody told us!"

"Nobody knows. I only came this afternoon. How you've grown, Twins! What long legs!"

The twins each thrust out a leg and gazed at it critically. "Not so very long, I think," Elizabeth said. "They don't stick out of our frocks too far. But we're bigger than we were."

"Are you quite grown-up?" Margaret eyed Benedicta curiously.

"Not all the time. I could play bears with you in the dark."

The twins grinned. "Not today, thank you."

"What about a game up in the dormitory?" Damaris asked unkindly.

Margaret turned red. "No. Pig! I shall call you Mary Damayris. I hope you don't like being called that."

"I don't mind," Damaris retorted.

Elizabeth put down the golden kitten and came to her, looking earnestly up into her face. "Can't you really dance now? Do you mind very much? We're frightfully sorry."

It was said so sincerely and simply that no one could be hurt. Rachel looked anxiously at her sister, but Damaris said quietly, "Thank you, Elizabeth. I'm sorry, too, but it can't be helped. I can't dance, but I can do other things. Wait till you've seen my garden properly!"

"Brave," Benedicta murmured, under her breath. "I wouldn't have dared!"

Rachel nodded, relief in her face. "Nice of Elizabeth-Twin!"

"Mother calls it the Damaris Garden," Margaret remarked.

"What an odd name! I love my garden."

"And George? Do you love George?"

"It's difficult to love George. He's so prickly, and he doesn't stay to talk to me."

The twins laughed. "We'd better go now. We only came to see the cats. Mother won't know where we are. We'll come back later to see George."

"May we tell people Benneyben has come back?" Elizabeth asked.

"Is she a secret?" Margaret added, freeing the black child, who butted her golden friend with her head and dashed away into the kitchen.

"We don't want to spoil a secret," Elizabeth explained.

"I'm not a secret. Tell your mother that I'll come to see her tomorrow. I'm staying with Miss Betty tonight."

"That's nice for you," Margaret commented.

"I'll go now," and Benedicta turned to Rachel, when the twins had gone off together. "You want to get back to your work. I shall come to see the rest of the Abbey tomorrow."

"I'll give your babies some milk, Ray. They're shrieking for it," Damaris said. "Here—take this! Show Benedicta the oratory. She'll like it."

She handed to Rachel a key which had hung round her neck. Rachel took it, looking grave but well-pleased, and led the way out to the cloisters again.

“Damaris must like you quite a lot,” she said. “This is the key to her own private place. There are times when the thought of all she has lost is too much for her and even the garden can’t comfort her. She has to get away by herself. Mrs. Raymond understood and gave her the key of a little room that isn’t shown to visitors, because there’s nothing to see. But once when Marry was in there she found a secret stair in the wall, which led to a place that even Mrs. Raymond had never seen. If Marry wants you to see it, it means she likes you very much.”

“Oh, I’m glad she feels like that!” Benedicta’s tone told how deeply she was moved. “Up the refectory stair? I never knew there was a room in here!” as Rachel unlocked an ancient door.

“Mrs. Raymond knew about this, but, as you can see, there’s nothing to show to visitors.”

Benedicta looked round the bare little chamber. “No, but if it’s where Mary Damayris comes, when she’s breaking her heart because she can’t dance——! She is, isn’t she, although she’s so brave?”

“Only sometimes,” Rachel said quietly. “She really is happy in her garden.”

“The Damaris Garden,” Benedicta murmured, her eyes roaming round the bare-walled room. “Oh! Oh, I see! Can we go in there?”

Rachel had touched a spring and opened a door in the wall. Holding a torch, she led the way up four old steps. “No electricity in here!” She stood aside for Benedicta to pass.

“Do you see? An almost defaced crucifix, and a step below, on which the Abbot knelt to pray. This was his private place, as well as Marry’s.”

“The stone is worn away where he knelt,” Benedicta whispered. “It’s a very holy place. Oh, thank you for bringing me here! Could you—could you leave me alone for a minute or two?”

Rachel understood. Benedicta Bennett was not the first to make that request. The first who had made it to her had been Rosamund, the Countess of Kentisbury, and her friends guessed that she had prayed for the health of her greatly-loved but delicate husband. Waiting in the room below Rachel wondered if this new girl would pray that she might come to the Abbey.

Benedicta gave her a clue, when she came quietly down the worn steps. “I would like to be good enough to live and work here; worthy, you know. I don’t think I am yet, but perhaps the Abbey will teach me things.”

Rachel smiled, as they went out and she locked the door again. “Damaris must think you are good enough to see the oratory, since she gave us the key.”

“Perhaps she thought I needed it,” Benedicta said ruefully.

“That wouldn’t be like her. No, she just liked you and wanted to do the best thing for you that she could. Come back in the morning to see the rest of the Abbey!”

As Benedicta settled down in her bed at the Music-School, which was run for Lady Quellyn by pretty Scottish Betty McLean, the Guide Captain, her thoughts were busy with the girls in the Abbey—Rachel, the writer, and Damaris, the dancer; Rachel in her white gown and Damaris in her corduroy shorts. She liked them both and she believed they had liked her. She would be glad to work with Damaris in her garden, if it could be arranged, and to be fed by Rachel in those cool grey rooms in the Abbey walls, with their colours and pictures. She thought of the oratory and of how it had been found, and of Mary Damayris rushing in to cry her heart out when the pull of her lost career became too great.

Then she thought of the schoolgirls and their flight to the Manor, and wondered anxiously about the result. Would Joy Quellyn understand? She was hot-tempered; she spoke without thinking, and she had wounded many people, Benedicta knew, though they made allowances

and loved her still. It would be tragic if Queen Marigold and little Jansy were really hurt, when they had meant no harm. They had acted for the best, as they thought, though probably they had been unwise.

Wondering what had happened at the Hall, Benedicta fell asleep.

CHAPTER SIX

JOY ACTS

Joy Quellyn lay back in her chair and looked about with a sigh of deep content. There were roses everywhere; the afternoon sun streamed through the big windows and threw patches of red and blue and green from the stained glass on the polished floor; the walls had framed portraits of her ancestors for many generations. The wide staircase led up to a gallery from which the bedrooms opened; the wood of banisters and railing was dark oak and matched the ancient settles and tables and big chairs in the hall below. It was her home and she loved every corner of it; she had been in New York, except for brief visits home, for four years, and she had had two children there. Now the travelling days were over; about that she was determined.

“It’s good to be home at last! Oh, I am so glad!”

“It’s good to have you at home,” her friend and secretary, Mary Devine, assured her.

“This time we’re going to stay. Ivor won’t make any plan that means living away from home. The years in New York have helped him in his career; he’s even more highly thought of than he was before he took on the David Orchestra. Requests and engagements are pouring in; he’s going to be very busy, and he has the London work as well. All sorts of places want him as guest conductor. But we shall live at home, and I shall only go with him to his concerts if it means just one night away from home. The boys and Baby Rose must grow up here, as Elizabeth and Margaret did.”

“Are you going to call her Rose?” Mary asked, with interest.

“Ivor wants her to be Maidlin Rose, and Rose for general use; Maidlin doesn’t mind. We didn’t really care for Madeline, which I thought of first, so when Ivor said we’d call the babe Rose, we decided we could put Maidlin as a first name, since it won’t be used. Rose Quellyn is a good name.”

“Better than Maidlin Quellyn,” Mary agreed.

“No one in the clan is called Rose for everyday use, though we have several Roses as second names,” Joy went on. “And Rosamund was always Ros, not Rose, except for one brief period, when we adopted her father’s name for her and called her Rosie. We were feeling particularly fond of her and she was going through a bad period, and we wanted to be extra friendly and affectionate.”

“I remember. It was at the time her stepmother appeared.”

“Rosie didn’t last long, and she became Ros again. Our little Rose will be the first. It’s a nice short name. I couldn’t see how to use Madeline; I don’t like names cut down—and certainly not into Maddy!”

“Dreadful,” Mary laughed. “Rose is much better. We’ve wondered what she would be called.”

“Rose Quellyn. Where are all the children? The house seems very quiet!”

A large party had gathered to greet her. Her cousin, Joan Raymond, the mother of Jansy and godmother of Littlejan Fraser, had come, bringing her youngest child, Jillian Rose, who had been newly born when Joy left home. Jen had come from the Manor next door, eager to show her twin boys, now nearly a year old. Rosamund, the Countess, had driven over from Kentisbury, and Maidlin had come from The Pallant, both clamouring to see their godchild,

Maidlin Rose, who had been born in New York two months before. They had not brought their children, however, feeling that these important little people would not be properly appreciated in all the excitement. This was Joy's day, and her small boys, David and Richard, and the new baby, had been the centre of attraction; and there had been much admiring comment on the way her twins, Elizabeth and Margaret Marchwood, had grown. Tomorrow Joy would lunch with Maidlin and have tea with Rosamund, taking her big daughters to see Maidlin's little girls and Rosamund's boys and her two sets of twin baby girls; and they would call on Joan on the way, to see the rest of her small family, Jennifer and Jimmy.

The men-folk had come too, for Maidlin's husband, Jock Robertson, was a close friend of Ivor Quellyn and they had much to discuss about future musical events. The Earl of Kentisbury and Jack Raymond, both quiet kindly men, had less to say, but were interested to hear about the voyage and to see the children. While "the clan" talked, mostly all at once, they had listened, smiling at one another occasionally, when the babel rose to a clamour.

"My wife always wins!" proclaimed Kenneth Marchwood, as Jen's voice rose above the rest—"But tell us, Joy! Don't interrupt her, Ros! Joy, how did you——"

"Nobody else stands a chance," Jack Raymond agreed.

"This is a real shauri—a great occasion." Kenneth used an East African word. He marched up and down, proudly carrying his sons one on each arm, and laughing as they waved their arms and almost hit him in the eye. Then he surrendered them to Jen, and went to tease Marigold and Jansy and to annoy "Lady Rosalind" by treating her with exaggerated deference.

Joy, eager for the family news, had noted with approval how Littlejan Fraser had firmly removed Elizabeth and Margaret to a table near a window, and with Jansy and Rosalind had given them tea and kept them out of the way. Now they had disappeared, and she wondered where they were. The visitors had gone home; the small children were in the nurseries; Ivor was busy at the telephone, greeting friends and making appointments for business interviews; and the house seemed deserted.

"I suppose the school crowd are all together somewhere," Joy remarked to Mary. "It was good of Queen Marigold to help! I liked the capable way she saw what was needed and took charge."

"Somebody's coming now. It's your twins," Mary said.

"We've been in the Abbey," Elizabeth explained from the doorway. "But we didn't go to the Damaris Garden, because we're going there later with you, Mother."

"We saw the cats," Margaret added. "One's gold and one's black, and the black one's granny once lived in the Abbey."

"A descendant of the Mother Superior?" Joy laughed. "How very suitable! Who brought her back to the Abbey?"

"And Benneyben's there. She'll come to see you tomorrow."

"Benedicta?" Joy and Mary spoke together.

"Now that really is startling news, Elizabeth!" Joy exclaimed. "I'll love to see Benneyben again! Does she look just like she used to do?"

"She's a bit bigger, but not so very much." Elizabeth considered the question carefully.

"Like us," Margaret put in. "She said we were a lot bigger. She looks just the same."

"And what brought Benedicta back to the Abbey?" Mary asked. "I want to see her again too."

"Tomorrow morning, she said. She came to see the Abbey. Aunty Ray—I mean, Rachel—had a tea-party for her."

“We interrupted the party. We butted in very badly,” Margaret said gloomily. “But we didn’t know.”

“They’d finished the party. Benedicta—that’s to be her name now, she says—is going to sleep with Miss Betty tonight, and she’ll come to see us in the morning. She said you’d be too busy tonight,” Elizabeth said, all in one breath.

“That was thoughtful of her! But we’d have made time for Benedicta,” Joy said. “I’m glad Rachel and Damaris gave her tea. It was kind of them, as they never knew her. Where are the others, Twins?”

“What others? Nobody’s been with us.”

“Not Marigold and Jansy and Rosalind?”

“Don’t know anything about them,” Margaret declared. “We haven’t seen them.”

“Then where can they be? I thought you were all together.” Joy looked puzzled.

“We’ll go and look for them!” Margaret cried. “Come on, Twin! Perhaps they’re in the garden!” and they dashed off together.

“What can the silly girls be doing?” Joy exclaimed.

Mary interposed. “I promised not to tell you until you asked, Joy. That was the most they could get me to say; they wanted me to promise I wouldn’t tell you where they had gone, but I couldn’t do that.”

“Gone? What do you mean, Mary-Dorothy? Where could they go? And why?” Joy cried.

“They’ve removed themselves to the Manor. They were sure you wouldn’t have room for them here. I told them it was absurd, but they wouldn’t stay. They meant well, Joy. They don’t want to be in your way.”

Joy stared at her. “Do you mean to say they’ve really gone? Without waiting to ask me?”

“We told them to ask you first, but they felt you’d have to say you wanted them—which was true, of course. They didn’t want to give you any trouble.”

“Whose idea was it?” Joy demanded.

“Littlejan’s. Jansy agreed, but I think Rosalind was doubtful.”

“I should hope so! A girl of her age ought to have some sense. Littlejan Fraser should have known better.” Joy was crossing the hall, but she stopped and turned back. “At the Manor? Do you mean to tell me Jen has taken them in, without a word to me?”

“She didn’t agree with them. She told them they were silly cuckoos; I think that was the expression. But she said, since they had made up their minds to be mad, it would be better they should hear from yourself just how mad they were, as they wouldn’t believe it from anybody else.”

“I see. Jen didn’t sympathise with them?”

“Not in the least. But she said they might camp out in her attics, if they wished.”

Joy gave what could only be called a snort and stalked to the telephone. “Ivor, could you spare me the phone for one moment?”

Her husband looked up from the notes he was making of his engagements. “Surely! What’s the trouble? You look upset.”

“I am, just a little,” Joy said grimly, and she called up the Manor.

Jen was expecting the call, and she answered herself. “The Manor speaking. Who is it?”

“Joy. Have you got my three silly schoolgirls?” Joy asked wrathfully.

“I have. They’re making up beds in the attics.”

“Then send them home at once, and tell them not to be such stupid little goops.” And Joy banged down the receiver with indignant emphasis, and turned to explain the situation to Ivor.

“Enterprising young people, but extremely silly,” he said, with indignation to match her own. “Send them all to bed for the rest of the evening. Best place for them!”

“Oh well!” Joy’s wrath began to subside, as his rose. “Mary says they meant well. We can’t have a row on our first night at home! But I really expected Marigold and Rosalind to have more sense. Don’t row them, Ivor, please. Leave it to me. I’ll talk to them.”

“You’ll be soft with them,” he growled, and turned to his notes again.

“I don’t feel like being soft, at the moment,” Joy retorted, and she went out to the hall to wait for her runaway guests.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SHIRKERS

“You kids had better sprint home and apologise.” Jen called the girls down from the attic. “I told you you were cuckoos. Joy says you’re stupid little goops. She’s in a towering rage; you’d better go and make peace. I don’t envy you your job.”

Littlejan looked startled as she came racing down the stairs. “Is she really wild? Do you mean it, Lady Jen?”

“I’m quite sure she’s wild. Go along and see for yourselves. Joy doesn’t do things by halves.”

“Golly, we’re in for it! Doesn’t she know we meant it for the best?”

“I can’t tell you what she knows. Go and find out,” Jen said austere. “It’s a pity you didn’t restrain the others, Rosalind.”

“Come on, you two! Let’s get it over. I’ll tell her we didn’t mean any harm,” Marigold said valiantly.

“Aunty Joy won’t be really cross, when she’s just come home.” Jansy tried to sound hopeful.

They set out at once, but Rosalind Kane lingered behind.

“Does Lady Joy want me too?” She glanced at Jen.

“You want to stand by the others, don’t you? You were in this with them.” Jen gave her a keen look.

“Yes—oh, yes! But I couldn’t have stopped Marigold. She was so very keen.”

“You mustn’t give in to her all the time,” Jen advised. “I know you think a lot of her and you went to school partly to be with her, but she makes mistakes sometimes and she’s younger than you are. You’d help her more by standing out against her when you think she’s wrong.”

Rosalind looked at her anxiously. “Do you think I depend on Marigold too much? Aunt Rosamund warned me to be careful of that.”

“On the whole, yes, I do,” Jen said gently. It was natural to be gentle with Rosalind, as it was natural to be bracing with Littlejan. “You should stand up for your opinions and have a mind of your own.”

Rosalind sighed. “It’s much easier to do what she wants.”

“My dear girl! Even if you know it’s wrong?” Jen asked severely.

“I didn’t feel this was wrong. I only thought it was rather silly.”

“I see. But it would have been better for the other two if you had refused to join in.”

“I couldn’t have done that,” Rosalind said simply.

“No, perhaps you couldn’t. But don’t give in to Marigold all the time. She has a strong personality, but you mustn’t let her dominate you. It would be good for you to have to do without her for a while.”

“I wouldn’t like that. I must go after them, or they’ll think I’m funking.”

“Yes, run along. Joy won’t eat *you*, you know!”

“If she eats anybody I’ll want her to devour me too!” and Rosalind raced off through the park after the others.

“Poor kid!” Jen laughed, as she went up to the nursery. “She has such a quiet way that no one can tell what she’s thinking. But from all one can see she does let Marigold rule her and

that can't go on. Evidently Rosamund foresaw it, if she warned her to be careful. If Marigold could have a long illness—but I sincerely hope she won't—it would do Nanta all the good in the world to have to stand on her own feet for a term or two.”

Rosalind found the girls waiting for her by the lake. “Come on, Nanta Rose!” Jansy shouted. “I need my maid to stand by me at this critical moment!”

“Come on!” Littlejan said abruptly. “I want to get it over. I'm worried. I didn't mean to upset Lady Joy.”

“Sorry! I had to ask Lady Jen something,” Rosalind said gravely, as they ran through the park and across the lane into the gardens of the Hall.

As they went in by the big door Joy was coming from the telephone. She had rung up the Music-School to say a word of welcome to Benedicta, a thoughtful act which sent Benney in to supper with a glow of delight on her face.

“Well, truants, what have you to say for yourselves?” She seated herself in a big chair, looking very much the mistress of the house and of the situation, and waited for the girls to speak.

“We didn't mean any harm!” Littlejan cried. “We honestly thought you'd rather have us out of the way, when you have such crowds of other people. Please forgive us!”

With a sudden inspiration she went down on her knees. “Please!” she pleaded.

Jansy flopped down beside her. “Please be nice, Auntie Joy! We never meant to make you mad!”

Joy's lips twitched. She looked at Rosalind, standing shyly behind the others. “Aren't you sorry too?”

“Terribly sorry, but—I can't make a joke of it,” Rosalind blurted out, scarlet with shyness. “It's all right for these two. You know them and I'm quite sure you want them; I've said so all along. But you don't know me, and there's no need for you to keep me here. I ought to be a boarder at school.”

“Oh, rot!” said Littlejan, still on her knees. “Silly rot!”

“Yes, silly rot. We're agreed on one thing,” Joy said. “Get up, you stupid! Littlejan Fraser, you're behaving as if you were eleven. My dear!” to Rosalind. “We want you very much, both for your own sake and Rosamund's. She is still one of my family; I adopted her and Maidlin when they were fifteen, you know. Don't say any more about it; of course I want you! But I want to know what all three of you mean by running away from your job like this.”

Littlejan and Jansy sprang up and stood gazing at her. “Running away?” Marigold asked indignantly.

“Yes—shirking,” Joy said severely.

“What do you mean, Auntie Joy?” Jansy cried.

“What's our job?” Littlejan demanded.

Rosalind's eyes gleamed. “I believe I understand. But we never thought of it. Oh, we are so sorry!”

“Perhaps I'll be sorry when I know what it is I've shirked!” Littlejan cried wrathfully.

“Your job,” Joy said again. “Your way to help me more than anything. You ran away from it and left me in the lurch.”

Littlejan and Jansy glared at her. “How did we?”

Joy looked at Rosalind, like someone turning from two children to a grown-up. “You see it, don't you?”

“Do you want us to help you with your twins?”

"Of course I do. They are schoolgirls now, and you are all school people. Two of you are Queens and one a maid of honour. Haven't I the right to expect you to help me with my big girls?"

"Gosh! Yes, of course!" Littlejan said limply. "We never thought of it, but it is our job!"

"But the twins have a governess!" Jansy protested. "Isn't the Wild Rose Queen somewhere about? We supposed she'd look after them!"

"Yes, that's right!" Littlejan cried eagerly. "The babies have their nurses and the twins have Miss Honor. That's why we never thought you could want us, Lady Joy!"

"Wild Rose has gone to her own people, of course," Joy retorted. "She hasn't seen them for nearly two years. We put her into the train and packed her off."

"And she's not coming back?" Jansy asked.

"We don't need her now. The twins are going to school with you."

Jansy looked at Littlejan. "Seems as if we'd been in rather a hurry to say we weren't needed."

"We didn't understand," Marigold said contritely. "I say! We're beastly sorry. We never meant to shirk a job. Can we do anything, now at once? Where are Elizabeth and Margaret? They won't be killing themselves or anybody else, will they? I've heard stories about how they used to go on."

"They aren't like that now," Joy said, with dignity. "But they'll be glad to have your company. They're in the garden, looking for you. I was very much impressed at tea-time by the helpful way you three took charge of them; I felt you were going to be of real use to me. It was a blow to hear you had run away and left me in a hole."

Marigold was scarlet, but she drew herself up and spoke bravely. "We didn't understand. We're sorry. It won't happen again."

"I haven't time to amuse the twins," Joy pointed out. "I've a thousand things to do. You can be all the help in the world, if you will."

"Oh, we will!" the three spoke together.

"But Marigold and Lob have homework," Rosalind added. "I haven't so much to do. I'm a Cookery student, and I just have notes and recipes to copy out, and my practising and extra French. I'll see to the twins, while the others do their prep."

"That's good of you, Rosalind! Are you really called Lob, Jansy?"

"Quite often," Jansy grinned. "Aunty Joy, call Rosalind Nanta sometimes. She likes it."

"Nanta? Oh, I remember! Her second name is Atalanta. Is Nanta your baby name?" and Joy smiled up at the tall girl. "May I use it sometimes? It sounds informal and friendly."

"Please! I like it," Rosalind admitted.

"The whole of it's Nanta Rose," Jansy added. "I always call her that."

"I think I must adopt it, just to make her feel at home," Joy said. "I'm sure she has enough of 'Rosalind' at school."

"And at Kentisbury," Nanta assented. "Aunt Rosamund likes it much better. But Virginia and my other two sisters call me Nanta. I don't suppose they'll ever get out of it."

"Those baby names stick," Joy said. "Don't they, Littlejan Fraser? You'd better become a Queen, Rosalind, and find a new name for yourself at school."

"She'd be the Lavender Queen," Jansy remarked.

"Don't be silly, Lob! I'm far too old. Come and find the twins!" Rosalind commanded.

"You're not as old as Aunty Jen was, when she was Queen Brownie!"

"But she'd been in the school for years. Don't be mad!"

Marigold looked wise, but said nothing.

Rosalind took Jansy's arm and drew her away, and Joy turned to the leader of the trio, as she was following.

"One moment, Marigold! You looked mysterious. Is the Club going to have Nanta for the next Queen?"

"I want them to have her," Littlejan said promptly. "She'd be a lovely Queen, and she'd look marvellous in lavender! But it's too soon to think about it. Jan has only had two months as Queen; there's plenty of time. I feel as if Rosalind isn't quite ready yet. The girls like her, and she's wonderful with the juniors, when she has anything to do with them. She's never had little ones in her family; she was the baby. She loves the kiddies and they love her. But when it comes to the rest of the school, I'm not sure. They like her all right, but she's too quiet; not bossy enough to be Queen."

"Not strong enough; too gentle," Joy agreed. "Perhaps she'll develop during the year. Rosamund would be thrilled if her niece became the Queen! Lavender—how pretty!"

"She'd look lovely," Littlejan ventured.

"I remember Rosamund had lavender for her bedroom, when I said she could choose her colour; and her going-away suit at her wedding was lavender. Nanta Rose must have the same tastes. We'd all like her to be Queen. But it would have to be next year; she *would* be too old after that!"

"Lady Joy, I am so very sorry about tonight," Littlejan said earnestly but shyly. "We really didn't understand. We never thought we could be any use."

"I believe that, Marigold," Joy said gently. "But you see it now, don't you?"

"Oh yes! And we will buck up and do anything you want."

"Then you'll be a very great help to us all. We won't think any more about tonight."

"Thank you very much," Littlejan said humbly. "We never meant to shirk or let you down."

CHAPTER EIGHT

IN THE DAMARIS GARDEN

“I hear you were so kind as to entertain Benedicta Bennett on our behalf.” Joy looked at Rachel, as they met on the garth. “We’re deeply grateful. We had a large and noisy crowd at the house. They’d have liked to see Benneyben again, but we really had enough excitement without her. Perhaps she’ll stay in the village for a few days; then she could go to see Maidlin and Rosamund. They both knew her well.”

“We liked her so much,” Rachel said. “I won’t tell you her plans, for she’ll want to do it herself tomorrow. Damaris is in the garden. You’ve come to see it, haven’t you?”

“And to see George,” Margaret reminded her.

“You won’t see George at this time of day; he loves the dark.”

“Don’t you like Rachel’s white dress, Mother?” Elizabeth asked.

“Very much.” Joy smiled at Rachel. “She looks like a nice young monk. I’m so glad to see you and Damaris here, my dear. It’s pleasant to know you are in charge of the Abbey.”

“We call ourselves Abbey Guardian and Abbey Gardener,” Rachel told her.

“Run along to the garden and find Damaris, Twins,” said Joy.

When they had gone she turned to Rachel. “Tell me about your sister! Will she never be able to dance again?”

“Nobody knows,” Rachel said, very gravely. “She thinks not; and she has reconciled herself to this new life. But Madame Roskova, her teacher in town, keeps some hope that the lost power may come back. Marry’s convinced it never will.”

“She must have been very brave.”

“She has been brave. She is really happy in the garden. The Abbey saved her, I’m quite sure.”

“And she is giving her life to it. That’s rather fine.” And Joy went thoughtfully to join the twins in the new garden.

“But where are the shorts—the working kit?” She smiled at Damaris, who wore her green frock and had left her hair uncovered.

“We had a visitor to tea,” Damaris explained. “And I’m not doing anything strenuous; just chopping off withered sweet peas. It has to be done each day.”

“Show us everything!” Joy suggested. “I like your title of Abbey Gardener!”

Damaris led them round her domain, telling where each set of plants had come from and who had been the giver. The twins were delighted with the pond, made from the fish-stream of the old monks, and tried to count the gold and silver fish, who would not stay in one place, but darted about, flicking their tails. Joy exclaimed at the improvement in the path to the tithe-barn, which had once been a muddy field-track and was now paved with grey blocks from the Lake District and bordered by marigold and lobelia plants, with bushes of lavender among them.

“I see a meaning in the blue and orange,” she said. “Is there a reason for the lavender too?”

“Young Littlejan wanted it put there.” Damaris made no further comment.

She showed her rockeries; red Wirral stones set in an angle of the grey Abbey wall and planted with gold and lemon rock-roses and cushions of white iberis; grey Windermere blocks

covered with rosy sedum and pink and purple heaths. The twins climbed up and down the steps and narrow paths of Wirral, and cried out in delight at the bird-bath on the very top of Windermere.

“I have to fill it every day; often several times,” Damaris told them. “When two or three blackbirds have had baths there isn’t much water left.”

“We understand now about the roses and lilies round the gate-house,” Joy said. “We asked Marigold, as you suggested.”

“They’re for old Ambrose and his Lady Jehane, because they used to meet there among roses and lilies,” Damaris assented. “It was Marigold who made the great discovery. Mrs. Raymond didn’t quite like the idea of turning the meadow into a garden, until Littlejan brought the old book and showed her that it had been a garden in Ambrose’s day. The lilies came from Maidlin and the roses from Lady Kentisbury.”

“They arranged that, I’m sure. They wanted their shares in the garden to be close together.”

“Now can we see George?” Margaret coaxed.

“You can’t see George till it’s almost dark. He creeps out from under that hedge and scoots across the flower-beds to this round lawn, and there he finds a tin plate of bread and milk waiting for him. Rachel brings it after supper every night. It takes him quite a long while to polish it off. But he doesn’t come every night; you might wait and then be disappointed. I wonder”—and Damaris looked at Joy,—“whether, just for once, as a great treat, you could let them stay up till dusk? I’ll keep a look-out for George, and if he comes I’ll ring up and they can come to see him. I’m sorry I said anything about him, but I didn’t know they’d be so keen.”

“They won’t be satisfied till they have seen him,” Joy agreed. “It’s a kind plan. Twinnies, if Damaris takes all that trouble, will you come back quickly and go right to bed, very quietly?”

“Oh, we will, Mother, we will!” they promised fervently.

“Then, just for once, because we’re all safely at home——! But you mustn’t ask to do it again. I’ll send Mary-Dorothy with them, Damaris. Thank you very much.”

“Have Littlejan and Jansy seen George?” Margaret asked.

“Oh yes! They’re old friends. Now come and see my hedge of sweet peas, over by the barn.”

It was late when the telephone rang and Damaris spoke from the Abbey. “George has just come through the hedge. Hurry, if you want to see him!”

She met them on the garth, her eyes full of amused excitement. “I say, you two, come on! Mary-Dorothy, such fun! There are *two* Georges; he’s brought his little wife! We’ve never seen two before. It must be a special honour for these twins.”

“Because there are two of us, do you think?” Elizabeth grinned.

“Ray’s watching them. This way!”

From behind a screen of delphiniums they watched in the half-dark, as two round balls of prickles completely filled the big plate.

Rachel smiled at the children and murmured, “George always stands in his dish. He’s taught Mrs. George to do it too.”

For a few minutes the two were very busy. Then one moved off, and the other followed.

“They’ve finished,” Elizabeth whispered.

“The plate will be full of muddy little footmarks,” Rachel told her.

“Listen!” Damaris murmured. “Gosh! Are they going to fight?”

The two round lumps were nose to nose and a curious hissing sound filled the air. It went on and on, amazingly loud to come from such small creatures, and the enthralled watchers held their breath and waited to see what would happen.

“If they fight I shall heave a brick at them,” Damaris vowed.

“Oh no! It would be lovely to see a fight!” Margaret pleaded.

“Horrid girl!” said her twin. “I shall try to separate them.”

“You’ll get pricked,” Rachel observed. “I’m not sure that they are fighting. I think she’s saying—‘My dear, that was an extraordinarily good supper. Thank you so much for bringing me!’ and he’s saying—‘You ought to have come before. For weeks I’ve been telling you what good food there is at this hotel.’ She’s thinking she’ll come every night.”

The twins giggled. “Perhaps they’ll bring a lot of babies.”

“I’ve heard hedgehog babies are white, but I’ve never seen any,” Rachel said.

“White? But how could they be?”

“I believe these two are quarrelling like mad,” Damaris whispered. “It sounds like the worst kind of bad language.”

“Oh, they’re going!” cried Margaret.

At sound of her voice, incautiously raised, the creatures scuttled off, still faster and in different directions.

“It was a fight! They haven’t gone home together,” Elizabeth exclaimed.

“This is where other people go home too,” said Mary Devine, who had been watching in amused interest. “You promised, Twins.”

“All right, we’ll come,” Elizabeth said reluctantly.

“Have Littlejan and Jansy seen two Georges?” Margaret’s eyes sparkled.

“Certainly not! Mrs. George has never come before.”

“Then we’ve seen something they haven’t. Come and tell them, Twin!” and Margaret dashed off in great delight.

Elizabeth, torch in hand, rushed after her. “The silly girl will fall over something in the dark. I’ll take care of her, Mary-Dorothy!”

Mary followed and saw them safely into the house. Then she came back through the Abbey to the little rooms in the wall. Rachel had just switched on the light under the red shade and drawn the long pink curtains, and the parlour looked very cosy.

“Come and talk to us, Mary-Dorothy! What happened about Marigold and the others? Did they go to the Manor?”

“We couldn’t ask Lady Joy, for fear the twins hadn’t heard the story,” Damaris added.

“They don’t know anything about it, but Joy told me,” and Mary described how the crisis had been dealt with. “I was glad Joy handled the problem so wisely; I was a little afraid of trouble. Marigold meant no harm. Now tell me about Benedicta’s sudden reappearance! I’m thrilled to think of seeing her again.”

“How long was she at the Hall?” Rachel asked. “It was while we were in Italy.”

“For some months. We nursed her after her accident, and we all became very close friends.”

“She seems a nice kid,” Damaris said. “But she’s rather at a loose end and feeling not exactly needed anywhere.”

“She wants to do something more than be merely a nursemaid to Penelope Rose,” Rachel added. “Penny Rose is her baby niece, whose mother is somebody called Gail. She once came

here, I believe.”

“Oh yes! We knew Abby Gail. We heard she was going to marry Benedicta’s brother. Abigail Ann was her real name, but she was often called Abby Gail, after the Abbey. She’s a fine pianist, though she never played in public. She wanted a job with houses and babies, nursing or cooking. And now she has a daughter of her own! She’ll be very happy.”

“Penny Rose,” Damaris laughed. “It’s a ducky little name.”

CHAPTER NINE

WELCOME TO BENEDICTA

Benedicta raced up the lane under the overhanging trees. A phone-call from Joy had asked her to come early, as the family party were setting out at eleven for their visits to Maidlin and Rosamund. Joy had, indeed, suggested that she should go with them, and see Maidlin, whom Benney loved, and her twin daughters, and also Rosamund, for whom she had a great admiration, and her boys and her double twin girls. But Benedicta knew better than to accept.

“Oh no, thank you!” she said, answering the telephone. “I must go home today. I’d love to see them all, but I really haven’t time. You won’t be back till late.” And to herself, as she put down the receiver—“I couldn’t do that! It’s more than kind of Lady Joy, but it’s her first visit, after being away for nearly two years. I couldn’t possibly butt in!”

She stopped at the Abbey wall and hailed Damaris, who was kneeling beside a very weedy flower-bed. “Hi, Abbey Gardener! Oh, please!”

Damaris rose, brushing loose earth off her bare knees; she was in working kit this morning. “Hi, yourself! This Abbey doesn’t open till ten. The Guide has gone for a walk; she must have exercise sometimes.”

“I know, but I only want to go through. It’s much the quickest way. Oh, please! Must I go round to the gate and up the beech avenue? It’s miles, and Lady Joy asked me to come early.”

“Oh, right! I’ll put you through into the garden. Saves a lot of time.”

“I’ll come to see Rachel after I’ve been to the Hall. They’re going off to pay visits about eleven,” Benedicta explained.

She looked round wistfully as she followed Damaris across the fish-stream to the inner gate. “I want to see every bit of the garden, too. I’d love to work here, if Jim will be sensible about it. Would you really have me? I feel it’s yours and I’m inviting myself into your very private place. It doesn’t seem quite fair. But how I’d love it!”

Damaris unlocked the gate and led her to the door of their cloister home. “That’s why; because I believe you love it as I do. And because you understand—for it is my very private place. I don’t think you’d chatter all the time.”

“I wouldn’t,” Benedicta said earnestly. “I really believe I know how you feel about it. I’d work absolutely quietly, at whatever job you asked me to do; I wouldn’t spoil the nice silent feeling. You’d hardly know I was there. But we’d get through stacks of work, and there’s a lot to do.”

“There is,” Damaris admitted, taking a key from a peg. “This opens the gate to the Hall. You don’t want to go through the tunnels, I suppose?”

“Lady Joy might have a shock, if I rose suddenly from the depths of the earth,” Benedicta laughed, as she followed Damaris across the garth and down the tresaut, a low stone passage leading by an ancient archway to the Abbot’s garden and so to the gate opening into the grounds of the Hall.

The gardener closed the gate after her and went back to her weeding. “No, she wouldn’t spoil the nice silent feeling. Good way to put it! She feels as I do about the garden. Queer how the quietness means so much to me, after——” and for one moment she saw the crowded theatre, and heard the cheering crowds and the roars of applause, which had become second nature to her during those three exciting years.

She gave herself a little shake, “Idiot! Stop that! Are you going to sob in your oratory, at this time of day? Not likely, with so much to be done. It might be good for me to have Benedicta Bennett working with me. It’s just possible I’m getting too used to being on my own. Mustn’t turn entirely into a hermit before I’m twenty-two!”

She said something of the sort to Rachel, when the Abbey Guide came back from her brisk walk to the hills.

“I couldn’t agree with you more,” Rachel told her. “It isn’t natural for you to work out there for hours without speaking to anyone; it’s not like you. You ought to have somebody, but it matters enormously the kind of person you have. Young Benedicta seems to me just right.”

“I’m getting a bit keen on having her,” Damaris confessed. “I hope the brother will see things in the right light.”

Benedicta, too, had been filled with hope by those few moments in the Abbey. “I believe she likes me. I almost think she wants me to come. She’s been so marvellously brave; I’d love to work for her. Rachel too; she can’t say it herself, but she must have been just as brave, though she only speaks about Damaris. She must have had a ghastly time; she says it was the Abbey that saved Mary Damayris, but I’m sure it was still more Rachel. I must never let them feel I’m butting in. Anyone can see they’re everything to one another, and there’s no room for anybody else. But I’ll be content to be an outsider, if only I can be with them. I know it can’t be a trio; it will have to be Two and One. But I’ll be terribly bucked to be the One to their Two!”

“Well, Blessed Girl!” Joy leaned over the stone balustrade of the terrace. “So you came through the Abbey! Clever of you to think of it. Are those two nice girls all right this morning?”

“Damaris seems all right. Rachel was out for a walk.” Benedicta came up the steps.

“It was Damaris I meant,” Joy remarked.

“Yes,” Benedicta agreed. “But I was just thinking—Rachel must have had a rotten time too. She’s stood by Mary Damayris splendidly, but it must have been very hard.”

Joy gave her a quick look. “I’m sure that’s true. We all sympathise so much with Damaris that we’re apt to forget what Rachel has been through.”

“And what she’s done for Damaris. Oh, Lady Joy, where are the new babies? I’ve never seen any of them.”

“David and Richard and Baby Rose,” Joy smiled. “Come up to the nursery and inspect them. I hear you have a niece? Nice for Abby Gail to have a daughter!”

“She’s called Penelope Rose, or Penny Rose. If I ever get married, I shall call mine Benney Rose, and they’ll be cousins.”

Joy laughed. “Are you thinking of it?”

“No, I don’t suppose I ever shall; it’s just an idea. Oh, they are like you and the twins!” Benedicta cried, at sight of the tiny red-haired boy and the very small baby girl.

“Not all of them,” and Joy showed her elder son, whose hair and eyes were very dark. “David is a Welshman like his daddy, but the other two are certainly Abbey bairns.”

The nurses had both been Queens of the Hamlet Club in their schooldays. The short round person who held up Baby Rose for inspection was Nurse Bee, or Beatrice, or Queen Stripes, from the colours of her gaudy robe. The younger girl was Gracie Gray, or Queen Garden, from the wide border of flowers edging her grey train, and she had hurried across the Atlantic in mid-winter to help Joy, when Queen Bee’s illness left the family in difficulties.

“Now come out to the terrace and tell me what you have been doing for the last four years,” Joy suggested. “Rachel said you had plans for the future.”

Benedicta told her story, and Joy exclaimed in sympathy as she heard of the death of Mr. and Mrs. Bennett. Then she gave a cry of delight, as Benney told of the hope that had been born in her when she saw the new garden at the Abbey.

“Oh, my dear, what a wonderful plan! You’ll come and work in the Damaris Garden, and we shall have you near us all the time! I do hope it will be possible.”

“I’d like it better than anything. I’ve been wondering what I could find to do. I’d love to work for the Abbey, and I do like those two girls.”

“I always feel you and Abby Gail belong to the family,” Joy said. “Gail saved Elizabeth from the fire in the toolshed, and you saved Margaret from that dreadful fall. We owe one twin to each of you. And now you are sisters-in-law, and you’re an aunt! Is Gail very proud of Penny Rose? It’s a dear little name!”

“Gail likes Penny Rose quite a lot, and Jim’s frightfully bucked about her,” Benedicta admitted.

“Won’t you come with us today and tell Rosamund about her new godchild?”

“No, please, I must go home and get things settled. But will you tell the Countess and Maidlin how much I want to see them and their families?”

“When you come to live here we’ll take you to visit them,” Joy promised. “You know that Maidlin has two little girls? And there are crowds of children at the Castle—six!”

“I only really know Roddy, the Countess’s little brother, but I saw Geoffrey-Hugh when he was very new,” Benedicta said.

“There have been two sets of twin girls since then. We haven’t seen the latest pair—‘my tinies’, as Rosamund calls them—Rosanna and Rosilda. Rosabel and Rosalin were about three months old when we left home. It’s going to be a very thrilling day for us!” Joy laughed. “Here come my twins; they’ve been in the garden. They’re very keen about all the new babies.”

“Have you heard where we’re going today?” Elizabeth seized Benedicta’s hand and looked eagerly into her face.

“Going to see twins—and more twins—and lots more twins!” Margaret sang.

“You’ll have a lovely time,” Benedicta agreed. “Give them all my love, won’t you?”

“I’m glad I didn’t butt in on the parties, though I would have liked to go,” she said to herself, as she went back to the Abbey. “Jim could have waited for another day, but it’s much better for them not to have me following round. Elizabeth and Margaret are excited enough without having me to talk to as well.”

“Does Lady Joy like your plan?” Rachel called a welcome and invited her in to the pink and grey room, where Damaris was drinking coffee and eating biscuits. “Come and join in our elevenses!”

“Oh, thank you so much! Yes, she loved my plan; she hopes I’ll come here. You’re as bad as all the rest of us,” Benedicta complained. “We all say ‘Lady Joy’ and ‘Lady Jen,’ but it’s not correct, is it? Those aren’t their names.”

“We know that. But it’s convenient,” Rachel began.

“What do you want us to call them?” Damaris demanded. “We know their fathers weren’t dukes or earls! But it would be horribly formal and stiff to say ‘Lady Quellyn’ and ‘Lady Marchwood’ all the time.”

“And we can’t call them Joy and Jen, as their friends do,” Rachel added. “It would seem like cheek.”

“It would be cheek,” Damaris retorted. “Have another biscuit, Blessing!”

Benedicta laughed. “I’m not good enough for that as a name. But thank you, all the same.”

“‘Lady Joy’ is a nickname, a compromise,” Rachel said.

“Half-way between being too formal and too familiar. She likes it. We know it’s not correct.”

“As for calling Lady Jen ‘Lady Marchwood’, we simply couldn’t,” Damaris added. “We’d rather call her Mrs. Brown.”

“Mrs. Brown?” Benedicta stared in bewilderment.

“Our first name for her, before we knew who she was. She told us she was Queen Brownie, and I said we’d call her Mrs. Brown,” Rachel explained. “It makes her laugh.”

“I must get on with my job,” and Damaris put down her cup. “When Ray’s finished with you, come out to the garden, and I’ll show you round,” and she took up her trug and her trowel and tramped away, followed by Benedicta’s wistful eyes.

CHAPTER TEN

TWO IN THE GARDEN

Jim Bennett saw things in the right light, as Damaris had hoped. He had been seriously troubled about his young sister, knowing she would want her own niche in the world, with worth-while work to do. He had been often to the Abbey during her stay at the Hall, and both he and Gail were thrilled to hear that the gate-house meadow had become a garden, and that the gardener was Mary Damayris, whose dancing they had enjoyed a year before.

"You're in luck, Benedicta," said Jim. "Will she really have you to help her?"

"She's in luck to get Benney," said Gail, laying Penny Rose in her cradle. "I wanted you, Ben, but I do see that this idea is more fascinating than just staying at home with us."

"If Penny Rose was mine, I shouldn't want to work in any garden," Benedicta said. "But she's yours, and you don't really need me. I'm sure I can be useful in the Damaris Garden; that's what Lady Joy calls it." And she raced jubilantly upstairs to hunt for her gardening outfit, put away since her days at Wood End School.

"I don't believe I've grown much," and she tried on her breeches and yellow smock. "No, they fit quite well. What a relief! It won't take me long to pack. I shall ring the Abbey and ask Rachel to arrange with Mrs. Puddephat. I liked the old lady, in spite of her weird name. Jim can come and have a look at her; he'll be quite satisfied."

But her excitement received a sudden check. On the night before she was to leave home, Jim came in from his office looking worried.

"Ben, I want you to do something for me. And for Gail too."

"What on earth can I do?" Benedicta demanded. "I'll try, of course."

"Oh, you can do it, but I don't know if you will. I want you to keep Gail and Penny company for a fortnight, while I go rushing round Europe on a business trip."

"But what's happened?" Benedicta cried. "Didn't you know?"

"Wasn't your manager going to do it, Jim?" Gail asked anxiously.

"He was, but the poor chap's wife is very ill and he won't leave her. I wouldn't, if it were you. I can't ask him to go. I'll have to take on the job. But I hate to leave you alone. If Ben will stay, I'll be much easier in my mind."

"I can manage alone," Gail said valiantly. "But I'd much rather have Benney, of course."

Benedicta's face had fallen in grievous disappointment. She knew she had no choice; the work in the garden could wait, but it would be very hard on Gail to be left with only Penny Rose for company. And they were giving her the life she wanted; she could not refuse to do this service before she left them. But it was a blow, and her face showed it.

"When do you have to go?" she asked gloomily.

"Next week, about the tenth."

"Then it will be the end of July before I start in the garden! Oh, Jim! Oh, well, there's no way out of it. I'll stand by Gail and do anything I can to help. I know how awful you'd feel if you had to leave her without anybody."

"That's decent of you, Ben. I do appreciate it," Jim exclaimed.

"It's really noble, Benney. I know how keen you are to start," Gail said. "It will make all the difference to me to have you. This is the first time Jim has had to go away, though we've known it might happen. The Abbey folk will understand."

“They’re keen on you. They wouldn’t want me to forsake you,” Benedicta admitted. “I’d better ring up the Abbey. Oh, Jim dear, what a bother you are! Upsetting all our plans like this!”

“It’s not my fault,” Jim protested. “I don’t want to go. But it must be done, and I can’t let that poor chap be away just now.”

“No, of course not,” Gail said quickly. “I’d rather you left me alone.”

“Can’t have that, either,” Benedicta agreed. “We’ll mourn together—you for Jimmy, and I for my garden. At least we’ll be company for one another.”

So it was almost the end of July when, reaching Whiteways village one afternoon, she took possession of her room under Mrs. Puddephat’s sloping thatch, tossed her travelling clothes on the bed, unpacked her suit-case, and arrayed herself in breeches, big boots and yellow smock, pulled a wide-brimmed soft hat on her lint-white hair, and raced up the lane to the Abbey, followed by the startled exclamations of her hostess.

“The old dear will soon get used to me! Damaris—oh, Abbey Gardener! I’ve come at last. Give me a job!”

Damaris straightened a tired back and gazed at her. “Gosh! I like your fancy dress!”

“It isn’t. It’s our school uniform,” Benedicta said indignantly. “It’s very comfy and useful. I hope you really do like it?”

“Oh, I do. It’s most suitable and picturesque. You’ll be quite a garden ornament.”

“That’s not the idea at all. I’ve come to work. Shall I weed that bed for you?”

“Right! I’ll be only too pleased,” and Damaris handed over her fork and trug. “Get out all the grass you can. If you’re doubtful about other things, give me a yell, and I’ll come and vet them. I’m fairly well acquainted with most of them now.”

Benedicta knelt and scanned the bed critically. “I bet that’s young willow-herb; a perfect pest!”

“Correct on both counts. It is willow-herb, and it’s a pest. Know this one?”

“Plantain?”

“Right again. Good for you! I caught young Charlie pulling up my seedling wallflowers yesterday.”

“I sha’n’t do that! Were you in time to save them?”

“Most of them. Charlie’s terrified to touch anything now.”

“What about this? It’s rather pretty, a rosette of tiny leaves and a little white flower—oh, *Damaris!*”

With a shout, Damaris flung herself on the weed and dragged it up and flung it into the basket. “How did it elude me? It shoots up as soon as my back is turned!”

“Is it so very bad?” Benedicta asked laughing. “I rather liked it. It’s a dainty little thing.”

“It’s the Enemy,” Damaris said solemnly. “I’ve declared war on it, and I’ve fought it for months. It comes up all over the place. It’s called something to do with a shepherd. Don’t have any mercy on it!”

“Shepherd’s purse? I don’t think——”

“No, that’s another. This is shepherd’s needle. I wish that shepherd hadn’t had so many needles! It will devour the whole garden, if you give it a chance. Hurl it out whenever you see it.”

“I will, of course, if those are your orders, Boss. Where is everybody? Who is at the Hall just now?”

“Only Lady Joy and the twins and the babies.”

“School people all on holiday?”

“Rosalind is staying with her married sister. All the rest are in North Wales, near Plas Quellyn,—Marigold and her small brothers and Jansy-Lob, with Mary-Dorothy to keep an eye on them. They’re in a cottage at the seaside, bathing and boating and fishing and climbing mountains, and seeing Mrs. Quellyn,—but they call her Robin—and the new baby.”

Benedicta sat on her heels and stared at her. “I know about Plas Quellyn, but it belongs to Robin Brent, who was head girl at my school. But you said Mrs. Quellyn! Is Robin married? But—who? How could her name be Quellyn?”

“I don’t know her, but she was here before she married Robert Quellyn, a cousin of Sir Ivor. So now she’s Mrs. Quellyn of Plas Quellyn, and the baby is called Bobbibach.”

“How surprising!” Benedicta exclaimed. “I’ll need to think about all that,” and she turned to her wedding, and worked steadily, while she pondered over this news of Robin.

At the sound of voices she looked up; then she sat and stared in astonishment and admiration.

Joy and the twins were crossing the garden on their way to the village, and all three were in navy blue.

“Gosh!” Benedicta said. “Are the twins Guides? I’d forgotten Lady Joy was a Captain!”

“Benneyben’s come back!” shouted the twins.

Joy waved her hand. “Glad to see you, Benedicta. We’ll talk later. We mustn’t be late. Come along, Twinnies!”

“Yes, Captain!” Elizabeth said promptly.

“Don’t call us Twinnies tonight, Mother,” Margaret protested.

“Don’t you call her Mother, then. She’s Captain tonight,” Elizabeth reproved her.

“That’s better. Come along, Guides,” said Joy, and threw a laughing look at Benedicta as they went to the gate.

“Tell me about this!” Benney demanded.

“Lovely for those kids, isn’t it?” Damaris remarked. “Fancy having your mother as your Guide Captain! Lady Joy used to take the Rangers; she meant the twins to start as Brownies, but they’ve missed their Brownie period by being in America, so they’ve gone in as Guides, and she has changed over to be in the Guides with them. There’s a new Ranger Captain, and Lady Joy and Miss Betty have the two Guide Companies.”

“How gorgeous for the twins to have a mother who will go into things with them!”

“I believe she nearly didn’t, but Lady Jen bullied her into it, and showed her how much she’d miss if she let the children do everything without her.”

“Oh yes! This is much better. She’ll be a good Captain.”

“The twins say she’s very strict, especially with them. But they like it, though young Margaret grumbles sometimes. They’re going off to Yorkshire tomorrow.”

“All of them?”

“Elizabeth and Margaret. They were so much upset at not being allowed to go to Plas Quellyn with Jansy and the rest that Lady Jen said they’d better come with her to the moors, to play with her big boys and John Raymond. That suited the twins, who have always been keen on those boy cousins. And they agreed that they couldn’t all go to Quellyn at once. So they’re off to the moors with Lady Jen. We shall miss them; they’ve been quite good about helping me, while Littlejan and the rest were at school. Next term they’ll all go to school together.”

“And I suppose in the evenings Littlejan took charge of them?”

“Or Jansy-Lob and Rosalind. Marigold had exams and a lot of preparation to do. The twins are startled and rather overawed to find Jansy a Queen and they’re inclined to follow her ideas, which is useful. And Rosalind is very good with them. They haven’t been any trouble.”

“It’s jolly for Lady Joy to have those three school people here. They’ll be an enormous help to her with the twins.”

“Most valuable; all the help in the world. Marigold and Rosalind are nearly grown up and yet are still kids enough to understand the twins and help them through. And those three are such pals; they work together splendidly.”

“Yes, it’s a jolly good thing for everybody that they’re here,” Benedicta agreed.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A SHOCK FOR LITTLEJAN

A month later, Joy went through the Abbey in uniform again, but this time she went alone. The twins were enjoying the moors and the boys, and there was still a fortnight before they need come home for school.

The village clock struck six. Rachel took off her white gown and came to sit in the garden on a slab of red Wirral stone, carrying a yellow cushion and wearing a green frock and a blue knitted coat.

Benedicta paused beside her. "You almost make a rainbow, sitting there! You only need a violet sunbonnet. Gaudy, I call you! Are those proofs of your book? I once corrected Mary-Dorothy's proofs; and I found some mistakes she had missed."

"Just a short story. The rainbow is quite an accident. Is that can of water for the bird-bath on Windermere?"

"There's only a trickle left in it. The blackbirds have been having non-stop baths," and Benedicta went to fill the hollow in the grey stone.

Mary Devine had come home a week before the others, to attend to urgent matters for Joy, which only she, who had dealt with all Joy's business during her absence, understood fully. Rob Quellyn had promised to put his visitors into the train and there were no changes till they reached London; and in Marigold's charge the boys and Jansy would give no trouble.

She came to join Rachel, as she often did in the evening. "Our last peaceful night! Let's make the most of it."

"What time does the crowd from Quellyn arrive?" Rachel asked.

"About half-past eight. Frost is meeting them at Paddington. They'll be tired; it's a long day. They were leaving Quellyn before nine. We shall put the boys and Jansy to bed at once, and they can rest tomorrow. Joan is coming for them in the afternoon; Jansy must spend part of the holidays with her brothers and sisters, and Joan wants Alan and Alastair as well. Littlejan is to go to Kentisbury, for some riding with her friend Tansy."

"They've had jolly holidays," Benedicta said, overhearing these plans as she went to fetch more water.

"Yes, they should be ready for a busy term. I'm a little bothered," Mary said anxiously. "A letter came for Littlejan yesterday and it's waiting for her; we couldn't send it on, as they were starting so early. It would only have missed her at Quellyn. I fancy it's from her father; I've seen the writing before. The address of his shipping firm is on the envelope and the postmark is London."

"London!" Rachel grasped the difficulty. "Perhaps he's coming to see her."

"I know. But we can't open the letter. Joy is rather bothered about it."

"You'll know in just over two hours." Benedicta took up the can she had set down. "Marigold will open it the moment she arrives."

"We can only wait," Mary assented. "We've prepared for him, in case he turns up; he has a permanent invitation. He came here once, over two years ago; he saw her crowned, which was jolly for her."

"There's a car coming from the village," Rachel said. "Lady Joy is out and there's no one at the Manor. The lane leads nowhere else, except to the hills."

“It’s the station taxi.” Mary rose quickly and went towards the gate. “Now I wonder——” Damaris, struggling with a pillar rose from which she was cutting out the long branches that had flowered, went to gaze at the car. “No use letting visitors go on, when there’s nobody at home,” she murmured.

The car drew up, and a bearded sunburnt man hailed her. “Hi! Is my girl ready for me?”

Damaris leaned over the wall. “I don’t know. Who is your girl? And what is she to be ready to do?”

Mary came hurrying up, with Rachel and Benedicta.

“Is it—oh yes! It’s Captain Fraser. Have you come to see Littlejan? How pleased she’ll be!”

“I’ve come to fetch her,” Alec Fraser exclaimed. “Is she ready?” Then, at the dazed looks which met him, “Hasn’t she had my letter? I wrote to her two days ago.”

“The letter is here, waiting for her. She’s coming home tonight. We couldn’t send it on,” Mary faltered.

“She’s been in Wales for a month,” Rachel added, to help her out. “They were starting for home this morning, so early that the letter would have missed her. They’ll be here about eight-thirty.”

Captain Fraser gave an exclamation. He turned to the taxi, paid the man and sent him away. Then he turned to Mary and the girls.

“I shall have to wait for Littlejan. I suppose I can get a bed in the village?”

“We can put you up. We’ve prepared for you, just in case you were coming to see Littlejan,” Mary said. “We guessed the letter was from you.”

He looked at them, knitting his brows. His news would be a shock; he had thought his message would have given them warning.

“I’ve come to take Littlejan away. Her mother needs her help.”

“Take Littlejan away?” Mary echoed his words in stunned surprise.

“Gosh, how they’ll miss her!” Benedicta murmured.

“Oh, must you? Must she go?” Rachel asked in dismay.

“There’ll be trouble, if they lose Marigold!” Damaris looked at Benedicta, who nodded.

“Her mother needs her, for a few months. She’ll come back,” Captain Fraser said hastily. “It’s a temporary arrangement, but Janice wants her help in a crisis. The girl’s nearly seventeen; she should be able to stand by her mother.”

“Oh, she will, of course!” Mary said quickly. “She’ll want to help, and she’ll be really useful. What is the sudden trouble?”

“Ilaisa wants to go back to Samoa. She has been with Janice for years, as nurse and companion; Jan depends on her for everything. She has heard that her father in Apia has only a few months to live, and she wants to see him again. We couldn’t keep her from him. She says she’ll come back and I believe it; she’s devoted to Jan and the baby. But while she’s away Janice must have help.”

“Yes, of course,” Mary said dazedly. “And her big daughter is the right one to give the help.”

“But isn’t there anybody nearer?” Damaris cried. “What about school? They’ll miss her frightfully!”

“She’ll want to go, to help her mother,” Mary said. “She’s very fond of the baby sister.”

“But she won’t want to leave everything here. She’ll be torn two ways,” Rachel exclaimed. “Poor Marigold! What a shock for her!”

Captain Fraser knit his brows again. “Janice is getting local help, but it can only be temporary. She’s going to miss Ilaisa terribly, as a friend and companion, while I have to be away. That’s why she wants Littlejan.” He glanced at Mary. “Baby Cecily is two years old now.”

Mary gave him a quick look. “Littlejan will go. Her mother has the right to her company; she’ll feel that. But how we shall all miss her!”

“She’ll come back. I was to promise that,” he said, to comfort them.

“It will be a shock to her, all the same,” Rachel said again.

“A shock to everybody,” Damaris observed. “What Jansy-Lob and Rosalind will say, I simply can’t imagine. The bottom will drop out of everything for them.”

“Oh, nonsense! She can’t be as important as all that,” said Littlejan’s father.

“But she is,” Rachel and Damaris and Benedicta assured him with one voice.

CHAPTER TWELVE

MARIGOLD HEARS THE NEWS

Mary looked at the girls. "Joy will come this way from the village. If you'll tell her what has happened, I'll take Captain Fraser to the house. Benedicta and Rachel, if you come back with Joy I'll lend you those books I've promised you.—We'll go through the Abbey; it's the quickest way," she said to the captain.

"I ought not to wait. I hoped Littlejan would be ready to go with me," he said, as he followed her. "I ought to be in town tonight. But if she has been travelling all day I can't ask her to set off again at once. Can I phone from the house?"

"Oh, certainly! But it's hard on Littlejan to be carried off so suddenly. Can't you give her a little longer? Her godmother will want to see her, and the Countess of Kentisbury and many others will be disappointed not to say goodbye."

"I'm sorry," Alec Fraser said, "but I hoped my letter would give her two days' warning. It's bad luck that she hasn't had it, but I can't wait. We're making only a very short call at London and we must get on. Partings are sad things; it's much better for her to get them over quickly. She hasn't time to see all these people who have been so kind to her, and it's easier for her not to do it. She'd feel the goodbyes badly."

"Terribly," Mary agreed, looking sober, and led him to the telephone.

Then she hurried up to Littlejan's room and began to pack a big trunk. "This will take most of the stuff she has here, and if there's more at Joan's it can be sent after her. Poor Marigold won't sleep tonight; after her long journey, it really is very hard!"

She was putting the last treasures into the trunk when the sound of voices took her down to meet Joy and the girls. Damaris had come too, with the private intention of being there, if possible, when the travellers arrived. They had broken the news to Joy, and she hurried in, looking perturbed.

"Mary, I must change; I won't be long. Ask Captain Fraser to excuse me for a few minutes. I've never met him; I wasn't at home when he came before. This is distressing news! Is there really no help for it? We don't want to lose Marigold."

"I'm afraid there's no hope," Mary said. "He wanted to take her tonight. The very longest he will wait will be early tomorrow morning. I've packed for her; she'll have to phone her goodbyes to everybody."

"Poor child!" Joy exclaimed, as she hurried upstairs.

"She's not a child; that's the trouble," Mary said to Rachel. "She's so nearly grown up that she can be a real companion to her mother. I couldn't have left them to travel alone if I hadn't known Marigold could be trusted completely. The boys and Jansy were so anxious for the extra week that they made all sorts of promises of good behaviour. As Jansy will certainly keep her word the boys will be well looked after."

"Oh yes!" Damaris agreed. "Jansy-Lob will back up Marigold. They'll be all right. But—gosh! How Jansy's going to miss her!"

"I'm very sorry for Jansy," Rachel said soberly.

"And for Rosalind, when she comes back," Benedicta added. "I only saw her once, but she seemed to think a lot of Marigold."

"She thinks the world of her. She and Jansy will be heartbroken," Rachel said.

Mary brought the books she had promised, but the girls, disturbed and anxious like everyone else, were in no hurry to go back to the Abbey.

"We're keen on Marigold too," Damaris explained. "We want to see her once more. There's no saying how early her tyrant father will drag her away in the morning."

"I expect she'll snatch a moment to say goodbye to the Abbey. Her father's very nice. We all like him," Mary remarked. "It's very unfortunate that Littlejan should have been away when his letter came; it makes her going so hurried. But, as he says, it may be better for her this way."

Joy was still making friends with Alec Fraser when, considerably earlier than had been expected, the big car swept up the drive, Marigold and Jansy leaning out of the windows and cheering wildly.

"For once the train was punctual to the minute, and Frost found us and packed us in, and we came rushing home at full speed. We're all right, Mary! We managed quite well on our own," Littlejan cried gaily. "Aren't we brown? We've had gorgeous bathing this last week; the tide was just right, and we went in twice each day. Hello, Abbey Guardians! Have you come to welcome us? Oh, what a jolly suit the new gardener has!—Why, Mary! Is anything the matter?"

"My tell-tale face. I never can keep secrets," Mary groaned. "Marigold, dear——"

"Mary, what's the matter?" Littlejan leapt from the car. "Is anybody dead? Not the twins? Or Aunt Joan?"

"No, no, Marigold, nothing like that. But—well, look, dear!"

"*Father!*" Littlejan's astounded cry rang out, and she rushed up the steps to throw herself upon him in the doorway. "Oh, what a glorious surprise! And the boys are here, so you'll see them too. Isn't that marvellous luck? Come and look at Alan! He's as well as ever he was. Did you come to inspect him after his operation?"

"My stars, lassie, what a big girl you are!" Alec Fraser cried, catching her in his arms. "A big, braw, bonny lass! Your mother will be proud of you!"

"Oh, I know I've grown! It's two years since you saw me, isn't it? Why didn't you tell us you were coming, Father? Come and see the boys!" and she hugged him again and drew him towards the steps.

"Yes, I must see the laddies. Tell her, somebody! Give her my letter; that will explain."

"Tell me what? Mary, why are you looking like that?" Littlejan's voice grew anxious again. "It's lovely to have Father here! There's nothing wrong, is there?"

Joy had come out with the captain, but it was to Mary and Rachel that Littlejan had turned.

Rachel brought the letter. "This will tell you, Marigold. It has been waiting for you since yesterday morning."

"Yesterday! But, of course, you couldn't send it on. Is it important? If it's only to say Father was coming, does it matter now?" Bewildered, her eyes went to the car, where Alec Fraser was lifting out his sons and exclaiming over their height and their brown healthy looks.

"I should read it," Rachel advised.

"Marigold dear, your mother wants you. Your father has come to take you to her. The letter will tell you all about it," Mary said.

"To take me to Mother—*now*? Right now? In Ceylon?" Littlejan gave a shout. "To Mother and Cecily? Oh, gosh, what a thrill!" and she ran into the hall and dropped in a corner of a big settle and tore open the letter.

Mary and Rachel, Damaris and Benedicta looked at one another. “Not much mourning there,” Damaris remarked.

“It’s lovely for her to be going to her mother and little sister,” Benedicta said wistfully.

“We hadn’t thought of her side of it,” Rachel agreed. “Of course she’s thrilled. Who wouldn’t be? Ceylon—heavenly!”

“She hasn’t remembered the other part of it yet,” Mary observed. “Help Jansy, if she needs it, girls. Joy must attend to Captain Fraser.” And she went into the house and pretended to be busy in one corner, but kept an eye on Littlejan, absorbed in her letter.

Littlejan looked up. “Mary-Dorothy!”

“Yes, Marigold?”

“This means going away from all of you, now at once.”

Mary came to her quickly. “Yes, dear. But you’re going to your mother. And you’ll be with your father. It couldn’t be easier or happier for you.”

“But I shall miss everybody frightfully. And what about school?”

“I expect you’ll come back; perhaps to take the Cookery course. You’ll be old enough by that time.”

“I’d like that.” Littlejan’s face was grave. “But I didn’t mean for myself. I meant to stand by Jan during her year as Queen. It’s hard on her, Mary.”

“Jansy will pull through; she’ll have Rosalind to back her up.”

“Yes—oh yes! They’ll be all right. But I meant to help.”

“You’re going to help your mother instead, Marigold.”

“I’d better forget all about Marigold! She belongs to school. Will you take care of my Queen’s train till I come back?”

“Of course we will. I’ve packed your big trunk, but there may be other things you’ll want to take.”

Littlejan gave her a startled look. “I don’t really believe it yet; I feel all dazed and upside down. When does Father want to start?”

“He wants to go tonight, but he knows it wouldn’t be reasonable, after your long day of travelling. You’ll need to go early tomorrow.”

“But what about saying goodbye? To Auntie Joan—and Lady Jen and Lady Kentisbury—and Chestnut and Tansy? How can I vanish all in a moment?”

“You must phone your goodbyes, dear. It will be very much easier than going to see people. You’ll get it over much more quickly.”

Littlejan dropped the letter and sat, elbows on knees and chin on her clenched fists, and stared at the floor. “Gosh, what an upset! I want to go; it will be lovely to be with Mother and I adore Cecily Rose. And of course if Ilaisa wants to go Mother will feel awfully alone.” She pronounced the Island name as her father had done—“Eela Eesa.” “But it’s rotten to leave everybody and everything. Oh, Mary-Dorothy, I don’t know what I want!”

“It doesn’t really matter, does it?” Mary said quietly. “You’ve no choice. The hardest time is when you can’t make up your mind.”

Littlejan shot a quick glance at her. “That’s true. If Father said—‘Will you come?’—I’d feel ghastly. But even Jan and Rosalind will know I can’t help it. I’m not letting them down on purpose.”

“They’ll understand. All you have to do is to go ahead and be cheerful about it. That will make it easier for us all. You don’t think we want you to go, do you?”

Marigold gave her another quick look. "Was that why you looked as if somebody was dead? Will people really care if I go?"

"We shall miss you horribly," Mary assured her. "Our garden will be empty without any marigolds in it."

Littlejan gave a rueful laugh. "Oh, Mary! I'm sorry."

"I'm not! If we didn't miss you it would mean you hadn't mattered very much to us for these three years. And you've mattered a great deal. Your going will leave a very big hole in our lives."

Littlejan coloured. "The three years seem a very big part of mine! I almost feel as if I'd belonged here always."

"Almost, but not quite. Your mother comes first."

"Oh, rather!" Littlejan sat up, squaring her shoulders. "Thank you, Mary-Dorothy. You've helped, as usual. I don't know what any of us would do without you. Help me now to get through tonight! What shall I do first? Can I do any packing?"

"Don't you want to speak to your father again? You had hardly a word with him."

"I'll tell him I'll be ready in the morning. But he'll have me all the way to Ceylon; he has only one night with the boys. Aunty Joan will look after them, won't she?"

"You can remind her, when you ring up to say goodbye, that you are leaving them in her care," Mary said, with a laugh. "You *know* they'll be looked after, Marigold!"

"Oh yes, I do! But I've had them for all this month. I know them much better than I did."

"That's something to be thankful for, as you are going away from them."

"Yes, but I wish we could all go together.—No, I don't!"

"Of course you don't. If the boys are left here you'll have to come back to them," Mary reminded her.

"I hope they won't feel too bad about being left."

"Don't worry about that. Joan will come tomorrow and carry them off. They'll be all right with her."

"And they like Jansy quite a lot. I'll tell her she must pretend to be me and take care of Alan and be a pal for Alastair."

And looking burdened, Littlejan went out to the terrace, to meet her father and the boys, who were coming in with Joy.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

QUEEN LOB IN TROUBLE

Jansy looked round wildly, as Littlejan ran indoors to read her letter. "What did Mary-Dorothy mean? Marigold couldn't go away?"

"She's going, tomorrow morning. Her mother needs her." Rachel thought it wiser to have no suspense and no mistake. "She'll want you to be brave and carry on without her, Jansy."

"Remember you're a Queen and people depend on you," Damaris urged. "You can do things when you have to, Lob."

With a sharp sob, Jansy raced past them and across the lawn, and disappeared down the Abbey path.

"I'll go," Rachel said quickly, as they all started to follow her. "Damaris, you wait and tell Marigold where we are."

"May I come?" Benedicta asked wistfully. "I like that kid."

"Come on, then. We can't leave her to break her heart alone." Rachel ran after Jansy, with Benedicta by her side. "Marigold has been like a rather special elder sister to Jansy," she explained. "Mary told me. She stood by her during an illness and gave up a lot for her sake, and Jansy has been devoted to her ever since. I think perhaps she's going to feel this more than anybody. There are thrills in it for Littlejan, but Lob will be left very desolate. And she's had nothing to eat after the journey. We'll give her something to keep her going, till they can settle down to supper. Jansy-Lob has had a nasty shock."

Jansy stood on the garth, looking dazed. She darted towards the sacristy, a lonely corner separated from the rest of the buildings; but Rachel dashed after her and caught her at the entrance, while Benedicta went towards the cloisters.

"Don't hide alone, Jansy! Come and talk it over with me and Benedicta. We know how you're feeling; perhaps we can help."

"Nobody can help," Jansy gasped. "Has Littlejan really got to go?" And she broke down and clung to Rachel, who flung an arm round her and held her closely.

"Why, kid, how you've grown! I'm sure you're taller than you used to be!" she exclaimed.

Jansy's sobs ceased. "It was the swimming," she explained unsteadily. "Marigold said I'd grown"—she caught her breath, but hurried on. "She's like a fish in the water, and so are the boys. I could swim before I went to Wales, though not very much; but we went in almost every day, and now I can dive and float and tread water and all sorts of things."

"Well done! And Marigold said it had made you grow?"

"She thought so. Mother said I'd start to grow soon; she was sure I wouldn't be a tiny spot all my life."

"It wasn't likely you'd always be a spot," Rachel agreed gravely. "Your father and mother are tall; I saw them when you were crowned. You'll go ahead now and be a big person quite soon. Your plaits are longer too; the holiday has done you good in every way. You're going to help Marigold, aren't you?"

"How can I? I can't do without her, Rachel."

"The kettle's boiling," Benedicta called, from the garth. "Come and eat a bun, Lob!"

"Benedicta really is a blessing, isn't she?" Rachel said cheerfully. "Come along! You're hungry, after all those hours in the train. Of course you can help Marigold! She wants to go to

her mother and baby sister; how would you feel if it was your mother and little Jillian, and you hadn't seen them for a year and a half? But Marigold won't go happily if she's worried about you. She meant to stand by you at school. Can't you make her feel you'll be all right without her? Then she can go and not worry."

"I'll be all right! I shall have Nanta Rose. But we want Marigold, Rachel! It will be horrible without her."

"Only at first, and you must think what a good time she's having," Rachel urged. "Look what Benedicta has done! She's been at my cupboards and found biscuits and cake, and milk and sugar. Here's a nice little tea ready, to keep you going till supper time."

The table looked very tempting under the glow of the red lamp, as Benedicta switched on the light. Jansy, suddenly very hungry, said soberly, "It's jolly decent of you. I'm sorry I was an ass."

Rachel came from the kitchen with the tea-pot. "You won't go on being an ass. You were taken by surprise, that was all."

"Yes. That was why. I'm sorry," Jansy said again.

Rachel smiled at her. "And school will be all right?"

"Oh yes! Though there are worrying things. Marigold was going to help. But we'll pull through. It's lovely for her to go to her mother," Jansy said bravely.

"That's plucky. You keep thinking of that. Did you hear what Damaris said?—'You can do things when you have to.' And she knows."

"Mary Damayris knows all about that," Benedicta agreed.

Jansy glanced at them, as she took her cup from Rachel. "I'll remember. Say 'Thank you' to her from me, please. Do you think Marigold wants to go away?" she asked, a sudden break in her voice.

Rachel's reply was prompt. "She wants to go to her mother. Who wouldn't? But it will take a little while to reach her mother, and she's going to be very lonely and homesick for you and all of us at first. If she's worried about you as well, thinking you are miserable, it will make things harder still."

"Then it would really help her if—if I could——"

"I'm sure it would, Lob. Send her off in good spirits. You couldn't let her down."

"How would I let her down?" Jansy demanded.

"By making her think you aren't grown-up enough to be Queen. She was very keen for you to be chosen; she was sure you'd be a good Queen. Now is your chance to prove that she was right. Now, tonight, by being brave and letting her go off happily; and during the next two terms, by being a splendid Queen without her to back you up. Don't let her down!"

"I see." Jansy sounded very subdued. "I'll try. And, I say! Thank you awfully much for understanding. May I come and talk to you sometimes, after school starts?"

"I hope you will. I haven't forgotten all about school yet. I was a prefect, and you're a Queen. I may be able to help."

"When did Marigold's father come? Do you know why her mother wants her?"

Rachel was still telling what she could, struggling with the strange name of the Samoan nurse—"It sounded like Eela Eesa, but I don't know how it's spelt," she said—when voices sounded from the cloisters, and Littlejan and Damaris appeared at the door.

"Look at them hogging it in here!" shouted Littlejan. "Buns and cake and tea—and I'm starving!"

“Stodging without us,” Damaris complained. “I’ll bring more cups. Make yourself at home, Marigold!”

“We ought not to wait. Mary-Dorothy yelled after me that supper was ready, but if Jan can stuff herself on buns so can I. Thanks a thousand times, Rachel!—and for more than the cup of tea!” Her eyes met Rachel’s, full of meaning and understanding. “Now, Lob, down with that last drink and come home!” and she drank her own cup hastily. “Thank you, Rachel. That was nice. But we ought to go.”

She took Jansy’s hand and they ran off together.

“Poor kids!” Rachel said. “A cup for you, Marry? We’ll clear up and have supper. We had to comfort Lob. I think she’ll be all right now.”

“They’re standing on the garth,” Benedicta said, from the doorway.

“Don’t disturb them. Marigold’s saying goodbye to the Abbey. She won’t have time to come again.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

IN MARY-DOROTHY'S ROOM

Jansy never forgot that evening and yet she could not remember the details clearly.

There was the moment on the garth in the twilight, when Littlejan's arm went round her. "Buck up, Lob! You'll have this dear place to come back to. I'm going to everything new—except Mother and Cecily. You'll have heaps of jolly people to pull you through. Talk to Rachel; she'll help."

"I know. I'll be all right," Jansy said valiantly. "Don't worry about us. We'll carry on at school."

"Stand by the twinnies. And remember what I said about Mirry."

"That's difficult," Jansy objected. "Mirry's as old as you. I'm only a kid; I can't do much. But I will try."

"Tell Rosalind what I said to you up on the headland yesterday. Doesn't it seem ages ago? Rosalind will help; she's older than Mirry. Come on! Mary will be looking for us. Goodbye, dear Abbey! I'll come back!"

Then came the excited noisy supper, with Littlejan and the boys talking at full speed to their father, while Jansy sat very quietly, next to Mary, who understood and gave her an encouraging smile now and then.

Next there was hurried unpacking of suit-cases, to separate Littlejan's possessions from Jansy's and repack them in the travelling trunk, and Jansy was called by Mary to help, while Littlejan was shut in with the telephone, saying goodbyes to everybody. The boys were hustled off to bed, and Alec Fraser talked shyly with Sir Ivor, who had arrived from town to find his home in a turmoil.

"All finished, Marigold?" Mary asked gently, as Littlejan appeared, looking subdued and unlike herself.

"Yes, Mary-Dorothy. I spoke to Auntie Joan, and to Maidlin, and Lady Jen, and Lady Kentisbury. She promised to say goodbye to Tansy for me and to keep Chestnut safe till I come back. Roddy's old enough to ride him, so he'll be exercised properly, but I'm afraid he'll forget me. It isn't nice saying goodbye."

"No, it's horrid," Mary agreed. "But it will be lovely to come back, and you may not be away for very long. Jansy and I have finished this job and I've sent her to bed. Don't stay talking to her too long, Marigold. You're to have a six o'clock breakfast, and you're very tired."

"I can sleep once we've sailed. Mary-Dorothy, will you be in your brown room in about half-an-hour?"

Mary looked at her quickly. "I could be, but—yes, I'll be there, Marigold."

"Decent of you! Thanks, Mary." And Littlejan went soberly up to bed.

She did no more than bend over Jansy for a final hug. Jansy sprang up and clung to her for a moment, then drew herself away. "Go to bed, Marigold. You'll be dead tomorrow. I'll be all right."

Littlejan went to her room. "The poor kid will weep. I feel like it myself. It's the end of one life and the beginning of another."

She slipped into her dressing-gown and crept along the corridor to Mary's room. "May I come, for the last time, Mary-Dorothy?"

"Only for one minute. It's late and you ought to be in bed."

"I want to remember that I came to talk to you the very last thing. It's a big bit of the house, this brown room, and talking to you is a big bit of—of our life here. I don't know how to put it or what I mean, exactly, but I had to come."

Mary gave her a keen look, wondering if the girl knew how big a thing she had said and how much it meant to Mary herself. No, she decided, Littlejan did not realise; how could she? She had spoken for herself alone and as she felt at the moment. But her words would be treasured and remembered.

"Sit down, Marigold," she said quietly, pushing a stool towards the gas fire. "I have something to tell you that may make it easier for you to go. I'd have come to your room, if you hadn't suggested coming to me. Your father told me something, while you were in the Abbey, and asked me to tell you. I think he's a little shy of his big daughter, but that will wear off in a day or two." And she smiled down at Littlejan.

"I don't know him a bit well," Littlejan admitted. "I've been away at school so much."

"The voyage will put that right. You'll be great friends before you reach Ceylon."

"Oh yes! But tonight I feel I know all of you here much better than I know him. Something to tell me, did you say?"

"About Christmas time you are going to have another little brother or sister, dear. That's why your mother wants you so much."

"Oh!" Littlejan cried, stunned. "And Ilaisa is going away! Oh, poor Mother! Yes, I see. She wants me for company. Oh, Mary-Dorothy, I'm glad I'm old enough to go!"

"If you'd been a year or two younger she couldn't have taken you from school. But you're nearly seventeen; she has a right to your company now."

"Oh yes! And I can help her with Cecily, if she tells me what to do. Mary-Dorothy, how lovely for her to have *two* little ones, when the boys and I have to be away at school! It was nice for her to have Cecily, but two will be marvellous! I do hope it's another little girl!"

"I don't know how she feels about that. She may want another boy. But either way it will be a very happy thing for her to have two babies in her nursery, when her big family has to be so far away. You want to go to her now, don't you?"

"Oh, rather! Much more than I did before. I will try to help her. Thank you, Mary-Dorothy! Perhaps"—and Littlejan's eyes sparkled—"perhaps Mother will have two! Wouldn't that be wonderful? I'd be terribly bucked to have two!"

Mary laughed. "Don't set your heart on having twins. I think it would be rather hard on your mother. I'm sure she'll be satisfied with one. Now off you go to bed! Try not to think about all this tonight. You'll have plenty of time on your journey."

"Aunty Joan's coming very early, to carry off Jan and the boys. They won't have much time to feel lonely," Littlejan said wistfully. "You'll stand by Jan next term, won't you, Mary?"

"Dear, of course I will. I love Jansy-Lob."

"There are difficult things at school; she'll tell you. I think it would be better for her and Rosalind to be boarders; then everything would be new. It will seem so odd to them to be here without me. But Lady Joy wants them to live here; I asked her just now."

"There are the twins, you see," Mary explained. "They'll all go to school together."

“It’s hard on Lob. She can’t be expected to keep those big twins in order. Being her cousins, they know her too well. It’s hard on everybody.”

“The twins are very much impressed by Jansy’s being the Queen. They are quite inclined to look up to her,” Mary remarked. “Don’t worry, Marigold! They will miss you badly, but they’ll be all right. Goodnight, dear, and try to sleep.”

In the morning came an early silent breakfast, when everyone was heavy-eyed and even the small boys were subdued, though they alone had slept well.

Littlejan rose from the table, her face determined. “Now for it! We won’t say any more goodbyes; I’ll be back quite soon, I expect. Come on, Dad! Once we’ve gone they’ll all cheer up.”

The luggage was already in the car, and Frost was waiting to drive to Wycombe for the London train. Even his face was sombre at this breaking-up of the family.

Captain Fraser chuckled. “Nobody loves me! I’m in everyone’s bad books. It shows what a lot they think of you, my lassie!”

“Listen!” On the terrace Littlejan stopped, her face lighting up.

From the Abbey came the sound of the bells; one low note and one high—one Michael and one Cecily—repeated three times.

“Goodbye!” Littlejan whispered. “Three goodbyes. Is it one for each of the girls in the Abbey?—Oh, listen, Father! That’s for me—‘Come again soon’—two Michaels and a Cecily, and Michael to finish. How lovely of Rachel and Damaris! But I can’t bear it. Come on! Better get it over!” and she jumped into the car. “Goodbye, all! Good luck, boys! All the best, Jan! Thank you, Lady Joy! Thanks, Mary-Dorothy! Please start quickly, Frost dear!”

With a grim smile of understanding, Frost set off and they were gone, leaving a very silent group on the terrace, gazing after them.

“Do something to comfort these children, Mary!” Joy said desperately. “Jansy looks simply tragic!”

“I know what to do,” Mary began.

“You always do,” Joy said in relief.

“Jansy, I need your help,” Mary said. “Your mother will be here about eleven and your things must be ready. We made a dreadful mess of your suit-case last night; come and help me to re-pack. And then wouldn’t you like to show the boys the tunnels under the Abbey? They’ve never seen them.”

“I suppose they haven’t. Yes, I’d like that,” and Jansy’s sober face brightened.

“Packing first,” said Mary, and led her into the house to get to work.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE ABBOT IN THE ABBEY

“I’ve been unlucky. I haven’t seen all the family yet,” Benedicta remarked that morning, as she worked with Damaris in the garden.

“You’ve seen Lady Joy and her twins and her babies, and Jansy and Rosalind, as well as our lost Marigold,” Damaris argued. “And you spent a whole day with Maid.”

“Her house and her garden and her babies are lovely,” Benedicta agreed. “But I haven’t seen Lady Jen and her little-large family, for they’re in Yorkshire; and Lady Kentisbury and her babies have been in Scotland—I want to see them badly. Most of all I haven’t seen Mrs. Joan, for she’s had her kiddies at the sea-side, and when I’m working in her Abbey-garden I feel I ought to have seen her. She wrote me a jolly welcoming letter, but it’s not the same.”

“You’ll see her before long,” Damaris prophesied. “She’ll want to see you, I expect.”

She was right, for Joan had had the same idea, and after coffee with Joy and Mary at the Hall she came through the garden and the tresaunt.

“Where’s the new girl in my Abbey?” she called.

Rachel came out to meet her. “The gardeners are in the garden, unless Damaris has gone to the village to see about some special manure. She spoke of it this morning. We like Benedicta so much, Mrs. Joan!”

“I’m glad. I was going to ask you. She fits in, then?”

“Beautifully. She doesn’t talk too much, but I’ve an idea she watches everything and thinks a lot. Damaris loves having her in the garden. I’m relieved about that; Marry was alone too much.”

“It’s much better for her to have company. I’ll have a word with Benedicta.”

“I’m sorry for Jansy,” Rachel said, as they went to the gate. “She’ll miss Marigold dreadfully.”

“At school—yes. But she has Rosalind Kane to stand by her.”

“Rosalind seems to me a very good stand-by, but not in any way a leader,” Rachel said doubtfully. “She can’t take Marigold’s place.”

“And you think Jansy, as Queen, needs someone to lead her?”

“She’s very young to be Queen. She might need help with the seniors. I don’t know if Rosalind is the type to give enough help. She seems to me more likely to be a good assistant; to back up Jansy-Lob, rather than to have ideas of her own.”

“At present I think you’re right.” Joan smiled at her Abbey Guide. “But Rosalind has it in her to lead, if she were driven to it. Her eldest sister is a fine strong young woman, and Rosalind is very like her. Perhaps she’ll develop the strength she needs if she is called on to do it; that is what happened with Virginia. She was needed and she rose to the occasion. Are you expecting difficulties at school for Jansy?”

“There are the twins,” Rachel said. “They’re big girls to be going to school for the first time, and they’ve had a queer start, with those years in New York.”

“They’ve been well trained. Barbara Honor knows all about the school, and she’ll have prepared them for it. And she’s joining the school herself, as English mistress, this term; the twins can always go to her for advice.”

“That may help,” Rachel agreed. “How Jansy has grown during her Welsh holiday!”

Joan laughed. "I exclaimed about it as soon as I saw her, and she cheered up at once. She was terribly upset about being so small for her age. She has grown quite a lot in the last month; she's very proud and pleased."

"Now that she's started she'll go on growing," Rachel said, as she opened the entrance gate to let Joan go through to the garden.

Benedicta was digging in a corner, intent on her work.

"Well, new girl in my Abbey?" Joan hailed her. "How are things going in the garden?"

"Oh, Mrs. Raymond! How kind of you to come!" and Benedicta ran to meet her. "I love the garden, and I am so glad to be here!"

"It's looking very nice," Joan gazed round at the flowery space. "And you look very nice too, in your pretty school smock."

"I shall wear it out, but I can get another. I've wanted to see you so much! I say, Mrs. Raymond, you're jolly lucky to have Rachel in the Abbey! Did you know?"

"I rather thought I was." Joan smiled at her. "She's a good Guide, isn't she?"

"It's more than that," Benedicta said earnestly. "She's a real Guardian, not only for the Abbey. Mrs. Joan, when the monks were here, I suppose there was an Abbot who took care of everybody?"

"I'm sure there was. What are you thinking, Benedicta?"

"Rachel's going to be the Abbot, in your Abbey. She's much more than just a Guide. People come to her to be helped; I should come myself, if I were in a hole. She tells them what to do. That's like the Abbot, isn't it?"

Joan sat on a flat red stone and pointed to another beside her. "It certainly is. Sit down and tell me more about this; it's the sort of thing I can only know if somebody tells me. Who comes to Rachel for advice? I shouldn't have thought she was old enough yet to give help."

"Only the school people, of course. I expect the grown-ups go to Mary-Dorothy, as they used to do."

"I expect they do. Do you mean that Jansy comes for help to Rachel?"

"She will next term, if things are difficult. It was really to the Abbey that Jansy came last night, when she heard about Marigold. But Rachel comforted her and talked sense to her and gave her tea and buns; Jansy was hungry after the journey, but she hadn't thought of it. Rachel knew and made her have some tea, and she felt better. I'm definitely certain Jansy will come to Rachel, if she gets into any mess."

"Good!" Joan said. "I'm definitely glad to hear it. My mind will be much easier about her now."

"And Littlejan came to ask Rachel's advice, with Rosalind and Jansy; that was some time ago. I believe all the school crowd will come to the Abbey; Rachel's so much nearer their age than Mary-Dorothy. Last night she said to Jansy that she hadn't forgotten all about school yet, and that she had been a prefect and might be able to help Lob as a Queen. I'm beginning to think of Rachel as the Abbot in the Abbey."

Joan's face was thoughtful. "I wonder if she'll stay? If you're right she'll be invaluable to these growing girls; there are Elizabeth and Margaret too, and little Rosemary Marchwood from the Manor. It would make me very happy to think there was somebody in my Abbey who would help them all in case of need."

"Then you can be happy right now," Benedicta said stoutly. "I'm positive certain Rachel is your Abbot, and I know she won't ever go away. She loves it all too much."

Joan looked doubtful. “She’s only twenty-three. She may marry; or Damaris may get restless, and she will always come first with Rachel. Or Mary Damayris may reappear; Damaris may want to dance again.”

“If Rachel had to leave the Abbey now, it would just about kill her. She’s given herself to it altogether.”

“Not quite. She’d stand by Damaris,” Joan maintained.

“Damaris doesn’t want to leave her garden. I think they’ll both stay here. I’m quite sure Rachel will.”

“You may be right. In any case, for the time being Rachel looks like becoming the Abbot spirit and keeping the tradition of helpfulness and sympathy. Thank you, Benedicta! It’s a happy thought that I shall take away with me. A Counsellor in the Abbey! But your name is shorter and better; an Abbot, then. I sha’n’t say a word to anybody, of course, either to Jansy or to Rachel herself. But we’ll wait and watch, and see how things develop. One little bit of business! You understand that you will have the same salary as Damaris?”

“Oh, no, please!” Benedicta cried. “I don’t need it, really. And I invited myself. You mustn’t——”

“I must,” Joan assured her. “You have to pay for your room in the village. If you give full time to the garden you must feel you are earning your keep! You’ll need your dress money to buy new smocks and breeches, to say nothing of boots. Don’t say another word, but show me round the garden, and then I must take Jansy and the boys home. Congratulate Damaris for me; everything is looking lovely, and it does you both great credit.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

BENEDICTA'S DAY OFF

"May I have a day off, Boss?" Benedicta called across the garden, as she arrived to work a few days later.

"Sure!" Damaris looked up from a bed of small wallflowers. "Where do you want to go?"

"Kentisbury. I had a letter from the Countess. They came back from Vairy Castle a week ago. It will be like old times to see her again."

"I suppose you haven't seen the masses of small girls?"

"The first two were born while I was at Wood End, but they were too young to have visitors, and I didn't go back after the holidays. I remember Roddy and the baby boy, Hugh."

"Not a baby any longer. They've been here; the boys love climbing about on Wirral and Windermere. Hugh's three and a half now, and Roddy is a fine little chap of six. When will you go?"

"I've been asked for next Wednesday."

"Right! I'll get along without you for one day."

"I'll do that transplanting," and Benedicta knelt to tackle the job.

The Kentisbury car came to fetch her, and she settled down to enjoy the long drive. As they crossed the drawbridge and entered the quadrangle she gave a cry of delight and begged the chauffeur to stop.

"Let me have a good look! Oh, how pretty!"

The high grey walls, with their rows of windows, were on three sides; on the fourth was the ancient keep, carrying the flag which told that the family were at home. The oval lawn enclosed by the walls was not all green, as she remembered it, but was a twinkling mass of daisies, white stars everywhere. Playing among the daisies were four baby girls, two of two years old, two of sixteen months; they wore tiny smocks of different colours, the elder pair in rose-pink and gold, the younger in green and violet; and all had fair curly heads and little white socks and shoes.

"What a picture!" Benedicta said, as the babies crawled or trotted about, gathering daisies and carrying them to the two nurse-girls in blue uniform, who watched and helped them. "Oh, there's Lady Kentisbury at the door!"

The man drove on, circling the lawn carefully, lest any baby should take it into her head to dash out into the roadway.

"Come along, Benneyben! What fun to see you again!" Rosamund came to the door of the car. "How do you like the welcome I planned for you?"

"Oh, Lady Kentisbury—those lovely babies! And such a crowd of them! They're all little girls, aren't they?"

"Four little girls," the Countess agreed gravely. "We call them our Little Square for Four. Some day they'll dance 'Argeers' together. The boys are busy with boats by the lake; they look down on the girls, I'm afraid. Don't you like the colour scheme? It's the first time they've worn different frocks, and they're greatly intrigued about them. Mostly we put them all in blue, or white, but I've always said they should be a colour scheme, and they like it."

"But the daisies? Where have they come from? There weren't any daisies when I was here before!"

"The daisies are most improper," the Countess admitted. "They put themselves there, and the babies were so delighted that just for a year or two while the children are small we're leaving the daisies. They love to roll in them, like puppies. Presently they'll grow out of daisies, and then we shall take up the grass and relay it and have a lawn again."

"It's pretty; I like it," Benedicta declared.

The rose-pink baby came trotting up, as the car drove away. Her hands were full of daisies and she offered them to the visitor, with no trace of shyness. "For you. Pretty!"

"Rosabel will give away anything," Rosamund murmured. "She loves making presentations! Here comes Rosalin; unwilling to be left out, but not so keen to give up her daisies!"

The golden twin was following her elder sister. "I got some too," she said doubtfully.

"Thank you very much." Benedicta bent to greet them. "Suppose you each give me three and keep the rest for daisy chains?"

Joyfully the twins allowed her to select three flowers from each bunch. "Molly makes chains," Rosalin explained, and showed a necklace of daisies hung round her neck. "Rosabel's not ready yet."

"Well done, Rosalin!" cried her mother. "Not long ago you'd have said—'Yosabel's not yeady.' You're a big girl now, aren't you?"

"Very big," Rosalin assented. "Bigger van tinies."

"Goin' to get my chain from Molly," and Rosabel trotted off.

"Want to see," and Rosalin was after her.

"Molly is Queen Hyacinth; Queen of the Hamlet Club a few years ago," Rosamund explained. "I call her Hyacinth, but it was too difficult for the children, so they use her real name. Now come and see the boys!"

Walking through the gardens to the park, they found Roddy and Hugh radiantly happy in the stern of a dainty white rowboat, in which the Earl himself was paddling them quietly about the lake, watched enviously by a handful of children on the bank. On the grass sat Nanny, the head nurse, who had brought the boys to the lake.

"This is an unusual treat!" Rosamund exclaimed, as her husband waved his hand and the boys ecstatically did the same, nearly upsetting the boat in their excitement.

At a sharp command they subsided, and the voyage continued towards an island.

"It's deep just there," Rosamund explained. "It would be fun for me and the small girls if Geoffrey drowned himself and Lord Verriton and Roddy—the two heirs,—wouldn't it? But the boys have been trained to be obedient; they're safe enough. It's part of Roddy's preparation for the Navy, to give instant obedience, and he quite understands."

"They look just like brothers," Benedicta remarked.

"They think they are brothers. It hasn't occurred to Roddy yet to ask why he isn't Lord Verriton, when he's three years the elder."

"He doesn't know?"

"No, he still calls me Mother and takes life as he finds it; he's only six and a half. I'm told I may expect questions after he's seven. At present he's quite satisfied. He'll be amused to hear he is really my brother, not Hugh's!"

"He'll think it's very odd," Benedicta ventured.

"He'll be intrigued to find he is Hugh's uncle," Rosamund laughed. "And that the little girls are his nieces, and not his sisters! I don't expect any trouble with Roddy. Oh—look! How kind! But Geoffrey is always kind."

The Earl brought the boat to the landing-stage, with long sweeping strokes. The boys jumped out, and Hugh went to the group of watching town children.

“Daddy’ll give you ten minutes in the boat,” he announced, in a clear baby voice. “Come on!”

With shrieks of joy the children climbed aboard, and Lord Kentisbury rowed them gently up and down in the shallows near the bank.

“No deep-water voyage for this crowd!” Rosamund said. “They may not be as well trained as our boys. Do you see Roddy’s sailor-suit? He often wears sailor things, but Hugh never does; it’s all part of the plan, to make Roddy feel his importance as a future Navy man. Presently he’ll go to prep. school and then to Dartmouth. He’s thrilled about it.”

“Won’t they go to school together? It would be nice for Hugh.”

“Oh no! Hugh will go to prep. school for Eton. In every way we mean them to feel they are preparing for different futures. They’ll have a tutor for a year or two; with so many sisters and nurses, they need a man to balance things. Then Roddy will go to school and Hugh will learn to stand on his own feet; at present he relies too much on Roddy, and copies him in everything, but that won’t last long. Roddy will soon be going away, to start on his career. He must have something big and definite to look forward to, just in case it occurs to him that Kentisbury might have been his some day. But I shan’t emphasise that, and he may not realise for a long while that he was the heir for three years. Kentisbury is Hugh’s responsibility; it was Hugh who was sent to invite those children to the boat! Hugh is Lord Verriton, and the town babies know it.”

“I see,” Benedicta said, greatly interested. “You’re preparing them for being grown-up already.”

“As soon as they could walk and talk; the Navy for Roddy, Kentisbury for Hugh. No going to sea for Geoffrey-Hugh, however much he wants it! If we have another boy later on, he may join Roddy in the Navy, but Hugh can’t be spared.”

“Another boy would be lovely, after all the girls!”

“That’s what I think. But the doctors won’t let me have him yet. It was rather a strain having the girls so close together, and they say I must wait till the tinies are at least two before I think of having another. Now here’s a friend to meet you!”

“Is it Tansy?” Benedicta turned quickly.

“Tansy is in London, having her entrance exam for college; you must see her another time. Rosalind has been out with Ferguson for her riding-lesson.”

Rosalind, in breeches and jersey, her long plaits wound up over her ears, and wearing a cap on her yellow head, came down the path to them. “It’s the girl with the lovely name. I saw you in the Abbey,” she said. “The day we were—what did Lady Quellyn call us?—stupid little goops, I think it was.”

“You were, rather,” Rosamund assented. “I quite agreed with Joy.”

“But it wasn’t Lady Rosalind’s fault,” Benedicta urged. “She had to go in with the other two.”

“I don’t see that at all,” Rosamund protested. “And she won’t love you, if you call her that.”

“Nice of you to understand, though,” Rosalind said. “If you wouldn’t mind dropping that silly name I think I shall like you very much. If you don’t, I shall have to call you Miss Bennett.”

“Oh, please! I’m Benedicta.”

"I love your name. I'm Rosalind, or Nanta."

"Skip off and change for lunch, Rosalind," the Countess commanded. "Take Benedicta with you."

"I expect I'll see you a lot, if you live at the Hall during term," Benedicta said, as they climbed the steep path to the Castle, while Rosamund waited for her husband and the boys. "Everybody comes to our garden in the evenings."

"The evenings will be getting dark. But I'm sure I shall come, and Jansy-Lob too," Rosalind said. "I've been staying with my married sister; she has a lovely house in Wiltshire." Her eyes grew thoughtful, for Virginia had told her a secret, and Rosalind looked forward to a new title in the spring, of which she would be very proud. "I'm to be godmother to her baby, next year." She could not keep it in.

Benedicta shot a look at her and understood. "How lovely for you! Aren't you glad?"

"Terribly pleased! I love all little kids. I'm the youngest and I've never had much to do with them; some of the juniors at school are darlings. It will be wonderful to have a baby really belonging to me. But it won't be for some time yet."

"You have two other sisters, haven't you?"

"The horsey sister and the yachting sister," Rosalind said solemnly. "They've been here all August, having a jolly time, while I was with Virginia. Now they're at Vairy, having a still jollier time; there are boats, *and* horses! The Castle was too crowded while all the babies and nurses were there; it's not very large. Now Mandy and Minty—they're twins, you know—have it to themselves, though I expect some of their friends will turn up to help them to have an even jollier time! A pal of Minty's has a yacht, and he wants to take them cruising round the lochs."

"It sounds all right for Lady Mandy and Lady Minty!"

"They're both half engaged," Rosalind informed her, as they ran up to her room. "Mandy's boy lives here in Kentisbury; his father keeps the riding-school. As soon as the twins are twenty-one they'll be engaged, but they say there's no hurry to announce it and they love being engaged and pretending they aren't. They've always pleased themselves, and Aunt Rosamund has been marvellous with them. They won't do anything that would worry her. They'll settle down soon." She was changing at express speed into a blue frock.

Letting down her hair she began to brush out her long plaits. "I sha'n't put this up for a year yet; I'm only seventeen and a half. I have to roll it up for cooking at school, and for riding, but not for anything else. Have you seen the babies yet? They call me Aunt Nanty; it's a lovely name. I was always Nanta till we came here; short for Atalanta, my second name. Jansy-Lob calls me Nanta Rose."

"How are you going to get on without Littlejan Fraser?"

Rosalind's face grew sober. "I simply don't know. I've hardly thought of anything else for the last week. I had a letter from her, written as she was going down Channel. She's bothered about how Jansy will get on as Queen; she meant to stand by her."

"She'll want you to do it instead."

"She does," Nanta agreed. "And I don't feel up to the job. I'll do what I can, but I don't know the girls very well yet. I've only had one term; most of the others have grown up in the school."

"Do you expect things to be difficult?"

"There's the new Head—Miss Raven." Rosalind was plaiting her hair again. "We've had her for one term. I never knew Miss Macey, but she'd been there for years, and it's hard for

anyone to follow her.”

“Don’t the girls like the new person?”

“They say she isn’t too bad. But I’ve an idea she’s going to make changes, now that she knows the school, and the girls won’t like it. They hate things to be different. They’ll say she’s messing up everything.”

“They can’t go on in a rut for ever,” Benedicta observed.

“That’s what Aunt Rosamund thinks. And she says the seniors must back up the Head, whatever she does. I’m afraid they won’t see it.”

“It doesn’t sound like being a very happy term.”

“It’s impossible for the Queen to be outside anything that happens. If there’s a mess Lob will have to be in it, and I have to stand by her. I’m rather sorry I’ve gone back to school,” Rosalind said unhappily. “I went for the fun of it, and to be with Littlejan and Jansy. I didn’t bargain for rows in the school and people taking sides, for or against the Head!”

“It may not be as bad as you think. I’m quite sure Jansy’s glad you’ve come to school.”

“We won’t talk about this downstairs,” and Rosalind dismissed school and would not return to the subject.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

AN UNEXPECTED RETURN

Benedicta, telling Rachel and Damaris of her experiences that evening, was invited by telephone to the Hall, to repeat her story there. "We want to hear what you thought of Rosamund's Double-Two of babies," said Mary Devine.

"She calls them 'Our Little Square for Four.' I'll come right away."

Benedicta was telling Mary and Joy all about the daisy lawn and the baby colour scheme and the boating on the lake, when, with shouts of excitement, Elizabeth and Margaret rushed in from the terrace.

"Mother! You didn't expect us, did you?"

"I did not!" Joy gasped, half strangled by their arms. "What does this mean, Twinnies? I thought you weren't coming till Monday!"

"I'm the culprit. I had to come home, and we thought a surprise wouldn't hurt you, so we didn't ring up." Tall curly-haired Jen Marchwood came in by the open French window. "Do you mind having two big daughters thrust back upon you?"

"They haven't been giving you trouble, I hope?" Joy asked in alarm.

"Mother! As if we would!" Margaret cried indignantly.

"It isn't us that's the trouble," Elizabeth said, with a disregard for grammar that would have horrified Barbara Honor. "It's Rosemary who's the bother this time."

"As usual," Margaret added.

"What's the matter, Jen?" Joy and Mary spoke together, for Jen looked burdened and unlike her usual self.

"That child has given me more worry than all the other six put together," Jen wailed. "I did think I was going to get her safely off my hands this term! Eight years old, and she hasn't been to school yet! It's been one thing after another.—Oh, there's Benneyben! Glad to see you, Blessing. You were here when Rosemary scared us stiff over her appendix. We talked in the Abbey; remember?"

"Rather!" Benedicta exclaimed. "What has happened to poor Rosemary now?"

Joy and Mary were asking the same question. "Tell us, Jen!"

Jen dropped on a settle and said wearily, "Got a little damp at a picnic on the moors. We were caught by a sudden storm. We hustled the crowd home and no one was a penny the worse except Rosemary. She's down with bronchitis. She would have bronchitis! And yet, you know, in spite of the way she keeps us on the jump,—or because of it—Ken and I care more for that child than for any of our bouncing healthy boys."

"Of course you do," Mary said, looking troubled. "Shall I come and help you, Jenny-Wren?"

"To tell the truth I thought of borrowing you for a week or two," Jen admitted. "Nancy is in charge and she's very useful, and Ken knows what to do. I'm going back tomorrow. As we look like being parked at The Grange for a while I came to fetch warm garments for the whole family; it will soon be autumn on the moors. But it would be an enormous comfort to have you there, Mary-Dorothy."

Mary looked at Joy. "What do you think?"

“Go!” Joy commanded. “I want you, but if Jen needs you that’s all that matters. Call for her tomorrow, Jen; she’ll be ready.”

“Joy, how sweet of you!” Jen cried. “I always want Mary if anything goes wrong. She’s something strong and solid behind me. Ken wants her to come too.”

Mary rose quickly. “Don’t talk nonsense, Jenny-Wren! I’ll go and begin preparations. I have some things to finish for Joy, and a parcel of my own to make up, besides packing. You’ll tell me more about Rosemary in the car.”

“Proofs to send off? Am I tearing you from important work? Is it fair?” Jen asked wistfully. “I do want you, Mary-Dorothy!”

“That’s what is really important.” Mary’s smile told of the understanding between them. “No, I’m not busy now. I’m sending off a new story. It was finished before I went to Wales; I’ve been reading it through and it’s ready to go. I’m quite free to nurse Rosemary, or look after the babies, or play with Katharine and Michael, or be company for you.”

“You shall do them all, but especially the last,” Jen vowed. “I must go and look out winter clothes. Ken will phone me at seven to give me the latest bulletin. I didn’t like coming away, but our good doctor is in charge and he knows all about Rosemary; he’s seen her fairly often! And I shall be back tomorrow night, plus Mary-Dorothy. What a comfort!—Walk with me as far as our gate, Benedicta. How does the Damaris Garden grow?”

“Beautifully! I love it—and Mary Damayris and Rachel!”

“I was sorry to hear about your father and mother, Blessing,” Jen said gravely, as they crossed the lawn.

“How kind of you to think of them, when you’re so worried about Rosemary!” Benedicta exclaimed.

“I’m not really worried; not frightened,” and Jen smiled down at her. “It isn’t a bad attack and the babe will be well looked after. But I’m annoyed and disappointed. We shall have to take care of her all winter, after this; we sha’n’t dare to send her to school till May. It means months more of lessons at home. She reads quite nicely already. I shall need to have two classes, that’s all; Rosemary in one and Mike and Katharine, still learning to read, in the other—Upper and Lower School! But it isn’t good for Rosemary to be always with the little ones. She needs children of her own age.”

“I think it’s rather a good thing she can’t go to school at present,” Benedicta said, as they entered the Manor grounds by the little gate and went towards the lake. “I’m sorry for the reason, of course, but I do think May will be much better.”

“I don’t understand.” Jen looked at her in amusement. “What makes you think that? Why is it a good thing?”

“Wouldn’t Jansy and Rosalind have felt they had to look after her at first?”

“Perhaps they would. Will they be missing Marigold so much that they’ll have no time for anyone else?”

“Something like that. They’ll have too much to think about. They’ll need to keep an eye on Elizabeth and Margaret, and they’re expecting other worries. Rosemary would have been one more. By May things will have settled down.”

Jen raised her brows. “What worries do they expect? I know they’ll miss Littlejan Fraser; but is there anything more?”

“I’ve been at Kentisbury today, seeing the Countess and the babies and the boys; and Rosalind was there. Ought I to say Lady Rosalind, when I speak about her to someone else?”

“I shouldn’t bother; certainly not in the family! What did Rosalind say, to trouble you so much?”

“That things might be difficult and that the new Head was going to make changes; she didn’t say what changes. But she thinks the girls won’t like it, and that they’ll take sides, for or against the Head, and that Jansy won’t be able to keep out of it.”

“She certainly won’t! I hope Jansy will have the good sense to stand by the Head, whatever the dear lady wants to do. And I hope Rosalind will stand by Jansy. By gum!” said Yorkshire Jen. “They are going to miss Marigold Fraser! She’d have given the school a lead all right!”

“Yes. I didn’t say anything about it to Lady Joy, because of the twins, but I know Rosalind and Jansy are bothered about next term.”

“So it’s just as well they shouldn’t have Rosemary on their minds. I’m inclined to agree with you. It may be all for the best, if she can’t go to school till May, and I’m quite sure she won’t!”

“You’ll find a letter from Marigold waiting for you at the Manor,” Benedicta said, as they paused by the lake. “Unless it’s been sent on to you? Everybody has had letters; there was even a note to me. The ship put in at Plymouth for an hour or two, to pick up some extra cargo, and Marigold was able to send to the post. She seems to have spent all her time going down Channel writing letters.”

“I expect she did. She’d be feeling terribly homesick and lonely, poor kid. She’s a great letter-writer.”

“Rosalind had heard from her. Marigold wrote to Lady Joy to thank her for all the time she’d lived in her house, and to Mary-Dorothy to say thanks for everything, and to other people to say goodbye properly.”

“And to Rosalind to ask her to stand by Jansy-Lob?”

“That was the idea,” Benedicta agreed.

“Poor Marigold! She’s missing everybody dreadfully,” Jen said. “Well, I must go on and get to work. Good luck to you, Blessing!”

“Good luck to you with Rosemary,” Benedicta responded, and stood gazing at the lake, as Jen disappeared into the orchard at the Manor.

“This is where Mrs. Joan told me that Rosemary had to have the operation, the day the Countess was married. Poor Rosemary! She does give them a lot of bother! But all the same, I’m glad she isn’t going to school this winter,” and Benedicta went thoughtfully back to the Hall. “I do wonder what changes that new Head is going to make!”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MARIGOLD IS NEEDED

The car set Rosalind Kane down at the door of the Hall, and Jansy rushed out to greet her.

“Ready for school? I say, how grown-up you look! Nice, you know; but I never saw you dressed like that before.”

Rosalind wore a neat blue coat and skirt, with a white blouse, instead of the frock and long coat which were usual with her.

She gave no explanation till the car had gone and she stood beside her trunk and suit-case on the terrace. Then she said grimly, “This is one of Miss Raven’s new ideas. You haven’t heard, as you’re only in the Fourth; Aunt Rosamund had a notice from the school. All girls from the Fifth upwards, Sixth and Cookeries, will be allowed to wear tunics only for games and gym. For ordinary classes they must have blouses and blue skirts.”

“Oh!” Jansy stared at her blankly. “How grown-up they’ll look!”

“I suppose that’s the idea. The senior school are to look like seniors.”

“They won’t like it,” Jansy said. “They’d much rather stick to their gym slips.”

“I know. There’ll be a lot of grousing.”

“Do you like it?” Jansy asked doubtfully. “It makes you look much older.”

“I’d rather wear a frock. But I wasn’t keen on gym things. I felt all legs.”

“You looked it,” said Joy, who had heard the conversation from the doorway. “I always thought you were too tall for a gym slip, but you had to wear one if all the rest did. The girls will get used to it.”

“Aunt Rosamund says they will—if they try.” Rosalind’s tone was full of meaning.

“You think they won’t try?” Joy asked.

“I’m sure they won’t want to try,” Jansy remarked. “They’ll make a frightful fuss.”

“Then they’ll be very silly. It isn’t a new idea,” Joy urged. “When I was at school we all wore skirts as seniors. When Jen went back to take the Cookery course she was only allowed to wear a tunic for games.”

“Aunt Rosamund told me,” Rosalind agreed. “She was surprised to hear I was allowed to wear gym things when it was too cold for a cotton frock.”

“It’s only been for the last two winters,” said Jansy, who had been for some years in the school. “When I went first the seniors wore skirts and blouses. But they petitioned the Head, and she laughed and said they might wear their gymmies, if they liked them so much better.”

“Mackums—I mean Miss Macey—was getting slack,” Joy said severely. “I know Joan felt it was time she retired. The school needs to be pulled up; the girls won’t like it, but it will be good for them.”

Jansy and Rosalind looked at one another.

“We are going to have a jolly term!” Jansy groaned.

“We need Marigold,” Rosalind said, as one who stated an obvious fact.

“Stand on your own feet!” Joy retorted. “Jansy, I hope you’ll do your duty as Queen. The Queen must put the good of the school first.”

“Jansy doesn’t come into this,” Rosalind began. “She’s only in the Fourth. Nobody will ask her to give up her gymmy.”

Joy eyed Jansy thoughtfully. “But she’s growing fast. By the time she’s in the Fifth she’ll be ready for skirts and blouses. She’s not a tiny spot any longer. Come along in, girls! The twins are helping in the Damaris Garden, but they’ll come back presently.”

“The fuss may not start at once,” Jansy murmured, as she slipped her hand through Rosalind’s arm. “While it keeps warm the girls will stick to their cottons. But there will be a row presently, and even if I don’t come into it I won’t be able to stay outside. You know what I mean, don’t you, Nanta Rose?”

“It’s not very clear, but I do understand,” Rosalind assured her gravely. “The Queen will have to say what she thinks. And it does concern you and your crowd, for you’ll be seniors next year.”

“Shall we talk to Rachel after tea? She’d know what we ought to do.”

“We know that already,” Rosalind said grimly. “The question is, will we do it, or will we funk?”

Jansy glanced at her. “Marigold wouldn’t like us to funk. Rachel would buck us up.”

“I know. But I think we won’t go to her till we’ve had one day at school.”

“Oh, right! We’ll know where we are then.”

“And we may know what we want to ask her,” Rosalind agreed.

The twins came rushing from the Abbey, clamouring for tea. “We’ve been weeding, and—such fun, Jansy! We’ve found George’s bedroom,” Margaret cried.

“A hole under the hedge. We think it’s where he sleeps all winter,” Elizabeth added. “Isn’t it sport to be going to school at last, Nanta Rose? We’re frightfully keen.”

Rosalind smiled down at her. “Then you’ll like it and you’ll get on all right.”

“Oh yes! Miss Honor told us about being new girls and being frightfully humble and meek and all that sort of thing.”

“Not pushing ourselves forward,” Margaret explained. “Waiting till we’re asked to join things, you know. But we want to be in the Hamlet Club straight away.”

“Oh, of course! The Queen will see to that.”

Elizabeth pulled a face at the Queen. “It is odd to think that Jansy’s It! She isn’t nearly old enough or—or awe-inspiring in the least.”

“I may be all that at school,” Jansy retorted.

“We’re going to call her Lob,” said Margaret.

“That’s her Queen’s name, so you must obey her as the Queen,” Rosalind told them.

As the car, with Queen, maid, and twins, drew up at the school gate next morning, it was surrounded by an eager crowd.

“Marigold! What d’you think of all this? Tell us, Marigold!—I say, where *is* Marigold?”

Rosalind and Jansy sprang out, followed a little shyly by the twins.

“Marigold’s gone.” Jansy flung back at the group of dismayed seniors.

“Gone?” Tessa cried. “Gone where?”

“Ceylon,” Jansy said simply.

“But—but—oh, you tell us, Rosalind!”

“Her father came and took her away, quite suddenly. Her mother needs her. She’s somewhere about Suez by now,” Rosalind explained.

A blank silence greeted the news. The girls looked at their small Queen and her tall maid, and then gazed at one another.

“How—how simply foul!” groaned more than one.

“Won’t she come back?” Phyl faltered.

"I'm sure she will. But not for a few months, at any rate."

"But we can't do without her!" Tessa wailed. "We need her, especially at this—this crisis!"

"Did you know it was a crisis, Rosalind?" asked Sandra, a Cookery student.

"We rather thought it might be," Rosalind admitted. "We'll have to face up to it without Marigold, that's all."

"But we can't! We need her!" Tessa wailed again. "Oh, how utterly disgusting!"

"We can, if we've got to," Jansy said sturdily. "Marigold would say we were fearful mugs, if we couldn't get on without her."

"She might not put it just that way, but she'd certainly feel like it," Rosalind observed.

"Do you know how bad things are?" Tessa demanded. "Have you heard that the Head's sacked poor old Mademoiselle?"

"Golly! Why?" Jansy cried.

"And we're to have an English person for French, not another Mademoiselle." Tessa's injured feelings found vent in wild indignation. "As if anyone English could be good enough! She's called Miss Verity. Why shouldn't we have a real French person? Aren't we worth it? Isn't our French important?"

"It's rough luck on old Maddy," said Sandra. "She'd been here for umpteen years. I remember her when I was in the First Form."

"And now you're a Cookery and nineteen." Rosalind laughed across at her. "Some people might say Mademoiselle had been here too long. Perhaps she'd had enough of you and she wanted to retire."

"Well, I'm not going to do French for an English person," Tessa announced. "And I'm not going to parade about in a blouse and skirt. Like the new Head's cheek, to interfere with our clothes! Why can't we wear what we like?"

"Oh, Tessa!" Rosalind exclaimed. "Before the juniors?"

Tessa looked abashed. "I suppose I ought not to say it, but I mean it, Rosalind. I feel just desperate."

"It's the start of a rebellion," said Elizabeth Marchwood solemnly, from behind Jansy.

"What a joke! Will we be in it too?" Margaret asked hopefully.

Jansy took quick action. She seized a twin by each hand, and dragged them away. "Come and find your form-room! And the Head and Miss Honor will want to see you.—Look here, you two! Don't talk about what those silly seniors are saying. You weren't meant to hear. They're excited and they don't mean half of it. You can talk to Nanta Rose at home, but you're not to gossip to the rest of your crowd; see?"

There was a new authority in her voice. The children looked subdued for the moment and she hoped her words would take effect.

"It would be sneaky to talk about things you weren't meant to hear," she added.

"But there were other kids there besides us!" Margaret argued.

"Do you care about Mademoiselle, Jansy?—I mean Lob?" Elizabeth asked.

"She was a nice old thing, but nobody likes French and she couldn't keep order a bit. I expect she wanted to retire; I should think she was sick of us. But I do feel we ought to have a real French person," Jansy admitted.

"Perhaps an English one will keep order better," Elizabeth said shrewdly. "She'll be more used to English classes."

"Here's your room; and here are some of your lot. Betty—Diana—Jennifer—Ann—here are my cousins from the Abbey. This is Elizabeth and that one's Margaret; you'll soon know

them apart. Now you can look after them for me; I've heaps of things to see to," and Jansy was gone, to seek out other new girls and make them feel welcomed and at home.

The twins smiled shyly at Betty, Diana, Jennifer and Ann, and the four settled down to the business of making friends.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE REBELLION IN THE SIXTH

“Tell us, Nanta Rose! What happened?” Jansy begged.

They had been separated all day, even during the dinner hour. Now, in the car on the way home, was the first chance to compare notes.

Rosalind glanced at the interested twins. “I’ll tell you later, Lob.”

“You needn’t mind us!” Margaret said. “We aren’t going to have anything to do with your old rebellion.”

“Who said there was a rebellion?” Rosalind demanded.

“They sounded like it this morning; not you, but the others,” Elizabeth explained. “We talked about it and decided it wasn’t anything to do with us. Betty said nobody was going to snatch our gymmies off our backs for years yet. And Jennifer thinks it’s a jolly good thing to have an English person to teach French, for we’ll know what she’s talking about.”

“Diana says she won’t remember to jabber French at us all the time, if she’s got an English mind,” Margaret added. “And Ann hated Mademoiselle, so she’s jolly glad. You seniors can rebel as much as you like. It’s nothing to do with us.”

“And you know we wouldn’t repeat anything you say at home.” Elizabeth’s tone was full of reproach.

“I hope you wouldn’t,” Jansy said severely. “Are they all feeling fearfully bad, Nanta Rose?”

Rosalind knit her brows. “I’m afraid they are. Tessa and Phyl have decided to stand up for Mademoiselle, as they call it, and they say they won’t work properly for Miss Verity. And they loathe the thought of wearing skirts; all except Sandra,” and she laughed.

“What’s the joke? Why doesn’t Sandra mind too?”

“Is Sandra the fat dumpy little senior?” Elizabeth asked with interest.

“She’d look awful in a tunic,” Margaret remarked.

“That’s the point. She’s small and stout and round, and she says she used to feel frightful in gym things. Tessa asked if she supposed she’d look any better in a blouse and skirt, and Sandra said she had hopes and she knew she couldn’t look worse, and that it was all right for tall thin people like me to wear a gymmy but that for her it was absurd. I said it wasn’t all right for me and I’d felt all legs. But we’re the only two who like the change.”

“Jean isn’t there, is she?” Jansy asked, referring to the Queen who had come before her.

“It’s very difficult,” Rosalind groaned. “Jean has left, to have a few months helping her mother, before she goes to college. You’ve heard about Olivia?”

“The head girl,” Jansy explained to the twins. “Scarlet fever in the hols and in quarantine for three weeks yet. She can’t even write letters, so it’s no use asking what she thinks.”

“And Mirry has gone to boarding-school.” Rosalind eyed the Queen thoughtfully.

“Mirry? Boarding-school? I hadn’t heard that!” Jansy cried. “Why, Nanta Rose? Marigold wanted us to do something about Mirry this term!”

“Marigold told me. She thought Mirry wasn’t happy, and was feeling out of things; and she wanted us to pull her in again. I expect Mirry felt it for herself and asked her mother to send her somewhere else.”

“But why?” Elizabeth asked curiously. “What made her be out of things?”

“She was the Queen before Marigold,” Margaret argued.

“We think that was the trouble. She was Queen too early, and she was followed by Marigold, who was a strong Queen, and people forgot that Mirry had ever been a Queen, except when there was a procession. It put her in a difficult position, and Marigold only began to understand last summer. She wasn’t very old, and she didn’t realise that Mirry was being overlooked as an ex-Queen. When she did think of it she told me, at the end of last term, that we must do something about it, when school began again.”

“She told me in Wales,” Jansy agreed. “We were going to bring Mirry more into things. Boarding-school! Oh, that’s rotten luck—for us! All right for Mirry, of course. But I liked Mirry. I’m sorry, Nanta Rose. She’d have been on your side in this mess.”

“It is a mess, and the girls are taking sides,” Rosalind said unhappily. “I don’t see what they can do, except grumble, but they’re doing that in earnest. Miss Raven introduced Miss Verity to the Upper School and to those miserable Cookeries like me who take French, and said she had lived all her life in France, until the last few years, and she speaks French like a native. I don’t see that it will make much difference; she may teach better than Mademoiselle and she may keep order better.”

“She can’t keep order worse!” Jansy said grimly.

“Wish we’d had Mademoiselle!” Margaret muttered. “We loathe French!”

“I guess there won’t be much playing about with Miss Verity,” Elizabeth remarked.

“But Tessa and the rest can’t, or won’t, see it,” Rosalind ended. “They never seemed to care so much for Mademoiselle, but they’re furious because they say she’s been sacked. And she hasn’t; the Head said definitely that she wanted to retire and go and live in France.”

“Phyl and Tessa are looking for things to grouse about,” Jansy observed. “We’re rather in a mess, aren’t we, Nanta Rose?”

“I shall talk to Rachel after tea.”

“We’ll come too,” the twins said instantly.

“No,” Rosalind told them firmly. “You’ll practise and do your homework; you have some, I suppose? Remember what your mother said this morning!”

“I forgot she was going to Daddy’s concert,” Elizabeth admitted. “She always puts us on our honour to be good, when she goes out at night; if we didn’t promise she wouldn’t go. She hasn’t forgotten that time when she went to a concert and we went into the Abbey in the dark, and Benedicta saved Twin from falling through the window and got hurt.”

“It’s a great pity we had to promise,” Margaret sighed. “For with Mary-Dorothy away we could easily have stayed out quite late.”

“Think so?” Jansy asked unkindly.

The twins eyed her, and then looked at one another.

“She’s turning into an old bully, isn’t she?” Elizabeth commented.

“Gashly!” Margaret agreed. “Frightfully awful!”

“But as we promised Mother——!”

“Oh yes! There’s no help for it. We’ll go to bed because of that, but not to please Jansy-Lob.”

“So long as you go at the proper time, I don’t care why you do it,” Jansy retorted.

“Yes, you do, Lob,” Rosalind remarked. “They must keep their word to their mother, whether they obey you or not.”

“Oh well, of course! I say, Nanta Rose, we do seem to have lost all our Queens! There’s nobody left but me. I’m glad I’ve got you.”

“I don’t know how much use I shall be! It was a great mistake for Marigold to go away, just this term,” Nanta groaned. “We could do without Jean and Mirry, if we had to, but Marigold really mattered. It leaves you quite on your own.”

“Except for you,” Jansy said sturdily. “I’m going to use you a lot. What else are you my maid for? I’d expected to have Marigold to help, but I won’t let people say I was depending on her. If you’ll back me up, we’ll carry on without her and without any other Queens.”

“I’ll back you up all I can,” Nanta promised.

“And we’ll both talk to Rachel after tea.”

Elizabeth eyed her indignantly. “Haven’t you got any homework?”

“Never mind my homework. I’ll see to that,” Jansy told her.

“Bully!” Margaret said resentfully.

Joy had already started for town, to join Ivor for dinner before the concert. With some grumbles, the twins settled down to work after tea, and the Queen and her maid went off to the Abbey.

“You don’t think we ought to stay and help them? It’s the first night of prep.,” Rosalind asked, as they set out.

“No, I don’t, Nanta Rose! They haven’t much to do; I asked Diana what their homework was, and they can do it quite well. It’s much better not to begin helping them. They’ll do it all right; and they’ll practise. They promised Aunty Joy, and they always keep their word.”

“It’s a great relief that they do.”

“Oh, rather! If you can once get a promise out of them they stick to it. We mustn’t stay too long, for I’ve got stuff to do too.”

“And I must practise,” Rosalind agreed, as they went down the tresaunt to the garth.

CHAPTER TWENTY

BENEDICTA'S IDEA

“Do you like Tessa, apart from this trouble?” Rachel asked, when she had heard the story—the loss of the elder Queens, the new English-French mistress, the rule about no tunics for seniors.

“She’s quite all right most of the time,” Jansy said.

They were sitting in the little parlour within the Abbey walls. The lamp was switched on, for it was dark early in there, and the soft red glow filled the room. Damaris was perched on the arm of the sofa, under the painting of Striding Edge, swinging her feet as she listened to the story. Benedicta crouched on the floor, pulling books out of the shelves, looking for one to take home to her rooms. Rachel, giving her whole mind to the problem, sat at the table, facing the picture of Grisedale Tarn.

She looked at Rosalind. “Tessa matters more to you. How do you feel about her?”

“I’ve always liked her. She was the first to ask me to go to school, and Phyl was the second. They’re Sixth, but they’ll be Cookeries next year, and they said they hoped we’d have one year together. I like them both, but I do feel they’re making a mess of things this term.”

“Oh, yes!” Rachel agreed. “They’re feeling sore about having to wear skirts, and they’ve gone too far and said too much. They’re wrong, of course; no school lets its seniors go about in gym things. If their late Head allowed it, she must have been too easy-going for her last year. The girls must get back on right lines, and they must dress and look like seniors. One would hope they would act like seniors too, and give a good lead to the school. What do you think, Benedicta? You’re nearer to your school days than we are.”

“That’s why I begged to be allowed to stay for the conference,” Benedicta explained. “I’m still keen on school news, and Rosalind told me that she was looking out for rows. I think Tessa has taken up an untenable position”—she glanced at Jansy and added—“a position she can’t hold; and she’ll have to climb down.”

“She’s talked too much to do that,” Rosalind began.

“She can’t do anything else,” Damaris said. “She doesn’t want to be sent home to dress herself, but that’s what will happen if she turns up in gym things.”

Rosalind looked worried. “Miss Raven said today that the weather was turning colder and we’d better give up our cottons for this year. She’ll expect us in skirts tomorrow.”

“You’ll wear yours, of course?” Rachel asked.

“Oh yes! Tessa tried to make me say I’d stick to my cotton frock for a few days longer or come in my tunic, but I told her we couldn’t fight the Head and I should do as she wished.”

“Quite right,” said Damaris.

“But Tessa won’t love you,” Benedicta observed. “She can’t defy the Head unless the whole Upper School stands by her. You’re the opposition. Stick to it, Rosalind!”

“Tessa can’t defy the Head, even if there’s no opposition,” Rachel said. “She probably knows it by now. She’ll have to climb down. Can’t you think of some way to make it easy for her? That’s why I asked if you liked her. Can’t you help her out? You’re in the right, you see.”

“I’d help her, if I could,” Rosalind said earnestly. “Both for her and for the school. We can’t let Littlejan down, and we know how much upset she would be, if there was a row in the school.”

“That’s true,” Rachel agreed. “And Littlejan will come back. You’ll have to report to her.”
“We’ll have to write to her, all about school,” Jansy remarked. “She wouldn’t be very glad to get the sort of letter I should write tonight.”

“Mustn’t upset the Marigold Queen, when she’s so far away,” Damaris said. “It would be brutal.”

“But what can we do?” Rosalind looked at Rachel.

“Help Tessa to see she must give in and be a decent sort of senior. I don’t quite see how, but there must be some way. Benedicta, you have bright ideas! How can they help Tessa to climb down?”

Benedicta looked round from her quest of a book. “Do I? Have ideas, I mean. First I’ve heard of it! But as it happens, I’ve just had one, though I don’t know if it will work. That Club of yours, that Jansy’s the Queen of—does the whole school belong to it?”

“Benedicta, what a ghastly sentence!” Rachel laughed.

“It’s not in an essay, and I’m not a literary lady. Does everybody belong to the Club?”

“The Hamlet Club?” Jansy gazed at her round-eyed. “No, only about half the school. A lot of the girls don’t care about the dancing. But why?”

“Do you mean,” Rosalind began slowly, “that the Hamlet Club could help?”

“Couldn’t you call them together and put it up to the Club to give the school a lead? What’s the good of them? Do they only dance and crown the Queen? Can’t they do something really useful, for a change?” Benedicta sat on her heels and gazed at the schoolgirls. “Jansy’s the Queen; can’t she make them see it?”

“The motto!” Jansy gave a shout. “‘To be or not to be; that is the question!’ The school’s having to choose; the Club ought to pull them through! Oh, Nanta Rose! Could we do it?”

“It would be much easier for Tessa to climb down as one of the Club,” Damaris observed. “She’d probably be glad of the excuse. She must know she can’t go on; she’s not an infant.”

Rosalind’s eyes were eager. “It would be a wonderful chance for the Club to help the school. If the whole Hamlet Club promised to back up Miss Raven the rest would have to do it too. Oh, I wish we could make them see it!”

“Try,” Rachel suggested. “Has your motto ever helped the whole school, or has it just been useful to single girls?”

“I don’t know. I’m so new——”

“But I do,” Jansy exclaimed. “Mother’s told me the story. The Club was a secret at first, but they gave up the secret to help the school out of a hole.” And she plunged into the story of the beginnings of the Hamlet Club. “I don’t know if they thought of the motto at the time, but of course it was there in their minds, when they had to decide whether to keep the Club to themselves or use it to help the school.”

“Oh yes, that was using the motto all right,” Rachel agreed. “Has it ever been used since then for the good of the school?”

Jansy looked doubtful. “I don’t think so. But it’s been terribly useful to people,—privately, you know.”

“I’ve heard about that, from Littlejan. Isn’t this a chance for the Club, through its motto, to lead the school?”

“If only we could!” Jansy said wistfully. “Wouldn’t Marigold be thrilled? She thinks no end of the motto.”

Rachel leaned forward and spoke earnestly. “You must try, you two. It’s a simply marvellous chance. I suppose you can call the Club together, as you’re the Queen, Jansy-

Lob?”

“Oh yes! I can call a meeting. But they won’t listen if I talk about wearing skirts. It doesn’t matter to me, and they’ll tell me so.”

“What matters, to you and everybody, is that your Club should back up the new Head through thick and thin. But the girls would be much more likely to listen to Rosalind.”

“Nanta Rose, you’ll have to talk to them,” Jansy cried.

Rosalind flushed. “I couldn’t; oh, I couldn’t! I’ve never done anything like that.”

“You could begin,” Damaris said encouragingly. “There has to be a first time for everything.”

“Didn’t your sister—the one you’re so keen on—do something like it in that village where you used to live? The Countess told me about her lecture and said she’d been a perfect brick,” said Benedicta.

Nanta thought of Virginia, facing the village people and making the first speech of her life as she asked them to pull together, during the illness of their leader at Rainbows. “She was wonderful. I was proud of her,” she owned. “But I’m not like that. I can’t lead anybody.”

“You can’t tell till you try,” Damaris argued. “You may be a born leader. You’ll never know, if you merely back up other people. You seem to be jolly good at that.”

“I like helping people. But I—oh, I couldn’t make a speech to the Club!”

“I’m sure you could,” Rachel said heartily. “You’re so like your aunt. Lady Kentisbury could do it.”

“I’m not like her,” Rosalind pleaded desperately.

“You’re exactly like her.” Rachel smiled at her. “That will help you with the Club; they think a lot of her, I know. Go ahead, Rosalind! You won’t find it so hard. It will help both the school and the Club, and it’s much the easiest way out for Tessa and Phyl. They’ll fall in with the rest, and when they think it over they’ll be jolly grateful to you and Jansy.”

“I’ll call a meeting, if you’ll do the talking, Nanta Rose,” Jansy begged.

“You’re used to platforms,” Damaris urged. “You play solos at concerts. This won’t be so very different.”

“There’s all the difference in the world,” Nanta retorted. “I don’t mind playing, but I’ve never made a speech.”

“You won’t make one now. You’ll just talk to the Club,” Rachel said. “They’ll start discussing what you’ve said and Jansy will ask for a vote. If you’re keen enough to help the school, you’ll find the words you want will come.”

“They’ll all hate me, and I did want them to like me! I wish I’d never gone back to school.”

“They’re much more likely to”—Damaris paused. “To love you for ever, because you’ve pulled them out of a mess,” she ended.

“What were you going to say, Damson?” Benedicta asked, when the girls had gone off across the garth, Rosalind depressed, but Jansy more hopeful than when she came.

“‘To choose you for the next Queen.’ That’s what is going to happen, if Lady Rosalind rises to the occasion.” Damaris slid from her perch. “Is George’s supper ready, Ray? I’ll take it out for him and set this girl on her way home.”

“Don’t hint at that idea to Nanta Rose,” Rachel said, handing over the dish of bread and milk. “It hasn’t entered her head. But it will come. The girls like her already; if they feel she is a leader, after all, there’ll be no doubt about the next Queen. But don’t say anything about it, either of you.”

“No, Boss,” said Benedicta. “I’d like her to be Queen. It would be a jolly finish to her school life.”

“You’ve helped her to it, by having that idea of the Club and the motto,” Rachel assured her.

“The Hamlet Club to the rescue—of the new Head! I hope the good lady will appreciate it,” Damaris laughed. “Come along, Blessing! George will be waiting for his supper.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

SLOVENLY SENIORS

“Miss Verity?” Joy asked next morning, raising her brows. “How very odd! You can’t know, of course, Rosalind, and none of the girls at school now will remember. But the Queen before me, who crowned me and looked after me like a godmother, was Marguerite Verity, the Strawberry Queen. She’s living in New York, with a husband and three small children; I’ve seen a lot of her lately. Could your new French mistress be any relation?”

“She’s English; she might be,” Jansy said. “It would be fun to have a cousin, or something, of Strawberry’s in the school. I know Strawberry well enough, but I’d forgotten her surname.”

“Ask Miss Verity,” Joy advised. “If she’s related to our Strawberry get her address or phone number, and I’ll ask her to tea; she mustn’t come to the school unwelcomed by the old Queens!—Yes, Rosalind, you look very neat; turn round! Oh, you’re all right! I hope the others will be as tidy. Your skirt is beautifully cut; your Aunt Rosamund saw to that, I suppose? You’ll show the rest how they ought to look. Good luck to you all!”

“It ought to help, to know you look nice, Nanta Rose,” Jansy pleaded, with a glance at her friend’s grave face, as they set out in the car. “Aunty Joy’s very particular.”

Nanta gave her a small smile. “Thank you, Lob! I need all the help I can get today.”

“Why?” the twins spoke together. “What are you going to do?”

“Are you thinking there’ll be a row, because you’ve gone into a skirt?” asked Margaret.

Rosalind shook her head and said nothing.

“Perhaps you’ll know, by the time we go home, and perhaps you won’t. Till then, you can wait,” Jansy said tartly.

She knew no more than the twins did, but she was hopeful. Nanta had practised for a long time, and even to Jansy the music coming from her violin had been full of foreboding, while Elizabeth had demanded, “What’s the matter with Nanta Rose?”

“Got a pain somewhere, I should think,” Margaret said, busy with her supper.

Nanta had said nothing to reassure Jansy, but had gone to bed looking burdened. Forces she did not understand were working in her, inherited from a long line of ancestors who had given public service when they saw it was needed. The same thoughts had driven Virginia to a big effort, and Nanta was dimly aware of it. She knew very well that her uncle and aunt at Kentisbury spent their lives giving useful help, when they would often have preferred to stay quietly at home with their children and their garden.

Nanta did not quite understand, but she knew that there was a duty to be done and that she could do it; and the motto of the Club demanded that she should rise to the occasion. She was nervous, even frightened; but every instinct drove her on.

“If you’ll call a meeting, I’ll do what I can, Lob,” she said, as the car drew up at the school gate, speaking hurriedly lest even now she should draw back.

“Oh, splendid! I’ll see to it,” Jansy said joyfully. “Twins, if Miss Raven’s willing we’re going to have a meeting of the Club. You can come and be received as members.”

“Good! We’ll be there!” Margaret cried.

“What do we have to do?” Elizabeth asked cautiously.

“I have to shake hands with you, and ask you to repeat the motto and promise to live up to it.”

"I shall grin when you shake hands with us," Margaret announced.

"Do we have to keep the promise?" Elizabeth demanded.

Rosalind turned on her. "Elizabeth Joy Marchwood!"

"Well, it might be awkward sometimes."

"I expect it will be, but a promise is a promise."

Jansy glanced at her, then turned to the twins. "Off you go! I've a lot to do. Don't tell Jennifer and Diana about the meeting till you get the notice. It may not be today, after all."

"Oh, let's get it over!" Rosalind murmured.

"If I possibly can, Nanta Rose. You're being jolly decent. I say! Shall I tell Miss Raven we want the Hamlet Club to help her in the mess she's in with the seniors?"

Nanta smothered a laugh. "I don't advise it, Lob. It wouldn't be exactly tactful. Just say you want the Club to meet.—Oh, if only we could have Marigold for one day!"

"You'll do it quite as well, and just think how thrilled she'll be! I shall write reams to her on Sunday, if the Hamlet Club has saved the school."

"It hasn't saved it yet," Rosalind retorted.

It was a difficult morning for the Upper School. Miss Raven looked at them, when she came in to make her announcements, and said scathingly, "I must say I never saw a more slovenly set of seniors. My dear girls, can't you dress yourselves decently? The sooner you learn the better. Phyl, tuck in your blouse; you are most untidy. Yvonne, your skirt is slipping down. Juliet, don't you know how to knot your tie? Ask somebody to give you a lesson. Tessa, why have you come in your tunic?"

Tessa, scarlet, muttered something about her skirt not being ready. The explanation she had meant to give so glibly, about preferring her tunic, died on her lips under the Head's keen gaze.

"You had plenty of warning. See that you come properly dressed tomorrow. Only Sandra and Rosalind seem able to put on their clothes neatly." And Miss Raven left them.

"Seething with rage, everyone of us!" Phyl wailed. "I tried to come in my gymmy, but Mother caught me and made me change. I meant to back you up, Tessa."

"I meant to wear my cotton, but I couldn't get round Mother," Tessa groaned.

"You like it, don't you, Sandra?" Rosalind asked. "You look jolly nice."

"I think I look better than I did in my gymmy," Sandra admitted.

"The worst of it is that she thinks we can't look decent," Tessa said bitterly. "It hasn't occurred to her that we aren't trying."

"Slovenly is a beastly word, especially when you're doing it on purpose," Phyl moaned.

"We'll have to give in," Juliet said gloomily. "We can't go on like this all term."

"I suppose Rosalind and Sandra are feeling virtuous." Tessa's tone was resentful.

"No, only comfortable," Sandra said easily. "You'll soon get used to it."

"I'm thinking what Marigold would say." Rosalind's voice was low and unhappy.

There was a short silence. Then Tessa exclaimed, "You think she'd side with the Head?"

"I know she'd loathe having any sides!" Rosalind spoke with sudden vigour. "And I'm certain she'd say seniors had to play the game by the school." Her cheeks were scarlet with embarrassment.

The girls liked her and they saw what it had cost her to speak out. They knew, too, that she was right about Littlejan Fraser's attitude.

"We're going to be late for our beastly French," Tessa said shortly, feeling very uneasy. "Come and see what our English person is like in class!"

“Her accent’s good,” said Yvonne, whose mother came from Paris. “I had to take a message to her from the Head, and she speaks perfect French.”

“All the same, she’s only English,” Phyl growled, convinced that here, at least, was a real grievance.

Rosalind and other Cookery students joined the Sixth for French, and at the end of the class they agreed with Yvonne.

“Her French is beautiful,” Rosalind said wistfully to Tessa. “I like her. You didn’t make things easy for her, and it’s her first time with us. Isn’t it rather hard?”

Tessa, ashamed of herself, said curtly, “It’s hard on us not to have a real French mistress.”

“Lots of schools don’t,” Yvonne said. “If a girl is good at French and takes her degree in modern languages, why shouldn’t she teach in English schools? I’ve thought of trying it myself.”

“You’re half French,” Phyl pointed out.

“So is Miss Verity,” Rosalind said quickly. “She has lived in France all her life. Oh, Tessa, don’t be mad!”

Tessa, nursing an imagined grievance and not knowing how to retreat from the position she had begun to regret, was glad of an interruption. A card was slipped into her hand by a junior, with a brief—“From the Queen. Please read it out!”

“A meeting of the Hamlet Club, after school, in the gym,” Tessa announced. “What’s that for? Did Lob tell you, Rosalind?”

“New members, I suppose,” Phyl said. “There are the Abbey twins, to begin with. I wonder if there’ll be any dancing? I brought my tunic, as there’s drill this afternoon. I suppose we’ll be allowed to wear tunics for dancing?”—in sudden alarm.

“I jolly well hope so! Did you bring your fiddle, Rosalind?”

“Jansy asked me to bring it, so I expect she hopes we shall dance,” Rosalind said, and Tessa’s first question went unanswered. “Come on, Sandra! I like cooking better than French.”

Jansy caught her during the dinner hour. “I’ve done my bit, Nanta Rose. You will help, won’t you?”

Rosalind gave her a wavering ghost of a smile. “I won’t let you down, Lob. I’m beginning to think Phyl and Tessa will jump at an easy way out. We’ve had a horrible morning.”

“Rotten luck!” Jansy spoke with sincere sympathy. “They don’t look awfully nice, do they? You and Sandra are the only tidy ones.”

“That won’t last long. Don’t say anything about them!”

“Oh no, we won’t!” Jansy promised.

No comment was made, but Rosalind and Sandra were aware that during the break for dinner Yvonne’s skirt was pulled up and Phyl’s blouse was tucked in and Juliet’s tie was knotted neatly.

“We can’t let ourselves down before the Lower School,” Phyl said reasonably, and wished she had thought of it before. “Lob didn’t say a word, but she looked volumes. ‘Slovenly’! I can’t bear that!”

“We’ll be changing for drill,” Juliet remarked. “So Tessa won’t look odd any more.”

And Tessa knew that tomorrow she must dress as the rest did. She could not go on looking odd for ever.

They were welcomed to the gym by the sound of the violin. Rosalind stood on the dais, playing as much to give herself courage as to please them. The Club accepted the invitation, and seized partners and called for the name of the dance.

“I can never remember which tune is which,” said Tessa.

“Isn’t it ‘Steam Boat’?” asked the more musical Phyl.

“‘Steam Boat’ it is,” and Rosalind paused. “I was playing you in, but you can dance, if you like. When everybody’s here we’ll have the meeting.”

“New members, I suppose,” and Phyl turned to Margaret Marchwood. “Dance with me, Abbey Twin! You know all the dances backwards, don’t you? Which twin are you?”

“Not backwards. We know most of them frontwards. I’m Margaret. Elizabeth’s dancing with Jansy. Thank you very much! The Queen can’t dance with both of us at once,” Margaret explained.

Jansy, reaching the top of the set, forsook Elizabeth and stepped up beside the fiddler. The dancers paused, then squatted on the floor for the meeting.

Suddenly grave and Queen-like, Jansy welcomed the new members, shook hands with each and asked her to repeat the motto and to promise to be loyal to it. She handed to every candidate a badge to be worn on her dance frock—a square of green bearing a white cross.

Then, flushed and eager, she spoke. “Hamlet Clubbers! My maid wants to say something to the Club. Carry on, Rosalind!” And, in an undertone,—“Buck up, Nanta Rose!”

Rosalind, looking white, laid down the violin she had been clutching to her breast and came forward to face the Club.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

NANTA ROSE AND THE HAMLETS

Rosalind, knowing she would be expected to play, and having no drill class, had not changed, and she looked very grown-up in her neat skirt and blouse, in spite of the long yellow plaits on her shoulders, as she faced the girls and spoke bravely and urgently.

“Hamlet Club dancers! The Queen and I have seen a chance for the Club to do a big thing for the school. Some outsiders say we do nothing but choose a Queen and dance. That isn’t quite true; I’m sure the Club has helped the school in lots of ways, and I know it has kept the old girls in touch with present-day people. Now we want it to do more. We want the Hamlet Club to give a lead to the rest of the school.”

She paused, gazing down at her audience. Most of the girls and all the juniors looked frankly puzzled, but there was understanding in the glance that Phyl shot at Tessa, and Nanta saw that they knew what was coming. But what their attitude would be she could not tell.

“This term there are things that most of us don’t like,” she went on steadily, and Tessa looked at Phyl and grinned. “But our new Head has decided, and it’s up to the school to back her all we can. If we fight against her we shall only be uncomfortable, and she’s bound to win in the end. Couldn’t we of the Hamlet Club back her up for all we’re worth? There are so many of us that the others would have to come into line. It would be doing a really big thing for the school.” “And it would be living up to the motto,” said Jansy unexpectedly.

“I wasn’t going to say that, for fear some horrible person would think it was preaching,” Rosalind remarked. “But it is true and the Queen has said it for us. Lots of our girls have found the motto helped them, when they had to choose between two ways; now couldn’t it help the school? ‘To be or not to be’; how can we let Miss Raven down?”

“Oh, bother you, Rosalind Kane!” broke from Tessa.

“We know it’s what Queen Marigold would want us to do,” Nanta said steadily. “We want to write and tell her the Club has helped the school. It will cheer her up no end.”

“It’s a pity she didn’t stay and be in all this mess,” Tessa grumbled.

“There needn’t be any mess,” Nanta retorted. “Let’s fall into line, dress as the Head wishes, and work well for Miss Verity. And let’s do it for the sake of the Club and our motto.”

“Nanta Rose, do you *like* having an English person to teach you French?” Tessa’s grievance rose again.

“I don’t mind. Her French is jolly good and she runs her classes well. She makes them interesting.”

“And Mademoiselle didn’t, I suppose?”

“I never said anything about Mademoiselle. I liked our French class this morning.”

“And anyway, Miss Verity’s related to the Hamlets, and if we’ll have her she’s going to join the Club.” Jansy brought out her news with great effect.

“Related to us? Lob, what do you mean?”

“Her aunt was the third Queen. Look at the photo in the hall, before you go home! The Strawberry-pink Queen was Marguerite Verity,” Jansy said calmly. “I asked Miss Verity if she was any relation, and she said Marguerite was her aunt. Miss Verity’s father was older than Queen Strawberry, and he went to live with French relations and went into their business and married a French person. But he was born and lived till he was grown-up quite close to

Wycombe, in a village on the hills. Miss Verity has heard about our Club from her aunt, and she's awfully keen to learn to dance."

"Gosh, how queer! Shall we let her in?"

"I don't see why not. Heaps of old girls come on dance nights," Jansy said. "But we'll need to teach her the dances."

Tessa looked up at her. "You'd better take on the job. You're a good teacher; you taught me! 'I *will not have* those crossings skipped'! And you danced with rage."

"Perhaps you know now how awful you looked," Jansy retorted.

"Perhaps Miss Raven would like to join too. Lob could have a class for mistresses," said Phyl.

"If Miss Verity's going to dance with us, we shall have to do French decently for her," Tessa grumbled.

"Well, why not?" Rosalind demanded. "Everybody, let's finish this job and have some dancing before we go home! Lob and I mustn't keep Frost waiting too long. Won't you vote that the Hamlets back up the Head and receive Miss Verity into the Club?"

"Are you putting that to the meeting?" asked Phyl.

"Of course, if the whole Club wants it——!" Tessa began, with no intention of losing this easy way out of her opposition. "I don't mind doing it for the Hamlet Club."

"Then I'll put the resolution to the meeting," said the Queen. "Hands up, all who promise to stand by the motto! 'To be or not to be'; to back up Miss Raven and be nice to Miss Verity. Any against——? Oh, good! Then let's ask Rosalind to play 'Twin Sisters' for our new members! Margaret-Twin, I must have a dance with you. And then we'll have 'Meeting Six', and you two shall be my women and I'll have a twin on each side of me."

Eagerly the girls sprang up. Many had been completely bored by the meeting, being outside the troubled area of the school.

"Waste of time, I call it; all that talking," said Diana to Jennifer and Ann.

"Just for some silly seniors," said Betty, and asked Elizabeth-Twin for a dance.

"I'd like Miss Raven to know we're doing it for the Hamlet Club," Tessa remarked, as presently she danced with the Queen. "I don't want her to think she's bullied us into being good little girls."

Jansy laughed back at her. "I expect she'll be told. Aunty Joy is going to ask Miss Verity to tea, to make her feel at home and to tell her about the Strawberry Queen in New York. I shouldn't wonder if Miss Verity hears about our meeting, when they get talking over the Club. She'll pass it on to Miss Raven."

"I don't mind giving in, if the whole Club's doing it," Tessa admitted. "But I want the Head to understand."

"We can't tell her! But somebody else will. I say, Tessa! When I asked Miss Raven about the meeting she said she'd like to come!"

"Gosh! That would have been jolly awkward!" Tessa exclaimed, as she turned the Queen under her arm. "What on earth did you say?"

"That it was only a business meeting, to receive my small cousins and some other new members, and it wouldn't look nice, as we'd be in our gym things; but that I hoped she'd come to a dance-evening soon, when we'd be wearing frocks. She was too busy to come to any parties last term, as she was so new and she was only finding out about things. She saw the dancing on May-day and she wants to see some more; she says she'll have more time now."

“Was she sensible about it?”

“Quite! She said she saw my point and she’d prefer to come to a proper evening presently. She asked if we liked tunics for dancing, and I said most of the girls did but I liked a dance frock better. And then I said I knew the seniors wouldn’t want to dance in skirts and blouses, so I hoped she wouldn’t mind if they stuck to their gyms.”

Tessa eyed her with respect, as hand in hand they swung out of the line and back again. “What marvellous tact, Lob! Did she take it well?”

“I thought so. She gave an odd grin and said we’d consider dance practices on a par with games and gym, so tunics would be allowed. I think she knows there’s been—well——”

“A rebellion in the Sixth,” Tessa said solemnly. “You and Nanta Rose seem to have quelled it between you. I must tell Phyl this story!—Phyl! Have ‘Butterfly’ with me? You do get a chance to speak to your partner in ‘Butterfly’!”

Presently Rosalind put away her violin. “Lob, we really must go. Poor Frost will be frantic.”

“Come on, Twins!” Jansy shouted. “You’ll see Diana and Jennifer tomorrow! Fly, both of you!”

“I suppose you’d never have played for us again, if we’d turned down your resolution, Nanta Rose?” Tessa remarked, as they hurried to the cloakrooms.

“We couldn’t risk that!” said Sandra.

“Rosalind’s invaluable to us. But she doesn’t get any dancing herself,” Phyl acknowledged.

“It isn’t easy to play those dances, if you’re feeling uncomfortable; it wouldn’t be easy for me, anyway.” Nanta looked at Tessa. “And I’d have felt very uncomfortable. I wouldn’t have refused, but I might have played badly.”

“You couldn’t play badly, if you tried,” Tessa said, deep admiration in her tone. “But I’m glad we didn’t make you feel bad.”

“I’m glad the meeting went all right.”

“Well——!” Tessa bent to change her shoes. “I’m glad, too, Nanta Rose. Thank you for keeping us straight. I wasn’t feeling too happy.”

“I was terribly frightened of you all,” Rosalind whispered, stooping over her shoes also. “You were jolly nice about it.”

“If we should ever lose you, as our Fiddler, I don’t know what we’d do.” Tessa spoke aloud again.

“You’d have Miss Lane, as you did before. But you won’t lose me as long as I’m at school. After that I don’t know.”

“Lose our Rosalind? Our Fiddler? Never!” cried Phyl.

“Oh, but we might!” Tessa murmured, as the Abbey four raced off to their car and patient Frost.

Phyl gave her a quick look. “You mean May-day?”

“Sure! We couldn’t do better. She’d keep the Club on the right lines. And the kids adore her. So do I, after tonight! We were in a hole, and she knew it and found a way out for us, without saying anything.”

“She said a good deal, but not the sort of thing you mean. Don’t give her a hint; we’ll take her by surprise. It’s a long while till May-day,” Phyl said.

“We’d been thinking of her. She’s made us think still harder tonight. But we’ll keep it dark,” Tessa agreed.

“Oh, I’m tired!” and Nanta sank into a corner of the car. “I don’t want to talk, but just to be quiet.”

“But you didn’t dance,” Margaret argued.

“You made a jolly good speech, Nanta Rose. It was just what we needed,” said the Queen. “We’ll tell Benedicta; it was her idea.”

“Is it hard work making speeches?” Elizabeth asked.

“Very, sometimes. I thought they’d all hate me.”

“Well, they didn’t. It was the other way round,” Jansy assured her. “You have a good rest. I’ll talk to these two.”

No one met them as the car drew up at the door of the Hall. As they went in, Elizabeth, always sensitive to atmosphere, shivered and looked round nervously. “There’s something wrong. I don’t like this! I’ve felt like it before. Somebody’s dead, or something.”

“Oh, Twin!” Margaret wailed. “Who do you think it is?”

“What nonsense, Elizabeth!” Jansy exclaimed. “You’re tired, that’s all.”

“I feel it too; a sort of foreboding,” Rosalind said anxiously.

“Well, it isn’t Mother that’s dead, for here she comes!” Margaret cried, as Joy came down the big staircase.

“Girls, be very quiet! There’s been an accident in the Abbey, and Benedicta is badly hurt. Nanny Bee is taking care of her and the doctor will be here soon. Come and have your tea, but don’t make a sound.”

“Benneyben hurt in the Abbey *again*?” Elizabeth whispered. “How did she do it, Mother?”

“It wasn’t us this time,” Margaret cried.

“Gently, Margaret-Twin! No, it wasn’t your fault. Come and have your tea and I’ll tell you all about it.”

“She’ll get better, won’t she?” Rosalind faltered. “Is she very badly hurt? We all like her so much!”

“Yes,” Joy said quietly. “We can’t tell till we have the doctor’s report. Come in, dear; you look tired out.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE SECOND TIME

Benedicta, working alone in the garden, cutting off stalks of dead lavender, wondered, as she had done several times lately, what Damaris was doing in the oratory by herself. For some days Mary Damayris had shut the door on the world and disappeared for an hour; but when she came back to the garden she did not seem in low spirits.

"I don't believe she had been crying yesterday," Benedicta murmured, as she laid down a fragrant sheaf and began on another bush. "How this stuff has grown! It makes me think of Rosalind, because of that hint of somebody's. If she should be a Lavender Queen, she'd find her flower ready for her here, in among the lobelia and marigolds. So suitable! But about my boss; she seemed rather extra jolly yesterday. She hadn't been weeping over her lost career! Perhaps she writes poems, in there all alone. I wonder when she'll tell? Rachel doesn't know; I've seen her look at Damaris in a questioning sort of way. Mary Damayris won't tell us till she's ready. I do wonder—golly, what's happening out there?"

From the road near the farm gates came a confused noise, shouts and yells and barking. Out of the yard dashed two huge cart horses, dragging a great waggon laden with turnips. They wheeled towards the hills and tore past the Abbey wall. Then, bewildered by the barks of Bess, the bloodhound, they turned again and rushed in at the Abbey gate, the waggon lurching behind them.

"The garden!" Benedicta gasped. "They'll smash everything to pieces! Damson's garden! Oh, I must stop them! Stop! Stop, you brutes!"

Snatching up a hoe she darted to the rescue, brandishing her weapon and shouting, to turn away the frightened horses. There was no time to think of danger; she could see only the destruction that those mad hooves and heavy wheels would cause in the Damaris Garden. And Damaris was not there to help.

It was over in a moment. The horses backed and reared; the men came rushing up and caught their heads.

But Benedicta had tripped and fallen and lay under the cruel hooves.

"Be her dead?" cried one of the men. "Hold them brutes, Tom. I'll get her out o' this."

"I be holdin' on 'em," gasped the second man. "Here comes Master. Miss Rachel too."

"What's happened?" John Edwards shouted, as he ran to them. "Is anybody hurt?"

"What is it?" Rachel cried, drawn from the Abbey by the noise. "Oh, Benedicta! What did she do?"

"Tried to stop they horses," said Tom. "Plucky, I call it. But she fell, and I doubt they kicked her."

Rachel knelt by Benedicta, her hands shaking as she raised her head. Then she put Benney down gently.

"We must take her to the house." Her voice was steady, but she was very white. "Could you lift her on to a gate or something? And cover her up. I'll phone to Lady Quellyn and the doctor. We mustn't handle her; we may do harm; lift her very carefully. And take those creatures away, please! Why are they in here?"

She shivered as she looked at the great horses, still enough now, but trembling and panting.

“They ran away, missy,” said Mr. Edwards. “We’ll see to this little lass. Shall we take her to the Hall?”

“Yes, please. There isn’t room in the Abbey.” Rachel raced to the telephone and told the story to startled Joy.

“Of course she must come here! We’ll be ready for her. I’ll fetch Nanny Bee to help. Have you rung up the doctor?”

“I’ll do it now. Thank you so much! We must save her. I’m sure there’s concussion; she’s unconscious.”

Rachel’s voice broke. She rang off hurriedly and called up the doctor. Then she ran back to look at Benney.

Damaris came down the oratory stair. Her face changed, as she saw the sad little procession on the garth.

“What’s happened? Ray, what is it?—Oh, I say! She’s not dead, is she?”

Rachel went to her quickly. “Marry, come in and I’ll tell you. We can’t do any more for Benedicta. Lady Joy and Nanny are waiting to take care of her; we’d only be in the way. The doctor’s coming as fast as he can. There! Sit down and I’ll tell you all I know.”

Damaris had been strung up to a high pitch of excitement, alone in her retreat. As the exaltation left her she was white from the sudden shock, and Rachel saw it, though she did not understand.

“Tell me!” Damaris begged. “What happened?”

“I heard a noise and ran out to see. Apparently the two big horses from the farm had run away and had dashed in at our gate. Benedicta tried to stop them and fell; I’m afraid they kicked her, but it’s difficult to say. She’s unconscious, but I don’t know how much she’s hurt.”

Damaris understood. “It was to save the garden,” she half sobbed. “She’s so keen on it. Oh, Ray, suppose she’s dead?”

“Those creatures would have ruined the garden, if they’d careered madly over it,” Rachel admitted. “I suppose Benedicta couldn’t bear the thought of it.”

“It was for me. Don’t you understand? To save it for me.” Damaris gazed at her with tragic eyes. “It’s my garden, and I wasn’t there. She felt she had to save it for me. Oh, if she’s dead, Ray!”

“She isn’t dead yet,” Rachel said stoutly, and put her arm round her sister and held her closely. “Don’t shake like that, Marry dear! She may not be very bad. Lady Joy will tell us as soon as they know.”

“It was for me,” Damaris groaned, and hid her face on Rachel’s shoulder.

“I know what Benedicta would want you to do,” Rachel said. “Go and see how much damage is done. You may be able to save things, if you go at once. The horses didn’t get beyond the gate-house, but between that and the gate there may be broken plants. When you see her she’ll ask at once what happened to the garden. I’ll put on the kettle for tea.”

“Marry needs something. It was a bad shock,” she said to herself, as Damaris, grim-faced, went out to see what had happened to her plants. “I don’t know what she does in the oratory, and she won’t tell me till she’s ready, but it’s something that works her up tremendously. This, on top of it, has been almost too much for her.”

Damaris came in, when called to tea. “Some things are broken, but it’s the end of the season. I’ll soon clear up the mess. Any news?”

“Not yet. The doctor was out on his rounds, but they were trying to get in touch with him. Nanny is experienced; she’ll do what she can, till he comes. Here’s your tea, Marry.”

“I ought to have been there,” Damaris said drearily. “It’s my garden; I ought to have taken care of it. But who could have expected anything to go wrong out there? Isn’t Benedicta a little brick, Ray?”

“She is. And she’s brave. This is the second time she’s been hurt in the Abbey, and the other was to save somebody too.”

“I shall go and ask for her presently, if they don’t ring,” Damaris said, with a shiver. “I keep thinking she must be dead.”

“I don’t believe she’s dead,” Rachel asserted. “But I’d like to know the doctor has been.”

It seemed a long while. Damaris wandered restlessly about, unable to fix her attention on anything.

“Now I know how Daphne Dale felt, last November,” she jerked suddenly.

Rachel glanced at her. “When you had been hurt in saving her. Poor Daphne! I was sorry for her.—At last!”

She ran to the telephone, listened intently, then said in a subdued voice, “Yes, I see. Thanks. As soon as you can, please. We’re feeling very bad. You’re sure there’s nothing we could do? I was afraid not. Thank you again.”

She turned to Damaris. “The doctor has come; they’ll give us his report later. Lady Joy knew how we’d be feeling.”

“Then she isn’t dead?”

“Of course not. I told you she wasn’t. There’s no more to tell yet.—Oh, bother! You wait for the next message and come and tell me.” And Rachel went to open the Abbey gate to visitors.

She was leading them from the chapter-house, after showing the crypt and the tunnels, when Damaris came across the garth.

Hastily Rachel excused herself to her clients. “One moment, please! I must take a message.”

“A broken wrist, very bad bruises, and severe concussion; not conscious yet,” Damaris said briefly. “He’s coming again later; he wants to see her through this unconscious period; and he’s sending in a nurse; He can’t be sure she’ll pull through till she wakes; one of the brutes must have kicked her on the head—jumped on her, I suppose.” She turned hurriedly and fled out to the garden.

Heavy-hearted, Rachel went back to her visitors. “At least Marry hasn’t shut herself into the oratory and left me out,” she thought, while she described the dormitory of the monks and showed where they had slept. “I was afraid she might turn against the garden. If she’ll work off some of her misery out there it will help her.”

When the guests had gone she looked for Damaris and found her digging furiously. “Marry! You aren’t supposed to dig, are you?”

“Must do something. I’m quite fit; it won’t do any harm. You’d better stay near the phone.”

An hour later Rachel called to her. “Marry! No more news yet”—as Damaris raced to her hopefully,—“but here are Jansy and Rosalind, looking unhappy. We aren’t feeling too good ourselves, but perhaps we can cheer them up a little. They’ll be feeling horribly in the way. It’s nice of them to come here.”

“It’s the only place they could come,” Damaris said, throwing down her spade. “They want to talk to you. Do you suppose they know any more?”

“I shouldn’t think so. Lady Joy would have rung up. But we’ll ask them.”

“We haven’t anything to tell you,” Jansy said gloomily. “We know we’ll be a disappointment, but we had to come. Aunty Joy’s busy with the babies, because Nanny Bee is with Benedicta; the new nurse hasn’t come yet. The twins have gone to bed; they’re frightfully upset. Nobody has time to talk to us, and Nanta Rose doesn’t like to practise, though I don’t believe they’d hear the fiddle upstairs.”

“Couldn’t you practise here? We’d like you to play to us,” Rachel suggested. Then she glanced quickly at Damaris and added, “But better not, perhaps.”

“I don’t want to play tonight,” Rosalind said heavily. “I keep thinking and wondering.”

“I know,” Rachel agreed. “But it won’t help. Come and talk to us! We want to hear about school. How did things go today?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

IN THE ORATORY

“But how perfectly splendid!” Rachel cried, when Jansy had told her story. “Thanks to Nanta Rose, the Club has saved the school from an uncomfortable time. I’m quite sure Tessa and the rest are grateful. That’s what I call being really brave, Rosalind!”

“I didn’t want to do it. But the girls were nice about it. I don’t think they’re going to hate me; I was afraid they would,” Nanta confessed.

“You needn’t have feared that. You must tell Benedicta, when you’re allowed to see her,” Rachel said. “It was her idea that the Club should help.”

“I want to tell her. Then you think—you don’t think”—Nanta stumbled over the words.

“I’m sure she’ll pull through. It’s the second time, and she came safely through the first accident. I know it’s not a good reason, but I believe she’ll be all right.”

This was oddly comforting to Rosalind and Jansy, and they looked less unhappy and presently, at Rachel’s suggestion, went with Damaris to the garden.

“You can carry on with Benedicta’s job. It will be light enough for an hour yet. She was cutting off the dead lavender,” Damaris said. “It’s still very sweet, although the flowers are dead. There’s a lot to cut. Ray will stay near the phone.”

No message came, however, and at dusk the schoolgirls left the Abbey and crept away to bed in the silent Hall.

Rachel put supper before Damaris and they ate in silence.

“Why don’t they ring up?” Damaris asked suddenly, her voice showing her state of high nervous tension.

“Because there’s no news. Benney’s still unconscious and no one can say anything. Lady Joy would tell us if—if things were settled either way.”

“I can’t stand this!” and Damaris sprang up. “I can’t read, or settle to anything. I’m going to my little room. Care to come? If we leave the doors open we’d hear the phone.”

“Thanks, Marry dear. It’s what I want more than anything.” And gratefully Rachel went with her to the Abbot’s tiny parlour in the wall.

“Bring your coat. It will be chilly,” and Damaris picked up a wrap.

There was a rug on the floor. Rachel curled up on this and Damaris crouched beside her.

“I’m frightened about that girl, Ray. Suppose she doesn’t know them, when she wakes!—if she does wake. Suppose that kick damaged her brain, and—and——”

“Marry dear, don’t!” Rachel pleaded. “I’m thinking of that too. But surely it won’t happen! Don’t put it into words; it makes it seem more real. May I go up to the oratory and pray for her?”

“We’ll go in turns. You first,” Damaris assented.

When both had knelt in prayer before the old crucifix, they sat together on the rug, Rachel holding Damaris tightly.

“Ray!” Damaris whispered. “If Benedicta dies tonight, I shall never like that garden again.”

“She isn’t going to die,” Rachel insisted. “What about going to bed, Marry? The phone would wake us; we should be thinking about it all the time.”

“We couldn’t sleep. No, I’ll stay here. You go to bed.”

Rachel shook her head and they sat silent, waiting.

Would Benedicta wake to raging fever? Would her mind be blank? Or would she know Lady Joy and be herself? The girls never doubted that Joy would be by her bedside. The questions went round and round in their minds; the three possibilities. Or would Benney drift away in that unconscious state and never wake again?

The Abbey was very quiet, save for an occasional hoot from the owls who lived in the ruins. Suddenly the telephone shrilled through the silence.

The girls sprang up and raced down the worn old steps. Rachel tripped and rolled on the grass.

“Hurt yourself?” Damaris gasped.

“No. You go on. I fell over a kitten—coming to look for us.” Rachel caught up the golden kitten and ran to the telephone.

Damaris was already taking the message. “Oh—good! I *am* glad! Thank you so much! No, we weren’t in bed, but we’ll go now. We were in the oratory; yes, the only place we could bear. A thousand thanks!”

She turned to Rachel. “Lady Joy speaking herself. Benney’s wakened and been rather sick; they seem pleased about that. Now she’s going to sleep properly. She was quite sensible, and she wanted to know if the garden was much damaged. So she remembers things all right.”

“Oh, I’m thankful!” Rachel said fervently. “She’ll do now; the other things will mend in time. It was about her head I was worried. Come to bed, Marry; we’re ready for it! We’ll be able to sleep now.”

A small black head poked up inquiringly from the basket on the kitchen floor, and the second kitten sprang out and came wailing for food. Rachel put down the Golden Boy and set a saucer between them, and the black and yellow faces plunged into the milk.

“A hint for us,” Damaris said, laughing in great relief. “I’m starving! Let’s celebrate, with a pot of tea, and do the thing in style!”

“A festive supper,” Rachel agreed, and put on the kettle and brought out cakes and buns.

“Marry, what were you doing in that little room, when the accident happened?” she asked.

Damaris bent to feed the kittens with scraps of cake. “Only practising steps. I always used to do it in a corner of the garden; I don’t want to forget everything, even if I can never really dance again. I don’t like being watched, for I’m horribly clumsy, so since Benedicta came I’ve done my steps in the Abbot’s parlour. You don’t think he’d mind, do you? It’s not as holy as the oratory.”

“He wouldn’t mind.” Rachel looked at her curiously. “I don’t think Benedicta would have felt you were clumsy.”

“I know what I ought to be doing. I feel sick to think I was doing steps while Benney was saving my garden!”

“Oh, Marry dear, that’s mad! You couldn’t know!”

“I feel that way, all the same. I’m going to bed. Goodnight, cats!”

“Goodnight, Aunty,” said Rachel, speaking for the kittens.

And, greatly relieved on Benedicta’s account, she too went to bed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE LEADER OF THE ORCHESTRA

“What’s the matter with you, Twins?” Jansy looked at her cousins severely, as they drove home from school next day.

Among the seniors the atmosphere had been much happier. Miss Raven had looked with obvious satisfaction at her tidy classes, but had tactfully made no comment. Tessa, glad to have escaped from her false position and very grateful to Rosalind, had been even more friendly than usual. Miss Verity, pleased by an invitation from Joy, brought by Elizabeth-Twin, had found her classes go more smoothly.

Rosalind, greatly relieved, was thinking of the letters they would write to Littlejan, when Jansy’s remark made her look at the silent twins.

“What’s wrong with you two?” she asked in her turn. “Surely you haven’t got yourselves into any mess already?”

“No, we haven’t,” Margaret retorted. “Don’t worry about us! We’re all right.”

“You aren’t all right,” Jansy observed. “You’re never quiet like this unless there’s something wrong.”

“Well, we’re not going to tell you what it is,” Elizabeth told them.

“Have you had a row with Jennifer or Diana?”

“No,” said the twins curtly.

“Not with anybody,” Margaret added. “Leave us alone.”

The Queen and her maid looked at one another. “Better do it, I should think,” Nanta suggested.

“I don’t see why we should bother about them, if they don’t want us to help,” Jansy agreed. “They’ll have to tell Aunty Joy.”

“We can’t tell Mother,” Margaret said. “We’re going to talk to Rachel. *You* talk to Rachel! Why shouldn’t we?”

“Don’t be silly, Twins!” Jansy said sharply. “Of course you can tell your mother! What could you possibly have to say to Rachel that you couldn’t tell Aunty Joy?”

“You don’t understand.” Elizabeth put an arm round Margaret and held her closely.

The elder girls looked at one another again. “Leave them alone,” Nanta said. “Rachel will talk sense to them.”

“Margaret’s in some sort of mess,” Jansy murmured, drawing nearer to Nanta and leaving the twins alone in their corner. “Look how Elizabeth’s cuddling her! They won’t tell us, but Aunty Joy will get it out of them.”

“Wasn’t she going to see Mrs. Robertson?”

“Aunty Maid—yes, she was going to tea with her. She said the nurse would do all that Benedicta needed, so she won’t be in for tea. Shall we let the kids go and talk to Rachel?”

“Oh yes, rather! It may be just what they need. We evidently aren’t enough! It has to be somebody outside the house.”

“Rachel will tell us about it afterwards,” Jansy said hopefully.

Rosalind looked doubtful. “I don’t believe she will. Leave them alone; they’re feeling very bad, poor babes.”

No objection was raised when, after tea, the twins turned resolutely from homework and practising and ran off to the Abbey.

"I don't know what's happened, but I do know just how they feel," Jansy said, spreading out her books. "Rachel's sort of comforting; she'll tell them what to do. But I'm sure Auntie Joy would have had the truth out of them if she'd been at home."

Rachel, typing in her study, saw the children coming and went to the door to meet them. "Nice to see you, Twins. Where are Jansy and Rosalind?"

"We wouldn't let them come." Elizabeth stood and looked at her. "We want to talk to you. A dreadful thing happened at school today."

Rachel smothered a laugh, for the brown eyes that gazed at her were full of tragedy. "Oh, Twins, I am sorry! Have you told your mother?"

"Mother's out," Elizabeth explained.

"We don't want her to know," Margaret added.

Rachel, looking startled, drew them into the little room and closed the door. "Now tell me what this means! What have you done that you don't want your mother to know?"

"It was at school—the music—the orchestra," Elizabeth began. "Oh, Twin, you tell!"

"I can't!" Margaret wailed. "You promised you'd make Rachel understand!"

"I can't do anything unless you tell me," Rachel said patiently, sitting at her table again but pushing her papers aside.

Elizabeth's story came with a rush. "We've been looking forward enormously to joining the orchestra. We've played a lot, you know; Mother wrote pieces for us and played with us, at the concerts on the ship and in New York. She wanted us to be used to playing to people, so she asked friends to come in the afternoons and we had music and tea. Twin played her violin; mine's a 'cello."

She paused and gazed at Rachel, and her arm slipped round Margaret, as if to comfort her.

"Yes, I'd heard about your music," Rachel agreed. "You play well, don't you?"

"People seem to think we do. So we thought they'd be glad to have us in the orchestra at school and it would be fun to play with a lot of others. After classes today Juliet came to our room; she's in the Sixth and she's the secretary for the orchestra. She came to us and she said, 'You play, don't you? Sure to, with your mother and stepfather! What's your instrument?' So I said, 'Cello, and Margaret plays the violin.' And Juliet said"—her brave voice wavered—"Juliet said, 'Oh, just another fiddle! Well, I guess we can make room for her. You'—and she looked at me—'you'll be jolly useful. We've only two 'cellos and they aren't up to much. If you're as good as you ought to be we'll use you for solos.' And then she went away."

"And—and—I felt they didn't really want me at all." Margaret gave a gulp. "And Jennifer—she was listening—she said, 'They'll be glad to have Elizabeth. Of course, they've heaps of fiddles.' I thought it was just beastly of her."

"And Diana said—'Everybody plays the fiddle. But 'cellos are really useful. They're jolly lucky to have you.' I don't think she need have said it, just like that," Elizabeth said resentfully.

"It was very unnecessary of Jennifer and Diana," Rachel agreed, gazing thoughtfully at the twins. She saw the situation clearly. Though Elizabeth had not put the thought into words, it was obvious that Margaret, standing in front with her fiddle, had felt herself the leader of the trio, as indeed she must have been, since the violin would inevitably take the melody, however much Joy might have tried to avoid unfairness. Elizabeth, sitting near the piano and in most cases taking the accompanying low notes, must have accepted her position cheerfully, no

doubt rejoicing in the richer tone of her instrument. Now, suddenly, Margaret's dream was shattered; Elizabeth was the important one; she herself was merely "another fiddle." It had been a bitter blow.

"I shall say I won't play solos," Elizabeth announced. "That would make you feel better, wouldn't it, Twin?"

"No, it wouldn't make me feel a scrap better," and Margaret broke down and wept.

"You can't do that, Elizabeth," Rachel explained. "You're part of the school now. If your 'cello can help the school you must do your best. What you feel doesn't matter."

"I can't play, if I'm feeling bad," Elizabeth argued.

"Margaret doesn't want you to feel bad. Do you, Margaret-Twin?"

"No, no, no!" Margaret cried, with a return of her baby vehemence. "That's what's the matter! I can't hate you, because you're Twin."

"Surely you don't want to hate Elizabeth?" Rachel exclaimed, her tone shocked.

"I do! If she was any other girl I'd hate and detest her. But I can't hate Twin."

"Of course you can't," Elizabeth said indignantly. "Just you try hating me and see what you'll get!"

"What would it be?" Margaret asked, diverted for a moment from her trouble.

"I can't imagine," Elizabeth assured her. "But it would be something you wouldn't like one scrap."

"Twins, stop talking nonsense!" Rachel scolded. "Margaret isn't going to hate anybody. She's going to be brave and stop thinking about herself, and when Elizabeth plays solos she'll be proud of her."

"I'll be proud all right, but I shall wish it was me," Margaret wailed.

"It will be you one day. I suppose while Rosalind Kane is in the school nobody else is asked to play fiddle solos? There isn't likely to be anyone else as good as she is. What you must do, Margaret, is learn to play with the rest of the orchestra; it's quite a different thing from playing solos on your own! Then in two or three years, when the girls know you and your music, you'll be leader of the orchestra and the violin solos will come your way. Elizabeth may play solos, but she can never be the leader; that has to be a fiddler." And Rachel smiled at Elizabeth.

"That's true," the elder twin said eagerly. "We've been to concerts and the first violin often takes solos. You do think Twin could be the leader of the orchestra some day, don't you, Rachel?"

"I'm quite sure she will be, if she learns all about the orchestra and how to play with the other instruments." Rachel's tone of assurance was full of comfort for poor sore Margaret. "She's too small and too new, but when the present seniors have left, and Rosalind has gone away, and Margaret is somewhere about the Fifth or Sixth form, she's sure to be leading the orchestra. But it means work; you don't jump into a position like that all at once."

"I will be leader, some day!" Margaret vowed. "And then Diana will say they're jolly lucky to have *me!*"

"I'm sure she will. Now it's going to be all right, isn't it, Twins? You'll both work hard, learning to play with the others, and nobody's going to hate anybody?"

"I never did hate Elizabeth, not for one minute," Margaret protested. "But I did rather wish she wasn't my twin."

"So that you could hate me comfortably?" Elizabeth asked. "Well, you can't, so that's all about it."

“We won’t have any more about hating people,” Rachel said firmly. “And you’ll tell your mother the whole story before you go to bed?”

Elizabeth looked doubtful. “Mother won’t like it.”

“It doesn’t seem quite so bad, now that I’m going to be the leader of the orchestra,” Margaret admitted.

“You’ll need to work for that, and your mother can help you,” Rachel reminded her.

“We’ll see,” was the most Elizabeth would promise. “You won’t tell anybody why we came, will you? Jansy and Nanta Rose want to know, but we’re sure you won’t tell.”

“Anything we tell you in the Abbey is a secret,” Margaret said anxiously. “If you give us away we won’t be able to come again.”

“The confessional!” Rachel said to herself. “I feel rather like an old monk, receiving private confidences. All right, Twins! I won’t tell anybody.”

“Not anybody at all?” the twins spoke together.

“Not anybody at all. It’s a promise.”

“Oh, goody! That’s safe! We’ll come to you next time we get into a mess!”

“You’d much better go to your mother,” Rachel said, as she went with them to the garden gate.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

A VISIT FROM DAMARIS

“Abbey Guardian!” Joy hailed Rachel from the garth next morning. “Thank you for being so kind and understanding with my daughters!”

Rachel came to meet her. “Then they told you? I’m so glad. They were very shy about it.”

“Jansy told me there was trouble and that they had come to you. I’m glad they had so much sense! I saw for myself when they came back, and I had the story out of them at bedtime. Poor Margaret! We’ve allowed her to feel important, and this has been a blow to her.”

“A real shock,” Rachel agreed. “But she’s facing up to it pluckily.”

“I believe she is. I told her I was proud of her. She has always been more temperamental and highly strung than Elizabeth, though Elizabeth is artistic and very sensitive too.”

“Elizabeth is delightful in her way with Margaret,” Rachel observed.

“Yes, she’s really very good,” Joy said, well pleased.

“The twins made me promise not to tell anybody,” Rachel remarked. “But I feel Rosalind ought to know. She could help Margaret so much.”

“They asked me to promise, but I said I should tell Nanta, for that very reason,” Joy said. “She can, and she will, help. I shall let her tell Jansy, because Jansy can probably help too; but they won’t talk about it to the twinnies, who are afraid of being laughed at.”

“Jansy and Rosalind won’t laugh. How is Benedicta? Did she sleep?”

“Very well. She must keep quiet for a while, but she’ll be strong again in time.”

“And how did you find Maid and our small cousins?” Rachel smiled. “When are we going to hear Maid sing again?”

Joy gave her a quick look. “Not at present. She isn’t singing in public this winter.”

“Oh! I’m very glad.” Rachel understood at once.

“Yes. Her little girls will be two years and nine months old by March,” Joy said quietly. “To go back to Benneyben, her great wish is to see Damaris. We’ve told her the damage to the garden isn’t serious, thanks to her brave action, but she won’t be satisfied till she has heard it from Damaris herself. Nurse thinks she might have a visitor in a day or two.”

“Damaris will come, as soon as it’s safe,” Rachel promised.

“Well, Blessing?” and Damaris bent over her assistant, two days later. “Fancy getting yourself crocked up like this and leaving me to cope with the garden all alone!”

“Oh, tell me! Is it much hurt?” Benedicta pleaded.

“Not very much. The snapdragons by the gate are badly knocked about, but it was time for them to come out.”

“They were such lovely colours, pinks and lemons! I’m sorry; we might have had them for another month.”

“I’m clearing out the wreckage and we’ll have blue asters instead, to welcome people at the gate. Maid has heaps on her terraces and she sent me a big box of them. I say, you know, I’m most terribly cut up about this!” and Damaris sat on the bed and gazed at her. “You’ll be all right soon, won’t you? I need you in the garden.”

“I’m sorry I’m letting you down. They won’t let me use this hand for some time, I’m afraid. But I just couldn’t bear the idea of that great lorry crashing all across our garden!”

"I know; a ghastly thought. I'd have tried to save the garden myself. It was jolly plucky of you to dash to the rescue all alone! I do appreciate it most frightfully much," Damaris said earnestly.

"Tell me what happened at school!" Benedicta changed the subject hurriedly. "Or do you think Queen Lob would rather tell me herself? I'll be allowed to see her tomorrow."

"She'd like to tell you. Nanta Rose seems to have been rather a heroine, but it was your idea. I say, as soon as you don't need that nurse, couldn't you come back to the Abbey? Ray wants to look after you, and you can have my room. I've always said I would sleep in her study."

Benedicta's face lit up. "Would you have me? It seems such a shame that Lady Joy should have to put up with me, and I know they haven't room for extra nurses and people."

"They had to bring you here, until they knew what was wrong. You might have needed operations and things, and there isn't room in the Abbey. But if it's only rest you want, and help to comb your hair while that wrist is in plaster, we can do all that and we'd like to have you. The Abbey's nice and peaceful for getting over things."

"I'd love to come," Benedicta said wistfully. "But I won't be much use to you. Nurse says my wrist must be in plaster for a month, and then it will be weak for some time and I'll need to be careful. I shall have to learn to use my left hand."

"We'll dress you and cut up your meat, and you can read all our books and lie in the sun on the garth. I'll ask Lady Joy to restore you to us as soon as the nurse will agree. I feel frightfully bad to think I was doing dance steps while you were getting mauled for my garden!" Damaris burst out.

"Is that what you do, all alone in the oratory?" Benedicta asked eagerly. "I didn't like to ask you."

"Not in the oratory; that's where we pray that good little girls may get better. In the outer room; the Abbot's parlour."

"Did you?" Benedicta asked, wide-eyed. "Pray about me, I mean? How perfectly marvellous of you, Damson! And all because of that silly kitten! Black cats aren't lucky for me, evidently."

"Black cats?" Damaris stared at her, dazed.

"Rachel's Nigger. She ran out of the gate-house, right between my feet, just as I picked up the hoe and dashed at the horses. I tripped over her and crashed down."

"It was enough to startle the horses and stop them. So Nigger was the culprit! We didn't know that. And late that night Ray fell over Golden Boy. We'd better get rid of them both."

"Oh, no! I love them! But that's what made me fall. Tell me about your practising, Damson! Can't I see what you do?"

Damaris shook her head. "Nothing to see. And I feel awful; so clumsy and stiff. I can't get the positions I want. At first I didn't care even to try, but after a while it seemed a pity to forget everything and I thought the power I've lost might come back, if I worked at exercises. So I began practising in a corner of the garden, and then when you came—I couldn't bear to be watched, you see—I borrowed the parlour from the Abbot. Rachel doesn't think he'd mind. It's better than sobbing on the floor."

"Much better," Benedicta said fervently. "You must be heaps stronger. Perhaps, after all, you'll be Mary Damayris again some day!"

"I'm nowhere near it yet. But"—and she flushed and tilted her chin valiantly—"I'm nearer to it than I was at first. I am sure of that."

“Oh, Damson! It would be marvellous if you could dance again! And I’d go and watch, and I’d think how I’d worked with you in your garden, and wouldn’t I be proud!”

“I hope you’d be looking after the garden for me.” Damaris gave a small laugh. “I say, Blessing! Don’t say anything to Ray about this! She knows I practise, but I’ve been doing that for months. If there’s ever anything to tell she must hear it first of all; I couldn’t have a secret from Rachel. But there’s nothing to tell yet.”

“Only that you feel more hopeful than you did. I won’t say anything, Damson. But you’d go back to the stage, if you could, wouldn’t you? You’d leave the Abbey and your garden? You want to be Mary Damayris again?”

Damaris looked at her. “Well, what do you think? I want it more than anything in the world. It’s my life. I’d leave any number of Abbeys and gardens, if I could dance again.”

“Yes,” Benedicta agreed. “I knew you’d say that. But Rachel would stay, wouldn’t she? She loves the Abbey and she’s needed here.”

“It’s going to break Ray’s heart, if I go away. She’ll want me to go, and she’ll help me all she can; she knows what it means to me. But she’ll feel she ought to go with me; we’ve done everything together, all our lives. And she has dug in here; her roots go deep already. She couldn’t bear to leave the Abbey now. And, as you say, she’s needed. All those girls come to her for help.”

“She’s the Abbot,” Benedicta said. “What will happen?”

“I won’t have Ray. She must stay here and do her job, and if ever it’s possible I must go away and do mine. We’ll have to part company; it’s the only way. I’ve thought about it a lot lately. But it will hurt Ray badly, when I go.”

“Yes,” Benedicta agreed, looking thoughtful. “I won’t say anything, Damson. I see how hard it will be for you both.”

“It will be very hard for Ray. I shall hardly have time to think, if I go back; every minute is filled, in that life. But she’ll have hours and days alone, and she’ll wonder if I’m all right and if she ought to have gone with me. I shall ring her every night, to report progress, no matter what it costs. But it may never happen, so don’t worry her when there’s no need.”

“No, I won’t. But you’ll let me watch your exercises?”

“Perhaps; I’ll see. Get well enough to come back to the Abbey; that’s the first thing! Now I’m going to beat Miss Nigger for knocking you down.”

“Oh, don’t! Please! I’ll never forgive you, if you do! I love her little black face!” Benedicta cried.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

A GREAT DAY FOR ROSALIND

Consternation reigned in the Hamlet Club when it was realised that the Folk Play during the Christmas holidays would have to be given without Littlejan Fraser.

“We can’t have the Play without a Fool! She did it so marvellously! And Anne, who understudied, has left,” Phyl wailed. “Queen, what are we to do?”

Jansy reddened. “I don’t want to shove myself forward, but I’ll do it, if you like. Two years ago, when I had chicken-pox and Marigold—but she wasn’t Marigold then—stayed at home with me, she taught me the Fool. We did heaps of the parts, just for something to do; she said it might be useful some day. If Alison gets married and can’t come back to do her part, Littlejan makes a splendid Doctor. I’ve seen her do the Fool so often, and I know the words.”

“One problem solved! But you can’t wear her scarlet and yellow. You’d better have yellow and green.”

“She could wear Littlejan’s suit if she tucked her hair out of sight,” Tessa said. “She’s grown so much that I believe it would fit her.”

“There’s Mirry’s part too; she was Sabra, St. George’s bride. Perhaps one Abbey twin could take it on, and the other could be Dame Dolly, instead of Lob,” Phyl suggested.

Jansy’s face lit up. “That would be marvellous! Oh, do put the twins in, if you can!”

“I say, everybody!” and Yvonne came in. “I’ve seen Olivia. She’s out of quarantine and she’s coming back next week. I told her about all that fuss at the beginning of term, and she said we were making absolute asses of ourselves, and it’s a good thing Rosalind and Sandra had some sense and that the Hamlet Club put its foot down. She was quite fierce; said the senior school must back up the Head, if she asked us to come in pyjamas and dressing-gowns.”

“It wasn’t quite as bad as that,” Juliet laughed. “You score, Rosalind, you and your Hamlets.”

“It was the Club,” Rosalind protested.

“It was you, Nanta Rose, and you know it,” Tessa retorted.

Jansy made no comment, but she told the story to Littlejan in a long letter, and told also how she was to play the Fool at the Christmas dance-school.

Marigold’s reply, received just before the end of the term, was full of congratulations. It brought great news; a new little sister had been born, fair-haired like Cecily and therefore “Father’s girl,” since Littlejan and her brothers were dark like their mother. The baby was to be called Janet Joy.

“Janet is for Lady Jen and for Mother’s mother, who was Janet Fraser,” Littlejan wrote. “We know Lady Jen doesn’t like her name, but it happens to be Granny’s name too. We aren’t going to call Baby ‘Janet.’ She’s to be Jantyjoy, all in one word—just like that. Jantyjoy Fraser is a lovely name! Father’s sure he’ll call her Jantyboy! So you can send your love to Littlejan, Cecily Rose, and Jantyjoy!”

“Jandy Mac’s family is growing,” Joy said. “That’s five, as many as Joan and I have.”

“And she’s got all your names in her family, for Littlejan’s name is really Joan, though we mostly forget,” Jansy said.

“Jandy, and Jansy, and now Janty! It’s to be hoped Jantyjoy will never go to school with you,” Joy laughed.

“She won’t. I’m almost fourteen, and she’s only just started,” Jansy said with dignity.

“So Jandy Mac has won this winter’s baby race!” was Jen’s comment. She had brought back a much stronger Rosemary to the Manor, with the younger children and the small-boy twins; and Mary had returned to her duties at the Hall. “Oh well! Maidie and I must have our race alone! The prize is a beautiful baby boy.”

“Jen, how can you?” Joy protested. “You may both have little girls!”

“Maidie ought to have her first boy, and I’m determined to have my sixth, Francis Patrick,” Jen said airily, and continued to talk about Pat Marchwood all through the winter.

“You deserve to be disappointed,” Rosamund told her. “Going on like this! And after having two boys last time! I quite expect you’ll have Francesca Patricia.”

“I sha’n’t be a bit nice to her, if I do,” Jen threatened.

But Rosamund only laughed at her. “Another little dark girl, like Rosemary and Katharine!” she prophesied. “I wish I was in your race too. I sha’n’t be patient much longer. I hope my turn will come next winter!”

Benedicta begged to be sent back to the Abbey, as soon as the nurse was dismissed. Protests were swept aside by Rachel’s pleading, and Joy admitted that she had planned to invite some musical friends from Paris, but had felt it would not be possible with an invalid in the house as well as her small boys and Baby Rose. Rachel assured her that Benedicta should have every care, and Damaris promised help and removed herself to the cloister room. Benedicta was installed in the big inner bedroom, to her great delight, and was waited on hand and foot by two devoted slaves and slept upon by two delighted young cats, who were fast leaving kittenhood behind them.

But as soon as she was able to use her hand freely she insisted on going back to her room in the village.

“Damson must have her own bed and Rachel must have her workroom. I’ll come to the garden every day and do what I can; my wrist will soon be strong enough for real work. What do we do in the winter?”

“Same as on wet days,” Damaris told her. “Darning—writing letters—reading—knitting.”

“I can write now, if I’m careful. And I’ve stacks of mending waiting to be done.”

They had been lucky in their weather during August and September, but now, in November and the winter months, came wet cold days when outdoor work was impossible. On the first of these Benedicta did not appear, and after waiting for a while Damaris said in annoyance, “Sulking in her digs! I wanted to talk over plans with her.”

“Not sulking. She thinks we don’t want her, when she can’t be in the garden,” Rachel said. “She’s terribly afraid of being in the way.”

“She’s an ass! I’ll go and rout her out.”

“No, leave her for one day; she has heaps to do. Tomorrow you can tell her to come as usual, even when it’s wet,” Rachel advised.

Benedicta was greeted with reproaches next morning, but she said promptly, “I couldn’t butt in on you for a whole day. I was all right! Mammy Puddephat looked after me like a mother. Can we work outside today?”

“I intend to try. But you’re to come, whether it’s wet or not,” Damaris said forcefully. “I needed you badly yesterday; I want your ideas on spring plans. I was frightfully upset when you didn’t turn up.”

“O.K., Boss!” Benedicta said cheerfully. “If I can be any use, of course I’ll come.”

“Bring your darning and letters here,” Rachel said. “I work in my room, and you and Marry can have the parlour. She was lonely yesterday.”

“More stories, Authoress?”

Rachel coloured. “I’m going on with my book, now that we’re less busy. But I don’t believe it’s any good.”

“We’ll wish you luck! You must have peace and quietness for that. I’ll amuse Damson on wet days.”

“I want your advice on how to spend my wedding-present from Dicky Dandy,” Damaris retorted. “We must send off orders for next season’s plants.”

Benedicta had heard about the gift which had to be spent on the garden, and during the dark days that followed she and Damaris spent happy hours poring over seed catalogues and making colourful plans for the spring and summer.

Benedicta begged to be allowed to watch the practice of dance steps, which had become a regular part of Damaris’s day; but Mary Damayris refused steadily, though apologetically.

“Please don’t ask me! I still feel horribly clumsy and awkward; I couldn’t bear to be watched. I’ll tell you, if I ever feel good enough.”

Benedicta could not tease her, so Damaris retired to her little room and worked steadily, but in private.

At Christmas Benedicta went home for a week, to help to fill Penny Rose’s first stocking and deck her first tiny tree, and to let Jimmy and Gail see for themselves that she had recovered from her accident. She came back to the Abbey joyfully, eager for brighter weather and work out of doors once more.

Rosalind, Jansy, and the Abbey twins came often in the evening, to sit by the fire in the parlour, with its red glowing lamp, and tell of happenings at school, while Nanta knitted woolly garments for her much-desired godchild. It was a surprise to Rosalind that there was no discussion of the new Queen, as the spring term wore on; but she supposed it was the custom, not guessing the silence meant that the Club had nothing to say because they had made up their minds.

“Do you think I could see the crowning?” Benedicta asked wistfully, one evening. “I’ve heard about your coronations, and I’d love to see one.”

“I’ll invite you, and Rachel and Mary Damayris too, if they’ll come,” Jansy promised. “I have to crown the new Queen, whoever she is; and they put forget-me-nots on me. Marigold can’t be there, but Jean will come back and be my godmother.”

“Haven’t you chosen the new Queen?” Rachel asked.

“I haven’t heard anybody say anything.” Jansy fixed a stern eye on Elizabeth and Margaret, but they gazed into the fire with particularly innocent faces.

“It seems to be the way not to talk about it,” Rosalind said. “Tessa would make quite a jolly Queen.”

“They often don’t say much beforehand. Tessa would do quite well,” the reigning Queen agreed. “I say, Rachel! Do you know what I heard the other day? ‘Ask the Hamlets what they’re going to do about it.’ And—‘Are the Hamlets going to take it up?’—when some new plan was made. The Club’s much more important than it used to be.”

“I’ve heard that too,” Nanta assented. “The seniors say—‘What do those Hamlets think? We can’t go against the whole lot of them.’ There’s a feeling that if you want anything done you must go to the Club for help, or at least have the Club on your side.”

“Splendid!” Rachel exclaimed. “That’s good for the school, so long as the Club has the right leaders.”

“It’s safe enough with Lob and Nanta Rose,” said Benedicta.

Early in March the girls, coming through the Abbey on their way home from school, exclaimed at sight of Rachel’s radiant face and the obvious excitement of Damaris and Benedicta.

“We have a very new cousin. Maidlin Robertson has a little boy,” Rachel explained. “We’re all so happy about it. We rang the bells for him, because Maid loves the Abbey so much.”

“Nice for Marjory and Dorothy to have a brother,” Damaris added.

“Aunt Maid?” the twins and Jansy spoke together. “Oh, good! What’s he called?”

“John Paul Robertson; John for his daddy and Paul for his Italian grandfather. We’re going to see him on Sunday, when the Abbey’s closed to visitors,” Rachel said. “Maid will be so pleased to have a boy called after her own father!”

“Now if Lady Jen has Francis Patrick soon, everybody will be satisfied,” Rosalind said in a low tone to Rachel, who laughed and nodded.

March also brought a great day for Rosalind. Her eighteenth birthday came at the end of the month, and Jansy, finding that it fell on a Saturday, gleefully seized the chance and informed Nanta that a party would be held in the barn in her honour.

“And please don’t put your hair up till after the holidays!” she begged.

Rather overwhelmed, Nanta protested that the whole Hamlet Club need not trouble to celebrate her birthday.

“They’ll like it. We’ve been wanting to have some dancing. And they love you for the way you’ve played for us,” Jansy insisted.

Nanta’s biggest gift came just after breakfast, when she was called to the telephone. “Kentisbury asking for you. Good wishes from Rosamund, I expect,” Joy said.

Rosalind came from the phone with eyes wide with excitement. “Virginia has a little girl. I’m an aunt! On my birthday!”

“How clever of Virginia!” Joy said warmly. “Hearty congratulations, Nanta Rose! A daughter? Then you’ll be her godmother, I suppose. Is she to be called after you?”

“After the two families. I feel much older than eighteen! She’ll be Nancybell Rose,” Rosalind explained. “In Gilbert’s family the first girl is always called Nancybell, after an ancestress of whom they’re very proud. Aunt Rosamund will be her other godmother; another Rose baby for the house-party of little Roses she’s going to have some day! Virginia’s pleased; she wanted a little girl. They can have an heir next time. And Mandy and Minty have announced their engagements; Mandy’s going to marry Charles Harvey, who keeps horses in Kentisbury, and Minty’s marrying a baronet who has a yacht.”

“You must grow up and find somebody too,” Jansy teased.

“Not yet,” Nanta said firmly. “I’ve another year at school.”

“And it’s going to be the best you’ve ever had.”

“I don’t see that, Lob. I’ve loved my first year with you.”

“The second will be nicer,” Jansy declared, but would say no more. “Come and tell Rachel about—what’s her pretty name?—Nancybell Rose Seymour!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

QUEEN FIDDLER

“Oh, Jen, how could you?” Rosamund cried. “Spoiling the look of your family like this! So untidy and careless of you!”

Virginia was not the only one to have a baby on Nanta’s birthday. Rosamund, on her way to the barn, had come to see Jen’s latest effort.

“I like that!” Jen protested. “For weeks you’ve been reminding me that I must take what I could get and be kind to whatever came! And now you talk as if it was my fault! You know I wanted to have Pat!”

“And you’ve had Patricia,” Rosamund mocked. “It serves you right. But why couldn’t she be like your other girls? She’s so odd, after Rosemary and Katharine!”

“All the same, she’s rather nice,” Jen observed, looking down at her new daughter, who was not small and dark, a little Marchwood, as family tradition demanded, but big and fair, with a mop of yellow curls like her mother’s.

“And blue eyes,” Jen added. “She hasn’t even got her daddy’s eyes; his are dark, though the rest of him is fair. He’s terribly pleased with her; says I’ve given him a little Jen at last.”

“She’s certainly a little Jen! When she goes to school and has two yellow plaits she’ll be the image of you. She’s a lovely baby, but she is a shock!”

“She was meant to be such a nice little playmate for Chris and Barney; just eighteen months younger,” Jen said mournfully.

“She’ll play with them all right! She looks a born tomboy.”

“She’s not Patricia,” Jen said. “She’s Barbara—a stranger, you know, because she isn’t like the other girls; and Rose—I want a Rose-baby too. You’ll be her godmother, won’t you?”

“Barbara Rose! How pretty! Of course I will. I’ll love to have a Rose-baby in your family, besides Rosemary, who wasn’t really called after me, though I used to pretend she was. Barbara Rose will be a lovely addition to my bunch of little Roses! Wild Rose will think she’s called for her.” For the Wild Rose Queen of the Hamlet Club, who had crowned Rosamund, had been Barbara Honor.

“No, it’s because she’s a stranger. She’s exactly like all our boys, but she won’t look right with the girls. They’re terribly thrilled about her! I’m going to dress her in a blue jersey and knickers and call her Bobbie. She’s a little mistake; but all the same, I think I’m going to like her very much.”

“I’m sure you are! She’s much more of a credit to the family than your other daughters. But she’ll look more like Babbie than Bobbie, unless you shave off those curls.”

“I sha’n’t do that! Ray and Dammy rang the Abbey bells for her,” Jen added. “We heard them; we were so glad they had remembered—Babbie Rose and I! Do you mind if I ask young Nanta to be a godmother too? Godmothers Rosamund and Rosalind! If I die, you can bring up Barbara between you.”

“I never saw anybody look less like dying! Oh, do ask Rosalind! It will make her so happy.”

“Two godchildren in one day!” Jen had heard about Virginia. “Nanta Rose will be a proud lass. On her birthday too!”

“Two godchildren and a birthday *and* a crown!”

“You think so?” Jen asked eagerly. “What fun! The twenty-fifth Queen, and one of us. Nice!”

“I think that’s the reason for the party, though nobody has told me so.”

“They wouldn’t, of course. What will her name be, as Queen?”

“Lavender. She’ll look lovely. I’d have chosen lavender myself, but Joy said I must be a red red rose, as my name was Rose-of-the-World.”

“Oh, you had to be the Rose Queen! As Nanta’s so like you, you can imagine it’s yourself wearing lavender. It’s a good choice; if it happens, give her my love and congrats. In any case, tell her I want her as godmother. She must hear of it on her birthday, and I can’t see her today.”

“I’ll go along to the barn. You and Babbie Rose are tired. May I really tell Rosalind? She’ll play better than ever, after all these excitements.”

Nanta’s eyes were shining as she fiddled for the party. Rosamund’s news had seemed the final touch to a thrilling day. She was happy and proud and excited; her music told the tale, and the girls danced as they thought they had never danced before. Margia Lane had come to help, so that Nanta could dance occasionally, and she listened with deep appreciation and delight.

“How that child of yours can play!” she said to the Rose Queen.

“She’s thoroughly worked up tonight,” Rosamund agreed. “It’s her birthday; she’s eighteen, and very soon her hair will have to go up or be cut off. I hope she won’t do that! And she has had several bits of good news. She’s thrilled to the limit, and she’s thrilling the whole Club.—And she’ll be still more thrilled in a moment,” she added.

Jansy had looked at Tessa and nodded. Tessa had disappeared into the dressing-room and was now standing in the doorway. As “Haste to the Wedding,” asked for by the Queen, ended, the dancers fell into two lines and Tessa, grinning widely in amused embarrassment, came up between the files, carrying a great sheaf of iris, of palest lavender-blue.

Rosalind, suddenly scarlet, clutched her fiddle to her breast and stared.

Tessa spoke out bravely. “Nanta Rose, please take these flowers, with our love and best wishes for your birthday and with a million thanks for all your lovely music. And will you please be our new Queen?”

Rosalind, by mere instinct, put down her violin carefully and held out her arms for the flowers. Looking at Tessa over the big bunch she gasped, “What did you say? You couldn’t mean that, Tessa!”

Tessa laughed in delight. “Then we did give you a surprise! Of course we mean it! We decided last September, when you bullied us so horribly!”

“I never did!” Nanta protested. “And I’m much too old!”

“Not a scrap too old. You’ve another year at school,” Phyl told her cheerfully. “You can be a mother to the babes and an aunt to the seniors. You’ll keep us straight!”

“Phyl, don’t be mad! I’m not good enough——”

But her words were drowned in the shout that went up, half laughter, half approval.

“You’re our Queen!” Sandra shouted. “Cheers for Queen Nanta Rose!”

The Countess shook her head vigorously. Nanta saw it and understood. As soon as she could make herself heard she said, “Thank you all very much indeed. I’ve had so many lovely things happen today that I didn’t think there was room for any more. The party seemed a perfect finish to my birthday; I never dreamed of anything like this. If you really want me I will try. And, please, I’ll be Queen Rosalind. That baby name ought to be forgotten now.”

"It never will be forgotten. We like it," Phyl informed her.

"But won't you be Queen Lavender?" Jansy cried.

Rosalind coloured. "I can't believe it yet. Yes, please, I'd like to be Lavender."

"You're Queen Fiddler," said Phyl.

"Come down and let us dance round you!" Tessa pleaded. "You really won't? Oh well! Miss Lane, will you play 'The Queen's Jig'?" Rosalind must dance."

There was a shout of joy and lines were hastily formed. Jansy ran to Rosalind. "With me, Nanta Rose!"

"Thank you very much, Lob."

"I shall call you Lavender now. Lob will crown Lavender! Miss Lane will talk to you about your train."

"You won't put up your hair till after you're crowned, will you, Lavender?" Tessa pleaded, as they waited for the music to start. "We want your picture for the Queens' gallery with your plaits; they're part of you."

"I'll think about it," Nanta promised. "I might wait for a month or two."

"I like Phyl's name for you. We'll call you Queen Fiddler," Tessa said. "Oh, gosh! The Head's going to dance in your honour! I saw her in a corner with Miss Verity. They're dancing with Susan and Sally, the Edwards twins. I say, Phyl! Let's ask for something easy, and I'll take the Head and you'll take Miss Verity, just to show we've forgotten all that fuss at the beginning of last term!"

"Not forgotten, but forgiven," Phyl said solemnly. "Right! Queen Fiddler shall play 'Bonnet So Blue'. Even the Head can manage that."

Joan and Joy, each dancing with an Abbey twin, smiled their congratulations as they met Queen and Queen-elect in the dance. Rosamund held out her hand to Benedicta, watching from a corner with Rachel.

"It's very easy; I'll help you. Pretend it's a class at Wood End School!"

"She'll be a lovely Queen. We're so glad about it," Benedicta said eagerly.

"She'll do very well," Rosamund assented. "How is my godchild, Penny Rose?"

"Splendid! Growing fast. She's a year old now."

"I've had two new little Roses today. Have you heard?"

"Rather! Barbara and Nancybell. Such pretty names! Rosalind is thrilled about being twice a godmother. She told me just now."

"You must come and see her crowned," Rosamund said. "Is your wrist quite strong again?"

"Oh yes! I can use it in the garden."

"Good! Don't break any other parts of you!"

"But what am I going to do for a maid?" Jansy cried, at the end of the dance. "I've lost my Nanta Rose!"

"I shall want a maid too. We'll find some juniors," Nanta began.

"I know!" Jansy shouted. "We'll each have an Abbey twin! It's time they stopped being their mother's maids, now that they're in the school. You can have Margaret, because you're both fiddlers. I'll have Elizabeth."

"But I don't want to lose them," Joy objected. "Do you want to leave me, Twinnies?"

"No, Mother." The twins spoke dutifully, but their eyes were wistful.

Joy surrendered. "You'd rather be maids to reigning Queens than to an old back-number? I suppose you're right. Joan's had to give up Jansy. But what am I to do on May-day?"

“We’ll find you somebody!” The twins spoke together, breathless with eagerness. “You don’t really mind, do you? It would be fun to be maids for Jansy and Nanta Rose!”

“For Lob and Lavender!” Margaret added.

“Then you must find me a nice junior.”

“Would you have Jennifer?” Elizabeth asked. “She’s in our form. Diana—she’s her chum—is Littlejan’s maid, and Jennifer feels left out of the procession.”

“We must put that right,” Joy agreed, as Jennifer, scarlet and eager, was pushed forward by Margaret. “Will you carry my green train on May-day, Jennifer?”

“Yes, please,” Jennifer murmured, overcome with shyness. “I’d love to. O-o-oh! Aren’t you like the twins!”

“I have been told so,” Joy said gravely. “Then that’s settled. No, Twinnies, I don’t mind at all. But won’t Diana feel left out this year, without her Queen?”

“Oh no!” Jansy explained. “She may be lonely, but we won’t leave her out. She’ll carry a marigold crown on a cushion. Littlejan hasn’t left school; she’s only gone away for a little while.”

“That’s a good plan,” Joy assented. “So everything is decided, and the Lavender Queen is complete with colour, flower, and maid. What will you choose for your picture from Miss Lane, Rosalind?”

“May I really have one? Then the Abbey garden, please.”

“The Damaris Garden! That’s a good choice,” Joy said heartily.

And as the Queen-elect went through the garden on her way home, a welcome pealed out from the Abbey bells, rung by Damaris and Benedicta, who had gone racing ahead.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

THE TWENTY-FIFTH QUEEN

“You’ll come to see Nanta Rose crowned, won’t you, Damson?” Benedicta asked wistfully, for Rachel had told her how Damaris had refused to go to Jansy’s ceremony, for fear she would be recognised.

“You can wear your scarf over your hair,” she urged, as Damaris seemed to hesitate. “Lots of people do; country-dancing makes such clouds of dust.”

“I’d like to see Rosalind crowned. Yes, I’ll go,” Damaris promised.

“It would have been hateful to leave you at home,” Benedicta said joyfully.

When they set out in the small Rover car, which Jen had sent from the Manor for their use—since Joy’s car would be badly overcrowded—Rachel looked at her sister and said quietly, “Aren’t you going to tie your head up in a bag tonight?”

“No, I sha’n’t bother. People have forgotten Mary Damayris by now.”

“If you’re trusting to that, I think you’re making a mistake,” Rachel warned her. “People don’t forget so quickly.”

“They do in ballet. Someone else comes along, and if you drop out you’re forgotten. And anyway, everybody will be looking at the Queens. I sha’n’t be noticed.”

“That’s more likely than the other. All eyes will be on Rosalind and her lavender train,” Rachel admitted.

“Besides—oh, well! I’ll tell you later—perhaps!” Damaris seemed to have spoken on a sudden impulse and to have repented before the words were said.

Rachel stared at her. “What were you going to say?”

“Can’t tell you just now. You’d crash the car into a ditch. Look out for your driving and don’t worry about me!”

Rachel gave her attention to the road; it was years since she and Damaris had learned to drive, but they had not had much practice lately. She knit her brows and puzzled over the hint in Marry’s words. What could she be going to say?

They ran down into Wycombe, and in the business of parking the car and finding their way into the school there was no time for thought. They were seized by the Abbey twins, in white frocks, Margaret wearing a lavender girdle and Elizabeth one of deep blue, and were led to seats kept for them as guests of the reigning Queen. Then the twins ran off, to put on wreaths of their Queens’ colours and to take up their duties as maids, and the dancing began.

There was no time to worry now. Whatever it was must wait till the crowning was over.

They watched the long line of Queens, nearly complete, though Strawberry was still in New York. Jen, her new daughter now five weeks old, took her place in the procession but had promised not to dance in the party afterwards. Her experienced nurse was taking care of little Barbara, and Maidlin, by urgent invitation, had left her baby son at the Manor in Nurse’s charge, and had brought the Silver Queen, her own good nurse, to join in the line of Queens, while Lindy Bellanne took care of the twin girls at home.

Rosamund had brought Queen Hyacinth to dance; Gracie Gray, the Garden Queen, had come from the Hall, leaving Beatrice, the Striped Queen, in charge of Joy’s three small people. Joan, Joy and Rosamund were in their places, with the President; the first Queen, and her daughter—the twenty-first Queen, not yet returned to boarding-school for the summer

term—were there too. It was nearly a full muster of Queens; even Marigold would be represented by her orange crown, carried by lonely Diana.

In the dressing-room, the twenty-first Queen turned to Jansy and spoke rather shyly.

“Did I let you down fearfully by going away to school? I didn’t know about Marigold. It left you terribly on your own.”

“I had Nanta Rose. We needed you, and Jean and Marigold too, but we pulled through, thanks to Rosalind,” Jansy said. “Did you want to go to boarding-school?”

“Father always wanted me to go, with Uncle Dick’s girls. I’d tried to get out of it, but I didn’t feel I was getting on awfully well and I thought it might be a good plan to go away.”

“D’you like it?”

“It’s not too bad. It’s a jolly fine school, but I miss the Hamlet Club. We don’t have any country-dancing, only waltzes and fancy stuff.”

“Poor you! You’re such a jolly dancer. Can’t you reform them?”

Mirry shook her head. “They think our dancing’s silly. Mother’s going to start; we’d better get into line. I’m sorry I let you down, Jan.”

In the procession she was followed by small Diana, carrying Marigold’s orange crown, and by the tall red-haired Scot, Jean, and then came Jansy, wearing a faded crown. Jean laid a wreath of forget-me-nots on Queen Lob’s loosened red hair, and Jansy rose from her knees and faced the cheering crowd.

“Thank you all very very much! I’ve had a jolly time as Queen, and I hope you have too. I know you’re going to enjoy yourselves with our new Queen!” Her voice was brave and clear; then she came down the steps and with great dignity walked through the long hall to fetch her successor.

“How she has grown during her year!” Rosamund murmured to Joan. “She’s going to be tall, after all.”

“She’s very much relieved about it,” Joan smiled. “She was terribly afraid she was going to be little all her life.”

“A good thing Margia took my advice and gave her a long train,” Jen observed. “I said she’d soon begin to grow.”

“Here comes your tall niece, Ros,” Maidlin said. “Aren’t you proud of her?”

“Very. She has come out of herself marvellously during her year at school. She’s a real personality now, not just a shadow of Virginia or Littlejan Fraser. She looks nice, doesn’t she?”

“Lovely—oh, beautiful! The school thinks so too.”

A shout of welcome had greeted Nanta and her shimmering lavender train. It was lined with pale grey—“The colour of a lavender bush all winter,” Margia Lane had said. “We won’t use any green; we must keep you distinct from Jean’s dark green and powder-blue.” Sprays of lavender were worked on a narrow grey border; taking Tessa’s hint, she carried an armful of iris of rich lavender-blue; her hair still hung in its long plaits, drawn forward on her breast.

Curtseying to the assembled Queens, she knelt to be crowned by Jansy, then took her place on the throne, with Rosamund on her left hand. Jansy took the seat on her right; the Abbey twins arranged the lavender and deep blue trains, and then sat at the feet of their Queens; the maypole was brought out, and dancing began again.

“A very pleasant addition to our gallery of Queens!” said the President, when the interval came and friends gathered in groups to gossip. “On behalf of the Club, I thank you for producing such a nice niece, Queen Rose!”

“Thank you!” the Countess said, with dignity. “The school has already done a great deal for Rosalind. I hope she’ll do well for them.”

“From stories I’ve heard she has done something already,” said Miriam, the White Queen.

“She was terribly upset about that.” Rosamund laughed. “She thought she was making them all hate her for ever. I knew better, but I couldn’t convince her. But she’s a brave child, and she went ahead and did the right thing.”

“And they loved her for it,” Joan said.

“Yes, I think they did,” Rosamund agreed.

“They’ll miss her music,” said the President.

“Only for tonight. Queen or not, she’ll play for them except on State occasions,” Rosamund promised. “She can’t bear not to play, and that’s the truth. She’s Queen Fiddler!”

“How is your Baby Foursome?” the President asked.

“The Little Square for Four? Splendid! The tinies are two now; I can begin to think about that little brother,” Rosamund said hopefully. “I’ve been very patient!”

“Good luck to you! I suppose they all talk all the time?”

“Oh yes! The tinies call themselves Zanna and Zilda, and we’re allowing it while they’re so small. Big Twins have cut out a syllable and are Ros’bel and Ros’lin; it was Rosabel’s idea. They can keep their full names for formal occasions.”

“I like Zanna and Zilda,” Maidlin laughed.

“And when are we going to see your boy, Maidie?” the President turned to her. “We were all delighted to hear about him.”

Maidlin smiled up at her. “He’s very nice. If any of you care to come to The Pallant next week, Paul will be at home and will be pleased to meet you.”

“That’s a generous invitation! I shall bring a carload of Queens; I’ll ring up and give you warning of the invasion. Is he as dark as his sisters?”

“No, fair with a touch of red.” Maidlin’s smile gleamed again in her black eyes. “He’s like his father. Jock doesn’t mind, as he’s had two dark daughters.”

“I expect he’s very proud of his boy. And your little Stranger, Jenny-Wren?”

“Oh, you can see Barbara at any time! She isn’t shy; she’s a big bouncing girl, just like me.”

“Then I hope you’re proud of her,” the President retorted.

“I am, rather, now that I’m getting used to her,” Jen admitted. “She was a bit of a blow at first.”

“You used to try to make us believe you were shy,” Rosamund remarked.

The Lady of the Manor grinned. “I’ve had to get over it.”

“Now I suppose you’ll go on and have Pat next year!”

“No,” Jen said unexpectedly. “We aren’t going to have any more—for some time, at least. Ken says five boys and three girls are enough for any man to clothe and educate, and I suppose he’s right. It will be rather expensive! Barbara will have to be the sixth man in my morris side. I’m quite sure she’ll be a morris dancer!”

“You’ve had more than your share already,” Rosamund agreed with Kenneth.

Rosalind was surrounded by a crowd of friends, all admiring her shining train. She made her way through them, carefully attended by Margaret Marchwood, and came to the girls from the Abbey, in their seats under the gallery.

“It was nice of you to come! I hoped you would,” she said. “I wanted Virginia to be here and she wanted to come, but it meant being away from home, and she didn’t feel it would be

good for Baby. Aunt Rosamund asked them, but it meant too much travelling. I'm glad you're here," and she looked at Damaris, with understanding eyes.

"I funk'd it last year," Damaris said frankly. "But I wanted to see you crowned, and nobody has time to think about me."

In that she was mistaken, however, for when the Queen moved away, to be congratulated by the President, the head girl took her place.

"Do tell me! I saw you once, in the barn, when young Jansy was chosen Queen. Aren't you Mary Damayris, the dancer? I saw you dance, in town."

Rachel turned quickly, her face full of reproach, with an instinctive desire to protect Damaris. But to her surprise Damaris answered, calmly and naturally.

"That's right. Yes, I remember you. You're the head of the school, aren't you? You've chosen a jolly new Queen, let me tell you."

"I know. But, I say! You had an accident or something, didn't you? Won't you be able to dance again? Are you all right now?"

And Rachel and Benedicta, holding their breath, heard Damaris say quietly, "Oh yes! I'm quite fit again. But I've taken on a new job at the Abbey. The party's beginning; don't you want to join in? We're going home now."

Rachel took her arm and drew her away. "I'll get the car. You two wait here."

"Oh, *brave*, Mary Damayris!" Benedicta whispered.

Damaris gave her a queer little smile, full of secrets. "Not really brave, Blessing. I'll tell you tonight. Don't tease me just now."

Joan, keeping Jen company on the platform to watch the dancing, smiled as she saw them go. "I am so glad about that!"

"About what, Abbey-Girl?"

"That ancient name!" Joan laughed. "About those nice girls in the Abbey, Brownie. Ann Watson was a dear and she loved her job, but she was old and tired. It makes me very happy to know there's youth and health and energy in charge of my Abbey; something so vital and full of life and help to everybody. I've heard a good deal from Jansy; Rachel is invaluable. Benedicta calls her the Abbot."

"Good for Benneyben! She's right; Rachel is your Abbot. And you're right to be happy about her being there."

"I wonder if she'll stay?" Joan said to herself, as Joy came to invite her to a dance. " 'Hunsdon House'? Yes, 'Traveller's Joy', I'll love it, thank you!"

CHAPTER THIRTY

A PROMISE FROM RACHEL

Damaris switched on the lamp under its red shade and the glow filled the Abbey parlour. She had begged to be left alone during the drive, saying she was too tired to talk; but when Rachel stopped the car at Mrs. Puddephat's cottage Damaris had roused herself from her silence.

"Come back with us for a few minutes, Blessing. I'll see you home presently. I want to speak to Ray, and I'd like you to be there too."

"Oh, please let me come!" Benedicta begged. "I know there's something to be told."

"Tell you presently," and Damaris lapsed into quietness again.

Rachel and Benedicta looked at one another, as the car set out, Benedicta's eyes blazing with questions.

Rachel shook her head. Her lips were set and her face was full of excitement. She was beginning to guess what was coming.

"I'll run the car round in the morning. Lady Jen said that would be time enough," she said, and drove carefully through the gate-house, past the pansy beds and the sweet-briar bushes, and in by the entrance to the passage outside their door. "There's just room and the car will be safe here."

Damaris faced the others in the little parlour, by the red glow of the lamp.

"You thought I was brave when I spoke to Olivia. But I wasn't. You see, I'm going back. I'm going to be Mary Damayris again."

"*Marry!*" Rachel whispered. "Oh, Marry, what has happened?"

"Oh, cheers!" Benedicta shouted. "You'll dance again! You'll be famous! Oh, Mary Damayris, tell us all about it!"

Damaris looked at Rachel. "I've been working for months. You've known that. I've practised, but I haven't been able to get the position I wanted—in my hip, you know. Nothing was much use till I could get that, but I went on working; something drove me on—I couldn't help it. This afternoon, in the Abbot's parlour, I did it; I got the position." She paused, catching her breath.

"Oh, Marry, how wonderful!" Rachel cried. "You have been plucky! To work for all these months without any success to cheer you on! And to get it at last! How marvellous you must have felt!"

"You'll go on now! You can do anything, if you can do that," Benedicta exclaimed.

"It will mean months of work; perhaps years. I must have lost almost everything. But I've something ahead of me now, and I'll put up with anything, massage or any sort of treatment, since I know it's going to give me back the power I've lost. I thought it was gone for ever. I shall write to Sir Robert Duncan and ask his advice and say I'm ready now to do anything he wishes. And I shall tell Madame and Antoine that some day I hope to come back, if they'll have me."

"If! You know they're dying to have you," Rachel said. "Oh, Marry, I am so glad! You do deserve it! You're only twenty-three; you've plenty of time to build up a new career. You'll be the Goose-girl again, and you'll make new ballets. What a welcome you'll have!"

Damaris gave her a searching look. “Yes, that’s all right. I mean to do all that. But what about you? You haven’t thought of yourself yet.”

“That’s like her,” Benedicta put in.

“Yes, just like her. You can’t leave the Abbey, you know, Ray.”

“Leave the Abbey?” Rachel said slowly. “No, I hadn’t thought of that.” She dropped into a chair and sat staring at Damaris. “I must go with you,” she said. “You’re my first job; everybody says so. But—the Abbey! I’ve taken on that as my job too. Marry, help me! What are we going to do?”

Damaris was at her side in a moment, her arms round her. “Old dear, I won’t have you with me at any price! It would tear you in pieces to leave this place. And you’re needed here. All those girls come to you for help, and they’ll come again, often. You can’t leave the Abbey, Ray. You can’t let either the place or the people down. Everybody needs you here.”

“She’s the Abbot,” Benedicta said urgently.

“But—but you, Marry?” Rachel half sobbed. “You must go. You can’t stay here now!”

“Nothing could keep me here! I have to go; the other is my life and I must go back to it. Ray dear, be sensible! I’ve been thinking of this for months. There’s only one way. I must go and you must stay here. We can’t go on for ever, doing the same things. We have to part company, as soon as I’m ready to start training again.”

“No!” Rachel cried, fighting against the new idea, though her reason told her the change would have to come. “No, Marry! I must be with you, to take care of you.”

“Madame will do all that. If she gets me back she’ll treat me like eggshell—like her one and only darling precious chick. You know that very well.”

Rachel did know it. If Mary Damayris reappeared Madame Roskova would care for her as if she had been her own.

“If you mean that I shall get into mischief without you, I’m going to be most frightfully offended,” Damaris mocked. “And anyway, I sha’n’t have a second to think. You know what a dancer’s life is like!”

This also Rachel knew. For three years she had stood by her sister during her public career, and there was little she did not know of what lay before Damaris. It seemed unthinkable that she could let Marry go back to that strenuous, sometimes heartbreaking, life without her support in the background.

“I suppose you couldn’t live here and go to town every day?” she asked unsteadily. “Or go only certain days in each week?”

“No, I couldn’t do that, my dear,” Damaris said gently. “You forget the daily practice. No one can dance in public without regular work and criticism.”

“I forgot that. No, you couldn’t do it. Marry, I don’t know what to say.”

“Say ‘Good luck!’ and carry on with your job. I’ll ring you up each night, and I’ll come here every Sunday, if I possibly can. I rather think I’ll be able to make my own terms with Madame and Antoine.”

“They’ll let you do anything you like, if you’ll only go back,” Rachel assented. “But I can’t bear to let you go without me!”

“We’d have to separate sooner or later,” Damaris urged. “Suppose one of us married? The other one would be left lamenting. We may as well have a shot at doing things on our own.”

“I’m not going to marry! Are you?”

“You can’t tell,” Damaris argued. “Look at Daphne Dale, throwing up her career and falling into Dicky Dandy’s arms! Gosh! I hope it doesn’t happen to me! But you ought to

marry some day——”

“No,” Rachel said finally.

“You can’t be sure. The man who gets you will be a lucky chap. Don’t say ‘No!’ like that! You do see that we’ll have to separate, don’t you?”

Rachel sat with bent head. Looking up at last, her eyes found the painting of Helvellyn. “I feel,” she said, catching her breath, “that if I let you go alone back to that hard life, it will be like letting you dance on that knife-edge of a path, as you once wanted to do, without my being there to help you, if you fall.”

“The imagination of the novelist!” Damaris said solemnly. “You must learn to control it, Ray. I’m not going to fall! I shall be well looked after. You’re needed much more here, among all these kiddies and schoolgirls. They’ll come buzzing round you for help. The married folk will go to Mary-Dorothy at the house, but the new generation will come to you in the Abbey. You’re going to do your job, aren’t you?”

After a pause, Rachel said soberly, “Yes, I am.”

“Good! And you agree that I must do mine?”

“I suppose so. Yes, Damayris.”

Damaris gave a whoop of joy. “Thanks, old dear! And you’ll be happy about it?”

“I’ll be very proud and happy about your success.”

“But you’ll be happy about me when I go away?”

After another pause Rachel said, “I’ll try.”

“That’s a promise! Good for you! We’ll do our jobs and we’ll meet often, but we’ll go our different ways. Is that settled, Ray?”

Rachel gave her a brave smile. “I’ll try,” she said again.

“And I’ll look after the garden for you, Damayris!” Benedicta cried joyfully.

“I hoped you would.” Damaris turned to her happily. “What a very good thing you came back to the Abbey, Blessing!”

[The end of *Rachel in the Abbey* by Elsie Jeanette Dunkerley (as Elsie J. Oxenham)]