



JANIE STEPS IN

**ELINOR M.
BRENT-DYER**

Author of the CHALET SCHOOL SERIES

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JANIE STEPS IN

BY
ELINOR M. BRENT-DYER

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Janie Steps In

Chapter I

ROSAMUND IN A DILEMMA

Rosamund Willoughby looked up with a sigh of relief as the drawing-room door opened and her husband came in.

‘Nigel!’ she exclaimed. ‘At last! Where on earth have you been? I was just wishing you would come.’

Nigel Willoughby, tall, fair-haired and slim, with hazel eyes full of mischief, strolled across the room to where she had been sitting, gazing out with unseeing eyes at the big, summery garden lying below the grassy terrace on to which the french windows opened. He hauled up a big arm-chair and dropped into it, stretching out his long legs with a heartfelt sigh of relief. ‘Now this is filling at the price! What’s biting you, Rosy-posy?’

She flushed and gave him an indignant look. ‘I won’t tell you a thing if you can’t address me properly. “Rosy-posy,” indeed!’

‘It’s too hot for the whole thing,’ he murmured, closing his eyes lazily. ‘Rosamund Morgan Anita Willoughby!’ Your godparents must have been bats at the time of your baptism, my love. Go on and tell me what’s eating you and don’t scrap; there’s a good girl.’

His wife gave him another indignant look. Then she relaxed and giggled. ‘What I’ve ever done to have a husband like you! Oh, well! Let it pass!’ Her charming face suddenly became very serious. ‘Nigel, sit up, please. I want to talk very gravely indeed to you. I’m at the end of my tether. I’ve done my best and I’ve failed—badly.’

He sat up, the mischief gone from his eyes. ‘What do you mean? Explain yourself. *How* have you failed?’

‘With Nan. And I’d have given a lot to have succeeded!’

‘I don’t see how you can blame yourself,’ he said slowly as he felt for his cigarette case. ‘You’ve been goodness itself to her—poor little soul!’

‘I’ve tried, goodness knows, but I’ve failed, just the same. She’s no better than she was when she first came to us six months ago. If anything, she’s worse.’

‘She looks very washed-out, I know, and it’s easy to see that she’s still heart-broken. But isn’t that natural in the circumstances?’

There was silence while Rosamund considered this dictum. Then she shook her head. ‘No-o; I don’t think so. She ought to be getting better by this time. It’s nearly eight months since it all happened, and though no one could expect her to forget—I doubt if she ever could!—still, the wound should be healing a little now; and it *isn’t*! It’s as bad as it was eight days afterwards. That’s not natural at Nan’s age, Nigel.’

‘Don’t you think her loss of weight and colour may just be that this place doesn’t really suit her? After all, the Thames valley is a fairly big change from the west coast of Donegal.’

‘That may have something to do with it—I’m not saying it hasn’t. But it’s a great deal more than that. That wouldn’t account for her heartbreak. Such a thing would be awful enough for any girl of her age; but Nan and Aunt Gatty weren’t just mother and daughter. They were tremendous chums as well. Nan’s lost her dearest friend as well as her mother. It isn’t just that she’s lost weight and colour as you say. She’s listless and takes no interest in anything or anybody. All she wants to do is to get away into a corner by herself and be miserable. Her very hair is losing its curl and her eyes look as if she’d cried most of the colour out of them. You can’t let that sort of thing go on.’

‘What does Doc Fanshawe say about her?’

‘I haven’t had him. He could only give her a tonic and advise trying to interest her in other things. A lot of use that would be!’

‘Then what *do* you propose to do?’

‘That’s what I want to consult you about. It doesn’t seem to make any difference to her where she is or how long she stays there. I’m beginning to wonder if it’s so awfully good for her to be with me after all.’

Nigel turned a look of startled curiosity on her. ‘What on earth are you getting at? I should have said you were the best possible person—her mother’s favourite niece—Oh yes, you were, my dear. Don’t try to argue *that* point! We all knew it—and the only one of the lot to resemble her at all. At that, your aunt had brown eyes and yours are blue; but at least you have the same features and so on. The only difference is the eyes. I should have

thought being with you would have been quite a comfort to her for that reason only, poor kid.'

'I'm not so sure.' Rosamund spoke slowly. 'Isn't it, in a way, helping to keep the whole thing alive in her memory—I mean alive in the way we don't want? I think if she'd gone to one of the others it might have been wiser.'

'H'm! Yes; I see what you mean. You may be right. At the same time, I don't quite see how it could have been managed. Cesca and her vicar are in the heart of the Black Country—not the best place for a kid who isn't in the rudest health—and Con and Rex are off to Ceylon next month, so *they're* off the map. Lal is never available; less so than ever, now that she has her twins. That leaves you with young José.'

'A lot of use José would be! She can't look after herself properly, let alone that Nan is a problem that, to be quite frank, has left me guessing. I certainly shouldn't hand Nan over to her tender mercies!'

'Well, what do you suggest then? I can see you have an idea neatly hatched, so you might as well cut the cackle and tell me outright.'

Rosamund straightened in her chair. 'The Lucys!'

He whistled softly. 'So that's your solution! Do you think they would take her? It would be a complete change of scene; I see that. Has she ever been in Guernsey?'

'No; never. That's one point I'd thought of.'

'I suppose Steyne Winting is out of the question?'

'Oh, utterly! It lies nearly as low as here, for one thing. And then, Sigrid has her hands full with the babies. Besides, I think Nan wants something that Sigrid, with all her sweetness, couldn't give her. Janie could.'

'I see. Otherwise, I should suggest that when you come to talk about babies, the Lucys have four of their own.'

'Yes; but their *own*! That makes a difference, you know. Sigrid has her trio and Maidie's girl and Con's two boys in addition. I couldn't ask her to take on the responsibility of a delicate girl like Nan—and in Nan's present state—on top of all that.'

'No; I suppose not. Well, what do you want me to do, then?'

'I want you to put a trunk-call through to Les Arbres for me. Nan mustn't go on like this a moment longer than we can help.' Rosamund

stopped there and suddenly frowned. ‘You don’t know, of course, and I doubt if the others will have thought of it, but when Aunt Gatty was Nan’s age, there was a danger of lung trouble. She outgrew the tendency, but for two or three years they had to be very careful with her.’

He gave her a sharp look. ‘Are you afraid of that with Nan?’

‘I hope not—not if we act at once. Auntie was always frail and Nan’s been as sturdy as a young pony until—well, until the accident. But when there *is* such a medical history, it naturally makes one anxious and I’m afraid that if she isn’t roused from this state of morbid grief we *shall* have trouble with her.’

He nodded. ‘I should think you were right. O.K.; I’ll put the call through and then we’d better see how we can best arrange things.’

‘Then you hop along and do it at once. No use delaying.’

He nodded and sauntered from the room while his wife picked up her needlework and went on with it until he returned to announce that the line to Peterport was engaged, but he had asked Exchange to put the call through as soon as possible and ring him back.

‘Where is the kid—now, I mean?’ he asked as he sat down again.

‘I sent her out with Belinda and the children. She went at once. That’s one of the awful parts of the business. She’s absolutely docile—she’ll do anything you ask her, just as though it didn’t matter to her at all. And Nan had plenty of spirit before.’

‘She had an awful shock, you know. She seemed half-stunned when she came here.’

‘I know; but—eight months past! She ought to have got over that by this time. I don’t like it, Nigel. I’m responsible for her to her father. Uncle Binkie sent her to me because he thought I’d be best.’

‘And I agreed with him,’ her husband interjected quickly.

‘So did I at the time. I feel now that it was a mistake. It wasn’t a big enough change. If Nan could have gone with him—but she couldn’t, of course. He didn’t want her, either.’

‘Poor old Binks! I don’t wonder he feels as if he must put the whole Seven Seas between himself and the British Isles!’

‘It wasn’t his fault,’ Rosamund said quickly. ‘If anyone was to blame, it was those wretched idiots who let a blind and imbecile child run loose.’

‘That won’t make it any easier for him. I only wonder the whole affair hasn’t sent him clean off his head.’

‘He couldn’t have done anything else. The child ran right out into the road—almost under the car-wheels. If he hadn’t swerved he would have gone clean over her. It was a miracle he wasn’t killed as well.’

Nigel looked very serious. ‘In the circumstances, I should think he’d have preferred that. He’ll never walk without crutches again, even if he ever gets that far.’

‘No; and it’s an awful thought. But this long voyage may strengthen him and he may come home much better. Surgeons can do such marvellous things nowadays.’

Nigel shook his head. ‘I doubt it. I don’t even think he’ll want it. When I saw him the day he sailed he looked as if the mainspring of his life had gone. Don’t hope for much there, Rosamund. Binkie’s a broken man.’

His wife said nothing for a moment. Then she cleared her throat. ‘Well, anyhow, I’m going to do what I can for their child. I’m going to enlist Janie. I have an idea that J. and her obstreperous family may be just the tonic Nan needs. Beside, Nigel, Janie—and Julian, too, for that matter—has something you and I haven’t got. I don’t quite know what it is, but it’s *there*. For one thing, however much she may be tied up with her own family, she always seems to be able to take in a dozen other folk at the same time. I can’t do that. To me, you and the children make up the world, and everyone else—even Mother and Dad and the rest—have to come after. I love Nan dearly; but—well, there’s a little circle that holds you and Toby and Blossom and the rest have to remain outside.’ Rosamund suddenly looked forlorn. ‘It isn’t awfully nice of me, but there it is.’

‘And there it always was,’ her husband told her. ‘Don’t I know it! Didn’t it take ten years off my life persuading you to let me into the family circle? No, my dear; it isn’t a question of niceness or nastiness. It’s simply part of your make-up. You wouldn’t be you without it. Besides, come to that, *I* like our own little crowd best. If you’re not nice to know, neither am I. You and I, my dear, are clannish. Janie and Julian aren’t. It takes all sorts to make a world.’

She grimaced at him. ‘What an abominable cliché!’ Then she added anxiously, ‘I’m glad you think that way, all the same. I’ve often wondered if it meant that I was selfish and self-centred. I *have* tried to get over it, but however hard I try, I never manage it.’

‘You let it alone,’ he ordered. ‘You suit me as you are. If I’d had J. for a wife, murder would have been done more than once.’

‘Only twice,’ she retorted, ‘and that would have been at the same time. There goes the phone! Come along and hold my hand and we’ll put it to J. in its plainest terms.’

Chapter II

NAN

A week later, Rosamund was standing in her bedroom looking out of the window on to the sunny garden where her small son and daughter were playing together. Their nurse, once housemaid in her own old home, now 'Nanny' to her adored 'Miss Rosamund's' children, was seated on a rustic seat, keeping watch over them while she sewed at overalls.

Presently, their mother leaned out of the window and called: 'Toby!' Then as he paid no heed: 'To-bee!'

He looked up with a cheerful grin. 'Hello, Mummy! Want me?'

'Yes; come along, please. And where is your hat? It's far too hot for you to be out there in the sun without it. Put it on, please.'

He picked up the linen hat he had flung off and rammed it down on his head. 'I'm comin'! Blossom, you go on with the house.'

His small sister lifted an exquisite little face to the window. 'Wants to come, too, Mummy. Me come!'

'You can't! Mummy called me, not you!' her brother retorted.

Blossom smiled at him. Then she turned to the window again. 'Mummy! Me too?' Her clear little voice rang out.

'Not just now. You go on with your game. I'll try to come and play with you after tea. I just want Toby to take a message for me. He won't be long.'

Blossom turned back to her bricks without more fuss. Rosamund had brought up her children to obey her without question and it would have been hard to find a better-trained little pair anywhere.

Meanwhile, Toby had raced across the lawn, up the bank leading to the terrace, through the french window of the drawing-room and his mother heard him coming up the stairs like a cantering pony. As he entered the bedroom, she turned from the window where she had been watching Blossom's attempts at house-building and gave him a smile.

'Here you are! I want you to take a message for me, sonny.'

'O.K. Where do I go?' he demanded in his manliest way.

‘Do you know where Nan is? I thought she was with you.’

Toby considered. ‘She came—but she didn’t stay. I *raver* fink she’s down by the fishpond. She went away quite a while ago.’

‘Well, will you go and find her and ask her to come to me here. And Toby; go, please. Don’t just stand a hundred yards away and shout at her.’

He went red. ‘No; I won’t. Has she to bring you anyfing?’

‘Only herself, thank you. How hot you are, sonny!’ She took her handkerchief and wiped his face and he sniffed rapturously at its perfume.

‘You do smell nice, Mummy—like ve mignonette round vedges.’

Rosamund’s laugh rang out. ‘What a compliment! Isn’t it rather hot out there for you and Blossom? What about going to the shrubbery when you’ve found Nan, and playing there? It’ll be cool and shady there now.’

‘No; it’s fine. We like it,’ he replied briefly.

‘Very well, then. Run along and don’t get too hot with playing. See that Blossom doesn’t either, and tell her from me she is to keep her hat on.’

‘I’ll keep an eye on her,’ he promised. ‘She does have to be watched, doesn’t she, Mummy?’

‘That’s because she’s little and precious. But with a brother like you to take care of her, she’ll be all right. Thanks, old man. I know I can trust you.’

‘You bet!’ He trotted off, his fair head a little higher for her last speech, and she looked after him with a tender smile. For six, he really was very big and sturdy, she thought. What matter if he was plain as boy could be, with a wide mouth, over-big nose, chin like a ramrod, and freckles? Boys didn’t want beauty. It was just as well that the good looks had gone to his little sister who was, as everyone acknowledged, the pick of the younger generation. What really mattered with a boy was that he should be manly and trustworthy, and he was that already.

‘Toby’s the best little chap in the world,’ thought his proud mother as she turned back to pick up a letter from her dressing-table before she went to sit down on the old-fashioned love-seat set across the bow-window. Then she turned her thoughts from the children and fixed them on her young cousin. What would Nan say about the new idea? She hoped the girl would fall in with it without making any difficulties. The last letter from Peterport had suggested that the girl should set off for Guernsey as soon as possible.

‘You know what our crossing can be like, even in September,’ Janie Lucy had written. ‘If the poor kid is already as wretched as you say, you don’t want to make her worse by wishing a severe dose of sea-sickness on to her!’

‘Here’s an idea! You pack for the lot and come over, even if you Willoughbys can stay only a week or ten days. It’s time Toby and Julie saw more of each other and I’m sure it would do Blossom good to have other little girls to play with! From what you tell me, my dear, I’m afraid your daughter looks like being a minx of the first water. Why don’t you and Nigel provide her with a sister or two? Our own Julie improved at the rate of no man’s business when Betsy was able to sit up and take notice! Where Vi is concerned, she’s most absurdly motherly, bless her! Did I ever tell you we’d called her Viola? She arrived in the spring just as the pansies came into flower. I really *couldn’t* consider “Pansy” for a name, so we came over all Roman and made it “Viola.” Pollie’s had any amount to say on the subject! She thought it should have been “Pauline” after her, but one in the family is enough, thank you!

‘Vi has eyes just like dark blue pansies. Julian’s are black, but they’re *blue-black*. We’re hoping hers won’t darken like the others’, and so far they haven’t altered and are a source of great joy to all of us, from Grandy down to Betsy, who doesn’t seem to resent being deposed from her place as “Baby” in the least.’

‘A baby may help with Nan,’ Rosamund thought as she sat there, glancing through the letter. ‘Blossom isn’t tiny and helpless or she might have done the trick; but she’s a real little personage now. A minx, is she? H’m! I’m not so sure of that, J., my love! At least she’s obedient. If she develops minxish tendencies later, we must deal with them. I don’t see Toby’s sister getting much chance that way. I shan’t worry about it. But I really must write and tell Janie the latest news or she’ll have plenty to say when we *do* meet!’

A tap at the door broke in on her musings and she looked up and called, ‘That you, Nan? Come in darling!’ Whereupon the door opened and Nan Blakeney entered slowly.

Three or four years ago, someone seeing Sir Charles and Lady Blakeney for the first time, having already met Nan, had said in startled tones, ‘How could two such handsome people come to have such an ugly child?’

At the time Rosamund, to whom the words had been addressed, had protested furiously and she had never really forgiven the critic. Even now

she would never acknowledge that there was any truth in them. Nan was not pretty of course; even she had to own that; but she was very far from being ugly. True, her mouth looked heavy and her skin sallow; her nose was too small for her face and her chin was short and sharply pointed. But her hair was wonderful—long and thick and wavy and densely black; and her eyes would have redeemed the plainest face.

But now—Rosamund felt a queer tremor pass through her as she looked at the listless, pallid girl who crossed the room to her. Long hours of fretting for the adored mother so tragically killed in a motor accident had robbed the child of what colour she had had. The eyes, which had been vividly, gloriously blue, were positively fading in hue. The hair was dull, heavy and waveless. More than ever Rosamund felt that something must be done, and done at once.

She held out her hand with a welcoming smile. ‘Come here, Nan. I’ve some news to tell you.’

Nan came to her and dropped on the carpet beside her, kneeling so that she could look up into the charming face above her with wistful, hungry eyes. Rosamund saw the look and again felt that they were doing the right thing. She pulled up a little stool beside her and patted it.

‘Come and sit down here, Nan.’ Then, as Nan obediently sat on it, resting her arms on her cousin’s knee and still looking up at her, she went on, ‘That’s better! Now listen to me. You’ve heard me speak of my friend Janie Lucy, haven’t you?’

‘The one who lives in the Channel Isles—Guernsey, isn’t it?—and who has a little girl about the same age as Toby? Didn’t she come to your wedding with her husband? I seem to remember—’

Rosamund nodded. ‘Yes; they were married only a few weeks before we were and were still as fond of teasing each other as they always have been. They’ve never outgrown it, either.’ She gave a sudden chuckle as she remembered sundry episodes and Nan gave her a surprised look. ‘So you remember her, do you. Nan? Did you like her?’

Nan nodded as she said, a little more interest creeping into her voice and manner, ‘Yes; I remember that I thought how jolly she was.’

‘Yes; that’s Janie—always was. Now listen carefully, Nan. Nigel and I aren’t quite happy about you. We think you aren’t too well just now and perhaps this place doesn’t suit you. We *are* rather near the river and the house lies low. Janie has invited you to go to her for a week or two—longer

if you like and the climate suits you—to get braced up for the winter. We do have the most awful fogs here sometimes. We think it would do you a world of good, so Nigel is arranging to run across with you on Thursday of this week and, as this is Monday, we've a hectic time before us, getting you ready.'

Nan sat bolt upright on her stool. 'Rosamund! Please—I don't mean to be a nuisance, but oh, please don't send me away—*please* don't send me away from you! I—I couldn't bear it!'

'Only for a little holiday, dear, till you are really fit again.'

'I *can't* go—oh, I *can't* go!' And she dropped her head on her cousin's lap and began to sob heavily.

Rosamund put an arm round her and lifted her. 'Nan, why not? Janie will be most awfully good to you and you'll love her family—she has four now. The baby is only about six months old—less! You love babies, I know. We can't exactly call Blossom a baby now. You'd like to have a tiny baby to play with, wouldn't you? And Janie would be certain to let you have her little Viola to pet and nurse. And then Guernsey is so beautiful. It has a glorious coast and the climate is sure to suit you a great deal better than ours.'

But Nan only sobbed on, repeating, 'I can't go—I simply *can't* go!'

'Why not?' her cousin demanded. 'Do you mean you think your father mightn't like it? But that's nonsense, Nan. He'd be delighted to know you were with Janie. He knows both her and Julian and likes them enormously. Is that it, dear? You needn't be afraid of that.'

'It—it isn't that,' Nan sobbed.

'Then what is it? Nigel will take you across so that it won't mean going alone. You don't mind the crossing, do you? You're a good sailor—a lot more so than I shall ever be.'

'Oh, it isn't that—not that at all!'

For a moment, Rosamund looked down at her young cousin with exasperation in her face. What could you do with a girl who simply sobbed and wept and begged to be allowed to stay? She felt as if she could have shaken Nan. Then the memory of the girl's heavy loss swept over her and she continued with her gentle pleading once more—by far the worst thing she could have done if she had only realised it. Nan was in a state where she needed firm handling and not so much petting.

‘What is the objection, Nan? Tell me, darling. I want to know.’

For a moment or two Nan struggled with the sobs which threatened to choke her. Then she got it out. ‘You—you’re so like—Mother! Oh, *don’t* send me away from you *now!* You—you’re all I have left to remind me!’

Rosamund quickly made up her mind when she heard the broken plea. As she had told Nigel more than once, she had been afraid that Nan was feeding her morbid grief on the likeness. This was proof positive and a stop must be put to it at once or the girl would fret herself into real illness. Granted that the bond between Lady Blakeney and her only child had been unusually strong and close; it was eight months since the accident and Nan should have been feeling her sorrow in a much more healthy way by this time. Anything that prevented it ought to be removed at once. Rosamund decided then and there that this thing should not be allowed to continue.

‘I’m not sending you away from *me*, Nan,’ she said. ‘I am going away myself for a few weeks. Even if you stayed on here, I shouldn’t be with you. I’m gong to Oxford to stay with Nigel’s niece, Maidie Clitheroe. She had a bad operation a short while ago and though she is convalescing now, she is still very frail and her husband wrote last week and asked me to go to them to be with her. Maidie and I have always been great pals; I said I’d go, of course. Now don’t cry like that,’ she added as the heavy sobs broke out again. ‘All I’m asking of you is to go to Janie while I’m in Oxford. That’s not much. Won’t you do it for me?’

It was a little time before Nan could control herself, but at last she sobbed out an assent. Rosamund struck while the iron was hot, sent her to sponge her face and bathe her eyes and when she came back looking a little more like herself, begged her to take the children for a walk.

‘There’ll be such heaps to do with both of us going off,’ she said. ‘I simply must have Belinda’s help. If you’ll take charge of Toby and Blossom for the next few days, she’ll be able to give me her time and that would be a tremendous help and you’ll earn my undying gratitude.’

A fleeting smile broke over Nan’s sad little face at this and her cousin was encouraged to add, ‘Keep them out as long as you can. Take the push-chair and a basket of milk and bread-and-butter and cake and go up to the Seele. No matter how hot it is down here, you always get a nice breeze up there and it will blow away that headache of yours. Would you do that?’

Nan agreed. After all, she might as well take the children up to the Seele as anywhere. The thought of the cool breeze pleased her. Rosamund had a

lovely home, and in the winter when it was cold and the wet white fogs came stealing up from the river she fully appreciated its warmth and shelter. But in these hot August days, she sometimes felt as if she would stifle among all the trees. She found her hat while Rosamund ran down to the kitchen to pack a basket for the picnic party and presently set off with Toby pushing Blossom's push-chair on which their tea rode in state while Blossom herself pranced and frisked round her brother and cousin in a state of wild delight.

Rosamund saw them off, but when they had vanished round a curve of the drive, she turned and ran indoors and up to the nursery where Belinda was rocking comfortably by the open window, doing nothing for once.

'Belinda, I want your help!' her mistress cried; and Belinda sat up and listened attentively to her mistress's proposals for the young guest.

'She ought to take practically everything, I think,' Rosamund said thoughtfully. 'Once she's over there, I mean her to stay there for much longer than any three or four weeks, though it wouldn't be much good saying so to her now. She might refuse to go altogether if she thought it meant that. Now *could* we possibly get all her winter things into my second big trunk, do you think? Can you manage it so that we could send it off tomorrow, luggage in advance? Then she can have her own two cases with her summer things and take those with her. She needn't know anything about the rest until she gets there. Can you do it? You can? Then I'll ring up Mr Willoughby and ask him to take her ticket for Thursday morning and see to the rest of the business. Come along, Belinda! We'd better begin at once, for there's packs to do. I'll go and ring up while you get the trunk out of the box-room. We must get that off as soon as possible, for I want to go to Oxford on Wednesday myself, so it'll mean working double tides.'

Nan came home shortly after six, looking better than she had done. There had been a fresh breeze up on the Seele which had whipped a faint pink into her cheeks and tangled the loose masses of black hair that hung without ribbon or slide all round her in a cloak of glory. Much to her cousin's relief, she heard all the plans for Thursday without any remonstrance, ate a slightly better dinner than usual, and, when Rosamund looked into her room last thing that night, she found the girl asleep.

'I believe quite a big part of it is the atmosphere down here,' the mistress of the house remarked to her husband as they sat by the open bedroom window, smoking a final cigarette. 'She's to take charge of Toby and

Blossom for the next two days and I sincerely hope that they behave like *demons* all the time!’

Nigel laid his cigarette down on the window-sill and stared at her. ‘Well—upon—my—word!’ he said with a pause between each word. ‘That’s a nice thing for a good mother to say! What on earth is it in aid of?’

‘The more fully Nan is occupied for the next two days or so, the easier it will be to carry out my plans and the better I shall be pleased.’

‘Oh, I see. At the same time if they overstep the bounds now and you allow it, where’s the justice in pulling ’em up later when there’s no need for demoniac behaviour? Not,’ he added reflectively, ‘that I see any need for Blossom, at any rate, to do more than behave as usual. That daughter of yours, my dear, is a Perfect Limb!’

‘She’s your daughter just as much!’ Rosamund retorted. Then she suddenly looked dejected. ‘But I see what you mean. Oh dear! What a muddle life is!’

‘Have you only just discovered that? How slow of you!’ he tossed away the smouldering end of his cigarette and lit another. Then he looked at her as he pocketed his lighter. ‘The trouble with you, my child, is that you’ve been doing too much. Just you shed that becoming dressing-gown or whatnot that you have on and hop into bed and go to sleep. It’s nearly one, anyhow. You’re tired out. Oh, and don’t try to carry other folk’s burdens as well as your own, for you can’t!’

‘Janie seems to manage it,’ Rosamund sighed as she did what he told her.

‘Janie’s a freak—so’s Julian, if you come to that. They’re a good pair! You and I are ordinary normal people. That makes all the difference. Now shut up and go to sleep. You’ll feel better in the morning.’

Chapter III

EN ROUTE FOR GUERNSEY

Nan sat in the railway carriage, flattening her small nose against the window-pane and keeping her back firmly on the other occupants of the compartment. Nigel had fully intended taking her across the Channel and handing her over to the people at Les Arbres himself. He had been prevented by a sudden crisis in a big lawsuit in which he was acting as Junior Counsel and had to alter his plans almost literally at the last moment. Rosamund had already departed for Oxford when the phone-call came, so she was not available for escort either. He had therefore done the best he could by taking Nan to Paddington and putting her in charge of the guard there. The man had promised to see her safely on to the boat and she would be met at Peterport by one or other of the Lucys, so there was little chance of her coming to any harm. But her cousin felt that it might be a dull journey for her and was seriously troubled about it.

‘You’ll be very careful, won’t you, Nan?’ he asked as he settled her in her reserved seat with an armful of magazines and novels and a basket of chocolates, fruit and biscuits beside her.

‘I’ll be careful,’ Nan replied in her dreary little voice.

‘Don’t let anyone speak to you on the boat and stay on board until either Janie or Julian turns up for you. They’ll be there all right. You’re sure you’ll know them when you see them? Did Rosamund give you those snaps?’

‘Oh yes, thank you. And Mrs Lucy is short with brown eyes and looks like Puck and Mr Lucy is very tall and dark and handsome.’

‘Well, I don’t see how you can go wrong anywhere.’ Nigel surveyed her with a worried look. ‘I wish to Heaven I could have come with you as we arranged, but, as things are, I can’t. I’d have sent Belinda, but she is definitely the world’s worst traveller.’

‘Anyhow, she’s in charge of Toby and Blossom,’ Nan pointed out.

‘One of the other maids could have given an eye to them for a day or two if that were all. But she’d be useless to help you—in fact, you’d have had to do all the helping yourself. Belinda on a boat is the greenest thing I’ve ever seen!’ He gave a reminiscent grin.

‘Well, I’ve promised to be very careful, so don’t look so worried,’ Nan said, rousing herself a little. ‘And I’ll wire from Peterport as soon as I get near a post office. Will *that* satisfy you?’

‘It’ll have to, I suppose. Don’t forget it; that’s all. I shall worry until I hear you’ve got there and are safely in Janie’s charge.’

Nan smiled involuntarily. All her life she had heard that Nigel was a most irresponsible being, especially in his salad days, and she knew that even now he could be capable of wild doings. To hear him talk like this had its funny side. However, the porters were slamming the doors, so Nigel kissed her and got out to stand on the platform below her window, asking if she had plenty of money—what about another pound or two just in case? Was her ticket safe and did she know which van her light trunk was in? Was she certain that she could recognise Janie and/or (he put it this way himself) Julian when they turned up? Then the whistle blew and the train began to pull out of the station, slowly at first, then with gathering speed. Paddington was left behind and she was off on this journey she still didn’t regard with any pleasure at all.

Once they were clear and running through the suburbs of south-west London, Nan took a survey of her fellow-passengers, decided that she would have nothing to say to any of them and turned her back on them. The journey to Weymouth would take about three and a half hours and there was one lady sitting opposite her who looked as if she were a chatty soul. Nan had no desire, quite apart from Nigel’s injunctions, to enter into conversation with any stranger, so she stared out at the landscape with wide, unseeing eyes.

She was not actually unhappy just now, for she had deliberately gone back in thought to the days a year ago when her mother was with her and they were all in all to each other. For eleven years she had been an only child, and though there had been great rejoicings when a little brother arrived to join the family party, Nan had not been allowed to feel any change. He had died a few months later and Lady Blakeney had clung even more closely to her little girl as a result. Her father had been busy most of the day with his duties on the estate; and although Mlle Barré had had part of Nan’s education in hand, her mother had still kept a good deal herself.

Small wonder, then, that when that fatal accident occurred in which Lady Blakeney was flung out of the car on to her head on a pile of flints and died at once, Nan had been stunned by the shock. Her father was in no case to help her for he had been badly injured himself, and even when he had to a

certain extent recovered, his nerves were so shattered by the blow of his wife's death that it was thought wiser to keep his daughter from him most of the time. Then the surgeons had advised a long sea-voyage to try to help him recover his tone so that a grave operation might be performed which, it was hoped, would enable him to walk again, even if it was only with crutches, and Rosamund had come to take her to Whitelade by the Thames until Sir Charles should return.

It had been hoped that living with the cousin who had so greatly resembled her mother would help and bring her through the worst of the trouble, but it had failed. Rosamund recalled Lady Blakeney all too vividly to the heart-broken girl and Nan had fretted and visibly declined. Now she was going to a place where neither persons nor surroundings could remind her of all she had lost.

Not that Nan thought of all this. In a happy daydream she was far-away in Ireland, waiting on the steps of Blakeney Place with her mother for the horses to be brought round for their morning canter. Hark! There came the sound of hoofs on the gravel and Paudeen came in sight, leading Silverlight, her mother's handsome grey, and her own dear little chestnut, Wild Kitty. Now they had mounted and were going slowly down the avenue under the yellowing chestnut leaves. Kitty was tossing her pretty head, arching her neck and prancing sideways and her mother was laughing merrily at the lovely creature's little airs and graces—

Someone touched her arm urgently and Nan, wakened from happy dreaming, turned wide bewildered eyes on the chatty lady who was leaning forward and offering her chocolate biscuits with a smile.

'It's after ten o'clock. You've been gazing out of that window for nearly two hours and I'm sure you must have had an early breakfast. There's no time for lunch at Weymouth. We don't reach the station in time. You certainly won't feel like a meal aboard. It's going to be a nasty crossing with the wind that's blowing—look how those bushes are bending! Make the most of your opportunities and have one or two of these.'

With an effort, Nan pulled herself together. 'Thank you; it's very kind of you, but I'm not hungry and I have heaps here if I were.' She touched her basket.

'Then, my dear, let me advise you to eat something *now*. The boat doesn't reach Peterport until half-past six and it may be even later. All that time without food! It would be very bad for you.'

‘Oh, but I shall have lunch on the boat of course,’ Nan said.

‘Not if the Channel is as bad as I think it will be—a horrible heaving that makes you wish to die!’ the lady retorted with decision.

‘I never mind how bad a crossing is. I’m quite a good sailor. And I really am not hungry just now,’ Nan said with equal decision. She made a quaint little bow as she spoke, and picking up one of her pile of magazines opened it at random and took refuge behind it.

It was the snub direct. Even the chatty lady recognised that and her kind, rather foolish face went red. She laid the bag of biscuits she had been holding out on the seat beside her.

‘These modern children!’ said a scraggy matron acidly. ‘They have impudence for anything these days—no manners at all!’

Behind the pages of *Country Life* Nan went scarlet. The masses of hair falling loosely about her, unconfined by ribbon or slide, hid her face from her companions. The matron sniffed loudly and the chatty lady moved along. They began a low-murmured conversation and Nan slowly regained her normal colouring; but for the remainder of the journey she read assiduously.

At Weymouth, they were three or four minutes late, the train having been held up by a breakdown gang which was busy on two overturned waggons. By the time Nan had collected all her belongings and the friendly guard had come to her, there was barely time to rush aboard the boat.

‘There y’are, Miss,’ said the kindly man. ‘Safe an’ sound! Now you’ll be O.K. till your friends meets you at t’other side, won’t you? It looks s’if you’ll be gettin’ a tossin’, but mebbe you don’t mind that, eh?’

‘Not in the least,’ Nan declared with a little mechanical smile that never got beyond her lips. ‘Thank you so much for all your kindness. Would you please do one thing more for me?’

‘Cert’nly, Miss, if there’s time, like.’

‘Send off this wire. It’s to my friends at Peterport to tell them I’m on the boat. And this one for my cousin to say I’ve got this far safely.’ She thrust the two forms and a ten-shilling note into his hand.

‘Too much ’ere, Miss. Them wires’ll cost three bob. Wait a tick!’ He fished in his pockets and produced two half-crowns and a florin. ‘There y’are; there’s your change.’

Nan shook her head. 'Please keep it as a little "Thank you" for being so kind,' she said in her pretty voice, which had the faintest touch of Irish brogue.

'No, no, Miss. The gentleman saw to all that, thank you. Here! I must get crackin'. Don't want to miss me connection as you might say!' He forced the coins into her hand and got back to shore just in time. The next moment the gangways were swung away and in less than five minutes they were passing slowly down to the sea with the great shingle reach of Chesil Bank on their right and before them a stormy-looking stretch of water with white-capped waves glinting in the late August sunlight.

Nan put the money into her bag and looked about her. A fair number of people were on deck, including the acidulated matron and the chatty lady. The latter was regarding the tossing waves with a look of deep aversion and Nan thought to herself that here was *one* person, at any rate, who would soon be fleeing to the cabin.

At her left hand was a tall dark man whose eyes rested kindly on the lonely girl. He thought her a mere child, for Nan, slightly built and with her long hair flying in the wind, looked barely fourteen. With him were two boys. One was like himself; the other was fair-haired and brown-eyed and wore a certain seraphic expression which Nan recognised at once. She had seen it on the face of a boy-cousin, renowned in the family for sinfulness, when he was meditating some rather worse piece of mischief than usual. This boy seemed about the same age as Raymond and she thought the other must be three years older.

They were not looking at her, but the sea. Presently the younger boy broke into an irrepressible chuckle and pointed to the chatty lady. 'There goes one, anyway! Coo! Isn't she *green*!'

'What do you mean? What are you talking about, Bill?' the man asked sharply. 'Mind your manners, young man, and don't point!'

'Just someone gone to the cabin, Dad,' Bill said innocently.

His brown gaze roved round in search of fresh victims. It fell on Nan and his eyes lighted up. 'Bet there'll be heaps of others presently—when luncheon gets going, you know. Heard the menu, Dad?'

'Much as usual, I suppose,' his father said indifferently. 'Hello! There's la Primaudaye! No idea he was crossing by this boat. Lucky for me! I wanted a word with him and now I can clear a bit out of the way tonight.'

You two stop about here and don't get into mischief. I'll come back for you presently and we'll go to lunch. D'ye hear me, Bill?

'OO-oooh, Dad!' Bill's coo was as guileless as any wood-pigeon's; his face expressed complete innocence.

His father glanced sharply at him and then departed. Bill promptly edged himself nearer to Nan, straddling a little to keep his balance as the boat, now drawing nearer the open sea, began to pitch more heavily with the motion. A good many people were hurriedly leaving the deck with every sign of future misery in their faces. Bill paid no heed. To his way of thinking, he had caught an ideal victim. This skinny, hairy girl-kid would never stand the kind of tossing they would have. Just wait a moment! *Wouldn't* he make her squirm!

'Heard the menu, Mike?' he asked sweetly of his brother, his clear, bell-like tones reaching Nan distinctly.

Mike turned round from the rail and tumbled to the joke at once. 'Hot roast pork, isn't it?' he asked in a gentle, far-carrying voice.

Bill nodded. 'Um-m-m! With lots of crackling and jolly fat just like hot butter! Scrummy!'

A man standing nearby overheard the unscrupulous imp's remark, turned yellow, uttered a groan and vanished. Bill's eyes gleamed, but he paid no further heed. He was intent on Nan.

'I heard there was hot roast beef, too, and roast duck as well,' he said dreamily. 'Lashings of sage and onions!'

'What's the veg—cabbage?' Mike inquired politely.

'Yes; and cauliflower with melted butter—*swimming* in melted butter. And for pudding there's trifle, meringues and whipped cream—*dollops* of whipped cream!—and rice for anyone who feels sickish!'

The challenge—she knew well enough that it was intended for her—roused Nan as nothing else would have done, Trying to make her seasick! What impudence! She forgot Nigel's final warning not to speak to strangers, though it is safe to say that Nigel was not thinking of schoolboys when he uttered it. She turned to the pair.

'What a *dull* menu!' she said sweetly to Bill. 'I suppose the duck isn't garnished with *fat* bacon, is it? *Lots* of fat bacon, all oozy and dripping? Delicious!'

Bill's jaw dropped and he stood staring at her blankly. She gazed back at him with complete gravity, holding her long hair back from her face with one hand. The fresh wind was actually whipping a faint pink into her cheeks and the laughter she was trying to suppress made her eyes shine. At such a moment Nan did not look plain.

Bill had nothing to say at the moment and Mike came to his rescue.

'Shut your mouth, idiot, or you'll be swallowing the whole sea,' he said with brotherly brutality. He turned to Nan. 'You must excuse him. He's a bit gone at times.'

Bill's chuckle broke out again. 'You a decent sailor? Oh, good! We always do this, Mike and I. Of course if Mother or Dad are around and catch on that ends it! But Mum's at home—our twin sisters got chickenpox while we were staying with Aunt Clare so we couldn't go home before. Dad came over last week for some shooting and to take us home as all the chicks have gone to roost.'

'Have what? What *do* you mean?' Nan demanded. This was Greek to her.

Bill cast her a look of contempt. 'Bit thick, aren't you? I mean the kids are all right now.'

'Oh, I see,' said Nan, thus enlightened. Then she added politely, 'I hope they didn't have it badly?'

'Van was pretty rotten,' Mike said. 'Nell wasn't too bad, though. The thing was Dad and Mum didn't want us to get it as well. We'd been spending a few days with Auntie J. before they started spotty—Well! What's eating you now?' For Nan had given a cry of surprise.

'With *who* did you say?' she demanded, casting grammar to the winds.

'Auntie J.—our "best" aunt as my young cousin Beth calls her. Real name Aunt Janie—Mrs Lucy—Well, what's up *now*?' For Nan had uttered a shout.

'Mrs Lucy? But that's where I'm going this minute! Mrs Lucy of Les Arbres you mean, don't you? That's her! Then you two must be the Ozanne boys! I've heard reams about you from my cousin Rosamund!'

'Michael Peter and William Julian Ozanne, at your service,' said the first-named, bowing with a flourish while Bill turned red. 'But if that's the case, who are you? Auntie J. didn't expect any visitors when we left her. She

hasn't written, of course—she never does. Dad says she's the world's worst letter-writer. What's your name, anyhow?'

'Nan Blakeney—Anita Gertrude if you want the whole of it.'

'Blakeney?' Mike turned to his brother. 'That ring a bell anywhere?'

Bill shook his fair head. 'Not a tinkle! Never heard of her!'

'Perhaps you know my cousin Rosamund Willoughby—and her husband Nigel? I know they've often come to Guernsey for the holidays.'

'*Rosamund!*' This solved the puzzle for both boys. 'You mean Auntie Rosamund and Uncle Nigel—the Willoughbys! Of course we know 'em!'

Nan nodded. 'She's my cousin. I've been living with them and now I'm going to stay with Mrs Lucy for a week or two as Rosamund has gone to Oxford to stay with a friend.'

'I know now.' Mike looked serious. 'I've heard Mum and Dad talking—Bill, you shut up!' For Bill had suddenly looked intelligent and opened his mouth to say something.

Nan guessed what had been coming. The light died out of her face and her lips quivered. 'I know what he was going to say. Yes—that was Mother.'

'Oh I say!' Mike gave her a shy look. He was right out of his depth. Luckily, Mr Ozanne had finished his chat with his old friend and had come to see what his sons were doing. Mike could usually be relied on to behave himself; but Bill had been known as 'Bad Bill' from his earliest days and fully lived up to the sobriquet.

'Here's Dad!' Mike turned to his father with a look of relief. 'Hi, Dad! This is Nan Blakeney. Says she's coming to stay with Aunt J. for a bit.'

Paul Ozanne looked with kindly eyes at the childish-looking creature with her black hair tossing madly in the freshening wind and her eyes wet with tears.

'J. told me you were coming,' he said, taking a slim, froggy paw in his warm grasp. 'Are you alone or is either Rosamund or Nigel with you?'

'Rosamund's gone to stay with Mrs Clitheroe at Oxford and Nigel had a sudden conference in Town and so I had to come alone,' Nan explained when she had swallowed the sobs which had threatened to choke her.

'Alone? Well, that's plucky,' Mr Ozanne said, tucking the little hand through his arm. 'We'll look after you for them, shall we? Bill, you ruffian,

how many unlucky folk have you driven below with your wicked guesses at the menu? Oh, don't look seraphic! You don't get away with that sort of thing with me! I know you too well.'

Bill grinned uncertainly. 'Well, we had quite a bit of fun,' he said. Then he chuckled. 'Anyway, she,' nodding at Nan, 'went one better.'

Mike's broad smile suddenly made him startlingly like his brother. 'She did put the lid on it all, I must say. Rather neatly, too.'

Paul Ozanne shook his head at his sons with a frown. 'You two don't improve with keeping! There's the bell for luncheon. How about it! Nan? Can you eat anything or does the bare thought of food revolt you?'

'I'm a good sailor,' Nan said soberly.

'Then along with me and let's see this wonderful menu we've heard so much about. And boys! Mind your manners! No unpleasant remarks at table!'

He led the way to the dining-saloon where, much to her surprise, Nan found that she quite enjoyed the duck and green peas followed by a strawberry ice with cream poured over it. Mr Ozanne took them back to the deck when the meal ended, insisted on Nan's pulling on her raincoat and then left the trio to amuse themselves after warning them to keep away from the rails and not indulge in anything mad. Both Mike and Bill had made the trip several times and he knew that Nan was accustomed to crossing the Irish Sea.

It was a grey, chilly day and the three shoved their hands in their pockets after they had turned up their collars and Nan had tucked her hair into her scarlet beret, and marched briskly up and down the deck which was more or less deserted by this time, most folk preferring even the horrors of the cabins to douches of salt water. However, there was one little group of ladies who had elected to brave the weather. Nan saw the acid matron among them and would have steered clear. But Bill was ripe for mischief. Grabbing her by the arm, he edged nearer the little group, asking in dulcet tones, 'Can you swim, by any chance?'

'Swim? Of course I can,' Nan said, staring at him. 'I learnt almost as soon as I could walk. Why? What's this in aid of?'

'Well it's *rather* rough, isn't it?' He switched on a super-angelic expression with the question and Nan, glancing at the somewhat nervous group beside them, jumped to what he was doing and resolved to pay back

her fellow-passenger for the embarrassment she had been made to feel on the train.

‘I *have* known it worse,’ she said, her clear voice reaching the victims all too distinctly. ‘I’ve crossed from Ireland in a heavier sea than this—but not *much*.’

‘Did you get safely across?’ asked Mike, taking an interest in the topic without any idea of what his companions were doing.

‘We-ell, *just!*’ From Nan’s tone they might have barely survived shipwreck of the worst kind instead of a mere breakdown in the engineroom which had delayed the boat three hours or so. Her horrified listeners could not know this, of course.

‘Oh, well, let’s hope for the best,’ Bill said hopefully. ‘You never know, do you? Still, it can be pretty bad off the Casquets.’

‘What under the sun are you driving at?’ his brother demanded.

‘*Hush!*’ Bill replied with a meaning glance at the poor ladies.

At that moment, Mr Ozanne decided that it was getting too rough for the children to stay on deck any longer and came to send the three to the cabin. The sea was rising and he saw no reason why he should arrive at Peterport accompanied by three bedraggled children.

‘Come on down, you three,’ he said, laying an arm round Nan’s shoulders and beginning to draw her in the direction of the cabin. ‘It’s getting too wet out here for Nan, at any rate, and I’d just as soon have you two under cover as well’

One of the ladies rose and stopped him. Courteously raising his cap at her agitated, ‘Oh, if you please—’ he awaited her pleasure.

‘Is there—do you think—is it *dangerous?*’ she asked anxiously.

‘Dangerous?’ he repeated a trifle blankly. Then, ‘Oh, you mean the sea! Oh no, certainly not. It’s rather wetting, though, and I should recommend you to take shelter in the cabin. We are nearing the Casquets and there is always a nasty swell there so I’m afraid it won’t be pleasant until we get past them. I’m just taking the children down for that reason. But there certainly is no danger. If there had been, you would be below.’

He raised his cap again and walked off briskly with his trio to the saloon, where they had to settle down to some harmless pastime until the steadying

of the boat's keel and the slowing-down of the engines told them that they were in harbour.

'Come along!' Mr Ozanne said. 'Nan, I want you to pick out your luggage so that we can get off at once. Mike, keep an eye on those cases. Bill, you fold up that rug and strap it up with the coats and gather Nan's magazines together.'

He swept Nan off to point out her luggage to him and had them separated from the rest of the great heap, leaving her to mount guard while he returned to retrieve his sons. After that, things seemed to happen with a rush. The vessel was warped home to the quay. Porters came aboard to grab trunks and cases and bear them off to their several destinations. Nan, clutching her magazines, was hustled down the gangway, Mr Ozanne holding her arm firmly while casting a backward eye to make sure that his sons were following with all their belongings. Suddenly, just as they stepped on to the quay, he gave a pleased exclamation.

'Ha! Janie! Here's your visitor safe and sound. Here you are—take her while I go and see to her trunk and cases.'

Nan felt herself thrust into a pair of warm arms and a merry voice exclaimed, 'Nan! I'm so very glad to see you! The car's over by the hotel, Paul. I'll take Nan to it and get her out of this beastly wind and you can bring her things along. Hello, kids! Had a good holiday? I'll hear all the news later. Come along, Nan; we'll soon be at home now. You must have had a ghastly crossing, but it's over now and you're safely here!'

She was hurried across the wide cobbled stretch of the quay and into the front seat of a big saloon car where she was bidden, 'Stay there while I make sure that Paul's left nothing behind!'

Almost before she had recovered her breath, her hostess was in the driver's seat beside her and Mr Ozanne was saying cheerily, 'Well, see you later on, Nan. Good-bye for the present!' He slammed the door and stepped back and his sister-in-law let in her clutch and they moved off majestically along the quay and then turned up a narrow hilly street where visitors still thronged though the summer season was almost at an end. Involuntarily, Nan heaved a deep sigh. The journey was over and she was in Guernsey at last.

Chapter IV

LES ARBRES

At first Janie Lucy said not a word to her guest. She was far too much occupied in manœuvring the car through the traffic of the narrow High Street to pay attention to anything else. Once they had reached the summit, however, and were passing through quiet roads lined on either side with tall stately houses of the Regency period, she began to talk.

‘You must have had an appalling crossing with this wind.’

‘Well, it was pretty bad,’ Nan agreed. ‘A good many people were upset.’

Janie shuddered. ‘Thank goodness I wasn’t there! My husband always says I’m the world’s worst sailor and he isn’t far wrong. It doesn’t seem to have bothered *you*, though.’

‘It never does,’ Nan said simply. ‘I love the sea.’

‘Lucky you! But how did you happen to come with Paul and the boys? I’ve just had a wire from Nigel to say that he was awfully sorry but they’ve had to let you come alone. I got a shock when I saw you all together.’

An unexpected dimple dipped in Nan’s cheek as she replied, ‘It was an accident, really. Nigel didn’t know that they would be there, I’m certain.’

‘Then how on earth did you come across each other?’

‘Bill had the cheek to try to upset me by reciting the menu at me. I wasn’t going to put up with that—it was a sheer insult! I just joined in—and went one better!’ Nan concluded with deep satisfaction.

Jane’s peals of laughter rang out. ‘Good for you! That boy’s never out of mischief. He’s born to be hanged if you ask me. I suppose that when he found he’d made a little error of judgment he roped you in for his wicked schemes?’

‘Oh, I did a little,’ Nan admitted demurely.

Her hostess glanced at her. ‘H’m! Bad Bill always contrives to get any help he wants. It’s positively uncanny the way that child manages—and he only nine! Did Mike take a hand in the game? Yes; I thought so. Mike looks and behaves like a young saint a good part of the time, but get him going and he’s worse than Bill, any day in the week!’

To herself she was saying, 'What a very good thing for Nan that she fell in with Paul and his demons! From what Rosamund said I expected a full-blown Niobe on my hands, but those young sinners have done her good already.'

She swung the car round a corner into a broad, tree-lined road where the houses were few, standing in their own grounds, and at one side they had a full view of the tossing sea. Presently they came to a pair of massive iron gates at which she turned in and they ran up a winding avenue to draw up before an old grey stone house, bowered in virginian creeper which was turning rosy. Wide latticed windows seemed to flash a welcome and the garden was still sweet with late-blooming roses, gladioli, dahlias and great hydrangeas which towered up, nearly to the roof. The house stood on a broad grassy plinth which gave a terrace all round it. A short flight of five steps led up to it from the drive to the great door which stood hospitably open to show a cluster of small children in the charge of a pleasant-looking girl of twenty-two or-three, all waving excitedly.

'Here we are—and here's all my family but Baby Vi!' the hostess exclaimed, leaning over to open the door on Nan's side. 'Out you get!' And she set the example by springing to the ground and running round the car to throw an arm round Nan and march her up to the house.

'Here she is!' she cried joyfully. 'Have the kids been good, Miss la Touche?'

'Very—for them,' Miss la Touche said cautiously.

'Good! Well, now I expect you want to be off home. It was jolly decent of you to stay till I came back. I only hope your mother isn't thinking that the *Gens du vendredi* have caught you!'

Miss la Touche laughed. 'It isn't Friday, so she won't worry about that. And even if it had been, it's much too early for the likes of them. Thanks, Mrs Lucy. I'll be off if you're sure you can spare me now. I'll see Nan tomorrow and then we can get to know each other comfortably.' She flashed a smile at the girl, who responded shyly. Nan still looked so childish that the governess saw no reason for addressing her formally, and formal introductions were not much in Janie Lucy's line.

Janie herself nodded gaily to the elder girl. 'O.K. Off you go! We'll be seeing you tomorrow.' Then, as Miss la Touche pulled on her raincoat and tucked her short dark curls under its hood and set off with a farewell wave of

her hand, the mistress of the house turned to her visitor. 'We'll go in now and then you shall meet my family.'

She pulled Nan into the big square hall and shut the door. Then she tossed down her own coat and cap and turned to the eagerly-waiting children. 'Come along, family! Nan, this is our eldest, Juliet—Julie for short'—she pronounced it with the soft French 'J'—'We named her for her Daddy.'

A handsome dark child of six came forward, holding up her face for a kiss. 'I'm so glad you've come,' she said. 'We hope you'll stay ages an' ages. We love having visitors!'

'Do you really?' Nan asked. 'How nice of you!'

But Janie was pulling forward a small, fair-curved boy of five and introducing him as John. 'Our only boy, so far,' she added. 'And this is Betsy, who is two.'

Nan kissed them, thinking to herself what *good* children they seemed to be, for they stood still till called and didn't try to interrupt. Julie and John were a lovely pair, she so dark; he so fair, despite having inherited his mother's brown eyes. Betsy the two-year-old was a funny little thing, the picture of her mother with the same smooth brown hair and bright eyes and quaintly puckish features.

'And the baby?' the guest asked when she had finished kissing the small fry and replying to their greetings.

'Up in the nursery,' Janie replied. 'And it's time these folk were there, too. Half-past six is bedtime for small people, isn't it, Julie?' She touched the round olive-tinted face with a gentle hand. 'Say good-night to Nan, my lambs, and then run off to Nanny like good children. You'll have plenty of time to talk tomorrow.'

They did as they were told and trooped off obediently.

'What *good* children!' Nan said, looking after them wonderingly. Rosamund had her own pair in excellent order, but they were none too ready to go when bedtime came and both found plenty of good excuses for not going.

Janie laughed. 'Oh, they're *obedient*. I'll give you that much. Their father insists that a word must suffice. But *good*? I shouldn't like to say. You'll soon find out for yourself. Now come along and take your things off and be introduced to your own room. This way!'

She led the way up a flight of old shallow stairs where the passing feet of many generations had worn faint dips in the treads, to a gallery running all round the hall. At the back, a passage led off it at either end and it was down the left branch that the children had disappeared. Mrs Lucy led her guest to the front of the house. She opened a door on the right and stood back, motioning Nan to enter.

The girl went in and looked round her with interest. Such a pretty room it was! Wallpaper, curtains, cretonnes on the chairs and small couch at the foot of the bed were besprinkled with roses. Muslin curtains with ruffles hung inside the cretonnes. A big log fire glowed and sparkled on the white-tiled hearth. The lamps had rose-flowered shades. Roses twined on the creamy ground of the carpet and over the big eiderdown. In short, as Nan later wrote to her cousin, it was a real rose-garden of a room. Her blue eyes lit up as she looked round and Janie knew at once that she liked it.

‘I’m so glad it appeals to you,’ she said eagerly. ‘See!’ she led the way to one of the deep, lattice windows. ‘It looks out on the garden though there’s not much view on a day like this. It’s been like November all day. And *stormy*! Do you see this door here? This opens into a little dressing-room between this one and ours. I’ve put in a table and two comfy chairs and a bookcase and it’s your own little sitting-room. You can sit here when you feel you can’t bear the sight of us a moment longer! I hope, though, that *that* won’t happen too often!’ She went in, followed by an eager Nan. ‘The door at this side opens into our room, so if ever you wake in the night and feel lonely or frightened, all you’ve got to do is to come to us and there you are! See!’

She opened the door and Nan went after her into a room a good deal larger than her own, but with the same old-fashioned furniture. There were sweet-peas where Nan had roses and two quaint half-tester beds soaring to the ceiling cast a shadow over one side. A door opened to the left of them.

‘Julian’s dressing-room,’ Janie explained. ‘That opens into the night nursery, but we won’t invade that at present. Nanny will be busy putting the sprats to bed and she doesn’t love intruders at bedtime. Nurse’s room is beyond. All these rooms open into each other.’

‘Isn’t that awkward sometimes?’ Nan asked thoughtfully.

‘Could be, I suppose. It isn’t so far, though. I only put people I really want into the rose room; and, of course, we must have the children close at hand.’

Nan went pink at the implied compliment. Janie saw it and changed the subject.

‘Chuck your hat and coat off,’ she said, leading the way back to Nan’s room. ‘The water’s boiling so you can get rid of the sea salt and then you’ll feel a lot fresher. After that, we’ll hop down and have some tea. Julian won’t be in till all hours so I said we’d have a decent tea and just supper tonight. Then I’m going to shoo you off to bed. You can meet the boss of the house in the morning. I’m going to make myself decent.’

She was as good as her word and vanished while Nan discarded hat and coat, fished her slippers out of the case someone had brought upstairs and revelled in the velvety-feeling water. By the time she had done that, Janie was back again and telling her to sit down to have her hair brushed.

‘Lucky you to have such a gorgeous wig!’ Mrs Lucy sighed enviously. ‘Mine’s practically always been short. I did try to grow it about two years ago, but it looked such a sight that Julian himself cut it off one night at bedtime. Of course, he only made worse of it and I had to go and have it properly cut next day. That was the end of me trying to grow my hair. My two sisters have tremendous manes, though.’

‘But why did you let Mr Lucy cut your hair if you wanted to grow it?’ Nan wanted to know.

‘*Let* him? I never did! He came up behind me with the scissors hidden and he’d chopped off all one side before I knew what he was doing! I raged about it, but that didn’t put the hair back again. Oh, how mad I was!’

Janie saw a faint smile curving her guest’s lips and she went on: ‘And, if you’ll believe me, my sisters had the nerve to applaud him when they saw me with a neatly-cropped head again, though only two months before they had been wailing because I was the only one of us three to be bobbed! For two pins I’d have slain the lot of them!’ She spoke viciously. Then she drew the comb through the well-brushed hair before her and nodded. ‘Nice and smooth. Got a ribbon or something to tie it up?’

Nan shook her head. ‘No; I always just let it hang loose.’

Janie opened her eyes, but said no more. Instead, she put the comb back on the dressing-table and suggested that it was time for tea. She drew Nan from the room and they went downstairs to a pretty drawing-room where an inviting tea table stood beside another bright fire. Janie gave one look at the greyness outside and then firmly switched on the lights and drew the curtains.

‘Let’s be cheery, whatever else we are!’ she remarked as she installed Nan in one arm-chair and took possession of another herself.

Nan gave her the rather sad smile that was usually the gayest she showed at that time. ‘This is a cheery room, Mrs Lucy, anyhow.’

Janie put down the teapot she had just lifted and faced her solemnly.

‘There’s one thing I’d like to say,’ she began while Nan stared at her with wide eyes. ‘Since you’ll be here for a while and there isn’t all that much difference in our ages after all, what about dropping “Mrs Lucy” and making “Janie” of it at once? I’m certain Rosamund has always spoken of me as “Janie”—unless she made it “J.”’ she added thoughtfully.

Nan went pink. ‘I’d like to if it isn’t cheek. But we’ve only just got to know each other and I couldn’t come bursting on you with “Janie” just like that—now could I?’

‘I suppose not.’ Janie heaved up the teapot again. ‘Well, that being settled, what about a spot of tea? How d’you like it?’

Warm and comfortable by the dancing fire, with a cup of creamy tea on the table at her elbow and a toasted bun dripping with butter on her plate, Nan snuggled down in her chair. Despite herself she was feeling more cheered than she had ever done since the day of the disaster. Janie’s gay chatter took her out of herself—a process begun by Bad Bill on the boat—and she somehow felt more at home here than she had ever done at Whitelade, sweet and kind though her cousin had been to her. She answered her hostess at first with shy monosyllables and brief sentences. Then she found herself talking more freely and even laughing once or twice.

Halfway through the meal there came the scuttering of small feet in the hall outside. The door opened and a sturdy little figure in pyjamas appeared.

‘John Lucy!’ His mother exclaimed reproachfully. ‘What are you doing here? And where, may I ask, is your dressing-gown?’

‘F’got it,’ John replied calmly. ‘You was so long comin’, I comed to see if you’d f’gotten us.’

‘Rubbish! That’s only an excuse and you know it. I haven’t forgotten and I’m coming up as soon as I’ve had tea. Now run along back. And remember! You are not to do this again. Do you understand?’

‘*Bovver!*’ said John fervently. ‘*Anuvver* forbid!’

But he turned and left the room without further ado, much to the amazement of Nan, who knew that Toby and her other young cousins would not have been so amenable.

Janie caught the look and chuckled richly. ‘Poor lamb! Their father has insisted from the very first that once a thing is forbidden it’s forbidden. He allows no disobedience. The trouble is they think of so many things no one would ever dream of forbidding until they’ve done them. Now you see why I laughed when you said you thought them so good. They’re not—far from it! They’re young demons, the whole pack!’

Nan joined in her laughter. ‘What *sort* of things do they do?’

‘We-ell,’ Janie said consideringly, ‘there was the time when Julie and John—have another bun, Nan, while they’re hot—when they woke up in the middle of the night and thought they would like something to eat. They got up and promenaded downstairs to the larder—and how they managed it without Nanny or either of us hearing them is something no one’s ever explained!—and helped themselves to a weird mixture of jam-tarts, ham, green apples, jam sandwich cake and piccalilli and sardines. The only thing they could find to drink was an open tin of condensed milk, so they took that. They feasted on the stairs—where they upset the sardine tin incidentally, and the grease-mark hasn’t come out of the wood *yet!*—and next day were both so ill that I was frightened out of my wits. Peter, my sister Anne’s husband, was really afraid that Julie was in for appendicitis, she was in such agonies of pain. As soon as they were better, Julian cross-examined them till he got to the bottom of it. Midnight feasting is now strictly forbidden and I don’t think they’d want to try it on again, anyhow. Julie certainly won’t!’

‘I should think not!’ Nan exclaimed. ‘I wonder they didn’t die!’

‘Oh, they’re toughs all right,’ their mother said serenely. ‘It was a nasty shock for us, though.’ Then she broke into bubbling laughter. ‘The worst of it all is that, since then, Cook locks up everything before she goes to bed, and unless we remember to tell her when we’re likely to be out late we have to go to bed fasting, no matter how hungry we are.’

Nan looked at her hostess. Then she relaxed and went into such peals of laughter as she had not done for ages. There was something irresistibly comical in the way Janie told the story. As for Janie herself, she mentally patted herself on the back for having banished, if only for a minute or two, the sadness from her guest’s eyes. She finished her tea and then rose,

flicking crumbs in every direction, for tidiness was no virtue of Janie Lucy's.

'Coming with me to see the babies?' she inquired. 'Or would you rather have a book down here by the fire?'

'Oh, may I come with you?' Nan begged. 'I'm longing to see the baby.'

'Come along, then. Just ring the bell for Bonita to clear, will you? It's at your side of the fireplace. Thanks a lot. Now come on!'

Janie raced off up the stairs, Nan following, and led the way to the nursery where Julie and John were busy with milk and biscuits, while Nanny was brushing small Betsy's golden-brown locks.

'Well, people,' their mother said, sitting down in the rocking-chair drawn up before the fire. 'Are you ready for me?'

'Just!' Julie bolted her last fragment of biscuit and John tried to gulp down his milk in such a hurry that he spilt part of it over himself. Luckily, Nanny knew her charges and he had a big feeder on over his dressing-gown. She produced a towel to wipe him, removed the feeder and the pair raced for their mother, who had Betsy on her knee and was holding a serious conversation with that young person.

'Come along,' she said. 'Where's Vi, Nanny?'

'In her cot, ma'am,' Nanny replied. 'She'll be waking any minute now. Shall I bring her?'

Janie glanced at her watch. 'Another ten minutes. I'll hear prayers first. Take Miss Nan to the night nursery and let her have Baby if she's awake. Bring her in here in ten minutes' time, Nan. I'll be ready then.' She gathered her children round her while Nan followed Nanny to the night nursery where three little beds and a big cot stood against one wall. A Margaret Tarrant picture hung over each and in the middle of the wall, above the pictures, was a big Crucifix. The rest of the furniture was white-painted wood, with sprays of flowers here and there. The wide lattice windows were half-closed with gay curtains in white and blue hanging over them. Nanny drew the visitor to the cot and Nan stooped over it to look at the rosy occupant whose long black lashes made little fans on her cheeks. She stirred as Nanny gently removed a small thumb from her mouth and Nan found herself looking into a pair of the most wonderful violet-blue eyes she had ever seen.

Nanny smiled, well pleased at the girl's exclamation, and stooped and lifted the baby out. 'Will you take her, Miss Nan? She'll be good. She's too

small to be shy yet.'

For reply, Nan held out her arms and Nanny gently put the cherub into them. Vi stared up unblinkingly at the stranger, but she made no sound.

'Isn't she adorable!' Nan breathed as she sat down in the chair Nanny pulled up for her. 'How old is she, Nanny?'

'Just eighteen weeks,' Nanny said. 'Her birthday's April 7th. She'll be five months in another fortnight. Yes, she's a lovely baby and as good as gold—at present, anyhow!'

Nan laughed. 'She's a darling! And what glorious curls! I never saw hair such a dark golden before.'

'It'll turn like Betsy's later,' Nanny remarked as she straightened the bedclothes. 'More golden, maybe. I couldn't say.'

She finished a few odd jobs and then the sound of voices coming from the nursery, accompanied by a shriek from Janie, told them that prayers were over. Vi had heard it, too. She made a few soft sounds and then suddenly turned bright red, screwed up her face and yelled lustily.

'Hungry,' Nanny said knowingly. 'Will you take her to her mother, please, Miss, while I put the others to bed?'

Nan got up, carrying her burden very carefully, and went into the nursery, where she found Janie looking rather stunned, while John had a conscious air. Nanny followed and said, 'Bed!' in no uncertain tones.

The three meekly turned to her and she came and picked up Betsy, asking, 'You've finished with them, ma'am?'

'Ye-es,' Janie said thoughtfully as she took Baby Vi.

Nan glanced at her as the children ran past. The girl heard Julie giggle softly, but John scuttled off to his bed without a word.

'You might run along and begin unpacking, Nan,' Mrs Lucy remarked as she settled her youngest daughter comfortably. 'I'll be along presently.'

Greatly wondering, Nan said 'Good-night' to the night nursery and departed for her own room. Something had happened—so much was certain. The big question was—what?

Chapter V

JULIE CREATES A SENSATION

Nan began her unpacking. Someone had been into the room and made up the fire while she and Janie had had tea, and the room was warm and bright with the soft light from the big standard lamp at one side and the drop-light over the dressing-table. Halfway through the unpacking, there came the sound of light footsteps and then Janie appeared, giggling like a school girl.

‘What *do* you think?’ she demanded as she burst in on her guest without any ceremony. ‘Give you three guesses!’

Nan had been taking piles of dainty underclothing from her trunk and putting them away in the drawers of the graceful, narrow tallboy in one corner, thinking all the time of her mother who had chosen so many of them. The tears had not been far off as Janie was quick to notice, though she seemingly ignored the fact.

‘*What* do you think is the latest?’ she repeated with a guggle.

‘I don’t know,’ Nan said soberly.

Her hostess shot a quick look at her and then came forward and knelt down at the lower drawers. ‘You hand them to me and I’ll put them away. That’ll be quicker. Now then, Nan, pull up your socks and think! I said I’d give you three guesses. What do you imagine that awful son of mine has done now?’

Despite herself, Nan’s lips quivered at the amused horror in his mother’s voice. ‘I haven’t the foggiest. I don’t know what sort of things he’d be likely to think up.’

‘Have a guess,’ Janie urged. ‘Go on! Make *one* shot, anyhow!’

Nan hurriedly recalled some of the pranks played by her young cousins. ‘Has he mixed salt and sugar together?’

‘No—and for pity’s sake don’t even hint at it to him!’ Janie cried. ‘What on earth put such a ghastly notion into your head?’

‘My cousin Frank did it. Auntie Muriel had a dinner-party that night.’ Nan’s dimple suddenly deepened. ‘Uncle Fred was simply raging!’

‘So I should think! I should feel like slaying John if he ever did anything so awful!’

‘You could always forbid it beforehand, couldn’t you?’

‘I could—but you don’t know John! He’d promptly think of two *other* things to mix that I hadn’t forbidden and I can’t issue a general ukase against mixing. That *would* give him a good excuse for refusing to eat his bread and milk!’

Nan began to laugh. ‘And I thought your children so amazingly good at first sight. I certainly never knew such *obedient* children.’

Janie sat back on her heels. ‘Yes; I’ll bet it remains “at first sight”! Oh, they’re obedient and we certainly haven’t spoiled them. Julian has always insisted that they obey on the word and without any fuss. They’re absolutely truthful—almost too much so at times. I should hate them to tell lies, but there are times and seasons when the *plain* truth is best suppressed. My pack don’t seem to realise it, though. Tact simply isn’t in them—or not yet, anyhow. They’re kind to each other, and I’ve never known them to be mean or underhand; but there’s absolutely no getting level with their ideas!’

Nan sat down on the side of the bed, a pile of jumpers in her lap. ‘I don’t think Rosamund has any worry of that kind with Toby and Blossom. They’re obedient as a rule, though Toby sometimes takes obstinate fits. Blossom has a temper, too. But it’s all quite ordinary naughtiness. You don’t have to think ahead of them. But what *is* it that John’s done?’

‘I only wish I could “think ahead” of mine!’ Janie said ruefully. ‘John’s latest! He slipped out when Nanny’s back was turned and Jacqueline la Touche was busy with Julie’s music lesson. He went to the garage and found a pail of some colourwash that de Garis had just mixed and left for a moment. Then he marched down to the seawall end of the garden, climbed up and daubed the outside with original designs as far down as he could reach. They aren’t allowed outside the grounds without an older person with them, by the way. We came by the main road so of course we didn’t see it. I’ve been down to look, though, and there was a small crowd outside admiring his efforts.’

Nan stared. ‘What on earth *did* he draw?’ she asked.

‘*Skeletons!* My brother-in-law, Peter Chester, was showing Julie and his own girl Nancy an easy way of drawing them a week or two ago. John was watching, but I should have thought he was too little to take it in. But oh, no

fear! And there is our seaward wall simply *plastered* with 'em for all to see. Julian will be furious about it!

Nan rocked with laughter and Janie looked at her, well pleased.

'It's all very well to laugh, but that wall will have to be scraped before it's right again. He used some sort of stuff that doesn't wash off and, to make matters worse, it's quick-drying.'

'But how do you know anything about it?' Nan asked curiously.

'Oh, he told me just before he began to say his prayers. Quite calmly, of course. I wish you'd heard him! "Mummy, vere's a lot of skellingtons on ve seawall. I put vem vere." And then he started in on "Our Father".'

Once more Nan shouted with laughter. In fact, during the short time she had been at Les Arbres, she had laughed more than she had done in all the past eight months put together. 'Oh, *no!*'

'Unfortunately, it's "Oh, yes"!—hand me those jumpers and I'll put them away—You see, I've always trained them to tell me about their sins when I hear their prayers at bedtime. It's easier all round when I have them all to myself like that. It's always worked, but just lately John's taken to making his confession and then plunging straight into his prayers. I can't say anything then and he knows it. I've talked to him and he was quite sweet about it. Said he'd told me and God knew and he was sorry now so he couldn't do any more. The fact of the matter is,' Janie went on as she bestowed the jumpers in one of the top drawers, 'Vi should have been a boy. What John needs is a brother or two. He's the only boy among three girls so I suppose he's bound to be spoilt. I will say that Julie does her best to squash him, but there's hardly enough difference between them to make it easy—only fourteen months. If John had a brother it would be a lot easier.'

'What about his cousins?' Nan suggested as she lifted out her shoes.

'They're *too* much older. At least, Mike and Bill are and so is Paul Chester. The Chester twins are the same age. They're joining him for lessons with Miss la Touche when they come back from Devonshire, where all the family but Peter are for the present. I think it may be better then. But honestly, so far as I can see, John is well on the way to becoming Bad Bill The Second!'

Nan giggled. 'Oh, I hope not! I should have thought one of that kind was enough for any family! Where should I put my shoes, please?'

'In the closet. There's a shelf for them—I'll show you.'

The shoes were put away and the oddments taken out of the big trunk and then, while Nan and Janie tackled the suitcases, little Mrs Lucy regaled her guest with more tales of the wicked doings of John. That done and the room left tidy, the two went downstairs to supper, after which Janie insisted that her guest must go to bed after a hot bath.

‘You’ve had a hectic day and made an early start,’ she said sensibly. ‘You must be tired to death. You hurry up and hop into bed while I go and take a dekko at the kids. I’ll come back presently and if you’re still wakeful we can gossip awhile and you shall tell me all the Whitelade news. You’ll be resting, anyhow, even if you’re not asleep.’

However, when she ran back to the bedroom, it was to find Nan in bed and, as she had expected, half asleep already. The little hostess sat down on the side of the bed, chattering softly until she had the satisfaction of seeing the long black lashes drop. Then she switched off the lights and slipped out of the room, well pleased. A final visit near midnight showed her that Nan was sleeping as soundly as the small fry and she nodded to herself as she tucked in the bedclothes more cosily.

‘I’ll bet *that’s* something she hasn’t done for long enough,’ she thought.

The next morning Nan met her host, who proved to be a big, rather silent fellow, though as she was fated to find out he was an inveterate tease on occasion. The thing she first noticed about him, apart from his tremendous height—he stood six foot four—was that his eldest daughter was his image. Black curling hair, finely-cut features, smooth olive skin, blue-black eyes with long lashes—all came from her father. John, so Nan was informed, was the likeness of his Grandfather Lucy except for his brown eyes.

‘And Betsy, as you can see, is Mamma in miniature,’ Julian put in with a wicked glance at his wife, who happened to hate the term.

Janie gave him a grin and refused to rise, however. ‘Breakfast’s in. Stop talking rot and come along before everything’s stone-cold,’ was all she vouchsafed. ‘Thank goodness the weather seems to have cleared up a little. We’ll have a run into town presently, Nan, and show you the shops. Besides, you want a ticket at the Guille-Allées—’

‘At the *what?*’ Nan demanded, startled out of her manners.

‘That’s the public library. Quite a good effort, especially in books about the Islands. We’ll have coffee and cakes in the Arcade and buy a *gâche* for tea. We might even hop along to Elizabeth’s if there’s time and introduce

you to her and the twins—Nella and Vanna. They're just better from chickenpox, by the way.'

'Yes, Bill told me that on the boat,' Nan said, unfolding her table-napkin. 'At least he said that the chicks had gone home to roost.'

'Well, that's one way of putting it!' Janie passed the coffee cups along while Julian presented his guest with a plate loaded with bacon, egg and tomato.

Nan gasped, but she was still too shy of him to say anything, so she tackled it as best she could and contrived to clear it. Julian heard and looked at his wife with one eyelid lowered for a second. Then he leaned across the table to spear a hot roll with a fork.

'Julian Lucy! Where are your manners?' Janie demanded.

'Well, you two won't look after me and I'm certainly not going to get up and wander round the table for everything I want!' he retorted. 'Try one of these with some of that honey, Nan. You'd better! I know Janie! She'll walk you off your feet before lunch. You need a good brekker before you set out, believe me! Now carry on and tell us about the Willoughbys. How is my god-daughter progressing?'

'Are you Blossom's godfather? I'd no idea. She's lovely, of course. She couldn't help it with Rosamund's eyes and complexion and features. Her hair is a lovely golden—something like Baby Vi's but lighter, I think. She's a little monkey at times and her temper is the limit when it's roused. Toby, bless him, is as plain as they come, but he's a dear kid and so steady and reliable, considering that he's only six.'

'More than I can say for our son!' Julian turned to his wife. 'Seen the seawall, J.?'

'Bless me, yes! Besides, he told me about it himself when he said his prayers.'

'Quite so. He's going to hear from me presently.'

'He's said he's sorry, Julian,' Janie protested.

'He'll be just a little sorrier before I've finished with him. It's no use trying to beg him off, J. That boy's exploits are getting beyond a joke and it's time he was brought to his senses. I won't have him spoilt.'

Janie said no more. She knew what a certain look about her husband's beautiful mouth meant. Master John was for it and she had to own that he

deserved all he would get. Julian, however angry he might be, would never be cruel and John's punishment would not be too heavy for his years.

Julian changed the subject with a question about Whitelade and no more was said. After breakfast, however, the master of the house interviewed his son in the library and the spanking he got made him resolve to leave all colourwash alone for the future.

'And mind this,' Julian said, surveying the boy severely, 'you'll get exactly the same if you ever do such a thing again. Understand?'

Gulping down his sobs, John nodded. It was his first spanking and it had been a horrid shock that Daddy could hurt him so much *on purpose*! He was sent off to the schoolroom in a very subdued frame of mind and Julian, thankful to have got it over, went to offer to run his wife and Nan into Peterport if they liked to hurry up.

Nan enjoyed the walk about the town with its narrow, hilly streets. She got her ticket at the Guille-Allées and revelled in the sunshine and fresh sea-breeze. They called at the Ozannes, but no one was at home, so Janie introduced her visitor to Javotte, who had been her own nurse and now ruled over the nursery at the big house in Lemesurier Square. Then they caught the bus back to Les Arbres. It ran along the coast road, so Nan was able to see John's decorations, which de Garis the chauffeur had not yet been able to attend to and once more she burst out laughing.

Over lunch, Janie surveyed her with satisfaction. There was a faint tinge of pink in her cheeks and her eyes had lost their look of hidden tears.

'Rosamund was awfully sane to see that it was best for Nan to have a complete break,' thought the young hostess. 'By the end of a month I'll bet the kid looks a different being. I'm going to tackle her mental processes as soon as I dare. This is only surface, so far. She's jolly well staying here till it's got down to the roots!'

They spent the next two or three days in much the same way. John continued to behave himself properly and Julie was generally good enough when left to herself. Nan easily slipped into the place of adopted sister to the two grown-ups and aunt to the little ones.

The real excitement came on the following Tuesday when the Ozanne family came to tea. Nan lost her heart to Mrs Ozanne, a sweet, gracious woman whose hair of spun gold and deep brown eyes were reproduced in Nella, the elder of her twin girls. Vanna was dark, but that was the only difference between them. They were not quite seven, being five months

older than Julie, who flung herself on them with shrieks of joy. These three and Nancy, the second of the Chester girls, were great chums, and, thanks to the twins' chickenpox and the fact that Mrs Chester and all the children had been away since the beginning of July, Julie had had spasms of loneliness.

At six, Mr Ozanne came to collect his family and exclaimed to Janie at the improvement in Nan.

'She's got some colour now,' he said. 'Hope you're keeping her for a while, J. Get some flesh on her bones, while you're about it. She's a regular little scrag at present.'

'What do *you* think? I'm keeping her as long as I can!' Janie retorted.

It may have been the excitement of having her cousins again that upset Julie, usually the most responsible of the Les Arbres family. However that might be, when half-past six came, bringing with it bedtime, she was missing.

'Bad little wretch!' her mother said serenely when Nanny came to ask where the young lady was. 'She's not come in from the garden with the others, I suppose. Take them upstairs and begin operations, Nanny. Miss Nan will run out and bring her along.'

Nan was quite willing to oblige. She ran off and began to search through the flower-gardens, calling the truant as she went. No Julie came, though she called and called. By the time she had hunted through the last of them, Nan was beginning to feel worried. She went through the shrubbery to the kitchen-garden and conscientiously hunted behind every gooseberry and currant bush, as well as gazing up into the apple and pear trees. No Julie was forthcoming, so Nan went to the little plantation at the far side of the house and drew a blank there. The stables and garage were locked and the key in a safe place. De Garis trusted none of the children.

Wondering what on earth she could say to Janie, Nan went back to the house to find that lady on the point of coming to seek her.

'Well, have you sent the imp to the nursery?' she demanded. 'Bad little thing! She'll get the lecture of her life presently! I won't allow her to go off like that, and she knows it.'

'Please—I can't find her anywhere,' Nan gasped.

'Can't find her? Oh, nonsense! She *must* be somewhere about. She won't have left the grounds. I told you that's a forbidden thing and Julie never breaks a forbid. The monkey's playing you up! I'll go myself—and when I

find her, she can just come and say how sorry she is for giving you so much trouble. Mind you're stern with her, Nan. You scam and change. Dinner will be ready in half an hour.' And she raced off, calling, 'Julie—Julie!' at the full pitch of her sweet voice.

But still no Julie appeared; and when Julian arrived, hungry and ready for his meal, he was greeted by a half-frantic wife. It was more than an hour since they had first missed the child and no sign of her was to be found anywhere, though, by this time, everyone in the house but Nanny was hunting.

'Don't worry,' he said when he had heard what she had to tell him. 'Julie's the best of the bunch and she's never yet disobeyed a direct order. You two girls go and start your dinner and I'll soon bring the young lady along to explain herself.'

'Do you think I can go and sit down calmly and eat when I don't know where my little Julie is?' Janie demanded furiously. 'I'm coming with you—of course I am! Nan, you go and begin. There's no need for you to come as well. We'll soon have her now!'

Nan shook her head. 'If you'll go through the gardens again, I'll just trot down the avenue and see if she's behind any of the bushes there,' she said, catching up a light coat, for a thin mist was rising and her silk frock was chilly wear.

She was off before they could stop her and Julian at once led the way to the rose-garden, certain that the child must turn up before long, when he promised himself that he would give her a talking-to on hiding at bedtime that would do her for the rest of her life! But when he had drawn blank everywhere, both in the grounds and the house and no one else had had any better luck, he was as anxious as his wife, though he took good care to keep it from her.

'She's run amok and disobeyed orders for the first time in her life,' he said as calmly as he could. 'It'll be the last, too—I'll see to that!'

'Oh, stop talking that way!' Janie raged at him. 'Something's happened to her! I know Julie would never go off like this for nothing!—*What's that?*'

She sprang to her feet listening. They heard treble voices mingling with a man's deep tones. Then the big door opened and two extraordinary figures were ushered into the hall by a tall man with a twinkle in his eyes though his face was abnormally grave.

Janie stood as if petrified and Julian's jaw dropped as he glared at the two funny little objects that came to a standstill before them. As for Nan, she cast one look at the pair and then made for the nearest open door, where she collapsed on to the first chair and had her giggles out.

There was some reason for her. Julie was robed in an aged coat and skirt of her mother's. The skirt swept the ground and trailed behind her in a grand train. On her head she wore a hat which Janie recognised with a gasp as one of her trousseau hats. Bill wore a pair of his father's plus-fours, tied up above the knee with elastic—Paul Ozanne was a bare two inches shorter than Julian—and a badly-worn college blazer. A golf cap almost obscured his face and he was too much overwhelmed by the knowledge that Nemesis was at hand to remove it.

'I found them in Fountain Street,' the tall man said cheerfully as Nan fought with her giggles. 'They had a crowd of kids round them, all jeering at them—though I must say they were giving as good as they got! I had no idea, Janie, that any of our kids had such a gift for invective! I thought you'd be worrying, so, as I couldn't get anyone on the phone, I bundled them into the car and brought 'em along. Thought you'd better see Bill as well. In any case, I doubt if they've missed him yet at Lemesurier Square. I'll give Paul a ring now, Julian, and assure him that his son is safe and will shortly be handed over for execution. Janie, put that child to bed with some milk and biscuits and leave punishment till the morning. She's tired out and bitterly ashamed of herself, now she's come to her senses. You can deal with her quite as effectually tomorrow as tonight.'

'Peter!' Janie found her tongue. 'Did you say *Fountain* Street? How on earth did they get there?'

'Walked, so Bill says.'

'*Walked?* But it must be more than a mile from here!' Janie turned to her daughter: 'Now stop crying, for that won't do any good and tell me; did you really walk all the way—and dressed like that? You did?' as Julie nodded speechlessly. 'Well, all I can say is that people will begin to think I have a lunatic for a daughter!'

Julie howled at this. Stumbling over her long skirt, she floundered across the floor and flung her arms round Janie's waist. 'I—I didn't *mean* to be naughty, Mummy,' she sobbed. 'And I didn't disobey—truly I didn't. I didn't go out alone—*Bill* was with me!'

Janie stooped down, her hands on the small shoulders, and held the small girl from her so that she could look into her face. ‘Whatever has that to do with it? Bill’s only a kid and you’ve been *told* that you’re not to leave the garden unless it’s with someone older.’

Julie bawled loudly before she managed to get out, ‘But Bill *is*. He’s ever so much older! Ya-ah-ah!’

‘Oh, don’t scold the kid now, Janie. Take Peter’s advice and pack her off to bed!’ Julian interfered. ‘It’s all she’s fit for just now. As for you, Bill, my lad,’ he swung round on Bill, who looked thoroughly scared and shrank away, ‘your own father can deal with you this time. But let me tell you this. If ever you take any of my children away again like this, I’ll give you such a father and mother of a thrashing as you’ll remember for the rest of your days. Got that?’

With his uncle looking at him with blazing eyes, Bill mumbled something incoherent. For once in his life he felt really frightened. He had had no idea that Uncle Julian, usually the best of good pals, could look at him like that, nor speak in a tone that seemed to take the skin off you! But Julian had not finished with him yet.

‘Whose idea was it that you went off?’ he demanded.

Bill flinched. ‘It—it was mine,’ he said faintly. Then, evidently feeling that he might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb. ‘We—we were all dressed up and—and I dared Julie to walk along the road like that.’

‘And she took it.’ Janie had lifted Julie into her arms. ‘She always will take a dare, as you very well know. All right! I’m going to put her to bed now. I’ll see your mother tomorrow and tell her what I think of you and your conduct. . . . No; I don’t want to hear anything more from you. I’m sick of you! De Garis can take you home when your uncle’s finished with you. Now do you mind standing out of the way? I’m taking Julie up to bed.’

‘I’ve finished with him,’ Julian said, striding after her and taking the still-weeping Julie from her. ‘De Garis can take you home, Bill, and I hope your father gives you what you deserve. Peter, if you ring the bell Bonita will fetch de Garis and he can run this young devil home. . . . You stay for dinner, will you? Though,’ he added, ‘Heaven knows what it will be like by this time. It’s nearly nine o’clock.’

‘I’d better ring up Paul and let them know where their young hopeful is,’ his brother-in-law replied. ‘If it’s as late as that, Elizabeth will be worrying about him.’

He turned to the telephone as Janie and Julian went upstairs with their own prodigal, and Nan, who had come out of her shelter, looked across at Bill. He was standing in the middle of the hall, scraping the rug with the toe of his shoe and she saw that his lips were tightly compressed and guessed that it was all he could do not to cry like his small cousin. Dr Chester had evidently got Mr Ozanne, for he was telling the story in curt, vigorous sentences. Nan went over to Bill.

‘Bill, you’ve been an awful ass,’ she whispered urgently. ‘If you’ve any sense, you’ll tell your people that you’re frightfully sorry. You are, you know.’

Bill gulped. ‘Dad’ll be mad all right,’ he said briefly.

‘Well, what d’you expect? It was a mad thing to do. Janie’s been nearly crazy with worry—and so have I. But it won’t last for always and you’d better promise you won’t do such a thing again.’

The doctor turned from hanging up the receiver at that moment and grinned, though Nan could not see him as her back was turned.

‘O.K., Bill. They hadn’t missed you. Your father says you’re to go straight home with de Garis and he’ll see you when you get there.’

Bill looked sulky. ‘It was only a lark—’

‘There are larks *and* larks.’

‘Well, but, Uncle Peter—’

‘Don’t argue with *me*. You can keep that for your father. Now you can go to the kitchen and tell de Garis your uncle wants him to take you home. Later on, I expect he and your aunt will forgive you if you show yourself suitably penitent.’

Thoroughly snubbed, Bill trailed off to the kitchen regions and Janie and Julian, having left Julie to Nanny with strict injunctions that no more was to be said to her that night, came down and they went in to a badly-overdone dinner. When it was over, Janie disappeared upstairs to find her daughter clean and fast asleep. Her eyelashes were still wet, but her sobbing had ceased and she was sleeping quietly.

‘She’ll be all right, ma’am,’ Nanny said. ‘She’s had some hot milk and she was so tired, she went straight off as soon as I laid her down. You’ll see. She’ll be right enough in the morning.’

‘I expect so,’ Janie said.

Nanny said no more, though she secretly hoped that Miss Julie would get her deserts. She had been worried, too, and apart from that, she had no wish for Julie's brother and sister to hear of her escapade. John was a demon for mischief at any time.

Janie went down to the drawing-room, where Bonita had just brought the coffee to find that the doctor had gone home.

'How is she?' Nan asked eagerly.

'Sound asleep, poor mite! Julian,' as he came in from seeing the doctor off, 'I'll talk to her tomorrow and she must be punished, of course. But she wasn't deliberately disobedient, thank goodness. Oh, how tired I am! I feel as if I'd been put a dozen times through a wringer and come back from the wash completely unstarched! Nan, you must be done, too. We'll have our coffee and then go to bed.'

But later on when she and Julian were in their own room, she turned to him anxiously. 'Julian, do you think all this upset will have hurt Nan?'

'Not it! Do her all the good in the world! I've a great respect and affection for old Rosamund, but I can just guess how she's gone on with the kid—wrapped her up in cotton-wool, and that's the last thing she needs. What *she* wants is to be taken completely out of herself and Julie and Bill between them have certainly done that tonight. . . . Now you get off to bed. You look a complete wet at the moment!'

But Janie was too tired to rise. 'I feel it,' she sighed, taking off her necklet and dropping it on the mantelpiece. 'If we had many more experiences of this kind, you'd have to book me a place in the nearest luney-bin and order a few bales of straw to stick in my hair!'

Chapter VI

JANIE SHOVES HER OAR IN

There was peace for two or three days after that. The small fry behaved themselves as well as one might expect and Nan, growing steadily into the ways of the house, found that she had very little time to grieve over past events. She was to have less shortly, for one morning a letter arrived for Janie from her sister Anne Chester. It should have come the previous day and as it contained the news that the Chester family were returning home and might be expected by the afternoon boat, there was no peace for anyone, as Julian ruefully remarked. Janie was in a tearing hurry to be off to Pierres Gris, the Chester's house at the far end of the long St Sampson Road, and once she had read her epistle, she rushed them all through breakfast at express speed.

'Have mercy on our tummies, woman!' Julian protested after she had told him impatiently that if he wanted another cup of coffee he must hurry up. 'I refuse to upset my internal regions for anyone. Don't you give in to her, Nan. She's ruthless when she's in this mood!'

'There's most likely piles to do at Pierres Gris,' Janie protested. 'Dulcie means well, but she's only a kid really, and *Peter's* no good at seeing to things. So long as places aren't actually filthy, I don't believe he'd ever turn a hair.'

'That's a libel!' her husband retorted, taking his cup from her. 'The point is that he's rarely long enough at home for him to bother.'

Janie turned to her elder pair, who breakfasted with the family. 'There's Miss la Touche. Have you two finished? Then be off with you. Hi, John! What about Grace? Julie, fold your own napkin. No one else will do it for you.'

John folded his hands, shut his eyes, and chanted aloud some gibberish that Janie evidently understood, for she nodded to him and he fled, followed by Julie, who had to be called back to fold her table-napkin five days out of seven.

Nan knew now that Miss la Touche came from nine till half-past two every weekday except Saturdays. She taught Julie and John, the Ozanne twins and Nancy Chester in the mornings. Dinner for the children came at

twelve-thirty, and then they had a walk. If the weather was too bad to go out, one of the empty stables had been fitted up with climbing-ropes, a jumping-horse and parallel bars and here they drilled, did elementary apparatus exercises and generally shook the fidgets out of themselves. On one afternoon in the week Nanny had all of them for knitting, and on another she taught the little girls needlework. The twins and Julie had begun piano lessons this last year and had to practise twenty minutes each, which filled up the remainder of the afternoon very nicely. Nancy had begged for a fiddle and was to have one when she was seven. In the meantime, she had learnt her notes along with the rest; but she flatly refused to learn the piano.

On this morning, Nan helped herself to another roll and butter, remarking as she added honey, 'It's jolly for there to be so many of them— Well, why are you glaring at me like that?' she broke off to inquire of Janie.

'You surely can't want *another* roll?' her hostess protested.

'You sound as if I'd had about fifty already. This is only my second and I was awfully hungry this morning!' It was Nan's turn to protest.

'Well, I want to be off and you and Julian are taking such ages over your food.'

Julian followed Nan's example and helped himself to a roll, too. 'It's no use, J. We mean to have all the eats we want, so you pipe down.'

Janie cast him a furious look, but he kissed his hand to her and bit into his roll while Nan, with some idea of preventing any more trouble, said, 'It's awfully jolly that they can have a little school like this, isn't it? And didn't you say the Chester twins were coming when they got back?'

Seeing no help for it, Janie gave up and agreed with Nan. 'Yes, they are. It was hot so early this summer, that we had holidays in May and June and early July. Jacqueline and her mother had a month in Brittany and Elizabeth and I took our crowd to Birchington for six weeks. Anne had had an invitation from an old friend of ours who married a Cornishman, but it was for August. Mélie has one little girl who is Nancy's twin and they have a big farm, so though Anne was sorry that Nancy and the twins should lose their lessons she decided that it was better to go. I'm only sorry Jacqueline can't take Beth as well. But she doesn't pretend to be able to manage beyond first lessons and she couldn't cope with a girl of twelve. Therefore, Bethy goes to school in Peterport. I wish it was a nicer one, though.'

'It's Anne's own fault it isn't,' Julian remarked stormily. 'I've not the faintest use for pride in any shape or form!' With which cryptic remark he

rose and left the room, banging the door behind him.

Nan turned a wide-eyed look on Janie, who shook her head.

‘No, Nan; I’m telling you nothing—yet. Ring the bell for Bonita and then scoot and get your hat if you want it. Julian has the Rénault this morning as he has to go over to Petit Bôt, so we can use the Rover. You get cracking and don’t keep me waiting.’

Nan went to such good purpose that in a few minutes more they were driving down the road to Pierres Gris. She watched the flying landscape in silence. She was longing to know the meaning of Julian’s final speech and why he should have so suddenly flown into a rage, but she knew that Janie would explain only when it suited her.

They drew up before a tall, shabby gate in a high wall of grey stones and Janie broke her silence by saying, ‘Here we are! Hop out and open the gate, Nan; there’s a lamb.’

Nan jumped out and opened the gate into a lovely old garden now suffering from neglect. Some of the roses were going to briar; the lawns needed cutting and rolling; the wide borders were weedy and the plants should have been severely thinned. So much she saw and then the car passed through and she had to shut the gate and scramble in again.

The long straight drive led up to an old house built, like Les Arbres, of grey stone. There was no flight of steps up to a terrace, however. The big door in its deep porch was approached by a wide slab. The paintwork was shabby and though there was a charmingly homey air about the house, even an inexperienced girl like Nan could see that various repairs were badly needed. And it was the same indoors. The furniture was good, some of it even valuable; but it was worn and faded. The cretonnes in the pretty drawing-room were nearly white and had been carefully darned and patched in a good many places. The leather of the dining-room suite was badly rubbed, and wherever you went in the house it was the same story.

A big, stupid-looking girl with a wide smile came out of the kitchen to greet them. She told Mrs Lucy that she had put all the vases in the flower-room and Janie nodded, told Nan to bring the great armful of flowers from the back of the car and then led the way to a big, glassed-over porch at the back of the house. It had a sink and taps at one end where Nan was instructed to lay the flowers. Then Janie, addressing the damsel as ‘Dulcie,’ sent her off to the town with a long list of errands. She peeped into the surgery, where the doctor was glancing through his casebook before setting

off for his surgery in the town, and told him that she would take charge, so he need not worry. A few sentences passed and then Janie returned to Nan and the flowers and they set to work to fill vases, jars and bowls and set them everywhere.

At first they worked almost in silence. Then Janie suddenly spoke.

‘You see the house?’ she began abruptly, going on sticking roses into a huge old bowl of Spode ware.

Nan nodded. ‘Yes. What about it?’

‘I’m going to tell you a rather sad tale, Nan. It will explain a lot to you, though. It goes back six years or so ago when Anne and Peter returned to Guernsey after living a few years in Hampshire. Peter had been junior partner in a practice there. Six years later, he came here as dear old Dr Fuzzey’s partner, and *were* we all pleased!’

‘Thrilled, I should think,’ Nan agreed as she finished a big green jar and set it to one side.

‘You’ve said it! Thrilled we were. Anne and Peter were quite young, you know, but he’d done awfully well. Then his godfather died and left him everything and he had a jolly decent private income. He took part of the capital to buy this house and the extra furniture they needed and so on. The rest he left just as it was. Anne had always wanted to come back to Guernsey—it’s very special with us three, but I’ll tell you *that* yarn another time—and Peter wasn’t sorry, either. This was quite a good practice, though it had gone down a little the last year or two. Dr Fuzzey’s *aged*, you know! Peter went at it, and he’d soon pulled it back. He’s clever; and then he’s never let himself go rusty, not even after what happened two years ago.’

Janie set her bowl on a shelf and brought another while Nan, glancing up, remarked, ‘I like him awfully. I think he’s wizard!’

‘Oh, he is!’ his sister-in-law agreed. ‘We’re all frightfully fond of old Peter; and Anne, of course, was head over ears in love with him—still is, for that matter. Well, two years ago, they had five kids—Beth, Paul, Nancy, the twins—Robin and Dickon to you! They’d given them the best they could in every way. There was an excellent governess for Beth and Paul and a good nanny for Nancy and the twins. They had three well-trained maids and a man for the garden. I can tell you, he and de Garis ran it neck and neck which was the best—Les Arbres or Pierres Gris!’

‘It’s a lovely garden still,’ Nan said. ‘It only wants a spot of regular work to make it almost as pretty as yours.’

‘It wants what it won’t get—*can’t* get, unless miracles happen.’

‘But why?’ Nan asked quickly.

‘It’s this way. Peter’s money was invested and handled by a lawyer in the north of England where old Mr Wedderburn had lived. This man had always seen to the business and Peter saw no reason for taking matters out of his hands. The property was all in the north and Rennison lived there. He could attend to everything far better than Peter, whose home was in Hampshire and, later, here. Things were all right so far as anyone knew and the income came in quite regularly and no fuss.’

‘Then what happened?’ Nan demanded, for Janie had suddenly stopped short and was staring unseeingly out at the garden.

‘Two years ago some rents didn’t turn up when they were due. Peter waited a week or two and then when they still didn’t come, he wrote to Rennison. To his horror he got a letter back from a total stranger. The whole business had gone to smash. That man had cleared out with every penny he could lay his hands on and the police who were called in had put everything into the hands of—of the Official Receiver, I think it was, and found the whole show in such a muddle that they didn’t know which end to begin at!’

Nan exclaimed with horror. ‘Oh, Janie! How simply ghastly!’

‘Yes; wasn’t it? They caught Rennison in Paris and brought him back to stand his trial. He got twelve years for embezzlement—if that’s what it was. I’m never very sure. Anyhow, it didn’t really matter. What *did* was the fact that they couldn’t get hold of a penny of all the money he’d made off with. They couldn’t get a sniff of it, and so far he has refused to say where it is.’

‘But what had he been doing?’ Nan asked.

‘Speculating heavily. He’d gone through his own money and used his clients’ to bolster things up as long as he could. Everything’s gone, including every penny of Peter’s private fortune. The poor lad hasn’t a farthing beyond what he makes in the practice.’

‘Oh! It’s appalling!’ Nan cried. ‘Can’t they *possibly* force that man to say what he’s done with it?’

‘No. Unfortunately,’ Janie said viciously, ‘torture isn’t allowed in England! Peter wasn’t the only one—or the worst off, either. Some people were utterly ruined. One poor thing committed suicide because she was left penniless. Others had to turn to and get work though they’d retired and hoped to spend their last years resting. One poor old man had to go to the

Public Assistance Officer. It wasn't so bad for Peter, though it was bad enough. He's young and he has a good practice. But they'd had a lot of rather heavy expenses just then. Paul had to have an operation in the spring of that year. They wanted him to have the best, naturally, so they had taken him to London, where he was six weeks in the nursing home. Anne had gone with him and taken the twins and they'd put up at a decent hotel. No reason why they shouldn't as far as they knew then. They'd had a lot of the old roses cleared out and made a proper rose-garden. Anne had had a new fur coat, and on her birthday Peter had given her a little car of her own. It wasn't extravagant as they thought they were situated; but when it meant that there was nothing but the practice, well, you can see what happened.'

Nan saw. Her blue eyes darkened at the thought. 'Oh, I'd like to *kill* that solicitor man!' she cried. 'Those poor old folk!'

Janie nodded. 'I always feel murderous when I think of Rennison!' she said. 'And then, just when things were at their most awful, Babs arrived!'

'Babs?'

'Barbara—Anne's youngest. Anne was frightfully ill for weeks; no one knew if she would come through or not. She'd kept on being brave as long as she could and Babs was the last straw. And Babs herself, poor mite, was so frail that Peter baptised her on the spot. He didn't think she'd live an hour.'

'But she has done?'

'Oh yes—thanks to old Javotte. Javotte *made* her live. Dr Fuzzey used to swear it was witchcraft. She's a tiny, fragile thing, not in the least like any of the others—and I'm including the three families in that. All of them are sturdy ruffians, even Elizabeth's Vanna, who was always considered the delicate one of the crowd until Babs came along. By and by, Anne began to pull round and Babs gave her a fresh interest and she carried on with what Javotte began. I can't tell you how many times they've thought the poor kid was at her last gasp. Somehow, though, she's always come through.'

'Oh, poor little soul!' Nan said pityingly.

'Oh, I'm sorry for Babs all right. I know Peter thinks it unlikely that she'll ever be anything but feeble and sickly all her life. And I'm desperately sorry for him and Anne, for they're never free from anxiety about her as well as all the money worries.'

'It must be dreadful for them all,' Nan said fervidly.

‘It is. And the one it comes hardest on—to my mind—is Beth.’

‘Beth?’

‘Yes; their eldest girl. For the first ten years or so of her life, Beth had everything, just as our crowd and Elizabeth’s kids have. I don’t mean she was spoiled or anything like that. Anne has too much sense for that. But she had the same kind of life as our Julie and Betsy and Vi and Elizabeth’s Nella and Vanna. Why not? There was always plenty of money.’

‘And now, I suppose, they have to consider every penny.’

‘You’ve said it. They had to send Miss Taylor away, for one thing. If she’d been any use with K.G. folk, I’d have taken her on myself and Beth would have come to Les Arbres and just gone on with her; but she never taught first lessons. She came to Anne when Beth was eight. Then they had to dismiss Nanny and the other maids and Anne got a young girl of fifteen and did most of the housework with her help as well as having complete charge of Babs. Beth had to give a hand with the twins and Nancy and she’d never done such a thing before. Then that girl—Lily, her name was—turned out to be the most awful thief and Anne had to shunt her at a moment’s notice. It was months before they got another maid—they either refused to come or else wanted the earth in wages. They’ve had Dulcie rather more than a year now. You’ve seen her, so you can imagine what she’s like. She’s devoted to them and she never minds work, but she’s as dull as they come. I’d go crackers if I had to manage with just her!’

‘Oh no, you wouldn’t!’ Nan retorted. ‘You’d hustle round and try to get something into her. I know you now!’

Janie suddenly relaxed and grinned. ‘You’ve got something there—if Dulcie was capable of taking anything in. Julian says she’s splendidly allergic to brainwork of any kind. She can barely read or sign her own name and I doubt if she can do much more than add. Anne never dares to send her on an errand where she’ll have to bring home change. *Any* one could cheat her and she’d never know it.’

‘How awful! But Janie—may I say something?’

‘Carry on!’

‘Well, Bill told me that his cousin Paul goes to school with him and Mike.’

‘Yes; and that’s what Julian was getting at this morning. You see, Nan, we all wanted to rally round and help; but Anne and Peter are horribly,

loathsomely proud and they won't let us do what we want. She's the worst, and while she was laid up, Paul got Peter to agree to his educating Paul who is his own godson, and I said I meant to be responsible for Nancy who is *my* godchild. But we knew we'd have to go slow, so we let Beth wait a few weeks and by that time Anne was sitting up and taking notice; and when Elizabeth wanted to send Bethy to a really good convent school in Jersey, Anne got on her high horse and wouldn't hear of it. She set Peter off and they arranged for Beth to go to a private school in Peterport. It gives quite a decent education for very little, but the girls who go there are not the kind Anne wants for Beth's friends. Most of them are silly, giggling little idiots with only two ideas in their heads—boys and the Pictures! The few others are kids who want to pass exams and go to jobs away from Guernsey. Our homes are here and we adore the place. Anne doesn't want Beth to start turning up her nose at it. Then most of them come from little houses and Bethy lives in a big one and the little beasts call her sidey and rub it in. She really is miserable there, but Anne won't see it. The kid's getting a very fair education and she only goes for lessons. Peter takes her in the car and calls for her at the end of the day. She's not allowed to go to tea with any of them nor invite them. She did at first, but Anne got such shocks that she put a stop to it.'

Nan looked troubled. 'But—isn't that—isn't it—well—rather—'

'Snobby of Anne? It looks like it, I know; but it isn't. We want Beth to be a little girl while she *is* a little girl. Most of those little idiots at Miss le Poidevin's are trying to be grown-up and sophisticated.'

'Oh, I see. Yes; Mrs Chester couldn't have that.'

Janie nodded. 'I thought you'd get it. But what I want you to see most is that Beth feels that she's the one who is paying most heavily. She was old enough to feel the change when it came, but *not* old enough to know that it breaks her mother's heart when she has to keep on saying, 'No' when Beth asks for anything. She sees that Paul and Nancy are getting a decent education while, as she thinks, she is being fobbed off with any old thing. Out of school-hours she has to help with the kids and in the house, and until all this happened, her playtime *was* playtime. And then Anne is so absorbed in Babs and her ailments that she hasn't time to consider how Beth is being warped by all this—and she is, you know.'

'It's awfully rough luck for her,' Nan said soberly.

'I know it. Oh, my child, whatever else you do, avoid pride like the devil! It's the worst sin of all, believe me. Some day Anne and Peter are

going to wake up and then they'll agree with me. Only, by that time I'm afraid it'll be too late to do much good where Beth's concerned.'

'I think it's one of the most dreadful things I've ever heard of.'

Like a flash Janie was on her. 'You do? Then think of it when you begin to fret over your own trouble. I've said nothing about your loss, Nan, but though I'm desperately sorry for you, I'm ten times sorrier for Beth. You were always your mother's darling, but Bethy thinks that *her* mother hardly cares two hoots about *her*! Babs has taken her place. It isn't so, I know. If anything went badly wrong, Anne would soon show her the truth; but as long as she's well and sturdy and Babs is always ailing, Anne feels that her duty lies there. And we daren't say anything. All this—their losses, her illness and Babs' frailty—has changed her. She doesn't fly into rages, but she freezes up and it's like trying to get through a stone wall to try to get to the real Anne. Some day I shall bust through and say exactly what I think. Just at present, for Nancy's sake I've got to hold my tongue.' Thus Janie, not knowing how soon it would be before she would hurl hot words on the subject at her sister, regardless of Nancy or anything else but Beth's good.

At the moment, she glanced at Nan's face, realised that no more must be said for the present and suggested that they were short of greens. She handed Nan the secateurs and sent her out to the garden to bring some. Nan took them and dashed off into the sunshiny garden to try to recover the self-control that was wobbling perilously.

Chapter VII

THE APPLE-RIOT

Nan came back only when she had got complete control of herself, and that was not for some time. It was the first time that anyone had spoken so bluntly to her about her loss, and for the moment she felt that Janie had been cruel. Janie had guessed this might happen and had almost held her tongue in consequence. Then she told herself that gentleness was clearly of no use for Nan. It would take a shock to break up the wall of silent misery in which she had enclosed herself.

‘Some folk need a poultice and some a lancet,’ she had told herself as they drove to Pierres Gris. ‘It strikes me that what Nan needs is the lancet—if I can find enough nerve to use it.’

She made no remarks when Nan arrived with an armful of greenery and red eyes. She set to work on fresh bowls and vases and for the next ten minutes or so they worked in silence. Then, when the last jar had been filled, Janie stood back and regarded their handiwork admiringly.

‘Well, that’s the lot. Now we’ll sort them out. Take that bowl of dwarf sunflowers and put it on the dining-room table, will you? We’ll have these dahlias for the corners, I think. They’re a bit gaudy, I admit, but that room faces east and doesn’t get any sun after about eleven o’clock, so it can do with colour. Come on!’ And she picked up the two huge green jars and led the way to the dining-room, which was sunny enough at present.

Presently they were carrying the vases and bowls for the drawing-room and were trying the effect in various places. Suddenly Janie picked up a photograph of a wistfully lovely woman and handed it to Nan.

‘That’s Anne—Julian’s work. It’s a great hobby of his. And look here, Nan.’ With a hand on her guest’s arm, she wheeled her round to the french windows and pointed to a large painting hanging between them. ‘*This* was Anne five years ago before it all happened. An artist friend painted it and it’s her just as she was at that time.’

Nan was startled at the tremendous difference between the two. The painting showed a woman who was radiant with happiness. Her whole face laughed with it and her eyes glowed with joy of life. Involuntarily, the girl looked again at the photo she still held and she gave a little gasp.

‘Oh! That *brute!*’ she half whispered.

Janie nodded. ‘Yes; he’s to blame for—extinguishing *that*. I won’t say it’s dead, for we’re always hoping that something may happen to bring it back. But it’s taking its own time about coming.’

Nan nodded silently. She set the photo back on the cabinet from which Janie had taken it. ‘Is Beth like her mother?’ she asked.

‘In character—yes; in looks—a little. She has Anne’s eyes and complexion, but otherwise she’s a lot more like her father.’ Suddenly her tone changed. ‘Well, that’s all, I think. They won’t be here till six-ish, so we’ll go and do the shopping now and come back later. Elizabeth will be along, too, if Nella is well enough to be left after her green blackberry debauch! That child’s a born imp! However Elizabeth, who was always the *goodest* of us three, came to have such an outrageously wicked family passes my comprehension! Mike’s the only one of the lot to be relied on to behave like a responsible being. The other three are sinful beyond words.’

‘No worse than your own bright lot, Janie, my child,’ said the doctor’s voice; and Nan understood the sudden change of topic. ‘Julie and John are demons of the first water and Betsy won’t be far behind them, if at all.’

‘Oh, heavens, yes! I know it!’ Janie said calmly. ‘I never expected anything else. It would be next door to impossible for Julian and me to produce a collection of young saints.’

He chuckled. ‘Glad to hear you own it. You were always a handful in your young days; and Julian, for all his quietness, could beat the whole lot of you put together when he chose.’

Janie grinned at him puckishly. ‘I’m always telling him that still waters run deep where he’s concerned. Peter, Julian told me to tell you he’d meet the boat with the *Rénault* as you may be tied up with your surgery. Nan and I will come over early in the Rover to make sure everything’s ready and de Garis will take the old Vauxhall for the luggage.’

‘H’m! Well at any rate if de Garis gets off first I’ll have plenty of warning of their approach. Why on earth d’ye keep that tin-kettle of a relic, J.? It’s a disgrace to a decent family!’

‘It’s de Garis’s fancy,’ Janie said airily. ‘It’s my private belief that he tucks the old thing up in rugs every night and kisses it good-night! Some day I’m sending it to the nearest jumble sale. Then I shall fly up here for protection until his rage is over. I’m sure he’ll feel like battle, murder and sudden death when he finds it gone.’

‘Sister—you’ve said a mouthful! Well, I’m off on my round now. By the way, you may expect me for lunch about one. That all right?’

‘Perfectly. And Peter; for pity’s sake go and get your hair cut before Anne sees you. You look like a musician out of a job with those shaggy locks almost on to your collar!’

‘For unmitigated courtesy, never to speak of kindness, commend me to sisters-in-law!’ the doctor said resignedly. ‘Elizabeth held forth about the suit I was wearing yesterday and now you abuse my hair. Is there any other little item you’d like seen to before this evening? Don’t be shy. Just say it.’

Janie stood still and surveyed him from head to foot with mischief in her eyes. ‘No-o, I think not. You’ll be in Anne’s tender mercies after this. I don’t mind telling you I doubt if she’ll ever again agree to leaving you to Dulcie’s care. Has that girl done *any* mending for you?’

He glanced down at his jacket. ‘Oh, my pocket! I forgot I’d torn it the last time I wore this suit.’

‘*And* your socks! There’s a huge hole in the left heel. Peter, you *can’t* go round looking like that! Go and change quickly—do! I put three pairs Michelle mended this week in your sock drawer. Go and change them and bring those to me. Then Nan and I will depart. Nan, you go and get your hat. We’ve piles of shopping to do before lunch.’

Once they had reached the town, Janie proceeded to shop with vim.

‘I’m filling Anne’s store-cupboard,’ she explained. ‘In the excitement of coming home she may *not*—lots of emphasis on the “not”—notice what’s there. She hasn’t been away from home since Paul’s operation till this summer. Only Mélie Lihou—Mélie Tregaskis, now—wrote and asked her to go to them for a couple of months and take all the children. Mélie has only one and they live miles from anywhere. I couldn’t go as my lot were having chickenpox at the time, so we persuaded Anne to go, and from what she says it’s done them all good—even poor little Babs.’

Nan said nothing but she thought the more. How thoughtful Janie was! And yet she behaved like a schoolgirl more than half the time and it was hard to believe that she was married and the mother of four.

Meanwhile Janie herself was murmuring over her list. ‘Got the flour. Sent Dulcie to the farm for the butter. Two pounds of tea and three of coffee. Box of biscuits—I wonder if I dare try to get another or if Anne will twig and fly out at me?’ She gazed round the shop and her eyes fell on a box of magnificent apples. ‘Oh, *apples!* Come on, Nan! We’ll order a couple of

sacks of them. They'll soon get through them with all their crowd, ass!' as Nan exclaimed. 'Five or six pound of apples goes nowhere in a family of their size. And apples are so *safe*! If Peter can only hold his tongue Anne may quite well think that they are off their own trees.'

The apples were duly ordered and then Janie plunged into a china shop to try to purchase a new teapot since Dulcie had broken the spout of Anne's cherished little morning teapot only the day before. It ended in a full morning set, but, as Janie sagely remarked, the extra cups and saucers would always come in handy, so *that* was all right.

'And now,' she said, 'I think that's the lot. We've just time to fly round to Lemesurier Square to inquire about young Nella.'

They drove up the narrow hilly streets and into the quiet square where, at the big corner house, they interviewed Elizabeth Ozanne and her younger twin.

'How is it you weren't in it too, Vanna?' Janie demanded.

'Bed,' Vanna replied succinctly.

'What had *you* been doing?' her aunt queried.

'*Only* put mustard into Cook's custard pudding,' Vanna replied sweetly.

Janie doubled up with laughter and Nan followed suit, while Elizabeth said severely, '*Janie!* It wasn't a joke! The pudding was spoilt and all the eggs and milk and sugar wasted. I was very angry with her.'

'Don't tell me you never found out until it came to the table!'

In spite of herself, Elizabeth's mouth twitched suspiciously. 'Paul had the first mouthful. Vanna, run away to Javotte and stay with her until the gong sounds.' Vanna ran off and her mother turned on Janie, who was fighting with incipient hysteria. 'Janie Lucy! How can I keep order if you go and giggle like an infant over such a naughty thing? Vanna really was outrageous. And Paul is so fond of a baked custard!'

'I—only wish—I could have seen—his face!' Janie choked out between shrieks of laughter. 'I can—just imagine it!'

Elizabeth looked at her and then collapsed. 'Oh, how wildly startled he looked! That bad child had put in a heaped tablespoonful—and Cook never saw her! A more horrible compound you couldn't imagine!'

By this time they were all laughing helplessly. At last Janie sat up and mopped her streaming eyes.

‘Oh dear! I’m *aching*! Elizabeth, you must have done something ghastly in your extreme youth to be burdened with such a wicked family. I wonder —’

The chiming of the hall clock stayed her wonderings. She bounded to her feet with a shriek of dismay. ‘One o’clock! And Peter’s lunching with us at one! Nan, don’t sit there cackling like a hysterical hyena! Come along at once!’

‘Don’t worry,’ her sister said. ‘Grandfather is ten minutes fast. You can do it if you go at once.’

Janie paid no heed. Driving the still-giggling Nan before her, she fled and Elizabeth was left to straighten the chairs and cushions upset in the wild flight, while Janie, driving as fast as she could, raced Nan and herself home.

The afternoon was spent in a final ‘look-see.’ The groceries had all arrived and Janie herself saw to packing them away in dark corners of the big store-cupboards, Dulcie being warned to say nothing about them, but just use them quietly. Then the lady issued her final orders.

‘Now listen carefully, Dulcie. There are a few apples coming along some time this afternoon. Put them in the apple-loft for the present. You won’t have time to lay them out properly today, but you can see to it tomorrow. Just tell the man to put the sacks in a corner—and don’t talk!’ For Dulcie had begun to say something. ‘I’ve still got two or three things to see to before Mrs Chester comes. Lay tea for the little ones in the nursery. Miss Nan will help there and they’ll be tired and the sooner you put them to bed the better. I’ll ask Nanny to come and help. Mrs Chester will be tired, too, and I won’t have her worried with them—*Don’t* talk!—I’ve brought cakes and buns—you’ll find them in the larder. Mind you put the bowl of flowers back on the table when you’ve laid the cloth. Now I must go. I must see Nanny and ask her to come along by six. If you’ve anything to say to me, it’ll keep till I come back. Come on, Nan; we must fly!’ And off she went, leaving the flustered Dulcie with her mouth open and anxious speech nearly exploding from her. Later, Janie wished she hadn’t been in quite such a hurry!

They raced home, where Janie ran up to the nursery to consult Nanny about going to Pierres Gris for the Chester babies’ bedtime. Nanny was quite agreeable. Julie and John were going to Pierres Gris to help welcome their cousins, and Betsy and Vi could be put to bed a little earlier. Michelle or Lucie would stay in the nursery to look after them until Nanny came back.

Then Nan was ordered off to put on a warmer frock than the thin cotton, she was wearing and appeared in a frock of thin woollen material of a blue that exactly matched her eyes. The rush and flurry of the day had deepened the pink in her cheeks and her mouth had lost its droop. Janie looked at her approvingly. She was deeply anxious that Anne should take to her guest, and knowing her sister's love of beauty she was thankful that the first impression of Nan would be a good one.

After all, they were late. When they reached Pierres Gris, they found luggage piled up in the drive; the chatter of young voices coming from everywhere, so it seemed; from an upstairs window, the wailing of a tired baby.

'They're here!' Janie cried, leaping from the car. 'Never mind the doors, Nan. De Garis will shut them when he comes for the rest of the cases. Come along; this way!'

She raced down the wide hall to the drawing-room, leaving Nan to follow or not as she chose. That young lady reached the room just in time to see her hostess fling herself on a tall, slim woman crowned with a mass of black plaits who was standing by a window talking to Mrs Ozanne.

'Anne!' she cried. 'Oh, Anne, how gorgeous to have you again! We *have* missed you all so horribly! How's everyone after the holiday?'

Mrs Chester hugged her sister. 'Janie darling! How glad I am to see you again! Thank you for all your work here. *I* know who did the flowers and saw to everything—I've been hearing all about Nella's latest!'

'Don't give me all your thanks. Nan helped me—this is her!' with a sublime disregard for grammar. 'Nan, here's Anne!'

Nan came forward shyly and Anne Chester took her hand and bent to kiss her. 'I've heard so much about you, Nan, that you aren't a stranger. I'm so glad to see you in the flesh at last. Now we've come home, mind you run along here as often as you like. Come whenever Janie gets too overpowering. I know what she can be like!'

Janie made a face at her sister. 'Overpowering yourself!' she began; but just then the doctor arrived, a small boy hanging on to each hand and a bigger boy and girl behind him. Surgery was just over and this was his first sight of his wife for two months.

He dropped the boys' hands and made straight for her. 'Anne!'

Something in Mrs Chester's eyes as she lifted her face for his kiss made Nan suddenly blink. She had seen the same look in her mother's face many a time. But before she could do more than remember, the doctor was releasing his wife and now there was a queer expression in his eyes. He looked round the group, now reinforced by Julian and Paul Ozanne, who had been helping with the luggage.

'I suppose tea will be ready in a few minutes,' he said slowly. 'Before it is, though, I'd like you all to come with me to the apple-loft.'

The *apple-loft!* Janie started violently, and if anyone had been interested to notice, she wasn't the only one. Nobody said anything, however. They merely fell in behind the doctor and his astonished wife and meekly followed them out of the house, across the yard and up the steep ladder to the big, airy loft over the stables where shelves of wire netting had been put up for storing fruit and vegetables. Arrived there, the doctor grimly ushered them all well into the place and then stood waiting.

Anne Chester took one look and emitted a yelp of surprise. The children shrieked joyfully. The rest were dumb. From floor to ceiling, those shelves were laden with apples. Apples were heaped up in the centre of the floor and filled the spaces under the lowest shelves. Two sacks stood in a corner. There were apples wherever it was possible to squeeze an apple, and the scent of them was overpowering.

Having got everyone exactly where he wanted them, both literally and metaphorically, the doctor broke silence.

'When I was driving down High Street on Friday,' he began blandly, 'I noticed that Le Marchant had a fine stock of apples, so I thought I'd lay in a few. We are all fond of them and our own trees are a dead failure this year. I told him to send up half a hundredweight. They were cheap and even that doesn't go very far with a family like ours.' He paused as four people gasped, but not one said anything so he went on: 'When Dulcie asked me this morning just after surgery what she should do with the apples'—he looked round his audience with a sardonic sparkle in his eyes—'I told her to put them in the apple-loft and give Toni and Olivette Lemercier half a crown each to spread them out. I also uttered threats as to what would happen if they ate so many that I was called out in the middle of the night.'

Janie grinned faintly at this, but no one else did anything but gaze at the doctor with fascinated eyes.

‘I heard no more about it,’ he said, ‘until I arrived home for the four o’clock surgery, when Dulcie met me at the door looking frightened nearly out of her wits to say that the apple-loft was full and she didn’t know where to put the *other* apples Mrs Lucy had ordered. Neither, for the matter of that, did I when I saw this place.’

He stopped speaking and there was still a thick silence. When he spoke again, it was in quite a different tone. ‘What, under the sun, possessed you all? Do you think we intend to *live* on apples this winter? And didn’t any of you mention to any of the others that you were thinking of sending in *apples* as a Welcome-Home gift for Anne and the kids?’

Nan, standing well in the background, glanced round the company. Elizabeth Ozanne’s eyes and mouth were three round O’s; Anne Chester kept opening and shutting her mouth like a stranded codfish, as Janie did not hesitate to tell her later on; Paul was suddenly finding his collar too tight for him; and, for the first time in her acquaintance with him, Julian looked thoroughly taken aback. The children were joyously calculating that, with such a store as this, no one would ever refuse them an apple. As for Nan herself, she speedily passed from a state of shock to one of suffocated laughter.

Paul broke the silence after a loud gulp. Looking supremely foolish he said, ‘The fact of the matter is *I* saw those apples of Lemercier’s this morning. I thought a few would be a nice greeting to Anne so I told then to send up a couple of hundredweight at once. I hadn’t time to tell Elizabeth about it.’

‘I ordered mine last Saturday,’ Elizabeth confessed. ‘I was passing the Rosomons’ and I saw they had a fine crop so I called in and told them to send a hundredweight to us and another here some time today.’

‘Nan and I were in Guérin’s this morning,’ Janie said, basely dragging the innocent Nan into the family fuss, ‘so we had a couple of sacks sent up.’

It was left to Julian to crown the affair. ‘I had business with Tom Le Martin and he offered me apples—that was yesterday. I told him that we already had more than we could do with in the orchard, but if he wanted to get rid of them, he could send some to Pierres Gris. He rang me up and said they could spare five hundredweight, so I told him to go ahead.’

‘*What?*’ shrieked Anne at this juncture. ‘Are you telling me that we have,’ she counted rapidly on her fingers, ‘over twelve hundredweight *already?*’

‘That would seem to be the idea,’ her husband told her sweetly.

‘Mercy!’ Anne sat down limply on the edge of the nearest shelf.

‘What’s wrong?’ Janie demanded.

With an effort, Anne pulled herself together. ‘You—you’re all the most tremendous dears,’ she said rather faintly. ‘But oh, I don’t know *what* we can do about it! The Trevaskises had a bumper apple crop and Mélie insisted on giving me a couple of hundredweight to bring home. They were all properly wrapped and crated and it seemed such a chance to have plenty of fruit for the winter for once that I closed with her offer on the spot.’

Her voice died away and she stayed looking round at them all in a rather stricken silence. It was broken by a loud wail from Dulcie. They heard her clattering over the cobbles of the stableyard and then her voice came up the ladder, laden with despair.

‘Ma’am! Oh, ma’am! Here’s a cart with ever so many *more* apples and the man says they’re yours. There’s nowhere to put them and please, what am I to do about them?’

Chapter VIII

THE ELDEST DAUGHTER

The final disposal of those apples prevented Nan for ever from feeling either a stranger or a visitor at Pierres Gris. By the time they had had tea—punctuated by wild bursts of laughter when anyone thought of the unexpected form the welcome to Anne and her family had taken—and then set to work to pack away the last three or four hundredweights of apples, the girl felt herself one of the family. You can't go flying from pillar to post, struggling to pack away fruit in all sorts of odd holes and corners where it will keep safely and not scent the entire place, and remain on formal terms with the people you are helping.

Nan laughed and shrieked with the best, and at ten o'clock, when the last apple had been put away, sat down with the grown-ups to partake of a very scratch meal, tired out with hard work and merriment. She fell asleep in the car going home and Julian had to lift her out and carry her up to bed—Nanny had gone with Julie and John hours before—and Janie had to shake her soundly to rouse her sufficiently to undress and get into bed. She slept like a top all night and came downstairs next morning looking as Rosamund would have rejoiced to see her.

Janie clapped her hands when the girl came into the room, a pink flush in her cheeks, eyes shining after that long, quiet slumber and hair curling and glinting under its big bow as it had never yet done since she reached Guernsey.

'*Apples* seem to suit you, Nan,' Julian said as he set a plateful of bacon and tomatoes before her. 'I hope all that colour's natural,' he added teasingly. 'What do you say, J.? Should I take her out to the pump and put her head under it and find out?'

'Just you try!' Nan retorted. She pulled out her handkerchief, scrubbed her cheek with it and offered it for his inspection. 'There you are! Satisfied?'

He grinned as he subsided into his own chair. 'We'll forgo the pump. And you might remember the kids. You're setting them an awful example in irreverence for their elders and betters, Nan.'

'And who began it, I'd like to know?'

‘Pax—pax! Let’s change the subject. What do you folk propose to do today?’

‘Picnic!’ Janie said promptly as she glanced out of the window at the sunny garden. ‘It’s going to be a gorgeous day and Nan has really seen nothing of Guernsey yet. You can’t call round about here and Peterport seeing the place. How are the tides, Julian? Could we do Moulin Huet, do you think?’

Julian shook his head. ‘Much better not. I can’t be with you and I’d rather you didn’t go there with the children without me. Why not Pleinmont and show Nan La Rochelle? She’s heard plenty about it, but she’s never seen it yet.’

‘And we might get a boat at L’Erée and row out to Lihou Island and show her where we haunted,’ Janie added eagerly.

‘Well, not until after tea. I’ll join you for that and the tide’ll be just right for it then. O.K.?’

‘O.K., if that’s what you want. What were you saying, Nan?’

‘I was asking where you *what*? Whatever do you mean by saying where you haunted, Janie?’

‘Oh, you know—came over all ghostly. Haven’t I ever told you about that adventure? It was one of the jokes of the season, not to speak of adding a pleasing yarn to all the legends that hang around Pleinmont.’

‘I’ll tell her. You go on with your breakfast or you’ll never finish.’ Julian helped himself to toast and honey. ‘It was this way, Nan. You do know, I suppose, that the folk round here are as superstitious as they come?’

‘Oh, yes. Janie told me that and Rosamund said something about it, too.’

‘Right! Well, according to the old-timers, all the witches and wizards in Guernsey keep Witches’ Sabbath every Friday night on the shores of Rocquaine Bay, which is part of Pleinmont—or Pleinmont’s a part of it. At L’Erée there’s a tidal island. You reach it by a causeway over the rocks when the tide’s low. There’s a ruined chapel dedicated to the Blessed Virgin on it and that’s Lihou. By the way, never try to cross by the causeway at half-tide or you’ll be a wet, drowned corpse and no one will love you.’

Nan chuckled. ‘How nasty you sound! You must have a horrid mind!’

‘Oh, do get on or I’ll tell Nan myself,’ Janie said impatiently as she held out her hand for Nan’s cup. ‘Julie, pass Auntie Nan’s cup, please. Now go

on, you bore!’

He gave a deep chuckle. ‘O.K. Well, Nan,^[1] years ago when we were all young and sinful and far from being the sensible creatures we are today, some of us decided that it would be just the place for a haunt. Rosamund and Cesca wouldn’t have anything to do with it—too grown-up, even in those days! But J. and your cousin Con and Maidie Willoughby and Rex and my humble self all got out at midnight with sheets and torches and a supper—’

‘You’ve forgotten Pollie,’ Janie interrupted him. ‘She came, too.’

‘She gate-crashed the party, you mean. No one invited her. Well, we got a boat and rowed over to Lihou from Pleinmont. Then we draped our sheets round us, switched on our torches and wandered round and about the ruins. We sang the Lykewake Dirge, a ghastly funeral thing that the girls were addicted to at the time, at the tops of our voices—’

‘But how could anyone hear you? They’d probably all be asleep at that hour.’

‘Oh, we saw to that all right. We let out a few wild screeches to wake ’em up before we began. Anyhow, it was a still night and you know how sound carries over the water. The effect must have been uncanny to say the least of it.’

‘And the funniest part of the whole show,’ Janie put in with a wicked twinkle in her eye, ‘was Julian’s face when it was all over and we wanted to go home and found that the boat which *he* had tied up, oh, *so* carefully, had slipped her moorings and was drifting away well out of reach. We daren’t let any of the boys go in after her for the tide was falling and the pull is tremendous just there. We just had to sit down and wait till it was low enough to cross by the causeway and then walk two miles home.’

At that moment, Julian’s eye was caught by the gleam in his small son’s. ‘I forgot the kids were here,’ he said limply.

‘Oh, mercy! So did I!’ Janie regarded her offspring with a look of disgust.

Julian settled the matter promptly. ‘Julie and John, listen to me. I forbid you to play at spooks or anything of the kind until you are past sixteen. It’s a forbid. Mind that, you two.’

‘*Bovver!*’ said John fervently.

‘And here’s another,’ their mother added, determined to make the most of the opportunity. ‘Whatever pranks you may hear of us having played

when we were all too young to have much sense, you are *never* to copy. You've got quite enough original sin of your own without borrowing from us!'

'What's that, Mummy?' Julie asked, her small head on one side.

'What's what? Oh, original sin! Wickedness of your own, of course. If ever you try to do any of the things we used to do I'll stop telling you stories about when Daddy and I were young.'

'That would be simply horrid!' her daughter said with great decision. 'John, it's a forbid—mind that!'

John nodded solemnly, and Nanny appearing at that moment for them the pair were given leave to get down and went off, both telling their guardian about the projected picnic in an incoherent duet.

'Just as well you stopped it before it happened,' Nan said laughing. 'I saw haunts in John's eye before Julian spoke.'

'I could kick myself for being such an ass as to forget that they would be listening with all their ears,' Julian agreed.

'So could I!' Janie chimed in with a sigh. 'Oh dear! What have we done to be blessed with such imps?'

'I love the way they always talk of "a forbid,"' Nan said thoughtfully.

'Oh, Julie began that years ago. Mercifully, it's always been a recognised thing with them that a "forbid" must never be broken. Otherwise, I doubt if any of us would be here to tell the tale!'

Nan broke into laughter again. 'They certainly aren't hard up for ideas.'

'Oh—ideas! I could a tale unfold; but we'd be here all day if I did. You can find out for yourself, anyhow. There's one thing,' she added complacently. 'No one could say with any truth that they're a *dull* crowd!'

Nan opened her eyes widely. 'You never seem to have any peace where they are concerned. I should have thought you'd have been glad to have them—well—say a little less adventurous.'

'Phooey!' Janie retorted. 'They're truthful and obedient and they *are* kind. You can't expect everything in this world. I shouldn't much like having a heavenly family—I shouldn't know what to do with it.'

'How right you are!' Julian stood up, preparatory to taking his departure for the golf-links, where he had a match with his brother-in-law, Paul

Ozanne, and two other men. ‘And seeing that angel-children exist only in books and therefore you’ve got to have some weakness, I’d rather it was mischief than a good many other things I could mention, even if they *are* rapidly turning my hair grey.’

‘*You’re* not going grey!’ Nan jeered. ‘Don’t think it!’

‘Not yet, perhaps; but it’s coming.’ With which he departed, and Janie and Nan were left alone.

‘He’s quite right.’ Janie poured out a third cup of coffee for each of them and leaned back comfortably in her chair. ‘They do keep us on tiptoe most of the time—but it’s nice naughtiness.’

‘Here’s a young cart-horse gallumphing down the hall!’ exclaimed Nan as there came a clatter of feet on the parquet floor outside. However, it turned out to be only Beth Chester who came tumbling in, her curls flying, her face eager. ‘Auntie J.! Mother says what about a picnic to celebrate the apple-riot?’ She flung herself on her aunt as she spoke.

‘I’ve had breakfast, thank you,’ Janie said as she pushed the chestnut mop out of her mouth. ‘And I never have liked hair, whichever way you spell it. We’d just been deciding on a picnic at Pleinmont. Nan’s not seen it yet. Get yourself up, you lump, and I’ll go and ring your mother and Auntie Elizabeth and make arrangements. You stay and talk to Nan. Give her a roll and butter and some of my honey, Nan. I never knew Beth when she wasn’t hungry!’ But she gave the curls a caressing tug and there was sheer adoration in the beautiful violet eyes Beth turned on her.

She jumped up and left the room and Beth slipped into her uncle’s chair while Nan brought her a clean plate and knife and offered the basket of rolls.

‘They’re still warmish—scrummy!’ the young lady observed as she buttered her roll and spread the honey lavishly. ‘We never have them at home—too dear.’

Nan had nothing to say to that. She lifted the coffee-pot. ‘A cup of coffee?’ she suggested. ‘It’s still pretty hot.’

Beth shook her head. ‘Dad says we’re not to drink coffee until we’re fourteen. Isn’t there any milk left?’

Nan filled a cup for her and gave it to her. Beth was examining the pretty honey-pot which had come from Rosamund. ‘This is new. Auntie J. didn’t have it when we went away. It’s super!’

‘My cousin Rosamund sent it with me,’ Nan explained rather shyly. She had never been to school and she felt rather at a loss with a girl of Beth’s age.

‘Rosamund—Oh, you mean *Auntie* Rosamund. Is she really your cousin? She must be years older than you.’

‘About ten. Auntie Nita was the oldest of the family and my mother the youngest.’

‘Poor her! Your aunt, I mean.’

‘Why ever?’ Nan asked wonderingly.

‘Because if ever there’s anything horrid to do or someone has to go without, it always comes to the eldest girl. I know; I’m the eldest of our lot.’

‘That’s rot,’ Nan said firmly. ‘Rosamund’s the eldest of their crowd and she’s always had as much as the rest. Of course she helped with the others. Con told me that if they couldn’t have Auntie Nita they always wanted Rosamund; but you expect that.’

Beth glanced at her. ‘Thought Auntie Cesca was the oldest?’

‘Well, I suppose she is—but she’s not their real sister and she was always rather delicate when she was little.’

Beth took a second roll. ‘How on earth do you mean? Auntie Cesca’s not their sister? What *is* she, then?’

‘Step-aunt. Grandpapa married again when Auntie Nita was only thirteen and Cesca was the youngest of that family. Her own mother died and Grandpapa wasn’t any use with a baby, so Auntie Nita took her—adopted her properly, you know—and she was brought up with Rosamund and Con and the rest. They explained to her and the others when Cesca was fifteen, but it didn’t really make any difference. She’s only six months older than Rosamund.’

Beth frowned over her roll. ‘What a queer thing! Oh, well! But anyhow, that sort of thing doesn’t work in *our* family. If ever there’s anything beastly to do like looking after the kids, or clearing up their toys or things like that, it’s always me that has to do it.’

‘But don’t you *want* to help your mother?’ Nan demanded.

‘No; why on earth should I? ’Tisn’t as if I got anything by it.’

Nan was nonplussed and thankful that Janie came back just then and the conversation had to cease.

‘All right; you can scram, Bethy. You’ve got to help Mother to get ready. We’ll call for you with the cars in an hour’s time. Off you go! Nan, you cut off to the kitchen and ask Cook to hard-boil eggs and get going on the sandwiches. Why are you hanging about, Bethy? Mother’s waiting for you.’

The joy had faded out of Beth’s face. ‘I’ve always got to be helping,’ she grumbled. ‘Why should I have to go slogging away as I do?’

‘The eldest girl in a family generally does help, of course. Julie does lots of things for me already, and when she gets older I shall ask her to do more. Now, Bethy, there’s no time to stand about grousing. You run along.’

Beth went off, still frowning. Janie gave a little sigh and then turned and raced along to the kitchen, where Nan was buttering the slices of bread Cook was cutting and Lucie was just putting a big panful of eggs on the stove. Mrs Lucy came to take over the bread-cutting while Cook turned out boxes and tins and produced cakes and buns and tarts. Presently she came back to her mistress.

‘What about fruit, ’m? I’ve packed a nice basket of plums, but you know what the children are. Shall I put in a few apples?’

Janie, looking up, caught Nan’s eye as Cook spoke and the pair promptly collapsed into shrieks of mirth while Cook regarded them with amazement that changed into indignation.

‘There’s nothing funny about *apples* that I can see, madam,’ she said stiffly.

With a great effort, Janie choked down her laughter. When affairs went well in the kitchen, she was always ‘’m’ or ‘ma’am.’ ‘Madam’ indicated that Cook was offended.

‘It was,’ her voice quivered, but she overcame it, ‘a mad joke that happened at Mrs Chester’s last night. I’ll tell you, Cook. Nan, if you shriek like that, you’ll be sick. Run along upstairs and ask Nanny to get the children ready. They may take buckets and spades and shrimping-nets but nothing else, remember. They have a ball and one or two other toys out at La Rochelle and I *won’t* go looking like a moonlight flit!’

Nan, looking startled, went off on her errand, leaving her hostess to smooth down Cook’s ruffled feathers. That was easily done, even though a good deal of Janie’s story was incoherent with laughter. Cook was soon

laughing, too, and her big, jolly peals set her mistress off again. Nan finally came down to the kitchen to find the pair of them almost helpless. Janie was on the wide window-sill rocking back and forth and Cook was in her huge wicker-chair, purple in the face and gurgling alarmingly.

‘What on earth’s wrong?’ the startled girl demanded.

Cook lumbered to her feet. ‘Eh, Miss Nan!’ she choked out.

‘I know—the apple-riot!’ Nan cried. She began to laugh, too. Then she remembered. ‘Nanny and the children are all in the hall waiting and de Garis has the car round. Are you ready, Janie? I think John will drive that poor man off his head if he has to try to cope much longer.’

‘Mercy! I’d forgotten the picnic!’ Janie grabbed up the basket of plums and made for the door. ‘De Garis will be round presently to collect the rest of the food, Cook. We shan’t be back till the children’s bedtime, so if any of you like to take the afternoon off, that will be all right.’

Then she shot off to find that Nanny had succeeded in gathering the children in a group on the terrace while de Garis waited, looking grim.

‘Here we are, de Garis!’ his mistress cried. ‘Now let me see. Nanny, you take Baby and John and Betsy in the back, will you? Nan, you sit in front and squeeze Julie in between us. John, if you don’t sit still all the way, I’ll turn right round and bring you home again and put you to bed.’

John gave his mother a thoughtful look. What he saw in her eyes seemed to convince him that she meant what she said, so he snuggled into his corner, and Nanny, whose arms were occupied with Vi, heaved a sigh of relief. If John were good, Betsy was likely to be good, too. Julie, wedged in between her mother and ‘Auntie Nan,’ would have no chance to be anything else.

De Garis shut the doors and Janie started off, heading for Pierres Gris, where they were to pick up the Chesters.

‘How on earth are we going to crowd everyone in?’ Nan demanded.

‘De Garis is bringing the Rover. He’ll be along in a few minutes,’ Jane explained. ‘Anne will take over from him—he wants to put in a good morning on the orchard—and Nancy can come behind with the twins. Beth will stay with her mother and see to Babs in the car and Paul will be with them. We’ll manage all right. Here we are!’

She drew up before the gates of Pierres Gris, where the whole family, including the doctor, awaited them. De Garis swept along a minute later and

left the Rover for a word or two with his mistress, after which he departed. The doctor came up to the Renault.

‘Only you and Anne and Nanny to look after all these imps?’ he said with a twinkle. ‘You’re a brave woman, J.! I wouldn’t take it on for all the tea in China!’

‘Oh, Elizabeth’s joining us with her small fry and Javotte; and you’re forgetting Nan,’ Janie said easily. ‘She’ll give us a hand with the tinies.’

Anne Chester had been settling Babs on the back seat of the Rover. She looked up at the last words. ‘How are we managing, J.? Beth can sit at the back with Babs and I can take the twins in front—’

‘We’re letting down the seats and they can sit in the back of *our* car with Nanny,’ Janie replied. ‘Paul and Julian are coming out for tea, Peter. Can you do likewise?’

‘I’ll come if I can. More, as you very well know, I can’t promise. I’d a light surgery for once this morning, so it may mean that I shall be up to the eyes this evening. If I find I can’t get off, I’ll ring you at La Rochelle. Someone’s sure to be there around teatime.’

‘Come if you can, Peter,’ his wife pleaded. ‘Crowding’s all right now, and good fun; but you know what they’ll be like by that time.’

‘I’ll do my best. Now are you all settled? Mind your fingers, Nancy-Pretty. I’m going to shut the door. There! Off you all go!’

Anne blew him a kiss before she moved off. Janie was about to follow—had, indeed, just begun to move—when the doctor suddenly rushed after them, shouting anxiously, ‘Janie—Ja-nee!’

Janie pulled up and hung out of her window. ‘What is it?’

‘Did you remember to bring any *apples*?’

His sister-in-law threw him an indescribable look of fury, disgust and laughter, all combined. Then she pressed her foot on the accelerator and shot off down the road after the Rover without deigning to reply. He waved a derisive hand after them and then went back to prepare for his morning round, chuckling as he went.

[1] See *Seven Scamps*.

Chapter IX

HAPPENINGS

When it was all over, Janie Lucy vowed that never again would she agree to a picnic without a special guard of at least three—two to keep an eye on everyone and one to watch the tide!

It was still not eleven when they reached La Rochelle, where the cars were driven round to the back and everyone tumbled out. Elizabeth Ozanne and her quartette had not yet turned up, but might be expected at any minute. Janie and Anne wanted to get their encampment made before that happened or they might spend a good hour arguing with the boys about its site. Nanny took all the small fry over to the big cement ramp that runs down to the sandy shore, sat them down and pulled off sandals which she gave to Julie to carry back to the cottage which Janie had opened. She and Nan were carrying in the baskets of food and disposing them in the cool, stone-built larder, while Anne Chester lifted out the back carrying-basket that held her youngest child and bore it down to the beach.

Once the food had been safely bestowed, Janie called Nan to a shed and produced a light tent. 'We'll set this up, for there isn't an atom of shade on this shore,' she said. 'It doesn't do for Babs to be too much in the sun—it makes her cross. Give me a hand with this, Nan. Then I'll shut the door and we'll be all right. Come on!'

Between them, they lugged the tent down and Nanny came to help them to set it up. When it was in place, Janie called for Vi, who was having her morning nap, and she was stowed away.

'Now you go and paddle, Nanny,' the young lady said. 'Anne, you might take Nan up and show her over the house. I'll see to settling Babs.'

Anne nodded. 'All right. Come on, Nan, I'll show you every hole and corner in the place.'

'Don't forget to point out the kitchen table and tell her the yarn about you and the goat!' Janie called after them.^[1]

'What on earth does she mean?' Nan asked as she followed Mrs Chester to La Rochelle.

Anne began to laugh. 'It was a minor adventure of mine when we first came to Guernsey. I'll tell you. It was ghastly at the time, but I saw the funny side later on.'

She led the way into the kitchen and the tour began.

Meanwhile, Janie set to work to make a nest of rugs and cushions for Barbara and settled her in it while Nanny took the rest of the crowd to the water's edge to enjoy themselves. They made any amount of noise, for the entire crew were rosy, sturdy, high-spirited and riotous, though everyone of them was well under control and they all stood slightly in awe of Nanny.

Janie, glancing down at her youngest niece, thought that she looked like a changeling among the rest. Flaxen hair curled limply over her head. The little face, sharpened by ill-health, looked almost waxen beside the rose-and-tan of her sisters and cousins. Hollows lay at the blue-veined temples and in the little cheeks just now very faintly tinged with pink. Under the wide blue eyes were violet shadows. The tiny hands were like claws and the poor little arms and legs were mere sticks. Yet with it all, Barbara had a weird beauty of her own.

Old Dr Fuzzey declared that only a miracle had brought her through life so far. He had never expected her to survive her birth by more than an hour or so. But constant watchful care had kept her in the world so far and now the old man began to say that if they could keep her safe until she was seven, she might live to grow up. But it was anxious work and a never-ending strain.

'All the same,' Janie thought as she laid the child in her nest, 'Devonshire has done her good. She looks better than I ever saw her before.' She bent and kissed Babs. 'That comfy, darling? Shall Auntie lift your head a little more so that you can see? There! That's better, isn't it?'

'Auntie J.!'

Janie looked up to find Beth and Paul beside her. 'What is it, folks?'

'Can we two paddle farther out if we don't get wet? The tide's just on the turn, so we'll be safe enough for a while and we won't go far out.'

'Right you are! Don't take the tinies with you, though. Your mother and Nan will be here presently and then we'll go with you. No more than up to your knees, you two!'

'No, Auntie. We'll be careful. Come on, Paul!' She turned to go, but Barbara held out her arms with a whimpered 'Be'—Be'!'

Beth frowned. 'I can't play just now, Babs. I'm going to paddle. Auntie will stay with you. I *may* go, mayn't I?' This last to Janie.

'Yes; run along, both of you,' Janie said serenely. She had never approved of her sister's habit of making all the others give way to Barbara's slightest whim. In this case, she could do as she chose, Anne being otherwise occupied, and she waved the pair off. 'Off you go! I'll see to Babs.'

They raced away to splash knee-deep into the water while Nanny gathered all the younger ones round her to make 'a *huge* castle.' She had no wish to contend with people wanting to follow Beth and Paul.

Barbara twisted up her face and began a dreary little whine. 'Be'—'onts Be'—'onts her! Be' come ba'! Babs 'onts oo!'

Although nearly eighteen months old, she had never walked yet and her speech was slow and uncertain. All the same, she was talking more plainly than she had done before the Devonshire visit. Janie felt certain that she was better. All the more reason, then, to put a stop to the training that was slowly turning her into an utterly selfish little creature.

'Anne will swear!' Janie thought to herself. 'I don't care, though. Beth shall have her fun today, anyhow.' Then she spoke. 'No, Babs. Beth and Paul are off to play and you must be good and stay with me. Look at the pretty sea.'

But Barbara kept up her whine. She was sharp enough to know that this usually got her what she wanted. On this occasion, however, she had to deal with an aunt possessed of a strict sense of justice and not with an anxious and too-partial mother. All her whining brought her was a remark that Beth couldn't hear and wasn't coming in any case.

Barbara was puzzled. From sheer surprise she stopped her wailing, and Janie, curling up beside her, began to tell her stories to distract the poor little soul's mind from her sister. She succeeded so well that, by the time Anne and Nan, reinforced by the Ozanne family, had put in an appearance, the child had drowsed off and was sleeping peacefully.

'Where's Beth and Paul, Auntie J.?' was Bill's greeting to his aunt.

'Shut up shouting!' Janie said in a vigorous undertone. 'I've just got Babs off and if you wake her, heaven help you! Hello, Elizabeth! Shoo your rowdy family off, will you? Vi's having her morning nap in the tent as well and there'll be no fun if the pair of them rouse up.'

Mrs Ozanne nodded. ‘You boys go and play with Beth and Paul. Vanna and Nella, you run along to Nanny and mind you do as she tells you! Janie, Javotte’s just making coffee and she’ll take charge of the babies so we can go and see to our elder folk when we’ve had it.’

‘Then I’ll pop up and help to carry it down,’ Janie said, jumping up. ‘Coming, Nan?’

Nan nodded and went flying after her and presently they returned, carrying the steaming cups while old Javotte, still a good deal more active than many a younger woman, despite her ninety years, came after them with a plate of small cakes in one hand and a big bag of ginger nuts in the other. She sat down in a chair Janie had set up for her, and when the elders had had their coffee they went to join the children, carrying the ginger nuts with them.

Julie saw them, uttered a yell and dropped her spade to come racing up with a demand to be allowed to paddle properly.

‘So you may when you’ve had your nuts,’ her mother said. ‘Sit down now and eat them. Here’s Nan with the milk and your mugs.’ As Nan came down the sands a can of milk in one hand, a bouquet of plastic mugs in the other.

They sat down for their elevenses, but the moment they had finished, they were up and dancing about, demanding in a chorus to be allowed to paddle properly.

‘Right!’ Janie had taken complete charge. ‘Remember this, though. Anyone who gets wet will go straight to bed at La Rochelle. I could fit Beth out, but I’ve nothing for the rest of you. Julie, your paddlers are coming down. Come here and I’ll fix them. Anne, you take your twins, and you can hang on to yours, Elizabeth. Nan, take charge of Betsy, will you. Keep both eyes on her. Otherwise, you’ll find she’s waded in up to her neck. I’ll see to the rest. Coming, Nanny?’

With whoops of delight they all raced over the firm sands to where the tiny ripples were lapping up and up, a little higher each time. In a moment they were all splashing joyously. The four elder children were farther out, well above their knees in water. Nan, with Betsy, was just ankle-deep. For about twenty minutes the fun lasted, then Anne, feeling she had been a long time away from her little invalid, decided to go in. Elizabeth went with her and Nanny called all the little ones to come, too, and finish the castle. Nan gave up Betsy to Nanny and waded in to join the four farther out and have

some fun on her own account. Janie followed and they started a game of seeing who could walk farthest on tiptoe without dropping back on their heels. Janie, who was sea-wise, kept an eye on the tide. The water at Guernsey rises as much as forty feet at a time. At first, it scarcely seems to move. Then suddenly it deepens tremendously, and unless you are prepared you are swept off your feet. Long before anyone had had enough of the fun, they were sharply called back.

‘Come in, all of you! Quick, now, or you’ll get wet!’

The children had always had it well dinned into them that, paddling or bathing, they must obey on the word, so they splashed quickly in at once. Nan, not understanding, was slower and all at once found herself waist-deep in water. With a wild yell she leaped shorewards, caught her foot in some seaweed and went down on her face with a mighty *splash!*

Nan had yelled, but the positive howl that Janie let out at the sight would have turned a banshee green with envy. Forgetting that she was in rapidly-deepening water, she tried to rush to the rescue and splashed so vigorously that the breathless Nan, rising like Venus from the foam, was drenched over again. But Janie paid no heed. Already the water was deepening from second to second. Shrieking to the children to hurry in she grabbed Nan’s arm, and towing her along got her into shallow water when she herself slipped, and down she went, pulling Nan after her.

On the sand, Elizabeth and Anne, who had come tearing down at sound of the yells, caught hold of two half-drowned creatures and began hurrying them up the shore, across the ramp and into the garden of La Rochelle. At the door stood a tall, fair young man in grey slacks and a sweater. He turned and stared and a slow grin began to curl his lips.

‘Hello, Janie!’ he said. ‘Who’ve you been trying to drown *now?*’

‘Y-y-you wait t-t-till I g-g-get warm ag-g-gain!’ Janie retorted as well as she could for chattering teeth. ‘I’ll t-t-tell you what I th-think of y-y-you th-then, D-D-David W-W-Willoughb-by!’

Elizabeth had opened the door and pushed Nan in. ‘Straight to the kitchen!’ she said. ‘David, go to the shed at the side and bring sticks and coal and start a fire in the living-room. Hurry! Neither of them must take a chill if it can be prevented.’

David—whoever he might be—vanished on the word and Nan and Janie were taken to the kitchen, where they were stripped of their clothes and then rubbed down with two of Julian’s special towels until they were pink all

over and crying for mercy. Janie indignantly demanded if her sisters thought they were rubbing down horses, but Elizabeth merely remarked that they must be brought to a glow.

Finally, Anne vanished upstairs to seek the clothes Janie always kept there in case of emergency. Twenty minutes after they had reached the cottage, Nan and Janie were seated before the crackling fire in the living-room, dry and glowing and in old but tidy garments of Janie's.

Then, and then only, did Elizabeth condescend to recognise the presence of the visitor.

'Sorry to be so curt, David,' she said, 'but they were both soaking, and though the sun is bright, there's a nip in the wind. Sit down and I'll introduce you. Nan, this is David Willoughby, a younger brother of your cousin Con's husband. You've met him, haven't you?'

Nan nodded. 'Yes, they spent their honeymoon in Ireland and ended up by a week-end with us. I know Mrs Clitheroe, too,' she added. 'I've met her since I've stayed with my cousin Rosamund. How is she? Rosamund said she'd been rather ill.'

David Willoughby looked at her. The hard scrubbing had brought the pink to her cheeks and her glory of hair was hanging loose, drying still. Janie's skirt was a little long for her, which made her seem rather more grown-up than the flowing locks did. He was unable to make up his mind whether she was grown-up or not, so he decided to play safe.

'You're Miss Blakeney, I know,' he said in respectful tones. 'Didn't we meet years ago at old Rosamund's wedding? Yes; I thought so. Remember how Rex and Con marched out at the end when most of the guests had gone and announced their engagement?'

Nan laughed. 'And we danced "Haste to the Wedding" for them and Auntie Nita was so mad with Rex for putting ideas into Con's head.'

'That's five years ago. I was just a kid, then.' David heaved an elderly sigh. 'Heigh-ho! How time does pass!'^[2] He gave Nan a steady look from sleepy blue eyes.

Janie turned just in time to see it and she gave a gasp. What did David mean by looking at Nan like that? She was just a baby—well, not much more. And how old was *he*? Janie did a few sums in her mind. Twenty-two! She glanced sharply at Nan, but Nan had heard the clatter of cups and was saying joyfully, 'A hot drink! I could just do with one!'

Anne entered, bearing a tray with cups of steaming chocolate. ‘I know it’s rather near dinner-time,’ she said, ‘but I thought it might complete the cure. And I never knew David when he couldn’t do with a little something extra. Here you are. Help yourselves.’

They drank the chocolate and then while Elizabeth went to rinse out the sea-soaked clothes and hang them up to dry and Anne suddenly recalled Babs and departed to make sure that she was all right, Janie possessed herself of a towel and proceeded to finish the drying of Nan’s hair.

‘You’d better come upstairs and comb it out,’ she said, pausing in the chatter to feel it. ‘It’s as dry as makes no matter. Come along! Excuse us, David. Find yourself something to read or else go and join the party on the shore. We’ll be along presently. You might suggest that it would be a good idea if they began to see about dinner.’

David amiably departed shoreward and Janie and Nan ran upstairs, where Nan was able to reduce the gleaming, curling mass to something like order.

‘But what I’m to do with it, I don’t know,’ she said in dismay. ‘My ribbon’s gone. Lend me something, Janie. A bootlace’ll do if you’ve nothing else handy.’

‘A bootlace will *not* do!’ Janie cried. ‘I don’t believe I’ve a scrap of ribbon here, either. Half a sec. while I hunt! No; not a thing. But here are some clips and a packet of hairpins that Elizabeth must have left the last time they were here. Sit down and I’ll pin it up for you.’

Nan made a face. ‘I didn’t mean to put it up as early as all this,’ she protested.

‘Never mind. It’ll have to go up soon. Eighteen in November, aren’t you? Well, then. Pass me that comb and don’t argue.’

Nan meekly passed the comb and Janie proceeded to deal with the mop as pleased her own taste. She combed it smoothly back from Nan’s face, securing it with clips. Then she coiled it into a big bun on the nape of the girl’s neck. Finally, she felt in a drawer and produced a silk net in which she confined the bun to keep it safe.

‘There you are!’ she said. ‘That’ll be safe enough. It suits you, Nan.’

Nan took a hasty look at herself in the mirror. She had to own that Janie was right. The severity of the style was broken by the curling ends that

danced round her face, which had lost its usual shadowy look now that the heavy hair was lifted off it.

Janie, regarding her with pride, suddenly said, 'I rather think you're going to be pretty, Nan.'

Nan swung round on her. 'Pretty? *Me?*' she said incredulously.

'Why on earth not? You've lovely eyes and your hair is magnificent. Now that you're losing your puppy sallowness and your skin's clearing, you're getting a gorgeous colour. If you'd only laugh a little more, your mouth would improve. At present, it drops at the corners, rather like a bloodhound's,' she added.

Nan gasped. 'Of all the awful things to say!' Then she giggled. 'Janie, you're the outside edge! Bloodhound, indeed!'

'No need to make yourself look plain when you can manage otherwise,' quoth Janie. 'Well, that's done. You can let it loose again when we get back, but you certainly can't go round with it flying every which way all the afternoon. You *aren't* a little girl now, so why try to look like one?'

Nan gave her a quick look but said nothing and they went downstairs and out to the shore, where they were greeted with shouts from the rest of the party.

'Here you are at last,' Anne observed. 'Come along and sit down and we'll begin. Pass the sandwiches, Bill.'

After lunch, they went up to the cottage with the two babies. Nanny kept the youngsters down on the shore, though they had to abandon their castle, for the tide was rolling in rapidly now and the breeze which had sprung up while they were paddling was freshening a little and whipping the ripples into real waves.

David suggested that Nan should take a stroll with him to see Les Fontaines, the house the Willoughbys had rented all one summer some years before, and walked her off before anyone could object.

Elizabeth, ironing out the damp garments, looked out of the window after the pair. 'David's a fast worker,' she said.

Janie, changing Vi to her other arm, looked up. 'I hope that doesn't mean what it seems to,' she said. 'Nan's not eighteen until November.'

'I don't know about her. She's still just a little girl in a good many ways; but David always knew his own mind,' her sister said.

‘Well, I shall certainly put my foot down on any silly nonsense at present,’ Janie said calmly. Then she added, ‘Did you ever see such a change in anyone? Nan’s a different creature. When I think of the white-faced misery Paul handed over to me on the quay and look, at the girl who’s just been marched off, I’m dumb with amazement.’

‘She’s terribly thin, though,’ Elizabeth said as she hung up Nan’s frock and came to take Janie’s. ‘That skirt of yours had to be pinned over at the back, even though it *is* on elastic. Do try to get a little flesh on her bones while she’s with you, Janie. I was horrified to see what a little scrag she is!’

‘I got rather a shock myself,’ Janie said.

‘Are you really going to keep her for a year?’ Anne asked. Barbara was asleep on the big couch in the corner and her mother was lying back in an arm-chair gazing dreamily out of the window.

‘I expect so, though she hasn’t grasped it yet. Anyhow, I had a wire from Rosamund last night to say that Blossom had developed spots and they weren’t sure what it was, so Nan must stay where she is for the present. She’s been here just a fortnight, and she was to come for a month at least. I don’t wish anyone any harm, but I shan’t break my heart if those two prove to have caught something that keeps the kid away from Whitelade for another six or eight weeks. We’ll consider the rest when that’s ended.’ Janie got up to lay her baby down at the other end of the couch. Little Vi was already half asleep and as her mother put her down, the long lashes fell over the deep violet-blue eyes which were the joy of her mother. Janie fenced her in with cushions and then stood watching her. But Vi was full-fed and satisfied. She gave a funny little sigh, and fell asleep. Her mother tucked a baby-blanket over her.

Anne came and stood beside her. ‘Safely off!’ she breathed.

‘O.K.; but we’d better talk quietly for a few minutes,’ Janie said. She turned and looked round the room with a sigh of pleasure. ‘I love Les Arbres, but La Rochelle is very special to me. We began our Guernsey life here and I spent the first fifteen months of my married life here, too. I love it more than words can say and always shall.’

‘I daresay,’ Elizabeth said as she finished her task and began to clear the ironing-board and irons away. ‘All the same, you couldn’t have gone on here. Imagine trying to bring up four children in this space—and four such children as yours!’

‘What do you mean? They’re no worse than yours—not half so bad! I admit Julie and John do their best to turn our hair grey at least once a week, but what about Bad Bill and your own twins? You can’t talk, my dear!’

Elizabeth laughed, but Anne looked at her frail baby sadly. ‘I only wish Babs was able to try to turn *my* hair grey through her sins!’

‘She’s stronger this summer,’ Elizabeth said quickly. ‘Peter told me he was sure of it. And at this stage, every day is a gain. Try not to be so anxious, Anne. You’ve brought her through so far and if she goes on as she is doing, she ought to be very much better presently. You know what Dr Fuzzey said about that.’

Anne made no reply. Her eyes went from the fragile child she loved so deeply to Janie’s healthy youngster. Then she turned away.

Janie and Elizabeth looked at her, but they knew better than to say anything more and just then Nan and David came back with Nan flushed and giggling at his stories about that summer at Les Fontaines and they turned their attention to past history and left the question of Babs alone.

[1] See *The Maids of La Rochelle*.

[2] See *Janie of La Rochelle*.

Chapter X

NAN IS LEFT IN CHARGE

The rest of the month passed quietly. In the event, Blossom proved to have caught measles, so there could be no question of Nan's going back to Whitelade until all fear of infection was over. And then, just a week before she was free, Toby went down with it, and though neither was really ill the infection was just the same.

'Oh well, never mind,' Janie said cheerfully, 'In any case, I don't want to part with you, Nan, so it's all to the good. Now you can settle down for a while and that's all.'

A terrific clatter outside in the hall at that moment, accompanied by piercing shrieks, sent them both flying to find out what had happened. John and the rocking-horse were lying in a heap at the foot of the stairs and Julie at the top was howling even more loudly than he was.

Apart from a black eye, he proved to be little the worse for his tumble though one of the rockers of the horse was snapped in two and its nose badly crushed.

'What on earth were you doing?' his mother demanded when he had been doctored and his yells and those of his sister had been hushed.

'I was a soldier,' John quavered. 'I was chargin' ve enemy.'

Further questioning brought to light the fact that the imps had found out that by dint of rocking very hard, it was possible to get the horse to move forwards. John had been charging the enemy along the corridor while Nanny attended to Vi, who was cutting her first tooth and was very fretful with it. Some careless person had left the gate at the top of the stairs unlatched and down horse and rider had come.

'You look like a young prize-fighter,' Janie said unsympathetically as she regarded her son's face. 'Well, it's your own fault. I'm not going to forbid a silly thing like this. I should think your own common sense will tell you not to do it again. Another time you want to charge the enemy just look and see that the gate is latched before you begin. Now you can be off and I'd choose a quiet game for the present.'

A week later, the whole family went to tea at Pierres Gris—all, that is, but Nan, who had previously accepted an invitation to drive to Petit Bôt with Elizabeth and the twins. The children vanished to the nursery, since it had been raining all the day before and the garden was too wet for them to play in. Halfway through the afternoon, Anne took Janie upstairs to see some new curtain material she had bought. On the way down again, they went to pay a visit on the nursery crowd and found Julie and Nancy liberally covered with green and crimson spots.

They glibly explained that they had been playing at hospitals and the spots were the results of a terrible disease called ‘Nootles.’

‘And where they got *that* name from, goodness only knows!’ Anne said resignedly as she surveyed the pair. ‘Where did you get the paint from to do it, Nancy?’

‘Beth’s paint-box,’ Nancy said briefly.

Beth, who had just come in from school, uttered a howl of rage. ‘My paint-box? How *dared* you? Who said you could take it? I—’

‘Hush!’ her mother said repressively. ‘Nancy, you are *not* to take other people’s things without leave. You’ve been told that before. Go and wash, both of you, and then come down to the drawing-room.’

‘And you come, too, and bring your paint-box, Bethy,’ Janie added. ‘I want to see the damage. Where did you leave it, you two?’

‘In the bathroom,’ sobbed Nancy, who had dissolved into tears at her mother’s rebuke.

‘Go and get it, Beth, and bring it down,’ Anne said.

‘What’s the use?’ Beth muttered. ‘It’ll be ruined!’

‘Auntie and I want to see it. Go and do as you’re told,’ Anne said with a kind of weary patience in her voice that brought Janie’s eyes to her face.

She said nothing, however, until they were in the drawing-room, waiting for the three to arrive. Then she asked, ‘Anne, aren’t you well?’

‘Oh, don’t talk nonsense, Janie! I’m only a little tired. I was up most of the night with Babs. I think she’s cutting another tooth.’

Janie looked serious. So far, Babs had cut every tooth with bronchitis. ‘Then leave me to deal with this,’ she urged. ‘Yes, do, Anne. I’ll calm Bethy down. You must admit she has good cause to be furious. That paint-box has been the apple of her eye ever since Elizabeth and Paul gave it to her. If I’m

not missing my guess, those two beauties will have left it in a pretty mess. Well, no more pocket-money for Julie, at any rate, until it is put in proper order again. That's one thing certain!

'Oh, have it your own way.' Anne still spoke wearily. 'Nancy can lose her pocket-money, too. But Beth had no right to speak as she did.'

'I've told you what I think about that. I'd have been raging in her place.'

'That isn't any excuse for rudeness!' Anne spoke with sharpness.

'Anne, have you taken a dislike to Beth by any chance?'

Anne turned and looked at her. 'Have you gone mad by any chance?' she inquired icily. 'How dare you say such things to me?'

'Because it looks like it. Even when she's the injured party Beth can do nothing right in your eyes, it seems.'

Anne Chester's eyes blazed with sudden anger. 'You've no right to speak to me like that, Janie. Beth is being very difficult and tiresome and she needs to be checked sharply. I won't be spoken to as she spoke to me!'

'I've told you I don't blame her,' Janie said sturdily. Inwardly, she was quaking, for latterly Anne had shown a positive genius for taking people up the wrong way. Outwardly, she was quite calm and her sister stared at her.

'*You-don't-blame-her-for-being-so-rude?*'

'No; I do *not*. Anne, listen to me!' Janie spoke urgently. 'I know things seem desperately hard to you, but in her own way Beth feels them just as hard for her. Remember, she's old enough to remember when everything was quite different. You *won't* let us help with her education—'

'Oh, for pity's sake, Janie, don't start on that again!'

'I don't mean to, though I think you and Peter are making a big mistake and one you're going to rue bitterly later on when it's too late to do anything about it. However, I suppose you won't mind that!'

'I've given in to you about Paul and Nancy. Let that be enough! Do you think it's pleasant for me to know that my children are being educated through the charity of their uncles and aunts?'

Anne spoke bitterly and Janie suddenly threw prudence to the winds.

'Charity? Yes; that's how *you* choose to look at it! You can't give any of us credit for being fond enough of the children to want to help because we love them. I don't believe Peter would be half so idiotic if you didn't egg

him on. Things have been hard for you, I know; but a good many other people are even worse off. I hope to Heaven they don't wrap themselves round in silly pride and hurt—yes, *hurt*—their relatives by being “independent”! If we grudged doing anything, you'd have cause to complain; but seeing that we love you all and only want to show our love, I must say I think you might be nicer about it! As it is, you're deliberately sacrificing Beth to your wicked pride! You're warping her whole character and making her miserable! Then you think you're showing a proper independence! Defend me from such independence—that's all I've got to say!

Janie paused, out of breath with this tirade, and before her stunned sister could begin to answer, Beth appeared in tears over the maltreated paint-box. Nancy and Julie had done their very worst. All the greens and reds were messed up past redemption. To make matters worse, they had used hot water to get the paint to work more easily and the two precious sable brushes had been left in the water and were utterly ruined. The final touch had been added by the pair upsetting the hot water over the box and not pausing to mop it up.

‘Well,’ Janie said with a grimness that struck terror into the hearts of the culprits as they sidled, clean, if smarting, into the room, ‘I *had* intended giving you all a party next week. Nancy and Julie will not come to it. They can replace all the paints and brushes with their pocket-money so I'm afraid they'll be penniless for quite a time. Don't cry so, Bethy. It shall be put right; I promise you that. Suppose you go and see what you can do for it now and I'll write away tonight and order fresh paints and brushes and they'll be here by next week. As for you, Julie,’ she turned on her daughter with a severity that promptly reduced that young person to tears, ‘I'm ashamed of you. If ever I hear of you doing such a thing again, Daddy shall hear of it. Apologise to Beth at once for touching her box without permission and, remember, I forbid you ever to take anyone else's things again without permission. Now apologise.’

Julie sobbed out, ‘I'm sorry, Beth—I'm ever so sorry.’

Beth looked at her stonily. ‘All right,’ she said shortly.

‘And now Nancy.’ Anne suddenly entered the affair. ‘The same thing applies to you as to Julie. Tell Beth you're sorry and promise me you will leave her things alone in future.’

Nancy, who had never really stopped crying—Janie, in telling Nan of the affair wound up by saying, ‘In fact a *wet* time was had by all!’ sobbed out a

few words which her sister received as she had received Julie's. Then the pair were sent to the nursery and Anne turned to her eldest girl.

'I'm sorry this has happened, Beth. It won't happen again. I'm going to give you the little secretaire out of my bedroom and you can lock all your treasures in it. It was excessively naughty of those two and I don't blame you for being angry with them. They deserved Auntie's punishment and Nancy shall certainly have no more pocket-money until your box is paid for. Come and kiss me, girlie, and cheer up.'

Beth went obediently, but she turned her cheek for her mother's kiss, and Anne, roused to sudden clear-sightedness by her sister's words, noted fearfully that she made no effort to return it. She tilted up the sullen, tear-stained face and kissed the child's lips saying, 'I'm sorry it's happened, dear. You shall have the secretaire and the box shall be put right.'

Beth stood perfectly still. As Janie had told Nan, she was very like her mother in disposition and the happenings of the last two years had done her a good deal of harm. Sensitive, and imaginative, she had made up her mind that her parents cared less for her than for the others and it would take a good deal more than this one little scene to move her from this silly idea.

Anne guessed at something of what the child was thinking and kissed her again. 'Go and see what you can do with the box, Bethy,' she said gently. 'And don't fret about it. It shall be made like new—I promise you that.'

'So did Auntie,' Beth said slowly. She moved a little. 'May I go, please?'

Her mother let her go and she left the room at once. Anne turned stricken eyes on Janie, but Janie could not take back a word she had said.

'You've got to think of Beth as well as Babs,' was all she would say. She was desperately sorry for her sister, but to her way of thinking if only this afternoon's affair had roused Anne to Beth's danger, it was a good thing.

It probably would have done so; but that night Barbara went down with the worst attack of bronchitis she had yet had and Anne was absorbed in her for the next few days. They managed to pull the poor baby through, but it had taken all she had gained during the summer and they were back where they had been before and things returned to the old rut. Beth's paint-box was lavishly replenished by Janie, who also added a sketching block and other drawing materials. Anne had moved the secretaire into Beth's room

immediately tea was over so the child was able to lock up her possessions; but this was all.

‘And that means,’ Janie said, talking it over with Nan a few days later when Barbara was once more out of immediate danger, ‘that nothing’s changed.’

‘Well, no one can say that you haven’t done your best,’ Nan said. ‘I don’t know how you dared to barge in like that.’

Janie grinned. ‘I told you I meant to do something about it. I shall be at Anne again as soon as I dare. I *won’t* stand by and see Beth spoilt for life because I was a funk. However, it’s got to wait for the present. No one could be brutal to Anne just now. In the meantime, shall you mind awfully if I leave you alone for a few days to look after things?’

‘What things?’ Nan sat bolt upright at this.

‘Well, it’s this way. Julian has to go to Alderney on business and he wants me to go with him. Luckily we seem to be all set for a spell of fine weather or I’d refuse flatly. However, as it is, I’d love to go. It’s only for a long week-end. Only we can’t take you with us. We’re to stay with an old bachelor that Julian knows who would expire of sheer horror if I turned up with a young lady. He knows me and he’s resigned to me—he even suggested that I should go with Julian. I must take Vi, of course, but she’s too young to count. Why he asked me at all I can’t imagine,’ she added.

‘Because he wanted you, of course,’ Nan said, laughing. ‘I don’t mind being left in the least, but I don’t see how you mean me to be in charge. Michelle will run the housekeeping side and Nanny and Miss la Touche will be with the children. What’s left for me?’

‘Anything you find that needs doing and you know I’d do it. And there’s one thing I do definitely want to leave in your hands and that’s the children’s prayers. Nanny is very good in most ways, but she has some weird notions I wouldn’t like them to hear. Furthermore, I’ve discovered that when they confess to evil deeds at night, she punishes them. I’ve never done that—only talked to them very seriously. That’s the whole idea.’

‘But Julian spanked John for messing up the garden wall.’

‘Yes—but he found out about that himself. John knew that at the time.’

‘Oh, I see. I’ll do anything I can for you, of course. Only, will Nanny agree? I mean I always feel she thinks of me as—as—well not much more than a child myself.’

‘You’ll be eighteen in three weeks’ time. I propose you put up your hair at once. You’re not childish in your manner, you know, Nan. If Nanny sees you with a bun at the back instead of a cow’s tail, she’ll *have* to realise that you’re grown-up. What do you say?’

Nan thought it over. ‘O.K., if you think it’ll do the trick.’

‘That’s all right, then. I’ll come and show you how to do it before dinner. Oh, and Nan, you’ll go the rounds last thing at night just as I do, won’t you?’

‘Yes, so long as Nanny doesn’t get her back up.’

‘She won’t. I’ll see to that. She’s very good in many ways, you know. I can trust her where health and things like that are concerned and she does marvellous sewing. It’s just that I object to her religious ideas which, to be quite frank, are ghastly, and I won’t have them taught to my children.’

‘When are you going?’

‘Thursday to Tuesday I expect.’

So it was left. Janie had a talk with Nanny before she went and that individual agreed rather flatly to leave prayers and confessions to Miss Blakeney, who had appeared with her hair up two days before. The packing was done, and on the Thursday morning the travellers set off. Julian had presented Nan with a couple of new novels and a big box of sweets to keep her company, and Elizabeth had been enjoined to keep an eye on Les Arbres since Anne was too much engrossed in Barbara to be of use to anyone else.

For the first two days all went well. Janie had given Michelle a hint and that good old soul seemed to need quite a lot of help from ‘Mlle Nan.’ She was always coming with questions and suggestions and Nan made sundry decisions very gravely and thoroughly enjoyed being at the head of things.

Saturday, however, ushered in a big change. It began with the arrival of Nanny, while Nan was having breakfast with Julie and John, to say that she had just had a telegram from home to say that her father was very ill and asking for her. She must go at once.

Without any thought except for Nanny’s woes, Nan agreed promptly. ‘Of course you must go! I’ll look after the children.’ Then, as a sudden thought struck her, ‘But how will you manage? You’ve missed the morning boat and there won’t be another till—Oh my stars! It’ll mean waiting till Monday at this time of year!’

‘That’s all right, Miss Blakeney. De Garis’s brother-in-law is a fisherman and he’ll take me over in his boat, de Garis says. I’ll go and pack my case and then, Miss, if de Garis might run me into town?’

‘Of course he can! You get off as fast as you can and don’t worry.’

‘It’s Saturday, Miss. Miss la Touche won’t be here.’

‘That won’t matter. Julie and John will be good when you are in such trouble, Nanny. Won’t you, kids?’

Julie and John said they would—and meant it. Nanny went off to pack her case and by ten o’clock she had left the house. The day had begun by being grey but dry. Rain had begun to fall, however, and when Nan bethought herself that it was time to take the children for their morning walk, she found that it was coming down in a fine drizzle and walks were *off*.

‘Oh, goodness! How ghastly!’ Nan cried, looking out of the window at the drenched garden. ‘Well, it can’t be helped. Perhaps it’ll be fine tomorrow and they can be out most of the day. But I’m not going to risk their catching colds in this. Well, I’d better run up to the nursery and see what they’re doing. Michelle will want to get down to her own chores.’

She folded up the dusters with which she had been dusting the inner drawing-room and put them away. Then, after a glance round to make sure that all was as it ought to be, she left the room. She was met in the hall by Lucie, who was bringing the letters which had just arrived. Nan glanced through them, took her own and asked her to put the rest in Mr Lucy’s study. She ran upstairs and along to her bedroom, where she tossed the letters on the bed and then scurried to the nursery from which were issuing such howls as startled her.

She burst in to find John, clad lightly in his vest and a couple of aged ostrich feathers, brandishing a toy hatchet with which he was chasing a shrieking Julie round the table, while Betsy, attired mainly in an old shawl, sat on one of the window-sills, also screaming at the top of her voice.

‘What on earth d’you think you’re doing?’ Nan gasped—unavailingly, since no one could hear her through the noise they were making.

She slammed the door shut with a vigorous push and the bang it gave brought the young monkeys to a standstill and all noise stopped with almost uncanny suddenness. Betsy sat up with her mouth wide open and Julie and John, coming to their senses, gave one look round the havoc their mad chasing had wrought and then stared down at their feet. Mungo, the big

retriever who had sneaked upstairs when no one was looking, came over to Nan and beat her heavily with a flailing tail.

Nanny never allowed Mungo in the nursery since he was young and large and invariably broke something, so Nan dealt with him first. Opening the door, she shooed him downstairs and he went with his tail between his legs. He knew as well as anyone that this was forbidden ground to him.

Having settled the dog, Nan turned to the bad children. 'Where are your clothes?' she demanded.

John jerked his head towards the night-nursery door. 'In vere.'

'Then go and get dressed at once—all of you,' she ordered. 'Betsy, come along!' She picked up Betsy and bore her off to dress her again.

Julie was able to manage for herself so long as someone tied any strings. John was still sitting on the floor pulling on one sock when Nan looked round after sending Betsy back to the nursery.

'Hurry up, John,' she said.

'He can't,' Julie told her sweetly. 'He's too little to dress himself.'

John gave a howl of rage and went for his sister, but Nan was too quick for him. She made a dive and caught him, holding him firmly. 'You go and see what you can do with the nursery, Julie,' she said. 'Don't let me see it in its present mess when I come back. John! Stop wriggling! If you don't, you'll go back to bed for the rest of the morning.'

John looked at her out of the corner of his eyes and decided that it might be as well to tempt Providence no further. He stood still while she put him back into his clothes, washed his hands and face and brushed his hair until it shone. It took twenty minutes or so to do it all, for he had adorned himself with war-paint of pastels and it took some washing to clean it all off. When he was presentable again, Nan took his hand and led him back to the nursery, where the tables and chairs were more or less in order but the room still looked far from the orderly place Nanny always kept it.

'We'll finish putting this tidy,' Nan said, still in her severest tones. 'After that, we'll thread beads until your cocoa comes up.'

She made them all help—even Betsy. That young lady had to pick up the toys scattered about and put them on one of the window-seats. Then Julie was told off to put them away. When everything was done, Nan produced the three small tin trays kept for the purpose, emptied bags of beads on them and gave each child needle and cotton and they sat quietly stringing beads

into bracelets, rings and necklaces until Michelle arrived with the cocoa and biscuits at eleven o'clock. When they had been consumed, Betsy was laid down in her cot for a nap, and Nan, having seen that the beads and trays were put away, asked what John and Julie would like to do that was *quiet*.

'You tell's a story,' Julie suggested eagerly.

'Wants to go out,' John said, fixing his brown eyes on Nan.

But the rain had now changed to a steady downpour that looked like lasting all day and there would be no 'out' for them.

'Story, Auntie Nan—*please* tell us a story,' Julie said coaxingly.

'All right. Come along and sit down, John. It's raining far too hard to go out just now. We'll see what it's like after dinner.'

'Wants to go *out*.'

'You can't. You'd get wet and catch cold. Come and listen to my story.'

'*Wants* to go out.'

'I've told you you can't. Come, John; be good.'

John had not the faintest intention of being good. On the contrary, he had forgotten his promise and meant to be bad. And bad he was. He made a rush for the nursery door, which was slightly ajar, and Nan was just in time to stop him from going headlong down the stairs again. Michelle had not latched the gate properly.

Nan shut it firmly and then picked up John and carried him, kicking and fighting the whole way, back to the nursery, where she bumped him down on a chair and said, 'Now sit there and don't dare to move until I say you may. If you do,' she added, 'I'll tie you into it! You're a very naughty boy and if I have any more trouble with you, I'll put you to bed in a room by yourself for the rest of the day.'

This was a hated punishment, so John stopped squirming and burst into tears instead. 'Wants Mummy!' he bawled.

'If Mummy was here, she'd spank you,' Julie told him self-righteously.

John glared at his sister, but Nan had succeeded in impressing him so he stayed where he was, and Nan, after looking in on Betsy who was sound asleep, retired to a corner with Julie and told stories until the children's early dinner came up, together with old Michelle, who took in the state of affairs at a glance.

‘Jean has been bad,’ she said severely. ‘This afternoon, he will not have des bonbons.’ Fresh wails from John, who nevertheless stopped them when told to do so. Michelle had been his father’s nurse, and though the children adored her, they stood in considerable awe of her on occasion. ‘Go down now, Mlle Nan,’ Michelle said. ‘*Déjeuner* awaits you.’

Thankful for a little peace, Nan escaped, forgetting all about her letters till after lunch when she went upstairs to seek them and peeped in at the nursery on her way down again. All was peace and calm. Betsy was playing with her building-blocks and John and Julie had been ordered to bring their knitting and do six rows each before they played. Michelle had heard the story of the morning’s doings and had told them what she thought of the way they had broken their word to be good. She nodded at Nan, told her to go and rest for the afternoon as she herself meant to stay with the children, and then turned to pick up a stitch John had dropped.

Nan thankfully retreated to the little drawing-room where Lucie had lit the fire. She read her letters—from her cousin and David Willoughby, who wrote to inform her that he had been commissioned to the North Atlantic Fleet, but hoped to run over to say good-bye before he sailed.

‘How nice of him!’ Nan thought. ‘He does write jolly letters!’

Then she tucked it down the side of her chair, helped herself to a sweet from Julian’s box and settled down to enjoy the latest Bassetshire book. She was tired with her morning’s work, however, and the rain beat at the windows with a monotonous drumming that was soothing. Gradually, the print blurred. Nan’s black head slipped down against the cushions and she slept.

She was roused by a perfect cascade of Norman-French from Michelle, who had rushed in on her, chattering fast all the time. Nan sat up and rubbed her eyes.

‘What is it, Michelle?’ she asked dazedly.

Michelle only chattered harder and tried to drag her to her feet. Nan was fully roused by now and she jumped up. She couldn’t make head or tail of Michelle’s speech, but she guessed that something had gone wrong in the nursery. She burst into the room, Michelle bundling after her talking all the time, and demanded to know what was wrong.

It was now the middle of October, and on a dreary day like this, the nursery was shadowy by this time. There was enough light from the big fire to see, however, and she just bit back a scream as her eyes fell on Betsy.

The short brown hair was parted in the middle to fall sleekly down on either side of the little pointed face. But what a face it was! It was deep crimson, and as Nan with a horrified exclamation turned the child so that the grey light from the window fell full on her, she saw that Betty *glittered!*

For a second, the girl was speechless. What awful disease was this? And what, oh what would Janie and Julian say if they saw her? At the same time, Nan was conscious of a vaguely familiar odour.

‘Switch on the lights, Michelle,’ she said sharply. ‘Betsy, do you hurt anywhere, darling?’

‘No,’ said Betsy, raising wide brown eyes to her. ‘Face is stiff.’

Michelle had switched on the lights by this time and Nan looked closely again. Betsy really looked ghastly. Her whole face was crimson with the exception of her eyes and eyelids. Her neck was the same lurid hue, though her ears were their normal rosy-pink. Nan felt so frightened, that she decided to ring up the doctor at once.

‘You stay with them, Michelle,’ she said. ‘I’ll be back in a moment.’

She raced out of the nursery and nearly fell downstairs in her haste to reach the telephone. Before she got there, however, the doorbell rang and Lucie came to answer it. In her fright, Nan had forgotten the Pierres Gris number and she was hunting through the directory for it, when deep familiar tones brought her instant relief. Tossing the book aside, she rushed forward.

‘Oh, *Peter!*’ she gasped, forgetting all formalities in the stress of the moment. ‘Thank goodness you’ve come! Betsy has some horrible disease.’

‘Mumps!’ the doctor interrupted her laconically.

‘MUMPS!’

‘Mumps. I called in to warn you not to take the kids near the Ozannes as both the twins are down with it. However, I seem to be late for the fair. Don’t look so scared. I’ll come up and have a look-see at her—and the other two. They’ll probably all get it now, but it’s nothing to worry over.’

By this time they were in the nursery and Peter had taken Betsy from old Michelle. Julie and John, looking half-scared, half-delighted, were standing together in a corner. When they saw their uncle, their faces fell and they glanced at each other.

Peter plumped Betsy down on the table under the light and tilted her face up. ‘Let’s have a look at you, imp—*Great Kitty!*’ The last remark burst from

him as he saw the small face.

‘Oh, what *is* it?’ Nan implored.

‘Blest if I know—never saw anything like it before! Here—who’s been eating peardrops?’ He sniffed at his small niece. ‘O.K., Nan. I’ll put her right in a jiffy. Go and bring me all your manicuring things. Michelle, you’d better rout out some cold cream.’

Nan fled for the things. He looked them over when she brought them, selected the nail-varnish remover and with the aid of it and some cotton-wool quickly removed the nail-varnish with which Betsy’s bad sister and brother had adorned her. Mercifully, they had spread it thinly, so it came off fairly easily, and when it was done and old Michelle rubbing in cold cream in case her darling’s skin should have suffered, Peter called the culprits to him and speedily had the story out of them.

The varnish had been sent to their mother as a birthday present. As Janie never used coloured nail-varnish, she had put it into her ‘rubbish-box’ and forgotten it. While Nan was dealing with John that morning, Julie had gone to look in the box and found it. She had produced it when Michelle had dozed off and she and John had persuaded confiding little Betsy to let them paint her with it so that they could play hospitals. Mercifully, they had had the sense to let her eyes alone, but they had covered the rest of her face and neck and thereby given Nan and Michelle a severe shock.

When he had got all this, the doctor sat back and pronounced judgment.

‘Very well. You’ve been *in* mischief while you were up. We’ll send you to bed now for the rest of today and *all* tomorrow and see if you can keep *out* of it. And if either your Aunt Nan or Michelle have any complaints to make about your conduct before Tuesday, you won’t go down to the quay to meet Mummy and Daddy when they come back. Take them away, Michelle!’

Two howls of desperation rose at this.

‘Oh, Uncle Peter,’ Julie wailed, ‘don’t send us to bed for a whole day. Spank us instead—please do!’

‘Yes, please do, Uncoo Peter!’ John joined in with the roar of a miniature bull of Bashan.

‘No fear! I said bed and bed it is. Off you go!’

And off they went, having brimmed their cups with iniquity, while Peter took Nan downstairs and got the story of the day from her. He promised to

look in on the morrow since it was quite likely that the children would have mumps, as Vanna and Nella had been to lessons on Thursday, though as both had complained of feeling sick the day before, they had been kept at home.

‘And don’t worry, Nan,’ the doctor said as he prepared to go. ‘Even if they do have mumps, it’s not deadly and they’re all in the pink of condition. They won’t have it badly. See you tomorrow!’ and away he went.

Chapter XI

MUMPS!

‘May I speak to Mrs Lucy, please?’ Thus Nan at the telephone on Sunday evening.

There was a minute’s pause and then Janie’s voice came through. ‘Hello!’

‘Oh, Janie, is that you?’

‘Yes, it’s me. That you, Nan? What have those wretched imps been up to?’

‘Oh, Janie, you can’t come home on Tuesday!’

‘*What?* Have you gone mad? Not come *home*? D’you mean the house has been burned down?’

‘Well, at any rate you can’t bring Vi here. Of course the house hasn’t been burned down!’

‘Then why can’t I bring Vi? You must have taken leave of your senses, Nan! Julian! Come and listen to this! I think Nan’s gone bats. She says first that we can’t go home and then that we can’t take Vi, anyhow.’

Julian took the receiver from his wife. ‘What’s up?’ he asked resignedly.

With the voice of the Delphic Oracle, Nan sent the horrid news to Alderney. ‘Julie and John have both got mumps and probably Betsy has as well!’

‘Oh, good *Lord!*’ Julian spoke profoundly.

Janie had heard. ‘*How* have they got mumps? They were all right when we left home.’

‘The Ozanne twins started it. They went down on Saturday. They didn’t come for lessons on Friday, but Mrs Ozanne thought they were just bilious. The mumps didn’t appear till Saturday afternoon. Peter came to warn me and he called in after tea to see Julie and John and says they’ve both got it.’

At this point, Peter Chester, who was standing by, took the receiver from Nan. ‘Julian, this is Peter. The kids have mumps all right—going to be very

light, though. But whatever happens, Janie can't bring Vi into the midst of it. Tell her I say so.'

There was a scuffle at the other end. Then he heard his sister-in-law's voice. 'Peter, what *is* all this nonsense? Of course I'm coming home!'

'Oh no, you're not, my dear. I won't allow it, and neither will Julian.'

'Neither of you will be asked.'

'Don't talk such rot! Of course you're not coming! Vi's your first duty at present—No, they're not really ill—only miserable at the moment and that'll soon pass. My dear girl, your kids are far too healthy to take anything badly. We can manage here, but it's certain you can't bring Vi into the thick of mumps just when she's teething. And I won't have her upset, either, so you can't cast her.'

'Oh, *Peter!*' Janie's voice was a wail. Then she asked anxiously, 'How are Vanna and Nella?'

'Nella's going to be a light case. Vanna has it rather badly, poor little soul. And I'm not sure that Nancy won't have it. She's been very piano for her today, though she seems to be all right otherwise so far.'

'Nancy? Oh, Peter! What about Babs?'

'Thank God she hasn't been near any of them since Tuesday. She was fretful and Anne was afraid of another tooth, so she kept her right away from them and I'm hoping she'll escape. Too soon to say yet, of course.'

Janie was silent a moment. Then she said anxiously. 'And Nan? Oh, Peter, is she likely to get it?'

Nan, standing at his elbow had heard this. She grabbed the receiver with small regard for manners. 'Janie, this is Nan. You don't have to worry about me—I don't take things. I haven't had anything in my life except pleurisy four years ago. And it's not because I was specially kept away from infection. I just don't take them, so stop worrying about me.'

'Well, it's a slight relief to hear that. Oh, Nan! I don't know what to do! My poor babies—'

'They're more cross than ill,' Nan said feelingly. 'Peter says they're going to have it as lightly as possible, only the infection's there all right. That's why you mustn't bring Vi. She's too little for it.'

'I'm torn in half!' Janie said forlornly. Then she suddenly added, 'And have you two lunatics decided exactly where I *am* to go? Elizabeth's off as

the twins have it; and if Nancy's likely to come down, so is Anne. I can't stay on here. What do you suggest I should do?'

'Go to La Rochelle, of course. Peter's sent Lucie there already to put it in order and air the beds and so on. Not,' added Nan with some satisfaction, 'that you're likely to leave Alderney for a day or two. With this storm there won't be any boats running on Tuesday. Peter says so. Thursday's the earliest you're likely to be able to cross. We'll have La Rochelle ready for you by then. And Janie!'

'Well! Tell me the worst at once. What other mad ideas have you?'

'Just this. That if Nancy and the rest of the Pierres Gris crowd have it, they'd better come here and keep the house clear of infection for Babs's sake. It'll be O.K. If the worst comes to the worst we can get help.'

'I think you've got something there. Give over to Peter and let me talk to him.'

The result of that lengthy call was that it was agreed that Nancy, who was almost certain to come down, should be brought to Les Arbres next day and if the doctor thought any of the rest were likely to take mumps, they should come, too. By mutual consent, neither he nor Nan said anything about Nanny's dereliction. Time enough for Janie to hear that when she was in Guernsey again. Janie herself agreed reluctantly to go to La Rochelle with Vi, since none of her three was really ill nor likely to be. Peter declared that the people to be worst off were those who had to look after them!

Then they rang off after the doctor had promised to report to Alderney every day as long as Janie and Julian were there.

Thereafter, things settled down into a pattern. Nancy was brought over next day. She felt sick and uncomfortable and was very sorry for herself, but she was no more ill than her cousins, who greeted her with delight. On Tuesday, Robin and Dickon joined John, and Peter Chester informed Nan that the former Chester Nanny was free, having left her last place and come to spend a few weeks with her sister at Le Forêt before she looked about for another. She was delighted to come to Les Arbres and Nan and Michelle were thankful to have her. Not one of the children was badly ill and they were being very trying as a result. Nanny came along, walked into the night nursery and took charge and that ended most troubles. Nancy and the twins greeted her with joy, and by the end of an hour she had everyone lying down, resting comfortably and calmed. Nan had been too inexperienced and

Michelle was too old to handle such imps easily, but Nanny did it almost with a look.

‘I’m thankful to have her,’ Nan told Peter. ‘I’m not eighteen yet and to have those children ill when I’m in charge—oh, it *has* been a load!’

‘I know. We won’t tell Janie that just yet, though. She’s still got to hear about Nanny and she’ll go off the deep-end over that.’

‘Tell Janie? I should think not! She’s been a dear to me. I can’t ever repay her for all she’s done for me—not if I tried with both hands!’

Peter looked at her. The weeks had certainly made a difference, and in place of the white-faced misery who had arrived in Guernsey that August day was a girl who looked tired, as well she might, but whose cheeks were rounding and pink, whose eyes had recovered their brightness and whose thick curly hair was gleaming. When her face was in repose, her lips still drooped and there was a gravity about her that was hardly natural at her age. All the same, he decided that Janie and Julian had made a good job of her so far.

‘Janie, my child, would try to help anyone in trouble—even a—a hedgehog! She has a heart as big as the world and, what’s even better, a sane outlook on life. And Julian’s well matched with her. They’re a pair all right!’

‘I agree,’ Nan nodded. ‘I owe them a lot.’

‘If you come to that,’ he said, buttoning up his coat to the chin, ‘so do we. Anne could tell you that—even,’ he gave a chuckle, ‘enough apples to keep a hospital going!’ With which remark he fled and Nan went back to the drawing-room to go on with the mending.

The next day brought Beth to Les Arbres. The two nurseries were full now, so Nan had prepared a little room on the far side of her own for the girl.

‘It’s going through the entire crowd,’ the doctor declared when he had seen her settled as comfortably as possible. ‘Mike’s out of it, thank goodness, and so’s Paul; but Bill looked very suspicious to me this morning. I warned Elizabeth to keep him in bed and I’ll look in on them this evening when I’m passing.’

‘What about Barbara?’ Nan asked anxiously.

‘Well, oddly enough she’s got well through that last tooth. No bronchitis for once, thank Heaven! and she seems better just now than she’s been since the summer. I’m raging about Bill. If he hadn’t come home for that week-

end, he'd have been out of it, too. As it is, I'm certain he's in for it and poor Liz will have her hands over-full.'

'Don't let her hear you call her that,' Nan warned him, laughing.

He chuckled. 'Wouldn't she be mad! All right, Granny. Give me credit for a *little* sense.'

'How about Beth?' Nan left the topic.

'Well, she's very uncomfortable at present, poor kid. I'm afraid she's going to be a worse case than the rest of the crowd here. Keep her quiet and don't let her fret if you can help it. She begged to see her mother before she came, but I daren't allow it for Babs's sake. Anne waved to her from the window, but that was the most we could do.'

'And you *do* think Babs will escape, don't you?' Nan was identifying herself completely with the family and she waited anxiously for his reply.

'I'm beginning to think she may. Now, Nan, mind what I say. You've got Nanny to take the heavy end of the job and you're to rest up a little now. Keep fit, whatever you do. Remember that if you let yourself down you're much more likely to take it than if you are well. And then Heaven protect the lot of us! I should think Janie would go for me with a meat-chopper!'

Janie and Julian arrived by that afternoon's boat. The sea still heaved uneasily and Janie was limp and green when Julian helped her down the gangway with Vi on the other arm, as rosy and well as anyone could wish. The doctor met them, bringing good reports of their family which acted like a tonic on their mother. She looked decidedly less green, and when she had been seated in the car held out her arms for her youngest daughter.

'Give me Vi, Julian, and go and see about the cases. Peter, what about Nan? Has she come through all right?'

'Definitely. She's tired, of course. She's rather young for such an emergency, but she kept her head well and coped until we could get help. Remember our Nanny—Nanny de Carteret? She was staying with the le Cheminants at Le Forêt—Oh, don't be such an idiot, J.! Clara de Carteret married Peter le Cheminant six or seven years ago.'

Janie nodded. 'I remember. What about her?'

'I fetched her along to Les Arbres to help cope. It was getting too much for Nan and Michelle, and Elizabeth couldn't spare Javotte. Poor little Vanna has been really ill with it though she's beginning to come round now.'

Janie raised her eyebrows. ‘Your old Nanny? But what on earth for? Why can’t our Nanny do the coping? Look here, Peter, what *is* all this in aid of? There’s something behind it all.’

The doctor looked guilty. ‘Oh Lord! I’d forgotten we hadn’t told you.’

The last remnants of sea-sickness left Janie at this. ‘*What* haven’t you told me?’ she demanded, sitting up with a jerk.

‘What’s all this?’ Julian asked as he came up bearing the two cases.

‘Finish with those cases and get in,’ the doctor said testily. ‘Do you want to keep us here all day? I want to get Janie out to La Rochelle and I have a job to do, remember.’

‘Oh, Peter, can’t I go home first and have just a *peep*?’ Janie coaxed.

‘Not the smallest squint! You may make up your mind to that. You’re going straight out to Rocquaine with Vi and that finishes it!’

‘You *are* a pig! You might remember I haven’t seen any of them for a week and this is the first time I’ve ever left them.’

‘You’ll survive it,’ the doctor said callously as he slipped into the driving seat. ‘So will they. They’ve got past the stage when they howled for Mummy because they felt so awful. The whole lot are sitting up and taking notice now. And a sweet little set of sights they are with their mumps. I think Julie’s are the biggest. All the same, they’re heavily infectious and you’re not going to risk anything.’

Julian had got in beside him and as he drove off from the quay, Janie leaned forward, having tucked Vi into a corner of the back seat and demanded, ‘And what about your own little lot? How many of *them* are down now?’

‘All but Barbara—and Paul, of course. Nancy and the twins are going on all right. Beth only began this morning. I’m rather troubled about her. Anne daren’t go near her, of course, and the kid sobbed the whole way to Les Arbres because her mother hadn’t kissed her good-bye. I pointed out that we couldn’t risk Babs, but it didn’t seem to help. The silly kid seems to have got it into her head that her mother doesn’t love her or some such rubbish. It’s worrying, for it won’t do her any good to fret.’

Janie’s next speech made him sit up in every sense of the word. ‘But that’s just exactly what she does think. Oh, I *wish* Bethy had escaped! This is going to make things a thousand times more difficult.’

‘What under Heaven d’ye mean?’ he demanded, slowing down as he spoke.

‘What I say, of course. I can’t go into it now—it’s too long a story. But that is exactly what Beth feels about her mother.’

Julian glanced round at his wife. He felt that this was no time to upset the doctor by parading Beth’s woes, so he said casually, ‘Leave Bethy alone and explain just what you and Nan have been keeping from us. I want to know what it’s all about.’

Janie realised that the topic was definitely changed. ‘Oh yes,’ she said eagerly. ‘What has Nanny been up to? *Don’t* tell me that she’s got it, too!’

‘Not so far as I know. The last we heard, she was still in London.’

‘*What?*’ It came as a duet and Julian added, ‘What on earth is she doing in London when she ought to be here at Les Arbres?’

‘She got a wire last Saturday morning to say that her father was very ill and asking for her. Nan sent her off at once, of course. No one had any idea that the kids were all due to break out in mumps then. I didn’t know it myself until Elizabeth sent for me later in the morning. Nan was coping as best she could until I turned up in the evening to warn her to keep herself and the family away from Lemesurier Square. The mumps didn’t appear till late afternoon so I couldn’t do anything about it before, and in any case I knew they were safe enough with the downpour we had all Saturday. I couldn’t get hold of Nanny until the Monday, so the poor kid had to do the best she could with Michelle’s help.’

‘But Nanny had no right to go off like that when I wasn’t there!’

‘Oh, come, J.,’ Julian said a good deal more temperately, ‘you know you’d have sent her off at once if you’d been there. Nan only did what she knew you’d have done. By the way, there wasn’t a boat that day, was there? How did she manage to get across, Peter?’

‘There was the early morning boat all right, but she missed that, of course. De Garis’s brother took her over. It had to be settled in a hurry and, as I’ve told you, no one expected mumps then.’

‘I see. Then have you heard anything from her since?’

‘Just a wire yesterday to say that he was still very ill and she couldn’t return just yet. Nothing to worry over, though. If she doesn’t come back at all, I’d advise you two to snaffle Nanny de Carteret at once and have done with it. I can tell you, we parted with her most reluctantly.’

‘We’ll wait and see what our own Nanny wants to do,’ Janie said cautiously. ‘If she decides that she must stay with her father, though, Nanny de Carteret would fill the bill exactly. I’d have taken her over when you parted with her only we were settled already at the time.’

By this time they were clear of the town and running down the country road between hedges where the leaves were yellow and red. Vi, who had been very good up to this, gave a little murmur which meant that she wanted her tea and meant to have it. Janie dropped the subject of Nanny and picked her up.

‘Wait a little, precious. Only a very little longer now and then you shall have it. Peter, has anyone seen that there’s milk and baby-food at La Rochelle, do you know?’

‘I ran Nan over this morning when I went out to the de Garis with two baskets loaded with supplies, so I expect that’ll be all right. She had milk, I know, for there were three bottles of it.’

‘That’ll be all right, then. We can manage for tonight, I expect, and I must shop tomorrow. Nan said she was sending young Michelle to see to things.’

‘Yes; Michelle will stay with you. What bottle-feeds is Vi having?’

Janie explained and this lasted them until they swung round the corner and were running along the Rocquaine Bay road. Here, she turned to her husband to say, ‘About you coming out to sleep at La Rochelle, Julian. As I shall have Michelle with me, do you think it’s necessary? I’ll be all right, and I’m beginning to think I’d just as soon you were at Les Arbres.’

‘I’ll think about it,’ he said cautiously. ‘Probably I’ll divide my time between you. For some things, it’s easier to be at Les Arbres. Has de Garis taken either of the cars out, Peter?’

‘No idea. He hadn’t this morning, but I don’t know what Nan may have done about it since. Here we are!’

And he drew up with a sweep before the gate just as Vi, finding that her whimperings brought her nothing, burst into a roar. Janie jumped out, caught her up and ran up the narrow path to the door where little Michelle, one of her young maids, was waiting to welcome her.

‘There’s a good fire in the living-room, ma’am,’ she said eagerly, ‘and Miss Nan told me to have a bottle ready for Miss Vi, so it’s waiting. May I take her?’

‘Good for Nan!’ Julian remarked as Janie handed over the wailing baby to Michelle’s eagerly outstretched arms. ‘What a brain the kid has!’

Michelle had vanished in the direction of the kitchen and Vi’s howls suddenly stopped as the bottle with its nice warm milk was held to her lips. Janie, who had followed to watch, came back with a guggle. ‘She’s going at it as hard as she can. Poor lamb! It’s nearly half an hour past her proper time.’ Then she swung round on her brother-in-law. ‘Well, Peter, I must say you’ve given me some shocks. I’ll never dare to go off again and leave my family. Goodness only knows *what* might happen another time!’

Chapter XII

JULIAN TURNS COMFORTER

Janie was home again so Nan felt relieved, especially when Julian arrived after nine o'clock and informed her that he meant to spend at least every other night at home. Despite Nanny, he insisted on a peep at his family before going to bed.

'Oh, go on, Nanny!' he jeered when she pointed out that even grown-ups were not immune to mumps. 'I was through three epidemics of it at school when I was a kid and never a penny the worse. Anyhow, mumps or no mumps, I'm having a dekko at the kids, so that's that!'

'Where's Beth?' he asked Nan when his visit was over.

'In the little room beyond mine. With Nancy, Julie and Betsy in the night nursery and John and the twins in the nursery and all of them ready to ramp all over the place, I thought she'd be better by herself. Peter told me to keep her as quiet as I could. She's running a temp. just now and she has it pretty badly, poor Beth!'

Julian nodded and peeped in on his eldest niece. She was sleeping at the moment, but he saw the high flush on her cheeks, and when he touched her he was rather startled to find how hot she was. He drew the bedclothes up and tucked them firmly round her. Then he attended to the fire before he joined Nan outside.

'Come on downstairs and give me all the news,' he said. 'She's all right at present. What does Peter think about her?'

'I don't know. He doesn't like the temp. It's gone on all day and when Nanny took it at six she was over 103 degrees. I'd rather not go downstairs, Julian. She might rouse up and need me. Come into my sitting-room and I'll send for coffee and then we can talk. If I leave the door between it and my bedroom open, I can hear if she cries out.'

Nan led the way to her tiny sitting-room and established him in one of the big arm-chairs by the little fireplace. Then she ran off downstairs to return with a tray of coffee and biscuits.

'Here you are,' she said. 'How's Janie? And how's Vi?'

‘Janie’s very well—though I wouldn’t have said as much earlier in the day,’ he grinned. ‘She’s the world’s worst sailor, though she comes round pretty quickly as a rule and she did it even quicker today when she heard about Nanny’s sudden departure.’

‘Well, I don’t see what else I could have done.’ Nan sipped her coffee. ‘Anyhow, I doubt if I could have kept her. She simply told me she was going and *went*. We managed all right and it wouldn’t have mattered in the least if it hadn’t been for the mumps. Miss la Touche wanted to come and help me, but Peter wouldn’t hear of it. She’s never had the thing and Mrs la Touche is so frail he said it would be madness to risk it.’

‘He was quite right. And what about yourself, Nanette? I don’t know what Rosamund is going to say to us when she hears of all this.’

‘Do we need to tell her? Anyhow, it’s no one’s fault, really. As for me, I never seem to catch things. I feel quite fit now.’

‘It’s early days yet to talk.’ Julian drained his cup and stood up. ‘I don’t know about you, but I’m for bed. I have to be up early as I promised J. I’d be with her for breakfast. You look as if a touch of sleep wouldn’t hurt you, either.’

‘All right; I’m going, so you needn’t fuss,’ Nan said ungratefully. ‘I’m just going to take a look at Bethy in case she’s roused up and then I’ll run along to the night nursery and have a word with Nanny. You’ll lock up, won’t you, Julian?’

Julian had just been going into his own room through the far door. He stopped to turn to her. ‘Look here, Nan, I won’t have you missing your night’s sleep, running round after Beth. You were sent to us in the first place because you were so out of sorts. Neither Rosamund nor Nigel is going to have the chance of saying that we let you run yourself down again when you’re so much better now. If you hear Beth and Nanny doesn’t go to her, you can rouse me and I’ll see to the kid.’

Nan laughed at him. ‘I told you not to fuss. Bethy only came today and it won’t hurt me to have one or two broken nights.’ She suddenly sobered. ‘You know, Julian, she’s heart-broken about her mother. I know Mrs Chester couldn’t kiss her good-bye when there’s Babs to consider, but Beth thinks it’s because her mother doesn’t love her. She’s cried an awful lot about it. I think that’s partly why she’s so poorly just now. If she wakes up crying again I must go to her.’ Then, as he looked completely unconvinced, she added, ‘It’s what Janie would do. You know it is! I can’t do less.’

‘Janie, my child, is sturdy and well. She hasn’t ailed a thing since she had scarlet fever and nearly passed out eleven years ago. You’ve had a bad doing, and though you certainly look fit enough, you can’t take liberties.’

‘I’m quite well now,’ Nan said shortly. ‘You go and lock up. Here; you might take this tray down when you go. I’m off to Nanny.’

She ran off and he was left to feel that, gentle as she usually was, Nan had a strong streak of obstinacy in her. He could only hope that Beth would sleep all night; or, if she did wake up, Nanny would hear and go to her.

In the event, Beth slept more or less till six o’clock next morning, when she woke up, feverish and thirsty. Nanny was at her side, however, before Nan could rouse properly out of the deep sleep into which she had fallen as soon as she was in bed. Nanny was delighted to have one of her first nurslings in her charge and she made Beth more comfortable and cheered her up a little. The temperature fell later, which was just as well, for Peter arrived to see his patients and he brought the bad news that Barbara had started on another tooth and was wheezing and coughing with sharp bronchitis at the same time.

‘When is Mummy coming to see me?’ Beth asked him wistfully.

‘Not yet, I’m afraid,’ he said. ‘Babs is very ill again and she can’t leave her—Why, Bethy!’ For Beth had burst into tears and sobs at this.

‘Babs—Babs! It’s always Babs!’ she sobbed, sitting up in bed and holding up her mumps with each hand. ‘She’s all Mummy ever thinks of! If I was *dying* she wouldn’t care so long as she had Babs!’

‘Now, Beth, you’re talking nonsense,’ her father said, laying her down with a firm hand though he tucked in the clothes gently enough. ‘Of course Mummy loves you—our very first baby. But when Babs is so ill, she must stay with her. She’s as sorry as can be that she can’t come to you, but she can’t. It’s just as bad for Julie and the rest. Auntie J. has to stay away because of Vi, and they can’t have her. Come, girlie; don’t be silly. Mummy and I love you all dearly and as soon as you’re better you shall go home and be with her again.’

But Beth refused to listen and he had to give it up. But he came out of the girl’s room looking so worried that Nan, waiting to hear what he thought of her, promptly leapt to the conclusion that Beth was dangerously ill and looked at him mutely, not daring to speak.

‘I don’t know what to do about Beth!’ he burst out when they were safely out of earshot. ‘Nan, do *you* know how long the silly child has cooked

up this fancy that Anne doesn't love her?"

'Ages, I think,' Nan replied promptly. 'She thinks Babs has taken her place, you know.'

'That's rubbish,' he said shortly. 'If Babs had been normally healthy like the rest of them, Anne would have had time for Beth, but as it is, she's a constant care. She's badly ill today, poor baby. Anne daren't leave her for an hour, and if she could she couldn't come here. Mumps would finish the child, I think. Look here, Nan, I hate to put it on your shoulders, but you're the only one available. See what you can do to get this silly notion out of her head. It's not true, you know.'

'Oh, I'm sure it's not,' Nan agreed. 'At the same time, when Beth's feeling so rotten and—and wants her mother,' she choked a little over this, 'it's awfully rough on her that she can't have her. I'll do what I can, but I honestly think that Anne's the only one who could really put things right.'

'Well, she must wait for that,' he replied. 'But Beth mustn't go on in this way or she'll be really ill.'

He went off on his rounds after that and Nan did her best with Beth, but without avail. When the child was not crying, she was lying in a sullen silence, brooding on her woes, and nothing that anyone could say or do seemed to help her. Her fever remained high and when the obstinate temperature broke at last it left her too weak to care about anything. Peter was very anxious about her. He dared not tell Anne, for though the tooth had come through, the bronchitis was not so easily cleared up and Babs made headway even more slowly than her eldest sister.

'Bethy, darling, isn't there anything I can do for you?' Nan pleaded desperately one afternoon when she had come in to find Beth sobbing drearly to herself. 'Tell me and I'll do it.'

Beth tried to shake her head, but her neck was too stiff and swollen for her to manage that and she lay with the tears rolling down her thin white cheeks, looking the picture of misery.

'But you oughtn't to cry like this, Bethy,' Nan coaxed, sitting down on the side of the bed and stroking the rough chestnut curls. 'You won't get well if you go on fretting and it's making your father horribly anxious. Do try to cheer up! Your mother will see you as soon as ever it's safe. She told me so herself when I saw her in the garden this morning. And she sent you all those lovely roses with her fondest love. Look at them!'

Beth said nothing. She never even opened her eyes. Nan decided that it was time to do and not talk. She got up, armed herself with a bowl of warm water and towels and brought a cake of her own special sandalwood soap.

‘It’s time your face was washed,’ she said firmly. ‘Sit up and I’ll do it for you. Come on! And stop crying, or it’ll be no use.’

She propped the invalid up with pillows and sponged the hot, tear-stained face thoroughly. Then she dried it, and having set the bowl away, brought brush and comb and tackled the untidy curls. When they were reduced to order, she produced a length of salmon-pink ribbon to tie them back and then inducted Beth into a new bed-jacket to match. By the time this was done and the pillows heaped up comfortably, Beth felt comforted in spite of herself.

‘You—you’re sweet to me,’ she choked out.

‘Rubbish!’ Nan said trenchantly. ‘Anyone would want to cheer up such a Niobe as you’ve been these past few days. Now cheer up and enjoy your lovely roses. You’re lucky to have a mother to send you such nice roses, Beth.’

Beth turned eyes that were still slightly swollen on her. ‘Are you *sure* she sent them to me herself?’ she asked with a gulp.

‘Absolutely certain. She called to me as I was passing and said she wanted to send you those. She’d cut them for you herself and they were with her fondest love. I was to tell you that she missed you dreadfully and was longing to have you home again,’ Nan enlarged, carefully suppressing the ‘all’ that Anne had spoken. ‘Honestly, Beth, she *can’t* come. Babs has been most dreadfully ill and she’s not a great deal better even now. Dr Fuzzey thinks they’ll pull her through, but it won’t be easy.’

Beth’s lips set at this mention of her little sister, but she said nothing and Nan was wise enough to leave it alone. It was a pity that things had happened so that the girl was jealous of the poor baby, but talking wasn’t the way to cure it; that was clear. Nan went off and came back with Beth’s tea and coaxed her to make what might be called a light meal. Still, it was better than she had done since her illness, and after that she began to improve though the rest of the patients, even Vanna, were ramping about and occasionally making their nurses wish that quarantine was well over long before Beth was able to leave her bed and sit by the fire in a big chair for an hour or so.

At last, however, the infection ended. Anne came to see her eldest girl for a short while and take the rest home, where Babs was still there to greet them. Beth was to stay at Les Arbres for another week or so for she was still too weak to do much for herself and there was enough work at Pierres Gris without adding another invalid to it.

Things settled down at Les Arbres except that its mistress was still absent. Both she and Baby Vi had caught cold and the doctors had firmly refused to allow the pair to let loose cold-germs in a house where the rest had just recovered from mumps. So Janie was tied at La Rochelle until she and Vi had ceased to sneeze and go about with noses twice their usual size and a vivid red.

One morning, a brief letter came for Nan from her father. He was able to write very little and at long intervals, so this was a treasure. She had breakfasted alone, for Julian had got up early and gone off to La Rochelle to have that meal with Janie. Lucie was busy turning out the inner drawing-room, so Nan made for the library, fairly certain of being undisturbed there, and settled down before the fire in a big arm-chair.

She read her letter and sat frowning at it. Surely her father's writing was very shaky—much more so than the last letter had been? She had it in her cardigan pocket and pulled it out to compare the two. Fearfully she noted how the letters trailed off and the signature was almost illegible. During the past weeks, she had begun to grow up and the child who had come to Guernsey was already a long way behind her. *That* girl would never have seen the difference, much less guessed what it might mean. The girl who sat quietly in the arm-chair saw it all. Nan *knew* with certainty that it would not be so very long before she would be fatherless as well as motherless.

‘But I must be decent about it!’ she thought. ‘Dad adored Mother, and even if he was quite well he'd never, never be happy again without her. Only—what's going to happen to *me*? I'm all alone. Rosamund's a darling, but she doesn't really want me—she doesn't need me. She's got Nigel and the children and that's the main part of life to her. Everyone else has to come a long way away from that circle. And Auntie Nita and Uncle Hal have gone away for the next two or three years and Con's in Ceylon and all the others are busy, too. There's no one left if Daddy goes.’

At this point, she broke down and sobbed bitterly. She never heard the front door open, nor brisk footsteps coming along the hall into the library. Julian had called in on his way to the town to pick up some papers he had forgotten. As he entered the room, he heard the desolate sobbing and closed

the door behind him quietly. Then, tossing aside his coat and hat, he came to the arm-chair where Nan half-crouched, half-lay, shaken with the violence of the storm.

‘What’s wrong, Nanette?’ he asked, sitting down on the other arm and laying a hand on the heaving shoulders.

Nan sat up and turned to look at him. ‘Julian!’ she choked. ‘I—I didn’t know you were there.’

‘Never mind that. Tell me what’s happened.’

For reply, she held out the two letters. ‘Look! Do—do you—see?’

He glanced at them frowning. He had no need to look at them in earnest, for only two days before he had had a letter from Nigel Willoughby which had warned him of what was coming.

‘The news is bad,’ Nigel had written. ‘I told Rosamund that when I last saw Binkie I knew he was broken. We hoped this voyage would pull him up a bit so that the medicos could patch him up for Nan’s sake. But the fact is he doesn’t want to get better. He’s weaker than he was and they’ve landed him at Madeira—they were coming back from South America—and I’ve had a letter from there. Nan’s Dad won’t be coming home to her.’

Julian Lucy sat and looked down at the black head laid back on the other arm of the chair. Poor little Nan! And yet, in one way, it was as well that she had grasped it. The shock would be less severe when the last news came. Only he must do something to comfort her now.

‘Nan,’ he said gently.

Nan caught her breath. ‘Yes?’ she half whispered.

Julian suddenly made up his mind. Standing up, he stooped and lifted the girl bodily out of the chair; then sat down with her on his knee, and held her as he would have held his own Julie.

‘It’s pretty bad, kid, but for your Dad, it’s the best that can happen.’

‘I—I can see that,’ she sobbed. ‘He—he’ll be with—Mother again.’

‘Yes. And, Nan, I don’t suppose they told you, but if he lived, he’d be a cripple for the rest of his life. Did you know that?’

Nan stopped sobbing in sheer horror. She sat up and faced Julian. ‘Oh, Julian! *No!*’ she breathed.

He nodded. ‘Nigel told me that ages ago—before ever you came here.’

‘He—he’d have hated that,’ she said, again in that breathless whisper.

‘Well, now he’s going to be spared it. Can’t you feel a little happy about that?’

‘Oh yes!’ she gasped. Then the tide of desolation swept over her once more and she crouched down in his arms again. ‘But, Julian, what about me? Where shall I go? There’ll be nobody left.’

‘Rosamund—’ he began.

‘Oh, she’s very dear and sweet, but she—she doesn’t really want me.’

‘She would never say that, kiddy.’

‘Oh, I know that. She’d try not to think it, either—but she’d *feel* it!’

Julian was taken aback. He had not realised that Nan was grown-up enough to sense this. He remained silent and she went on.

‘When—when I first went to them, she was—*darling* to me; but since I’ve been here I’ve known that though no one could have been sweeter and kinder—not even Janie—she had times—of wishing that—that they were just by themselves. She’s like that. I’ve heard Mother say it.’

‘Old Rosamund was always on the clannish side. She and Allegra are both alike in that. But she’ll certainly want you to make your home with them when—when you need it. Don’t be afraid of that, Nanette.’

‘And,’ Nan said slowly, ‘I shall always feel I’m a visitor.’ Suddenly she sat up again and speech poured from her. ‘I felt it all along, you know, though I didn’t understand it at the time. Besides, what I wanted then was just to look at her and remember—Mother. Then she sent me here and there was no one to remind me—not in that way. And Janie and you were so decent to me, but you made me do things and—and be a part of the family. And then Janie told me about the Chesters—and made me see how horrid it is for them—and especially for Beth. And then when Bethy was ill here she talked to me and I saw that I hadn’t the worst trouble by a long chalk. I’d always known Mother and Dad loved me; but Bethy thinks her mother doesn’t at all. I—I’m not sure how she thinks of Peter. Don’t you *see*, Julian? I wasn’t left on the outside for a single moment. Janie dragged me in and made me part of you all. Oh, it sounds *beastly* selfish to be talking about ME like this, but—but I can’t help it. I—I feel so *alone*!’

‘I don’t see any need,’ Julian said quietly, for he had discussed this with Janie when Nigel’s letter had come. ‘We guessed how you felt. You see, we know Rosamund—and Nigel’s off the same piece of cloth. Now listen to

me, Nan. You say we've made you part of the family. Well, we shall have to talk things over with the Willoughbys—Nigel is your guardian and trustee, you know—but if they will agree, what about going on being part of our family? You know we don't want to lose you. Julie said to me only yesterday, "How did we ever do without Auntie Nan?" When I told J., she said she often wondered that herself. If you're right and they will agree, what about staying with us—making Les Arbres your home until you go to one of your own—'

At this point, Nan suddenly blushed crimson and he stopped dead and surveyed her with amazement. 'Look here, young woman, what's this in aid of?'

'N—nothing. At least—Oh, well, there's nothing—I mean—*nothing!*'

Julian, who had been sitting open-mouthed, shut his lips and set her on her feet. 'I ought to be off. I'm late for the office. Look here, Nan, you talk it over with J. She'll help you a lot better than I can.'

For reply, Nan caught at his arm. 'You *have* helped me. I was feeling dreadful and so—so *alone*. Now, whatever happens I won't feel that again. And—and—if it comes, I'll be brave about it. I—I'd hate Dad to be a cripple and—and you've helped there, too. But I *will* talk it over with Janie. Only—you've taken the worst out of it. Honestly you have, Julian.'

He bent down and kissed her. 'Then that's all right. It won't be easy at first, I know. You see, Nan,' and his deep, beautiful voice suddenly shook, 'I know what it means. It isn't so very many years since I lost my own dear mother. Sometime I'll tell you about it if it'll help you. But I understand and so does J. Perhaps that's why we fit in, we three. Rosamund's never had a big loss like that.'

'No; she hasn't,' Nan said wonderingly. 'I didn't think of that. Thank you for being so decent to me, Julian. If—if it comes to that and they'll agree and you and Janie really want me, I'd rather stay here with you. It isn't that I don't love Rosamund. I do and I always will, but—I don't fit there and I do here.'

'Then that's settled. And now I must go or Paul will blow the roof right off. You can go and see Janie this afternoon if you like. She's still rather pulled down—that was a nasty cold she had—but she's free from infection. They're coming back tomorrow. But you go along this afternoon and have a chat with her. She'll soon make you see if we want you or not!'

Chapter XIII

JOHN ONCE MORE!

Janie returned in triumph next day. Nan had taken Julian's advice and gone to La Rochelle in the afternoon before. They had had a long talk from which the girl had emerged consoled and braced for what must come.

Julian had had a chat with his wife over the telephone, so she knew all about it before ever Nan appeared. When he had demanded the reason for the girl's last incoherent remarks, she had hooted with laughter and told him plainly to mind his own business.

'No prying, my lad!' she warned him. 'Anyhow, there's nothing to pry into—*yet*.'

From that stand she had refused to be moved so he could only make up his mind to keep his eyes open. Meanwhile he set to work to draft a letter to the Nigel Willoughbys which would put things tactfully.

Everyone was on the doorstep to welcome the wanderers. Julian drove Janie home after lunch so as not to interfere with lessons, which had begun again. Miss la Touche had been informed that the afternoon would be a holiday and had gone home at twelve o'clock. Nanny had taken the children for a brisk walk till their early dinner, and when that was over, they had been washed and put into fresh things, so it was a very trim group that stood cheering and waving in the deep doorway.

Julian brought the car up to the foot of the terrace steps with an air, and Janie, leaving her youngest daughter packed into a corner of the back seat, nearly fell out of it in her hurry and raced up the steps through the fine drizzle, which had begun during dinner, held out her arms and clasped her eldest trio to her, dancing them all round and exclaiming at the way they had grown while Nan ran down to pick up Vi and bring her into the house.

Meanwhile, Janie, having hugged and been hugged to her heart's content, had set her family away from her and was regarding them with exclamations of amazement.

'Good Heavens! What a *size* you all are! Julie, that frock's indecent! It's a bare frill round your waist! As for you, John, you look as if you were bursting out of your clothes. And—oh, my goodness! that's one of Julie's frocks that Betsy's wearing!'

Nan, who had sat down on the big settle and was divesting Vi of her outdoor clothes, looked up. 'We've had a simply awful time with their things. We've had to turn up Julie's frock an inch or two for Betsy. Her own wouldn't go near her. As for Julie, Nanny and I have put false hems on all hers. I didn't exactly like to buy for them without you.'

'We'll have an orgy,' Janie promised everyone at large. 'Come in and shut that door, Julian, then we can talk. *That's* better! Now stand still and let me look at you all. H'm! A more leggy lot I never set eyes on!'

'Mummy—Mummy! One of my teeth has gone!' Julie proclaimed, stretching her lips in a wide grin to show the gap. 'It came out when I was eating toffee. Nanny says it'll grow again, though.'

'It will. You needn't worry about that. John will be the next, I suppose.'

'I'm free,' Betsy said severely. 'Had my birthday and *you* wasn't vere.'

'Oh, my lamb, I know it all too well! But Mummy didn't forget you. There's *such* a parcel for you in one of my cases.'

With a squeal, Betsy fell on the nearest. 'In here, Mummy?'

'*Now* you've done it!' Nan informed her, getting to her feet with Vi in her arms. 'There'll be no peace for anyone until that case is unpacked.'

Janie grimaced at her. 'Why can't I hold my tongue? All right, folks. Daddy shall carry the cases upstairs and we'll all come and unpack them. Where are you taking Vi, Nan?'

'To show her to Nanny. She's never yet seen her, you know, and she just won't believe that you and Julian could possibly have a blue-eyed daughter.'

With a bound Janie was over the cases and grabbing Vi. 'Are you, indeed? I'm showing off Vi myself. Come on, everyone! Julian, bring the cases, please.'

They streamed after her up the stairs, and when the introductions between Nanny and Vi were over and the young lady had been settled in her cot for a belated nap, Janie led the way to her bedroom, where she unpacked the cases and handed out parcels to everyone. There was a paint-box for Julie; a small Meccano set for John; a doll's bed with a lovely doll for Betsy and a box of handkerchiefs edged with cobwebby lace for Nan.

The rest of that day was a gala festival ending in bed at seven for everyone of the nursery people. Janie, hearing prayers and confessions for the first time for more than a month, owned afterwards that not until she had

tucked each child into its bed and kissed and blessed it did she feel fully herself again.

‘Never again!’ she proclaimed as she sat in the drawing-room after dinner, sipping coffee and looking round with loving eyes. ‘It might be scarlet fever next time and that’s an even longer quarantine. I’ve just held out and only just! Now I’m going to settle down and be happy again.’

For the next two or three days, all went well. The children were as good—or bad—as usual and Nan vowed that the house seemed ten times brighter and gayer now its mistress was back. News came from Pierres Gris that Babs was on the upgrade again and the worst that anyone had to confess at bedtime was breaking something or having a fight with someone else.

‘It’s too good to last,’ Julian said one morning at breakfast after Julie and John had gone off to the schoolroom. ‘They’ll be breaking out somewhere.’

‘Why should you say that?’ Janie demanded. ‘I expect mumps has made them realise that they’ve got to be a little sensible, now they’re getting so big. We’ve had only two really bad escapades since I came home and they weren’t anything to fuss about really.’

‘*You* didn’t have to tackle the postman when Julie had emptied a jug of water over him yesterday,’ Nan retorted. ‘I was coming in from the garden and got the full blast of his wrath.’ She suddenly began to giggle. ‘Oh, how mad he was! I told Julie what I thought of her when I next saw her.’

‘So she told me last night. You seem to have made quite an impression. Did you punish her, by the way? She never said anything about *that*.’

‘No; but I said if she did such a thing again I should speak to you and ask you to take away her paint-box for a whole week. *That* sobered her,’ Nan said with satisfaction in her tones.

‘You should have done it on the spot. Julie’s a young demon on occasion, though I think it’s mainly because she leaps into things without bothering to think first,’ Julie’s mother said. ‘Now John deliberately thinks things out. When *he* does bad things, it’s because he’s planned them.’

The post had come earlier and Julian had been reading a letter while his women-folk chatted. Now he looked up. ‘Yes! Well, I’d be just as glad if he didn’t plan quite such evil doings. I *thought* you were crowing rather too loudly, J.! Here—look at this and see what your hopeful son has let us in for! At least I suppose it *is* his doing!’

He tossed the missive down the table as he spoke and applied himself to toast and marmalade with healthy gusto.

‘It doesn’t seem to have affected your appetite, anyhow,’ Janie commented, rescuing the letter from the butter-dish and wiping it with her napkin. ‘And *must* you be so messy?’

She opened it as she spoke and began to read. Her face underwent changes so rapidly during the process that Nan was eaten up with curiosity to know what it was all about. When she had finished, she turned a look of absolute horror on her husband and demanded, ‘Julian! Did you *ever*? *When* did all this happen?’

‘Well, the good lady is somewhat illegible, I admit, not to speak of being sadly ignorant of the rules of punctuation; still I did manage to gather that the episode occurred some time last week between Wednesday and Sunday.’

‘But—but, when was he out alone that he could do such a thing?’ Janie gasped. ‘It’s a forbid; you know that. Even John has never broken a forbid.’

‘Not the foggiest. Nan, have you any ideas on the subject?’

‘But what is it about?’ Nan asked. ‘So far as I know he’s never been out alone nor had the chance to slip out, supposing he did decide to break a forbid, which I don’t think is likely.’

‘If he’s really at the bottom of this,’ Janie said, waving the letter at her, ‘he *must* have been out. He would get no chance of doing it when he was with Nanny or us. Oh, dear! Julian—’ she looked apprehensively at her husband.

He shook his head. ‘No good, my dear. If John has been as disobedient as that, he gets what’s coming to him. You’ve told them all that they’re not allowed to go beyond the gates without someone grown-up and that’s got to do them. John knows what happens when he disobeys. If he thinks the game is worth the candle, that’s *his* affair.’

Nan could bear it no longer. ‘Look here,’ she said, ‘what *is* all this in aid of? What has John been doing?’

Janie handed her the letter. ‘Read it for yourself—if you *can*, that is. Julian, there *must* be a mistake somewhere. I came home on Wednesday and they were with me until bedtime. On Thursday we were all at Pierres Gris for the twins’ birthday. It was an all-day affair, too, so they weren’t near this part of the world after ten o’clock and you brought us all home in the car and they went straight to bed. Friday—what about Friday?’

‘You and I went shopping and Miss la Touche stayed till we came back,’ Nan said, looking up from her attempt to decipher the letter. ‘They’d get no chance to play any tricks with *her*! I never knew anyone so on the spot!’

‘And on Saturday it poured all day again and they had to stay in the house. Someone was in charge of them the whole time. Nanny had them in the morning, but I took them to the drawing-room after lunch to give her a rest. And after tea, we went up to the nursery again and played games. Julian, he couldn’t possibly have done it! It’s a mistake! I must say,’ she added ruefully, ‘that I wish it hadn’t happened to Miss Payne of all people. I’ve never even called on her, though I’ve been meaning to do it. Life’s so full, though, I’ve never got round to it.’

‘John would seem to have forestalled you,’ Julian grinned. ‘What’s that, Nan?’

Nan had been reading the letter aloud with comments as she read.

‘“Dear Sir, I am *sorry* to have to complain to you but one day last week *your son* came into my *garden* and dressed up my *statue of Mercury* which stands by the *outer* wall in an old blazer which I presume to be *yours*”— How on earth did he get the sleeve over that serpent thing Mercury carries? —“and affixed a *moustache* to the face with some substance that *will not* wash off and I shall have to have it *chipped* off and as it is by the wall everyone who passes sees it and makes *rude remarks*.” Did they never teach her punctuation in her youth? That’s the first full stop on the page and she doesn’t seem to have heard of poor little commas! But she does quite a lot of underlining to make up!—“This is *awful* as my house is now a *laughing-stock* and what is even *worse* he also dressed up my Diana in a *shawl* and *golfing-cap* and she can be even *more* plainly seen.”’

Nan got this far and then doubled up with laughter. ‘Oh, *oh*! How priceless! I know where it is now, and I’ve seen those idiot statues. They’re marble and the poor things have looked so miserably cold with all the grey days we’ve been having!’

Julian and Janie joined her laughter though Julian, trying to sound stern, began, ‘It’s nothing to laugh at—’ when the door opened and Lucie came in looking rather scared.

‘Please, sir, Colonel Hayward from down the road is here and he wishes to see you at once.’

‘Colonel Hayward? At this hour?’ Julian exclaimed. ‘Did he say what he wanted, Lucie?’

‘No, sir; but he is *very* angry,’ here Lucie swallowed a giggle, ‘and it is Master John, sir—at least I think so.’

‘John again!’ Janie cried. ‘Whatever has that wretched child been up to *now*? You’d better go and see, Julian.’

Julian got up in leisurely fashion. ‘O.K.—O.K.! Don’t get so het up, J. It can’t be anything very much. You know what a peppery old boy the Colonel is at the best of times.’

He strolled out of the room to find the subject of his remarks standing near the door, which Lucie had left ajar. It was plain that the Colonel had overheard every word he had said, for he was purple in the face, and for a moment it seemed as if he were about to have a stroke. It took a good deal to disconcert Julian Lucy, but at that moment he would willingly have been anywhere else.

Inwardly cursing Lucie for not showing the old gentleman into the library, Julian made the best of it and went forward.

‘Good morning, sir,’ he said. ‘My maid tells me you wish to see me.’

‘See you? Yes, sir! I *do* wish to see you!’ the Colonel spluttered furiously. ‘I wish to see you about that infernal little devil of a son of yours!’

Then he started and turned even deeper purple, for Janie, hearing the voices and guessing what had happened, had come out to see if she could pour oil on the raging waters. The Colonel was an old-fashioned gentleman who prided himself on never using strong language before a woman. And now little Mrs Lucy had heard him calling her son an infernal little devil!

Janie nearly exploded as she read his expressive face. She pulled herself together with an effort and came forward with outstretched hand. ‘Good morning, Colonel Hayward. I’m afraid from what I can hear that our small boy has been making a nuisance of himself to you. Won’t you come into the library and tell us all about it? Just over here.’

The nearly strangling Colonel found himself wafted across the hall into a big, book-lined room where a log fire burned briskly and Janie was pulling chairs round it. She sat down in one, waved the visitor to another while Julian perched on the arm of the big Chesterfield settee and then said, ‘Now do tell us all about it. I’m afraid our children are apt to be mischievous, but we do know that they were under someone’s eye every day of last week, so whatever it is that’s been done, I don’t think John can have been in it *this* time. And that,’ she added calmly, ‘is by way of being a miracle, I may tell you!’

The Colonel looked at her with choleric blue eyes under bushy brows. ‘You flatter yourself, Mrs Lucy. Unfortunately, it *was* your son and no one else who was “in it,” as you say. He was seen.’

‘*What?*’ Janie forgot her manners in her surprise. Grammar, too, went to the wall. ‘But who by? *You* saw him, you mean?’

‘No—it was our common neighbour, Miss Murgatroyd. She told me that she saw him do it with her own eyes and rapped on the window, but he took no notice of her.’

Janie goggled at him and Julian asked in an expressionless voice, ‘But when did this take place, sir?’

‘On Thursday afternoon.’

‘But—but we were out all day Thursday!’ Janie had recovered her breath. ‘We spent the entire day with my sister at Pierres Gris, out at St Sampson’s. It’s more than a mile away and they played in the garden most of the time.’

‘Miss Murgatroyd declares that it was your son, madam.’

Now Miss Murgatroyd was a maiden lady living down the road who certainly *did* know John. Neither Janie nor Julian liked her for she was a bitter-tongued old lady who was always complaining about modern children and especially the Lucy crowd. All the same, it was hardly likely that she could have made any mistake about John.

‘And—what exactly is it that my son is supposed to have done?’ Julian asked gently.

‘He has changed my new and very expensive cocoanut doormat for a wretched rag of a thing nearly in shreds.’

Janie saw a discrepancy and leaped on it. ‘But if it was done on Thursday, how is it you’ve only come about it this morning?’

‘I only discovered it this morning when I went out by the side-door to look at my greenhouses.’ The Colonel paused. Then he went on, ‘I had best explain that I am the only member of the household to use that door. I have been laid up with an attack of gout and the door has remained locked all that time. The—the *rag* was the first thing I saw when I opened the door this morning. Miss Murgatroyd was passing and saw me and told me that she had seen your son—ah, John, I believe his name is—changing the mats on Thursday, but as she has been laid up, too, with a bad cold she was unable to do anything about it.’

Julian got up. 'We'd better send for young John and find out what all this means.' He went to the door and gave a shout of, 'Nan!'

Nan, still considering Miss Attwater's letter over her coffee, came flying to see what he wanted and was sent to the schoolroom to ask Miss la Touche to excuse John for a short time.

'What's he been doing?' she demanded.

'You'll hear all in good time. If you ask me, he's following in Bad Bill's footsteps. Anyhow, he can come down and speak for himself. Off you go!'

She ran upstairs to return with a calm John whom she pushed into the room and left to fend for himself while she retired to the morning-room once more and, finding her coffee grown cold, decided to make a fresh jorum while wondering all the time what John had been doing.

Julian turned in his chair as the small boy came in. 'Come here, John,' he said, holding out his hand.

John came up to him and stood at his knee, turning big brown eyes full of interest in the purple-faced old gentleman seated in his father's chair by the fire. 'Yes, Daddy?' he said.

Julian drew the boy between his knees. 'This gentleman is Colonel Hayward and he says that Miss Murgatroyd saw you changing his new doormat for an old one. Is it true? Did you do such a naughty thing?'

'Yes, Daddy.' But there was deep disappointment in John's face and voice, at which Janie gave a gasp though Julian moved not a muscle.

'When did you do it?' he asked.

'On Fursday afternoon.'

Janie could bear it no longer. 'But how on earth could you do it?' she cried. 'You were at Auntie Anne's all day!'

'Yes; but Robin an' Dickon an' me went wif Dulcie for a walk in ve afternoon,' he explained. 'Dulcie had a message for Miss Murgatroyd from Auntie Anne and we waited outside an' Francis de Gris was tellin' Peter le Marchant to do it an' Peter said he wouldn't 'cos ve old—' John stopped here. The epithet used by Peter le Marchant was an excessively rude term in Guernsey French and one he was forbidden to use.

'Well, let that pass,' his father said, guessing what came next. 'Go on with the story.'

‘Well, he said ve Colonel would blow ve roof off. I foughted I’d like to see him do it so I did it. An’—an’—nuffing hasn’t happened.’ John’s voice was deeply aggrieved and neither Janie nor Julian dared to look at each other. As it was, it was with an effort that Julian managed to control himself.

‘You knew you were being naughty—very naughty indeed?’

‘Ye-es, Daddy.’

‘But you did it, all the same?’

‘Ye-ye-es, Daddy.’

There was a pause, during which Janie saw that the Colonel’s colour was deepening and his eyes were nearly bulging out of his head. Then Julian looked across at their visitor.

‘He did do it, sir,’ he said in what Janie later called a ‘graven image voice,’ the truth being that he could scarcely speak at all for suppressed laughter. ‘I apologise to you for him. I am ashamed of my son. John, tell the Colonel you are sorry and beg his pardon.’

John’s lip was quivering. He adored his father and it was *awful* to hear him say so solemnly that he was ashamed of his son! But he knew his father’s word to be final. He left his safe shelter and marched up to the old warrior.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, holding out a pudgy fist.

More, he could not say. As it was, he was winking to keep back the tears. Besides, he was wondering what Daddy would do. Bed or a spanking, he supposed. He knew that evil-doing always brought punishment. He held up his fair head, determined not to cry.

The Colonel looked down on the plucky little figure and suddenly the fierceness left his eyes. ‘An apology between gentlemen always settles a matter,’ he said gravely, taking the small fist and shaking it.

‘John!’ Janie’s voice sounded desperate. ‘How could you do such a naughty thing—especially when Miss Murgatroyd rapped at the window at you?’

John was his own man again. Still standing with his hand in the Colonel’s, he turned to tell the strict truth as he had been taught to do. ‘But I told you *vat*, Mummy. I wanted to see ve roof blow off an’ I knew Miss Murgatroyd would tell tales. She’s a tell-tale-tit, vough no one ever slits her tongue,’ he added thoughtfully.

‘There—that will do just now,’ Julian said hurriedly. ‘Run away back to the schoolroom. I’ll talk to you later on.’

John left the room and the discomfited Julian turned to speak to his visitor. ‘I’m most frightfully sorry, sir—’

He got no further. There was a queer, rusty sound, like the creaking of an ungreased cartwheel, The Colonel was deep purple and seemed to be on the verge of suffocation. Before his alarmed host could jump to the rescue, he had fallen back in his chair with such a ‘*Pah-hah-hah!*’ as made Janie jump. The Colonel was laughing!

That cleared the air. Thankful for any excuse, Julian joined in, and Janie, after a startled look, caught the infection and laughed till the tears ran down her face. Nan heard the peals of mirth in the morning-room and was driven nearly wild with curiosity to know what it was all about.

At long last, the Colonel recovered. He got up and came across to Julian, holding out his hand. ‘First good laugh I’ve had since the war, Lucy. Never since my boy—’ He stopped, and Janie’s soft heart went out to him at once. Miss Murgatroyd had told her that his only son had been shot down during the war in the Western Desert.

She stood looking up at him with eyes brimming over with sympathy.

‘I ought to be awfully sorry John’s been so bad, but if it’s made you laugh, I can’t be. I’ll talk very seriously to him at bedtime and I’m sure he won’t play *that* particular trick again.’

‘Tut-tut!’ the Colonel said. ‘Just a boyish prank! Sorry now I made such a fuss about it. Fine boy, Lucy! Make a fine man!’

‘I hope so, I’m sure,’ Julian said feebly. ‘J., mind you forbid them to go changing other folk’s mats. Thank goodness that always holds them!’

The Colonel looked interested. Then he picked up his hat and stick. ‘Well, I’m detaining you. I’ll toddle along now.’ He paused and looked at them. ‘Only an old buffer, I know—er—a *peppery* old boy!’—Julian went darkly red while Janie chortled inwardly—‘but not so bad if you’ll take me as you find me. Come and see me, eh? Madam here might like my greenhouses and I’ve a lot of curios picked up pretty well all over the world. Bring the boy along to see ’em—bring all your children along. Like that sort of thing, eh? Kiddies do. Well, good-bye—good-bye!’

He went off, stumping down the drive, a lonely but somehow gallant figure.

‘Poor old boy!’ Julian said as they watched him.

‘*Peppery* old boy!’ Janie mocked. ‘For once, my lad, you got what you deserved for calling your neighbours names! A pity you couldn’t see your own face! It was a vision, let me tell you.’

Julian laughed. ‘I don’t mind telling you I *felt* caught out. You might warn Lucie in future to show visitors into some room and not leave them to cool their heels in the hall. Well, let’s go back and tell Nan the yarn. I’ll bet you she’s nearly dead from curiosity.’

Chapter XIV

ENTER BARNEY!

‘Janie!’

‘Well? What is it?’ Janie looked up from her knitting as Nan came into her room. Six months had come and gone since the day that the Lucys first made friends with Colonel Hayward, and in those six months a good deal had happened.

Nan’s father had gone shortly after to join his wife. The girl had been sad at first, though she had kept her word and remembered that for him it was the best that could happen. Julian had taken a trip over to Whitelade for a conference with the Willoughbys. Janie had been invited, too, but had flatly refused. It was windy weather, and dearly as she loved the sea she refused to risk sea-sickness.

‘You can do all that’s necessary,’ she had told her husband. ‘I’ll stay where I am, thank you. Give them my love and say how pleased we all are about their little Judy.’

For Rosamund had a second daughter who had been given the old Willoughby name Juliana with Jane tacked on for her dearest friend.

From that trip, Julian had returned to say that Rosamund and Nigel had agreed that Nan should make her home in Guernsey with the Lucys, though she would spend long holidays with her cousins. Glad to have it finally settled, the girl had requested leave to take a course of typewriting and shorthand and declared that when she was ready, she meant to join the firm of Ozanne and Lucy as private secretary to the Junior member. There was no real need for her to work, but both Janie and Julian agreed that it would be better for her to be regularly employed. The old house in Ireland went to a distant cousin of her father’s, though a good many things belonged to Nan herself.

After Easter when the weather was fine and warm Julian had agreed to take his holiday, and the entire family had gone with Nan to Blakeney Place to help her sort out everything. In order to save the sea-voyage they had flown, and it must be owned that Julie and John had put on a good many airs to their cousins about this experience.

Everyone had enjoyed Ireland, even Nan herself. She had recovered her tone and balance, and her grief for her father, though deep, was healthy. Janie, by stepping in, had saved her from serious trouble. Finally, they had come home to find that things were better at the Chesters than before the crash. An old cousin had died and left the doctor her small fortune so there was no need for the pinching and scraping which had hitherto been the order of the day. Anne had gone to Switzerland with Babs and Beth and reports from there told how Babs was steadily if slowly improving. Robust she would never be; but there seemed a possibility that by the time she was into her teens, she would be able to lead a normal life.

As for Beth, there was news of a very good new school opening in the autumn not far from Jerbourg and the doctor had promptly put her name down for it. Nancy and Julie were to go, too, for Miss la Touche had been married at Easter. As there was to be a Kindergarten attached, the Chester twins were also to go and Betsy had been promised as soon as she was old enough.

Altogether, those six months had brought a good many changes, not the least being the fact that Nan seemed to be growing up rather more quickly than anyone had expected. Janie's idea was that the letters which came so regularly from the West Indies had a good deal to do with it.

She now waited for what Nan had to say rather anxiously, for in the girl's hand were some sheets of the well-known paper from H.M.S. *Lothian*.

'Are you busy?' Nan asked.

'Not particularly. Want me for something?'

'Well, I do, rather.' Nan pulled up a humpty to the window by which Janie was sitting and sat down.

There was silence for a few minutes. Janie, hard at work on a tiny coat knitted in an elaborate pattern, was busy counting. At last she looked up. 'Well, what's the trouble?'

'This—though I don't exactly know—I mean—well—Janie, put that knitting down for a moment, will you? This is serious.'

Janie obligingly laid her knitting on the broad window-sill. 'So's my coat. June will be here next week and I don't want to be caught out, It's high time I had twins,' she said solemnly.

Nan laughed. 'It *would* be fun, wouldn't it? Boys, I hope. John does need a brother or two!'

‘So long as he gets *a* brother this time, I don’t know that I’ll mind too much if I only rise to a singleton. What’s wrong with your letter?’

‘It’s from David Willoughby.’ Nan’s colour rose as she spoke.

‘So I saw. How is he?’

‘Oh, very well and enjoying life to the full. But Janie!’

‘Well? Oh, do get on, Nan, or I’ll—I’ll shake you!’

‘It’s rather difficult. But—but—well, we’re chums, you know.’

‘I know it. Has he asked you to make it something else?’

‘Yes; how did you know?’

‘My lamb! It’s written all over you! Don’t do it, Nan—or not yet.’

Nan stared at her. ‘Why not?’

‘My good girl, how many times have you met? Three, at the most. The rest has been letters. It’s not good enough, Nan. You can’t marry a man—’

‘I didn’t say anything about *marrying!*’ Nan cried, scarlet to the roots of her hair.

‘I know you didn’t—but I’ll bet David has. I’m right, aren’t I?’

Nan’s eyes fell. ‘Not—not exactly that.’

Janie gave her an exasperated look. ‘For pity’s sake, Nan! If he doesn’t talk of marriage, why on earth are you looking like a well-boiled beetroot?’

‘Oh, well, he’s tied up in the West Indies for another eighteen months or so, but—but—well, he wants to send me a ring.’

‘O-*ho!* So *that’s* the milk in the cocoanut, is it? Now we know.’

Janie thought for a minute or two. She was ready to step in at any time, but this was something off the beaten track. A good deal depended on it and she was wondering if she ought to let it go. Then she decided that that was what she could *not* do, just because it *was* so important.

‘Sit down again, Nanette,’ she said, her tone changing. ‘You’re quite right. This *is* important. What do you feel about it yourself?’

Nan sat down on the humpty so that she could set her elbows on the window-sill and stare out of the window while she talked. ‘I’m—not very sure.’

‘Then David must wait until you are.’

‘Do you think so? He’s been awfully nice to me—I love getting his letters, you know. And he seems to be rather lonely—’

‘What on earth are you talking about? David lonely—with all his family?’

‘Yes; I know. But Janie, he’s away out there by himself. And anyway, Rex and Maidie are both married and haven’t time for him; and Peter’s *going* to be married—’

‘Since when? I didn’t even know he was engaged.’

‘David says,’ Nan picked up her letter and hunted for the place, ‘here you are. I’ll read it. “The latest is that old Peter’s marrying a girl he knows in Kelowna, the place near his job. He seems jolly thrilled with everything, though lord knows what Dad will have to say about it. Still, he’s older than Rex was when he married Con and he’s got a jolly good job and can keep a wife. He even has a bungalow to take her to. Don’t see why he shouldn’t go ahead if he feels like that. Anyhow, I’ve sent ’em my blessing and a rather decent silk shawl I picked up last time I was in Kingstown. I got two as a matter-of-fact. One for you and the other I meant for Maidie, but she’ll have to go without now.” That’s all about that,’ Nan went on, laying the letter down.

‘This *is* news! I must see what we can do. A cheque would be best, I suppose; then they can get what they like. Well, that settles that. In the meantime, Nan, we’d best get back to David. I can guess what he feels, for he and Peter were always pals. All the same, since we’ve got to be practical about these things as well as—the other thing, I’d like to know what he proposes to keep you both on. So far as I know, he hasn’t anything but his pay. His father couldn’t do anything for him. There’s still young Tim to consider as well as the three stepbrothers, who are only babies yet. Axel is only Julie’s age and there are Rolf and the baby as well.’

Nan went red. ‘I’m not exactly penniless myself, you know.’

‘Quite so. But I don’t see David Willoughby living on *your* money.’

‘Of course he wouldn’t. So far as that goes, I’ve never said anything about it to him except that I told him that the Place had gone to Dad’s cousin, but that I had some money of my own, only I wanted to work so I was learning typing and shorthand.’

Janie nodded. ‘I see.’ She thought this over. Then she came to a decision. ‘Look here, Nan, I don’t think you really care for David enough to marry him—or not yet. You’ve got to make up your mind if you’d rather see him

across the breakfast table every morning of your life than anyone else. And apart from that, remember that, as I said before, you've never really had much chance of meeting. It's your business, of course, but my advice to you is to tell him you'd rather wait for anything so definite as a ring until you see him again. You and he can go on writing in the meantime.'

Nan considered this. 'If you really think that's best—' she began.

'It's certainly best for you and it's you I'm considering. It's all very fine for David. He's been round and about and met dozens of girls. How many other lads of his age do you know?'

Nan gave her a startled look. 'Why—not many, of course. Blakeney Place is rather secluded, and anyway I had my lessons and so on and I wasn't thinking about anything of that kind then.'

'Exactly! You were still a schoolgirl and David was a young man in the Navy. Oh no, Nan! You must have your chance to meet other men and measure David by them—or them by David,' she added mentally, though she said nothing about it to Nan. 'You haven't had enough experience to judge for yourself. You can't go and get engaged to the first nice boy that asks you. And now that's enough. I've something to tell you.'

Nan folded up her letter slowly. 'All right. I'll write to David and tell him. But I—I do like him, you know,' she added.

'That's O.K. You go on liking him; but it's not *enough*. I know!' the experienced Mrs Lucy emphasised. 'And now for my own idea. What do you say to going with Nanny and one of the maids to La Rochelle next week?'

'Janie! How long for?'

'Well, until I feel like having you all back again. I expect a fortnight will be ample. Will you go with them and take charge for me?'

Nan swivelled round on her humpty. 'You know quite well that I'll do anything you want. I'd a lot rather be here in case you needed me. But if you'd rather I went to La Rochelle, I will.'

'I would. You'd be frightfully bored here, anyhow, for Nurse will be coming, and when *she* takes charge, she takes charge! Also I shall be much happier about the children if you're with them. You'll have all four with you, so you certainly won't be lonely. And, by the way, the same rule holds good there as here—they mayn't go out of the garden unless they have

someone completely grown-up with them. It's a forbid, so that'll be all right. I'll tell them myself at bedtime tonight.'

'We can come and see you if—if you're all right, can't we?'

'Delighted, my lamb! Oh, and by the way, I'd like you to be godmother to whatever turns up. Will you?'

'Oh, Janie! Are you sure?'

'Rather! So that's fixed. I say, it's a gorgeous day. What about lunch in the garden? Go and see Cook about it, will you? Nanny will be back with the family before long, so we'll have it all ready for them. I'll come presently.'

Nan skipped off and Janie, who tired quickly just now, put her knitting away and went down to the garden with a book.

The next week saw Nan, Nanny, Lucie and the small fry settled at La Rochelle, greatly to the joy of the children, who loved the pretty cottage where Julie had been born—the only one of them all to be so. The Lucys had been living at Les Arbres for some months when John put in an appearance.

Nurse was installed and was strict as she always was, rationing visits from the youngsters sternly. Nan saw Janie every day, generally in the morning when Nanny took charge of the family. She had taken her friend's advice, written to ask David to wait until he came home again before talking about a ring and felt happier once the letter had gone.

Two Sundays after that talk, Julian suddenly turned up for breakfast with them.

Nan gave him an anxious look when she came in from church and found him there, but she said nothing until the meal was over. Then she got him alone and asked nervously, 'Is—is Janie all right?'

He nodded. 'Quite all right when I left, but Nurse thinks you'd better not come along today. I'm taking Julie and John to church presently. You can ring up the house about twelve and ask how things are. If it's all right, I'll stay to lunch. And take that worried look off your face,' he added. 'Janie's all right.'

Nan sighed. 'I wish it was over now. We've been here nearly a fortnight as it is. Julian, you know Janie said I was to be godmother?'

'I do. What about it?'

‘What’s the baby’s name to be?’

He suddenly grinned. ‘That’s something no one can tell us yet. We can’t make up our minds. We rather wanted your name for a girl, but Anne has Nancy and you’re Nan, so we thought better not. If it’s a boy, we just can’t fix on a thing. Most trying; for old Michelle is talking gravely about it being lucky for the baby to arrive with its name chosen.’

‘If she’s a girl, I hope you’ll give her Katharine for one name,’ Nan said.

‘If it’s a boy, then I want your second name, please.’

‘What? But you know what that is,’ he protested.

‘I do—Barnabas! That’s why.’

‘Don’t get it.’

But Nan was in earnest. ‘Do you know what it means?’ Then, as he shook his head. ‘It means “Son of Consolation.” Listen, Julian. When I was right at the end of things, you and Janie consoled me as no one else had done. That’s why I want it. You’ve been a daughter and son of consolation to me. Please say “yes.”’

The mischief had died out of his eyes. ‘Thank you, Nan. That’s a big thing for us to be told. Very well; I promise that if it’s a boy, he shall have Barnabas for one name, whatever else we tag on to it. Now I must go if I’m to take the kids to church.’

Nan had hard work to keep herself occupied while they were away, but the call at noon brought word that Janie was all right and she hoped he would stay where he was until he was sent for. It was a glorious day, so after lunch they all went down to the shore, where the children paddled and built sand castles and Vi made strenuous efforts to walk. At four o’clock, however, Lucie came running down to them with the news that Nurse wanted Mr Lucy and Miss Blakeney. Julian had come over in the car, so he and Nan left Nanny to bring the children in and then went flying down the roads to Les Arbres.

The house seemed very quiet when they reached it. The windows were wide open and Mungo was lying on the broad terrace, asleep, though he bounced to his feet with loud barks of welcome when he heard the car. Elizabeth Ozanne appeared in the doorway, and one look at her face banished the grim expression which had been on Julian’s while Nan gave a cry of joy.

‘Oh, it’s all right! Oh, Elizabeth! We’ve been so anxious!’

Elizabeth laughed. ‘Very silly of you, then. Julian, you are to go up to Janie at once. Nan shall have her turn presently.’

He went into the hall. Then he turned. ‘Just a moment! Prepare me, please. Break the news gently. Have we achieved twins?’

Elizabeth laughed. ‘Certainly not! But John has a brother—a beautiful boy. He weighed nine pounds. Now be off to Janie.’

Half an hour later, Nan was admitted to the sweet-pea room where Janie lay, smiling a welcome. She ran across the floor and bent over the bed.

‘Janie darling! All right?’

‘Splendid! I’ve had a jolly good sleep, and apart from being a bit groggy, as you might expect, I really feel fine. Now don’t you want to see your godson? Here’s Nurse, bringing him.’

Nan stood up and turned round. Nurse was there, a woolly bundle in her arms. Nan held out hers, but the tyrant of the bedroom shook her head. ‘Better not yet. He’s sleeping nicely. Tomorrow, though,’ she added as she drew down the shawl and Nan stooped over her godson. He was a shock! So red, so crumpled, with a tiny button of a nose and a shock of black fluff. What was she to say to Janie?

When she finally turned back to the bed, however, Janie herself was looking at her with a wicked gleam in her brown eyes. ‘Don’t say it, Nan! Don’t perjure yourself for my sake! *No* new babies are ever beautiful—except to their mothers. But you wait a week or two and then you’ll be as proud as a peacock with ten tails of your handsome godson!’

‘How did you know?’ Nan gasped.

Janie chuckled. ‘Never, as long as I live, shall I forget Julian’s face when he first saw Julie. I know *all* about it from experience. Now, I see dismissal for you in Nurse’s eye—’

‘Well, my dear,’ Nurse said with a motherly smile, ‘it would be as well for you to have another nice nap. Miss Blakeney shall come tomorrow and pay you a longer visit. But now I think she should go.’

‘O.K.; I’ll agree for today. Kiss me good-bye, Godmamma, and go home and tell the children they’ve a little brother Barney.’

Nan was obedient; but after that, the visits grew longer and longer until at the end of the week, the whole family came home again. After that, it seemed no time, as Nan said, before Janie was able to be up in her room.

Then she came downstairs, and when Barney was a month old, Nan held him at the font and proudly pronounced his names—Barnabas Julian.

‘Yes?’ Janie had said. ‘I like the idea of Barnabas; and since he has one of his Daddy’s names, why not the other? We’ll just switch it round. I don’t want two Julians in the family—too muddling.’

So it had been settled. Janie declared that she was bitterly disappointed that he hadn’t been twins and that his eyes would be as dark as Julie’s before long. Apart from that, so she said, she was delighted with her new son.

The most disappointed person was John, however. He had been delighted to hear that he had a brother, but when he saw the said brother, his face lengthened and he turned to his father disgustedly.

‘Is *vat* my bruvver? Why, he’s no use at all! *He* can’t play wif me!’

‘He will—as soon as you learn to say your t-h’s properly perhaps,’ Janie assured him. You’re six now, John. You try. And anyhow, you have Robin and Dickon to play with. Give Barney a chance. He’s too new yet.’

But John was disillusioned and refused to take much interest in a creature that did nothing but eat and sleep.

‘There’s only one thing that annoys me,’ Nan said as they sat at tea.

‘What’s that?’ Elizabeth Ozanne asked.

‘Why, that we weren’t rung up as soon as he came. When I rang Les Arbres at twelve that morning, they only said that Janie was all right and I thought nothing had happened yet, and Barney had been there a good half-hour then.’

‘That was me,’ the doctor said sweetly. ‘I didn’t want any commotion in the house. Janie had managed beautifully. Even Julian didn’t know what was up until we finally sent for the two of you. Janie had a good sleep and was feeling fit when you did come and that was what she wanted. *And* what I wanted. Hello! Here’s the telegraph boy coming. More congratulations to the proud parents!’

But it was for Nan, a cable from Jamaica. David was coming home as his ship had been damaged and needed to refit properly.

‘Is that going to be the next thing?’ Julian demanded of his wife later on when the party had broken up and Nan had gone into the garden to put the deck-chairs away.

‘Not for a year or two yet if I can manage it,’ Janie replied. ‘Nan’s coming along nicely now, but she’s going to see something of other men before I’ll agree to that. But when she’s—say twenty, I might agree if you do. David’s a nice boy, but she must know him a good deal better than she does at present before I’ll agree to even an engagement. And, thank Heaven, she’s willing to take advice.’

‘And if she weren’t, you’d pitch in and forbid the banns,’ he said, laughing.

‘I’d certainly try to,’ she agreed. ‘All the same, if they’re both of the same mind a year hence, I don’t say I won’t say, “Bless you, my children!” In fact, I’m quite prepared to do it. I want Nan to have the very best, just as I have.’ She looked up at him with a sudden light in her eyes. ‘If David’s the best for her, she shall have him. If not—’

‘If not,’ he said, ‘that’s where Janie will step in once more.’

‘You’ve said it!’ Then she suddenly smiled at him. ‘All the same, judging by what I see of it, I rather think that this will be one time when Janie will not *need* to step in!’

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Janie Steps In* by Elinor Mary Brent-Dyer]