

TOMBOYS
AT THE
ABBEY

Elsie J.
Oxenham

THE ABBEY



SCHOOL SERIES

COLLINS

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TOMBOYS AT THE ABBEY

by

ELSIE J. OXENHAM



COLLINS
LONDON AND GLASGOW

First printed in this edition 1960

TO
MY GREAT-NIECES
DEBORAH AND SARA
WITH EVERY GOOD WISH
AND HOPING THEY WILL GROW UP
TO BE LOVERS OF BOOKS

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CHAPTER 1

TELLING JOAN

“What’s the matter with Jenny-Wren?” Joy asked.

“Nothing, so far as I know. She was all right ten minutes ago. Why, Joy?”

“I saw her just now and she looked gloomy, to put it mildly. Here she comes, to tell you all about it.”

The crowning of the May Queen was over. Beatrice, the new queen of the Hamlet Club, was displaying her gaudy train of striped red, green and yellow, and showing how it matched her bunch of tulips. The elder Queens were strolling about the school hall, talking with friends. Joy, the Fourth Queen, wore a bright green robe, a vivid contrast to her dark red hair, which was coiled over her ears under a crown of young beech leaves. Joan, the Fifth Queen, wore violet, with a wreath of white and blue, and her hair of the same beautiful red made a crown round her head. Joan and Joy, the Abbey girls, were cousins, but were as much alike as if they had been twins; as, indeed, their fathers had been.

Joan looked round for her maid-of-honour, Jen Robins, whom she had dismissed some time before, with orders to go and dance with the rest. Jen was nearly sixteen, blue-eyed and tall, with two long yellow plaits on her shoulders, and she wore a white frock, with the violet girdle and collar which showed her to be Joan’s attendant.

She came now, slowly and looking downcast, from among a crowd of girls of her own form. “Can I speak to you, Joan?”

“You can, and you may. In fact, you must,” Joan said promptly. “What’s the matter? Has anything happened? You were jolly enough until you went to dance.”

“I know. But everything’s gone wrong. Joan-Queen, could you—I mean, would you? Of course, you could; I know that. Anybody else would do it just as well.”

Joan’s eyes filled with amusement. “If you’d explain, Jenny-Wren.”

“Would you let me off being your maid for the whole of this term?” Jen looked at her with eyes full of woe.

“Certainly not! I want you, and you don’t want to leave me. Who has been upsetting you? Do they want you for cricket again? I won’t allow it!”

“Oh, but I want to do it!” Jen cried. “Quite half of me wants it! It’s only—only——”

"Tell me more about this!" Joan commanded. "Who has been teasing you? You weren't thinking of going in for cricket ten minutes ago."

"No, but—oh, Joan, it's Jack! It's too awful; I can't believe it yet."

Joan took her arm and led her firmly to the decorated chair on the platform which had been her throne during the crowning ceremony. "Sit down; take Joy's throne! Now tell me about this. What has Jacky-boy been doing?"

"She's leaving; going to live in London." Jen caught her breath and spoke unsteadily. "She's just told me. We've been chums since my first day at school; the day I saw you crowned. Jack's going away, Joan."

"Oh! Oh, what a pity!" Joan cried, in ready sympathy. "Why is it, Jen?"

"Her father's going into partnership with an awfully important doctor in London; in Harley Street. It's a big thing for him, but it means they'll have to live in town. They're moving at once. Jack's to be a boarder here, for this term; then she'll go to a day-school in London."

"I see," Joan said slowly. "You'll have her for one more term. And—yes, I understand. You want to be with her as much as you can, and so you'd like to join in her cricket. Is that it?"

"I'd be with her so much more. Jack cares for cricket more than anything. She'd like me to be in the team with her," Jen pleaded. "She thinks they'd have me. Did you mean it when you said you wouldn't let me go?"

"I'm sure they'll have you. They'll be glad to get their demon bowler back, if you can still manage Jandy Mac's magic twist. Of course, I didn't mean it. I thought they had been teasing you again, and I wanted to protect you."

"Nice of you," Jen said fervently. "I hoped it was only that. But you see how I feel about Jack, don't you?"

"I'm terribly sorry about Jack. And I do understand. You want to stand by her."

"It's not quite as important as when she was captain of the junior team and she thought I could help her to win her matches," Jen admitted. "But she's in the school team now, and she'd like me to go in with her, if they think I'm good enough."

"Not much doubt of that! Your fame as a bowler, in your very young days"—and Joan smiled into Jen's troubled face—"must have reached Sylvia; she's captain this term, isn't she? She'll be glad to have you. You'll be with Jack in all the practices and sports meetings; yes, I think you must do it, Jen. Jack will love to have you."

"She does want me," Jen agreed. "And I like cricket all right. But I do hate leaving you!"

"But we've had the coronation," Joan reminded her. "There may not be anything important for the Queens to do all term. It won't matter so very much."

"No, but I liked to feel I was your maid and that you'd ask me, before anybody else, if there was anything I could do to help you. But we've had to-day, of course. Jack was awfully decent; she didn't tell me the horrible news till the crowning was over, for fear it would be spoiled for me. And it would have been; I shouldn't have been able to forget."

"That was thoughtful of Jacky-boy. And she's to be a boarder for this term? Oh, then you'll be with her all the time; jolly for you both!"

"Jack doesn't think so; she hates the thought of being a boarder. She's always been a day-girl, and she likes living at home."

"She was a boarder once, when the school came to live at the Hall—in your first term," Joan reminded her. "Jack seemed quite happy then."

"Oh, but that was different. It didn't seem like school. You and Joy were so terribly kind! Jack doesn't want to live with her headmistress all the time."

"She might live with a much worse Head than Miss Macey. Tell her to cheer up! She'll be glad to hear she's to have you for cricket."

"Yes, I think it will help. Who will be your new maid?"

"You shall choose one for me, when I need one. At present I can do without a maid very well. Come and help me to undress! And then I'll dismiss you and you can go and tell Jack."

"My last job for you, for the whole term!" Jen said sadly, as she helped to fold the violet robe and to put Joan into her big coat, covering her long white frock for the car ride home. "I say, Joan, there's a new kid, an infant of eleven, who'd be a jolly maid for you, and it would cheer her up to be asked. She lives in the town, and she's terribly shy and scared. She's called Anne; if she's Queen one day, wouldn't it be odd to have Queen Anne?"

"I think it would be nice! But if Anne is only eleven, you needn't worry about Queen Anne for several years yet. Do you really think it would please her to be asked to be a maid?"

"I know it would. I saw her watching the procession, from the gallery, and her eyes were just popping out."

"Not quite, I hope! Fetch her, then, and I'll ask her. It would be fun to have a tiny maid."

"I'm afraid she won't be much help to you. She couldn't possibly dress you," and Jen paused in the doorway. "She's far too small."

"I can dress myself. And I've had an idea." Joan's tone became mysterious. "Anne will be my maid and you'll play cricket. But if there's

anything during the summer that means dressing-up, you will slip in and help Anne to help me. How's that, Jenny-Wren?"

Jen looked at her and exploded in a burst of laughter. "Joan! I won't be called your maid, but I'll be it—or her—all the same. Oh yes! How lovely of you, Joan! I'll go and find Anne." And she raced off, chuckling.

"You seem to have cheered up Mrs. Wren quite a lot." Joy came in to take off her crown and train. "What's the trouble?"

"I'll tell you the story in the car. At the moment, I'm conspiring with Jen to go behind the school rules. Don't say anything! You'll hear about it later. Jen is resigning her job as my maid, for the summer term, and she bringing along a new candidate for the post."

Joy whistled. "What's up?"

"Here she is!" Jen ushered in a small dark girl, with shy eyes and short brown hair. "Here's Anne, Joan-Queen!"

"That scrap? She only comes up to your waist!" Joy protested.

"A little higher than that. Will you be my maid, and carry my train, if there's a procession of Queens again this summer, Anne? Jen is going to be busy, and I shall be left without a maid. Would you like to help me?"

Anne's eyes rested on her worshipfully. "Yes, please."

"Then don't be shy. I'm not really frightening, am I, Jen?"

"Not often," Jen grinned. "But Anne will have to join the Hamlet Club, if she's a maid."

"And learn to dance," Joan agreed. "Will you do that, Anne?"

"Yes, please," Anne whispered, quite overcome by the presence of two Queens who were grown-up old girls of the school.

"Some day you must come to tea with us, and then you'll get to know us, and you'll be able to say more than, 'Yes, please,' won't you? You must ask your mother, but I don't think she'll say 'No'. All right, Anne! I'm sure you'll be a very nice maid. But it's only for this term, you know. It's really Jen's job, and she'll come back to me after the holidays. We must try to have one procession for you!"

"There's the summer fête. She'll have that," Jen said. "Come on, young Anne! You're really adopted into the school now, so you mustn't go on being shy. Come and tell the rest of your crowd that you're to be Queen Joan's maid for this term!"

"I haven't got a—a crowd," Anne objected.

"Oh, but you will have now. I'll see to that! They'll all want to know what Joan said to you. And you must find your mother and ask her. I've got to talk to Jack." And Jen took Anne firmly by the arm and led her away, leaving the Abbey girls looking at one another.

They would have been still more amused if they could have foreseen that seventeen years later, Jen's nine-year-old daughter would be comforting Anne's shy little girl of eight years old, on her first day at school.

CHAPTER 2

TELLING JACK

“You lot! Anne’s in your form, isn’t she? She’s going to be Joan’s maid for this term; I’m going in for cricket. She’ll tell you all about it.” And Jen was gone, whirling away to find her chum.

“Tell us why!” The juniors crowded round the embarrassed, but proud and happy, Anne. “What did Joan Shirley say? What does Jen Robins mean? Lucky you, to be a maid, when you’re new and such a kid!”

“I’m not such a kid as all that,” Anne retorted, finding her tongue and a new sense of importance at the same time.

The ex-Queen, Nesta, came across to the group. “You seem thrilled about something! What’s up?”

They told her what was up, in an excited chorus.

Nesta raised her brows. “Jen’s going to play cricket? I must inquire into this. Anne—is that your name?—Anne, it’s a great honour to be in the procession. See that you’re good enough. We wouldn’t like to have to tell Joan Shirley she couldn’t have you, because you were always assing about and getting into rows.”

“I won’t, please, Silver Queen.” Anne had become suddenly meek again.

The Silver Queen laughed. “My name’s Nesta, and my nickname is Honesty. All right, but remember! Help her not to forget, all of you. She’s very small and new; I wonder why Joan chose her? We can’t have her letting down the Queens!” And she gathered up her shining silver robe, with its purple border decorated with round white honesty pennies, and went in search of Jen and Jack.

But it was not easy to find them. Jack, a picture of depression, still sat in the gallery, her chin resting on the railing, her gloomy eyes on the gay crowd below. She was slim and neat, with black hair cut like a page-boy’s and very smooth and shining; she wore the regulation white frock necessary for these occasions, but she looked anything but festive.

Jen fell on her from behind. “Cheer up! You’re blue enough to turn the milk sour. It won’t be so bad being a boarder.”

“It will be beastly,” Jack retorted. “You’ll go messing about with those kids, teaching them silly games, and you’ll be running off to stay with Joan, and learning new dances and dressing up, and I shall hardly see you.” She was friendly with all the girls and especially with those who belonged to the

Sports Club, but Jen was her chum, and Jen was a keen member of the Hamlet Club and was apt to be preoccupied during the summer term.

"Come into a corner and listen to me," Jen commanded, and drew her to the back of the gallery.

"Now, listen, Jacqueline Wilmot, and then apologise."

"I'm sure I shan't! And don't call me that! If you do I shall call you Janet."

"Oh, pax!" Jen said hurriedly. "Anything to avoid Janet! All right, Jacky-boy, but do listen! I can't do anything about my babies; I must go on teaching them—I couldn't let them down. And everybody says they'll have to do some games at the fête again, as people loved them so much last year. But all the rest that you said is rot, so you needn't go on being so gloomy. I've asked Joan to let me off, for this summer, and I've found her a new maid, and I'm going in for cricket with you, if you can get my bowling good enough. Now will you apologise?"

Jack rose solemnly from the form on to which she had been firmly thrust, and grasped her friend's hand. "You brick! You absolute angel! Is it true? Will you really do it?" Her eyes were suddenly radiant and she shook Jen's hand fervently.

"I will—for you. I wouldn't, for anybody else," Jen assured her.

"I apologise several million times! You are jolly decent! I say! Look out! I must do something about it!" And in the narrow space between the wall and the seats she began to turn cartwheels on her hands.

"Jacky-boy! Not in your white frock!" Jen cried.

Jack came upright again. "Not much room here. It's not the frock that matters but what shows underneath; not like gym things. But it doesn't matter for you. I had to—to express my feelings. Is it really true? But don't you mind frightfully? They'll learn new dances at their practices and you'll be left out. Can you bear it?"

"I'm quick at picking up figures," Jen said haughtily. "Joan will tell me about the dances. If I see her," she added, realising the new state of things suddenly.

Her face fell and she was silent, while Jack eyed her anxiously.

Jen gave herself a little shake. "I'm sure to see Joan sometimes. She'll tell me what dances they are doing."

Jack's face cleared. "I was afraid you were going to change your mind. It is good of you, Jen! I'm terribly touched and grateful. It will make this term altogether different. Am I a pig to let you do it? You'll have all winter for dancing, when I've gone to that loathly London day-school."

Jen's arm went round her in sympathy and she squeezed Jack tightly. "I'm afraid we can't do anything about that, old dear. You must put up with

it, if it's what your people want. But we can make this term quite jolly, with heaps of cricket. We'll win every match for the school, between us. You will crit. my bowling, won't you? I must have gone off a bit, but I expect it will come back, if I slog at it and if you watch and tell me, if I slack."

"I'll do that!" Jack promised. "I say, Jenny-Wren! I love you quite a lot. I feel different about things now. I believe I'll have a good term for my last, after all."

"I'm going to see that you do," Jen told her.

"You're sure you won't go feeling mournful about Joan and the dancing?"

"I'm going to be thrilled about you and cricket. I *like* cricket! But dancing has always seemed to matter more, to me. I'm going to revive that twist Jandy Mac taught me and see if I can take seven wickets in every match—if they'll have me in the team!"

"You'll do it," Jack said, with conviction, her face aglow.

"Don't be too sure!" Jen cried, in sudden anxiety. "It may not come off and then you'll be disappointed."

"It will come off all right. Does Joan mind?"

"Not really. She said I ought to stand by you. I've found her another maid, a new kid called Anne. Some day she ought to be Queen and then she'll be Queen Anne."

"Don't put it into her head! You can't go choosing Queens for the Club like that. Why don't they have you for Queen?" Jack demanded. "I'm jolly glad they haven't bagged you, for you couldn't have escaped for cricket, if you'd been the Queen. But, all the same, I think you ought to be Queen. You'd do it quite as well as Beetle."

"Beetle has been here heaps longer than I have," Jen explained. "Perhaps if I stay for years and years—but even then they'd never want me; I don't see why they should. I can't see myself as Queen! And I don't believe I shall be here for years and years. Mother keeps throwing out hints about wanting me at home for company, and Daddy reminds me that I'm the only daughter of the house and that all the boys have gone away, either married or living in other countries. I don't want to leave school yet, but I do see that they might feel I was needed at home."

"Leave school!" Jack jeered. "You don't know enough about anything yet, not by a very long way. You'll need at least two years more. There's plenty of time for you to be Queen."

"I'd like it, of course," Jen confessed. "And I'd like two years more. But I don't believe I shall have them. Daddy's more gloomy each time I leave home."

“The old school would seem queer without either you or me in it,” Jack observed. “Oh well! Other people have to decide all that. They’ve fixed things up for me and they’ll do it for you when the time comes.”

“Why didn’t you go to the new school at once? Then you wouldn’t have needed to be a boarder. I know you hate the thought of it.”

“Couldn’t take me; full up,” Jack said briefly. “There’ll be vacancies after the summer. I’m booked all right.”

“I’m jolly glad they couldn’t take you,” Jen acknowledged. “If I’d come back and found you weren’t here and I was never to see you again, I’d merely have died of grief. Things are bad enough, but at least we’ll have this term.”

“Won’t I ever see you again, after July?” Jack asked, in horrified dismay.

Jen squeezed her arm, deeply moved by the terror in Jack’s voice. “For sure you will, old chap. We’ll arrange something. I’ll come to stay with you in London and we’ll do the Tower and Madame Tussaud’s. And you’ll come to us, and we’ll ramble on the moors and roll in the heather. I’m not going to lose you for ever; don’t you think it! Now oughtn’t we to go and ask Sylvia if she’ll propose me as a temporary member of the Sports Club? They let me do that before, for a term.”

“And a lot of use you were!” Jack scoffed. “Oh, I know you shone in two or three matches. But what about that sprained ankle? And getting yourself into quarantine for measles?”

“You were in quarantine too,” Jen retorted. “We had some sport, didn’t we? I can’t ask Sylvia if she’ll have me in the team, but I can ask if I may join the club and practise with you.”

“Sylvia will have you. And I shall say you ought to be in the team. But you’ll have to work up your bowling again,” Jack said earnestly, as they went in search of the cricket captain.

CHAPTER 3

TELLING JOY

"What's all this about a new maid?" Joy demanded, as they drove home after the crowning. For once she was not at the wheel; her aunt and guardian, Joan's mother, Mrs. Shirley, had insisted that she should not drive after the excitement of the ceremony, and Joy had admitted that it would be a nuisance to change as completely as would be necessary.

"You couldn't drive in a long white dress, looking like a bridesmaid," Joan had pointed out.

Joy had agreed, and the girls wore their coats over their gowns, and Billy, the young chauffeur, drove the car.

Joy sat beside him, but had turned in her seat to ask her question. Joan explained, and Joy pursed her lips.

"Hard lines on Jenny-Wren and Jacky-boy! Bad luck that they should be parted. They're twin souls; they'll feel terrible."

"They'll have to part sometime." Joan's matter-of-fact common sense spoke out.

"It needn't have been so soon. The Wilmots might have let Jack be a boarder for a year or two, instead of sending her to a new place."

"She's an only girl, just as Jen is. I suppose they couldn't bear to part with her."

Joy gave a groan of disapproval. "Hard on the kids! I feel for them."

"So do I," Joan agreed. "But somehow I didn't think you would sympathise so much."

"I wouldn't have liked to be parted from you for good and all, when I was sixteen."

"Oh!" Joan said, considerably startled, for Joy did not often show her feelings. She glanced at her mother, who smiled but did not speak.

Joy sat staring ahead and said no more. When Joan broke the silence it was to return to the schoolgirls and their trouble.

"Perhaps in the holidays we could invite both Jen and Jack and give them a jolly time together, Joy."

"Oh, sure! We must do that. But don't talk! I want to think."

Joan raised her brows and lapsed into silence also. "Any result from this prolonged period of thought?" she asked, as they drove up the beech avenue to the Hall.

"Tell you later." Joy cast a proud happy look at her house. She had inherited it from her grandfather four years ago, when she was fifteen, and the inheritance had been quite unexpected. She still felt a sense of surprise that it should be her own and she was still rejoicing in its possession. Joan, one month older, had been left the Abbey ruins in the grounds of the Hall, and she loved the Abbey as much as Joy loved the house.

They ran upstairs to change into shorter frocks and to tidy their hair, and Mrs. Shirley, going to her own room, heard Joy's comment, "Crowns of violets and beech leaves may look very beautiful, but when you take them off they do leave you in a mess."

"Yes, we can do with some tidying," Joan agreed, and did not ask any more questions. Something was working in Joy; they would hear about it in due course.

It was at night, as they sat over the fire, for May-day could be cold, that Joy spoke.

"I've had an idea. But I don't know if it's sensible or possible."

"You could tell us, and we could talk it over," Mrs. Shirley suggested.

"Yes, Auntie dear. But please be kind and say you like my plan."

Joan laughed, lying back in a big chair and gazing at the fire. "*Joy dear!* Neither Mother nor I will say one word till we know what your plan is."

"I know you won't. You're both cautious, and sensible, and perhaps a little stodgy."

"*Joy!* What a thing to call us!"

"Oh well, I'll take it back. But I've a feeling that my plan isn't cautious, and perhaps it isn't sensible, but it certainly couldn't be called stodgy. Quite the opposite!"

Joan addressed the dancing flames. "In time, if we're patient, we may hear all about it."

"What is your plan, my dear?" Mrs. Shirley looked at Joy.

The direct question from the aunt she adored brought an instant response. "Why shouldn't we ask those two poor kids here for the summer? They'd have far more of one another than they will at school. They could cycle to town each day; Jen's used to it. I believe they'd love it."

Joan's exclamation was echoed by her mother's startled cry. "*Joy dear!* What a very strange idea!"

"I know. But it isn't really, when you think about it."

"The girls would love it, of course," Joan began, as her mother looked doubtful. "But there's no need, Joy. They're to be together all summer."

"They'd like it much better if they were together here than if they were together at school."

"I'm sure they would. But what would the Head say? She's a dear and tremendously kind, but I don't know that she's as kind as all that."

"She let Jen come here for the whole of last summer, and for the autumn term too."

"Yes, but it was because we really needed her; in the summer to look after Rykie for us, and in the autumn to be company for Selma. Jen was the greatest possible use both times. But we can't say we need her help now."

"That's partly the point," Joy argued, while Mrs. Shirley listened attentively. "Having asked her twice for our own sake, because we felt she would be useful, I think we ought to ask her at least once because it will be useful to her."

"I see that," Joan agreed. "But will Miss Macey see it?"

"You'll have to talk her round," Joy explained. "She likes you. You've talked her into it twice already."

"I! It's your idea. And there are Mrs. Wilmot and Jen's people to be consulted too."

"I believe Mrs. Wilmot will be pleased. She's never been keen on sending Jack to be a boarder. She only allowed it once, in Jen's first term, when the school came here; and that wasn't really boarding-school at all. I'm sure she'd be glad and relieved, if we asked Jack here. And you know quite well what Mrs. Robins will say. She's been delighted to let Jen live with us."

"Do you yourself want the children to come, Joy?" Mrs. Shirley asked, with the directness of approach which Joan had learned from her.

"Don't call them children, Auntie dear. They're nearly sixteen; you'll hurt their feelings," Joy protested.

"They seem like children to me. Do you really want them?"

"That's the important point," Joan agreed. "You said Rykie must be my job, because she was my cousin; but this is entirely your idea. They mustn't come unless you're keen to have them, Joy."

"Well, I am keen. Yes, Auntie, I do want them. I think it would be fun," Joy said defiantly. "Some young life about the place and all that. Jen and Jack can be great sport, if they aren't too much on their good behaviour. It would cheer us all up to have them."

"I didn't know you were feeling so dull! What do you want to do? Pillow-fights at night? Perhaps I could oblige," Joan mocked.

Joy's eyes gleamed. "I might come to that; you never know! But I do think it would be fun to have two school people here. We'd hear all that's going on. When I was watching the girls to-day I had a wild spasm of longing to be back at school."

"You weren't so keen while you were there!"

“Oh, I don’t want to work! But I’d like the fun of the crowd and lots of things happening. Wouldn’t you like it, if we could go back to school?”

“I don’t know that I should,” Joan laughed. “I’m quite content to be grown-up; you evidently are not. Well, Mother dear, shall we try to find some young life for Joy’s sake?”

“Oh, not any young life! It must be Jen and Jacky-boy. You like them both, Auntie; you know you do.”

“I am always glad to have Jen here,” Mrs. Shirley said placidly. “I don’t know Jack as well as I know Jen, but they are friends, so I am sure I should like Jack too.”

“They wouldn’t need any looking after,” Joy urged. “There’ll be school and prep.; and if I know Jack, every spare minute will be given to cricket practice. We’ll find them a pitch, but not on the front lawn! I shall join in; it will be a change from tennis. I’m convinced Jacky-boy will hoot at my bowling and scorn my batting, but I may be allowed to do a little fielding in the background.”

“Oh, if you’re going to play with the little children——!” Joan jeered.

“Listen to granny! Of course I shall play, if they’ll have me. It would be good for you to join in too. You’re positively middle-aged,” Joy retorted. “And you aren’t twenty yet. Are you coming with me to see the Head? It’s no use writing to Mrs. Wilmot until Miss Macey has agreed.”

Joan looked at her mother. “If everybody is willing, may they come, Mother dear? It will please Jen so much, and I’d really like to do something for her. She’s trying so hard to be good to Jack and to comfort her.”

“I am willing, if you girls will take the responsibility, and if you can win Miss Macey’s consent,” Mrs. Shirley said.

“I can see only one thing against it,” Joan began solemnly. “I’m not at all sure of the effect on Joy. She has a wild streak in her, though we haven’t seen much of it lately; if Jacky-boy excites it, there’s no saying what may happen.”

Joy rose, in offended dignity, and threatened her with a cushion. “Unsay those harsh words! A wild streak! I’ll show you! At least, I’m not old and stodgy before my time! Wild, indeed! What about this?” and she strode to her piano and began to dash off the noisiest country-dances she could think of, at full speed, till both Joan and Mrs. Shirley cried for mercy.

“Oh, Joy, stop! I want to do them all, but not as fast as that!” Joan begged.

Suddenly Joy was lost in a Brahms waltz and then in a lullaby. She drifted into a Chopin Nocturne, and Mrs. Shirley smiled in pleasure, as she looked across at Joan.

Joan nodded; Joy's artist side had come uppermost, and she was herself again.

Joan lay back in her big chair and gazed dreamily at the leaping flames, and thought of the crowning and dancing, the maypole and the Queens; of the married first Queen of the Hamlet Club, Miriam; of the President, Cicely, who spent much time in travelling with her father to Ceylon; of the recent Queens, Muriel and Nesta, and of Beatrice, "Beetle," or Queen Bee, who must now carry on the tradition.

"She'll do it very well. She was always a kind helpful sort of person. . . . How I hope we shall see Jen as Queen some day! And how I wonder what will be the result—on Joy, especially—if Jen and Jack come here! I don't think we shall be dull; Joy may be indignant, but she has that wild, very young, side. She took very little notice of Rykie, but Jack and Jen will play up to her. Anything may happen!"

CHAPTER 4

TELLING JEN

Miss Macey was kind-hearted and she had a warm feeling for Joy, who had come to the rescue of the school at a crisis, with an offer of hospitality. But her kindness had limits, and she was astonished and a little doubtful when the new idea was put to her.

"But the girls will do very well here, my dear Joy! It sounds as if you thought we would not be good to them!"

"I didn't mean that!" Joy cried hurriedly. "It's only—well, you see"—she stumbled and cast an agonised look at Joan.

Joan had insisted that the proposal should come from Joy, but now she felt it was time to take a hand.

"We have had so much help from Jen, all last summer and autumn, Miss Macey. We really would like to repay her, and this seems a way to do it. We know she would be all right at school, but it means a lot to girls to be together and away from the crowd, and she and Jack are such close friends. It would make them very happy to have these three months as day girls, cycling to school every morning. And we'd like to have them so much. It would be a kindness to us too, if they could come."

"We're so terribly sorry to have left school," Joy said diplomatically. "Every May-day makes us feel cut off from the girls. We'd like to be more in touch with you all."

"That could be remedied." Miss Macey's eyes twinkled. "I have thought of starting a senior course for girls who have left, to include domestic subjects—cookery and needlework and house-wifery. Perhaps I should hurry on with the idea, so that you could come back to school for a few terms? You could brush up your French as well."

Joan laughed at the horror in Joy's face, and Miss Macey's smile deepened.

"I didn't mean that exactly. I shouldn't have time. I'm giving every minute to music," Joy said hastily, growing scarlet in dismay. "And I might not like it; I'm not good at house stunts. But it would be useful for Joan!"—in revenge for Joan's laughter.

"Thanks, but I'm learning the 'house stunts' at home. Mother sees to that," Joan retorted. "I'm really quite domesticated, Miss Macey."

"Preparing for a home of your own some day?" the Head smiled.

"I don't think so. I don't see any sign of it. But I do try to relieve Mother as much as I can."

"How is Mrs. Shirley? I thought she looked very well at the coronation."

"Oh, yes! She's splendid; ever so much stronger. We're beginning to see the result of these quiet years and a settled happy life," Joan said eagerly.

"What does she say about this wild plan of Joy's?"

"She likes the idea," Joan assured her. "She is very fond of Jen and very grateful to her for her help last year. She would like to welcome her to the house for her own sake this time."

"I see your point," Miss Macey admitted. "But I shall have to think about it and to write to Mrs. Wilmot and Mrs. Robins. I feel you should write also."

"Oh, we will! Then you'd agree, if the mothers are willing?"

"I might. But, as I say, I must think it over carefully. You will not say anything to the girls at present, of course."

"Oh, no! Thank you very much, Miss Macey."

"But if they're to come to us, you'll let us tell them ourselves? Oh, please!" Joy begged.

The Head laughed. "That will be only fair. I'm not sure that I approve. It seems very unnecessary."

"But it's Jack's last term!" Joy pleaded. "It would be such a comfort to the kids!—well, the girls, then! I'm sorry."

"That's better," Miss Macey said severely. "I hope if the girls come to you they will remember they are no longer children and will behave themselves and not worry Mrs. Shirley."

"Jen will never worry her. She's much too fond of her," Joan said quickly. "Then may we write to Mrs. Wilmot? We'll ask Mrs. Robins, too, but we feel sure she will let Jen come. But we couldn't write to them without your consent."

"You may write," Miss Macey said. "But my permission depends, as before, on punctuality at school and on homework properly prepared."

"I'm sure the girls will be careful," Joan promised.

Miss Macey's eyes twinkled again. "I will forgive the girls for being late, if you have another burglar alarm, but not for any other reason."

"Then let's hope they are never late," Joy said fervently. "We don't want any more burglars. We won't ask to see Jen to-day. I'm sure I would say something I shouldn't. We'll rush home and write those letters."

The answers from Mrs. Robins and Mrs. Wilmot were almost identical. If Miss Macey gave permission, the mothers would be delighted to agree to the plan; but the Head's consent was necessary.

“Miss Macey didn’t promise,” Joan reminded Joy, who had whooped with delight on reading the letters.

“But she’s going to agree. I saw it in her eyes.” Joy ran to the telephone to make an appointment with the headmistress.

“I believe Mrs. Wilmot’s really terribly bucked to think of Jack living here,” she said, coming back to Joan and Mrs. Shirley. “You see what she says about a summer in country air being so much better than the whole term in town! Jack hasn’t been too strong sometimes.”

“We must see that the girls spend all their spare time out of doors,” Mrs. Shirley said.

“There’ll be no trouble about that,” Joy laughed. “It will be nothing but cricket with Jack.”

“They can do their prep. sitting out under the trees,” Joan suggested.

“And how much prep. will they do?” Joy scoffed. “If they’re anything like me—like I used to be, I mean—they’d be much better shut in the library till the work’s done. The Head will see us to-morrow afternoon, Joan. She’s heard from the mothers too, and she says it all seems quite satisfactory.”

“Then she’s going to agree. Jolly for everybody,” Joan assented.

By Miss Macey’s permission, when they left her study next day, they went to the playing-field, where practice was in progress.

Jen saw them before anyone else, and basely forsaking Jack, to whom she was bowling, she came racing across the grass, her plaits and her green girdle flying, her legs looking longer than ever in her very short blue tunic.

“Joan! And Joy too! What fun to see you! Have you come for some cricket? I’ll bowl to you! Jack says I’m improving; I’d gone off a bit, but that twist is coming back. Take Jack’s bat and see if you can stand up to my balls!”

“We haven’t come for cricket.” Joan managed to edge in a word. “We’ve come to ask if you would like to live with us all summer and cycle to school every day, as you did when Rykie was here?”

Joy looked at Jen expectantly, awaiting her well-known shriek of joy.

But Jen’s response to the invitation was unexpected. She drew back and stared at the Abbey girls.

“Oh, I couldn’t! I’d love it, of course; you know that. But I couldn’t let Jack down. She’s counting on having me for company. I didn’t think you’d ask me to do that, Joan.”

“Idiot! As if we would!” Joy exploded. “You ought to know us better, you silly kid.”

“I wouldn’t do it, Jen,” Joan cried. “I put it clumsily; I’m sorry. We want you both, you and Jack together, of course.”

Jen gave a wild whoop and turned a somersault on the grass. "Joan! Angel! Darling! Do you really mean it? Both of us?—oh, gosh! What a time we'll have! But will the Head let us go? Have you asked her? Oh, Joan, don't dash the cup of joy from our lips! I just couldn't bear it."

"Of course, we've spoken to Miss Macey! What do you take us for?" Joan asked indignantly.

"Absolute angels! I'd never have believed anyone could be so kind. Who thought of it first? You, I suppose, Joan dear," with an adoring glance at her Queen.

"Well, I didn't. It was Joy's idea, first and last and all the time, though Mother and I agreed it was a very jolly one."

Jen whirled round on Joy. "You thought of it? I say, you're tons nicer than I thought! It sounds much more like Joan than you."

"How rude!" Joan exclaimed.

Joy had flushed. "Sorry you feel like that. I did think of it, all on my own, and I've spent ages writing to your mothers and interviewing the Head."

"It wasn't rude," Jen said earnestly. "It was really a big compliment. I never dreamt you could be such a sport. Is it true? I'm going to love you for ever, if it is."

"I'll risk even that. It's true enough. When will you come?"

"Now!" Jen shouted. "Did Mrs. Wilmot say yes? I know what Mother said!"

"Everybody said yes, though the Head can't see any reason for it," Joan remarked. "She's inclined to be hurt, because we think you'd be happier with us than with her."

"She's right there," Jen chuckled. She slipped her hand through Joy's arm. "You aren't really upset because I was surprised, are you? Don't you see how nice it is to have shown somebody how simply marvellous you can be? I know you're awfully kind about asking people to your house, but somehow I didn't think you cared about me as much as all that. I don't see why you should."

"Because you're such a good little girl, perhaps." Joy's indignation melted before her pleading tone. "All right, Jenny-Wren. I'll let you come, and I'll show you that I can have ideas, nice or otherwise."

Jen stared at her, fascinated. "What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing, I hope," Joan said promptly.

"Wait and see," Joy retorted. "Aren't you going to tell Jacky-boy? Perhaps she won't want to leave this happy spot?"

"You try her!" Jen shouted, and raced off to the nets, where Jack stood, watching and wondering.

CHAPTER 5

TELLING THE SCHOOL

Joan and Joy followed, curious to hear how Jack received the news. They heard her indignant comment—"Why did you go head over heels like that? You looked quite mad!"

But the news was told before the elder girls reached the nets, Jen pouring out the glorious prospect before them in a torrent of words.

Jack came to meet the Abbey girls, bat under her arm. "Is it true? Or is this child quite off her head? She looked like it, a moment ago. You won't really have us, will you?"

"Your hostess and—and inviter." Joan waved her hand at Joy.

"What a word! Would you like to come, Jacky-boy? It will mean hours of cycling, or the train in bad weather. But Jen seems to think it's worth it."

"Worth it! I should jolly well think so!" Jen cried.

Jack grasped Joy's hand and shook it fervently. It was her warmest way of expressing her feelings. "I shall love to come and stay with you. Thank you very much indeed; you're more than kind! I appreciate it deeply."

Then, her duty done, she flung away the bat and began to turn cartwheels on her hands.

"Oh, Jack!" Joan laughed. "You're worse than Jen!"

"I thought the beautiful speech wasn't natural," Joy scoffed.

Jack sat looking up at them, her short hair falling in her eyes. "Does Mother know? When she decided to send me here, she said how much she wished the school had been still at the Hall, as it was three years ago, when I was a boarder for a term. I guess she's pleased, isn't she?"

"We asked her, and she is willing you should come to us," Joy said primly.

"Then there's only one thing left to do," Jen announced. "But you'll have to tidy your hair before you do it."

"As for hair, go and look at yourself in a glass," Jack retorted. "What's the one thing? Start at once? Oh—pack, I suppose. We'll need some clothes, won't we?"

"No, thank the Head," Jen explained.

"Oh! Yes, I suppose we'd better do that. I do need you to keep me straight," Jack admitted. "Let's go now, shall we?"

"It's certainly the thing to do, but not the first thing," Joan remarked. "Go and tidy yourselves, before she sees you. You look like wild creatures."

“Come on!” Jack picked up her bat and seized Jen’s hand, and they raced together to the school.

“Where have they gone? What did you say to them?” The rest of the cricketers forsook their practice and came crowding round.

“Only invited them to come home with us for the summer,” Joy said airily. “Get over the shock as fast as you can.”

“Oh, but why? Oh, Joy, you didn’t really?” There was an envious shout.

“I did, really and truly. Why not? We want them, and they’ll be glad to get away from all you lot and be on their own.”

“Well, I think it’s a shame. Jen’s always going to stay with you! We want her here.”

Joan swept this aside. “Don’t be silly, Beetle. You’ve done without Jen for two summers and most of one winter—as a boarder, I mean. You’ll see her every day. Where’s my new little maid? Are you trying your hand at cricket, Anne? That’s all right, but you can’t do it in earnest, you know. You must join the Hamlet Club and learn to dance.”

“I want to, please, Queen. But Jen said I’d better learn to bowl, so she’s been teaching me.”

“Those kids were talking about queens and colours yesterday; I heard them,” the reigning queen, Beetle, said. “D’you know what that young maid of yours would choose, if she was ever queen?”

Joan looked at little Anne. “She needn’t bother about it for a few years; it’s a long way off. What would you choose, Anne?”

“Clover, please, Queen; pink clover,” Anne asserted.

“Just a weed!” Beatrice said scornfully.

“You could say that of Speedwell,” Joan retorted, referring to the queen who had come after her. “Clover pink would be pretty with Anne’s brown eyes and hair.”

“And white clovers round the edge of the train, and some four-leaved ones for luck,” Anne added eagerly.

Joan laughed. “You’ve plenty of time to change your mind in four or five years. I shouldn’t worry about it, if I were you.”

“I’m not worrying! But they asked me what I’d be.”

“Oh, I see! But you’ve a long way to go before you’ll be ready for that clover. Come to the next dance-practice and I’ll see if you’re going to make a good dancer.”

“Jen said she’d teach me,” Anne explained. “And then——”

“She can’t! She won’t be there!” There was a chorus from the cricketers.

“She remembered that afterwards,” Anne said, with dignity. “They’ve put her into the school team, because of her bowling, so she won’t have time for dancing. So she said she’d hand me over to the Silver Queen.”

"Nesta will take care of you, and so will I," Joan promised.

She and Joy were still talking to the crowd when Jen and Jack returned, looking most unnaturally neat but rather crestfallen.

"Won't the Head let you go? Serves you right!" Beetle jeered.

"The Head's delighted we should go," Jen said haughtily. She looked at Joan. "But we're not to go till Friday, after school. She wants us to—to see our clothes are in good order. As if they wouldn't be in order! We've just come back to school; our mothers saw to all that!"

"We thought we were going home with you right now, this very minute," Jack said limply, deeply disappointed.

"You couldn't expect to walk out just as you are," Joy said.

"I could pack in three minutes, if it was to go home with you," Jen told her.

"I'm going to Oxford for a music-lesson on Friday. I'll pick you up at half past four," Joy promised. "Mind you're ready on the tick, with everything packed and waiting."

"We'll be ready! Joy, you are an angel!"

"You wait!" Joy threatened. "You may not find me such an angel as you think."

Jack stared at her. "What do you mean? Joan, what does she mean?"

"I've no idea. It sounds most alarming," Joan said seriously. "I hope you won't have too much of her. You may wish you were back at school. Come along, Joy, before you talk any more nonsense. Jenny-Wren, these people want to get hold of you," waving her hand towards Nesta and Beatrice and the rest. "They don't approve of you at all. We'll leave you to their tender mercies."

"Oh, have you told them? I suppose they're green with envy?"

"Sylvia won't be exactly pleased," Beetle suggested indignantly. "She will say you're going to slack on your cricket. She wants you here, under her eye."

Jack looked at Joan. "You'll let us practise, won't you? Jen says it will be all right. I thought perhaps we ought not to go, because of cricket."

"You shall practise as much as you want—so long as you do your prep. first," Joan told her.

"And I shall field for you," Joy announced. "Cricket must come first. We quite understand that."

"Oh, Joy, will you? Oh, what a joke!"

"I'm quite prepared to be told I'm not good enough to bat or bowl with earnest players like you two, but I can perhaps run after your balls and save your legs in that way," Joy mocked. "You'd better go and reassure Sylvia. Your cricket practice will be all right; you shall choose a pitch as soon as

you arrive. Come on, Joan! You do talk an awful lot, when you come back to school!”

Joan threw a laughing look at Jen, who was breaking into an indignant protest. “Go and tell the rest of the school about your good luck. Remember to say it was Joy’s idea.”

“They’ll all rag us,” Jen said mournfully. “I wish we could go with you now, just to escape from them.”

“You must put up with that. I’m sure you can look after yourselves,” Joan laughed, and left them to face the protests and questions of the crowd.

“You won’t be too mad and crazy, will you, Joy?” she asked, as they drove homewards.

“What makes you think I shall be mad and crazy?” Joy demanded indignantly.

“The silly way you’ve been talking.”

“I had to excite the kids. They’re far more keen to come because I threw out a few hints.”

“What are you going to do? Put things in their beds?”

“I might, if I can’t think of anything more original.”

“Don’t be too infantile! You can be such a baby sometimes.”

“That,” Joy said solemnly, “is what I intend to prove to Jacky-boy. I think Jen knows—or at least guesses the worst.”

“Joy, please!”

“I won’t do anything to upset Auntie. Don’t worry!” was all Joy would say.

CHAPTER 6

JOY'S WELCOME

Not unnaturally, Jen and Jack looked hopefully at Joy, when she had tucked them and their luggage into the car on Friday afternoon.

But Joy was full of thoughts of her music lesson, which always exalted her into a state of high enjoyment and excitement. She was eager to reach home—to get tea over—to go to her piano and work out the new interpretation of certain music which had been given to her; she had eyes only for the road and was intent on making the best speed she could.

“Don’t chatter to me,” she commanded. “I’m busy.”

Her passengers looked at one another, disappointed and startled. But Joy’s face was so determined that they dared not interrupt, so sat silently behind her, their hope of surprises fading gloomily.

“She’s gone all grown-up,” Jen murmured sadly. “I hoped she wasn’t going to be any older than us—than we are!”

“Perhaps she’ll un-grow again presently,” Jack whispered.

Jen shook her head despondently. “I never saw her go on like that before. I don’t believe she’ll do it again.”

This was crushing, and Jack’s spirits fell still lower. “All the same, it’s marvellous to be here,” she said, as they drove up the beech avenue and saw the Hall before them.

Joy understood, and her lips twitched. She said nothing to relieve the gloom of her guests, but drew up before the big door, with a brief—“In you go! Billy will bring your bags and things.”

Joan came running out to welcome them and to lead them in to speak to Mrs. Shirley. “After tea, Jen must go into the Abbey to see the Mother Superior and Timmy. The Curate is here to greet you.”

The slim black cat with the square white patch under his chin came, purring, to rub on Jen’s legs. She picked him up and loved him, and he sang his joy at seeing her again.

“He really seems pleased to see you,” Mrs. Shirley smiled. “Jack, dear—I understand that is what I am to call you?—I hope you will be happy with us.”

“I know he’s pleased! He loves me,” Jen said fervently.

“I’m sure I shall. Thank you so much for letting me come. And please don’t call me Jacqueline!” Jack pleaded.

"I like Jacqueline; it is very pretty. But I won't use it, if it will make you feel more at home to be Jack."

"Or Jacky-boy," Jen added. "That's what I call her—out of the song, and because she looks like it, you know."

"Here comes tea." Joan invited them to the table. "After tea, the Abbey and the cats; and then we'll go and see the cricket pitch. It's all ready for you."

Jack gave her a radiant look. "Now I know why Jen adores you," she said.

"Because I offer you a cricket pitch?" Joan laughed.

"No, because you understand."

"Oh, but I know how important cricket is!" Joan assured her.

Joy came in from the garage, ready for tea but still pre-occupied.

Joan glanced at her. "Good lesson?"

"One of the best. I've heaps of new ideas; I want to work them out. Will you take these two into the garden?"

"I intend to do just that. I know you'll be glued to the piano all evening."

"Is Joy always like this after a music lesson?" Jack asked, as they stood on the cloister garth, while Jen ran to meet the comfortable black mother cat and the beautiful shaggy gray Timmy, and collapsed on the garth with them both in her arms.

"Usually, if she has enjoyed the afternoon. She comes home full of new ideas, as she said."

"She seemed so much jollier at school the other day."

"She has that other side," Joan said non-committally.

Jen gave her a quick look. "You're afraid she'll go back to it, aren't you? Don't you know that we're hoping she will?"

"Dying for it," Jack said. "What did she mean by the things she said?"

"Come and inspect your pitch! Joy? Oh, she was just being silly. Music means the whole world to her, and, as you saw, it has claimed her for to-night."

The pitch was warmly approved by Jack, the authority. She had brought her bat and she made Jen send down a few balls, just to open the game, she explained. Then she and Jen followed Joan, who had gone to the house to join her mother.

"To-morrow we'll have a good go on that jolly pitch," Jack said. "But I don't believe Joy meant it when she said she'd join us."

"I was going to look in my bed, for fear she would have put brushes or sponges in it, but anybody can see she's not thinking of games to-night," Jen said sadly.

They went upstairs to unpack, and then came down to supper and to listen respectfully, while Joy, with absorbed face, played Chopin Preludes to Mrs. Shirley and Joan. Then they went up to bed, happy to be at the Hall, but deeply disappointed in their hostess.

"I'd love to raid Joy's room!" Jen said wistfully. "But with her looking like that and going all musical genius, I simply wouldn't dare."

"I say, Joan!" When the girls had disappeared Joy spoke a hurried warning. "Sit with Aunty for a while! I don't want her to be scared."

"Joy!" Joan's fears were confirmed. "What are you going to do?"

"Only make those kids shriek a bit. I must cheer them up. I've been a horrid shock to them."

"You have, but—oh, Joy, don't be too mad!"

"I wonder if they've found the crumbs yet."

"Crumbs? Joy! Oh, you baby!"

"In their beds; water-biscuits. I thought they might be hungry in the night. But they won't shriek about the crumbs. There's something else."

"What are you going to do?" Joan demanded again.

"Tell you afterwards." And Joy raced off to her own room.

Jack and Jen prepared for bed, sober but content. Jack, as always, was ready first and sat on her eiderdown clasping her knees and making comments, while Jen brushed out her yellow mane.

"There doesn't seem to be any less of it."

"There's more," Jen retorted. "It takes ages to do, so you'd better always bring a book. What about Latin?"

Jack ignored the horrid suggestion. "I can't imagine why you put up with it. It must waste hours. Why don't you chop it off?"

"Daddy. He'd break his heart. We had four boys before me; he's determined to have me looking like a girl. He'd loathe the sight of your cricket-ball head."

"It's jolly easy and it saves a lot of time."

"There!" Jen flung back her heavy plait, tossed aside her dressing-gown, and took a flying leap on to her bed. "Shall we talk for a bit? I'm going inside, anyway—Ow! Oh! Oh, Joy Shirley, you—you pig!"

"What is it?" Jack cried, fascinated. "Snakes? Worms? Snails? Have I got some too?"

She flung down her sheets and surveyed the mass of crumbs, which had not been improved by her previous position. "Oh, how utterly messy! How filthy! Is this Joy's way of welcoming us to her house? And we thought she was so grown-up!"

"Grown-up!" Jen raged. "She's a silly object. We'll do something about this to-morrow, however solemn she looks! What you said—snails and

worms; quite a good idea!”

Jack chuckled. “What do we do now? We can’t sleep in these beds!”

“Brush and dustpan; housemaid’s cupboard along the corridor. I’ll get them. Don’t make a sound! Joy will be hoping we’ll yell.”

She pulled on her blue gown and crept out to find the brush and pan. Very carefully she swept her bed free of crumbs, saying hard things about Joy, when she found them even under the pillow and right to the foot of the bed, so that the sheets had to be stripped off completely. This operation produced another shower of crumbs, which had been tucked between the blankets, and she groaned indignantly again.

“You’ll need to sweep the floor,” Jack commented. “I shall shake everything off my bed to start with and brush it all up together.”

“There! Now you get down to it!” Jen thrust the pan towards her. “I’d like Joan to see this floor! Joy must have gone mad!”

“She worked hard, getting the crumbs between the blankets and under the quilt, and I guess she used a pound of biscuits.” Jack, in pink pyjamas, crawled about, brushing happily. “So she did mean something by those mysterious hints! I feel heaps better. Anything may be going to happen!”

“There is that way to look at it,” Jen admitted. “Perhaps we needn’t be disappointed in Joy, after all.”

“What shall we do with this muck?” Jack sat on the floor and surveyed the dustpan, a mixture of crumbs and fluff from the carpet. “Chuck it out of the window?”

“No, we’ll give it to the birds in the morning. Shove it in a corner. I know what I’d *like* to do with it!” Jen said darkly.

Jack grinned. “Stuff it down Joy’s neck? Which is her room?”

“What’s that?” Jen, half in bed, sat up and listened.

Jack raised her head, as a strange moaning noise, almost like a growl, came from the corridor. Then something scratched on the door.

Petrified, Jen stared, motionless.

“One of your cats prowling about?” Jack’s voice had a tremor in it, for the sound was certainly alarming.

“Joy, I bet my boots!” Jen came to her senses, and sprang to the door and threw it open.

Then she gave a wild shriek, as something large and furry bounded on all-fours into the room, and made for Jack.

In a flash Jack was out of bed. She banged the door shut and switched off the light. “Go for her, Jen!”

Together they leapt upon the intruder in the dark. In the rough-and-tumble that followed Joy’s bear-skins were torn off and she was hurled to the ground and held there by their combined weight.

“The crumbs, Jen!” Jack panted.

With a whoop, Jen grabbed the dust-pan and flung shower after shower of crumbs over the helpless victim. Joy kicked and struggled as a handful was poked down her neck. Then, as Jack tried to force some into her mouth, she gave a mighty heave and tossed the younger girls aside.

“Two to one! Not sporting! Oh, you dirty little pigs! I shall never be clean again!”

CHAPTER 7

PLAYING BEARS

“Go and have a bath!” Jen jeered, and switched on the light.

Then she gave a shriek, but of laughter this time, for Joy sat on a mound of skin rugs, her beautiful red hair streaming about her, frantically trying to get rid of the crumbs which were tickling her everywhere.

“What a sight she looks!” Jack commented. “We did get some into her mouth, after all.”

“Half of it sweepings off the carpet!” Joy choked.

“Give her some water, Jack,” Jen suggested.

“Not I! She can just swallow it!”

Jen fetched a glass of water. “I have a forgiving spirit. There, Wild Bear! Wash it down!”

“Forgiving spirit! It’s I who have to do the forgiving!” Joy informed them, when she could speak without coughing. “Of all the filthy horrible people! Carpet sweepings! Ugh! You little ruffians!”

“And why were there any carpet sweepings?” Jen asked gently.

“You don’t suppose we wanted to carpet-sweep at ten o’clock at night, do you?” Jack mocked. “They’re your crumbs and your mess. We only gave them back to you.”

“Who was the idiot who switched off the light?” Joy asked wrathfully. “That was not a part of the entertainment I had planned for you!”

Jen chuckled. “Jacky-boy was the genius. I was too taken aback by the sight of a furry bear coming into my room to have any ideas. Oh, Joy, what an idiot you are! You gave us an awful lot of work, clearing out our beds!”

Joy smiled complacently. “I bet I did! But I guess I cheered up your little minds quite a bit, at the same time, didn’t I?”

“I wonder Joan hasn’t been here to see what all the row was about,” Jack began.

“Oh, Joan knows!”

“I don’t believe it!” Jen shouted. “Joan would never have anything to do with such a ghastly deed!”

“All the same, she knows, for I warned her I was going to make you yell. She’s keeping Aunty quiet and calm.”

“But we want to know what’s happening,” and Joan stood in the doorway and gazed at them. “Really, Joy!”

Jack and Jen sat on their heels and waited. Joy removed strands of red hair from her eyes and wriggled her shoulders to get rid of the crumbs.

"We were playing bears," she explained.

"You were, you mean," Jen cried.

"And what's all this mess on the floor?"

"Crumbs; Joy's crumbs," Jack explained.

"Since nobody's dead or injured, I'll leave you to clear up," Joan said ruthlessly. "If you don't do it to-night, you'll have to tidy the room in the morning. We can't ask Susie Spindle to do that for you. I must go and tell Mother nobody has been killed. She's a little nervous, after that wild yell. Jen, I suppose?"

"Well, Joan, I opened the door because we heard a horrible moaning noise outside, and a wild woolly bear jumped into the room. Do you wonder I shrieked?"

"No, on the whole, I don't," Joan admitted. "Joy, do get up and do your hair!"

"Do my hair! I need a bath. The little brutes put crumbs down my neck!"

"I really don't blame them," Joan rejoined. "They've certainly put crumbs in your hair. You look like a wild man of the woods."

"Mother dear, can't you see it?" and, the door safely closed, Joan began to laugh as she described the scene. "Joy on the floor, with masses of bear-skin rugs round her; she must have collected them from all over the house. Her hair hanging down and full of crumbs, in the most frightful mess; and Jen and Jack half scared of what I'd say, but quite determined I should understand it was Joy's fault, which I knew well enough! The room all untidy; they'd evidently been fighting on the floor. And Joy saying calmly that they had been playing bears!"

"She can be very childish at times," Mrs. Shirley sighed. "I hope she doesn't do something she will regret one day."

"Oh, I don't think she will! But her tomboy side has been roused by having the kids here."

"They are big girls now. They should not play about like children."

"They're not so big as all that! And Joy's older still. If the girls found their beds full of crumbs, you can hardly blame them if they took their revenge when she gave them the chance. Playing bears! She deserved to be smothered in crumbs. I'm not in the least sorry for her."

They heard the bath water running and knew that Joy was repairing damages. But they did not hear the hint with which she had left the younger girls.

"I say, you two!" and she rose and began to collect her bear-skins. "I've thought of something you can do for me. Hop into bed; have you got rid of

the crumbs? I guess so, for there's quite a pound of biscuits down my neck. When I've cleaned up I'll come back and tell you about it. If you find any hair-pins, remember they belong to me."

"We don't want your hair-pins! What makes you think we'll want to do anything for you?" Jack demanded. "After to-night's doings!"

"You know you've enjoyed my little welcome! I had to make you feel at home."

"What is it, Joy? What can we do for you? You know we'll do anything," Jen cried.

"The forgiving spirit at work again! I'll tell you presently. But be very quiet; Joan will think we're all in bed."

"Then don't growl in the corridor this time!" Jack retorted.

Joy crept away, and the girls once more swept crumbs from the floor, and then sat up in bed, awaiting her.

"I'm decent now," she announced, slipping like a shadow into the room. "Even my hair is brushed and clean. But I had a dreadful time with it, thanks to you young brutes. No, don't switch on; this is a private conference."

By the light of her torch she placed a candle on the table between the two beds and lit it. Then she squatted on Jen's bed.

"You're the one with the forgiving spirit! Jacky-boy may have some more crumbs about her."

"Not one crumb!" With a bound Jack was on the bed also. "Tell us, Joy!"

Joy held out a box of chocolates. "Especially provided as a reward for forgiving girls! Now are you game for a bit of exploring?"

"Exploring? Joy, where? What's left to explore?" Jen demanded.

"We won't have much time," Jack began. "There's prep. and cricket. Where do you want us to explore?"

"I haven't time to take on the job myself," Joy explained. "And you'll probably do it better. The other day I was looking over the shelves in the library, and I came on an old book giving the history of the house. Before it was called Abinger Hall it used to be Holyoake House." She paused.

"Holyoake House! How weird!" Jen exclaimed. "But why? Your Abinger ancestors have lived here for centuries. We know they were here in Ambrose's time, because of Jehane; she lived here."

"There was an older house. Jehane's father built the Hall," Joy said.

"But what did Holyoake mean?" Jack began. "And what do you want us to do about it?"

"Did it mean 'holy oak'?" Jen asked eagerly. "Oh, Joy, it sounds like the big tree on the village green—the holy tree, that the President told us about—that they danced round, like in 'Gathering Peascods.' Is that what you

think it meant? Was there a holy oak somewhere, and was the old house called after it?"

"Or it might be 'holly oak'; a tree covered with holly," Jack suggested.

"I like my idea best. Tell us what you think, Joy!"

Joy nodded to her. "I believe you're right. I think we had a holy oak, somewhere in the grounds. I want you two to find it."

"Oh!" They sat and gazed at her.

"What a marvellous idea! I'd love to try," Jen cried.

"But would it be still there?" Jack objected. "All those centuries ago?"

"Trees live for centuries," Jen reminded her.

"Wouldn't it be cut down, or struck by lightning, or something?" Jack urged.

"If it was considered holy, it wouldn't be cut down," Joy argued. "Perhaps it's a mad idea, but if our holy oak is still there, I'd love to find it."

"We could dance 'Sellenger's' round it!" Jen's eyes sparkled.

"We could, and we most certainly would. I thought you two could prowel about in the woods and see if you come across any big tree that might have been the holy oak. It shouldn't be difficult; our trees are mostly beech. You'd know an oak, if you saw it, I suppose?"

"You needn't be insulting!" Jack protested.

"Oak leaves are cut up into teeth; very pretty," Jen said. "We'd love to look for the holy oak, Joy."

"It might be in the grounds of the manor, next door," Joy said. "The estates may have been joined in those days. I know you don't mind trespassing in the manor park."

"We've done it before," Jen acknowledged. "I'm sure Sir Keith Marchwood wouldn't mind. Shall we look for her holy oak, Jack?"

"I don't believe anything will come of it, but I don't mind trying, some day when the ground's too wet for cricket," Jack conceded.

"All right, Joy! We'll find your holy oak for you, or at least we'll have a jolly good try," Jen promised.

CHAPTER 8

THE SURPRISING STRANGER

"There's one other thing Joy's 'holy oak' might mean," Jen said thoughtfully.

"I don't really believe in that old oak," Jack remarked.

"Well, I do! And it might be the Hollow Oak."

"I suppose it might, just as well as anything else. It might be the Holy Hollow Oak, covered with holly."

Jen grinned. "If we find one like that, we'll tell Joy at once. How many times can you say it quickly? 'Holy hollow holly oak! Holy holly'—oh, bother! You have a try!"

They had worked hard on Saturday, both at prep. and cricket, for, as Jen had warned Jack—"We're going to be watched by everybody, to see if we slack. Cricket matters a lot, but it doesn't matter most. Staying here at the Hall comes first, and if we don't do our prep. we'll be ordered back to school."

Jack had agreed. "No time for looking for holy oaks! It will have to wait."

"I say, Jacky-boy!" Jen began, as they set out on Monday morning, with plenty of time to be early at school. "Don't tell the rest of the crowd about Joy on Friday night!"

"But why not? They'd love it!"

"That's why. It would be all over the school and it would let Joy down. After all, she is a Queen! And she was only fooling because we were there. It doesn't seem fair."

"She's been sensible ever since."

"Yes, she's grown up again. Don't tell people she had a spasm of being a kid."

"Well, if you think we shouldn't tell"—Jack began.

"I'm sure we shouldn't. Joan didn't say anything, though I thought she looked at me in a meaning way as we were starting. I hope she felt she didn't need to say it! But when I first came here, and lived with them for a week before the rest of you came, she gave me a lecture about not talking of what happened at home and not abusing hospitality—that sort of thing. We don't want Joy to be sorry we're in her house."

"I see. Right! I'll be careful. We'll just say it's jolly good fun living here."

"I'm sure that's right. And we won't talk about the holy oak either."

"Oh, that! I'm not thinking about that! But I would have liked to tell the rest about Joy playing bears."

"Not unless she says we may; and I'm not going to ask her."

Jack sighed. "All right. I'll play up."

"Hallo!" Jen said suddenly, as they rode round the village green.

A girl had stepped from a cottage garden and was holding out her hand to stop them.

Perforce, they slackened speed and jumped from their cycles.

"What's up?" Jen demanded. "Do you want us? Who are you?"

"Don't you know her?" Jack jerked. "You know everybody here."

"Not this one. I've never seen her before."

"Please, I must speak to you," said the stranger.

She was tall and very fair, with two long yellow plaits drawn forward to hang on her breast. She had a definite touch of foreign accent, though her English was good and she did not hesitate for words.

"But why us? What do you want? You'll make us late for school," Jen began. "Is there anything we can do?"

"Yes, please. I want to see Miss Shirley. You know her. Will you take me to her?"

"Joan? Or Joy? I say, we're awfully sorry, but we can't possibly go back now. It's frightfully important we shouldn't be late; we simply must hurry on. Why don't you go to the house? They're both there. They'll tell you anything you want to know."

The girl's very blue eyes filled with dismay. "I—I thought you would tell her—would introduce me. I'm frightened."

"She looks it," Jack said. "She's shy, Jen. But we can't possibly see her through."

"Frightened of Joan? You couldn't be! But I don't understand!" Jen cried, bewildered. "Have you come here on purpose to see her? Who are you? How do you know about Joan? And about us; how do you know we're living with her?"

"You are Jen," said the surprising stranger. "You"—looking at Jack—"No, I don't know you. You live with Miss Joan Shirley and you go to school and you teach the small children games and songs," she said to Jen.

"Goodness!" Jen gasped. "Yes, you've got me down all right! Who on earth are you?"

"I am Gudrun Palmgren."

"Good—say it again! Good——what?"

"Gudrun Palmgren is my name."

"Goody! What an odd name! Where do you come from?"

"From London; last night. I want Miss Joan Shirley to help me."

"Jen, we're going to be fearfully late," Jack urged. "I'm off! Come on!"

"Look here, Goodrun Palmgren! This simply isn't fair!" Jen exploded. "It matters a terrible lot that we shouldn't be late, especially to-day. If you're still here about five o'clock—we can't say exactly to the minute—we'll do anything we can. But it would be much more sensible if you went straight to the house. Anyone will tell you the way. We can't stop now; we simply daren't. Good-bye!" She sprang on to her cycle and raced down the road after Jack.

"Well, of all the funny things!" she cried. "Jack, am I mad or is she?"

"You'd have been mad in two ways, if you'd stayed talking any longer—mad-crazy and mad-angry. I think perhaps she's a bit cracked."

"I don't think so." Jen pondered the brief interview as she rode. "She—this Goodrun person—I wonder how she spells it?"

Jack spelt the name for her. "I saw it in a book somewhere; legends—Norwegian or something. It's not Good; it's GUDRUN."

"Oh! It sounds like Good! Well, it doesn't matter. But she's not daft. She wants to see Joan, and she'd heard about me, and she's shy, and she thought it would be easier to tackle me than Joan. She's not grown-up, and she knows I'm not; but she knows Joan *is*, and she doesn't know how super-nice Joan can be. But what she wants with Joan, and where she's come from, and why she's here all alone, and how she knows so much about us, is utterly and absolutely beyond me. Fancy knowing about my children at school!"

"The whole business is crazy." Jack disposed of Gudrun Palmgren for the moment. "I'm glad you got away from her."

"I was sorry. She looked awfully let down. But we couldn't be late; not to-day, of all days!"

"Rather not! We'll do anything she wants on our way home."

"It's a long time for her to wait. I say, have you any money? There's one thing we can do. I've only the bob Joan said we must always carry in case we had a puncture and had to come home by train. And that's no use."

"What's it for? If you've a bob, it's more than I have. I've just the fare—tenpence!"

"That will do. Hand it over! I want pennies, you boob," as Jack looked puzzled. "A shilling's no use. I'm going to ring up Joan from the first phone-box, and tell her to go to the village and look for Gudrun Palm—what was it? Something about palms; Palm-tree?"

"No, not Palm-tree. Never mind; she'll tell Joan. Here are pennies; it's a good idea."

"I feel we let the kid down badly, and I'm sure she's a foreigner, although she speaks English jolly well. Thanks, old chap! If we need the

train, you can share my bob; but we shan't. The bikes are first-class. Keep a look-out for a phone-box!"

On the outskirts of Wycombe she rang up the Hall and asked for Joan. Joy's astonished voice demanded the reason for the call, but Jen was firm. "Call Joan, please, Joy. I must tell her something. Oh, we're all right! Don't worry; nobody's had a puncture or fallen off a bike. But I've only a second to spare; something happened that made us late. Joan will tell you; fetch her, Joy, *please!*"

Greatly puzzled, Joy called for Joan. "It's Jen, speaking from a call-box in Wycombe, and she won't tell me what it's all about. It has to be you——"

Joan passed her quickly and took the receiver. "Jen! What has happened?"

"Oh, Joan, dear! Please help! There's an odd girl in the village and she wants you, but she's too frightened to go to the house. She stopped us in the road and made us late; we said we'd help her on our way home, but we couldn't possibly be late for school."

"No, of course not. What does she want? Who is she?"

"I haven't the foggiest notion what she wants, except to see you. But she knows all about us; she knew I was Jen, and she'd heard about my class for the children. Her name's Gudrun Palm-something; we can't remember the whole of it. It's most mysterious."

"It is," Joan agreed. "What did you do about it?"

"This is what I'm doing. We told her we couldn't stay; but she looked awfully upset when we rode off. She's a foreigner, though she speaks jolly good English. I felt bad about letting her wait all day, so I thought of ringing you. Could you be nice to her, Joan dear?"

"I'll go and look for her and see what she wants. It sounds very odd! Is she staying in the village?"

"I suppose so. There wasn't time to ask. Will you remember her name? Gudrun Palm-something. Jack thinks it's Norwegian; she's seen Gudrun in a book. I'll have to fly; thanks awfully, Joan dear!"

"Norwegian—or Swedish—or Danish," Joan said to herself, as she turned to tell the story to Joy.

"Swedish?" Joy said at once. "I suppose it could be. It sounds like a name out of the old sagas; I didn't know it was still used. I say, Joan!"

"Yes, I was wondering that too," Joan agreed. "Could Selma be the connection? Jen said the girl spoke like a foreigner. Could she be a friend of Selma's?" For Selma, half-Swedish, had spent some months at the Hall during the winter.

"Let's go and find out!" Joy exclaimed.

But disappointment met them in the village. They wandered about, but saw no foreign girl. Joan made inquiries at various houses where she had friends, and presently found that a stranger had arrived on Sunday afternoon and had found a room at Mrs. Puddephat's cottage.

"She'll be all right there. Mammy Pudd. is a dear," Joy said.

"We'll go and look her up," and Joan went across the green.

But Mrs. Puddephat could not produce her lodger. The young lady had gone out; her hostess did not know which way she had gone. She was a pleasant young lady, but there was something odd in the way she talked. She had not explained why she had come to the village.

Baffled, the girls went home through the Abbey. "She may have come to see us. It's what she ought to do," Joan said.

There was no sign of Gudrun at the Hall, however, and they could only wait till some news came.

"If she's come all this way—perhaps from Sweden—to see you, she won't go off without doing it," Joy said. "She's evidently terrified of you; I can't imagine why! She'll wait till the girls come home and waylay them again; she seems to think Jen will be some protection; again, I can't imagine why."

"I wonder how old she is! But she must be grown-up," Joan argued, "or she couldn't be wandering about the country alone. I don't know why she should be so nervous."

"A guilty conscience, perhaps," Joy said flippantly.

They waited all afternoon, but there was no sign of Gudrun, nor any message from her.

"She's waiting for Jenny-Wren," Joy said again. "The girls weren't going to be late, were they? I can't bear this suspense much longer!"

"They didn't expect to be late. I hope they'll come soon. It's very worrying about this girl."

"She's hiding in the woods, till she can catch Jen and come here under her wing," Joy remarked. "Our two, plus Gudrun, will turn up presently."

CHAPTER 9

A FRIEND OF THE FAMILY

Once more, Gudrun stepped into the road in front of the cycles, and once more the girls jumped off and confronted her.

“So you’re still here!” Jen exclaimed. “Do you mean to say you haven’t been to see Joan?”

“I waited for you. I’ve been up there, in the forest. I thought you would tell her——” She paused.

“Yes? Tell her what? We haven’t very much to tell her about you yet, have we?”

“That I want to talk to her, please. That I want her to help me.”

“Oh, she knows that much!” Jen said airily. “I rang her up and told her. She’s been expecting you all day.”

Gudrun turned startled eyes on her. “You told her?”

“Yes, of course. It seemed such a long while for you to wait. I thought it would be easier for you, if Joan was expecting you.”

“I didn’t know. The cottage woman said something, but I did not understand. Miss Shirley will think I’m very rude.”

“I couldn’t ring you,” Jen pointed out. “Let’s hurry; she must be dying to hear what you want her for. Don’t tell us anything; wait till you can tell everybody together. But there’s one thing I simply must know. It’s been on my mind for hours, all through French and maths. Your name—is it Palmgren?”

“Yes,” said Gudrun, gazing at her.

“Is it—are you Swedish?”

“Yes?” It was a question this time.

“Do you know Selma Andersson? Is that how you have heard all about us?”

“Selma is my cousin; my second-cousin, really. I’d have told you if you had given me time.”

“Selma’s cousin! Oh, come and tell Joan! That explains everything—almost! Come on! We’ll go through the Abbey, Jack. Mrs. Watson will keep the bikes for us till the morning.”

“What made you guess?” Gudrun asked, as they hurried along the lane. “I’m not like Selma to look at.”

“You are not! You’re a real Viking”—with a glance at the blue eyes and yellow hair. “You’re more like me,” Jen chuckled. “But I’m not as pretty as

you are. We used to call Selma the Dark Daughter of the Vikings.”

“She told me. She said I looked more like those old people than she did. How did you guess?”

“We found out that your name was Swedish, and so I guessed you must have come because of Selma. We couldn’t remember your second name, except that it had something to do with trees; palms, you know. We asked at school if anybody had heard a name like that; and a girl in our form, who’s mad about music, said there was a composer called Palmgren and was that the name we wanted? We both remembered then and yelled that it was; she’d seen the name on programmes and she thought it was Swedish. Any relation of yours?”

“No, but I know his name.—Oh, what a wonderful place! This is what Selma talked about!”

“I bet she did!” Jen grinned, as they went through the ancient gatehouse and crossed the fish-stream. “But this is only the way in; the gate, you know. There’s a lot more to see, but you can’t look at it properly now; we must go and tell everybody you’re Selma’s cousin. You can come back later and go round the Abbey with Joan.”

Gudrun raised no objection, but her eyes were busy and very wistful as Jen and Jack, after a word of explanation to the caretaker, hurried her across the garth and down the tresaunt passage, Mrs. Watson following to unlock the garden gate. The beautiful wide windows of the refectory looked down on the enclosed green square of grass; doorways with round or pointed arches opened off it; and Gudrun craved to explore them all. But the schoolgirls were ruthless and dragged her on.

“You’ll come back later,” Jen said again, reading the longing in her eyes.

“It’s lovely. It’s very old, isn’t it?”

“It died in 1536,” Jen said solemnly. “That’s the year it was destroyed and turned into ruins. It was built sometime in the ten or eleven hundreds; at different times, of course. The refectory—all those big windows—is much later than the chapter-house, over there, with those darling little pillared windows on each side of the door. This is our way; come on!”

They passed through the gate into the garden of the Hall, and the house stood before them.

“Oh!” Gudrun gasped, and stood, as if poised for flight. “Oh, I’m frightened of her! I don’t know what she’ll say!”

“You needn’t be. Joan’s the nicest person in the world,” Jen assured her. “Do come on!”

“I don’t know why you’re so scared,” Jack remarked. “Have you been doing something you shouldn’t? You aren’t going to confess to a crime, are you? Have you a guilty secret?”

To the amazement of both girls Gudrun grew crimson. "I—I'll go back to London," she cried, and turned to the Abbey gate.

"Oh, no, you won't! The gate's shut, anyway," Jen shouted, and caught her by the arm. "You're not going to skip off, without telling us what it's all about! Even if you've committed a murder, you're going to tell Joan, right now! Come on; don't be an ass! It can't be as bad as all that! And I've told you—Joan always understands."

"It didn't seem so bad at the time," Gudrun faltered. "But now—I believe Miss Shirley will say it was a—a dreadful thing to do." She turned desperately to Jen for comfort. "I've run away. They don't know where I am."

Thrilled to the limit, the younger girls stared at her. "All the way from Sweden?" Jen demanded.

"Tell us how you managed it," Jack exclaimed.

"No, from London. I wanted to see Miss Shirley. I—I need somebody to help me, and Selma said Miss Joan Shirley helped everybody."

"So you skipped off from town and came to see her. Jolly clever of you!" Jen said. "She'll help, if anybody can—if you'll only tell her all about it. Don't say one word more; come and find Joan! I'll tell her what you've told us; shall I? Will that make it easier?"

"Yes, please," Gudrun said unsteadily, and allowed herself to be led towards the house.

"Here they come!" Joy, very curious, was watching from a window. "They've come through the Abbey, leaving the bikes with Ann Watson. The new girl's jolly pretty, Joan. I shall call her True Daughter of the Vikings; she's the real thing. Just what Selma would have liked to be!"

"She's frightened, or shy, or something." Joan glanced over Joy's shoulder. "We must put a stop to that," and she went out to the terrace to meet the girls.

"Pleased to see you, Gudrun!" she called across the lawn. "Why didn't you come earlier? We went to look for you, and we've been waiting for you all day."

"Oh, Joan!" Jen dashed forward. "Such a thrill! She's Selma's cousin! She wants you to help her, and she's run away from everybody and they don't know where she is!"

"Selma's cousin!" Joan grasped one fact out of the torrent of words. "Oh, my dear, how nice of you to come! We are so pleased to see you. Joy, Gudrun is Selma's cousin!"

"Jolly nice of you to look us up." Joy came out to greet the stranger.

"Oh!" Gudrun gasped. "Oh, there are two of you, just alike! Selma told me, but I didn't quite believe it. Which is Miss Joan Shirley, please?"

"I'm Joan." Joan's kind brown eyes smiled at her. "This is Joy, and we are cousins. The house is Joy's, so she's the one who will invite you to stay with us instead of with Mrs. Puddephat."

"Oh yes, rather! You will stay in our house, won't you?" Joy exclaimed. "We'll love to have you!"

"Oh, how kind!" Gudrun cried. "But—but——"

"Tell us later," Joan said. "I'm sure there's no 'but' about it. Did you like my Abbey? You've just come through it."

"I loved it. I want to see it all."

"You shall; every corner. But why didn't you come to the house, instead of asking Mrs. Puddephat to put you up?"

"I wanted to see Jen first," Gudrun faltered. "I was just a bit frightened—and Selma told me about Jen and said she was so friendly and—and such a good sort; and I thought she'd help——"

"How jolly nice of Selma!" Jen's face lit up. "But Joan's much jollier than I am and she's much more likely to be able to help. Joan, you didn't hear the end of what I said, did you?"

"I only heard that Gudrun is Selma's cousin, and so she's a friend, without needing any more introduction. But I know you said a good deal, as usual. What was the rest of it?"

"She's run away and they don't know where she is," Jen said, promptly and very plainly.

Joan looked at the new friend of the family, with lifted brows.

"Adventurous person!" Joy exclaimed. "Who are 'they'? Your people in Sweden?"

"My uncle," Gudrun said unsteadily. "He brought me to London. I wanted to see Miss Shirley, so I came here yesterday, without telling him."

"Rather unsporting, if he'd brought you from Sweden!" Joy pursed her lips.

"And he doesn't know where you are?" Joan exclaimed. "We must put that right at once. Where can we get in touch with him? I suppose you were staying at some hotel?"

"He will not be there till to-morrow night," Gudrun said hurriedly. "He came on business, and he had to see someone in Manchester. He left me in the hotel on Saturday and told me to go and see places—St. Paul's and the Tower of London. He won't be back till Tuesday night."

"And you saw your chance and sneaked away! That's rather bad, Gudrun Palmgren!" Joy said gravely. "Adventurous, as I said, but not very straight."

Gudrun flushed. "I didn't mean it that way. I thought I'd write, as soon as I'd seen Miss Shirley. He won't know I've come away till to-morrow night."

“We’ll wire,” Joan said. “He mustn’t have to worry about you. We can’t make excuses for you, but we can let him know you are safe.”

Gudrun looked at her with great blue eyes wide with distress. “You think I ought not to have done it?”

“What do you think yourself? Of course I think so! But I still don’t understand why you were so anxious to come here, and why you couldn’t ask him to bring you.”

“She wants you to help her about something,” Jen said. “Joan dear, couldn’t Jack and I have our tea, while Gudrun tells you all about it? We’re completely starving.”

“I’m sorry, Jen. Yes, of course; and I expect Gudrun would like some tea too. Come along, all of you! Mother will be wondering what we’re doing. You shall tell us your story presently, Gudrun; there’s obviously more to tell. Come and meet Mother! She’ll be so glad to hear you are Selma’s cousin. We’re very fond of Selma.”

“Our Dark Daughter of the Vikings,” Joy added. “We’ll call you True Daughter of the Vikings! You’re far more what we imagine Swedish people to look like than Selma was.”

“My mother came from England,” Gudrun said quickly.

“Oh, that explains your English! I was wondering why you spoke so well,” Joan said.

“We talked English as much as Swedish at home. That was why Uncle knew he could leave me to find my way in London. It was easy to come here. I knew where you lived, for Selma wrote it down for me, in case I wanted to write to her. I asked my way, and people were very kind. They knew I came from another country, but they understood me quite well.”

“Your English is perfect, but you have a fascinating touch of accent.” Joan led her into the entrance hall. “Mother dear, here is a new friend, Gudrun Palmgren—and what do you think? She’s Selma’s cousin! So she really is a friend of the family!”

CHAPTER 10

GUDRUN'S STORY

Gudrun shook hands shyly with Mrs. Shirley, of whom she had heard much from Selma. "But not half enough," she said to herself. "Selma couldn't possibly make me understand what she is like. She's a little darling; I don't wonder Selma loved her."

"We would welcome any friend of our dear Selma's," Mrs. Shirley said, in the soft pretty voice which was so like Joan's, though in appearance they were not alike, as Mrs. Shirley was dark and small and Joan had the red hair of her Shirley father. "As her cousin, you are doubly welcome, my dear."

"It's second-cousin, really," Gudrun explained honestly. "Our fathers were cousins. My mother was English."

"A cousin, all the same," Mrs. Shirley smiled, while Joan called the younger girls to the tea-table. "The relationship is quite enough to make you our friend. We have a very warm place in our hearts for Selma. And you are half English! That explains your excellent speaking."

"Selma told me a great deal about you all, and about this house and the ruins in the garden. I've wanted so much to see it."

"Gudrun, come and have some tea with Jen and Jack," Joan called.

"I don't really need more tea." Gudrun went to her. "The cottage lady gave me some; she's been very kind."

"She's one of the best! But you must stay with us now. We'll fetch your things while these girls do their prep. We can't have a friend of the family living in the village!"

Gudrun reddened and looked unhappy. "It's wonderful of you to go on speaking of me as a friend, when you don't approve of me."

"I don't say that! We haven't heard the story yet. I'm suspending judgment," and Joan gave her a swift smile. "There may be more to tell, which will make everything seem reasonable. At present, of course, it sounds odd. Sit down and have some tea!"

"You're very kind," Gudrun said unsteadily. "When may I tell you?"

Jen's eyes were asking the same question. Joy looked eager, and Jack was frankly curious, holding herself in with difficulty.

"When everybody has had one cup of tea and something to eat," Joan decreed.

Gudrun was too uneasy to eat, however. She drank her tea and looked at Joan wistfully.

“Sit in your big chair, Mother dear,” Joan said. “Gudrun wants to tell us more about why she has come here. We don’t understand yet.”

Looking puzzled, Mrs. Shirley settled in her own seat and waited placidly. Then everybody looked at Gudrun.

She reddened again, but began hurriedly.

“It’s the stage; the theatre! I’ve wanted it all my life, ever since I understood anything at all. I’ve worked, and learned Shakespeare, and I’ve studied, and I’ve been in school plays. I love acting better than anything.”

She paused, gazing anxiously at Joan.

“Another Rykie!” Jen exclaimed. “Oh, I say! You’re far too nice! Are you as mad about it as she was?”

Gudrun glanced at her. “I’ve heard about Rykie. I don’t think I’m quite like her. She did odd things because she wanted to go on the stage, didn’t she?”

“She did,” Joy agreed. “Very odd things!”

“I hope you aren’t like her!” Jack broke out, “I didn’t know her awfully well, but everybody said she was the limit.”

“Not all the time,” Jen cried. “And she was much better before she went away.”

Joan was looking thoughtful, and Gudrun glanced at her nervously. “I thought perhaps you’d help me. Selma said you helped Rykie.”

“I didn’t help her to go on the stage,” Joan exclaimed. “I made her go to school to have a decent education, as the first step towards the stage. But you’re older than Rykie was. I don’t know anything about theatres or how you get into that sort of life. I don’t see how we can help.”

“But will not your family help you, my dear?” Mrs. Shirley suggested. “Or perhaps they do not approve?”

“Is that the explanation, Gudrun?” Joan asked. “You want to go on the stage and they don’t like the idea?”

Gudrun nodded, and swallowed hard. Steadying herself bravely, she hurried on.

“I’ve always wanted it. At school they said I was very good and I must go to a dramatic school. Grandmother—my mother died two years ago and I’ve been living with Grandmother—she let me go; she says now that she thought I’d soon be tired of it and that I’d change my mind. She chose a very fine school, where they work you really hard, and she thought the work would sicken me of the stage and I’d be content to settle down at home. That was what she’d planned for me. I couldn’t bear the thought of it. I loved the school and I did work very hard, and they were pleased with me and said I had every chance of doing well. That upset Grandmother terribly; it wasn’t

in the least what she had hoped would happen. She made me go home and told me to forget all about the stage. I couldn't do it; I simply couldn't."

She looked at Joan, pleading for understanding and sympathy, her eyes wide with distress. As she spoke, struggling to make herself understood, there was an unconscious quality of drama in her voice and manner. They were all gazing at her, fascinated; her first real audience, though the thought did not occur to any of them.

"I shouldn't wonder if she did it jolly well," Jen murmured.

"It wasn't fair!" Gudrun went on, eager to convince Joan, who still had not spoken. "They should never have let me go to the school, if nothing was to come of it. It made me keener than ever; and then they said I must stop thinking about it. It wasn't kind or fair! I knew the school people had been pleased. I don't expect to do anything wonderful for years; I'm ready to wait, if only I can go on learning. I want to be in theatres, helping even in tiny ways—being an understudy for ages, perhaps, or working in the background, with costumes or properties. I'll do anything, no matter how small and unimportant, if only I can be in the theatre. I know I won't make much money, but I don't care, if only I can earn enough to live on. And I don't expect to be famous for a long while—if I ever am! But I do want to have my chance. I want to be with actors. I want to help, even if it's right behind the scenes. I'll do it for nothing, and starve, if only I can be learning."

"*Not* like Rykie!" Jen was the first to speak, as usual.

"No, not like Rykie," Joan agreed. "Rykie could never have said those things. You're more in earnest than she was."

"Rykie thought only of getting on and being at the top of the tree. She expected to start there," Joy said.

"One can sympathise with your grandmother, my dear." Mrs. Shirley spoke gravely. "It will be a hard life. She does not want it for you."

"I want it!" Gudrun cried. "I don't care how bad it is! I'll be absolutely happy, and I'll work desperately hard, if only—if only it's in the theatre."

"It sounds to me much more like the real thing than Rykie did," Jack observed. "She was all out for herself and nothing else."

Joan was gazing at Gudrun with puzzled eyes. "How old are you? You look like a schoolgirl, but you don't talk or think like one. You sound much more grown-up than you look. And you've had a year at a dramatic school; did you leave your ordinary school very early?"

Gudrun's eyes fell and she grew slowly crimson. "I knew I should have to tell you. I'm nearly nineteen. I've had my hair up for a year."

There was a pause, while they all stared at her.

"Then—then why——?" Joan began. "I love those big plaits, but why have you let them hang down again?"

"Then you aren't a school kid!" Jen cried. "You're a real grown-up person!"

"It was because of you." Gudrun turned to her quickly. "I knew you were still at school, and I felt I just had to make friends with you first. I thought it would be so much easier than coming to Miss Shirley. I was frightened!" and she looked at Joan. "I was afraid to come to you. I thought you'd be sure to say I ought not to have run away."

"I do say it, of course. Yes, Mother dear!"—at Mrs. Shirley's instant question. "Gudrun is supposed to be in London with her uncle, but he had to go north on business, and she wanted to ask our help, so she ran away from him. We're going to wire as soon as we can get hold of him. You knew I'd take the grown-up view and say you had done wrong, Gudrun?"

"Yes," Gudrun almost whispered. "But I knew Jen wasn't grown-up and I thought she was more likely to understand and that she might speak to you and make it easier for me. I thought she'd be more willing to help if she started off by thinking I was still at school. I suppose it was silly. I knew I'd have to tell you quite soon."

"It sounds as if Selma had made Joan seem rather an ogre," Joy observed.

"Oh, no, no! I don't mean that; she never did! But she said Miss Shirley was sensible and—and wise. I've a feeling that I'm not—not always."

"Not where theatres are concerned, perhaps," Joan amended. "You must put that hair up again and let us see how you look."

"I'd like to cut it off, but Grandmother said——"

"I'm sure she did," Joan laughed, as a chorus of protest arose, from all but Jack. "You dreadful girl! It's beautiful; you must never cut it. I want to see you as a grown-up person. Oh well! If you are nearly nineteen, it doesn't seem so unnatural for you to be wandering about the country alone! It seemed odd for a schoolgirl. Of course, your uncle thought he could trust you alone in London for a couple of days!"

Gudrun's eyes fell again. "I know you think I was wrong to run away. But it seemed such a wonderful chance, to be so near you; and Selma had made me think you would help. I knew you lived near London."

"But how can we help?" Joy demanded. "I know how you feel, for I'm like that over music. If anyone had given me training and then said I must give it up, I'd have exploded with a loud bang."

"You would. And you'd have been very difficult to live with," Joan said.

"But I don't see what we can do," Joy ended. "We don't know any theatre people; we don't even know how to get hold of them. We haven't an

idea how to start.”

“I have one little idea, but I don’t know if it’s any good,” Jen began. “Cammy, Joan. She might know the right people. She may have actress friends. Don’t you think she might be some use?”

“Miss Cameron, who teaches elocution and produces plays at our old school,” Joan explained to Gudrun. “That’s a good idea, Jen. We’ll see what Miss Cameron advises. But even with her help, I don’t see what we can do, Gudrun. Please don’t look so hopeful! We can’t help you against your grandmother’s wishes, and we can’t keep you here unless she is willing that you should stay.”

Gudrun looked almost ready to burst into tears. “I thought you’d understand.”

“I believe we do understand, and I sympathise with you very much. It was cruel to send you to the dramatic school in the hope that you’d turn against theatre life, and I’m sure it was unwise. When that failed and your people found you were keener than ever, I feel they ought to have given in and let you have your way. Don’t you think so, Mother?”

“Certainly. It was very hard on Gudrun to be asked to give up her great wish after she had been trained for it,” Mrs. Shirley said.

“Oh, how lovely of you!” Gudrun turned to her impulsively.

“It was a mad idea,” Joy said. “I’m all for helping. But I don’t see how, unless Cammy has ideas.”

“Only with permission from the folks in Sweden,” Joan said definitely. “It’s two problems; how to help Gudrun to go on the stage, and how to reconcile her grandmother to the idea. And the second problem must be solved first.”

“She’ll never agree,” Gudrun said.

And they all sat and looked at her hopelessly.

CHAPTER 11

A GREAT AMBITION

"Prep., girls!" Joan commanded. "Joy, will you see about Gudrun's room? She and I will go to fetch her things from the village."

"Don't you think you'd better take Joy with you?" Jen asked, her face blandly innocent.

"She may come, if she likes, of course. But why?"

"Do you want to get rid of me?" Joy demanded.

Jack chuckled suddenly. "Jen, you are mean!"

"Well, you don't know *what* she'll put in Gudrun's bed," Jen argued. "It might be something much worse than crumbs."

Joy leapt upon her. "Traitor! If I had any snakes I'd put them under your pillow! There! Go and do your hair! You look a fearful sight! Giving me away to a visitor like that!"

She tore the bows off Jen's yellow tails and ruffled her hair into a state of wild confusion. Jen, furiously indignant, made a grab for Joy's ears, to pull down her plaits, but Joy dodged, and jeered at her from behind her aunt's chair.

"My dears! My dear children, how rough you are!" Mrs. Shirley protested.

"How rough Joy is!" Jen grumbled. "You start, Jacky-boy; I must make myself decent. You always take ages over your essay. But how even Joan can expect us to settle down and work, with Joy being mad and Gudrun being thrilling, I don't know!"

"What did they mean about beds?" Gudrun had watched and listened, looking startled.

"I'll tell you, as we go to the village. If you girls don't get on with your work, there'll be trouble to-morrow at school."

"Yes, Joan dear," Jen said meekly, and picked up her ribbons.

"Explain to Gudrun that we're a lodging-house for tomboys," Joy called after Joan.

"And that Joy's the biggest tomboy of the lot!" Jen shouted, as she raced upstairs.

Joan laughed and explained the presence of the younger girls and told of the first night's riot, as she led Gudrun to the Abbey.

"It's just a chance that you found Jen here. She's supposed to be living at school," she said.

"Tell me about these wonderful places," Gudrun pleaded, as they reached the garth.

"You shall see it all properly to-morrow. It's an old monastery, an Abbey, but the church has gone. That was the dining-room of the monks; and up there was their bedroom. They used to walk in those cloisters, and this green garth was their burial-ground. We've just passed the day-room, where they worked when they weren't out in the fields or the gardens, or tending sick folk in the infirmary. This was the chapter-house, where they held meetings of the chapter, or council. There's a lot to see; I'll take you round in the morning. Now tell me! There are still things I don't understand. Why did your uncle bring you to London, if it was a business trip?"

Gudrun coloured. "They thought—I mean Grandmother; the others would let me act, since I want it so much, but she won't hear of it—she thought it would take my mind off the dramatic school and give me something new to think about. I'd never been in England and I wanted to see London. Uncle had to come, so she asked him to bring me. He said he'd have to leave me once or twice, while he went on business trips; he couldn't take me round with him all the time. But everybody said I was old enough to look after myself."

"Since your hair was up and you looked a mature and elderly person! You were younger than they thought, I'm afraid!"

Gudrun's eyes flashed. "In one way I was older. To me, coming to London meant coming close to you and I had your address. I thought you had helped Rykie and that perhaps you would help me too."

"I see; you had it all worked out. No one knew your plan for coming here?"

"Nobody at all. I never talked about it at home."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you," Joan said gravely. "But I really don't see what we can do—except introduce you to Miss Cameron. She might have ideas. We're not in touch with theatrical people. What is your own plan? You've had a year's training; in Stockholm, I suppose? What do you want to do next?"

"I have certificates; I passed exams," Gudrun explained. "I could go on to higher exams, but at the school they said practical experience would help me more. They really were very pleased with me." She looked at Joan doubtfully.

"I'm sure they said you were very good," Joan agreed heartily. "What did they advise in the way of experience?"

"Some time in a rep. company, if I could find one."

"A rep?" Joan queried.

“Repertory. A company that gives a different play every week. It’s hard work, but terribly useful.”

“Oh! Yes, that would be valuable experience. Did you know of a good company?”

“Oh yes, and the school would have recommended me. But Grandmother wouldn’t hear of it. I’d have run away, if it hadn’t been for this plan of coming to London. But it would have been difficult to run away in Sweden. I don’t think it would have been possible.”

“Very likely not. It seems to be a case of converting your grandmother.”

“She’ll never change. There is a reason,” Gudrun said unhappily. “My aunt, her daughter, went on the stage and she did very well, but it was too much for her. She was ill, and then she died. Grandmother can’t forget; she thinks I’d die too. I’m perfectly well and strong, but Grandmother won’t believe it.”

“That’s very sad,” Joan commented. “One can understand how she feels. You say the rest of the family are more sympathetic?”

“Or they care less about me,” Gudrun said grimly. “They aren’t as silly about me as she is. They can see that I’ll never do anything else, so they’d let me go on the stage, if only to keep me quiet and have me busy about something. Nobody, except Grandmother, wants me hanging about doing nothing.”

Joan thought this over. The solution seemed to be for the autocratic grandmother to die, but she could not say so.

“Did you think you might join some touring company in this country?” she asked, reverting to the earlier subject.

Gudrun stood in the shadow of the ancient gate-house and spoke vehemently, with the same touch of unconscious drama which she had shown before.

“I want to go to a school in London. I want to be with English people and get used to how they speak. All my training has been in Sweden; I want to act in London, as well as at home. I know I haven’t an English accent, and I want to learn it. There must be good dramatic schools in London; if I could have more training, in an English school, I’d correct my accent and I’d feel more ready to start.”

“That’s very wise,” Joan exclaimed. “You’d be willing to wait, to improve your English?”

“I want all the training I can have. A London school would teach me different things. But Grandmother would never allow it.”

“Don’t you think perhaps she might, if it would keep you from going on the stage for another year or so?”

“No. She was disappointed—and furious—when the last school made me keener than ever. She’d never let me try it again.”

“We could ask her,” Joan suggested. “And I suppose, after the London school, you’d try to get into some company?”

“To play tiny parts, and be an understudy, and help the costume person, and learn by watching the others. I’d be learning all the time. If only I could be part of a company I’d get the experience I need, and I’d be completely happy.”

“And you’ll work up to big parts, and some day we shall see you playing to crowded houses in London!”

Gudrun turned to her. “Some day I want to play Shakespeare. That’s my greatest hope; he’s wonderful! To be in Shakespeare I must be able to speak English—his marvellous lines!—without any accent. There are translations, but it’s not the same; he’s only the real thing in English. Some day”—she drew a long breath and coloured deeply—“some day, ever so far off, I’m going to be known as ‘this great Shakespearian actress.’ There! I’ve told you the very worst of me!”

“The worst! I call it the best!” Joan cried. “It’s a great ambition, and I hope you’ll realise it. Not just any sort of an actress; that won’t satisfy you. You want the best. You want to be Juliet—and Rosalind—and Portia. Oh, Gudrun, I do hope you’ll do it! I’m sure you will!”

“And Miranda; and Beatrice—she’s lovely. I want them all!” Gudrun’s face lit up, at the unexpected sympathy. “Oh, Miss Shirley, you do understand. And you are kind! Yes, I want the best. And the best is Shakespeare.”

“In perfect English. I agree with you all through, and if there’s any way we can help we’ll do it, Gudrun. You ought to join a company that specialises in Shakespeare; I expect there are some. We’ll ask Miss Cameron.”

“That would be heavenly!” Gudrun cried.

“Do you mind if I tell the others about your great ambition? Joy and I talk over everything together, and Jen will be thrilled.”

“I don’t mind anything, since you are all so kind. Miss Joy won’t make a joke of my big plans, will she?”

“I won’t let her rag you. She may call you Portia, but you won’t mind that!”

“Or Ophelia; or Titania.” Gudrun gave her a glimmering smile. “Or Viola; I love her.”

“‘Patience on a monument, smiling at grief,’” Joan quoted. “Here’s your cottage. I’ll talk to Mrs. Puddephat while you run up and pack your bag.”

CHAPTER 12

A FIRST STEP FOR GUDRUN

“Miss Palmgren is a friend of ours,” Joan explained. “She hadn’t let us know she was coming and she didn’t feel sure it would be convenient for us to put her up, so she came to you, until she could find out if we could have her. Now she must come to the Hall. She says you’ve been very kind to her; thank you, Mrs. Puddephat! She is a cousin of Miss Selma, who stayed with us last winter.—Have you much to carry, Gudrun? Shall I come up and help?”

“No, please! I’m nearly ready. I won’t be long,” Gudrun called in reply.

She came down presently, carrying a suitcase and wearing a big coat and a beret.

Joan stared at her and then gave a shout. “You’ve put it up! Oh, you do look nice! How have you done it? Let me see!”

Gudrun, with a shy look at Mrs. Puddephat, pulled off the beret and slowly turned round. Her fair plaits were coiled behind her ears, just above her neck, in big round circles.

“Very neat,” Joan commented. “You look quite the grown-up lady! Doesn’t she look nice, Mrs. Puddephat? We said she ought to put her hair up; she’s nearly nineteen. Now let’s go home and show the others how you look, Gudrun.”

“No need to tell her your hair had been up and had come down again,” she said, as they went along the lane to the Abbey gate.

“Could we take the bicycles for Jen and Jack?” Gudrun asked, as Mrs. Watson let them in. “Wouldn’t it be easier for them in the morning? I know they are in a hurry to be early for school. I nearly made them late to-day.”

“That’s a kind idea. We’ll wheel them through the tresaunt; that’s the passage under the refectory, by the day-room. Your case can sit on one and your bag on the other.”

Jen, coming out to join in Jack’s cricket, saw them and gave a shout. “Our bikes! Oh, you angels! We thought we’d have to fetch them. I say, where’s her hair?” and she stared at Gudrun.

“It seems to make a great difference in my looks,” Gudrun retorted.

“Oh, it does!” Jen cried. “You look positively old and dignified! You were quite right; I’d never have believed you wanted help, or have dared to try, if you’d looked like that!”

“Not old, Jen,” Joan protested. “Merely grown-up. But dignified—yes; I agree with you there. Don’t you think Gudrun makes a very handsome grown-up lady?”

“Oh, rather! She looks lovely. But nobody could think she was a school kid. Joy won’t put things in Miss Palmgren’s bed.”

“I hope Joy won’t do anything so rude or babyish. Where is Jack?”

“Gone to the pitch. We’re going to have some cricket. Want to come?”

“Sometime, perhaps. Gudrun is going to unpack. You’d better put the bikes away.”

“You are dear darling people,” Jen said fervently.

“I haven’t said half enough about your kindness in taking me into your house like this,” Gudrun began.

Joan gave her a swift smile. “You must say it to Joy. The house is hers. Only the Abbey is mine.”

When Gudrun came downstairs, after settling her possessions in a pretty bedroom from whose windows she could see the cricket practice going on, she went at once and stood by the piano, where Joy sat dreaming.

She did not speak, but presently Joy looked up at her and smiled. “Jolly of you to wait! I go off into a dream. Oh, how nice you look! I do like you with your hair up. Well, Juliet, we’re glad to have you to stay with us.”

“Did Miss Joan tell you?” Gudrun coloured.

“She did, Viola. But don’t call her, or me, ‘Miss.’ We don’t like it. Call us Joan and Joy; it sounds much more natural. I like your ideas, Portia. I hope the plan will come off. One day I shall watch you being Rosalind.”

Gudrun broke into a little gurgling laugh. “I can’t be them all at once!”

“No, Ophelia, you can not. But you’ll be them all in time, Miranda.”

Gudrun ignored her. “I want to thank you. It’s so very kind of you to have me here. But I’m troubled about one thing. When I said to Joan that I wanted to be with English people and get used to the way they speak, I do hope she didn’t think I was hinting that I’d like to stay with you. I never meant that. I thought of some place in London. She didn’t—you didn’t think I was asking you to have me here?”

Joy saw the shy embarrassment in her eyes.

“How blue your eyes are, Beatrice! We never thought that for one second. Put the idea right out of your head; may I say, your silly head? You’re Selma’s cousin, and we like you, and your plans are marvellous, and we’re glad to have you here. Does that ease your mind?”

“Very much, thank you, if you really mean it.”

“Oh, I do! We all do. But, I say! I don’t see why you shouldn’t, Imogen.”

“Shouldn’t what? I don’t understand.”

“Shouldn’t stay with us and get used to the sound of English. I think ours is fairly good, so long as you don’t pick up slang from Jenny-Wren and Jacky-boy. They don’t use much; not here! I don’t know what they do at school, but Auntie doesn’t like slang and they’re very good and use it as little as they can. Why don’t you stay for a few weeks, and just talk to us, and listen? I’m sure I talk enough!”

Gudrun’s eyes grew wide and startled. “But—do you mean that? I thought it was only till you could give me back to Uncle, so that you’d know I was being looked after? Perhaps two nights, or three?”

“Oh, don’t go away from us in three nights, Cleopatra! Your stiff old granny wouldn’t mind your visiting nice English people who are friends of Selma’s, would she?”

“I think she’d be pleased. And it would help me; it would be my first step. I want to be Juliet and all those other lovely girls in London, not only in Stockholm.”

Joy agreed. “Your accent must be so good that people won’t notice it; your English is perfect already. It is your first step and we’ll be terribly bucked—I mean, very proud and pleased!—if you’ll take it here, Perdita.”

Gudrun laughed, at the hurried change of words. “You haven’t called me Lady Macbeth yet?”

“I don’t like her. You stick to Rosalind. Don’t be a murderess!”

“She’s a lovely part,” Gudrun said wistfully.

“Perhaps some day, but not yet. Keep to the nice girls at first! You notice I don’t call you Celia, or Nerissa, or Jessica, or Hermia. Only the principal girls for you! Stay here—when we’ve asked your uncle, of course. Then you can practise bits of them on us. I’ll be Romeo, down in the hall, and you can hang over the staircase and be Juliet. Or we’ll be Rosalind and Orlando.”

“I don’t expect to start as Rosalind! The shepherdess would be quite enough; I’d be in the play and it would be my start.”

“Our dear little Rykie didn’t talk like that. She wanted Rosalind, as a beginning.”

“I said I didn’t think I was like her. Even a small part would be a big thing to me. Will you ask Uncle if I may stay?”

“We’ll wire, saying you are here and perfectly safe, and asking him to come and talk things over with us. Or we’ll go to town, if it would be easier for him. We’ll give him our phone number, so that he can ring us; he’ll want to ask questions. Does he talk English?”

“Oh, yes! For business, you know.”

“Yes, I suppose he’d need English. We’ll persuade him to let you stay with us. Joan shall tackle him; she’s good at coaxing people. Then he can explain to your grandmother. Come and tell Joan what we expect of her!”

“I love your beautiful house, and I love her Abbey,” Gudrun said wistfully. “It would be wonderful to stay here for a little while.”

“I hope you will stay—Portia!”

“You haven’t called me Desdemona.” Gudrun broke into a laugh. “You’ve forgotten her.”

“Oh well, so I had. But she was rather silly, wasn’t she? Cordelia, now; she had more in her.”

“I’m glad you know your Shakespeare so well,” Gudrun said demurely.

CHAPTER 13

GUDRUN'S NEW IDEA

Joan agreed heartily that a stay at the Hall would be a useful first step for Gudrun. "And I don't see why you shouldn't take a second," she said. "We'll ring up Miss Cameron and ask when she has a free period, and we'll see what she would advise you to do, supposing you are able to do it."

Gudrun's face lit up. "Oh, I'd like that!"

"Why shouldn't she go to Cammy for a few private lessons, if she's going to stay here?" Joy asked, as they sat discussing the future after the younger girls had gone upstairs, advising Gudrun with great bitterness to look in her bed carefully.

Joy smiled gently at them, and when they had gone she said reassuringly, "I haven't done a thing; really I haven't. It's quite safe, Juliet."

"I wouldn't mind," Gudrun said happily. "It would be fun, and I should know you really liked me."

Joy's eyes gleamed, but she said no more at the moment, feeling her aunt's eyes upon her. Mrs. Shirley had given warm approval of the change in Gudrun's appearance, declaring her to be, as Joan had said, a very handsome grown-up lady.

"Yes, she'll look jolly well in Portia's robes or Rosalind's doublet and hose," Joy agreed.

"What shall we say to your uncle?" Joan asked. "I'll phone the telegram and it will be waiting when he arrives."

Their guest sat gazing into the small fire which had been lit for Mrs. Shirley's sake. She looked up and found the other three watching her.

"Would it do to say—'Gudrun safe with friends of Selma's. Letter follows'—and I'd write to-morrow? He'd have the letter on Wednesday morning, wouldn't he?"

"Yes, if you posted early. We could add our phone number. Then he could ring up at once, if he can't wait for the letter."

"Will he be wild with you?" Joy asked. "Will you need our protection?"

Gudrun shook her head. "I don't know. I've never run away before."

"We'll help you to explain," Joan promised.

"You can hide behind me," Joy suggested. "But I expect Aunty would be still more useful. If she looks at him he'll melt at once."

"Joy, don't be absurd!" Mrs. Shirley protested. "Gudrun can hardly expect him to be pleased. He trusted her, and she ran away."

Gudrun flushed. "It's true. But I wanted to come so very much."

"Don't be brutal, Auntie dear! You're as uncompromising as Joan is at times, and that's saying a lot; hard-hearted, I call it."

Joan's eyes met her mother's in a fleeting smile. "It's no use pretending," she said. "Gudrun did let him down and she'll need to say she's sorry. But we'll try to make him understand."

"I'm not sorry I came here!" Gudrun cried. "You've all been so wonderfully kind!"

"Why don't you write that letter to-night?" Joy suggested. "It will be on your mind till it's done. Then if Cammy can see us to-morrow you'll be free to go to her. You might as well have her opinion before he comes."

"She may not have any free time to-morrow," Joan said. "But we can try. Give me your uncle's name and the address of the hotel, and I'll see to the telegram. You'll find writing things in your room. I'll show you my door, in case you want anything."

"I'd like to have it done," Gudrun admitted, and she went upstairs, and sat at the writing-table in the window and gazed out at the garden as it grew dark, and tried to write the difficult letter.

But it was even harder than she had thought; her mind was not at ease, and she could not concentrate. She made several false starts, then pushed the paper away and prepared for bed.

But she could not sleep. An idea had gripped her and she had to face it. She lay gazing wide-eyed into the darkness, and fought against it, and at last gave in.

"I'll do it! I must!" and with desperate courage she flung on a red gown and crept out to the corridor.

"Which is Joan's room? She told me; yes, there's a light under that door.—Oh!"

She had almost reached the door when it opened and Joan came out, the black Curate in her arms.

"Gudrun!" she gasped. "Is anything wrong? Yes, I can see there is. Come in here; now wait just a moment, while I put this boy out."

She returned almost at once, to find Gudrun standing, her face white and strained. Joan closed the door and looked at her. "My dear, what's the matter? Is there anything I can do?"

Gudrun leaned against the door, pushing back the heavy plaits which hung on her breast. "Have you sent the telegram? Oh, please forgive me! But I had to come. Have you sent it yet?"

"Not yet," Joan said gently. "I thought the morning would be better. It would only lie about in the hotel. What is it, Gudrun? Did the letter bother you?"

Gudrun sank down in a big chair. "I couldn't write it. I tried, but it wouldn't come. Please don't telegraph. I—I'm going back to town, to see him."

Joan sat on the arm of the chair and patted her shoulder gently. "Tell me, dear. I don't understand."

"It seemed so mean, so cowardly," Gudrun whispered. "To stay here, where you'd all help, and just write and tell him what I did. I'm not a coward; not really. I'll go back to town, and when he comes I'll be there, and he won't have to find I'm missing."

"It would have been a shock to him," Joan assented.

"I shall ask him to come to see you, if I may."

"Oh, of course! We want to see him. But, Gudrun dear, how much will you tell him?"

Gudrun looked up at her. "All of it. I'm not going to hide things. I see that I could ask him to bring me to see you, because you are friends of Selma's; he'd understand that. I needn't tell him that I've been here and that I know you already. I needn't say I ran away for two nights. But I shall do it. I shall tell him the whole thing."

"Then I say you're very brave and very honest."

"I want to be," Gudrun whispered. "I don't want to—what is it you say?—to funk? But I had to know if you had sent the message. It would have been more difficult if the telegram had been there. Will you forgive me for disturbing you? I had to know."

"The Curate had disturbed me. He likes to come to bed with me, but he doesn't stay long. He's a wanderer, and the outside world calls him after dark. I'm glad you came; you'd have lain worrying all night. And I am so very thankful you have decided. I know it's the right thing to do. Yes, tell him everything; the hotel people might mention that you had been away, and that would make things very awkward."

"I didn't think of that, but they might say something. I want him to know. It will show him how keen I am. He knows, but it will help him to understand."

"And now you'll be able to sleep," Joan comforted her. "But who is this? Has Joy heard us talking?"

The door opened gently and Jen's head appeared. "Is anything the matter? What's happening? Shall I go down and make cups of tea?"

"Jen!" Joan scolded. "Go back to bed at once! What are you doing here, you bad girl?"

"Oh, no, Joan, not bad! I only want to be useful. I heard talking, and I thought perhaps I could do something to help."

Gudrun was staring at her. "Do you often make tea in the night?"

“Always, if I think Joan needs it. Wouldn’t you like me to do it for you? You look a bit upset.”

“Nobody’s upset, and nobody wants tea, and it’s not the middle of the night,” Joan said ruthlessly. “I had to take the Curate down, and Gudrun wanted to speak to me. It’s only eleven o’clock. Go back to bed and don’t be silly.”

“Oh! I thought it must be about two in the morning. Are you sure, Joan?”

“You want a midnight feast, but you’re not going to have one this time,” Joan assured her. “Your cups of tea have been very comforting, but this isn’t the time for that sort of thing. Nobody’s ill, and there’s nothing the matter, and there are no burglars. Off you go to bed!”

Crestfallen, Jen turned to the door. “I didn’t wake Jack; I was very careful. But I did want to do something for somebody.”

“How kind she is!” Gudrun said, as the door closed without a sound.

Joan laughed. “Once or twice, in an emergency, Jen has risen to the occasion and presented me with tea at the exact moment when I needed it. She loves doing it; she’s really disappointed. You wouldn’t have liked it, I suppose?”

“Oh, no; many thanks! I shall go to bed now.”

“We’d have disturbed Joy, and possibly Mother, if we had had a tea-party,” Joan said. “Unless you really feel you need it, it’s better not. I’m thrilled about your new idea, and I do hope all will go well. If we can help in any way we’ll do it. There’s one thing Joy could do, and I know she will. She’ll write a letter to your uncle, asking him to come and stay with us for a few days, so that we can talk over your plans with him.”

“I’d like that! Oh, thank you so very much!” Gudrun said eagerly.

CHAPTER 14

A RED ROSE FOR GUDRUN

Joan, her mind full of thoughts of Gudrun, woke early next morning.

"I'll tell Joy. She'll be thrilled," she said to herself, and began to dress. "I'll talk to her before she gets up."

A glance from the window, as she drew the curtain, showed her Joy crossing the lawn, however. Joan hurriedly changed her slippers for strong shoes, found her coat, and followed.

"Joy!" she called.

Joy turned from the bush over which she was bending, and waved a pink rose-bud. "Early bird!" she cried. "Look! A lovely Madame Butterfly, just opened. I saw it last night, and I was sure it would be ready for Aunt's breakfast tray. Here you are! Tell her it's with all my love."

"It's beautiful; just perfect." Joan took the rose. "I've a story for you, Joy."

They strolled across the lawn, away from the house.

"A story? What have our tomboys been doing?"

"Not the girls. It's Gudrun. She came to my room last night, to ask if I'd sent the telegram to her uncle. She hasn't written; she's going to see him, to tell him the whole story."

Joy stopped and stared at her. "Did you tell her she ought to do that?"

"I hadn't thought of it, though when she said it I knew at once it was the right thing to do. It was her own idea."

"Then I think she's an absolute hero; heroine, I mean. A perfect sport! I say, Joan, isn't she a brick?"

"That's how I feel," Joan agreed. "I couldn't say much to her, but I do think it's by far the best way and that she's very plucky to face up to it."

"Plucky! I should say so! She won't take the easy way of writing and waiting to see what he does about it."

"The waiting time, till she heard or till he came after her, would have been very difficult. She's sensible to get it over quickly. But it would have been easier for her here, with all of us to help."

"She won't do it. She'll go all alone and confess," Joy exulted. "It's brave, and strong, and—and determined. I shall call her True Daughter of the Vikings, and it won't be because of her looks."

"You think it's worthy of a Viking Daughter?"

"It's adventurous, and—as I said—brave and strong and determined; and they were all those things. I suppose she'll have to go to-day?"

"Quite early, I should think. She won't rest or settle to anything here. But she hopes to come back with him, and I hope she will; I'd like to ask him about this old grandmother and the stage idea. You can help, Joy. Will you write a letter, inviting them both properly? She could take it to him."

"I'll do it, joyfully. I hope he'll come. We don't want to lose our new Viking so soon. He could leave her here while he does his business. And I'll do something else; I'll drive her to town and save her the train journey. You come, too, and keep her talking, so that she won't have time to worry."

"That's a good idea. If I can, I will. And I shall take her to see the Abbey, before she starts. Perhaps it will soothe her; I'm afraid she's dreading the interview with him."

"I should be," Joy agreed. "He doesn't come till the evening, does he? Then there's plenty of time for the Abbey."

"Don't say anything to Jen and Jack. They'd be thrilled; Jen would, at any rate. She'll appreciate Gudrun's courage. She'd say a lot and it would embarrass Gudrun. Let them get away to school before we say anything."

"We'll tell them at night. That will be quite soon enough for the tomboys."

"I'll warn Gudrun. Give me a rose for her! I'll say you sent it, with good wishes."

"What a jolly idea! Say it's with my congratulations on her pluck. Here's a lovely Etoile de Hollande," and Joy bent and cut a sweet-scented dark red rose. "There's nothing much more beautiful in the whole rose world."

Joan took the crimson rose and went back to the house. She tapped on Gudrun's door, and in answer to an invitation went into the room.

Gudrun, brushing out her yellow mane, turned in surprise. She looked tired, and Joan knew she had not slept well.

"I brought this, from Joy, with her good wishes and congratulations on your pluck. She'll write to your uncle, and she'll drive you to town."

Gudrun took the rose, her eyes wide with surprise. "Oh, how lovely! Oh, Joan, you've told her? Did she really say that? Does she think it's the right thing to do?"

"We both think so. We think you're very brave, and we'll help in any way we can. But don't say a word downstairs about your new plan. The girls would be excited; Jen certainly would. She'd say a lot and it might worry you. Leave it all till they've gone to school."

Gudrun nodded, burying her face in the rose. "Thank you. It's kind of you to make things easier for me. We won't tell them."

"Feeling all right this morning?" Jen greeted Gudrun anxiously. "You didn't look too good last night. I'm sure you ought to have had a cup of tea, to help you to sleep."

"It was a very kind thought, but I really didn't want it, thank you," Gudrun assured her.

"Well, if you ever do want something in the night, come and ask me to get it for you. I know where everything is kept, and I love looking after people."

"I'm sure you do. But if I wanted anything I should go to Joan. And I may not be here. My uncle may take me home at once."

"Back to Sweden? Oh, he mustn't!" Jen wailed. "We want you to stay with us, don't we, Joan?"

"We certainly do. But we must wait and see. Hurry, or you'll be late."

"We'll see you at night. He can't take you away as soon as that," Jen argued, as she sat down to breakfast.

Gudrun said nothing, but placed the red rose beside her plate, in a small vase she had found in her room.

Jen's eyes fastened on it. "Been pinching Joy's roses?"

"Joy gave it to me," Gudrun said, with dignity. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"It's one of those Etoile things she's so keen on. Is it to cheer you up?"

"Perhaps. And I think perhaps you will be late for school."

"Oh, no, we shan't!" Jen attacked her porridge with vigour. "We've plenty of time, so long as no wild Viking attacks us in the village."

Gudrun laughed, taken out of her own troubles for a moment; and Joan saw it with joy and blessed the unconscious Jen for her chatter.

"Were you late yesterday? I'm very sorry."

"We just scrambled through in time. I had to stop to phone to Joan about you. And then you went wandering in the woods and she couldn't find you."

"That forest was very beautiful."

Jen stared. "Forest? Do you have forests in Sweden? We call them the beechwoods. They are rather jolly. I say, you do see that we didn't dare to be late, don't you? We were sorry to be so brutal, but it's only on condition we're at school in good time and with our prep. done that we're allowed to live here during term. And yesterday was our first day. There'd have been a ghastly row, if we'd been late. Nobody would have believed we'd been held up by a Viking. But we really were sorry."

"I didn't know all that. I'm sorry I stopped you."

"Oh, I'm glad! But we couldn't stay and gossip, could we?"

Gudrun agreed warmly that they could not.

"I suppose you'll be ringing up Cammy this morning?" Jen asked. "I want to hear what she says."

"Perhaps not this morning. We may put it off for a day or two," Joan said.

"Oh, but——"

"Do stop talking, Jen! We'll be late," Jack warned her.

"Oh, well! Tell us later," and Jen hurried on with her meal, to Joan's relief.

Joy came in from the garden and her eyes fell on the rose. She gave Gudrun a quick appreciative look, and Gudrun looked back at her gratefully. But it was only after the schoolgirls had ridden away that she said shyly,

"Thank you so very much for the rose and for your message. You and Joan are doing everything you can to make things easier for me."

"I'm going to call you True Daughter of the Vikings," Joy informed her.

Gudrun's eyes widened. "Because I look more like one than Selma did?"

"Not only that. Because you're being one."

"How do you mean?" Gudrun asked, puzzled.

"You're on a quest, an adventure, and you're going all out for it—I mean, going right ahead—alone and without anyone to back you up."

"Do you mean by going to confess to Uncle?"

"Oh, more than that! That's the first step you have to take. But your quest is the stage and your adventure is the road to it. It was an adventure, a first-class one, when you came here alone to ask us to help, when you didn't know any of us. Wasn't it a bit difficult?"

"I was afraid," Gudrun admitted. "I was very much afraid, but I couldn't think of anything else to do. How happy I'd have been, if I'd known how kind you are! But I didn't know. Yes, I was afraid."

"But you came; you went through with it. Now you're going to meet another big adventure. But the end of them is the stage and the great Shakespearian actress in all the lovely parts. Nothing's going to turn you away from that. The Vikings were like that; going out on quests and having adventures and letting nothing come in the way. I'm sure you're a true one."

Gudrun coloured. "I'll remember the new name you have given me, and I'll try to be good enough for it."

"I believe your quest will end happily," Joan said. "Now Joy is going to write to your uncle, and you and I are going into the Abbey."

"I'd like to go back to the hotel," Gudrun said doubtfully. "Uncle might come by an earlier train, and there's no letter or telegram to tell him I am safe. He'd have a terrible fright."

"I hadn't thought of that. Yes, we mustn't keep you here too long," Joan assented. "But Joy must have time to write the letter. Come and see part of the Abbey and hear some of my stories! You can have the rest when you come back with him later on."

CHAPTER 15

BACK TO TOWN

Only half of Gudrun's attention was given to Joan's stories of the Abbey. She was interested in the beautiful old buildings, and she felt and enjoyed the atmosphere of peace that brooded over the ruins. But her mind was burdened, and Joan saw it and soon gave up the attempt to rouse her enthusiasm for ancient days.

"Joy will be ready for us," she said, and led the way back to the house. "You've packed your bag, haven't you? I wish you could leave it here; then we'd feel sure you were coming to us again. But it's better not; your uncle might think we were taking him for granted too much."

"If he's angry he may take me back to Sweden," Gudrun said unhappily. "If he does that, I shall write to you, and as soon as I am twenty-one I shall come to see you, if I may."

"We'll be glad. But don't upset your grandmother over us. Old ladies shouldn't be worried."

"But I want my own life!" Gudrun cried. "She's keeping me away from it!"

"I know. I want you to have it. But try not to hurt her too much. I can't help thinking of Mother and of how she would feel, if one of us insisted on doing something she didn't like."

"Grandmother can't bear the thought of the stage for me," Gudrun said hopelessly.

"You may have to be patient. I hope your uncle will come and talk it over with us.—Ready, Joy?"

Joy held out the letter to Gudrun. "I've said we'll be glad to see him here, but that if he doesn't like the thought of a house full of girls, with no man for company, he'd be comfortable at the pub in Whiteways. I didn't say pub; I said 'village inn,' and that it was quite decent."

Gudrun gave her a tiny smile. "That was thoughtful. He'll stay there. He's been a sailor, and he likes to be with men and to tell stories, and listen to them."

"We'll understand, if he prefers the pub. Run in and fetch your bag and say good-bye to Auntie."

Mrs. Shirley's farewell kiss was given with a warm hope that Gudrun would be back at the Hall very soon. "You are doing the right thing, my dear. I was so glad when Joan told me," she said.

Much comforted, Gudrun joined Joan and Joy in the car and was whirled away to town.

They had just drawn up before the hotel when the door was flung open and a large man, brown and bearded, dashed out and down the steps.

“Uncle!” Gudrun shouted. “Uncle, I’m here!” and she fumbled with the door of the car.

Joy leant across and opened it. “He heard you, even above the noise of the traffic. There you are!”

Gudrun sprang from the car and hurled herself upon him. “Oh, Uncle, it’s all right! You’ve been frightened about me! Why did you come back early?”

“Now, do we disappear, or do we stay to help?” Joy looked at Joan.

“We go home and leave them to it,” Joan said promptly. “Gudrun’s safe in his hands.”

“Couldn’t we be any use?”

“No, they’ll do better without us.”

Joy obediently drove away. “I’m sure you know best—as usual. But I’d have liked to stand by our Viking Daughter.”

“She doesn’t need it. She’ll be all right with him. Didn’t you see how he caught her in his arms? He’d asked for her and been told she hadn’t been in the hotel since Sunday. He was terrified she’d had an accident.”

“He was going to the police. I’m glad we weren’t any later,” Joy remarked. “All the same, I feel we’ve deserted her. In a few minutes she’ll remember us and she’ll find we’ve gone.”

“He doesn’t want us—yet. I think perhaps he’ll ask to see us before very long. When he hears her story, he’ll feel she is rather too much for him.”

“He may pack her off to Sweden, to the old granny.”

“I don’t think he will. I believe he’ll want to talk to somebody about her first, and we’re the obvious people. Gudrun must be a problem to the family just now.”

“The granny’s the problem,” Joy observed. “Gudrun said the rest of the family would let her have her own way. The old lady’s the difficulty. I suppose we couldn’t send her some poisoned chocolates?”

“There may be some less drastic way,” Joan laughed. “I liked the look of Captain Palmgren. I hope he’ll come to see us.”

“I’d love to know what they’re saying to one another!”

“Perhaps Gudrun will tell us some day. If not, we can surely guess,” Joan said.

“Child, where have you been? They told me you went out on Sunday and never came back.”

"Uncle, I've come to own up. I'm so sorry you had a fright, but I am quite all right, really and truly. I—I ran away for two nights, but I meant to have a letter waiting for you when you arrived," Gudrun cried.

"Ran away?" He held her at arms' length and stared at her.

"Couldn't we go indoors? I want to tell you—oh, but—but——" and she turned and looked wildly for the car. "They've gone! Oh, Uncle, such lovely people! And they've been so very kind to me! I wanted you to see them. I've a letter for you. But they've gone. Could we—oh, we can't go after them, can we?"

Gripping her arm, he led her into the hotel and up to his room. "What is this about a letter?"

She thrust it into his hand. "But you won't understand. Let me tell you all about it!"

"That's what I want. Go ahead!" He laid down the letter unopened.

"I ran away," Gudrun said breathlessly. "From you. It's been in my mind ever since you said you'd bring me to London. I wanted to see Miss Shirley. I thought she would help me to get on the stage."

His brows drew together as he gazed at her. "So that old trouble was at the bottom of it? And who are these people?"

"Two Miss Shirleys. Selma told me how good they had been to her; she lived with them for months last winter. You liked Selma, Uncle! She said Miss Shirley was kind to everybody and that she had helped another girl, Angus's sister Rykie, who wanted to go on the stage. So I thought perhaps she would help me too. But it was a mistake. Joan—that's Miss Shirley—helped Rykie to go to school, not to go on the stage. I didn't understand, and I went to ask her to help me. It isn't far; I went by train and it was quite easy. I was perfectly safe, and I meant to have a letter waiting for you here, to tell you where I was. But Miss Shirley said they'd bring me back by car, and I thought I'd be in plenty of time. And you came hours earlier than you said!"

"I caught an earlier train. I shall have to go back in a few days, when certain arrangements are made and papers are prepared, but I could not leave you alone for so long. Now it seems I should not have left you at all, if I cannot trust you. What am I to do with you?" He looked at her sternly. "Shall I take you home? I cannot leave you in London again."

Gudrun thrust the letter into his hand. "Read it! Oh, Uncle, they want me to go back! I could stay with them. But they want to see you too. Couldn't we go to them, and you'd see what a lovely place it is, and how kind they are? I'm sure you'll leave me with them, if you've seen what they're like."

He waved his hand to silence her and began to read Joy's letter.

Gudrun sat by the window and stared out at the stream of cars and buses, her hands clenched in her lap. She looked at him at last, feeling his eyes on

her.

“Uncle, don’t you understand how kind they are? Won’t you go to see them?”

“It is a kind letter,” he said gravely. “But why should they do so much for people they do not know?”

“They’re like that. And—and I think they liked me. The letter is from Joy, because the house belongs to her; you can tell how kind she is. But Joan’s even kinder; she’s all that anybody could want. And Mrs. Shirley is a perfect darling. Uncle, they were so good to me, and they helped in every way they could.”

“I feel,” he said heavily, “that it is my duty to apologise to them for the trouble you have given them.”

“I don’t believe they thought of it that way. They understood how I felt and they wanted to help. They even suggested ways to help me towards going on the stage,” she said defiantly. “It’s no use frowning, Uncle. I shall do it somehow and sometime.”

“So it seems! At least, you will go to any lengths, apparently. What did these ladies suggest for you?”

“That I should live with English people for a time, to get my accent right. They even said I could stay with them for a few weeks, instead of lodging somewhere in London; and I know they really meant it. And they have a friend who teaches acting in their old school; they’ll ask what she thinks I ought to do. Joy said I could go to her for private lessons.”

Captain Palmgren noted the “Joy” and “Joan.” There was the beginning of a real friendship here. He sorely needed the advice of someone who would understand this eager resolute child, who had been so difficult at home and who looked at him with such tragic determined eyes. He felt, as he had done more than once, that she would carry out her ambition. The only question was—how? In wild doubtful experiments, suggested by impatience and inexperience? Or under the guidance of wise friends?

“We will go to see these ladies,” he said abruptly. “I shall stay at their village inn; we cannot burden them with two guests. But you will be better in their care and they seem willing to take you. I shall talk to them and perhaps they will advise. I will go and ring them up.”

“Wait till they’ll be home again!” Gudrun cried. “Give them time to get back to the Hall! Oh, Uncle, thank you! I know you’ll love them, as I do!”

CHAPTER 16

A VIKING GREETING

Joy turned from the telephone. "That was Uncle speaking; Uncle Captain Palmgren. They'll come to-morrow. He'll stay at the inn, but he'll be very grateful if Gudrun may come to us, and he'll be glad to ask our advice about her. I like his voice, and he speaks English nearly as well as she does. He wants to apologise for the trouble she has given us; he sounds quite a good sort."

"Then we'll hope all will be well for Gudrun," Joan said heartily.

She and Joy were playing tennis when the girls came back from school. They jumped off their cycles and raced to the court.

"Where's Gudrun? Where's our Viking?" Jen cried.

"In London." Joy's tone was mysterious.

"Joy! What do you mean? Tell us, Joan!"

"Have you sent her back to her uncle?" Jack asked doubtfully.

"Not sent; taken her. We took her to town this morning." Joy teased them with a half explanation.

"Joy! Why? Did she want to go?"

"Not very much. She was rather scared."

Jen stared at her. "You didn't *make* her go? You couldn't!"

Joan came to the rescue. "Joy is only teasing. Gudrun decided to go back to the hotel, so that she could be there when he arrived and tell him all about it."

"But she nearly wasn't there," Joy murmured.

"Oh!" Jen cried. "But why? We thought she was going to write."

"She felt it would be better to go. I'm sure she was wise. She wanted to do the right thing," Joan explained.

"Was it her own idea?"

"Oh, entirely! We wouldn't have asked her to do anything so difficult."

"Then I think she was absolutely noble; a complete sport," Jen announced.

"Jolly plucky thing to do," Jack agreed.

"We're with you, every time," Joy told them.

"What happens now? Did he eat her, or beat her, or send her off to Sweden, or what?"

"They're both coming here to-morrow." Joan took pity on her. "He rang up from the hotel. Joy sent a letter by Gudrun, inviting him to come."

"Oh, cheers! Then we shall hear all about it!" and Jen danced a jig of joy on the lawn.

"Stop that, you mad thing!" Jack commanded. "Come in for tea. I want mine, whether you do or not."

"We'll have to do something about it, when the Viking comes back," Jen exclaimed. "We must celebrate somehow. We knew she was nice and a good sort, but she's much nobler than we thought."

"Braver, anyway. I don't know that noble is quite the word," Joan remarked. "Your tea's waiting. Joy and I want to finish our set. I'm leading by three games to two, so clear out and let me have my well-earned victory."

"I know what we'll do!" and Jen took Jack by the arm and ran with her in quest of tea.

"Nothing too ghastly, I hope!" Joy groaned, as Joan returned to the court and repeated the remark.

"I've no idea. We'll keep our eyes open for signs of a coming riot. Jen wants to show her appreciation of Gudrun's pluck," Joan laughed. "I hope her way of doing it isn't too drastic."

Jen let fall no more hints, however, but devoted her evening to prep. and cricket, and the elder girls were left wondering what was in her mind.

"What time are they coming?" Jen asked, as she said good-night.

"During the afternoon. We'll try——"

"Oh, how mean!" Jen raged. "We want to see him! We must hear what he's going to do!"

"But they'll be here when we come back, won't they?" Jack asked.

"I hope Gudrun will be here. Captain Palmgren will stay at the inn, but we'll try to keep him till you come."

"He's shy of all of us," Jack grinned.

"You must keep him," Jen urged. "We're dying to see him. If you let him go off to the pub, I shall scoot after him and stand at the door and yell the house down, till he comes out to speak to me."

"We'll tell him," Joan promised, laughing. "With that awful threat hanging over him he may decide to go straight back to town."

"He's not likely to be as big a coward as that, when Gudrun's so brave," Jen argued. "Tell him we want to see him, Joan!"

There was no doubt in Captain Palmgren's mind as to the reality of Gudrun's welcome, when the car from the station drew up before the Hall. His eyes had been busy as they drove along the beech avenue, and he gazed in surprise and delight at the beautiful, gracious old house. Then the car was assaulted by two tall girls, with gleaming red hair, who had flung away their rackets and come racing from the court.

"Gudrun! Glad to see you back!" Joan cried. "You can't think how we missed you last night!"

"Welcome to the Hall, sir! It was good of you to come." Joy remembered her position as his hostess, and after her first glad shout of—"Gudrun! Three cheers, Viking Daughter!"—she turned to him and spoke courteously and warmly.

"You have been so very kind to this bad child, and she has given you so much trouble. I wish to thank you," he began.

"Not bad, only full of adventure." Joan smiled at Gudrun. "And certainly not any trouble. We are glad she came to us."

"And we hope you'll let her stay," Joy added. "Run in and speak to Aunt, Viking Daughter, and shove that little case into your room again. I'm sure it's pleased to come back."

"Come and meet my mother," Joan said to the sailor. "We quite understand that you will be happier at the inn, and we hope the village men will drop in to chat with you. But you must have tea and a talk with us, and we hope you'll stay till our schoolgirls come home. Dreadful things are going to happen to you, if you don't." And she repeated Jen's wild threat.

The Captain laughed. "I must meet this young lady! But if I might leave my niece in your beautiful house, I should be more than glad."

"Oh, we want her to stay!" Joy exclaimed.

"And if I might talk to you about her, when she is not present," Captain Palmgren began, after a quick look round.

"She's indoors, talking to Mother," Joan reassured him. "Yes, we want some talk with you too. We'll send her to meet the girls on their way from school."

"I shall be very grateful. I do not know what to do. None of us can think what to do with her," he confessed.

Joan smiled at him. "Let her go ahead and don't worry about her. She'll be all right. I don't feel so sure about it, if you thwart her in her great ambition. You'll make her desperate and she may do anything silly. But we'll have a good talk about her when we've sent her away. Come and tell Mother what you have been doing in London."

The sight of Mrs. Shirley still further reassured Captain Palmgren and increased his desire that his niece should stay at the Hall. To Gudrun's intense relief there was no reference to her future or to her past doings; but she knew that there must be some discussion and that it was only postponed.

Captain Palmgren had many stories to tell and he told them well. Joy openly lamented his decision to put up at the inn, and demanded loudly to know why the village should entertain him and have the benefit of his yarns.

Gudrun listened in delight. This friendship was progressing well, and she felt it would ease her way.

Joan turned to her at last. "Why don't you go to meet the girls? They're nearly due, and they're in a hurry to see you. They were terribly upset yesterday to find you gone. Go through the Abbey; I'll give you the key."

Gudrun thanked her and went off, key in hand, well aware of what was happening.

"They've got rid of me very cleverly. But that's what I want; Uncle must have a talk with them. He likes them, and they like him. I believe it will be all right."

As the girls rode round the village green, they were once more stopped by an outstretched hand, as Gudrun stepped forward and signalled to them.

"History repeats itself!" Jen pulled up and jumped from her cycle. "Oh, we are so glad to see you!—Jack!"

Jack obediently dismounted, and they stood side by side, facing Gudrun, and each raised her right hand high.

"Skaal!" Jen said solemnly.

"Skaal!" Jack echoed.

"Oh!" Gudrun gasped. "Oh, how nice of you! But how did you know?"

"Was it right? Doesn't it mean 'Hail'? We had a lesson on the Vikings one day, and we thought we'd 'skaal' you, to show you how much we appreciate you," Jen said earnestly. "It would have looked better if we'd waited till Joan and Joy could be there too, but we had to do it as soon as we met you. We couldn't suddenly start 'skaaling' you after we'd been talking about other things. Was it a real Viking greeting?"

"It was," Gudrun assured her. "I'm terribly touched, and pleased, and thrilled. Thank you very much!"

"Now tell us!" Jen pleaded. "Is it going to be all right? Was your uncle mad? Did he forgive you?"

"Joan and Joy are talking to him about me now," Gudrun said, her colour rising. "They sent me to meet you to get me out of the way."

Jen grinned. "How clever! We'll skip in the back way and go to the dining-room, and you shall give us our tea. Then we won't disturb the conference."

"But we want to see her uncle," Jack protested.

"We're dying to see him and we're going to do it. But we'll let them finish talking; that will be tactful. We won't let him run away without talking to us too," Jen assured her.

CHAPTER 17

A COMPLICATION

“What am I—what are we—to do with the child, Miss Shirley?” Captain Palmgren pleaded.

“Tell us about her grandmother. Is there no hope that she could be talked round?” Joan asked.

“She’ll have to come round,” Joy said. “Gudrun will never give up the stage. You can’t stop her. She’s on fire; eaten up with the one idea. She won’t be stopped; and, anyway, you couldn’t do it. You can’t go against a passion like that.”

“Poor Karl!” said Captain Palmgren.

The girls and Mrs. Shirley stared at him blankly, and there was a moment’s stunned silence.

“Who? What?” Joan and Joy spoke together. “She never told us!”

“My son, Karl; her cousin. He has wanted her for two years.”

“She doesn’t want him!” Joy exploded. “She never mentioned him to us! Oh, tell him to find somebody else! There’s no chance for him with Gudrun; not the slightest!”

“She certainly is not thinking of anything like that,” Mrs. Shirley said doubtfully.

“Not at present,” Joan agreed. “But she might change. Just now she definitely would not marry anybody. Tell us more about him! Did you say he is your son?”

“My only boy. He is a sailor, and is away at sea most of the time. But he never forgets, though he has every chance to change his mind or to find someone else. It is only Gudrun for him.”

“And it’s only the stage for Gudrun,” Joy insisted. “He couldn’t ask her to give up her career before it’s started! We all feel she’ll have a career and that she’ll do well. Karl doesn’t exist, for her. Tell him it’s hopeless!”

“I suppose the grandmother wants her to marry and settle down?” Joan frowned. “She could do it, if she loved anyone enough, but I’m quite sure she doesn’t, just now.”

Captain Palmgren gazed across the sunlit garden. “My mother will not live long,” he said slowly. “The girl does not know, but there is trouble, which may become acute at any time.”

“That will solve the problem, if the rest of you are kind to Gudrun and if Karl will be sensible,” Joy said hard-heartedly.

"Joy, my dear," Mrs. Shirley protested.

"Oh, I don't mean that Gudrun should want her granny to die! But it will make things easier, and I do think the old lady is being hard on her and very silly."

"Perhaps, if Gudrun knew, she would be content to wait and to say no more about the stage while her grandmother is alive," Joan began.

Captain Palmgren shook his head. "She will not wait. As you say, she is on fire with this idea. And there is Karl. The old lady—that is what everybody calls my mother—she wishes her to marry him."

"You don't want it yourself?" Joan looked at him keenly.

"I should like it above all things. But I want my boy to be happy, and with an unwilling wife he would have no comfort."

"A wife who is full of other ideas," Joan amended. "Gudrun couldn't marry him unwillingly; she has far too much in her. But she might be persuaded into it and still go on craving for the stage. That would be a disaster for them both."

"They would only be unhappy," Mrs. Shirley said.

"Karl complicates things," Joy said frowning.

"We'd better leave Karl out of it, till we have talked to Gudrun about him. We can't possibly know how she really feels. She may be fighting against the idea of marriage, because it would interfere with her career; in that case, I'd feel she ought to give up the stage," Joan said, thinking out the problem slowly.

She smiled at the captain. "I don't know anything about being in love; I've had no experience. But I've always imagined that it was a feeling for which one would give up everything and be glad to do it. That if I fell in love, for instance, I'd be ready to go away with—him!—and leave Mother to Joy's tender mercies, and leave my Abbey, that I love so much; you haven't seen it yet. And that if I wasn't willing to leave everything, I shouldn't be really in love and it wouldn't be worth while getting married. I can't imagine any man who could make me feel like that, of course."

Joy had been holding herself in with difficulty. "I can't, either," she jeered. "I'll look after Auntie and the Abbey, if it ever happens. But I'm quite sure it won't."

Joan laughed. "Unless Gudrun can give up the stage for Karl happily and eagerly, she'd be much better not to marry him."

"She isn't thinking of it," Joy retorted. "You must tell him there's no chance of it, sir. Leave Gudrun with us; you know us now and you've seen the house. You know she'll be safe here. She'll pick up a good accent, if she hears English spoken all round her, and that will be a real help to her. We'll introduce her to people who may be able to advise her; we don't know

anything about the stage, but we have friends who do know. Her granny couldn't object to her paying a visit to nice English people! That is, if you think we are nice?"

Captain Palmgren looked at her gravely. "You would take the child to live with you, for a short time?"

"We'll love to have her, and it will help her. She must speak better English before she can play in Shakespeare, as she wants to do."

"I know. I have heard her talk of it. But why should you do so much for a girl who is nothing to you?"

"Because we'd like to do it," Joy said promptly.

"Because we like your Gudrun so much," said Mrs. Shirley.

"Because we believe she has a great future before her and we want to help," Joan added. "Three good reasons, don't you think so?"

"And you really believe she must be an actress?"

"We're sure of it." Joan and Joy spoke together.

"I cannot go home and tell the old lady. It would break her heart and kill her," he said heavily. "I can tell Karl, but not my mother. Miss Shirley, I have to go north again, to finish my business, and also to Scotland and to Ireland; to Glasgow and Belfast. I cannot take Gudrun on these journeys, and after what has happened I am afraid to trust her in London, as I had meant to do. If I could leave her in your hands, while I am travelling, it would be the greatest relief to me. When it is time for me to return to Sweden, we could speak then of the future."

"Done!" Joy cried eagerly. "Leave her with us! We'll love to have her, and we'll take care of her."

"When you are ready to go home, you'll find her so happy with us that you won't have the heart to uproot her," Joan said. "At least, I hope you will!"

"I am sure I shall. We will leave the future to itself, then. I am more than grateful for your help."

"We're very glad Gudrun came to us," Joan said.

"We're glad she had the sense to do it," Joy added. "Feeling as she does about the stage, she might have done anything crazy and got herself entangled with all sorts of people, in no end of a mess. I'm glad it was to us she came."

"I am glad, also, since you are so very kind. And you will talk to her of Karl? She may say more to you."

"I shouldn't wonder if we did," Joy grinned. "I'm dying to hear what she says about him."

"But not yet," Joan decreed. "Give her a day or two longer to get used to us. I wonder where she is? The girls should have been in from school long

ago.”

“I’ll go and scout round,” and Joy disappeared.

She came back in a moment, her eyes amused. “A nice little party, with Gudrun looking motherly behind the tea-pot.”

“How good of her! The girls are very anxious to see you,” Joan said to the captain. “Could you bear to repeat some of those stories for them?”

“Shall we go to them?” and he rose. “Gudrun has talked much of the younger girls.”

“They love her.” Joan led the way to the dining-room.

Jen sprang up at sight of them. “Gudrun’s being a perfect lamb, waiting on us and giving us our tea. Doesn’t she look like the mother of the family? How nice of you to bring her back, Captain Palmgren!”

“I really do not think I could have kept her away. Am I to tell you my stories of the sea?”

“Oh, yes, please! I mean, ‘Aye, aye, sir!’ We’d love to hear them. Where have you been? To Iceland?”

“Oh, many times; Greenland, also. But I have sailed south to the Tropics as well.”

“Tell us!” Jen commanded.

Jack grabbed her arm. “You’ve forgotten. Oughtn’t we to—what we did for Gudrun, you know?”

“Oh, rather! I did forget.” And Jen stood very straight and gave the Viking greeting. “Skaal, Captain!”

“Eh? What’s that?” His eyes twinkled, as Jack joined in the salute.

“They think it’s the right thing to do for Vikings, and they insist on calling us Vikings,” Gudrun said laughing.

“So!” He eyed the girls and gravely returned the greeting.

“We did it for Gudrun, when she met us in the village,” Jen explained. “Because she’d been so awfully plucky about going to town to own up.”

Joan laughed. “The village would think you were crazy. That was what you meant to do for Gudrun, was it?”

Jen’s eyes gleamed, but she said no more, but gazed at Gudrun and the captain.

Uncle and niece were looking at one another. As their eyes met, Gudrun said honestly, “I was afraid. I knew I’d behaved badly. I’ve said I’m sorry.”

“I suppose I must forgive you, since you came to these kind friends, my child. Will you stay with them while I do my business?”

“Oh, Uncle! Oh, thank you! Yes, I will, if they’ll have me. I’ll love to stay here!”

“Whoops! Cheers!” Jen shouted, and sprang up.

Jack seized her again. “Not in here. The lawn’s the place for head-over-heels. Calm down, idiot!”

“Well, it will be jolly nice to have the Viking Daughter here, and to know it’s all fair and square and she isn’t hiding from anybody.”

“Jolly nice, and we’re very glad she can stay,” Joan agreed. “Now go on with your tea, and Captain Palmgren shall tell you about his Iceland voyage when he was wrecked.”

“Carry on, please!” and Jen passed her cup to Gudrun. “More tea, thank you, Mother!”

CHAPTER 18

THE SILENT SERENADE

“Joan thinks the ‘skaaling’ was all we mean to do for Gudrun,” Jen chuckled, as they prepared to escort Captain Palmgren to the inn and then to bring Gudrun safely back. “She was feeling a tiny bit nervous, after my hint; I saw it in her eyes. She thinks it’s all right now and we’ve finished celebrating. I’d have liked her and Joy to join in; it feels odd to leave Joan out of anything. But it must be a secret proceeding or it won’t be any fun.”

“We’ll need Susie Spindle. Two wouldn’t be enough.”

“Susie’s game. I talked to her this morning. She knows what to do, and she won’t giggle. I was most emphatic about that, and she promised faithfully.”

“Susie seems to me exactly the sort who would giggle at the wrong moment,” Jack said severely.

Leaving the captain at the inn very reluctantly, the girls walked back through the lanes and the Abbey, and, still more reluctantly, settled down to their evening’s work.

“Only the thought of to-morrow, and Mademoiselle and Miss Macey, urges me on to this hateful task,” Jen groaned. “Real people are so much more interesting! Who wants to write essays on ancient history? And who cares about French?”

“You will, to-morrow morning,” Joan told her, and led Gudrun away for some tennis.

The strain of homework demanded half-an-hour’s cricket before supper. “To loosen up our minds, for fear we had French dreams,” Jen explained.

Gudrun came from the court to watch, and begged to be allowed to join in another time. The schoolgirls cheered and thanked her, and Joy declared that to-morrow she would play too.

Gudrun sat talking with Mrs. Shirley and Joan after supper, while Joy gave them a recital of nocturnes and waltzes. Then Joan proposed bed. “You must be tired. These last few days have been very full ones for you,” she said.

Gudrun agreed and admitted to being ready to rest.

She brushed and plaited her long hair and stepped into bed. Then, looking startled, she sprang out again, to look between her sheets, for she had felt something there. Memories of Jen’s warnings of two nights before

crowded on her, as she searched for the thing which had crackled when she sat on it.

She drew out an envelope, addressed—"Viking Daughter."

"I thought it sounded like paper!" and she stepped into bed again and opened the note.

"Dear Gudrun,

Don't go to sleep. We don't want you to think we're a nightmare, and yell, if we wake you too suddenly. It's nothing dreadful; don't be frightened! We're going to serenade you, because you're such a sport and we like you so much.

Yours faithfully,

J. and J. (*Not* Joan and Joy!)"

Gudrun gave a little chuckling laugh. "Nice girls! But how are they going to do it? They'll wake the house and alarm Mrs. Shirley. No, they won't do that. Then, how, I wonder?"

She switched out the light and lay waiting, finding it hard to keep from falling asleep. Then she sat up and turned on the lamp again, for the door was opening quietly.

The light made a small circle around the bed, but left the rest of the room in darkness. Three dim figures crept silently in and closed the door behind them without a sound. Three! Not Joan, surely. Was Joy taking part in this midnight visit?

While Gudrun stared, they appeared in the circle of light; Jen, with her yellow plaits and wearing a blue dressing-gown; Jack, in crimson, with her round black head; and Susie, slightly behind the others and obviously shy, in a tawny gown, her usually neat brown hair ruffled and untidy; Gudrun had seen her and had been fascinated by her name, Susie Spindle.

While the victim watched wide-eyed, the three placed themselves in a half-circle in front of her and began to play imaginary instruments. Jack, standing with outstretched left arm, was obviously fiddling; Jen was just as evidently playing a drum; Susie's hands went in and out, in and out—a concertina. There was no sound, but the faces of the three were filled with desperate concentration.

Gudrun gazed at them. Then she lay back on her pillows, and laughed and laughed, and went on laughing, but still without a sound.

Unknown to the younger girls, the door opened again and Joy stood staring at her guests. Her face lit up in amusement; she came and stood behind the others, playing an invisible trumpet.

Gudrun saw her, though the other serenaders did not, and she broke into a fresh paroxysm of laughter. Then suddenly she sprang up, and, using her bed as a stage, began to act in dumb show.

The fiddle, trumpet and concertina were lowered; the drum was forgotten. Breathless, the four watched, as the pantomime proceeded without a sound.

She crouched in one corner of the bed, her face to the wall, her hair falling about her, a picture of desolation, head bent on knees. Then she looked up, astonishment in her face; obviously someone had touched her on the shoulder. Springing to her feet, and keeping her balance wonderfully on the uneven bed, she flung out her hands in a wild gesture, joy and gratitude in her face, her lips moving soundlessly. She looked disdainfully at her red dressing-gown, tore it off and flung it away; then she smoothed her hair carefully, put on the gown again—it was obviously a different garment this time, and a much finer one, by the reverent care with which she smoothed out the folds and stroked it proudly. She sat down on the pillow and took up imaginary reins, and every one of the enthralled audience knew she was driving her coach.

“By all that’s wonderful!” Joy whispered. “Cinderella going to the ball!”

Gudrun’s lips twitched, while Jen and Jack glanced round in surprise.

Joy shook her head. “Watch! It’s brilliant. Can’t you see she’s Cinderella?”

Gudrun had reached the ball, and, slipping off the bed, she was waltzing with the Prince. A quick glance at the clock, and she was running away, back to her refuge on the bed, once more in rags and despair, her hair pulled about her in wild confusion again.

Joy threw one of Susie’s slippers to Cinderella’s feet. Quite seriously, Gudrun glanced up at the Prince, tried on the slipper—with difficulty, for Susie was a small person—and stood in triumph beside her invisible lover, gave him her hand, and began to dance with him again.

“And they all lived happily ever after!” Joy announced. “Viking Daughter, what a wonderful performance!”

“It was marvellous!” Jen cried. “But when did you come, Joy? You were very quiet!”

“So were you,” Joy retorted. “I was part of your orchestra. I played a trumpet.”

Jack grinned. “I wish we could have heard us! Trumpet—drum—fiddle—and concertina; quite a decent band!”

“Susie’s uncle at the forge has a ‘tina’; that was why she chose it,” Jen explained. “Joy, wasn’t Gudrun wonderful?”

“Skip off to bed, Susie. Here’s your slipper! Don’t make a sound,” and Joy opened the door. “I can see that you were needed for the band, but now it’s time for bed. You’ve had Miss Palmgren’s pantomime as well as the silent music. Did you know she was doing Cinderella?”

“Not till you said she was going to the ball, Miss Joy,” Susie confessed.

Joy smiled and closed the door behind her. “Imagination is not Susie Spindle’s strong point.”

Jen darted to the door. “Susie!” she whispered urgently. “Have you got your torch? Don’t fall over the Curate!”

“How did you do it?” Jack was demanding of Gudrun. “You never said a word, but you absolutely made us see it all.”

“I definitely saw the Fairy Godmother and the Prince.” Jen had closed the door cautiously and now turned to Gudrun. “It was terribly clever!”

“The thing I saw so clearly was the white satin ball-dress,” Joy remarked. “The red gown completely vanished.”

Gudrun laughed. “I hoped you’d recognise my lovely frock for the ball. It was miming; we did it at the dramatic school. We had to take a well-known story and play it, quite on our own, with no costume or properties, to the other students. Mother had told me of Cinderella, you know. I wondered how soon you’d guess. Thank you for the serenade; I enjoyed it so much. I felt I must have my part in the show too.”

“What is it all about?” Joy demanded. “I heard something and I came to see. And I found you all tootling away at invisible instruments. So I had to produce a trumpet. But now I want an explanation.”

Gudrun held out the note. “I found that in my bed. I sat on it.”

Joy grinned. “Easier to get rid of than water biscuits! Oh, I see! It was a serenade. What a marvellous idea! But you infants might have let me into it at the beginning.”

“We’d have loved to have you, and Joan too. But it had to be a secret proceeding,” Jen urged.

“Or it would have been no fun at all,” Joy assented. “I see that. I’ll forgive you, then. Gudrun, my love, could you do Cinderella again?”

Gudrun looked startled. “I suppose I could. But it might not be quite the same. Why?”

“I suppose you’ll never feel sure what you’re going to do. But keep it the same, if you can. I want Joan to see the pantomime; I’m going to fetch her.”

“Oh!” Gudrun cried. “Oh, is it good enough for Joan?”

“What a compliment to the lady of the Abbey!” Joy mocked. “It’s good enough for anybody. You two had better skip off to bed; you know what Joan will say.”

“Oh, rot!” Jen and Jack cried together. “We’re going to see it again. We’ll be like mice in a corner, but we’re not going away.”

“Shall we put it off till to-morrow?” Gudrun looked at Joy. “I don’t need to do it in my night things.”

“It wouldn’t be the same, if you were dressed!” Jen protested.

“We’re going to ask you to do Shakespeare for us to-morrow; I’ll be Romeo to your Juliet! But pantomime is for an evening performance. I’ll fetch Joan, and I’ll tell her what it’s all about. Get into a corner, then, infants. Perhaps she’ll let you stay.”

“Don’t fall over the Curate!” Jen warned her, as she left the room. “Now, Gudrun! Do Juliet for us! It will take Joy a few minutes to explain to Joan.”

“Or Ophelia; you could do that alone,” Jack urged. “Be Ophelia, mad, and handing out flowers to everybody.”

“Joan, I want you. Good thing you aren’t sleeping with Aunty to-night.” Joy slipped quietly into Joan’s room. “Joan, such a marvellous thing! Jen and Jack have been serenading Gudrun; because of her pluck, you know. It was all in dumb show; fiddle and drum, and Susie with an imaginary concertina. I caught them at it, so I joined in with a trumpet. And then Gudrun jumped up and began to do Cinderella, in pantomime, without a sound. It was the most brilliant thing I ever saw. She never spoke a word, but she made us see the whole thing—godmother, prince, the coach, the ball—everything. I tell you, she can act! I want you to see it, so I told her she’d have to do it again. Come on! She’s waiting for you. You’ll love it. It’s really worth seeing.”

“But must it be to-night?” Joan was preparing for bed and was brushing out her hair. “I’d like to see it, of course, but wouldn’t to-morrow do?”

“Better see it while she’s in the mood. By to-morrow, in the cold light of day and in her proper clothes, she might say she’d feel silly. The setting’s just right, by night. Come on, Joan!”

Joan finished her long plaits and flung them back. “I want to see it. Did you send the girls to bed?”

“I wasn’t so hard-hearted. No, Joan, I really couldn’t. I’m soft, I suppose, but I hadn’t the heart to do it.”

“Silly!” Joan scolded. “They ought to be in bed.”

“It only takes five minutes. They’ll go, as soon as they’ve seen the show again.”

They entered Gudrun’s room, to find her strolling up and down, apparently handing something to the girls as she passed them. Her hair was ruffled into wild disorder, and they caught a word or two, before she saw them.

“ ‘There’s rosemary; that’s for remembrance; pray, love, remember; and there is pansies, that’s for thoughts. There’s fennel for you; and columbines; —there’s rue for you; and here’s some for me:—we may call it herb-grace o’ Sundays. Oh, you must wear your rue with a difference’ ”—she broke off suddenly.

“I was keeping these two amused,” she said.

“Ophelia!” Joy laughed. “You shall do it for us to-morrow. But the pantomime! We want our Cinderella!”

While Joan watched with keen interest, Gudrun repeated her mimed story. Frantic applause broke from the audience in the corner, who till then had kept very quiet, not attracting attention to themselves.

“It was just the same. Oh, Gudrun, you are clever!” Jen cried. “Yes, Joan dear, we’re going to bed, right now. Come on, Jacky-boy!” and they slipped away, Jen’s eyes wide open for any sign of her black Curate friend.

“That was wonderful,” Joan cried, in delight. “Gudrun, thank you so much!”

Gudrun sat on the bed and gazed at her. “Would you have known? Joy had told you what it was. Would you have guessed?”

“I’m sure I should, when you dressed for the ball,” Joan said laughing. “You were so careful of the satin gown, and so proud. Oh, you’ll have to go on the stage! There’s no doubt of it. You’ve proved it to us.”

Gudrun’s face lit up. “How kind! At least, you know how much I want it.”

“Will you do that Ophelia scene for Mother to-morrow? We’ll find you some real pansies; columbines, too.”

“She’s going to hang over the railing in the hall and be Juliet,” Joy said. “Aunty must see what Miss Palmgren can do!”

CHAPTER 19

ONE STEP FORWARD

Joy called Gudrun to the telephone, soon after the girls had started for school next morning. "Your uncle wants a word with you."

Leaving her to speak to him she went in search of Joan. "Captain Palmgren on the phone. He's had a message forwarded from the hotel; the people in Manchester want him to come and finish up the business. Everything is ready, and they are waiting for his signature to some papers. He asked if we'd think him rude, if he went off at once, to catch a mid-day train in town; and if we were really sure it was all right for him to leave Gudrun with us; on our hands, was the way he put it."

"I hope you said yes to that?"

"I did; and I said no to the other. I said he must go as fast as he could, and that we wouldn't dream of giving Gudrun up to him. He's saying good-bye now and giving her good advice, and he'll have the rest of her belongings sent from town; another big case, besides the small one she brought with her."

"She wants to stay, so that's all right," Joan agreed. "Did he say if they had made him comfortable at the inn?"

"Couldn't have been nicer or kinder. He hopes he'll come back."

"I'm sure he will!—So now you really do belong to us, for the time being!" Joan cried gaily to Gudrun, as she came from the telephone.

Gudrun was looking serious. "I just don't know how to say 'thank you' properly. I don't know enough words."

"Then don't try. We're glad you can stay, and we hope it will be for some time. Why not have that talk with Miss Cameron about your future?"

"Good idea," Joy said. "I'll ring up and ask when she could see us." And she went to the telephone again.

Gudrun's face glowed with delight. "I'd like that. Oh, you are too kind!"

Joy came back presently. "Cammy has a free period this afternoon, until three-thirty. We'll run in after lunch and introduce Gudrun to her."

"And to Miss Macey," Joan added. "You must see the Head first and explain to her. Cammy can't give private lessons, unless the Head understands."

"True; I hadn't thought of that. We'll do things in the proper order. You'll come too, won't you?"

"I can't. I'm on duty in the Abbey this afternoon. Ann wants to go to the village; old Mrs. Watson is ill and I've promised Ann she shall go."

"Bother! You explain things so much better than I do."

"Gudrun will explain." Joan smiled at their guest. "You'll do it between you. You can explain to Miss Macey, but let Gudrun tell her own story to Miss Cameron. I can't forsake the Abbey, and I can't be unkind to Ann, who is really very fond of her mother-in-law."

"And you love being in charge of your Abbey," Joy jeered.

"I do. I like it much better when I have it all to myself."

"Do people come to see it?" Gudrun asked.

"Not a great many, but it's open to the public until six o'clock, and somebody has to be the guide. I love taking strangers round."

"I expect you do it beautifully."

"She does. That's why it's hers. She won it, by knowing it so well and loving it so much," Joy said. "I'll tell you the story as we go to town. Now I want you to see the gardens. We know you so well that it's odd to think you haven't been round the place yet!"

Joan was sitting on the cloister steps near the entrance to the Abbey, waiting for visitors, and enjoying the peacefulness and the sense of possession—"Mine! All mine!" she laughed in her heart—when a well-known "Coo-ee!" came from outside and the great bell clanged.

She went to open the gate, to the strains of "See the conquering hero"—sung by Joy.

"Here she is! She wants to tell you all about it. I'll take the car round and tell Auntie, and you can send Gudrun home by the garden. Don't make her late for tea."

"I'll give her tea here; she shall have an Abbey picnic. Was Miss Cameron nice to you, Gudrun?"

"I think she will do everything I want." Gudrun smiled shyly, her face glowing with hope.

"The Head understood, when I explained that our foreign friend was staying with us and would like to have a few private lessons from Cammy to improve her accent," Joy said. "Gudrun thanked her prettily, in her best English and her very best Swedish accent"—Gudrun laughed—"and Miss Macey agreed that Cammy could probably help her and sent us to consult her. By your advice, I then handed over to Gudrun and let her speak for herself. And then it happened." She paused dramatically.

Joan raised her brows and looked at Gudrun.

"I was afraid I had said too much," Gudrun said, as if in apology. "But Joy does not think so. I told Miss Cameron about my great wish, and how

nobody would listen to me at home, and how I had come to you to ask for help, and how you had been so kind.”

“She just poured it out,” Joy took up the story. “Cammy was thrilled from the first moment. It was dramatic enough for anything. Portia pleading with Shylock was nothing to it; though it’s too bad to call dear Cammy Shylock! But really, Joan, when Gudrun gets going, she does hold the stage!”

“I apologised,” Gudrun said hurriedly. “I said I was sorry, and I asked her to forgive me. She was nice; she said she could see how keen I was and she would like to help me. But she said I will need to work at my accent, and I must listen and talk to English people and try to speak as they do.”

“I told her about Cinderella, and she wishes she’d seen it,” Joy said. “I thought she was going to tell Gudrun to do it on the spot, but she didn’t. She said perhaps she’d see it later on.”

“I wished you hadn’t told her. I was afraid she would think it was childish and silly.”

“She didn’t,” Joy assured her.

Gudrun looked at Joan and spoke shyly. “Miss Cameron said she would write to you about business arrangements. I can pay, you know; you must not do that for me. But if you will plan it for me I will thank you very much.”

“We’ll see to all that. Did you tell her that your way is not clear with your home folks yet?”

“Oh yes! I told her about Grandmother, but she said I must not allow anything to keep me back, as she is sure I have a great future before me, and I must arrange things with my family somehow. But it will not be easy. Grandmother will never agree.”

“Don’t worry over that just now,” Joan said quietly. “Something may happen to make things easier for you. What about the future? Had she any ideas?”

“She said rep. companies were good training, but that it would be best if I could go into a Shakespearian company, and she would make inquiries. And she talked about Stratford. That means Shakespeare, doesn’t it?”

“It certainly does. If you could get training there, it would be just what you want.”

“She mentioned the Old Vic, too,” Joy said. “She seemed to be bursting with ideas. I think she was really impressed, and she means to help and to find ways to do it.”

“Couldn’t be better,” Joan said in delight. “Congrats, Gudrun dear! We shall see you on the stage yet. Now I’ll put on the kettle for our picnic, while

Joy takes the car home. When Jen and Jack come in, you must tell them your news. You didn't wait to bring them home in the car, Joy?"

"They'd have had to leave their bikes at school. And it's one of their late nights; Jen has her kiddies' class. We couldn't wait for hours," Joy said.

She was turning to the gate when Joan called her back. "Joy! I almost forgot. Such a queer thing! Mr. Dallas's office rang up. He wants to see me; he's coming early this evening."

"To see me, you mean," Joy exclaimed, for Mr. Dallas was her London lawyer. "I wonder what he wants?"

"He said 'Miss Shirley,' and he knows all about us. He certainly meant he was coming to see me."

"But how mad! He can't have any business to do with you!"

"I shall see him, all the same. If he's been careless and really wants you, he can send me away. But the message was for 'Miss Shirley' and that isn't you," Joan said firmly.

"We'll both see him." Joy frowned. "Perhaps there's something wrong, and he wants you to break it to me gently. Perhaps the money's all gone. What on earth should we do?"

"It's not the least likely. Where could it go?"

"Banks fail, and companies bust up, and shares aren't worth anything," Joy said vaguely. "It's an appalling idea! Would you like to be the caretaker again?"

"Oh, don't be silly, Joy! Your house won't disappear!"

"But there might not be any money to pay for keeping it up. I do feel worried! Why couldn't he say what he wanted with us?"

"With me," Joan insisted. "Don't be so nervy! It's probably something quite simple."

"Then he could have written a letter," Joy retorted, and turned to the gate, looking definitely alarmed.

"Don't frighten Mother!" Joan called after her. "I didn't say anything to her. We'll tell her afterwards."

"Then you do think it may be something serious," Joy said unhappily, and went out to the car and drove away.

"Do you really think there is anything wrong?" Gudrun looked anxiously at Joan.

"I'm quite sure there isn't. But Joy is very touchy where her house is concerned; she loves every stone of it. Her imagination has run away with her. She's thinking of new heirs to the property being discovered—which is quite impossible—or something of that sort. Don't worry, Gudrun! I'm sure it will be all right."

CHAPTER 20

A TREASURE COMES HOME

"And now, tell us about Karl!" said Joy.

Gudrun sat up, her face filling with sudden colour. "What did Uncle say?"

"Joy!" Joan cried indignantly. "Oh, Joy, you might have waited!"

"I'm bothered about old Dallas. I want my mind distracted," Joy protested.

"So you make Gudrun uncomfortable! It's all right, Gudrun; you shan't be teased. Don't tell us anything until you really want to do it."

"Do you think your house perhaps belongs to somebody else?" Gudrun used Joan's hint as a thrust at Joy.

"Perhaps. How can I know? Old Dallas is going to tell Joan something. It may be anything," Joy said gloomily. "But I'm coming to hear it too; 'Miss Shirley' or not."

"I'm glad Mother isn't here to listen to such nonsense," Joan scolded. "How could the house belong to anyone else? Oh, Joy, don't be such a baby!"

"Uncle Tony may have been married secretly in Australia and they've only just found out. If he left a family——"

"Joy! Don't be an idiot! You know he never married!"

"I said 'secretly.' Perhaps nobody knew."

"Jandy would have known. And he wouldn't have adopted her and left everything to her, if he'd been married."

"Jandy was only a school kid. She might not know——"

"Mr. Dallas to see you, Miss Joan," said a maid from the door.

Both the Abbey girls sprang up. "I never heard the car!" Joy cried, and dashed from the room.

"Forgive us, Gudrun," Joan said hurriedly, and ran after her.

Gudrun sat gazing out of the window, much perturbed, both for the sake of these new friends and on her own account. Her face flushed as she thought of Joy's words, and she blamed her uncle bitterly and wondered how much he had said.

From the next room she heard the sound of voices; a sharp cry, as if of surprise—was that from Joy? And Joan's voice, asking eager questions. Then the door of the room was closed quickly, and the murmur of a man's voice, explaining or telling some story, was all that could be made out.

Afraid she might be hearing too much, and trying not to listen, Gudrun went to the long windows and gazed across the garden. Then she stepped out quickly and went on to the lawn, to meet the schoolgirls, who were coming up the drive from the avenue.

They sprang from their cycles beside her. "Hallo, Viking! So you've been at school! You might have waited to bring us home!" Jack cried.

"How did you get on? What did Cammy say? Did she like you?" Jen's questions tumbled out, in eager sympathy. "Some of the girls saw you and told us."

"Saw Joy, you mean," Jack corrected her. "They don't know Gudrun."

"That's what I mean. What about Cammy, Gudrun?"

"She was very kind and I liked her. She will think of ways to help me. But——"

"Oh, good! Then that's all right!"

"Yes, I think so. But come into the house quietly. I'll give you your tea, as I did yesterday. There's a visitor—a lawyer—and Joan and Joy are talking to him."

"Joy's old man from town? What does he want?" Jen exclaimed.

"I don't know. Joy was frightened and fears there may be some trouble, about the house, or her money. Joan said that is impossible and she must not be silly. Then he came, and they went in a hurry to find out what he had come for."

Jack whistled. "It would be awful for Joy, if anything went wrong with her affairs now!"

"I don't see how it could, unless somebody turned up and claimed everything; someone from Australia," Jen said, looking worried. "Her uncle died there, and because he had died before his father everything came to Joy. But it did happen once; not that anybody claimed the property, but they thought she was going to do it and everything would be hers. Joy had a ghastly fright; I expect she's thinking of that now."

"And what happened?" Gudrun asked, fascinated. "The house didn't belong to anyone else, did it?"

"No, it was a mistake. It was a question of the exact date her uncle died, before or after his father. It was before, and so everything had to belong to Joy."

"Who was the other person?"

"A girl. We call her Jandy Mac; you're sure to hear us speak about her. She was as much upset as any of them; she'd stayed here, and she didn't want to take the house from Joy. She felt awful, until they knew it was all right. She's married now and she has a baby called Joan, but they call her Littlejan, because she's so like Jandy. Joy's uncle adopted Jandy and in his

will he left everything to her. If he had died after his father the Hall would have been his, and that meant it would have been Jandy's, and Joy and Joan wouldn't have had the house and the Abbey. That's why Joy is so worried, if she thinks it may be going to happen again. But I don't see how there could possibly be anyone else." Jen looked distinctly anxious, however.

"Joan said it was impossible," Gudrun said doubtfully, not understanding the explanation very clearly. "Joy would feel dreadful, if anything like that happened."

"A second time," Jack added. "Can't we go and ask them?"

"Fraid we can't," Jen said gloomily. "I'd love to burst in on them, but I know Joan wouldn't like it."

"Perhaps by the time you have had your tea, the lawyer will have gone," Gudrun suggested.

"That's true. Come on, Jacky-boy! I'm worried, but not so badly that I can't eat!"

Gudrun took charge of the tea-pot again, and the younger girls were soon too busy to talk. But not too busy to worry, and though both made a good meal it was taken in silence.

Gudrun was offering third cups of tea, when the sound of voices in the hall froze all three girls into alert attention. Jack sat erect, breathless; Jen pushed away her plate and waited, tense and anxious.

"They don't sound much upset," she murmured. "Joy's laughing. It must be all right!"

They heard a car drive away and the front door was closed.

"They've gone to the library, to look for me," Gudrun said. "We were talking there, when he came."

Jen shot past her and flung open the door. "Joan! Joy! Tell us! Is it all right?"

"Or is it another claimant for the property?" Jack added, close behind her.

The Abbey girls turned, and their faces were radiant.

"Very much all right!" Joy cried. "Jen, the most wonderful thing!"

"Look, Jenny-Wren!" Joan held out her hand.

In the palm lay a big ruby, glowing and beautiful.

Then, indeed, Jen gave a shriek of joy. "Jehane's ruby! The one you sold for Angus! Oh, Joan, it couldn't be! It's come home!"

"Yes, the ruby has come home. Look, Gudrun! Isn't it lovely?"

"It's a beauty." Gudrun came to look. "Is it—oh, is it the one you gave, so that Selma's Angus could have music-lessons?"

"Right! Then you know the story. It's the very same ruby. We never expected to see it again."

"But how, Joan? And why?" Jen besought her.

"And where?" Jack added. "Where did it come from?"

"We'll tell you, but we must tell Mother—oh, here she is! Look, Mother dear! Don't you want to hear the story?"

"What has happened? I heard Joy's voice and I thought she seemed excited," Mrs. Shirley began. Then her eyes fell on the ruby. "Joan! My dear, what does this mean?"

"That a treasure has come home," Joan said happily. "Sit down and we'll tell you all about it. Mr. Dallas has been here and he brought the ruby back to us." She looked at Gudrun. "A year ago, we asked him to sell it for us; we didn't know how to go about it. He argued with us, but when we insisted he took charge of the business."

"And now he has brought the ruby home?" Gudrun queried.

"But how? Why, Joan?" Jen pleaded.

Joan laughed at her eager face. "We never knew who had bought the stone. He didn't send it to a shop or to a jewel sale. He took it to Lady Hayward; we didn't know her, but she was an old friend of his and he had often done business for her. She was a great lover of fine jewels and she had a famous collection; she was over seventy, and her beautiful stones were almost her only interest. She loved our ruby and she bought it on the spot, as Mr. Dallas knew she would. He told her its story; he didn't know all about Jehane and Ambrose, but we had told him it had been lost for four hundred years in a ruined Abbey, and that it had belonged to a girl of Tudor days. What he did know was how we had found the jewels and why we had decided to sell this one."

"It was cheek of him to tell her about us," Joy interrupted. "But it's lucky for us he did."

"Very lucky," Joan assented. "She seems to have been thrilled; the story of Angus and his music-lessons really pleased her. She made Mr. Dallas add a line to her will, saying the ruby was to be returned to us on her death. And now she has died, and the ruby has come home."

"Her family were mad," Joy added. "They didn't want to give it up. But Mr. Dallas was firm; the ruby now belonged to the Miss Shirleys, he told them. So they couldn't do anything."

"But grumble," Joan smiled. "I'm sure they had plenty of jewels, without this one."

"What a lovely ending to its story!" Gudrun exclaimed.

Jen was gloating over the ruby. "It may not be the end. You never know, with Abbey treasures. They keep on having adventures. What will you do with it, Joan? Bury it with the others?"

“Bury it?” Jack cried. “You haven’t buried all the rest, have you? I saw they’d disappeared, but I supposed you had sent them to the bank, to be safe. Surely you didn’t bury them?”

“How careless, Jenny-Wren!” Joan said severely.

“Oh!” Jen gave a gasp of dismay. “Oh, I never meant it! I forgot Jacky-boy. Jack, forget that I said it! You aren’t meant to know. Oh, Joan, I am so sorry—so fearfully sorry!”

“You’re making matters worse,” Joy observed. “You’re telling Jack how much it matters, with every word you say.”

“Oh, Joan! I broke my promise!” Jen almost sobbed, and her hand went to the brooch in her tie—a silver bar, with three small stones in it; a ruby in the centre, a sapphire on one side, an emerald on the other. “You’d better have this back, Joan!”

“Don’t be silly!” Joan scolded. “Both you and Joy are being very stupid. It doesn’t matter; it isn’t serious; it’s nothing to do with Jack. She won’t ask any questions, when she knows it was something she wasn’t meant to hear.”

Jack looked mutinous. “Why can’t I hear? If Jen knows, why can’t I?”

“But what is it all about?” Gudrun asked, greatly puzzled by the woe in Jen’s face.

“There, you see! Now Gudrun wants to know too. If Jen would only think, just now and then,” Joy began.

“Joy, don’t make things worse.” Joan took charge of the situation. “Gudrun, we had a burglar alarm, some months ago, and the jewels were nearly stolen. Selma’s Angus saved them and was badly hurt—oh, you know the story?”

“Selma told us, when she stayed with us last spring.”

“Good! We were anxious about the jewels and we felt they might bring burglars again. So we put them away in a safe place, where no one will ever find them. Jen and the Curate helped us to do it. That’s all anybody needs to know. I can’t tell you what we’ll do, Jen. We may put the ruby with the others, but we haven’t had time to think yet. I’ve a vague idea in my mind. What about making it into a wedding-present for Selma, when the time comes? She won’t be married for a year or two, I hope. It would make a lovely pendant.”

“Oh, nice!” Jen whispered, still looking unhappy, however.

“Would Angus like that?” Joy objected. “I think you’d have to ask them. It might remind him too much of——” she glanced at Gudrun—“of lots of things; of how that beast Alf Watson broke his fiddling arm, for one thing.”

“We must think about it. Selma isn’t ready for a wedding yet,” Joan said. “Joy, you like having ideas. What about a celebration, for the return of the ruby?”

Joy's eyes gleamed. "It certainly seems needed. If ever there was a time to celebrate it's now. Right! I'll see to it. Go and do your prep, kids, and then—yes, I know. Go to bed early, and Gudrun and I will see what we can do."

Gudrun laughed. "I'll love to help. What shall it be?"

"It's your doing, Joan. You suggested it," Joy said darkly, as the girls went off to work, both rather silent. "You'll have to help. We shall need you!"

"I had to do something to get that look off Jen's face. She's heartbroken, because she forgot her promise. And there's really no harm done."

"Unless Jack teases her and gets the story out of her. Jen would be upset, if she had to tell the whole thing."

"She wouldn't do it, even if it broke her heart to refuse. But I hope Jack won't be so silly."

"She isn't satisfied," Joy said. "She looked positively thunderous."

"She'll have to calm down. What are you going to do to distract their minds?"

"Well, listen! You mustn't be alarmed, if there's a bit of a row, Auntie dear," Joy warned Mrs. Shirley. "It's Joan's fault. It's her idea."

CHAPTER 21

A CELEBRATION

In the library the girls were working in silence on opposite sides of the big table.

Jack looked up. "What has that queer brooch of yours to do with this business? You played with it, and you said Joan had better take it back."

Jen glanced at her. "Don't go on asking me things! I've said too much already."

"It wouldn't hurt you to tell me! Are those some of Lady Jehane's jewels?"

"Yes," Jen said unwillingly, afraid of going too far. "Joan and Joy have brooches just the same."

"I've seen them. I thought it was odd you should all have them. Are they a secret badge?"

Jen reddened. "Yes, just that. They're a sign that we won't tell anybody what we did with the jewels. If I tell you, Joan will have to take my brooch away. Do leave me alone!"

"You buried the jewels." Jack eyed her closely. "You said so. Where did you put them? In a hole in the garden? Or under a tree in the woods?"

"Under the holy oak, perhaps," Jen snapped. "What does it matter to you?"

"You didn't know about the holy oak—if there is one. You must have buried the jewels last winter, and Joy only spoke about the holy oak after we came here. Aren't you going to tell me?"

"No!"

"You know you can trust me," Jack urged, deeply offended.

"I don't," Jen told her bluntly. "If you can try to make me break my promise to Joan, I don't know anything at all about you. I thought I did, but I never believed you'd do that. Get on with your prep!"

Jack stared at her. Then she returned to her algebra, her face grim.

They worked in silence until Joan called them to supper. Joy was at the piano in the outer hall, and her music covered the gloom in which the meal was taken. Joan and Gudrun were finishing a game of tennis and called cheerfully that they would come in later; the set ended with a long rally, for the two were evenly matched, and the schoolgirls were going upstairs, still subdued and feeling awkward, when Joan and Gudrun came in.

"I shouldn't wonder if we meet again before the morning," Joan called after them. "Joy has something in store for you, but I'm not sure what it's going to be."

"Wait and see," Joy called, and crashed into a Sousa march.

Pinned to her pillow, Jen found a note. She glanced at Jack and saw that she had one also.

"Separate invitations!" she said, speaking naturally though with an effort. "Doing it in style, aren't they?"

She read her message. "Come to my room at ten o'clock. If you care to risk it? Gudrun."

"Mine's from Joy," Jack said, breaking the awkward silence with relief. "We're to go to Gudrun's room at ten o'clock, if we want to see something worth while."

"Gudrun seems to think it may be a little dangerous," and Jen handed over her note.

Jack grinned. "Shall we go? Perhaps they'll both be bears this time."

"Oh, rather! We can't funk."

"We won't funk. But it would be a bit of a rag not to go, and let them wait for us. Whatever it is, it would fall so horribly flat."

Jen considered the idea. "It would be a joke. They'd crawl to bed feeling crushed, and Joy would be fearfully scornful to-morrow. We'd say we didn't think it was safe. But I guess we'll go. I want to see what Joy's thought of this time."

"That's what they're counting on," Jack remarked. "Right! I'll risk it, if you will."

It seemed a long time till ten o'clock. The girls prepared for bed, and then lay waiting, inevitably thinking of the trouble earlier in the evening.

"I'm glad we're speaking again," Jen thought. "Supper was dreadful. It's a good thing Joan was out; she'd have seen something was wrong, and she'd have been down on us like a ton of bricks. But I never thought Jack would ask me to break a promise! I wish she'd say she's sorry."

"I never thought Jen would be a pig and keep a secret from me," Jack said to herself, over and over again.

Both girls felt their attitude to be justified, but neither was happy, and it was a relief when Jen sat up.

"Ten o'clock! Time to face the wild bears. Take your torch; the room's sure to be dark. I say, Jack! Don't yell, whatever happens! We've been warned. We know they're going to do some mad thing!"

"Not a yell," Jack said firmly.

They crept along the corridor to Gudrun's bedroom. "It is dark," Jen murmured, finding no light showing below the door. "Shall we knock?"

“Rather not! We’ve been invited. We’ll dash in, with our torches blazing.”

“That’s the style!” Very quietly Jen turned the handle, and they rushed in, torches held high and well ahead.

Then, with a shout, Jack tripped over a pile of rolled-up mats in front of the door. Jen fell on top of her, and at the same moment a hoarse voice from the bed growled,—“Come in, my little dears! Come and kiss your old grandmother!”

Both girls were up in an instant and dashing forward. Then a shriek, more of delight than of fear, broke from Jen, for the figure sitting up in bed had a huge frilly cap and sticking out from it a furry mask and fur-clad shoulders.

“Oh, grandmother! What a lovely nightcap!” Jen shouted.

“What a big mouth she’s got!” Jack giggled.

“All the better to eat you with, my little dears,” and with a terrifying growl the nightcapped figure leapt upon them.

The wild scrimmage on the floor took place in the dark, as both torches had been dropped. Joy was hampered by her furs and her mask, but had the advantage of having taken the others by surprise. At first they were two to one, but suddenly this was no longer the case, as Jack and then Jen found herself being thumped from behind with the rolled-up mats.

“Gudrun! Traitor!” Jack gasped.

“Guess my name!” the unknown assailant cried.

“Red Riding Hood!” Jen shouted. “Another fairy-tale play!”

Gudrun switched on the light. “Since you guessed my name—and since I invited you——”

The younger girls shrieked again, for she wore a scarlet hood, and a red table-cloth was draped over her nightdress. Joy adjusted her wolf-mask, which had slipped, and pulled her skins about her and settled her huge cap.

“I hope you liked *my* dramatised fairy-tale,” she said.

“We loved it! But where did you get those red things, Gudrun? I’m positive certain they don’t belong to Joan or Joy!”

“And the wolf-head?” Jack demanded, sitting on the floor. “Is it that big rug from the drawing-room? It’s a beauty!”

“Horribly life-like, isn’t it?” Gudrun said. “My hood came from the little girl-maid with the funny name—Susie Spindle. Joy had seen her wearing it in the winter. My cloak is just a table-cloth.”

“It was a lovely fairy-tale!” Jen sighed. “But where were you, when we came in?”

“Hiding behind the bed. I’d been devoured already, you understand.”

“Oh yes, of course! It didn’t take us long to guess your story, Joy!”

“Those rugs were a beastly trick,” and Jack rubbed her knees and elbows. “I went down an awful whack. And then Jen came bouncing on top of me!”

“You were awfully bony to fall on,” Jen told her.

“And you both yelled,” Joy said, with satisfaction. “I bet you said you wouldn’t, because you knew we were up to something.”

The invited guests looked at one another. “You said you wouldn’t, Jack!”

“You told me not to yell, but yours was much the loudest,” Jack retorted.

“We scored, Gudrun. We said they’d shriek and they did. Pull this thing off me, somebody! It’s terribly hot.”

“Keep it on! Sleep in it! You’ll have had enough of it by the morning,” Jack shouted.

Gudrun threw off her red hood and went to her partner’s aid. “There, Joy! Is that better?”

“Thanks, my little dear. You’re a good sort, if I did eat you up, before they came,” and Joy struggled out of her skins and reached for her dressing-gown.

“What happens now?” Jen demanded. “You’re not going to send us back to bed without treating us, after slaughtering us like this?”

“Treating you?” Joy looked blankly at Gudrun. “Do they mean they expect eats? At this time of night? And after that huge supper?”

“That was hours ago. And Gudrun was playing tennis; she doesn’t know anything about our supper.”

“Well, I’m sure I don’t know anything about another one. Can you do something about it Red Riding Hood? Where’s your basket of good things?”

“There isn’t even a toffee or a chocolate left in it. I ate them all coming through the wood,” Gudrun said solemnly. “I’m sorry if they are disappointed, but——”

“You asked us,” Jen pointed out.

“I’m afraid I didn’t provide refreshments,” Gudrun said sadly.

The two stared at her suspiciously. From the door came a new voice. “A ruby banquet is prepared——”

“Joan!” Jen gave a wild shout. “Oh, Joan, are you in it too? Oh, how lovely of you!”

“Gosh, look at Joan! How super magnificent!” Jack cried.

“The Fairy Queen,” Joan said, with dignity. “I’m sure I look the part much better than Gudrun, as Red Riding Hood.”

She wore the long white gown in which she dressed for May-day celebrations, with her violet velvet train hanging from her shoulders and a hurriedly-made-up wreath of white roses on her hair, which hung in two thick red plaits on her shoulders.

“You look glorious!” Gudrun cried.

Joan waved a white stick. “Come to my royal suite. The banquet waits,” and she led the way down to the kitchen.

“It’s the finishing touch,” Jen sighed, enraptured. “Somehow I never thought Joan would fool about with us!”

“Would rise to the occasion, you mean,” Joan corrected her. “My part is the humble role of housekeeper. I provide the magic food.”

“It looks magic,” Jack said joyfully.

“I couldn’t manage jellies. There wasn’t time for them to set,” Joan explained, pouring orangeade into glasses.

“It looks very handsome, even without jellies.” Jen eyed the creamy custard, the pink blancmange, the cress and egg sandwiches, and the large cake and small dishes of sweets, with glowing eyes.

“Be seated, ladies, wolf, and Red Riding Hood,” Joan commanded.

They settled down and the banquet began.

CHAPTER 22

JOY TAKES COMMAND

“Very convenient!” Jen said to herself, as she settled down in bed. “Jack and I were feeling bad, but Joy’s celebration has put all that silliness out of our heads.”

She was not the only one to have found the “ruby banquet” useful. Gudrun was greatly relieved that Joy’s question had not been repeated, though she was sure it would be renewed some day. At least she had been given time to think over what she would say; she would not be taken by surprise again.

Jen felt hopeful that her trouble would be forgotten. Gudrun had no such hope; Joy would not let the matter slide, though Joan might be able to restrain her for a while.

In the morning it seemed that Jen’s hope would be fulfilled. Jack woke with her mind full of the important cricket practice after school that evening, for which she and Jen would have to stay, as the whole team must be present. The following week brought an annual match with another school in the town, and Sylvia had called her men together to see how they were shaping. Jack could think and talk of nothing else, and both Jen and Joan, for their own reasons, rejoiced in it.

Jen gave herself up to cricket chatter and to discussion of the members of the team, and the two went off to school happily enough.

“Our ruby banquet has been a success. It was worth all the excitement and mess,” Joan said to Joy. “Jen is herself again, and Jack has forgotten her questions haven’t been answered.”

“Perhaps they have been answered, and that’s why Jack is satisfied.”

“No,” Joan said. “Jen hasn’t broken any promise. She couldn’t have been so frank and natural if she had a guilty conscience.”

“I suppose they won’t be home till supper time?”

“I’m sure they won’t. To-morrow’s Saturday, so prep. can wait. And we’ll have no fairy-tales to-night. Twice in a week is enough.”

Joy laughed. “I won’t be sorry. I’m black and blue, after the last two assaults on me!”

There was much talk during supper, of what Sylvia had said, of the general approval of Jen’s bowling and of her welcome by the team. Thoroughly ready to rest, the schoolgirls went up to bed in good time,

echoing to one another Joan's decree—"No fairy-tales to-night! Twice is enough."

But Jack had a tenacious mind, and in the restored comradeship she saw a gleam of hope. Above all things, she liked to get her own way.

She was ready for bed first, as usual, and she sat cuddling her knees and watching Jen brushing her hair.

"Be a lamb and tell me about burying those jewels!" she broke out. "Where did you put them?"

Jen whirled round and stared at her. "I can't; I've told you. I promised Joan. Do shut up!"

"But I want to know."

"Then go and ask Joan," Jen said, reasonably enough. "And see what you'll get," she added.

"I'm asking you. And we're pals. You won't trust me."

"I can't; you know I can't. Do leave me alone!" Jen was plaiting her hair at express speed, feeling that once she was in bed she could pretend to be asleep and Jack would be vanquished.

But Jack had no intention of giving in so easily.

"Don't be an ass! Joan wouldn't mind, if you told me; only me! She knows what chums we are. Did you bury them in the garden?"

"I'm not going to tell you one single thing, so you can just stop plaguing me."

"I shan't speak to you again, until you do."

Jen turned to stare at her. Then she sprang into bed, switched out her light, and turned her face to the wall.

Jack sat gazing at her, appalled. It had been merely an idle threat and half a joke. She had not expected it to be received like this.

There was only one way to save the situation; to apologise hastily and at once. But Jack had always found it hard to say she was sorry. Besides, she was not sorry. She was very angry.

She put out her light and lay down.

Jen, deeply hurt, was angry also. She lay for a long time in acute discomfort, conscious much more deeply than Jack was of the strained silence that filled the darkness.

Then she knew by Jack's regular breathing that she had fallen asleep. Jack had not intended to sleep; she knew something would have to be done, but she did not want to do it; she kept putting it off, and the weariness of the long evening's exercise took its revenge. She fell asleep and lay without waking till the morning.

Jen swallowed hard, and set herself to sleep also. "I never would have believed Jack would do it," was her last thought. "But she did say it. She'll

have to say she's sorry before I'll speak to *her*!"

She slept uneasily, and only because she was so very tired. But her mind was not at rest and she woke early.

The sun was streaming in. Jack lay sound asleep.

Jen hesitated. "I can't do anything. If I knew she was sorry for saying that, I'd wake her and we'd be all right and jolly again. But suppose she isn't sorry? Perhaps she wouldn't speak to me. I can't risk it. But it's going to be jolly awkward. I wonder if Joan will send us back to school?"

She was dressing quickly but quietly. She could not lie and think of the horrible thing that had happened.

"Could I go and talk to Joan? But that would mean giving Jack away; I can't do that. I must wait; Jack may be different when she wakes up. I can't tell anybody. I'd better go out; the garden's lovely this morning. That will give Jack a chance. I don't see how I can ever talk to Joan without telling her; she'll see there's something wrong at once. I'd better go into the woods and keep out of everybody's way.—I know! I could do that. What a good idea! But it would have been more fun to do it with Jack. Well, that's her look-out!" and her face hardened. "She won't speak to me. That's that!"

She stuffed her torch and two spare batteries into the pockets of her blazer. "Might be useful. You never know, when you go exploring, where you'll get to. I wonder what are the chances of finding any brekker? I could do with a bite of something. Perhaps Susie will be somewhere about. She'd give me some eats."

A faint sound as she cautiously opened the door gave her hope. Someone had placed a cup in a saucer.

Jen slipped out with great care and crept downstairs.

"Saved!" She went into the morning-room and closed the door. "Oh, Joy, may I have some? I want to go out, and I'm hungry."

"*I* want to go out and *I'm* hungry. Come and join me," Joy said cheerfully. "The sun woke me and I had to get up. Susie came to my rescue. Have some tea and toast! We can have more later; it's only six o'clock. Where's Jacky-boy?"

"Asleep. I didn't wake her."

Joy glanced at her quickly. She was unperceptive, but she could not be blind to the meaning in Jen's tone.

"Anything wrong?"

Jen nodded, but did not try to speak; suddenly she knew she could not. She took a drink of hot tea and felt better. "Don't tell Joan! She'll find out, but leave it till she does."

"Did the little ass tease you about the ruby?"

Jen nodded again. "I didn't want you to know."

"Can't we put things right?" Joy asked, with unusual gentleness. "I hate to see you look like that."

"You sound almost like Joan!" Jen gave a little gasp. "Lovely of you to care! But Jack's got to put it right. Nobody can help. She—she said she wouldn't speak to me till I told her about the burying."

Joy whistled. "What did you say to that?"

"Nothing. What could I say? I went to bed."

Joy looked sober. "I expect she was sorry, as soon as she'd said it."

"She could have said so. I couldn't ask her," Jen urged.

"What are you going to do?" Joy changed the subject. "Were you going out? Come into the garden with me! I love an early prow!"

Jen looked up, a spark of excitement in her eyes. "I'd like that. But I'll tell you what I was going to do! I was going to hunt for your holy oak, or hollow oak, or holly oak, whichever it is."

Joy raised her brows and laughed. "Do you believe it's real? I'm not sure that I do."

"It may be real. It will be something to do. I've been meaning to look for it ever since you told us about Holyoake House. I meant to do it with Jack, of course."

"I'll come too. You mustn't go exploring alone. You might fall down a hole or hurt yourself somehow. You start, and I'll come after you. How are you going to begin?"

"Oh, just wandering about, looking for big lonely oak trees. I'll start in the garden."

"You won't find it there. I know every tree in the garden. But you'd better look before you go farther afield. Right! I'll catch you up."

She went off, and Jen opened the long window and crossed the lawn.

Joy raced quietly upstairs and into the room where Jack lay still asleep. Then Jack was ruthlessly, even roughly, shaken till she was wide awake. She lay staring up at Joy, bewildered and frightened.

"What's the matter? Is the house on fire?"

"Get up, you idiot! You've got yourself into an awful mess and you must clear things up——"

"Gosh! I forgot!" Jack gasped. Her eyes went to Jen's bed. "Where is she?"

"Gone exploring in the garden. You'd better go after her and put things right in double-quick time, if you don't want to find yourself back at school."

Jack lay and stared at her. "I suppose it might happen. I don't want that. Did she tell you?"

“I made her tell a little and I guessed the rest. Did you mean what you said—that you wouldn’t speak to her?”

Jack flushed. “I meant it when I said it. When she turned round and went to sleep, I—I was frightened. I thought she’d say something, and—and _____”

“Make it easy for you. Why should she? Go after her, you ass, and tell her you didn’t mean it. She’s expecting me to come and help her to look for a holy oak.”

“Oh!” Jack gasped. “She’s gone without me?” She sprang out of bed and began to dress at express speed. “She mustn’t go alone. She’ll get herself into some sort of mess—fall out of a tree and be killed, or something. Somebody ought to go with her!”

“You’re going with her, and you’re going to apologise and clear up this mess, or I won’t have you in my house for another day.”

Jack looked at her. “If I do it, it won’t be for that reason.”

“I hope not. Go and put things right with Jen. You know you want to do it. You’ll find tea and something to eat in the morning-room. Yes, you’re to take some brekker, if you’re going out. Don’t be silly!”

Jack suddenly became very meek. This was a formidable Joy whom she had not met before.

Joy handed her a torch. “Jen’s taken hers. I don’t know what she expects to do with it, at this time, but you’d better be as well equipped as she is. Got any spare batteries? Two; good! Take them along. Now go and eat, and have a drink of tea.”

She darted into her own room, and then followed Jack down to the morning-room and stood on guard till Jack had taken enough food to satisfy her. Then she went to the window and pointed.

“Jen’s somewhere in the garden. Find her and tell her you were an awful ass and you’re sorry. Take this, in case you’re late for breakfast,” and she thrust a cake of chocolate into Jack’s hand. “Now go, and stop all your silly rot.”

Thoroughly cowed by this masterful hostess, Jack crept out and went in search of Jen.

CHAPTER 23

A GREAT FIND

Some odd instinct made Jack run to the toolshed and snatch up a trowel. In her mind was a vague connection between the jewels and the mysterious oak. Perhaps Jen would want to dig, to see if the treasure was still safe.

"Idiot!" she said to herself. "There's no sense in it!" But she carried the trowel as she set out in search of Jen.

"If she did want to dig and hadn't thought of this thing, and if I could give it to her, just at the right moment, it might be a help," she thought.

It was not hard to find Jen. As this was not a school day she was wearing a cotton frock of bright blue, though Jack, from choice, clung to her gym tunic. Jen was easily found among the dark undergrowth in the wild end part of the garden.

Jack darted to her, not daring to stop to think. "I say! Wait for me!"

Jen, expecting Joy, swung round in surprise, and stared at her. "I thought you weren't going to speak to me?"

"Well, I have spoken. I'm most frightfully sorry!" Jack blurted out the words. "I—I won't ask you any more. I was an idiot."

"Yes, you were," Jen said bluntly. "Don't you know anything about keeping promises? You made it horrible for me."

Jack grew scarlet. "I didn't think of it that way. I felt you wouldn't trust me."

"I couldn't, you mean. You could have gone to Joan."

"I didn't dare. Let me come exploring with you!"

"Joy's coming. Haven't you seen her?"

"I don't think she'll come. She sent me after you. She shook me till I woke up, and then she told me what she thought of me and sent me after you. I was almost scared of her; I didn't know she could be like that. I simply wouldn't dare to go back unless I'd told you I was sorry."

"Oh! That was why, was it?"

"Jen, don't be horrid!" Jack pleaded. "I know I was a beast last night. I wanted to tell you, but you looked so upset—and so mad with me—that I was afraid to say anything. I was glad when Joy told me off and shoved me out. I'd have come, anyway, but she brought me to the point. You don't know how fierce she was! I shook in my shoes and simply fled. May I come with you now?"

“Oh well, come on! What are you going to do with that? Dig up the holy oak and take it home?”

Jack dropped the trowel. “I don’t know. I suppose it was mad, but I thought you might want it. Where shall we go?”

“Bring it along,” Jen commanded. “You never know. I’m just as mad, bringing a torch at six in the morning. You’ve got yours too; then we’re both mad. But we may be glad before we’re done. If we find the holy oak, and if it’s a hollow oak, I’m going to have a look inside it.”

“I didn’t think of that. Jolly clever!”

Jen’s ruffled feelings were soothed by her admiring tone. “There’s no oak tree in the garden; I’ve been all over it. Now I’m going outside. The woods up on the hills, what Gudrun calls the forest, are mostly beech, but there are some spinneys over there”—waving towards the farm buildings and fields beyond the gate-house meadow. “They may be more mixed sorts of trees. I’m going to see.”

“Right! If we’re late for brekker, Joy knows where we are.”

“She knows what we’re doing,” Jen amended. “She won’t know where we’ve got to.”

She crossed the field, just outside the fence of the gate-house meadow, and then struck off towards one copse of trees, Jack following closely. Neither girl was satisfied with the position, but it was some relief that they could talk easily on surface matters. The old deep friendship was not restored, however, and both were aware of it, though Jen was the more conscious of constraint between them.

“Look! Oh, look! Could that be the oak?” Jack grasped Jen’s arm in her excitement, as they reached the edge of the spinney. “*Is it an oak?*”

Jen pushed her way through undergrowth and looked up at the leaves; then she picked one from the ground. “It’s an oak all right; look! That’s an oak leaf; and there are acorns down here. I wonder—! It’s big and old enough.”

“You couldn’t dance round it, because of the other trees. Why would it be called holy?”

Jen gave a quick glance round. “These trees are new; ever so much younger. It may have stood all alone in the field at one time. It’s hundreds of years old.”

She walked round the great tree. “There’s no holly. But I shouldn’t wonder if it’s hollow. There’s a dead bit on this side; it’s been struck by lightning, ages ago.”

Jack dashed after her to see. “Sure it has! I say, Jen!”

“I’m going to see if it’s hollow,” Jen said. “There are plenty of lumps sticking out. I’ll climb up easily.”

“Can I come too?”

“Not both of us at once.” Jen was firm. “If I fall down inside you’ll have to haul me out.”

“I saw it first,” Jack wailed. “Oh, well! It’s your stunt; I’m only tagging along. Go on, then! I want to see too.”

The gnarled trunk was easy to climb. Jen, country-bred and trained by big brothers, went up like a squirrel, and at about ten feet above the ground found herself able to look down inside the great trunk, where branches forked in all directions.

Clinging with one hand, she drew out her torch and flashed the light about. “It’s the hollow oak right enough, whether it was ever called holy or not. I can see a long way, but not right to the ground; there’s something blocking the view. I’m going down to see.”

Jack gave a shout of protest, but Jen was already over the edge and holding by her hands. She dropped; there was a splintering crash, as of breaking wood, and a yell of surprise.

Jack, good at gym though not at trees, was up the trunk in a flash. “What’s happened?”

“Don’t come down! Oh, well! We’ll get out somehow. Take care, Jack! I fell through a lot of rotten wood and there are splinters everywhere.”

Jack let herself drop. She found her waist gripped firmly and was lowered safely to the ground.

“All right?” Jen asked. “I’m a bit scratched and I’ve torn my frock. But it doesn’t matter. What’s this in your belt? I felt something hard when I caught you.”

“The trowel. I stuck it through my girdle, to leave my hands free for climbing.”

“Jolly good! We may be glad of it. Jack, there was wood all across the inside of the tree; a sort of floor. It was rotten and I went through. There are the ends still sticking out.”

Jack could see that for herself. The jagged splinters looked extremely sharp. “We’re lucky to be only scratched. I’d have been caught on some of those bits, if you hadn’t guided me down safely. Thanks a million times!”

“But why should anybody put a wooden floor inside a tree?”

They stared at one another, greatly intrigued and puzzled.

“To make a hiding-place?” Jack ventured. “Perhaps in the old days fugitives or—or priests wanted to hide in the tree.”

“Or it may have been a trap-door!” Jen gave a subdued whoop. “Perhaps the hollow oak was an entrance to a secret vault, where people hid from their enemies!”

"Then won't the vault be still there? Are we standing in it?" Jack's excitement grew with every suggestion.

"Torches! I hope they aren't broken. No, mine's all right." Jen's light flashed on and she swept the ray around.

"It's a very narrow vault," Jack began.

"It wouldn't need to be big; just for one man to hide for an hour or two, till the enemy went away. Perhaps it was in Roundhead days; they fought near here—wasn't Chalgrove Field in Buckinghamshire? John Hampden and all that, you know."

"Perhaps Charles the Second hid here on his way to France. You said there were stories about him and a farm in the hills," Jack cried.

"King's Bottom Farm. Charles was fond of hiding in oak trees, wasn't he? What a marvellous idea! The King's hollow oak! But all the same, I don't believe it is a secret vault; I think it's more than that."

"What more could it be?" Jack demanded.

"A secret passage!" Jen gave a shout. "It opens out over here; it goes on! And there are steps, going down. Oh, come on, Jack! Let's see where it goes! What have we found?"

"Good thing we brought our torches," Jack said.

Jen was cautiously feeling her way down a flight of rough steps. "These have been made; they aren't an accident. It was a long while ago; they're bad in places; be careful! But they're real. And there is a passage, and it's been made too—look!"

"I see," Jack said, in great delight. "A floor, of a kind—big stones buried in the earth—easy to walk on, like stepping-stones. And here and there more stones to hold up the walls. I wonder where it goes?"

"We'll find out. This is a thrill! And then we'll tell Joy all about her holy oak. You don't happen to have a compass on you, I suppose?"

"I don't carry one every day. Of course I haven't! What for?"

"To know which way we're going. We may be wandering under the woods on the hill. If we find steps going up, I shall be sure that's where we are—like the long passage from the Abbey, where we found the books and the dishes and pots and things."

"Or we may be going to the farm, where the fierce old farmer lives; the man Joy says is always cross."

"She told us never to go near the farm. She trespassed there once, and though she apologised he's never forgiven her. I don't particularly want to come out of this into one of his barns."

"Or his yard; or his kitchen! But we won't be able to get out, will we? Won't we have to go back and tell Joy?"

Jen looked determined. "Only if we really must. It's our find; I want to see it through."

"We shall be jolly late for breakfast! Joy gave me a huge slab of choc., just as I was starting, in case we were late. She won't be mad, if we don't turn up. I should think we could live on it for two or three hours, if not two or three days."

"Not days, I hope!" Jen laughed. "The tunnel couldn't be as long as that!"

"It looks as if it went on for ever."

"Not a bit of it! It's been made by somebody; you can see that all the way along. Somebody made it for some reason; it's going somewhere."

"I don't like it awfully much."

"It's all right. At the Abbey we're used to tunnels," Jen said airily. "It's a bit stuffy, but no worse than the passages under the chapter-house. It must lead to something or somewhere; nobody did all this digging just for fun."

That seemed obvious, so Jack made no more objections. "It will be a thrill to see where we come out. In the woods, do you think?"

"I guess so. If it was anywhere else the entrance would have been found long ago. It may be a hole under a hedge, and we'll have to dig ourselves out. We'll take turns with your trowel. What a good thing you brought it!—What was that?"

A crash somewhere close at hand made them jump. Startled, they stared at one another, in the glow of the torches.

"Something fell down," Jack said, unnecessarily.

"It sounded like that. I hope our roof hasn't fallen in and blocked the passage."

Jack turned and ran back the way they had come.

"Be careful!" Jen cried after her. "Don't fall over bits of it!"

She followed closely, but found the way as clear as when they had first come along. But there was more light from the opening, which, before, had shown only a faint glow of sunshine coming down the great trunk.

Jack was standing in a shaft of light, staring up. "I say! Look what's happened!"

The hollow oak, already rotten, had been jarred by their climbing upon it, and had fallen and lay blocking the entrance, though light now filtered down by its side.

The girls looked at one another. "Awkward," Jack said doubtfully. "We can't move that thing. I suppose we can get out?"

"Easily." Jen spoke with complete confidence. "We've got the trowel. We'll dig away the earth at the sides and crawl through."

Jack was poking about with a broken plank from the trap-door. "I don't believe we can. That isn't earth; it's roots, and I can't shift them."

Jen came with the trowel. "Here goes!"

Jack watched hopefully, but doubtfully. She was not surprised when Jen drew back and stood frowning. "This is beastly. I don't believe we can get out—not here. We can't squeeze between the tree and those roots. Only a mouse could get through."

"What shall we do?" Jack sounded alarmed.

"Dig ourselves out somewhere else. The tunnel isn't all built up; there are bits that are just earth."

"But there may be miles, or at least yards, of ground above us!" Jack objected. "It will take us a week!"

"Well, what else can we do? You have a try with the trowel. But I've prodded it all round, and everywhere it's roots as hard as iron. I can't break them."

Jack seized the trowel, and attacked the tangled roots valiantly. But they had been there for centuries and they resisted all her efforts.

"We'd need a saw. I don't believe we can get out—at least, not here."

"I'm sure we can't. We can stand and shriek," Jen suggested. "I'm rather good at it. Joy will come to look for us; not yet, but soon, when they begin to get worried because we don't turn up. She might just possibly hear us."

"She might be searching miles away. Your plan was better. We'll find some place and dig, even if it takes all day."

"If we're going to do that, we may as well go on to the end of the tunnel," Jen said practically. "We know there must be a way out there; the people who made the passage did it on purpose for somebody to get out. Come on!"

They ran together to the point they had reached already, and then went on more cautiously.

"Seems a long way," Jack said at last. "We must be under the hills! We'll never dig ourselves out."

"I'm hoping we won't need to do that. There ought to be a way out at the end of this tunnel."

"I hope so!" But Jack sounded sceptical.

Jen glanced at her. "Have you got your watch?"

"No. I dressed in a fearful hurry, with Joy glowering at me."

"I didn't bring mine. We are idiots, aren't we? My inside says it's time for some of Joy's chocolate."

They crouched on the rough stones that paved the passage and made a small meal. "Keep some in reserve," Jen said. "We aren't out of this hole yet."

“Hole’s the right word.” Jack was heartily sick of the tunnel. “Seems to be going on for ever.”

“*I’m* going on, anyway.” And Jen set out once more.

“We must have come miles,” Jack murmured.

Jen gave her another quick look. Jack was not strong, though she was wiry and full of life. Her nerves were beginning to play her false, and she was very tired. The silence in the tunnel was frightening, and Jen felt it also, though she was much the stronger of the two.

“Let’s have a rest,” she said. “We’re both a bit fagged. We’ll dig better presently, if we’re not too tired. Come and sit close to me.” And she squatted on a dry patch of earth.

Jack flopped beside her. “We ought to go on. Do you think perhaps we won’t get out, ever?”

A lurking fear was haunting Jen’s mind. She drove it away fiercely. “Get out? Of course we shall, when we come to the end of this passage. But there’s no harm in resting for five minutes. Are you comfy?”

“I’m sleepy. It’s so stuffy,” Jack murmured. Then she roused herself. “Jen, you’re nice. I’m sorry I was such a beast last night; I really am! Couldn’t you say pax? You haven’t quite got over it, have you?”

Jen flung away her last resentment. “It’s all right, old chap. I won’t think of it ever again. You forget all about it too. Have a wee snooze; I’ll wake you presently and we’ll go on.”

Her arm went round poor tired Jack and held her closely.

Jack gave a weary sigh. “Frightfully sorry,” she whispered. “I really am. You’re jolly decent, Jen!”

“Have a good rest,” Jen advised. “I’ll think of ways to get us out of this mess.”

CHAPTER 24

A GREAT SURPRISE

“Wake up, old chap! It’s time we did something about this.”

Jack sat up, rubbing her eyes. “Was I asleep?—oh, horrors! I’d forgotten. We’re still buried in the beastly hole!”

“I want to get out, but you’ll need to help.” Jen rose from her cramped position and stretched. “Oh, I’m stiff!”

“I’ve been lying on you,” Jack said remorsefully. “I’m a pig. Haven’t you had a sleep too?”

“I didn’t want it. I kept thinking about getting out of this mess.”

“And what did you think?”

“That we mustn’t waste our torches. So I put them out and sat in the dark, and held on to you for company.”

“And I went sound asleep and was no use!” Jack groaned.

“You were all the use in the world. I could feel you and I knew you were there. You just made all the difference. I wouldn’t like to be in this mess alone.”

“Nice of you! I haven’t been much use so far. But mess is the right word. What shall we do?”

“Go on! There’s some way out of this place, and we’re going to find it.”

“Right! I’m game,” Jack said valiantly.

They set out again, into the darkness of the unknown tunnel.

Almost at once Jack exclaimed, “We’re going up. This path——”

“Yes, I can feel it going up,” Jen agreed. “We’ll not have so far to dig, when we come to the end.”

“We may be going all the way up under the hills,” Jack said gloomily.

“Like the Abbey tunnel. I jolly well hope it’s not that. But we are going up——” as the path rose more steeply.

“What do you expect to find at the end of this?” Jack demanded.

“Steps. The Abbey passage ends in steps. We race up to the top and find a door into the woods.”

“And how do we open the door?”

“I don’t know,” Jen confessed. “It may be rotten, like the first trap-door, and we’ll hurl ourselves against it.”

But there was no door. The path came to a sudden end, blocked by a wall of earth.

Jen stood and stared at it, in blank dismay. Jack came to her side, and her hand crept into Jen's.

"What do we do now? There's no way out." Her voice quivered.

At the sound Jen's courage rose. "Dig!" she said. "It's what we've been expecting to do. Give me the trowel; you hold the light. We'll take turns; it will keep us warm."

"Good job we brought spare batteries. This thing's going dim." Jack's voice was still unsteady; she was feeling badly frightened.

Jen knew it; she felt much the same herself. She attacked the earth wall gallantly. "Did you expect to find a door standing open? Buck up, Jacky-boy! We'll get through this stuff easily."

"It's the first time you've called me that to-day." Jack swallowed something in her throat.

"I didn't know; it hasn't been on purpose. Am I flinging this all over you?"

"I'm keeping out of the way. I wonder if it will take us all day? You're not making much difference to it so far."

"I'm not, am I? But it's caked hard. You have a go, while I hold the torch."

They dug in turns, and both were soon hot and exhausted.

"Pause for rest and eats," Jen decreed.

They dropped on the loose earth they had hacked out and shared the end of the packet of chocolate. "Now we simply must get through," Jen said cheerfully.

"Or we shall starve to death," Jack added.

"I hope that was a joke, but I don't think it was a very nice one." Jen's tone was severe.

Jack said no more. It had not been entirely a joke.

"Now for another go!" Jen sprang up and attacked the wall of earth again.

"It's no use," Jack said, under her breath.

Jen turned on her sharply. "Don't be an ass! Anyone can see that passage was made to lead somewhere and that this—up the slope—was the way out. The ground has fallen in and blocked the entrance; it's softer than it was when we started to dig. I'm thrilled to see where we'll come out. I hope it isn't too far from home; I'm not going to feel in the least like a long walk, when we do get out. If only we had a compass!"

"If we've been going away from the Hall all this time, we'll have a jolly long walk," Jack said. "My turn now; you're fagged. Once we're out of this and in the world again, I shan't mind, if I have to walk miles. It's the buried feeling—and nobody knowing where we are—that's so awful."

"If we hadn't been absolute asses, we'd have left some sign; dropped something beside the tree," Jen mourned. "When they look for us, they'll see the hollow oak has fallen down, but that won't tell them we're buried underneath."

"It might. They know we were looking for a hollow oak. They may guess that we found it."

"And they'll poke round and find the tunnel," Jen cried. "At any moment we may hear Joy yelling at us, as she comes along the passage! Cheers! I don't feel nearly so bad now. But we won't stop digging. We'll get out by ourselves, if we can."

"Yes, for Joy may not find the oak for hours," Jack agreed.

Jen, digging with new energy, gave a shout. "I can see daylight! We're getting through! We're going to get out!"

"Then we'll be really alive again and not dead and buried," Jack gasped. "Oh, Jen, let me see! Where's the light?"

"There! Just a glimmer, but we'll soon make the hole bigger. Now where are we coming out?" Jen exulted. "In the woods, or in the farm, or in a cellar?"

"Too light for that. It's out of doors somewhere," Jack argued. "But it's a very faint light."

"It's coming through a tangle of grass and roots." Jen was investigating, perched on their heap of loose soil. "Hold me, Jack! I'm slipping—catch me!"

Jack grabbed her and steadied her. "That better?"

"Thanks a lot! Now for another go at these roots. They're only grass, but they're matted and all worked into a cake. I wish we had a knife! But your trowel's been jolly useful," she added.

She hacked and tore at the roots, enlarging the hole. "Now can you give me a boost up? Then I'll give you a hand and haul you out. I'm absolutely dying to know where we are!"

"In the woods, or a field," Jack said. "Climb up on me. I'm steadying myself against the wall."

Jen climbed on her shoulders, grasped the grass edges of the opening, and sprang. She fell back, knocking Jack over, and they rolled down their tunnel again.

"Bother!" Jen groaned. "I thought we were out that time. And we still don't know where we are; I didn't get high enough to see anything but grass. You have a go, Jack. You're lighter than I am; I'll be a more solid post for you. You won't kick me over."

"Jolly decent of you!" Jack appreciated the sacrifice. "I know you want to be the first to see. But it is sensible. I'll try."

They repeated the experiment, Jen bracing herself against the wall, while Jack, lithe as a monkey, swarmed up on her shoulders and struggled out of the hole—to sunlight and warmth and life.

She gave a shout. “It’s—oh, Jen, come and see!” She flung herself on her chest and stretched down her arms.

“Where are we?” Jen cried.

“Come and see! You won’t believe it. And they say miracles never happen!”

Spurred on by this mysterious utterance, Jen gripped her hands and scrambled out to join her. She looked round and gave a wild shriek.

“The Abbey! We’ve come home! We’ve come out in the middle of the garth!”

All round were familiar grey walls, empty windows, low doorways. From the ruined cloisters came a stout black friend and an inquisitive leaping mass of fur.

“Mother Superior! Timmy!” Jen almost sobbed and she sank on the grass and took them in her arms. “Oh, my darlings! Buried for hours in the earth we’ve been, and when we come out we find *you*. Jack, isn’t it wonderful?”

“Get out, you brute!” said Jack.

Jen peered at her over her armful of cats, and was in time to see her chasing away the slim black Curate, who wanted to inquire into the hole, where no hole ought to be.

“He mustn’t go down. You might never see him again,” Jack explained.

“Go away, Curate!” Jen commanded. “But he’d find his way out; he’d squeeze past the hollow oak. I say, we have made a mess, haven’t we?”

She released Timmy and his adopted mother and drove them away, and she and Jack stood staring at the hole in the garth.

“I wonder if Joan will mind? I’m terribly sorry, but we simply had to get out,” Jen said.

“We didn’t know,” Jack added.

“We must tell Joan at once. I’m glad there are no tourists here. They’d have had a shock if we’d risen from the depths of the earth at their feet! Come on, Jack! We must go and confess. Joan must know at once that we’ve spoilt the cloister garth!”

“Those cats will vanish down the hole,” Jack objected.

“We’ll give them to Mrs. Watson. Catch the Curate—if you can!”

After a wild chase the Curate was captured by Jack, and Jen, carrying the Mother Superior and Gray Timmy, led the way to the caretaker’s rooms. “Oh, Mrs. Watson, dear——!”

“Eh, Miss Jen! They be all searching for you. They’ve been here to ask if I’d seen you,” Mrs. Watson cried. “Fair taking on about you, they are. Where you been?”

“Lost,” Jen announced. “We must go and tell them we’re all right. What time is it? We’ve been buried for days. Is it still Saturday?”

“It’s after twelve. I thought it was tea-time,” Jack observed.

“We’ll be in time for lunch, after all. I thought it was much later. Mrs. Watson, dear, we’ve made a dreadful hole in the garth; we’re going to tell Joan. Please keep these cats shut up, or they’ll wander in and be lost! If tourists come, don’t let them go near till Joan has seen it.”

She dumped her burden in a big chair, and Jack set the Curate down on the table. Then, leaving Ann Watson exclaiming and asking questions, they fled, across the garth, down the tresaunt, and through the Abbot’s garden to the grounds of the Hall.

“Marvellous to be out of that hole!” Jack cried. “Isn’t the sun glorious?”

But Jen was troubled. “I’m sorry we’ve spoiled the garth, and I’m worried about what Joan will say. Come on!”

CHAPTER 25

A STORY TO TELL

“Joan! Oh, Joan, we’ve spoilt the cloister garth!” Jen rushed into the house and shouted her confession.

“Jen! Jack! Are you all right? Where have you been?” Joan cried, running from the library. “We’ve been terribly upset about you; you seemed to have disappeared completely. Joy and Gudrun are searching for you all through the woods. Come and tell Mother and me what you’ve been doing!”

“We’ve been inside the hollow oak,” Jen explained. “Aunty Shirley, I do hope you haven’t been worried. We really couldn’t help it. We got buried in a tunnel and we had to dig ourselves out; and when we did, we came up in the Abbey! I nearly fainted with surprise! We hadn’t an idea where we were, but we dug away the earth and struggled out—and there we were in the middle of the garth, with the chapter-house just in front and the cats coming to look at us! I tell you, I almost swooned!”

“We’re filthy dirty,” Jack added.

“You are. I don’t understand yet, but you seem to be all right. Is either of you hurt in any way?” Joan asked anxiously.

“We’ve been more frightened than hurt,” Jen said. “I don’t mind telling you—and telling Jack *now*!—that I was terrified. I was afraid we’d never see any of you again. I thought perhaps, in a few years, you’d find our mouldering skeletons.”

“Oh, Jen!” Jack shuddered. “I’m glad you didn’t say that before! I was scared stiff,” she added.

Joan could make nothing of it, but she had had experience of underground passages and she knew how frightening they could be.

“You seem to have found a new tunnel for us. If you’ll go and wash, I’ll find Joy and Gudrun, and then you shall tell us the whole story.”

“A bath would be more like it,” Jack said. “And we’re starving, Joan. We’ve only had bits of chocolate.”

“You don’t look too bad! But I’ll hurry on the lunch. You can have a bath later. Make yourselves fit to be seen, and then tell us what has happened to you.”

Jen ran after her, as she went to the door. “You’ll go and look at the poor garth, won’t you? I’m terribly worried; I’m in a ghastly funk to know what you’ll say. But we really didn’t know where we were, Joan, and we had to get out of the hole.”

“The thing that matters is that you’re here, safe and sound.” Joan gave her a quick reassuring smile. “You’ve no idea how worried we have been. Joy has been searching for you since nine o’clock, and I haven’t been able to sit still for five minutes. We were sure you would turn up, but we couldn’t help thinking you might have had some horrible accident.”

“How lovely of you to be worried! We really couldn’t help it. But you will look at the garth, won’t you?”

“You matter more than the garth. If you’ve made a hole in it, that can be filled up. I don’t suppose the damage is very serious.”

Jen drew a long breath of relief. “How kind of you! But I’ll be worried till you’ve seen how bad it is. It looks awful!”

“Go and wash!” said Joan, and raced away to shout in the woods for Joy and Gudrun.

They came running to meet her. “We think we’ve found the oak,” Joy cried, as they met. “It’s hollow all right. But it’s rotten and it’s fallen on its side, and we think it has only just happened. Do you suppose those girls could have had anything to do with it?”

“They say they’ve been inside the oak; I can’t imagine what they mean. They came rushing in a few minutes ago,” Joan explained.

“All right? No damage? Then what do they mean by scaring the life out of us like this? Where have they been?” Joy demanded wrathfully.

“We have been frightened about them. Didn’t they know?” Gudrun asked. “Joy keeps saying it is her fault they are here, and that she told them about the hollow tree.”

“We haven’t heard the story yet. I sent them to clean up, while I came for you,” Joan explained. “If you’ll come back to the house we’ll hear the story together. But there’s one thing I must do, to satisfy Jen. Joy, the queerest thing! She says they’ve made a hole in the garth! She’s terribly upset; she thinks they’ve spoilt it.”

“The garth?” Joy gave a shout. “But how could they? What were they doing?”

“They seem to have been in a tunnel and to have come out in the middle of the garth. They had no idea where they were; Jen says she nearly fainted with surprise, when they found themselves in the Abbey.”

Joy set off, racing across the lawn, past the house, and down the shrubby path to the Abbey.

“Goodness!” she gasped. “They have made a mess and no mistake! Doesn’t it look awful?”

Joan and Gudrun stood staring at the gaping hole in the grass. “It can easily be put right,” Joan said. “I hope no visitors come while it looks like this.”

"But first we must see what it's like in there!" Joy exclaimed. "I'm going down——"

"Not now," Joan said firmly. "We'll explore it thoroughly, but we must hear the girls' story first. What do they mean by saying they were *inside* the oak, do you think?"

"We could ask them," Gudrun said.

"Wise person! We will, and at once," Joan laughed. "Come on, both of you! They should be clean by now, or at least cleaner; Jack wants a bath, but I told her to wait for that. They're very hungry, as you can imagine."

"Have they got over their trouble? I told you how I bullied Jack into going to say she was sorry. Do you suppose she's done it?" Joy asked.

"I'm sure she has; there's no trouble now. I'm equally sure Jack wanted to clear things up. We'll ignore the whole thing," Joan said, as they went back to the house.

Jen, coming downstairs, met Joan's eyes anxiously. "Have you seen the poor garth?"

"We'll soon put it right. There's nothing easier than to fill in a hole; the grass will soon grow again. But we want to explore your tunnel first," Joan explained. "Now tell us your story!"

"We found the holy oak, Joy, and it is hollow," Jack cried.

"I found it too, in the field beyond the site of the Abbey church," Joy told her. "But it's rotten and it's fallen down. Did you two knock it over?"

"I think perhaps we did," Jen admitted. "We saw it was an oak, so we climbed up, and I looked in and found it was hollow. We knew it must be the oak of Holyoake House, so we thought we'd find out all about it and then tell you. I jumped down inside, and then I yelled, for I'd gone right through something, a sort of floor——"

"Oh, my dear! Were you not very badly frightened?" Mrs. Shirley exclaimed.

"A bit, perhaps." Jen smiled at her. "But I landed safely on the ground. There wasn't time to be really frightened; that came later. I only knew I'd gone right through something."

"It must have been a trap-door, but it was rotten." Jack took up the tale. "When Jen yelled I went after her, to see if she'd hurt herself."

The enthralled audience agreed in unison. "You would, of course," Joy said. "I'd have done it myself."

"Jen doesn't look very much hurt." Gudrun studied Jen carefully.

"You could have come for help," Joan began.

"It never entered my head," Jack assured her. "I had to know if she was all right."

The listeners agreed to this also; each one of them would have felt the same.

"I was all right," Jen said. "A bit scratched; the floor went into beastly splinters. But that didn't matter. It was jolly decent of Jack to come, when I'd been so horrible to her."

The startled circle stared at her.

"Joy seems to have told me the wrong story," Joan remarked. "I thought it was Jack who had been—who hadn't been very nice to you."

Jack was scarlet. "Jen, what do you mean? Don't listen to her, any of you."

"I was perfectly horrible," Jen insisted. "I turned my back on her and pretended to go to sleep. I made it awful for her. If I'd been nice about it, she'd have said she was sorry and things would have been all right. I made it too difficult."

"Oh, I see! That's one way to look at it," Joy mocked, while Joan and Gudrun exchanged glances, and Joan smiled at her mother.

Jack hastily took up the story again. "Jen hauled me down and didn't let me hurt myself, and then we found a passage; the trap-door inside the hollow oak was the secret entrance. So we had to see where it went."

"That's the point when you should have come to fetch us," Joy complained.

"Yes, Joy dear, but we never thought of it. We wanted to find out about it and then tell you," Jen said.

"I bet you did! Keeping it all to yourselves! You deserved what happened to you!"

"We went along the passage," Jack hurried on. "And then we heard a crash, so we rushed back to see what had happened. And the beastly oak had fallen down and there was no entrance left. We tried to dig round the sides, but it was all roots, as hard as iron, and we couldn't get through. You'll need men with saws to break them away."

"So we couldn't do anything but go on. We knew the tunnel must be going somewhere," Jen ended the story. "But it began to go up, and then it just stopped, and there was only a wall of earth in front of us. We dug and dug, and we had rests and we ate Joy's chocolate—and were we glad of it! Thanks terribly much, Joy! We went on digging, always upwards, and suddenly we came out, and it was the cloister garth we'd been digging up! We'd had no idea where we were. Can you guess how we felt?"

"Very dimly," Joan said, with a laugh.

"Jen gave a shriek that you could have heard out in the road," Jack observed.

"I'm sure I don't wonder," Mrs. Shirley said.

“The Mother Superior came stalking to look at us, and Timmy gambolled round, and the Curate tried to get into the hole,” Jen added. “We took them to Mrs. Watson’s rooms, Joan; they’re quite safe. They can’t disappear into the centre of the earth.”

“Just what I want to do! I’m dying to explore this passage,” Joy proclaimed. “When shall we go, all of us in a crowd?”

“Will it be like those places Joan showed me, under the Abbey? I didn’t like them very much.” Gudrun shivered.

“Worse,” Jen told her. “Lower, and more earthy and creepy. There are bits where you almost need to crawl. But it’s all right, if you have lights and if you’re in a crowd. I wouldn’t like to be down there alone.”

“What a dreadful idea!” Gudrun exclaimed.

“I was once—in the Abbey tunnels, quite alone, until the cats came and scared the life out of me. But you’ll go to this one with us and Joy; you’ll be all right.”

“And with me,” Joan said. “You aren’t going to leave me out. Now come and eat! It will make you feel much better.”

CHAPTER 26

ANOTHER SECRET BADGE

"Now, Joy! Who made that tunnel?" Jen demanded. "Was it the monks?"

They had spent the afternoon exploring the new passage, entering by the hole in the garth and making their way along to the hollow oak. Cricket, which should have kept the schoolgirls busy, had been forgotten. Examination had proved Jack's statement correct; not even Joy could force a way through the roots of the old tree.

"You had to go on, sure enough. You couldn't get through that tangle," Joy had said. "You did find yourselves in a mess!"

Very tired with their day's work, the younger girls lay on the grass of the garth, while Joan, Joy, and Gudrun sat on the cloister steps to discuss their new problem.

Joy looked at Joan. "What do you say? You're the one who knows these things. Could it be as old as that? Four hundred years?"

"I doubt it. I think our highwayman is much more likely."

"John Miles! That's only about a hundred years ago," Joy exclaimed. "You think the hollow oak was his funk-hole—his refuge"—with a glance at Gudrun. "When he had robbed travellers on the hills and was being hunted, he plunged into the oak, and raced through the tunnel to the garth and escaped that way?"

"The garth being in the middle of the ruins, which were not cleaned up and made into an Abbey again," Joan reminded her. "He would hide among the heaps of rubbish that were littered about; they say there was a wall right across the garth. He would easily find hiding-places for himself and his booty in all that mess."

"It sounds more likely than the monks," Joy agreed. "They had other secret ways of escape."

Jack looked up. "Would the monks dig holes in this green place? Wasn't it their burial-ground?"

"Right you are, Jacky-boy! Of course they wouldn't," Jen admitted. "I'd forgotten that. The highwayman is much more likely."

"There were other places the monks could have chosen; the gate-house meadow, for one," Joan said. "They wouldn't spoil the garth."

"No, we did that!" Jen groaned. "You will have it put right, won't you, Joan dear? I feel bad whenever I look at that hole."

"I think all the tunnel should be filled in. It isn't interesting and it isn't valuable," Joan insisted. "Someone might come on the entrance by the oak and force his way through, and he'd be in the Abbey before we knew about it."

"Thank goodness, they won't find Jehane's jewels in the refectory! Yes, we'll fill it in, and no one will ever use it again," Joy said.

Jen glanced at Jack, who reddened, and stared fixedly up at the refectory windows.

Joan changed the subject. "Perhaps our highwayman hadn't found the passage leading from the woods into the Abbey; he may have come on that later. The oak tunnel may have been his first idea."

Jen sat up. "Yes, Joan dear, that's all very fine, and I expect you're right about the highwayman and his friends making the tunnel. But that doesn't explain why Joy's house was called after the hollow oak, or the holy oak, away back four hundred years, before Jehane lived there and while the monks were still in the Abbey. Someone must have known about the oak, whether the tunnel was made then, or not."

Joy and Gudrun stared at her. "Bright child!" said Joy. "That's true. What about it, Joan?"

"I don't know why you should expect me to read all your riddles for you!" Joan protested. "Have a try yourselves this time!"

"The tree was quite old enough to date from the early days," Joy said thoughtfully. "It was much more than a hundred years old; well, it must have been, if it was ancient enough to be hollow by the highwayman's day! I don't suppose he hollowed it out; he found it as a hollow oak, and he went in and dug the tunnel and put the trap-door."

"That sounds right," Gudrun nodded.

Joan looked thoughtful. "You think the hollow oak is connected with the highwayman, but the holy oak is much older?"

"Two different things," Joy's interest was rising, while Jen sat up and gazed at her, intensely thrilled. "The holy oak had been there for centuries, since the early days of the monks, and had given its name to the house. Perhaps the village danced round it, as we believe they used to do. That would make it holy. Or perhaps it was planted by a priest; one of the Abbots

"Ambrose!" Jen gave one of her well-known shrieks. "Oh, Joan! Ambrose planted it!"

"I'm afraid not, Jenny-Wren. I'd be glad to connect Ambrose with the holy oak, but it's older than his day. Remember, Holyoake House was before Jehane's time; she lived at the Hall."

"But he did plant it!" Jen sprang up in her excitement. "Perhaps there was an older oak for the people to dance round and it was blown down, and Ambrose planted a new one to take its place, because he liked the idea of a holy oak and thought there must still be one. And the one he planted turned into our hollow oak for the highwayman to hide in. Oh, Joan, it's true! It's Ambrose's tree!"

"Jen, dear!" Joan remonstrated. "It's a lovely story and a nice idea, but you've no proof——"

"But I have! Oh, I have proof of it!" Jen cried. "Don't you remember a picture in the book that Katharine Marchwood made? We laughed and said Ambrose had taken to gardening in his old age. He was kneeling down, planting something. I'll fetch the book and show you. I know it's Ambrose's tree!"

She dashed off across the garth and up the refectory steps.

The other girls stared at one another. "It might be true. Jen has studied that book more than any of us," Joan began.

"What book?" Jack demanded. "You couldn't have pictures of your old monk! Is she off her head?"

"What is it all about?" Gudrun asked, greatly puzzled by the general excitement.

"We were given a book of drawings, done by a girl called Katharine Marchwood, who married into Joy's family and became her ancestress and lived at the Hall," Joan explained. "She knew the old monk, Ambrose, who lived and died in the gate-house; I showed you the place where he is buried. Jen was ill, after an accident, when the book came to us, and she lay and studied it for hours. I'd forgotten there was a picture of Ambrose doing gardening, but she loves him and she knows everything there is to be known about him. She may be right over this."

"I'd love to know Ambrose planted our oak," Joy said. "But there must have been an earlier one, to account for the name of the house.—Well, Historian!" as Jen came racing back. "Is it Ambrose again?"

"It is! I know it is! Look, everybody!" Jen had already found the page she wanted.

She spread out the old book and the others crowded round. A roughly-drawn stooping figure, with a monk's hood hiding the face, was certainly planting something, a thin stem which had two or three leaves. Behind him lay the trunk of a great tree, prone on the ground.

"It had fallen down," Jen said breathlessly. "He's planting another to take its place. And this thing in the corner is an oak leaf; Katharine could draw flowers and birds better than people."

Joy looked at Joan. “Seems all right. Isn’t Jenny-Wren a useful little person?”

“Not little!” Tall Jen laughed at her.

Joan’s eyes were very bright. “I believe she’s right. Our holy oak was planted by Ambrose, to replace the old one which had been called holy by the village people when they danced round it——”

“‘Gathering Peascods,’ ” Jen put in, her eyes gleaming. “They clapped their hands and touched the tree, and then they felt they were holy too.”

“It grew for three hundred years, though nobody danced round it any more. It was struck by lightning, and one day by chance the highwayman found that it was hollow and saw how it could be made a secret way into the ruins of the Abbey. Or it may have been used by smugglers; they may have stored their wine and lace and brandy in these parts, before sending them round the country.”

“And then Jack and I climbed up the old oak and it fell on us,” Jen added. “And I suppose that will be the end of it. It seems a pity, after its long life; Ambrose’s oak tree! Sorry, Ambrose dear! We didn’t do it on purpose. May I have a wee bit of it, off the trunk, Joy? I’d like to keep it.”

“Shall I have a piece set in a silver band and made into a brooch for you?” Joy asked. “And would Jack like one too?”

“To remind us of that tunnel!” Jen shouted. “Our secret badge! Joy, how lovely of you! Oh, yes, please!”

Jack looked up, her face radiant. “Thank you a thousand times! I haven’t anything ancient and mysterious; Jen has heaps. I’d like it ever so much, Joy.”

“I’ll see to it. You shall choose your scrap of bark and I’ll have it mounted for you,” Joy promised. “It will make a most intriguing brooch. Everybody will know it must have some story behind it. People don’t usually wear bits of wood in brooches!”

“All the same, I don’t need anything to remind me of that tunnel,” Jack groaned.

“No, but to remind us of the whole story of the holy hollow oak and of dear Ambrose planting it,” Jen said happily.

CHAPTER 27

THE STAGE AND THE SEA

"You asked me a question two days ago." Gudrun looked at Joy.

She was sitting in the dusk with the Abbey girls on the terrace, enjoying the scent from half-seen roses in the beds below. The schoolgirls, tired out with the day's adventures, had gone upstairs, and Mrs. Shirley had gone also.

"I asked because I wanted so much to know," Joy replied. "But Joan gave me a fearful lecture about being unkind and inquisitive, so I'm not asking any more."

Gudrun gave Joan a swift smile. "I expect it will be all right, if I tell her, won't it, Joan?"

"Oh, angel! Please do! Be a sport!" Joy begged.

"We'll love you for it," Joan assured Gudrun. "But only if you really want to tell."

"I've been thinking. I'd like you to understand."

"Then go ahead. I want to know quite as much as Joy does. I'll try to understand."

"You will, if anybody can," Gudrun said, with conviction. "Joy said: 'Tell us about Karl.' I suppose Uncle Gustave had spoken of him. Karl is his son, and he would like to marry me."

She spoke simply and quite frankly. Joan said at once, "But you can't, can you? You don't love him."

Gudrun coloured. "I don't think I do. I don't know."

"Oh, I know!" Joan exclaimed. "You're much too calm about him. You think of it as a nice plan—or a bad one. You don't feel as if you were Juliet and he was Romeo."

Gudrun considered the point. "I'm sure I don't. But I like him quite a lot! He's much the nicest of—of the boys who——" and she paused.

"Oh, have there been crowds of them?" Joy teased. "Well, of course, you are very pretty!"

"Very handsome." Joan altered the expression. "Don't mind her, Gudrun! She knows nothing about being in love. Neither do I; but I'm sure there's more in it than what you feel for your cousin at present. You don't care enough to give up the stage for him, do you?"

"No!" Gudrun cried. "No, that's the point. It means giving up my acting, and I've wanted it all my life. I don't care enough for that."

“Trust old Joan to hit on the exact point,” Joy remarked to a blackbird, who would not go to bed and was serenading them from a rose-bush. “Joan believes in all or nothing, where marrying is concerned. With her it’s a case of—‘Though father and mother and a’ should go mad, O, whistle and I’ll come to you, my lad.’ I learned that from Selma. I heard her singing it.”

“I don’t feel like that. I won’t give up the stage,” Gudrun said vehemently.

“As your uncle said: ‘Poor Karl!’ He hasn’t much chance,” Joan agreed. “You don’t love him, Gudrun, however nice he is. If you ever find you do love him, you’ll have to choose. But that time hasn’t come yet.”

“Didn’t your uncle say Karl is a sailor?” Joy asked.

“Yes. He’s three years older than I am, and he’s getting on well. When he is old enough and has passed his exams, he’ll have his own ship. Uncle is very proud of him. They both love the sea more than anything; as much as I love the stage, I think.”

There was a pause. Then Joy said bluntly, “And I suppose Karl isn’t willing to give up the sea and stay at home, if you marry him?”

Gudrun stared at her. “He would never do that. He couldn’t give up the sea.”

“I don’t see it! It’s not fair. You’re to give up your career and settle down to keep his house, while he goes to sea and leaves you at home and only comes back to you between his voyages! Why should you do all the giving-up? He doesn’t love you enough to give up the sea for you. He isn’t ready to do his share.”

Gudrun’s hands clasped and unclasped nervously. “It’s true. I hadn’t thought of it that way. But nobody could ask Karl to give up the sea!”

“You could, and you should, next time he asks you to marry him,” Joy said, with rising indignation. “He’ll ask you again, won’t he? He’ll go on asking you?”

“If I give him the chance, he will,” Gudrun admitted.

“Then give him the chance, and say you’ll think about it if he’ll give up the sea and stay at home. That will show him what you feel. Why should the girl do all the giving-up?” Joy said wrathfully. “I know it’s expected of her. She’s to give up her career and all her hopes just for the fun of getting married! I do think it’s unfair!”

Joan interposed. “Where it’s a case of making a home together, it isn’t so unreasonable. But in this case, when Karl expects to be away for weeks at a time, I feel it’s very hard to ask Gudrun to give up everything. He ought to do his share. You both have careers that you love more than anything. If one has to be sacrificed, then it would be only fair it should be both. Has anybody suggested that you should marry Karl and still be an actress?”

Gudrun peered at her in the twilight. "Nobody has thought of that. He wouldn't like it. But could I do it, Joan?"

"Lots of actresses are married," Joy argued.

"I don't see why not." Joan looked at Gudrun thoughtfully. "He'll be away from home a great deal. Even if you were in a play when he came home, he could come to the theatre with you. He'd have a great deal of you, but your work would have to go on."

"He wants to come first," Gudrun almost whispered.

"But he isn't willing to put you first," Joy said tartly. "It's a shame! It ought to be the same for the man as for the girl."

Joan laid her hand on Gudrun's knee. "If ever you find you love Karl, you must make a fair plan with him. You each have something—your career—that must come first; make him see it must be the same for both of you. He'll go to sea, and you'll act; you'll be together when he has leave. I see no reason why it shouldn't work out quite well. I'll ask Mother what she thinks, if you like; but I expect she'll feel that you should be ready to give up everything if you marry. The rest of your family will say the same; it's the usual idea. But I can't help feeling you have the same right to your life that Karl has. You must stand up to him and make him see it. If he really loves you he will see it; he'll want you to be happy. You'll never be really happy if you settle down to keep house for him and give up all thoughts of the stage. And I don't think you'd be a very nice wife, if you did." And she smiled at Gudrun.

"Any more than Karl would be a nice husband, if you made him settle down at home, while he was still wanting to go to sea," Joy observed. "I should think he'd be perfectly horrible."

"I'm quite sure I would," Gudrun owned. "I'd never feel really settled."

"Neither would he. You'd quarrel, and he'd go off to sea and leave you," Joy said.

"It might come to that. I don't believe you would be happy," Joan agreed. "In time you may be ready for a settled home life; and he may come to want it too. Your uncle has given up the sea and taken a shore job, hasn't he? But neither of you is ready for that yet."

"Perhaps we ought not to marry till that time comes?" Gudrun began.

"You'll have to discuss that with him," Joan told her. "But if he wants you to marry at once, and if he won't give up the sea, then you ought to be allowed to go on the stage and see what you can make of it. It really is the only fair solution."

"Next time he asks you, tell him it's to be you plus the stage, or nothing at all," Joy declared.

“And that you’ll marry him plus the sea,” Joan smiled. “Make him do his share. You’ll both be happier. Of course,” she added, “if you decided to go in for having a family, you’d need to give up the stage for a time. But you could go back later on. Having a family must be the very happiest thing in the world—worth even giving up the stage for.”

Gudrun looked grave. “That could wait. We needn’t do it at once.”

“And Karl ought to stay at home to help to bring up the family,” Joy insisted.

“Karl might not want to leave the family,” Joan suggested. “Poor Gudrun! It’s too bad to discuss her future like this!”

Gudrun gave a tiny laugh. “Just now I wouldn’t want even a family to keep me away from the stage.”

“Oh, no, not now! But perhaps some day—and if Karl makes you really love him in earnest—you may feel differently,” Joan said. “I’m sure you aren’t anywhere near wanting to be married yet. But I believe it can happen all in a moment, so you’d better be prepared.”

“I feel more prepared for the next time Karl speaks of it. You’ve made me see things much more clearly. I do thank you both very much.”

“Make Karl see things more clearly too,” Joy urged. “Show him there are points of view he hasn’t thought of. Make him be fair!”

Gudrun sat, thinking deeply. She looked at Joan at last. “I think, if I could make Karl understand, and if he was nice about my acting, I might perhaps come to like him very much; more as you say I ought to do. I like him already, but my work comes in the way. If I could have both the stage and Karl, I might want him in earnest.”

“Then we’ll hope it will happen,” Joan exclaimed, as she rose. “But you must wait. To bed, my dears! Joy shall dream of holy oaks and Gudrun of her great future.”

“Won’t you dream at all?” Gudrun laughed at her.

“I shall dream of you and Karl,” Joan promised.

CHAPTER 28

THE TOMBOYS CELEBRATE

As the three girls went along the upper corridor, there came suspicious bumps and a stifled squeal from behind a closed door.

They looked at one another. Then Joy leapt forward and flung the door wide.

“Oh, gosh! We forgot to lock it!” The voice was Jack’s.

The room was in wild confusion. Jen, looking taller and slimmer than ever in blue-striped pyjamas, stood erect on her quilt, with a pillow raised to hurl at the other bed. Jack had paused in the act of flinging one at her, and sat gazing in horror at the group in the doorway.

“You did,” Joy assured them. “Why did you leave me out of this riot?”

Jen flung the pillow at Jack. “We’re celebrating,” she explained.

With a yell, Jack rushed at her, catching her by the ankles. Jen, unsteadily poised, tried to jump aside, but staggered and came down with a thud. She grappled with Jack, and they rolled on the bed and over the edge, landing with a bang on the floor at Joy’s feet.

“You babies!” Joan exclaimed. “Pillow-fights, at your age!”

“We’ve decided we were like the Babes in the Wood, in that tunnel,—since Joy’s so fond of fairy-tales,” Jen explained, sitting heavily on Jack and pushing back her wildly-dishevelled hair. “I don’t know what we are now. We could be the Three Bears, if Joy would like to be Father Bear. Jacky-boy is Baby Bear; I’m sure I’m meant to be Mother Bear.”

“You’re just two tomboys,” Joan scolded.

“That’s a very nice thing to be,” Jack murmured. “If you could take Jen off my chest I’d say thank you. She’s a frightful weight. My tummy’s being crushed.”

“Get up, Jen! You’re too heavy,” Joan ordered. “Perhaps you had to celebrate your escape from the tunnel, but there’s been enough of it now. Tidy the room and get to bed. You have made a mess!”

“Every single thing that could be smashed is put away safely in a drawer,” Jen said, with dignity. “We’ve done absolutely no damage whatever. And it wasn’t the tunnel we were celebrating.”

“Oh! What then? Was it because Ambrose has turned up again?”

Jack shook herself free and began to straighten her bed.

Jen looked at Joan. “Not even dear old Ambrose. I should have thought you’d guess. It was because last night was so utterly horrible, and we’re so

glad to-night isn't."

"Oh! Yes, I see. Well, you've done your celebrating. I thought you were so tired?"

"I'm ready to go to bed now," Jen admitted. "But we had to have some sort of bust-up, to relieve our feelings. We were both thinking about last night, so I threw a pillow at Jack and she said we'd have a proper battle. We tidied the room before we began."

"Tidied it!" Gudrun said, with a laugh.

"We put things away. We won't untidy them till the morning. Let's go to bed, Jack, old dear! I feel heaps better since I flung that pillow at you."

"I don't feel quite so bad myself," Jack owned, as Joan and Gudrun withdrew, looking at one another in amusement.

Jen sat up in bed. "D'you know why I wouldn't put back the vases and things to-night?"

"Joy?" Jack queried.

"Of course. She won't be left out. Didn't you see her slip away, while Joan was telling us to tidy up?"

"I saw she wasn't there. What will she do?"

"I've no idea; that's where the fun comes in. She's got pillows in her room, so look out for a bombardment!"

They sat on their beds in the dark, awaiting some assault.

Before many minutes had passed, the door was opened very quietly and something large and furry crawled in, moaning gently.

"Not very original," Jen commented. "We've seen that bear-skin before. But I suppose it's my fault for suggesting Father Bear.—Ouch! Oh, you brute! You messy pig!"

"Oh, beastly!" shouted Jack.

Their attention had been fixed on the crawling bear. From behind, someone invisible had flung two damp sponges, catching Jen and then Jack full in the face. A quick rush and the enemy was upon them, while they were grabbing the sponges to return the assault. A wet towel was hurled over Jack's head; another was pushed into Jen's face.

She gasped and choked, and the bear sat on its haunches and cried, "Don't smother her, Joy!"

"Gudrun!" Jack escaped from her towel and threw herself on Joy, dragging her away from Jen.

"Gudrun is Father Bear. I am Goldilocks," Joy said blandly, and shook her loosened dark red hair over her face.

The invitation could not be ignored. The schoolgirls leapt upon her and seized handfuls and pulled hard.

Joy yelled. "Slay them, Gudrun! You promised to defend me!"

Gudrun caught Jen's long hair in one hand and Jack's bobbed locks in the other and did her share of tugging.

"Oh, pax, everybody!" Jen moaned. "I'm sore with laughing, and my head's coming to bits! Gudrun, you pig, you've nearly scalped me; let go! I've let Joy off."

"It's good for hair to be pulled; makes it grow," Joy said, sitting back on her heels and making a big loose plait. "Mine will grow like anything after to-night. How you tugged, young Jen! I didn't think it would hurt so much."

"Serves you right! Wet towels! Sponges! You are a messy brute!"

Joy grinned. "Not original; what? You didn't know I was behind Father Bear in the dark, with my hands full of ammunition!"

"What will Mrs. Shirley and Joan think?" Jack chuckled.

"I gave them warning. They shut their doors firmly, and left us to get on with it."

"You are every bit as much of a tomboy as we are," Jen complained. "I shall point that out to Joan."

"Joan knows," Joy said gently. "We didn't want to disappoint you in your Three Bears. Where are your peace tokens, Father Bear?"

Gudrun produced a basket, which had been hung round her neck. "I don't think they're damaged."

Joy solemnly handed round small jam tarts. "Who's been eating my porridge?" she growled.

The girls giggled, accepted the tokens of peace, and invited Gudrun to sit on one bed and Joy on the other.

"Who's been sitting on my bed?" Jack squealed.

"Who's been putting damp things on my pillow?" and Jen indignantly threw a sponge to the floor.

"You must have done it yourself. I put it somewhere quite different," Joy assured her.

"Yes, you pig! In my face. Jack, did you expect this sort of treatment when you came here?"

"I had hopes, since it's Joy's house," Jack grinned.

CHAPTER 29

A PROMISE TO JOAN

“Gudrun had better see Cammy about those private lessons,” Joy said, on Monday afternoon. “Shall I ring up the school?”

“A phone call for Miss Joan.” Susie Spindle came running across the lawn, sent by the maid who had taken the call.

Joan went to the house, and Joy and Gudrun sat talking of future plans.

“Something’s wrong,” Joy said, as Joan reappeared on the terrace. “Joan looks solemn.”

Joan stood by Gudrun’s chair and laid a hand on her shoulder. “Cammy and the lessons must wait. That was your uncle on the phone.”

Gudrun looked up quickly. “Didn’t he want to speak to me? Is he coming back?”

“He’s coming, for one more night at the inn. There’s trouble, my dear, and he’s going to take you home. Your grandmother is very ill.”

Gudrun sat up. “Oh, I must go! She’s been good to me in her way. Isn’t it very sudden?”

“Not really. They have known it might happen. He told me that much, when he was here before, but he said you didn’t know. He was sure you would want to see her again, and if you go quickly you may be in time. She is asking for you.”

Gudrun looked away across the lawn. “I must go. But I hope—oh, I hope——no, she couldn’t do that! I’ll go and pack my bags and just leave my night things till the morning. When will Uncle come?”

“He can’t be here before seven.”

“Could we go to-night, if I were all ready?”

“You could, but he doesn’t suggest it. Early to-morrow will do.”

“There may be no boat you could catch before the morning,” Joy said. “I’ll drive you to town and right to the docks. I did it for Selma and Angus.”

“I’m sure it would help. All those trains and changes and waiting at stations! You are very kind.”

“Can I help you to pack?” Joan asked.

“There isn’t much to do. But thank you, all the same.” And Gudrun went off to the house.

“Exit the Viking Daughter!” Joy remarked. “We shall miss her. I wish the old granny had held on a little longer.”

“Gudrun will come back,” Joan said. “We’ll tell her she hasn’t really paid that visit to us yet.”

“No, she’s being snatched away. What was she going to say about her granny? What couldn’t the old lady do?”

“I think I know, but I may be wrong. I’ll talk to her to-night, and I’ll tell you later, if it isn’t a secret.” Joan would say no more.

Jen and Jack, coming in from school, set up loud lamentations when they heard the news. “We want her here,” Jen wailed. “Oh, bother—bother—bother!”

“I want to stay. You can be sure of that,” Gudrun said sadly. “It’s nice of you to want me.”

“You’ll come back,” Jack assured her.

Captain Palmgren, arriving during the evening, had little to add to his phone news. He could tell Gudrun no more about her grandmother, except that the trouble had been hovering over her for months, and now that it had come it would be better for the old lady to go quickly. But she was determined to see Gudrun again before she died; and Gudrun’s lips pinched in deepening anxiety.

One thing the captain could tell, however. It was impossible for him to leave England for one more day, if any other way could be found to take the girl home safely. And there was another way.

“Karl is coming to London to meet you, my dear. You will be safe with him. He will reach London to-morrow morning, and I shall hand you over to him. You will start for home at once; I will follow next day, and I hope I shall be in time. But it is for you she is calling, without ceasing.”

“Karl!” Gudrun exclaimed, looking startled. She felt Joy’s eyes on her, though Joan was carefully looking the other way. She coloured, but said steadily, “Oh yes! I shall be all right with Karl. He is always kind.”

“Oh, certainly! He will take good care of you,” her uncle agreed.

“Hard on the Viking Daughter to have to cope with Karl, when she has so much on her mind!” Joy murmured, while Gudrun and her uncle sat talking in the dusk.

“It may be quite a good thing,” Joan remarked. “It will give her something new to think about; she is worrying about her grandmother. She likes Karl; I’m sure of it.”

“Not as much as she likes Shakespeare!”

“Perhaps one half of her can like Shakespeare and the other can love Karl,” Joan observed. “Nobody has asked Karl if he would let her go on the stage, if they married. It’s a new idea; he’ll have to think it over.”

“She said he wouldn’t like it.”

"He may be more reasonable than she thinks. He may accept her argument about the sea. We must be fair to him. He hasn't refused to consider the idea yet."

Gudrun had been in bed for a few minutes when there was a tap on her door. She sat up, startled. "They can't be playing games to-night! They wouldn't do it!—Who is there, please?"

Joan slipped into the room. "Only Joan. I want a word with you. If you don't want to talk I'll go away, but I feel there's something I ought to say."

"Oh, Joan! Please come in! Yes, I want you; I always want you. I thought it might be Jen and Jack."

Joan sat on the bed. "They won't come to-night. But they are very sorry to lose you."

"I'm sorry to go. I did want to have a little time here with you all. You've been so very kind."

"You must come back. We're counting on it. When your grandmother doesn't need you any longer, you must come to stay with us for a long while."

"Thank you! Oh, thank you! I shall look forward to it.—Joan!"

"Yes, dear? I know something is troubling you; that's why I've come."

"What does she want me for? What is she going to say?"

"I can guess, and I think you can," Joan said, deepest sympathy in her tone.

"She'll talk against the stage again and tell me I must stop thinking of it. I can't bear it, Joan! It's the only thing I want to do with my life."

"And your life is just beginning, while hers is ending. This is what I came to say," and Joan spoke very earnestly. "You must *not*—Gudrun, you must *not*—let her make you give any promise. I've heard of old people saying they could die happily if someone would only promise something; to marry or not to marry some person—things like that. If she asks you to promise to give up the stage, you mustn't do it."

Gudrun was gazing at her with eyes wide with horror. "If I did I couldn't keep the promise."

"No. Don't give any promise you can't keep."

"I thought she might scold and command me, if she is strong enough. I never thought of anything so dreadful as a promise."

"I thought of it. I've heard of such things happening. It isn't fair; you have your life to live and she mustn't try to manage it after she's gone. You must tell her you can't do it—you must cry and rush out of the room—anything! But don't give a promise you don't mean to keep. You could burst into tears at a moment's notice, if you had to, couldn't you?"

Gudrun gave her the ghost of a smile. "Perfectly well!"

“Then do that, or faint, or something. You may feel bad about doing it, but you’d feel worse if you gave a solemn promise and then had to break it.”

“Yes, I am sure I should. I won’t promise, Joan. I’ll make that promise to *you*!”

“Then if she talks you round, you’ll break your word to me! Hold on to that, and be brave. I’m sorry for your grandmother, but her life is ending and she mustn’t be allowed to ruin yours.”

“No. I will be brave. But I shall feel very sorry, if I have to hurt her.”

“I’m afraid we can’t help that. I don’t want your life to be spoiled.”

“If only she would understand!” Gudrun whispered. “I shall always feel I am displeasing her. If only I could go on and feel I had her blessing!”

Joan looked very grave. “That would be wonderful. I wish it could happen. It might; she may be gentler now. You’ll take our very best wishes, and our prayers, with you, Gudrun dear.”

“I’ll remember. It will help me more than anything. It was so good of you to come!”

“I want you to know we shall be thinking about you. You must come back, to stay with us and to tell us all about it, as soon as ever you can. Write to us quickly! We really care, you know.”

“I believe you do. I don’t know why you should,” Gudrun said. “I’m not very good at letters, and most of all if they have to be in English, but I will try.”

“Don’t write in Swedish!” Joan smiled.

“No. I will do my best,” and Gudrun lay trying to sleep, feeling much comforted.

CHAPTER 30

KARL AND GUDRUN

Miss Cameron rang up the Hall, a few days later.

"When is your young friend coming back, Joan? Jen Robins tells me she has gone off to Sweden in a hurry."

"Her grandmother was taken ill and she was sent for. We hope she's on her way back to us and that she'll be here quite soon." There was a note of excitement in Joan's voice. "We're completely thrilled; Jen doesn't know. We had a telegram, after the girls had left for school. We don't know what it means, and Gudrun hasn't written to us, so we've been feeling quite in the dark about her. She said she would find letters in English difficult."

"Yes, I expect so. Does she say she is coming to you again?"

"Oh, sorry! The wire says—'Coming back. All's well. We are very happy.' It suggests things, but it doesn't tell us much."

"Most puzzling," Miss Cameron agreed. "Who is 'we'? The family can't be rejoicing in the grandmother's illness, surely!"

"I believe she was an autocrat and ruled them all with a rod of iron. But we don't think Gudrun means the family. Joy and Mother and I have been discussing it, but we can't say anything till we have talked to Gudrun."

"No, of course not. But she sounds pleased with life, if she says all is well."

"Yes. Did you want her?"

"Oh yes!" Miss Cameron exclaimed. "I want her badly, as soon as possible. You've heard of the Nonesuch Players, who specialise in Shakespearian productions and tour the South coast?"

"I've heard of them. I love their name," Joan cried.

"I know the manager very well. I wrote and told him about your friend. I said, 'A beautiful girl, obviously highly gifted, and just eaten up with the desire to play in Shakespeare. Couldn't you make sure of her, before someone else snaps her up and puts her into modern comedy? She'll go anywhere to get an opening on the stage.' He was really interested and he would like to see her."

"How marvellous! And how nice of you to say such lovely things about her!"

"I meant every word. I was very much impressed by her; I'm sure she has a big future before her. When she comes back to you, will you let me know? I will arrange a meeting with Mr. Denton, the manager. They always

have two or three student-learners, who do odd jobs and understudy and very occasionally take small parts. It seems to me just the opening for Miss Palmgren.”

“We call her Gudrun. I’m sure she’d want you to do it too. That’s wonderful news, Miss Cameron; thank you very much indeed. We’ll ring you up as soon as she arrives. I hope he and Gudrun will be able to meet.”

“He’ll want her, if he sees her,” Miss Cameron said, with conviction, as she rang off.

“How decent of Cammy!” Joy exclaimed. “I’ve thought of a lovely part for Gudrun. She ought to be Arthur, in *King John*. The audience would be in tears, when she pleaded for her eyes.”

“I’m quite sure they would! But Gudrun is too tall for Arthur; he was only a little boy.”

“Bother! I suppose he was. Gudrun couldn’t possibly look like a little boy. What a pity! She’d have done it beautifully. Well, she could be Helena, in the *Dream*. Wasn’t Helena the tall one?”

“Hermia, the little one, says so,” Joan assented. “I hope Gudrun will fit in to this offer. It sounds exactly what she wants.”

“I hope she’ll come soon. I want to know what her mysterious ‘we’ means. Do you think it could possibly be—Karl?”

“It could very well be Karl. But what Gudrun means, and what they are happy about, I can’t imagine.”

“They can’t be engaged! It would be very sudden!” Joy argued.

“Gudrun had no thought of that when she left us,” Joan agreed. “We shall have to tell the girls, but we won’t say too much. They know her cousin was taking her to Sweden; it will seem quite natural that he should bring her back.”

As the schoolgirls sat at tea, Joan laid the telegram before Jen. “News of a friend. Good news, we think.”

“Gudrun!” Jen exclaimed. “Jack, she’s coming back. Look!” and she passed the telegram across the table.

Joan waited expectantly. Both girls were quick; questions were sure to come.

Jack read the message critically. “Sounds all right. I wonder when she’ll come?”

“She doesn’t say. It may be to-morrow,” Joan said. “We’ve made her room ready, with fresh flowers, in case she turns up.”

Jack was studying the telegram. “Who’s ‘we’? And what are they so happy about?”

Jen seized the paper and read it again. “Joan, what does she mean? Who is very happy? And why?”

"I can't tell you. I know only as much as you do. I may guess other things, but I don't know them."

"What do you guess? Oh, Joan, tell us!"

"Her cousin came to fetch her. He seems to be on leave; he's a sailor, you know. Perhaps he's bringing her back. Have some more tea?"

"Thanks. Yes, that would explain the 'we.' And 'All's well' might mean the old granny was better. But——"

"Or it might mean she relented at the last moment and said Gudrun may go on the stage, after all," Jack suggested.

"I hope it's that. But why are Gudrun and the cousin—what's his name, Joan?"

"Karl, Jenny-Wren."

"Oh, yes! Well, why are they so happy?"

"It may not be Karl who is happy. It might be the uncle, or the whole family."

Jen looked at the message again. "I think it means Karl, or whoever is coming with her."

"It's mysterious, but we can't know till they come," Joan said.

"Perhaps she's engaged to Karl," Jack exclaimed.

"She couldn't be! She wasn't engaged last week," Jen cried.

"A lot can happen in a week," Jack argued.

"We can't know, so suppose you stop discussing it and start on your prep. Then if Gudrun does come——"

"Whoops! I suppose she might turn up this very night! Come on, Jacky-boy! If she comes it may stop our cricket, but we can't afford to let her interfere with prep!" and Jen dragged Jack off to the library to work, with occasional intervals to wonder what the cryptic telegram had meant.

Jack finished first, and went off to her beloved pitch. "Come as soon as you're ready! Don't swot too long at that history. I'm sure you know it all right."

"I don't; not yet. Go and bowl at a stump! Your bowling isn't too good," Jen remarked.

"Doesn't need to be. We've got you."

"I might die; or have measles," Jen retorted.

"Don't you dare!" and Jack raced off.

Jen was putting away her own books and Jack's, for the library must be left tidy, when an outbreak of noise in the big hall made her pause—voices, and laughter; a car driving away. She flung the books into a corner and ran out to see.

Gudrun was in Joan's arms. "Oh, Joan, dear, I had to come! Is it all right? You said I might come back!"

"If you'd rung up from town, I'd have come to fetch you, to save you the slow train and the station taxi," Joy cried.

"Everything's ready, just in case you came to-night, but you didn't say if it would be to-day or to-morrow," Joan scolded, laughing. "Dear, we are so glad to see you!"

Jack came running from the garden and caught Jen by the arm. "Is that Karl, do you think? Stars, isn't there a lot of him?"

"Keep quiet, and we'll see," Jen whispered.

Gudrun was pouring out thanks to Joy. "I've come for that visit; I hope this time I'll be able to stay. It is good of you, Joy! Oh, everybody, this is Karl!"

"We thought it might be Karl." Joan turned to the tall fair sailor with a smile. "Have you taken care of Gudrun nicely? We are so glad to see you!"

Karl was bronzed and burly, like his father. He was also very shy. "I am glad to bring her to you. She tells me how most kind you have been. But my English is not good; not like hers. She must speak for me," he explained.

"I think it's very good! You haven't had as much practice as she has," Joan reassured him. "And I'm sure Gudrun can talk enough for the two of you."

He smiled shyly. "She has talked with her mother, who was English. I—not! My mother was Swedish."

"It makes a big difference," Joan assented. "Has she told you about us? Do you know us all? I am Joan, and this is my cousin Joy."

His eyes went from one to the other in astonishment. "She told me there were two."

"I'm afraid we're very much alike! Here is my mother. Mother dear, this is Gudrun's cousin Karl!"

Karl's blue eyes lit up, and he bent courteously over Mrs. Shirley's hand. "Madame, I am glad Gudrun will stay with you."

"We are very fond of her. We hope she will stay as long as she is happy with us."

"Oh, no, no, Mrs. Shirley dear! That would be for ever, and I have things to do!" Gudrun cried.

"Of course you have; big things," Joan agreed. "Karl, these are our schoolgirls, Jen and Jack. Have you heard of them too?"

"I think I hear it all; every little thing," he said, with a broad grin at Gudrun. "She talks so much about you all. These are the girls who are lost in tunnels and dig holes to come out of trees; who play the cricket and will have brooches made of wood. Is that it?"

"Our whole life history in two sentences!" Jen proclaimed. "How clever of you! Do we call you Mr. Palmgren?"

“No, please. I will not be Mr. Or Palmgren. I am Karl, and Gudrun is my —my cousin.”

Gudrun flung him a quick laughing look. “That’s all, so far. We aren’t engaged, Joan; not yet. But some day, when he has passed his exams and I’ve had my first part in a real play, we shall be. I’ve promised, and he’s promised. But we’re going to wait till things begin to happen.”

“Then they will come all at once; all the good things,” said Karl. “We sailors know how to wait. But home, and the good things, come in the end.”

CHAPTER 31

A VIKING FAMILY

"Tell us all about this!" Joan drew Gudrun to Mrs. Shirley's sitting-room. "Come along, everybody! We must hear the story. But you two ought to be fed. Aren't you very hungry?"

"Not in the least. Karl has given me plenty to eat. You feel you're being taken care of when you're with him," Gudrun said happily. "We'd like much better to talk to you."

"Talk, then!" Jen pleaded. "It's what we want too."

"Talk!" Joy commanded. "Later we'll eat. You shall have a feast of rejoicing."

"And these tomboy girls will put things in beds, because they are glad to see Gudrun again?" Karl smiled broadly, suddenly feeling very much at home. "That, she tells me, is their name."

"Tomboys they are, at times," Joan admitted. "But we'll try to keep them away from beds to-night. Gudrun has evidently told you all the stories. Now tell your story to us, Gudrun."

"There was so long on the boat. We didn't want to sleep, so we talked," Gudrun began.

"But it wasn't all about our tomboys, I'm sure," Joan suggested.

"It's a nice name," Jen said haughtily. "And it's Joy who puts things in beds, not us!"

"Perhaps we'll show you what we can do, if we try," Jack threatened.

"You will *not*!" Joan said firmly. "Now don't interrupt. We want Gudrun's news."

Gudrun had been putting off this moment. But now she plunged eagerly into her story, to the most attentive audience she had ever known.

"Karl was so kind, as we sailed away from England! I told you he was kind, Joan, but he was kinder and gentler than I'd ever known him."

Karl reddened. "It is easy to be kind to the best person in the world. And it was necessary; she was in trouble about the old lady."

"He was so good to me!" Gudrun went on. "I found myself liking him more than I'd ever done before. He told me Grandmother would go and he asked what I would do, for I should have no real home, though there are many aunts and cousins. He said I must go to his father and make my home there; and then he asked if some day—you know, I told you he would ask me again, if I gave him the chance, Joan?"

"The ship and the loneliness gave him his chance." Joan understood. "You felt more like saying yes than you had done before?"

Gudrun's eyes gleamed. "I asked if he would give up the sea and stay at home, if I married him."

"Good! That was the way to talk to him." Joy threw a quick look at Karl.

"I am glad she asked me," he said soberly. "I had not known how much she cared for her acting. I could not give up the sea; she could not give up the stage. We talked about it for a long time."

"That was wise." Joan's voice was gentle. "It was a matter that had to be settled. What did you decide?"

"That it must be the same for both of us. That it was not just that she should give up so much because she is a girl."

"Good for you!" Joan and Joy and the younger girls all spoke together.

"It would be frightfully unfair," Jen added. "And she couldn't do it. She'd never settle down, if she gave up the stage."

"I'm sure you'll be happier, if you begin by being fair to one another," Joan said. "It's a good starting-point."

"I had not thought of it," Karl admitted. "And the aunts at home do not like it. They think we are mad, and they say it will be wrong for Gudrun to be on the stage after we are married. But it must be the same for her as for me. If I go away and leave her, she must have her own life at home; and that, it seems, is the stage. It will be very hard to leave her, but that is my life. I could not give up the sea."

Joy looked at Gudrun. "Viking Daughter, I like him more every minute. I hope you'll marry him."

"Some day I think I will. He is Viking too, is he not?"

"Very much so! A Viking family. Don't you want to go sailing with him?"

"No, I am sick," Gudrun said simply.

Karl laughed. "That would not last. But she cannot sail if she must act in plays."

"True," Joy admitted. "Her work's on shore; your job is on the sea."

Joan turned to Karl. "I'm sure you will be very happy. You are making a good start by thinking for one another and being fair."

"I shall try to succeed on the stage," Gudrun said. "If I find I am no good, I shall be honest and tell Karl, and then I will give up my hopes and my big ideas, and he will find a little house and I will take care of it for him. But if I succeed, I shall go on, and when he comes home he will see me act and he will know how happy I am."

"I shall be very proud," Karl said gravely. "When all the world is talking of her I shall know she is my Gudrun."

“Yes, you’ll be proud of her,” Joan agreed. “It’s far better she should have her work to keep her happy and busy while you are away. But you won’t marry just yet, will you?”

“I must first pass my exams and have my own ship.”

“And I must make a real start,” Gudrun said.

“But when we are both doing well, then——” and Karl paused.

“Yes, then——!” Gudrun nodded.

“Then you’ll be married and everything will be all right,” Jen cried.

“We hope so,” Karl assented. “We are sure of it.”

“But what about your grandmother?” Jack asked.

“Tell us the rest of the story,” Joan begged.

Gudrun grew serious. “She died. Oh, Joan, it was dreadful! You were right; she was able to speak to me, and she asked me to say I would give up the stage. She said she couldn’t die happily unless I gave my word. I told her I could not do it, and the nurse and the aunts, who were there, begged me to say it to please her. I said I would not give a promise which I knew I could not keep. She was terribly distressed, and it was all too much for me. After finding Karl so kind and understanding, I couldn’t bear it. I did not have to try to cry; it happened! I broke down and cried and cried, and Aunt Ingrid told me to go away, as I was upsetting Grandmother still more. I rushed out, and there was this dear Karl, waiting to see what would happen. I couldn’t stop crying; he was very gentle with me, and he said he would speak to her, and he went away and left me. I don’t know what he said or how he did it, but——”

“I told you,” Karl said patiently. “I went to her bed and I said we would be married one day and I thought she ought to know. It pleased her; she had always wanted it. Then I said that when we were married I would let you go on the stage, so you must prepare for it now. She could not believe I would do that, but I said that you must have your life, as I must have mine. She was very tired; the struggle had been too much. She could hardly speak, but she said, ‘Will you take care of her?’ I said she could be sure of that. So she told me to bring Gudrun, and she said to her that she must do what I wished and that I must have the care of her now. And she gave us a blessing; and that was all. She did not speak again.”

“That was why I said, ‘All’s well,’ in my message.” Gudrun looked at Joan.

“Yes, all’s very well,” Joan agreed. “I am so glad! You’ll be much happier now, Gudrun dear.”

“Things are going to be better still,” Joy remarked. “You haven’t heard our news yet.”

“News?” Gudrun looked at her quickly. “What news can you have for me?”

“Miss Cameron rang up this morning. She thinks she’s found just the opening you want,” Joan said, and gave a quick explanation of Miss Cameron’s suggestion. “We’ll tell her you are here, and she’ll arrange a meeting with this manager friend.”

“Oh! But how glorious! How wonderful!” Gudrun cried, her eyes shining. “A company that only does Shakespeare? It is just right! Oh, please tell dear Miss Cameron at once! What is their name? What did you call them?”

“The Nonesuch Shakespearian Players. They are quite well known; even I had heard of them,” Joan said.

“What does it mean, that strange word?”

“What do you think it means?” Joan smiled. “Nonesuch!”

“That there is nobody like them?”

“I suppose so. It’s an old word of Shakespeare’s day. There was a palace or mansion called Nonesuch. It’s also the name of a lovely old dance.” Joan’s eyes met Jen’s, and they laughed.

“But how nice, to use an old name for their company.”

“I believe they do other plays; Sheridan and so on—things like *The Rivals* and *She Stoops to Conquer*. We’ll ring Miss Cameron to-morrow.”

“But I do not understand.” Karl spoke in his slow careful English. “Will Gudrun go away from here, from all of you, with some man you do not know?”

They looked at him; Gudrun with eyes full of amusement.

“It does sound an adventure, put like that,” Joan laughed. “She’ll be quite safe, Karl. They’ll take good care of her.”

“You don’t know Cammy; you’d better go and see her. Any friend of hers would be too, too respectable, and completely to be trusted,” Joy said.

Jen and Jack grinned at one another. “She’s good and solid, but she has some useful friends,” Jen agreed.

“I shall be all right, Karl. It has to happen. You didn’t think I was going to stay here and just enjoy myself, did you?” Gudrun asked. “I want to start, and this will be the most marvellous opening. I couldn’t have hoped for anything half so good.”

“I thought you would stay here and go to school some more,” he said doubtfully.

“She’ll go to school with this company, if they’ll take her,” Joan explained. “She’ll be learning all the time. They have students, and she’ll be one of them.”

Karl shook his head. “I do not like it. I must see this man.”

Gudrun looked at Joan, in amused dismay. "Could he go with me, do you think?"

"I'm sure he could, if he can stay till Cammy can get hold of her manager. The good man will have to see you, and Karl can go too; they'll understand." And Joan swept the whole family off to supper.

CHAPTER 32

PEARLS FOR GUDRUN

"Miss Joan, will it be right for Gudrun to do this?" Karl asked, recognising as everyone did that Joan was the one to give advice. "I do not like it," he said again.

"Indeed, Karl, it will be all right," Joan assured him. "She will not be only with this manager—who is probably a delightful person and very kind—but with the whole company. There will be other girls and older women. They'll like Gudrun and they'll be very good to her. She must go. It is the only way."

"Then she must be betrothed to me, before she goes."

"That's for you both to decide. If you have quite made up your minds, I think it would be a good plan."

"She would be mine," said Karl. "She would wear my ring. That would keep her safe."

Joan looked at him thoughtfully, but did not hint that engagements could be broken. Knowing Gudrun fairly well, she did not think it was likely to happen.

"Could I talk to her, without so many people here?" he went on.

"Alone; I think you should. She knows you are not quite satisfied. Are you staying with us? Or would you like the inn better, as your father did? We'll be glad to have you here."

"Please, I will like the inn. I left my small bag there, on our way."

"Then say good night to Gudrun and come back to-morrow morning, and she shall take you into the Abbey."

"She has told me. It is quiet there?"

"Very quiet and peaceful. We'll leave you alone with her. I won't say anything to her to-night."

"Thank you. You are very kind," Karl said gravely.

Gudrun turned to Joan, when he had gone to the inn. "What can I do? Is he going to be difficult?"

"Try to see his point of view. He hates the thought of letting you go among strangers. He'll be here early to-morrow, and you can take him into the Abbey and discuss it with him. You must seize this wonderful opening, but you must try to ease his mind about you.—Now, girls! And Joy! Please, no bedroom raids or antics to-night! Gudrun has had a difficult week, and she needs rest. We are all going quietly to bed, and we'll stay in our own

rooms and have no running about. Promise, Jen and Jack! Good! Joy?—you're quite as bad as they are."

"Oh, worse!" Jack cried. "Joy starts the fun every time!"

"Not to-night," Joy assured her. "To-night I play Chopin to put Gudrun to sleep."

"Oh, if you're going all grown-up and musical genius, there's no hope!" Jen sighed. "All right, Joan dear, we'll be good. We'll go to bed and talk about Karl. He's a proper Viking, isn't he? So big and determined. Aren't you just a wee bit frightened of him sometimes, Gudrun?"

"I might be, if I did not please him," Gudrun admitted.

Karl looked both big and determined when he arrived in the morning, soon after the girls had gone off to school. "Come with me to this quiet place, Gudrun girl," he said.

Joan handed the key of the gate to Gudrun, and they went off together.

"And now we ring up Cammy!" Joy said, as she went to the telephone.

An hour later Joan went through the tresaunt to the garth. "I wonder if Karl likes my Abbey! I'm glad we've had that horrible hole filled in. It doesn't look right, but it's better than it was when the girls burst out from the depths of the earth. The grass will soon grow again. Now where is our young couple?"

Gudrun and Karl were sitting on the cloister steps, but they sprang up and came to meet her.

"Look, Joan!" Gudrun held out her hand. "Isn't it a beauty? It's very old; it was Grandmother's and it had belonged to her mother. She gave it to Karl, for me, weeks ago; she always hoped we would marry."

Joan looked at the half-circle of pearls. "Oh, my dear, how pretty! Aren't you proud to have her ring?"

"Proud, and very glad. I know she wished it. And Karl is satisfied, for he feels that I belong to him now, and so I shall be safe, wherever I go."

"I am very, very glad." Joan looked up at Karl. "I hope you will both be very happy; I am sure you will. Come and show the ring to Mother and Joy and tell them your news."

"Will Mrs. Shirley be pleased? I do love her, Joan!"

"She'll be glad you are happy," Joan smiled at Karl.

"She is a beautiful little lady," he said.

Joan laughed and stored up the remark for her mother, for the pleasure of seeing her blush and say—"Nonsense, my dear! He didn't mean that!"

"Joy rang up Miss Cameron." Joan turned to Gudrun. "The Nonesuch Players are in Oxford this week, and Mr. Denton, her friend, will come to Wycombe to-morrow afternoon. So you and Karl must go to meet him and see how he likes you."

"Oh, that is wonderful news! But I shall be frightened, for fear he does not like me."

"If he does not like you, I shall knock him down and sit upon him," Karl said seriously. "But no"—as Gudrun laughed—"no, I think not. I shall shake his hand and thank him. For if he does not like you he will not have you in his troop, and you will have to stay here with Mrs. Shirley and Miss Joan."

"I'm sure he'll like her," Joan laughed. "What do you think of my Abbey?"

"It is beautiful. One can feel the rest and peace. Good men lived here, I think?"

Joan gave him a quick pleased look. "Very holy men, many of them, for hundreds of years. They were good and kind to everyone and were greatly loved by all the people."

"I knew it. I can feel them here still," he said.

Well satisfied, Joan asked, "Has Gudrun shown you it all? Their dining-room and workroom, and where they slept and where they talked over their problems?"

Karl looked at Gudrun, and Gudrun looked at Karl.

"I haven't shown him anything," she confessed. "We've been talking, all about ourselves. It is much better you should show him, Joan!"

"This won't do at all!" Joan said briskly. "Your affairs are settled, so now come along and meet my monks!" and she insisted on a tour of inspection, which interested Karl deeply.

"You have our very best wishes, my dear," Mrs. Shirley said, as she and Joy admired the pearls. "And you will take our love with you, wherever you go. You must remember you have a home in this country, as well as in your own, and you must come to us whenever you want to rest."

"Oh, Aunt, how beautifully you put it!" Joy cried. "You will remember, won't you, Gudrun? Just ring up any time and say you're coming."

"I shall remember that. It makes my mind very comfortable." Karl's eyes were glowing. "I shall be happy about her now."

Gudrun was almost in tears. "You are lovely people! But I haven't got this job yet, you know."

"You'll get it!" Joy assured her.

"Our good wishes will be with you, too, when you go away." Mrs. Shirley looked up at big Karl. "When you have leave you must write to Gudrun, so that she can meet you, and if Sweden is too far for her to go, then you must come to meet her here. She might not be able to leave her work for so long as a journey to Sweden would mean. We shall always welcome you."

“Karl, did you ever know such good people?” Gudrun was struggling not to break down.

Karl thought of the monks and the Abbey, but he did not know how to say what he felt. “I did not think people could be so kind. I shall not be afraid for you now. If you were in trouble they would help you.”

“You can be sure of that!” Joy said. “If Gudrun wires—‘Please come to me!’—I shall get out the car and rush to the rescue.”

Gudrun gave her a tremulous smile. “Thank you! I am sure you will. But I hope it will never be needed.”

“You’re engaged! Oh, what a lovely ring!” Jen shouted, on her return from school. “Oh, Joan, we ought to celebrate, for that ring!”

“Certainly not!” Joan retorted. “We’ve had enough of your wild riots! But to-morrow night, after Gudrun and Karl have seen Miss Cameron and her friend, if all is well we’re going to give them a betrothal feast; a celebration supper. You can make a speech, proposing their health! They’ll like that much better than your midnight revels.”

“We’d have to leave Karl out, if we had a bedroom riot, I suppose,” Jen said regretfully.

Joy drove Karl and Gudrun to town next day, and then went on to visit Miriam, the first Queen of the Hamlet Club. An hour later she found them waiting for her, outside the school.

“All well?” she asked. “You don’t look too unhappy.”

Their beaming faces answered her. “He’ll have me,” Gudrun said joyfully. “He seemed to like me very much. I did some bits for him; Arthur pleading for his eyes and some other things; and he was pleased.”

“The lady cried, about the little prince,” said Karl.

“Do it for us to-night. No, don’t!” Joy said hastily. “We don’t want to cry. You’d certainly upset Auntie, if you made Miss Cameron weep! What did you think of Mr. Denton, Karl?”

“He is very pleasant; he will take good care of Gudrun. He is not young, and he has a wife who will be like a mother to her; he said it. He is short and stout and bald; Gudrun is used to big men,” Karl said simply.

Joy shook with laughter. “All very comforting! You thought he was going to run away with your girl, didn’t you? Don’t make me laugh any more or I’ll tip you into a ditch.”

Karl looked at her gravely. “I am much more happy about Gudrun now, after your kind words and after seeing this good little man.”

“And after hearing of the motherly wife.” Joy grinned. “I’m sure she made a lot of difference. Oh, Karl, don’t be silly! Nobody is going to run away with Gudrun. She has a brilliant career before her. When shall we hear of your first success, Portia?”

Gudrun laughed. "It will be a long time before I am given a part, but perhaps they will let me be an understudy soon. But mostly I shall help in the background."

"What about your accent?"

"Miss Cameron thinks it has improved, and Mr. Denton says it is very pretty, but that it will soon go. He said my English was excellent, and he is pleased that I love Shakespeare so much."

"You must tell your story to Joan," Joy said, and gave her attention to the road.

CHAPTER 33

A NEWSPAPER CUTTING

Gudrun told more about the interview during the festive supper that evening. "Mr. Denton saw my ring and he was pleased. He looked at Karl and said: 'Are you her Romeo?' Karl was very shy and afraid to speak, but he said: 'She is my girl, my Juliet.' I thought it was so clever of him!"

"Oh, well done, Karl! That was very smart!" Joy cried.

"I have heard Gudrun talk of those people, though I have not read your Shakespeare yet. He goes with me on my next ship," said Karl. "I must know about these girls she will pretend to be. I knew what the little bald man meant."

"He said: 'Aha! That is good! If you have found your Romeo, you will be a better Juliet, and Rosalind and Viola too. You will know how these girls felt about their lovers.' I think I went red, but I am sure he was right," Gudrun admitted. "I know more than I did when I was here before. He asked if I could do Prince Arthur, though I am too old to be a little boy; but he said he would like to hear me say the lines. I had learned them at the drama school, so I was prepared. He was pleased."

"And Cammy wept," Joy laughed. "It must have been terribly touching. Jump up and do it for us now!"

"It would be too sad," Mrs. Shirley objected. "We do not want sadness to-night."

"Hear, hear!" Jen cried. "I don't want to be harrowed in my feelings, and I'm sure Gudrun would be very harrowing. Let's think of nice things to-night!"

"Make a speech, then," Joan suggested.

"I haven't anything to say, except that we hope she'll get on awfully well, and that they'll both be most terribly happy, and that we hope we'll see Karl again, and we want to see Gudrun act, and we know she'll be famous and have the whole of London talking about her some day, and—and our very best wishes in every possible way," Jen said, all in one breath.

"No one could say more than that," Joy laughed, while Mrs. Shirley and Jack applauded heartily.

"We agree with every word. Jenny-Wren has spoken for the family," Joan said. "I have one thing to add. Gudrun, we want you to have these, as a gift to remind you of this time with us. We'll have them made into a brooch or a pendant for you, but we felt we must consult you about that first."

While the schoolgirls gazed in astonishment, she went round the table to Gudrun's seat and laid before her three small but beautiful stones. "Father Pearl, Mother Pearl, and Baby Pearl! Or, if you prefer it—Father Bear, Mother Bear, and Baby Bear!"

"Oh!" Gudrun gave a gasp. "For me? Oh, Joan, you couldn't mean that! They're lovely—and they match my ring! Oh, Joan, how wonderful!"

"Joan!" Jen cried. "Are they some of Jehane's jewels? Have you unburied them?—Oh!" and she looked in dismay at Jack.

"That's enough, child!" said Joy. "One word more and you'll be sorry. Of course they're Jehane's jewels! Gudrun must have a wedding-present from the Abbey; a betrothal gift, I mean."

"Not a wedding yet, for a long while." Gudrun was gloating over the pearls. "Two grown-up bears and one baby one to go in between! They will make a lovely brooch—yes, a brooch, if I may, please. I shall wear them all the time as a brooch; as a pendant not so often, I think. It is so kind of you!"

"I'm sure you're right," Joan agreed. "Then we'll have them made up for you, by the man who is making little bits of oak into brooches for these girls. I can tell you, he was amused! He'll enjoy setting your pearls."

"Selma had an Abbey brooch," Jen said. "It's a jolly good idea, Joan and Joy, but you might have told me. I helped——"

"If you say any more, I shall guess that you buried those jewels in the Abbey," Jack warned her. "I'm not asking questions; I don't care a scrap where they are, and it's nothing to do with me. But they can't be far away, if Joan could get them so quickly. If you go on hinting, I shall start guessing, and then we'll have another row."

Jen grew suddenly sober. "I'm sorry; I apologise. I hated that row. I won't tease any more, Jacky-boy. Joan, I'm so glad you thought of it. It's nice to think of Gudrun wearing Abbey pearls! It will join us up with her for ever."

"What an odd expression!" Joan remarked. "Gudrun shall have a pearl pendant as a wedding-present, and we'll have our ruby made into one for Selma. Then they'll be Abbey cousins as well as real ones. Now tell us your plans, Karl and Gudrun! I suppose Karl's ship is waiting for him?"

"I must hurry," Karl said. "But I am glad to have seen Gudrun's little bald manager. I go to buy a book of your Shakespeare, and then I join my ship. I go to-morrow, please."

"So do I," Gudrun said. "It's better we should both begin things at once—your ship, my new job. The Nonesuch Players are in Oxford till the end of this week, so I'll join them there. You will tell me how to find Oxford?"

"By car," Joy said simply. "It isn't far. I'll drive you over to-morrow afternoon. Karl, I'll deliver her safely into Mrs. Denton's hands. I swear it!"

Karl laughed, but looked relieved. "That is indeed kind, Miss Joy."

Joy came back from Oxford next day to report that Mrs. Denton was kind and motherly—"Stout like her husband, but not bald!"—and that she had welcomed Gudrun warmly. "We'll send a note to Karl, to ease his mind," she said.

Jen sighed. "So that's the end of our Viking, for the time being! I hope we'll hear how she gets on, but I don't believe she'll write letters. Now there's nothing left but work and cricket. Come and stand up to my balls, Jack!"

"You have to prepare your babies for the hospital fête," Joan suggested.

"And I must train young Anne to be your maid. I can't have her holding your train badly. She's coming on nicely as a dancer," Jen said.

It was the custom for the Queens to attend the summer fête in state, and for the Hamlet Club to produce their maypole and show their dances, either in some garden or in the school hall. A play or some other event was combined with the dancing to make a pleasant afternoon, and Jen's small children were expected to provide an item of singing-games and action songs. This year a sale of work was added, and as the weather was indulging in an unsettled spell the stalls were set up in classrooms and the dancing took place in the hall.

Little Anne looked important and anxious as she carried Joan's violet train. When her Queen was seated on her flower-decked throne and the robe was arranged in graceful folds about her feet, Anne gave a sigh of relief and settled down on a cushion to watch the dancing. She had been to tea at the Hall and was no longer in awe of Joan and Joy, but she loved her Queen and looked up at her now and then with adoring eyes.

Jen, watching from the gallery, grinned as she saw that look, knowing just what Anne was feeling. But she was not unhappy in seeing her place with Joan filled. She had taken six wickets in more than one important match, and she was being assured on all sides that she would be expected to help the team every summer.

"You won't get me," she said cheerfully. "I'm only here because of Jack."

"Anne, will you take a message for me?" Joan bent to her small maid.

"Oh, yes, Queen! But ought I to go and leave you? What if you want me?"

"I do want you, now." Joan smiled. "Could you find Jen and bring her to me, as soon as the dancing stops? I want to tell her something."

Anne slipped away, full of importance, and presently, as the Queens began to move about the hall, Jen came to Joan's side. "Do you want me, Joan-Queen?"

Joan smiled at her. "This came by the second post, after you and Jack had left for school."

Jen looked at the envelope. "For you. I don't know the writing."

"I didn't know it, either. It isn't a letter—just a cutting from a local newspaper."

Much puzzled, Jen drew out the slip and perched on the arm of the throne to read it.

"*Twelfth Night*, at the Theatre Royal.

"The Nonesuch Players continue their successful three-weeks' season with a performance of *Twelfth Night*. A change has been necessary in the cast, however. Judith Stainer, whose Ophelia was such a feature of last week's *Hamlet*, was taken seriously ill during the weekend and was rushed to hospital for an emergency operation. Her part of Viola, in this week's production, was taken at short notice by the understudy, Gudrun Palmgren, who played the part with great delicacy and charm, rising to considerable heights of fiery passion, in her declarations of her love for the Duke. We hope we shall see more of this young lady. As is suggested by her name and her fascinating touch of accent—which, by the way, is entirely suitable for Viola, who was a shipwrecked castaway in a foreign land!—she is only partly English. She must certainly be seen on the London stage before long. A very noteworthy performance and a most creditable first appearance. We congratulate Miss Palmgren on the way she rose to the occasion, and we are proud that we have been privileged to have the honour of welcoming her to the stage."

Jen turned to Joan with shining eyes. "How lovely of them! Our Gudrun!—our Viking! Oh, I must tell Jack! Isn't Joy thrilled? Do you think Gudrun wore our pearls? Oh, Joan, she has made good! And at her first try! They must have thought she was good, to let her be understudy to the leading lady!"

"I'm sure they think she's very good," Joan assented. "It's the best possible news."

"The very best finish to the term! I thought at first it was going to be Jack's term, but now I believe I shall think of it as the Gudrun term."

"I rather thought it was going to be Tomboys' Term."

"We weren't so bad! And a lot of it was Joy," Jen protested.

"There's something written on the other side," Joan said.

Jen took up the paper again. “‘*Tempest* next week. I am Miranda.’ Oh, how lovely! She’ll do it beautifully. Oh, *what* a bit of luck for her!”

“Would you like to go some day, if the company comes anywhere near us? Joy would drive us in. It would mean a very late night, but perhaps on a Saturday, and just for once—to see our Viking act Miranda or Viola!”

Jen gave a little shriek of joy. “Oh, yes! Yes, Joan, please! And Jack, of course—to finish the Gudrun term! We’ll sit in the very front and raise the roof with our cheers! She’ll be a lovely Miranda. But I think she should go on being Viola, since it suits the way she speaks! I do hope they’ll come to Oxford or somewhere near enough, before the Judith person is better. Something to look forward to, after all! I must go and tell Jack! Oh, good for Gudrun!” and she rushed away, leaving Joan laughing.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

Because of copyright considerations, the frontispiece by Frank Varty (1906 or '07-1984) has been omitted from this etext.

[The end of *Tomboys at the Abbey* by Elsie Jeanette Dunkerley (as Elsie J. Oxenham)]