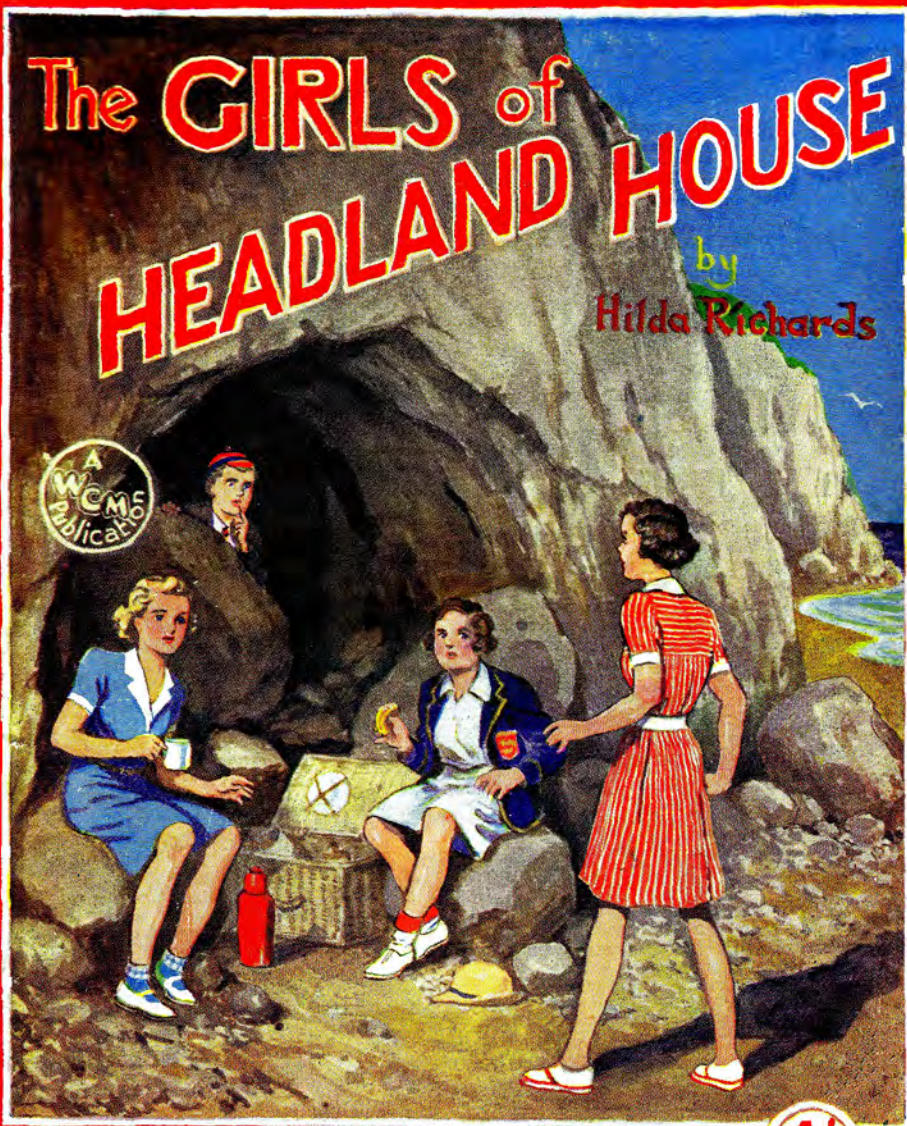


HEADLAND HOUSE SERIES NO. 1

# The GIRLS of HEADLAND HOUSE

by  
Hilda Richards



IT WAS HER BROTHER IN HIDING

1/-

# Girls of Headland House

By HILDA RICHARDS

MEG AND CO.

"ROT!" said Dolly Brace.

Dolly would not have said "Rot!" had Miss Gadsby, her form-mistress, been within hearing. Still less would she have said "Rot!" had Miss Beetle, the Principal of Headland House School, been anywhere in the offing.

But Miss Gadsby and Miss Beetle being at a safe distance, distance, far out of hearing, Dolly said "Rot!" and said it emphatically.

There were only two hearers of Dolly's vigorous remark unless the sea-gulls heard—Margaret Ridd and Ethel Bent. And both of them were quite used to Dolly's slangy style. The three shared a study at Headland House, where they were in the Lower Fifth.

They were a mile from Headland House now and great cliffs shut the school off from sight. They were seated on sea-worn boulders under the arch of the great cave under the soaring headland—a wide strip of shining sand between them and the sea. There was bright sunlight on the beach, but it was shady under the cave's high arch.

The fact that the headland cave was reputed to be haunted by the ghosts of dead-and-gone smugglers, did not prevent the three girls from selecting that shady spot for their picnic, and unpacking the picnic basket there. In fact, they had forgotten all about it. Yet, even on a sunny afternoon, the deep cave had an eerie look; stretching far under the great cliff, lost in darkness at a little distance from the cave-mouth. Even Dolly Brace, who had no nerves to speak of, would not have cared to venture into those shadowy depths.

Dolly was disposing of jam sandwiches, at considerable speed. Dolly had a healthy appetite, and made no secret of it. Margaret was pouring tea from a thermos into three little tin cups. Ethel was considering whether to follow a ham patty with a jam sandwich or a cream tart, when a sound from within the cave caused her to look round, with a little start, and stare into the deep gloom under the cliff.

"Wha-a-t was that?" ejaculated Ethel. "Is there someone in the cave? Did you hear a footstep?"

"It wouldn't be the ghost, in the daytime!" said Margaret, with a smile.

"Nunno! But——," Ethel gave another uneasy stare into the gloom, "What about moving out on the beach?"

It was then that Dolly Brace said "Rot!" Dolly was comfortably settled, seated on a low boulder, with her plump back against a higher one. Dolly was round and rosy, plump and placid. Once comfortably settled, she did not want to move. She had more weight to move than her friends.

"Oh!" ejaculated Margaret, suddenly. There was a sound of a clinking stone far up the cave, and it echoed strangely through the shadowy, eerie depths. Ethel jumped up.

"There's somebody in the cave!" she exclaimed, "Look here, let's get out on the beach."

"Rot!" said Dolly Brace, serenely, "No law against somebody being in the cave. Might be one of those silly schoolboys from Sparshott, exploring the place on a half-holiday. That's the sort of thing a boy would do. Getting wet and mucky, and

falling over rocks, and lost in the dark—that's the way a boy enjoys himself."

Margaret and Ethel stood looking up the cave. Dolly devoted herself placidly to jam sandwiches. But there was no further sound from the gloomy depths, and the picnickers settled down again.

They made a pleasant picture—Dolly, with her round, rosy face, Ethel with her blue eyes and mass of fair hair Margaret Ridd, slim and graceful, with a graver face than her companions. Dolly and Ethel chatted over the tea-cups: but Margaret was silent, with a faint little wrinkle in her brow. She was always the most thoughtful of the three: but on this particular afternoon she seemed unusually thoughtful. Dolly looked at her several times, and then closed a plump eyelid at Ethel, who laughed.

"Shall I guess your thoughts, Meg?" asked Dolly, suddenly.

Margaret looked up quickly, her face colouring a little.

"I—I was thinking," she stammered. "Only—nothing—I mean—"

"Less than nothing, if you ask me," said Dolly cheerfully, "Think I don't know? "Whenever you scowl like that —"

"I wasn't scowling!" protested Margaret.

"You can call it a thoughtful frown if you like—I call it a scowl. Whenever you scowl like that, you're thinking of that brother of yours at Sparshott, and wondering what fresh trouble he's landed in."

Margaret crimsoned.

"What's the latest?" asked Dolly. "Has the dear boy got a detention because he's too lazy to do his prep —? And does it matter if he has?"

"Nonsense!" said Margaret.

"If you mean rot, say rot—I always do!" said Dolly, "But what is the matter with dear Reggie this time! Has his nasty cruel form-master whopped him for not washing behind his ears?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" trilled Ethel.

"You always talk nonsense, Dolly," exclaimed Margaret, with just a note of sharpness in her voice. "I—I rather thought that Reggie might come over this afternoon on his bike, as it's a half-holiday at both schools, but—but he hasn't."

"He would have, if he'd known there was a picnic!" said Dolly. "Why didn't you let him know we had jam sandwiches, and cream tarts, and hard boiled eggs, and a cake? Then he'd have come over so fast, they wouldn't have seen his heels for dust."

"As if Reggie would care —!"

"Wouldn't he?" said Dolly. "Boys are gluttons! I can just see him wolfing these cream tarts, if he were here." Dolly helped herself to a seventh tart, "What are you laughing at?" she added, "Boys are greedy, and you know it as well as I do! Just greedy little animals."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Have I made a joke?" asked Dolly, mystified. "Am I an unconscious humorist?"

"You are!" said Margaret, laughing. "But never mind Reggie! I expect he was wanted for a game —!"

Dolly opened her lips—but at a sign from Ethel Bent, she closed them again. Dolly did not always think before she spoke: and she was about to say that Reggie Ridd was not likely to be wanted for a game, and that if he was, he wouldn't be much use, anyway. But she fortunately checked that remark in time. There was only one subject upon which Margaret Ridd

ever became what Ethel would have called cross, and Dolly would have called stuffy or shirty. That was the subject of her brother Reggie, at Sparshott. Neither of her friends liked Reggie: but perhaps a sister's eye saw something in him that other eyes could not see.

"Brothers are a bore!" said Dolly. "I've got two at home, and I know. Can you believe that they were thinking of co-edding us? Luckily they kicked. If they hadn't, I should have. No co-edding for me!" said Miss Brace emphatically. "Of course, I love my brothers—at a distance! The greater the distance, the more I love 'em. They feel the same about me. We're a very affectionate family so long as we don't meet. Tough to have a brother at a school so near as Sparshott's, poor old Meg!"

"Nonsense!" said Margaret.

"Now you're getting shirty!" sighed Dolly. "Don't let's talk about Reggie any more. Let's try to think of something pleasant. I—I mean ——!" Dolly stammered, realising that she had put it rather unfortunately, "I—I mean ——"

She broke off, startled, her little round eyes fixing on Margaret's face. That face had gone suddenly pale, and Margaret was staring up the shadowy cavern with startled eyes. Both Dolly and Ethel stared at her, blankly, and then looked round up the cave. But they saw nothing but lurking shadows.

"What—what is it, Margaret?" panted Ethel. "Did—did you see something? You're frightened—what was it?"

Margaret did not reply. She seemed to breathe with difficulty. Dolly Brace rose from her boulder.

"I—I say, this is rather an uncanny place," she mumbled. "Not a bad idea of yours to go down on the beach, Ethel. Let's."

"I'm going!" exclaimed Ethel, and she went—almost at a run.

"Come on, Margaret, quick!" exclaimed Dolly.

"You—you run on—I—I—I'll bring the basket," stammered Margaret.

"O.K. Buck up, then!" said Dolly, and she followed Ethel. Both disappeared round the great jutting rocks at the cave-mouth.

But Margaret Ridd did not follow. She stood where she was, staring up the cave. She could see nothing but dark shadows. But she knew what she had seen a minute ago—a white scared face that had peered round a great boulder, with a finger on the lips in sign of silence—the face of her brother, Reggie Ridd, of the Fourth Form at Sparshott. For a long moment she stood there, till the pattering feet of her friends died away round the rocks. Then, with a pale clouded face and a beating heart, she hurried up the cave.

### IN DEEP WATERS!

"REGGIE! What is it—what's happened—"

Margaret panted out the question. Her dark eyes were dilated as she looked at the white, strained, almost ghastly face of her brother.

Reggie Ridd was younger than his sister, by almost a year. Perhaps that was partly why Margaret had always felt protective towards him. Perhaps it was also because Margaret's character was strong and steady, while Reggie's was weak as water. If Margaret knew that her brother was selfish as well as unstable, she never realised it. He was fond of her, in his way at least his way had always been to come to her with his troubles. If Margaret extracted him from a scrape, Reggie would forget all about it as soon as the trouble was over. At the same time

Margaret had to be tactful about it. For Reggie never forgot that Meg was merely a girl! Girls, in Reggie's valuable opinion, did not really amount to much.

As Reggie seldom stopped to think, and always indulged any wish that might happen to occur to him, he was oftener in trouble than out of it. Generally they were small troubles. There was an account at the school shop he could not pay—or he had spent money sent him for books without getting the books—or that brute Bramper of the Fifth had kicked him, and he was going to get back on Bramper somehow—or he hadn't done his lines for Mr. Lamb and that beast Lamb had doubled them—or he had lost his puncture-repair outfit and could he borrow Margaret's?—small troubles but very numerous. But now, one look at his face was sufficient to tell Margaret that the present trouble was nothing like this—that it was something terrible. True, Reggie always seemed to regard his smallest trouble as a disaster that ought really to have checked the stars in their courses. But Reginald had never looked like this before.

He had been hiding in the cave—that was clear. Even now he kept behind the big rock, so that he could not be seen from the beach. He was in terror—in the grip of fear. Margaret's heart was like lead. What was it—what could it be—that made her brother look like that?

"Reggie! Tell me—what has happened?" She hardly breathed.

He cast a quick, scared look, round the rock, towards the opening of the cave, where the sunlight blazed on the beach. Ethel and Dolly were out of sight—no one else was to be seen.

"Will those silly girls be coming back?" he breathed.

"No—not for a few moments, anyway—they may come back if I do not join them—but what—why—?"

"They mustn't see me."

"Why not? Why —?"

"No one must! You don't understand." Reggie's voice came cracked and hoarse. "I—I cut across this way, hoping I might spot you out of gates—I dared not come to Headland House—then I saw you with those chatterboxes—of course, you had to be with them, when I wanted to see you alone! You never seem to stir without one or the other or both." Reggie's voice was resentful.

"But you are always with your friends, Cook and Banks —."

"Oh, for goodness sake don't jaw, Meg—I've got it bad enough without that. If you're going to jaw me, better leave me to it."

"No, no, no, dear! But tell me —."

"I—I got into the cave, when you came along the beach with those silly minxes," muttered Reggie. "I—I hoped I'd get a chance of speaking to you alone. I—I took the risk of showing up, when their backs were turned for a minute. I'm glad you understood, and did not let on. If they'd seen me —."

"For mercy's sake, Reggie, why shouldn't they?"

"Wouldn't they chatter, and then it would come out that I was here—they'd get me back to Sparshott!" groaned Reggie. "I—I can't go back."

Margaret's heart almost ceased to beat.

"Reggie! You don't mean you've run away from school! You can't."

"I have!" breathed Reggie.

"Good heavens! But—but what —!" Margaret's head seemed to spin. "Reggie, tell me what has happened—at once."

"I—I never did it," he muttered. "I swear I never did it, Meg. You believe me, don't you?"

"What was it?" articulated Margaret.

The wretched junior shivered.

"It—it was all Lamb's fault—old Lamb, my beak. He's always down on me. I told you I was whopped, because I hadn't done my lines—four of the best, just for that! I—I wanted to get back on him. I went to his study—after prep last night—he was in Common Room, jawing with the other beaks, and—and —. It was only a rag, Meg. I swear it was only a rag. How was I to know there was money in it?"

"Money!" breathed Margaret.

"It was his writing-case—a rotten old writing-case that he must have had for dog's ages—not worth five shillings. It was on his table, and I chucked it out of the window. It was after dark, of course—quite late—just before dorm. I didn't see it fall, but I heard it drop, some distance from the window. I—I thought I heard somebody in the quad, but, of course, I couldn't see anybody—and—and thinking it might be a beak—it was after lock-up, of course, and a fellow wouldn't be out of the House. I—I bolted from the study at once —." Reggie's voice trailed away.

"But—but I don't understand! You would be caned, perhaps flogged, for such a thing—but—but what did you mean about money?"

"There was money in it," said Reggie, hoarsely. "That came out later. The old fool kept money in it—a banknote for five pounds." He shot another suspicious glance towards the sunny beach, and went on, in trembling tones. "My luck was out—right out. I—I thought the coast was clear—but it wasn't! I ran fairly into Wilmot—he's a Sixth Form prefect—as I came away from the study. So—so when it came out that the writing-case was missing, it was known that I'd been there —."

"But it would be found in the morning!" exclaimed Margaret.

"Of course, I thought so—I never meant any harm—only to make old Lamb think it was gone, and then it would turn up all right at daylight. But—but you see, Wilmot got me, and knew I'd been there, so when Lamb missed his rotten writing-case, I was sent for. We were going up to dorm, and I—I was called back—down to Lamb's study. Of course, I had to own up what I'd done, as the rotten thing wasn't there—and Lamb went out at once with a torch to look for it. And—and it wasn't there."

"Reggie!"

"Don't look at me like that, Meg. Do you think I pinched Lamb's banknote, like everybody at Sparshott?" Reggie almost shrieked.

"No! No! No! But—why was it not found! It might have been missed in the dark—but this morning —."

"This morning it was all over the school—and half Sparshott was hunting for it. But—but it hasn't been found."

"But it must be found!" exclaimed Margaret. "If you merely threw it from the study window —."

"I can't make it out! It beats me! No fellow can have been out of the House, so late after lock-ups. It can't have been picked up by a fellow who'd keep it. A beak might have been out, taking a trot—but if he'd seen it, of course he would have brought it in. I thought there was somebody in the quad but I couldn't be sure in the dark. It can't be found. I—I suppose somebody must have picked it up, and—and kept it! But it doesn't seem possible! I—I feel as if it would all make my brain crack!"

Margaret's face was whiter than Reggie's now.

"Of course, they think I had it, when Wilmot saw me coming away from the study," moaned Reggie. "They think I've chucked the writing-case somewhere, and kept the bank-note. It—it looks like it, Meg."

Margaret's heart was like lead. She knew what it looked like!

"They searched my things, and—and searched me! Lamb doesn't believe I just chucked the rotten thing out of the window—how can he, when it can't be found? And—and as it happens, there's been trouble over a bill I owe in Rodwood—it's only two pounds, but they wouldn't wait any longer, and sent it to Lamb the other day. There was a row over that, already. So—so Lamb knew I was pushed for money, and—and—and it all seems to fit together. But—but I never touched it, Meg—I never knew there was a banknote in the rotten thing at all. How could I?"

"What has been done about it?"

"Lamb was fairly decent—for him!" said Reggie, bitterly. "He let it rest till this afternoon, in case the rotten thing might be found. I—I think he hoped I was telling the truth."

"I am sure he did," said Margaret, quietly.

"Well, it wasn't found—it's gone!—goodness knows where, or how. After dinner, he called me to his study. He told me that if I returned the banknote immediately he would do his best for me with Dr. Whaddon. How could I return it, when I hadn't got it? I—I was to go up to the Head at three, to be sacked—and—and—and ——" Reggie shuddered, "it might be prison, Meg! People are sent to prison for stealing! I don't know what they might do! So—so as soon as I got away from Lamb, I—I cut."

"But—but you cannot stay here—in this cave!" panted Margaret.

"I must! I—I dare not go back! And—and I can't go home! They'd get me there, if they wanted me—the police." Reggie trembled. "Thank goodness the pater and mater are in Switzerland—they won't hear of it yet. I—I keep on hoping that the rotten thing may turn up. You see, somebody must have picked it up—that stands to reason. Only—who could have been out of the House—and—and why should he keep it dark? It beats me! But—but somebody had it, Meg."

"Margaret!"

"Meg!"

Two voices were calling from the direction of the beach. It sounded as if Dolly Brace and Ethel Bent were coming back, as their chum had not followed them.

"Oh, Lord!" breathed Reggie Ridd, "they're coming. Meg—they mustn't see me. They'd chatter—you know what girls are! Keep them away."

"I must go to them, if they are not to see you," whispered Margaret, hurriedly. "I will get away later and come back, Reggie. We must think, and decide on something. Stay here till I come."

"Keep them clear of me, anyway. Give me anything you've got left in that basket—I'm famished!" Even in his terror and distress, Reggie contrived to remember that it was past tea-time, and that he was hungry.

Margaret, in silence, emptied the picnic basket of what it still contained, and then, basket in hand, hurried back to the cave-mouth, just as the figures appeared there, silhouetted against the sunlight on the beach.

"OH! Here you are, Meg!"

"Why didn't you come, Margaret?"

Dolly and Ethel exclaimed together. Both of them had been looking alarmed. But their alarm was relieved, as Margaret ran out of the cave with the picnic-basket in her hand.

"I—I—I was just coming—" stammered Margaret.

"Making us think something had happened!" exclaimed Dolly, indignantly.

"What could have happened?" asked Margaret, trying to smile.

"We know there's somebody in the cave," snapped Dolly, with an uneasy glance into the dark depths. "It might be that awful tramp."

"What awful tramp, my dear?"

"Corisande Cholmondeley saw an awful tramp hanging about the wood yesterday, and she said she ran all the way back to Headland House."

"Corisande is a little goose," said Margaret.

"Well, why didn't you follow us?" demanded Dolly. "We thought you were following us, and you stayed here."

"It was only a minute or two."

"It was more than five minutes. You frightened us," declared Dolly. "And you had the grub here, too. It was more than ten minutes! And I'm hungry! I believe it was more than a quarter of an hour."

"Make it an hour!" said Margaret.

"Br-r-r-r!" said Dolly. "Corisande said that that awful tramp would have had her wrist watch if she hadn't run for it."

"Well, there isn't any awful tramp here," said Margaret. "Let's go." The three girls walked away from the cave-mouth—much to the relief of the wretched schoolboy skulking in the shadow. "Shall we walk back to the school now?"

"We haven't finished the picnic yet," answered Dolly.

"Oh!" murmured Margaret, guiltily. The picnic-basket was now empty—though Dolly Brace was not yet aware of that important circumstance.

"This will do," said Dolly. She took a seat upon a hillock of soft sand. "Now open that basket, Meg, and let's get going again. We're safe enough here, if there are a dozen tramps in the cave."

"There aren't any, Dolly."

"Well, never mind the tramps, let's get going," said Dolly, and she opened the picnic-basket and jumped. "Where's the grub?"

"If Miss Gadsby heard you say grub ----" began Ethel.

"Bother Miss Gadsby! Gaddy's not here, anyway. What have you done with the tuck, Margaret? There were some ham patties left—and some of the eggs—and five or six tarts—and the cake—where's the cake?"

Margaret was crimson. She had passed on the picnic supplies to Reggie, without having had time to think. But if she had had time, and had thought, she could scarcely have done anything else. Now the extraordinary absence of the supplies had to be accounted for—but she could not mention Reggie.

"Well!" said Dolly, with a deep breath, "this beats it! This is the limit! I'd never thought it of you, Meg! You, of all people! A greedy little bounder like Becky Bunce, if you like but you! You stayed behind after we ran off—just to scoff the tuck! It beats Banagher."



"I—I—I did not," stammered Margaret.

"There where is it?" demanded Dolly.

Margaret opened her lips—and shut them again. Ethel was looking at her very curiously. Dolly was pink and indignant.

It was impossible to explain—without betraying Reggie. Margaret had no choice but to let the imputation pass.

"Let's go back to tea," she stammered.

"Yes, you must be in want of tea—after scoffing enough tuck for a regiment of dragoons," said Dolly, sarcastically. "Where did you put it all?"

Margaret did not reply. She started along the sands, at the base of the high cliffs, in the direction of Headland House. Ethel, silent but very surprised and curious, followed. Dolly Brace heaved up her plump figure from the sand, picked up the picnic-basket, and followed on. Dolly was generally as placid as she was plump; but she was cross now—quite shirty, as she would have expressed it. It was, as she had said, the limit.

But a few minutes later, the thought of the tuck was dismissed from even Dolly's mind, as, coming round a jutting bluff of the cliffs, the three girls almost ran into a frowsy figure that was slouching along towards them.

"Oh!" gasped Ethel, and halted.

"Oh, dear," breathed Dolly. "That must be Corisande's awful tramp."

Margaret set her lips.

"Come on," she said. "Walk quickly."

The man who was coming round the bluff was not pleasant to look at. He had a three days' beard on a face that had not been washed for a good deal more than three days. His nose, which was red and bulbous, was a little askew—apparently some combat had given it a list to port. He was clad in an old coat too large for him, and ancient trousers too small for him, and a battered bowler hat that would have made a dust-heap look shabby. He had a boot on one foot, and a shoe on the other—both much in need of repair. He had a short, black pipe in his mouth, the bowl turned downward, empty. And he had a discontented scowl on his face, as if not enjoying life that sunny afternoon. And, as he saw the three well-dressed schoolgirls, he gave a quick, foxy glance round him with two little piggy eyes under beetling brows, and stepped into their path.

"'Old on a minute, misses," he said. "Don't you be afraid of old Sid 'Arris! Old Sid 'Arris wouldn't 'urt a 'air of your 'eads."

It was rather an awkward spot for the three girls to encounter Mr. Harris. The jutting bluff left only a narrow walk between the rocks and the sea—and it was impossible to walk round Mr. Harris, unless Mr. Harris chose. And it seemed that Mr. Harris did not choose.

He blocked the schoolgirls way, with a grin on his red, shaggy face—not a pleasant grin. Sid Harris was not a pleasant character in any respect whatever. Obviously he was, by profession, a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles, and not at all particular by what means he snapped them up.

Margaret moved on resolutely; but she had to stop as Mr. Harris blocked the way. Dolly and Ethel drew close to her—a little behind. All three watched the shaggy tramp with uneasy fear. There was no one to be seen on the beach—but the irregular line of cliffs did not give a long view. There might be somebody quite near at hand, coming round a bulging corner of rock any minute. But no one was to be seen, and Mr. Harris was alarming.

"Let us pass, please," said Margaret, making her voice as firm as she could.

"Course I'll let you pass, missy," said Mr. Harris. "Think I'd 'urt yer? I wouldn't 'urt a fly, let alone a pretty young lady like you are. Besides, don't I know you're going to 'elp a poor man on his way?" He took a stick from under his arm, and gave a flourish with it. "Think I'd tap you on the crumpet with this 'ere stick! Not on your life—not when you're going to 'and me a pound or so to see me on my way, missy."

"Oh, dear!" gasped Dolly. "I—I haven't any money, Meg. The last went at old Janet's shop for the tuck."

"I—I have a sixpence!" faltered Ethel.

Margaret's eyes flashed. She had a little cash in her hand-bag. But she was not in the least disposed to hand it over to the leering, threatening ruffian.

"Let us pass at once!" she rapped. "If you do not, we will call for help. There are people within hearing, if not in sight. Stand aside."

"M-m-miss Gadsby said she was walking along the beach this afternoon," stuttered Dolly. "Oh, dear, d-d-don't I wish Gaddy would come."

It was the first time that Dolly Brace had ever longed for the company of her form-mistress. Generally, the less she had of it, the better she liked it. But she would have given a term's tuck to behold Gaddy at this moment! But there was no sign of Gaddy, or of anyone else.

Mr. Harris, with his grin growing more evil, came a little nearer to the three schoolgirls, and they backed away.

"You call for 'elp!" he said. "You jest go and do it, and see 'ow quick you'll wish you blooming well 'adn't! It will spile that pretty 'at if this 'ere stick clumps on it, you can lay to that—and that's jest what's going to 'appen if you give jest one 'owl, missy."

Margaret and Co. backed further, and Mr. Harris followed them up, flourishing his stick. Dolly gave a sudden shrill squeal of joy.

"Oh! Gaddy!"

Beyond and behind Mr. Harris, a figure came round the bulging cliffs—and never had the strong, stalwart, somewhat masculine figure of Miss Gadsby been so welcome to the eyes of her pupils.

Miss Gadsby wore close-cut tweeds, good strong boots, and a hat that was a hat, and not a perched butterfly. She carried a stick—a walking-stick—and it was a good strong, heavy stick. She had fairly large feet, and fairly large hands, and a determined face with two keen grey eyes in it, and a pair of very firm lips. When Miss Gadsby stirred in Headland House she could always be heard coming—indeed, some of her more irreverent pupils had likened her to the "huge earth-shaking beast" mentioned in Macaulay. But on the soft sand of the beach, even Miss Gadsby's feet made no sound: and she arrived without Mr. Sidney Harris having the slightest warning of her coming, as his frowsy back was in her direction. But the three schoolgirls, looking past him, saw Miss Gadsby's determined face and square jaw, and the sight of the most graceful and beautiful sylph could not have delighted them half so much.

"Now, 'and it over!" Mr. Harris was going on, flourishing the stick so close that the three girls had to jump back, Dolly emitting a shriek as it nearly tapped her little fat nose. "Make it a quid! It's worth a quid any day not to 'ave your blooming 'ats squashed on your blinking 'eads by this 'ere stick."

"Miss Gadsby!" shrieked Ethel.

Miss Gadsby's cool, clear eyes were already on the scene—and she had taken it in at a glance. She came on with a run, swinging her heavy walking-stick in her hand.

Then the tramp, from the looks of the schoolgirls, became aware that someone was behind him, and turned his head to stare and scowl.

He was relieved at once to see that it was only a woman. Mr. Harris was not a hero when men were about; but he fancied that he could deal with any number of women. He had yet to learn exactly what sort of woman Miss Gadsby was!

"You ruffian!" Miss Gadsby's voice came clear and sharp. "How dare you? Take yourself off at once! At once, do you hear?"

"My eye!" said Sidney Harris, staring at her, taken by surprise. "You torkin' to me, you? You want your face pushed through the back of your blooming 'ead—if you calls it a face, which it don't look like one. You —."

"Go!" Miss Gadsby stamped an imperious foot, and the sand flew in particles. "Go this instant! I shall report your conduct at the police station. Now go!"

"Yes, I sorter see myself goin'!" jeered Mr. Harris. "Why, you old tabby cat, you—yaroooooop!"

Miss Gadsby wasted no more words on the ruffian. She made a quick step forward, swinging her walking-stick, and that stick came with a sharp clump on the side of Sidney Harris's head. He staggered, with a frantic yell.

"Now go!" said Miss Gadsby, calmly.

"Oh, dear!" gasped Margaret and Ethel.

"Oh, crikey!" ejaculated Dolly. Miss Gadsby's eye shot round at her. Mr. Harris, for the moment, was negligible—he was staggering, rubbing his head, and spitting with pain and rage.

"Dorothy!" rapped Miss Gadsby.

"Oh! Yes, Miss Gadsby!" gasped Dolly.

"You said 'Oh, crikey.' You should not use such expressions, Dorothy. I have spoken to you on the subject before. Many times. I request you, Dorothy, never to let me hear you use such an expression again."

"Oh! No, Miss Gadsby," gasped Dolly.

"Look out!" shrieked Margaret. She ran forward, hardly knowing what she was doing in her alarm and excitement, as the tramp, recovering, made a vicious spring at Miss Gadsby, his cudgel whirling in the air. The savage ferocity in his face made it plain what he was going to do—if he could. Dolly and Ethel gazed in horror, dreading to see their form-mistress crash on the sand under the savage swipe of the cudgel, while Margaret ran forward—though it was dubious what help she could have given, had "Gaddy" needed it.

But "Gaddy" did not need it. Facing the ruffian with perfect calmness, Miss Gadsby wielded her walking-stick like a single-stick. There was a crash of stick on stick as she warded the ruffian's vicious slash, and the cudgel flew from Mr. Harris's hand, and whirled away on the beach. The next instant there was another crash—but this time it was caused by Miss Gadsby's stick landing on Harris's frowsy head.

Crash! The battered bowler hat was smashed—and the frightful yell that came from Mr. Harris seemed to indicate that the head within was in the same state. Mr. Harris staggered, lurched, and went over in the sand in a heap, still yelling. Miss Gadsby stooped, picked up his cudgel, and with a swing of her powerful arm, tossed it far out into the sea. Then she stood

looking down at the sprawling, panting ruffian, with cool contempt.

"Get up and go!" she commanded.

"Urrrrggh!" grunted Mr. Harris. "Oh, my 'ead! Ow! My napper! Phew, my nut! Ow!" He staggered to his feet, taking the battered bowler in one hand, and feeling his frowsy head tenderly with the other. "Ooogh!"

Miss Gadsby did not command him to go again. She stepped towards him, with a gleam in her cool, grey eyes that was enough—more than enough—for Sidney Harris. Mr. Harris got into rapid motion. His fancy that he could deal with any number of women was evidently only a fancy, after all. Mr. Harris, especially in a "pub," did not always know when he had had enough. But he knew now! He gave Miss Gadsby one look, and bolted along the beach like a rabbit. The schoolgirls gave him room to pass, and he disappeared along the cliffs at a great rate.

"Oh, Miss Gadsby!" panted Margaret. "Thank you so much. We —"

"I will walk back to the school with you," said Miss Gadsby. "You had better not come in this direction again, until the village constable has dealt with that man. I will speak to Boxer myself."

Meg and Co. walked back to Headland House with Miss Gadsby. On the way Miss Gadsby explained to Dolly, at considerable length, how unladylike it was, and how very unsuitable for a Headland House girl, to use such expressions as "Oh, crikey!" She had not quite finished when they reached the school gates—but as she had to walk on to Oke, the village, to report the lawless proceedings of Sid Harris to Mr. Boxer, the village constable, her lecture was left, like Schubert's symphony, unfinished. For which Meg and Co. were duly thankful as they went in.

## UNDER THE SHADOW

"WHAT'S the worry?"

"Oh! Nothing!"

"Rot!" said Dolly, decisively.

It was morning "break" the following day at Headland House. A good many girls of the Lower Fifth, as well as Dolly Brace, were wondering what was the "worry" with Margaret Ridd.

Margaret was seldom or never jolly like the plump Dolly: she was not often thoughtlessly gay like Ethel Bent: but she was always bright and cheerful and a good companion. But this morning, she was neither bright nor cheerful: and so far from being a good companion, she seemed to want to avoid everybody. And she had been like that ever since coming back from the cave the previous afternoon. Meg was often grave, and often thoughtful: but nobody at Headland House had ever seen her in the depths of the "blues" before. And, realising that eyes turned curiously upon her, Meg tried hard to be as usual—but failed. She could not help it! She was haunted by that pale, terrified face in the cave—by the knowledge that her brother was deep in trouble, from which she strove in vain to think of some means of helping him out.

Her brother accused of theft—threatened with expulsion from his school, if not worse. It was too terrible for belief—yet it had happened. He had always come to her for help in time of trouble—now, in this terrible trouble, he had come again—and she could not help him. She could only believe in him—against all evidence, against all probability. But that did not help him.

But for that wretched tramp, she would have seen him again the previous afternoon. She had intended to get away from her friends, as soon as she could, and hurry back to the cave. But Sidney Harris had stopped all that—for when Miss Beetle, the Principal, heard what had occurred, she immediately issued an order placing the beach between Headland House and the cave out of bounds. Until it was known that Mr. Harris had been taken in charge of the police, or had left the neighbourhood, no Headland House girl was to go in that direction again—and as schoolgirls, like schoolboys, sometimes forgot bounds, two prefects of the Sixth Form had been told off to keep guard, and to turn back any girl going in the forbidden direction. So Meg, even if she had determined to disregard the order of bounds, could not have gone—Edith Race or Florence Gunn would have turned her back at once.

At preparation, which was taken, after tea, in the big school-room by the junior forms, and in studies by the upper school, Meg, usually a good worker, had given little or no attention to work. Being in the Lower Fifth, Meg and Co. had a study—study by day and dormitory by night—and in No. 8 study they worked together—Meg, as a rule, acting as guide, philosopher and friend to the other two, who turned to her instinctively in difficulties. But that evening she had been unable to help Dolly or Ethel as usual—or to put her mind into her own work.

Reggie expelled—Reggie a fugitive from school—that miserable thought dominated her. That night she had slept by fits and starts—waking and hearing the chimes, and thinking of the wretched, frightened schoolboy, alone in the cave—camping out somehow in the solitude and darkness. She was pale in the morning: her heart heavy and her face clouded.

In class there was a spot of trouble with Miss Gadsby. Miss Gadsby was an efficient lady—very efficient. She strove—hard—to instil efficiency into her form. Carelessness and slacking were anathema to Miss Gadsby. She had a good heart but a sharp tongue. Poor Margaret had the benefit of the sharpest edge of Gaddy's tongue that unhappy morning.

In the French set that followed, Mademoiselle Mouton had opened her eyes wide at Margaret's blunders. Even Dolly Brace had never shown up quite so badly. Dolly was capable of translating "cocher" into "pig," and "cochon" into "coachman," and had, indeed, done so. But Mam'zelle was used to that. Margaret surprised her. But the "Sheep" fortunately was less efficient than Gaddy, and she only shrugged her shoulders.

In break, after the second work period, Margaret slipped away by herself, and was walking under the thick old fir trees by the school wall, when Dolly found her. She was trying to think—what could be done, if anything could? She must see Reggie again—she might learn from him something that, in the hurry, he had omitted to tell her—something that would help. And there was another thing—if he stayed in the cave in hiding, he must have food—and there was no one to help him but his sister. He could not stay there—it was impossible—yet how could she urge him to go back to school? If she did, he would not go—she knew that. But what was to come of it all? There was no help even from her parents, for they were abroad, not to return until the school holidays.

That wretched writing-case would be found—it must be found. Yet it must have been searched for in every possible and impossible place. Had Reggie, after all, taken the banknote, and thrown the case away—as his form-master believed? She drove that dreadful thought from her mind.

Dolly Brace eyed her, wonderingly. Margaret had been

bright and cheerful enough at the picnic—only thinking a little about that brother of hers. What was the matter with her now?

"Well, look here, Meg," said Dolly, "if it's my fault —"

"Your fault!" exclaimed Margaret, in astonishment.

"I mean to say, if you're shirty because I didn't like you staying behind and scoffing the picnic yesterday —!"

"You little donkey!" said Margaret, almost laughing.

"Oh! It isn't that?" asked Dolly. "Mind, I didn't mind! I daresay the sea air made you hungry. I know it does me. Perhaps I had more than my fair whack to begin with, too. If you'd told me you wanted the grub —"

"You are talking nonsense, Dolly."

"Well, if it isn't that, what is it?" demanded Dolly. "Ever since we came in yesterday you've been going about like a bear with a sore head. Looking like a Gorgonzola."

"Like a—a what?" ejaculated Margaret.

"A Gorgonzola—that thing that turns you to stone when it looks at you."

"Oh! A Gorgon! I didn't know I was looking like a Gorgon, Dolly," said Margaret, mildly.

"Well, you are! I think it's a Gorgonzola: but whichever it is, you're looking like it!" declared Dolly. "So tell a pal what's biting you?"

"Nothing! I mean —!"

"Well, what do you mean?"

"Oh! Nothing."

"It can't be that brother of yours," said Dolly, reflectively. "You haven't seen him, and haven't had a letter from him—so it's not that. What is it?"

"Ethel's calling you, Dolly."

"Which means that you're tired of my company! Look here, come along to old Janet's shop and have a cake. A cream cake!" said Dolly temptingly. "She's got some lovely cream cakes —"

"Not now. You go and have one, Dolly."

"I'm going to," said Dolly. "Only five minutes more before we go in, for forty minutes with Gaddy again. Don't forget your book—it's English History with Gaddy this time. You got her rag out this morning—better be wary—she may be fierce. I say, do come and have a cream cake. It will set you up."

"No! No! You run along."

"Br-r-r-r-r!" said Dolly. And she ran along—she was quite concerned about old Meg, but cream cakes were cream cakes, and Dolly felt that she needed something to see her through another forty minutes with Gaddy.

What could she do? What could she do? That question hammered in Margaret's brain till the bell rang for class. Miss Gadsby's eye was on her as soon as she entered the form-room. Generally, Miss Gadsby was satisfied with that member of her form. This morning she was far from satisfied. If Margaret did not show up better in English History than in first lesson, it was probable that the thunder would begin to roll.

Miss Gadsby expounded history in short, sharp sentences. She shot knowledge at her form rather like a machine-gun. She would pounce on you with a sudden question, and if you could not answer on the spot, she would become fearfully sarcastic. Seldom did Miss Gadsby administer any punishment beyond that of her tongue. But her tongue was deadly. Many of the girls would have preferred lines, or detentions, or even the "pointer." Miss Gadsby knew, as well as if Margaret had told her, that the poor girl's thoughts were wandering—Margaret was thinking of something more recent than the reigns of the Tudors, and to her,

at least, more urgent. But Miss Gadsby was dealing with the Tudors: and it was the business and duty of all her form to live and breathe the reigns of the Tudors—for forty minutes. Otherwise, what was the use of Miss Gadsby shooting knowledge at them, if they did not absorb it?

"Margaret!" Meg gave a start, and coloured, as her name was rapped out.

"Yes! Oh, yes, Miss Gadsby!" she stammered.

"Who came after Queen Mary?"

"I—I—I—" At any other time Margaret would have answered Queen Elizabeth without stopping to think. Gaddy's sudden questions seldom took her at a loss. But Reggie was filling her mind now, and all the Tudors had vanished as if they had never existed, for the moment, at least.

"You do not know?" The thunder rolled. "Your mind is a blank, Margaret, on the subject of one of the most important periods of English history. On one of the best-known periods of English history! You see no use, perhaps, in a knowledge of the history of your country? You feel that you are wasting your time here! I am sorry to waste your time, Margaret, no doubt very valuable." Gaddy was getting most frightfully sarcastic. "Very sorry indeed! Yet I must insist upon some attention—some slight attention—to the instruction, I give you, little as you value it."

"I—I——!" stammered poor Margaret.

"Dorothy!" rapped Miss Gadsby, like another bullet. "Dorothy! Tell Margaret, since she does not know, who came after Queen Mary."

"Oh, yes, Miss Gadsby. Philip of Spain!" said Dolly, brightly.

Miss Gadsby jumped nearly clear of the form-room floor.

"What?" she almost roared.

"So—so—so he did," stammered Dolly. "I—I'm sure he did, Miss Gadsby. It was Philip of Spain who came after Queen Mary, and—and she married him."

"Ha, ha, ha!" came in a trill from all the Lower Fifth. It was not uncommon for Dolly Brace to add to the gaiety of existence in that form. But this was unusually good, even for Dolly.

Miss Gadsby's face was a real picture.

"You—you—you utterly obtuse girl!" she gasped. "Can you think—is it possible that you imagine—that I was using the words 'come after' in such a slangy sense! Upon my word! You incredibly foolish girl, what monarch succeeded Queen Mary on the English throne?"

"Oh! But you said who came after Queen Mary, and I know Philip of Spain came after her, because ——"

"Silence!" thundered Miss Gadsby. "Ethel, you will answer the question."

"Queen Elizabeth!" murmured Ethel Bent.

"Quite! Now, Dorothy, tell me who came after Queen Elizabeth?"

"Philip of Spain," said Dolly.

"What?" Miss Gadsby fairly shrieked.

"He did really, Miss Gadsby," wailed Dolly. "I've read it in my history book. He was a widower by that time, and he came after Elizabeth just as he came after Mary. He must have been a very nasty man, but he did ——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence in the class! If anyone laughs again I shall detain the whole form for one hour," hooted Miss Gadsby.

Sudden gravity descended on the Lower Fifth Form of Headland House. But really it was not easy to be grave. Dolly Brace on English history was always rather an entertainment; and this morning she seemed to be in particularly good form.

"Dolly! You will write out fifty times —" Miss Gadsby was beginning. She was interrupted by a tap on the form-room door.

"Come in!" Miss Gadsby rapped that invitation, in a tone that sounded like a warning to keep out. Gaddy hated interruptions in form. Most of her pupils, however, rather liked them: that tap at the door was welcome to everyone in the form-room, with the solitary exception of the majestic Gaddy.

It was Weeks, the school page, who came in, evidently with a message for Miss Gadsby. That message was delivered unheard by the class, who caught only the murmur of Weeks' voice, and saw the frown gather on Miss Gadsby's brow. Even Becky Bunce, who strained her rather long ears to listen, caught nothing. But it could be seen that Gaddy was irritated.

"No!" said Miss Gadsby, decidedly. "Tell Mr. Lamb that a lesson is proceeding, and that if he desires to see a member of my form he must be kind enough to wait till the end of the period, which will be at precisely 11.45."

"Yes, mum!" said Weeks, and departed.

Margaret Ridd clenched her hands, unconsciously, under her desk, and the colour wavered in her face. It was her brother's form-master at Sparshott who had come—and she did not need telling which member of Miss Gadsby's form he had come to see. Was it news of her brother? What had happened now?

Miss Gadsby's eyes were on her. There was a rather strange look in those keen grey eyes—not unkindly now. For the remainder of that "period" Miss Gadsby passed Margaret over as if she were not there, for which the poor, troubled girl was grateful, for she could hardly have answered any question now excepting at random.

Prompt at 11.45 the form was dismissed. Gaddy was always prompt and punctual. She called to Margaret Ridd to remain, as the rest filed out.

"Margaret!" Why Miss Gadsby's voice was unusually gentle Margaret did not know, but it was a relief to her. "Mr. Lamb has called—from Sparshott—and desires to speak to you. It may be in connection with your brother at that school, as there is no other imaginable reason why he should call."

"Yes, Miss Gadsby," almost whispered Margaret.

"I shall take you to Mr. Lamb," said Miss Gadsby. "If you desire, I will remain during the interview. You may speak frankly, Margaret—yes or no."

Margaret, with flushing cheeks, gave her a quick look. Did Miss Gadsby know anything of the anxiety her brother had caused her for a whole term or more—anything of his weak character and his way of falling into trouble? How could Gaddy know anything about it?

But Gaddy was keen, observant: she seemed to know everything. She had seen Reggie several times, and she had a way of reading character at a glance. It dawned on Margaret that Miss Gadsby knew, or guessed, that some trouble in connection with her brother had brought Mr. Lamb over to Headland House.

Poor Margaret's face burned. Miss Gadsby might guess that there was some spot of trouble—but she could never guess the dreadful truth. If she heard what Mr. Lamb had to say she would learn—and the shame of it made Margaret feel that she would sink to the floor. Yet, sooner or later, probably sooner, she must know—everybody must know. All Sparshott School



knew already—all Headland House would know in a few days, Gaddy among the rest. Margaret made up her mind. There was something so strong, so steady, about Gaddy, that she felt that her form mistress's presence would give her strength.

"Yes, please, Miss Gadsby," she whispered.

"Very well; come."

And they left the Lower Fifth form-room.

### WHERE IS REGGIE?

Mr. Lamb rose to his feet in the visitors' room, as the door opened to admit Miss Gadsby and Margaret. Mr. Lamb was a rather small gentleman—they called him the "Little Lamb" in his form; and he had to glance upward to see Miss Gadsby's face. The Lower Fifth mistress of Headland House could have picked up the Fourth Form master of Sparshott with ease. She seemed, to Margaret's eyes, to tower over the little gentleman as he bowed to her.

"Good morning, Mr. Lamb." Miss Gadsby ruthlessly cut short polite murmurs from Mr. Lamb. "Here is Margaret Ridd, to whom you desired to speak. I am sorry I could not interrupt a class. It is an invariable rule not to do so."

"Oh! Quite!" agreed Mr. Lamb, rather nervously. "With your permission, madame, I will address a question to Miss Ridd."

"Please proceed; Margaret desires me to remain."

"Very well." Mr. Lamb twined his hands nervously. Little Lamb as he was, he was more than capable of dealing with a form of boys at Sparshott. But the hefty Gaddy rather overwhelmed him, and Margaret's pale, troubled face touched his kindly heart. He did not know that she was already aware of what had happened at Sparshott, but he had no doubt that she apprehended trouble of some kind, at this visit from her brother's form master. "I—I will be brief, Miss Ridd. I am sorry to tell you that—that your brother has left school, without—without permission."

"Yes, Mr. Lamb," murmured Margaret.

"There has been some—er—some trouble," said Mr. Lamb. "Perhaps I had better tell you—it cannot be concealed, and you must hear before long—pray understand, my dear young lady, how very sorry I am to have to tell you—but—but—something is missing at Sparshott—a—a banknote, in fact—and—and there is strong suspicion against Reginald Ridd, of my form."

Miss Gadsby shut her lips like a vice. She had expected that it was trouble of some kind from Margaret's brother, whom she despised from the bottom of her heart. But this was a shock to her. It was shock enough to Margaret, but nothing like what it would have been, had she not met Reggie in the cave and heard his story.

"My brother is quite innocent, Mr. Lamb," said Margaret, in a clear, steady voice.

"Yes, yes, we must—must hope so," said Mr. Lamb. "The circumstances are very singular, but—but—but—hem!"

"It would be wiser to tell this child the whole story, Mr. Lamb, since she is told that her brother is suspected of theft!" barked Miss Gadsby.

"Oh! Yes! Certainly! Very well! Briefly, then." Margaret listened in silence, while Mr. Lamb told of the missing writing-case: the tale she had already heard from Reggie. But it was new to Miss Gadsby, who listened intently, her face growing grimmer and grimmer. Margaret did not speak when Mr. Lamb had finished; but Miss Gadsby did.

"The writing-case has not since been found?" she asked.

"No, Miss Gadsby. Obviously it has been disposed of," said Mr. Lamb. "It is not to be found anywhere within the walls of Sparshott. The obvious inference is that the banknote was first taken out."

"That is not merely an inference, but a certainty," said Miss Gadsby. "The banknote has been stolen. Either the boy took the writing-case away for a foolish practical joke, and finding the banknote in it, kept it, and threw away the case—or, if his story be true, someone picked it up out of doors, after he had flung it from the window, and that unknown person kept the banknote and threw away the writing-case. It is one or the other—and undoubtedly theft." She paused. "Is the number of the banknote known?"

"Naturally," said Mr. Lamb. "I take the numbers of all banknotes. The missing note is numbered 0001111445."

"Then if it is passed it can be traced. That is something. The boy Ridd had no time for anything of the kind; but if it was some other boy —" Margaret felt a gleam of hope, and gave Gaddy a grateful look.

"Oh! Quite! Quite!" murmured Mr. Lamb. "But—but—it appears to be the dreadful truth that there is a thief in the school: it would hardly be just or even sensible, to suspect at random, when the banknote is known to have been in certain hands. I have consulted with Dr. Whaddon on the subject, and it is agreed that the unhappy boy shall leave quietly, with as little said upon this terrible subject as possible—for the sake of his parents, and—and relations." Mr. Lamb gave Margaret a very kind look. "But—but he has absented himself from the school—he has actually run away from school, and cannot be found. He has been absent since early yesterday afternoon—I have not the vaguest idea where he has spent the night. I have telephoned to his home, but he has not been heard of there—his parents, it seems, are abroad—he has not gone home. He must be found, and—and—that is why I am here, Miss Ridd. You may be able to help."

Margaret did not speak. She could have helped, far more than Mr. Lamb dreamed: but she had no intention of doing so. She could not betray the terrified fugitive hiding in the cave under the headland, even for his own good.

"The boy can have little or no money—except the banknote, which he will hardly venture to attempt to change in—in the circumstances," continued Mr. Lamb. "He cannot travel without money—not very far, at all events. As he has a near relative at this school, he may think of applying to her for assistance."

"Very probable, I think," said Miss Gadsby, drily. "The boy has a weak and foolish character: his sister is quite unlike him."

"Yes, quite, quite. If Miss Ridd has received a letter from him, for instance —"

"She has received no such letter; all letters for my form pass under my eye," said Miss Gadsby.

"Or a telephone call!" suggested Mr. Lamb.

"The telephone is used only by permission. But it is possible—Margaret, have you had a telephone call from your brother?"

"No, Miss Gadsby."

"And he has not been here?" asked Mr. Lamb. "He was seen leaving the school, and he appears to have come in this direction yesterday."

"Did your brother come to this school yesterday, Margaret?"

"No, Miss Gadsby."

"Very well, very well," said Mr. Lamb. "I am sorry, deeply sorry, to have been the bearer of such ill news, Miss Ridd. But I am sure you will see that the sooner the foolish boy is found and taken care of, the better for him and for all concerned. If you get word of him, I rely upon you to tell your form-mistress at once, and Miss Gadsby will communicate with me."

"Certainly," said Miss Gadsby.

And Mr. Lamb took his leave. There was silence in the room for several long minutes after he had gone. Margaret stole a glance at Miss Gadsby's grim face. She believed the worst of Reggie—as everybody else did. Only poor Meg believed in him—she was his sister. But a bitter thought was in her mind—would she have believed in him, against all the evidence, had she not been his sister? Miss Gadsby spoke at last, and her voice was quiet and gentle.

"This is a terrible blow for you, Margaret. You must not fancy for a moment that this casts any reflection upon you. Neither must you give up hope that your brother may yet be cleared."

"Oh, Miss Gadsby," gasped Margaret. The tears came into her eyes.

"There is no doubt in Mr. Lamb's mind, and it would be hard to blame him," said Miss Gadsby. "The evidence is clear enough, so far as it goes. But men do not judge like women—they have not the same clarity of mind. There is at least one point in your brother's favour."

"Yes?" exclaimed Margaret, eagerly.

"That is in his character. He is weak foolish, vain, selfish, thoughtless. He is exactly the boy to place himself in a false position by acting thoughtlessly, foolishly, inconsiderately—indulging any folly without a moment's reflection."

Margaret looked a little rebellious. She did not like to hear that character of Reggie. Yet there was hope to be drawn from it.

"Such a boy," said Miss Gadsby, "might act exactly as your brother claims to have acted. It is very likely that he did. In that case, he placed temptation in the way of some unknown person who was outside the study window at the time. I think it is very probable that this is precisely what happened."

"Oh, Miss Gadsby, thank you!" panted Margaret. "I know—I know—that Reggie never touched the money—he wouldn't—he couldn't —"

"Let that be as it may, obviously the foolish boy must be found," said Miss Gadsby. "You understand, Margaret, that if he communicates with you, you must inform me at once, for your brother's own sake. He cannot be allowed to wander about the country getting into new troubles. Now run away, my dear child, and try as much as you can to put the whole matter out of your mind."

"Yes, Miss Gadsby," said Margaret, obediently. And she went out into the quad. But she was not likely to be able to dismiss the matter from her mind.

She had to see Reggie. She had to urge him to return to school, or at least go home, or to the house of some relation. She had, anyhow, to convey food to him—he would not dare to leave the cave, and he must be terribly hungry now. She had to care for him, since there was no one else, and he could not care for himself. But how—how? The cave had been placed out of bounds—the Headland House girls were not, at present, allowed to wander on the beach, through that detestable tramp, Harris. It was impossible to go there in the daylight without

being stopped. Could she—dared she—leave the school after dark?

It was impossible. But what was she to do? She must see Reggie—she must! Poor Margaret had little mind for school work that day, and she could almost have cried with relief when it was over.

### A FRIEND IN NEED!

Ting-a-ling-ting! Jangle jang-jangle!"

"Oh!" gasped Margaret.

She rang her bicycle bell furiously. But it was too late. After class, Margaret was riding by the narrow lane, shut in by high hawthorn hedges, that led from Headland House to the village of Oke.

Her mind was made up, after long and painful thought. The Headland House girls were allowed to ride to the village on their bicycles. They were not allowed to ride beyond it, except by special leave; Oke being the end of bounds. In present circumstances, Meg had decided to disregard bounds. That was her plan—to ride into Oke, fill a bag with food at the village shop, and ride on—taking a roundabout course to Spurley, a village further along the coast. From Spurley she could get to the cave from the opposite direction.

It was rather a desperate plan, for it meant going many miles round: leaving her machine at Spurley, walking a mile down the beach to the cave—then the return. She would be late for roll-call—very late. Indeed, she could hardly be back for lock-up. There would be trouble—there might be suspicions—but she could think of no other plan, desperate as this one was: and, having with some difficulty, eluded Dolly and Ethel, she was riding fast for Oke when a cyclist came shooting round a corner, without a ring, charging right at her—a schoolboy who evidently did not realise the risk of charging round a sharp corner without warning.

She rang—she braked—but there would have been a collision the next moment, had not the schoolboy cyclist turned into the hedge in the nick of time, luckily seeing her a second before he crashed on her machine. The crash came—but it was in the hedge—the bike curled up, and the rider sprawled, yelling, among hawthorns.

"Oh!" gasped Margaret again. She was in haste: but she had to stop, to see whether the unthinking boy had damaged himself. He sounded as if he had! Duffer as he was, to charge round a corner in that reckless way, he must be a decent fellow to choose to crash himself instead of crashing her. She jumped down, threw her bike against the hedge, and ran to him.

"Oh! Ah! Oh! Whoop! Oh, suffering cats!" roared the sprawler. "Oh, my leg! Ow, my elbow! Wow!"

"Plum!" exclaimed Margaret, recognising him. She knew that plump youth—Eustace Percival Tumpton, of the Sparshott Fourth, called by his friends "Plum."

Tumpton sat up, spluttering, and blinked at her. She gave him a hand, and he tottered to his feet.

"Hurt?" asked Margaret, anxiously.

Oh! Yes! Just a few!" gasped Plum. "Sorry I nearly barged you over, Meg—my fault entirely. Wow! Jolly glad I missed you, though. My fault! Yow-ow-ow."

The plump youth rubbed elbows, and arms, and head, and neck, and knees. He seemed to have collected many aches and pains in his crash. But his chubby face remained cheerful, all the same. Margaret turned back to her machine.

"In a hurry?" asked Plum.

"Yes," said Margaret, briefly. She liked Plum—he was such an ass, that nobody could help liking him. But she was in haste now.

"I—I say, you ain't cutting off because—because —" Plum crimsoned and stammered, and Margaret crimsoned too. She had forgotten Reggie for a brief moment. But Plum, of course, knew—all Sparshott School knew. Her brother, at Sparshott, was adjudged a thief—up for the "sack" when he was found.

"I say," gasped Plum, "I say, Meg, don't cut off because—because of—of that. I don't believe a word against young Ridd. I told 'em so in the Lair. I said out plain that a chap that had a jolly sister like Meg Ridd, couldn't have done it. Young Ridd mayn't be much of a specimen, I said to all the fellows, but look at his sister! That's what I said, Meg. Honest Injun!"

Margaret smiled.

"I s'pose you've heard, though," exclaimed Plum, anxiously. "If—if you haven't, I—I've let it all out! I know the Little Lamb went over this morning—I—I say, had you heard?"

"Yes, I've heard," said Margaret, quietly.

"Oh! Good! Vernon says I'm always dropping a brick!" said Plum, relieved. "Jolly glad of a chance of telling you that I don't believe a jolly old word of it! Young Ridd may be a bit of a tick, I said to all of them in the Lair—that's our day-room, you know—but look at his sister Meg!—one of the very best! Vernon and Rake agreed with me, and said so."

"I'm glad," said Margaret. And, indeed, she was glad to hear that Reggie was not universally condemned in his own school.

"Wish I could do something," said Plum. "Did you know that young Ridd had bolted? If not —"

"Yes, I know. But I must go, I —" Margaret broke off, suddenly, with a sharp catch of the breath. A cyclist came into view from the direction of Headland House School. It was Miss Gadsby: grinding along manfully on her big machine. Margaret's heart almost missed a beat.

She saw Gaddy's keen eyes shoot, as it were, at her and the schoolboy with whom she was standing in the lane—Plum holding his bike, which he had just picked up. Meg knew, at that moment, what was in Gaddy's mind, and why she was there on her bike. Nothing ever escaped Gaddy—and she suspected some attempt on the part of Margaret to get in touch with her brother. She did not know, or guess, that they had already met, the day before; but her keen eye had been open, and she had drawn her own conclusions from Margaret going out on her bike after class without her friends.

And here she was—and that flash in her eyes told that, for a second, she fancied she had spotted Reggie with his sister. But the next moment she recognised the plump Plum. Margaret's heart was like lead. Her plan was knocked to pieces before she could begin to carry it out—she could not ride out of bounds now, with Miss Gadsby in the offing, with a keen suspicious eye open. What—what was she going to do?

Miss Gadsby thundered on, on her big bike, and Plum politely raised his cap as she passed. Gaddy could see, of course, that the Sparshott schoolboy had had a spill, which accounted for Margaret's stopping. She disappeared round the corner towards Oke, Plum staring after her.

"That's your beak, ain't it?" said Plum. "Looks a bit of a Gorgon, what? Jolly glad she ain't my beak! Looks tougher than Lamb! I say, if you're in a hurry —"

"No," said Margaret, miserably. "It—it doesn't matter

now." What was she to do? She had to get in touch with Reggie, but how—now that her carefully-thought-out plan had been so hopelessly knocked to pieces?

"Well, if you ain't got to push on for a tick, hold my handle-bars a minute, will you?" said Plum. "I've got to get this mudguard straight."

Margaret held the machine, while Plum wrestled with a twisted mudguard. And a sudden light came into her eyes, as a new idea came into her mind.

"Plum," she breathed, "Plum! You're a good fellow, and I believe you're my friend."

"What-ho!" answered Plum. "Why, I'd share by last stick of toffee with you, Meg. Dash it all, I'd let you have the whole stick."

"Will you do something for me, and—and keep it a dead secret?"

"Give it a name!" said Plum. "Wild horses couldn't drag it from me, old thing. Nor wild elephants, either," added Plum, by way of further assurance.

Margaret paused—thinking hard, a wrinkle in her brow. Could she risk it—dared she? Plum Tumpton was an ass—his best friend would have admitted that. But he was honest, loyal, and true, and his plump heart overflowed with the milk of human kindness. He could be trusted. She came to a resolve. It was Plum or nothing—now that she had seen Gaddy in the offing. And she could trust Plum.

"You know the cave under the headland?" There was no one to hear, save the birds twittering in the hedges. But she sank her voice to a whisper.

"Do I know it?" said Plum. "Do I know my own hat? I've explored it more than once, with old Rake and Vernon. Like to go there, Meg? Lots of time, if we cut along by your school and the beach. I can show you all over that cave."

"It's out of bounds for us."

"What a swizzle," said Plum, in disgust. "But what about the cave, Meg?"

"It's a dead secret," breathed Margaret. "My brother's hiding there, Plum."

Plum Tumpton jumped so suddenly that he nearly knocked the bike over. He blinked at Margaret.

"Oh, jiminy-whiskers!" he ejaculated. "So that's his game? Everybody's wondering where he is—not that a fellow would give him away, you know, if he knew. In the cave! My hat! I—I say, Meg, he ought to go back! Much better for him if he did."

"Yes, yes, but you'll keep it secret?"

"They can put me on the rack, and I won't say a word," answered Plum, stoutly. "If they stick on the jolly old thumb-screws, not a syllable."

Margaret laughed. Plum's loyalty was not likely to be put to such a test. But she became grave again at once: grave and anxious.

"I can't go to him, Plum. I—I was going—but—but he would be found if I did—now that—that —"

"The old bird?" said Plum, with a nod. "I know! The old bird's got an eye open! Tough old bird, ain't she?"

Margaret did not answer that.

"Will you go instead, Plum?" she breathed.

"Like a shot!" answered Plum. "'Tain't out of bounds for us, and if it was, I'd go all the same, if you asked me."

"Oh, thank you, thank you," whispered Margaret. "Will you take this bag, Plum, and—and go to the village shop, and—"

and buy all the food you can get for a ten-shilling note, pack it in the bag, and take it to my brother?"

"You bet!" said Plum.

"And I'll just scribble a note for you to take, as well." Margaret took a pencil and an old letter from her bag, and resting the latter on Plum's saddle, wrote a few hurried sentences. She folded the note, and Plum put it in his waistcoat pocket. "Here is the ten-shilling note, Plum—you'll get all you can for it, of—the kind of food you think a boy would need most."

"Trust me!" said Plum. "I know all about food. Food's always left to me to look after in our study at Sparshott. Vernon may know more about cricket, and Rake may know more about radio, but they both own up I know more about food."

Margaret laughed again. Her heart was lighter now. Plum tucked away the ten-shilling note, and took the bag from Margaret's bike which was to convey the supplies. Plum, evidently, was eager to oblige—and Plum could be trusted. Plum was not handsome, and he was not perhaps very bright: but Margaret felt at that moment that she liked Plum more than any other boy in the wide world.

"Thank you so much," she whispered. "Perhaps—perhaps Reggie will be nervous—he may hide if he hears you—but if you call out loud that Margaret sent you, he will understand."

"Leave it to me," said Plum. "I'll cut off now. Cheerio, old thing."

And Plum cut off, turning back to the village. At the corner, as he turned it, he waved his hand, and very nearly pitched off his machine. However, he stuck on, and disappeared from sight. And Margaret, with a thankful heart, and very kind thoughts of Plum, remounted her bicycle and peddled back to Headland House.

## DOLLY WANTS A STUDY SUPPER

Dolly Brace chuckled.

"The Gadfly's got her eye on you, Meg!" she remarked.

"But why?" asked Ethel Bent. "What have you been doing, Meg?"

Margaret did not answer that. It was fairly obvious that the Gadfly—otherwise Miss Gadsby—had an eye on Margaret Ridd. She had glanced at her at tea-time in the dining-hall, perhaps not having expected to see her back so early from her bike ride. Since then, Miss Gadsby had drifted as if by chance into the Lower Common Room, and noted that Meg was there—without looking at her, certainly, but Meg knew quite well why she had drifted in. Now the three girls were in their study, and Miss Gadsby had looked in, to ask Dolly for her lines on the subject of Tudor kings—which in the ordinary course of events Dolly would have taken down to Miss Gadsby. Perhaps Gaddy did not know how observant her pupils were, and did not guess that her masterly manœuvres were an open book to them. But they were!

Prep was on now. The three girls sat round the table, Dolly with ink on her plump fingers, and even a spot of it on her plump little nose, and her hair untidy: Ethel as clean and neat as a new pin, as she always was, not a strand of her pretty fair hair out of place: Margaret grave and thoughtful, as she often was over her work, though her gravity and thoughtfulness were not now caused by the task of preparing a Latin lesson for Miss Gadsby in the morning.

No. 8 was a very nice study. Three beds looked like three ottomans in pretty chintz—in the daytime. There were an arm-chair and a rocker, and three cane chairs. There was a hang-

ing bookcase. There were two or three quite good pictures on the walls—and a glaring oleograph with as many colours as Joseph's famous coat, which belonged to Dolly—and which her friends hoped every day would meet with some accident. It was a tidy study: for Margaret and Ethel found a permanent task in putting away the things that Dolly left lying about, and only occasionally was there a boot on the mantelpiece, or a hockey stick lying on an ottoman, or fragments of orange-peel in the fender, or a comb with several broken teeth on a chair. Dolly often complained that she could never lay anything down and find it again where she had put it—and the complaint was well-founded. Hairbrushes and combs and rumpled sweaters disappeared as if by magic when Dolly chucked them about the study.

"A fat lot she wanted my lines!" remarked Dolly. "Catch the Gadfly buzzing up two staircases for my lines! What games have you been up to, Meg?"

"Nonsense," said Margaret.

"Well, she's got an eye on you—the eye of a hawk," said Dolly. "Hasn't she, Ethel?"

"She has," said Ethel. "She can't think Meg's cribbing, I suppose. Meg never cribs. She won't even let us crib."

"And that's rot," said Dolly, pursuing a new subject in her usual volatile way. "Cribs help you through a whole lot."

"Not when you get to the exams," said Margaret.

"Blow the exams!" said Dolly. "Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof. And blow prep, if you come to that. I'm fed up."

Dolly Brace yawned, rubbed her nose—turning the blot into a smear—ran her fingers through untidy hair, making it yet more untidy, yawned again, and at length gave her attention to Latin once more. The three girls worked on—Dolly in a desultory way, as usual, Ethel reluctantly but carefully, also as usual, and Margaret with her thoughts wandering to a frightened schoolboy in a cave, alone in the dark, but feeling better, undoubtedly, since that good fellow, Plum, had taken him the bag of provisions, and a kind word along with them.

Reggie would not return to school—Meg knew that. He dared not. And she could not be sure that she ought to advise him to return. To return was to be expelled in ignominy—his absence kept off that last blow. And in his absence, something might be found out—that miserable writing-case might be somehow or somewhere discovered. That would set everything right. Reggie would be forgiven, if it was proved that the accusation was, after all, unjust. But—what chance was there of that? Little—or none!

It was comforting to think that Gaddy—so calm and so sensible—had at least an open mind on the subject. She did not believe Margaret's brother guilty—even if she did not believe him innocent. But she was a school-mistress, with rigid ideas on the subject of discipline: and if she had come upon the runaway, no doubt she would have taken him by the collar and marched him in. And certainly nothing would have induced her to allow Margaret to have any communication with him—except for the purpose of getting him back to Sparshott. Any idea of befriending the wretched boy, and helping him in his wild escapade, would have made the Gadfly grimmer than a Gorgon. And Margaret knew that the hawk-eyed Gaddy had read some such thought in her mind—hence her watchfulness. Luckily, she knew nothing: and her watchfulness did not matter now that Plum Tumpton had lent aid as go-between.

Dolly Brace rose at last, and threw down her pen.



"Everything comes to an end," she remarked, "even prep!" Dolly stepped to the window, and stared out into the dark shadows. No. 8 window overlooked a corner of the quad: dim shapes of the tall, thick old firs loomed through the shadows in the glimmer of a crescent moon. "It's dark," said Dolly.

"Is it?" yawned Ethel, "Yet I've heard Gaddy say that you are not observant, Dolly! If she had heard that—"

"Oh, don't be funny," said Dolly, "I mean, it's dark enough to cut out for a minute without being spotted."

Margaret looked round quickly.

"What have you got in your silly little head now, Dolly?" she exclaimed, "You know you can't go out after lock-ups."

"I know I can dodge out by the lobby door if I like, and nobody the wiser," retorted Dolly, "and I know I'm going to, I'm hungry."

"It will be supper soon—"

"When I say hungry, I mean hungry," exclaimed Dolly, "I don't mean that I want to nibble bread and marge in hall. I mean that I want supper."

"But Janet's shop is closed long ago," exclaimed Margaret, "Besides, you know that Gaddy is very strict on suppers in the studies. She won't have it."

"I don't want her to have it—I want to have it myself!" said Dolly. "And Janet's shop wasn't closed when I bought three pork pies before lock-up. I dared not smuggle them up to the study—the Gaddy would have spotted me, ten to one. You know her—always turning up just where and when she isn't wanted. So I left the parcel under a tree, to be smuggled in later. See?"

"But a parcel will be noticed, and—"

"It would if you were handling this," agreed Dolly, "But I've got some gumption. I don't carry that parcel in, I tie it to the end of a string from this window. You pull it up. After dark, safe as houses."

"Oh!" exclaimed Margaret.

"Wouldn't you like pork pies all round?" demanded Dolly, "I shall have room for the grub in hall afterwards, if you come to that."

"Much better to keep to the rules, dear—"

"So I would, if I could eat them!" said Dolly, "Gaddy can go and chop chips! I suppose it's close on a hundred years since she was a schoolgirl, and she's forgotten that young people have healthy appetites. I know I have!"

"That's no secret!" said Ethel, laughing.

"Bow-wow! So have you, if you own up to it," said Dolly, "now, turn off the light—can't handle that string with the light on. Here's the ball of string—and as soon as you hear me twitter below, you let it down, and then—hey, presto: pork pies for supper, and a laugh at Gaddy. I'm going."

And Dolly went. Margaret and Ethel exchanged an eloquent glance. It was not the first time that Dolly had run risks for a study supper—strict as the rules were on that point. Really, the supper provided in hall was good enough for most girls, and ample enough—but Dolly Brace's appetite was not merely healthy—it was exorbitant. Meg and Ethel, undoubtedly, would have preferred to go down to supper in hall, and run no risks. But they felt that they had to stand by Dolly—and they did.

Meg switched off the light. Ethel took the ball of string, prepared to unwind it at the window as soon as Dolly "twittered" below. The two girls looked down into the gloom. The faint glimmer of the silver crescent in the sky barely showed the outlines of the high firs, and the other buildings. Nobody mov-

ing in the quad would have been visible. It was easy enough, as Dolly had said, to slip out unseen by the lobby door—though the penalty was dire if caught. Was Dolly already down there in the dark, groping under a tree for her absurd parcel?

All was silent—still. Faintly, from lower windows, light gleamed out—but a few yards from the House all was deep shadow. It seemed to Margaret, as she stared down, that she caught a movement of some dim figure—taller than Dolly's. She caught her breath at the thought that some mistress—perhaps the Gadfly herself—might be taking a walk, and that the reckless Dolly might run into her. But she was not sure that it was more than a stirring shadow.

Suddenly, from the darkness and silence below, came an unexpected sound, that sent the blood thrilling to Margaret's heart, and caused Ethel to utter a startled cry. It was a loud, sharp, prolonged scream—a scream of terror.

"Oh, what—what can have happened?" gasped Margaret. She strained her eyes into the night, "Is that Dolly—oh, what—"

The scream was repeated, then scream on scream. It was Dolly—who could it be but Dolly? Scream! scream! scream!

"Come!" exclaimed Margaret. And she rushed to the door, Ethel at her heels, and they tore downstairs—into a house already in commotion.

### IN THE DARK!

Dolly had reached the tree under which she had parked the parcel, containing the three pork pies—and a few other things. When Dolly had cash, she was not sparing with it, in the matter of provender. That supper—once safely transferred to Study No. 8—was going to be a feast of the gods. But it was not transferred yet—it was not so easy a proposition as Dolly supposed. For, even as she stopped to grope for the parcel, a stealthy footstep close at hand caused her to start, and peer anxiously through the gloom—blotting herself out of sight, as well as she could, close to the tree-trunk.

Someone was passing on the other side of the tree, within a few feet of her. She thought of Gaddy—even of the majestic Miss Beetle herself—and fairly shivered at the idea of being caught out of House bounds after dark. But the next moment she realised that it could not be one of the staff of Headland House. No member of the staff would be creeping in the dark in that stealthy manner—almost on tiptoe. Who—who was it?

An awful thought of burglars flashed into Dolly's mind, and made her tremble. At that moment, she would have given a dozen study suppers, to be back in the lighted populated House. She even realised that there was something to be said for House rules, and for obeying them. But it was rather too late to think of that. She clung to the tree-trunk, palpitating.

Yet how could it be a burglar, before the lights in the windows were out? No burglar, even the most enterprising, started business so early. But if it was not a burglar, who—what—was it?

A sudden mutter of a voice made her start and tremble, as someone stumbled in the dark. She knew what had happened. On the other side of the trunk there was a wooden bench, where the girls often sat: everybody at Headland House knew that bench, and would not be likely to stumble over it, even in the dark. But the unseen person had stumbled—it was some stranger within the walls of Headland House. And the mutter that came to her was a man's voice—a harsh, coarse, surly voice—suppressed, obviously from caution, yet having to Dolly's straining

ears some strange familiar sound. The next moment she guessed—that tramp! The blood ran almost cold in her veins as she realised that, separated from her only by the tree-trunk in the dark, was the ruffian who had stopped the three school-girls on the beach the day before—the man who called himself Sid Harris.

Dolly shook in every plump limb. That awful man—that terrifying ruffian—only a few feet from her in the dark, and at a distance from the House. Oh! If he saw her—if he found her—! She could have screamed in sheer terror, but she shut her lips to keep back the sounds of fear.

What was the man doing there? What did he want? It was no question of burglary—even in her terror, Dolly realised that. Neither was Mr. Harris the kind of man to undertake such enterprises. Tramp, sneak-thief, pickpocket, occasionally footpad—that was Mr. Harris's "line." What was he there for? Dolly realised why he was there—the ruffian had crept into the place after dark, in the hope of picking up some petty plunder—anything left by chance out-of-doors, anything that might be "pinched" from an unlocked shed, perhaps even washing from a line. All was grist that came to the mill of a character like Mr. Harris. He was not an ambitious man—he did not dream of cracking safes for large sums—anything that would realise a few shillings for drink was good enough for Mr. Harris. Dolly thought of her wrist-watch—she dreaded that its faint tick might betray her. It was of silver, and not worth very much—but to Sid Harris it would be a prize. But it was not robbery she feared, it was the awful terror of that dreadful man so close in the darkness, that turned her blood almost to ice.

The angry mutter died away. She heard the man groping—he had found the seat over which he had stumbled. She heard a muttered curse, and then—she had not realised that he might pass round the tree. The first she knew was that a hand, outstretched to feel the way in the gloom, touched her cheek.

At that, poor Dolly's nerves gave way utterly.

She uttered a piercing scream, that rang far and wide, heard probably by every ear at Headland. As likely as not, it startled Sid Harris as much as anybody else. He started back, exclaiming hoarsely, in his startled surprise. Dolly flew.

If she had had wings, she could hardly have fled faster. She fairly whizzed towards the lighted windows of the House.

In her wild haste, she crashed into a bunch of laurels, unseen in the gloom, and fell. To her terrified mind, the tramp was grasping her—and she uttered scream after scream, ringing wildly through the night. Scream! scream! scream!

Doors were already opening. Lights flashed out into the gloom. Scream on scream came from the frightened girl, now almost out of her wits with terror. The great door of the House was flung wide open, and a blaze of light came out into the dark, reaching almost as far as the spot where Dolly lay screaming. A crowd of startled faces appeared in the lighted hall, staring out. Voices rose like a Babel, as Dolly screamed and screamed.

In the distance, there was a sound of hurried, scrambling flight. Mr. Harris was not pursuing Dolly, as she imagined he was making good his escape while the going was good. That sudden outbreak had startled Mr. Harris, and warned him that it was not safe to linger—after such an alarm, there was no hope of persuading his avocation of snapper-up of unconsidered trifles. Mr. Harris stood not upon the order of his going, but went at once.

Unaware of it, Dolly struggled and scrambled and screamed in the laurels. Above the Babel of voices came the clear tones of Miss Gadsby.

"I will go! Hand me that hockey stick, Mabel! Thanks, I have a torch." The tall, powerful figure of Miss Gadsby emerged from the House, hockey stick in one hand, electric torch, bright, in the other. Edith Race and Florence Gunn, prefects of the Sixth Form, followed her, also armed with hockey sticks. The rest crowded round the lighted doorway—another prefect warning back Margaret, who would have emerged.

Miss Gadsby tramped steadily in the direction of the screaming. Had Sid Harris lingered, probably a glimpse of her would have put him to flight. Mr. Harris's luck would have been hard, had he come within the swipe of that hockey-stick in Miss Gadsby's hefty grip.

Dolly had gained her feet—still screaming. The torch blazed on her.

"Dorothy!" exclaimed Miss Gadsby, in astonishment. Scream! scream!

"What is the matter? Do you not recognize me, you foolish girl? What are you doing out of the House? What has frightened you?"

"Oh, Miss Gadsby!" Dolly rushed to her. Gaddy, the formidable Gadfly—was a haven of refuge for the terrified girl. "Oh, save me! Keep him off! Oh! Don't leave me—don't leave me." she clung to Miss Gadsby's skirts. "Keep him away."

"You are safe now, my child," said Miss Gadsby, "I am with you! Was anyone here—who—?"

"That tramp!" shuddered Dolly, "That awful man yesterday—oh, keep with me—don't leave me Miss Gadsby—"

"Edith! Florence! Take this silly child back to the House," said Miss Gadsby, "she declares that a tramp has been here—perhaps it is fancy, but I shall investigate. Take her in."

"Yes, Miss Gadsby."

Edith Race and Florence Gunn took Dolly by either arm, and walked her back to the House—tottering between them. At the doorway Margaret threw her arms round her and drew her in. Miss Gadsby, firm, utterly unconscious of anything in the nature of fear, hockey-stick and torch in hand, proceeded to search for the tramp. It was very fortunate for Mr. Harris that he was no longer there.

"Dolly!" breathed Margaret, "Dear Dolly—be calm, my dear! What was it—what happened, you poor dear?"

"That tramp!" shuddered Dolly, "Oh, dear! In the dark—he—he—he touched me—oh, dear! That awful tramp—you remember him—"

"Yes, yes, but here? Are you sure—?"

"He touched me!" moaned Dolly, "I—I ran away! I—I think I screamed—"

"I think you did!" murmured Ethel.

Dolly was still shaking with terror. Margaret and Ethel led her into the Lower Common Room, where a score of girls surrounded them. In the midst of the crowd Dolly began to recover. But she was still white as chalk, when Miss Gadsby, at length, came in. Gaddy's face was stern.

"I have found no one," she snapped, "the porter has seen no one. But I have no doubt that some dishonest tramp may have trespassed here, in the hope of picking up something—are you sure of the man, Dorothy?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Gadsby. He was muttering to himself and I knew his voice, and—and—and I know it was that awful man."

"You have had a severe fright, Dorothy. You deserved it, for so recklessly a disregard of the School rules!" said Miss Gadsby, sternly. "In other circumstances, I should give you severe detentions for leaving the House after dark. But I think your fright has been sufficient punishment. Pull yourself together, child—you are in no danger now."

"Yes, Miss Gadsby!" mumbled Dorothy.

Miss Gadsby stalked away. Eager questioners surrounded Dorothy: and she recovered more and more, as she related, over and over again, her wild adventure in the dark. But there was still a tremble in her plump limbs, when the supper bell rang, and Margaret took her arm to lead her into hall. Even poor Dolly's appetite seemed affected—she ate hardly twice as much as Margaret or Ethel of the bread and cheese and cake provided for the school supper. As for the pork pies and other good things in the parcel, still reposing under the tree out in the dark quad, Dolly gave them hardly a thought—she would not have taken a single step out of the House again that night, for all the pork pies in the universe. Pork pies, for the time at least, had lost their attraction for poor Dolly.

### OUT OF BOUNDS!

"Thirty—love!" said Ethel Bent, staring.

Dolly Brace sniffed.

Becky Bunce chuckled. For once—positively for one occasion only, as it were—Becky was beating Margaret Ridd at tennis.

School was over that afternoon, at Headland House, at three o'clock. But there were "games" to follow. Gladly enough Margaret would have dodged games, that afternoon—but she feared the keen watchful eye of the Gaddy.

She had to see Reggie—she must see him. Plum had served her turn once, like the kind fellow he was: but Plum was not available a second time. He had taken food to the wretched fugitive, and a note that explained why she could not come. But another day had passed since then, and the weight of anxiety on Margaret's mind was almost more than she could bear.

There was no news from Sparshott: and she knew that that kind little gentleman, Mr. Lamb, would not have failed to let her know at once, had a discovery been made, in her brother's favour. That miserable writing-case had not been found—Reggie was still suspected, condemned—still hiding in the cave under the headland, lonely, terrified, in despair. She had to see him, if only to comfort him with the sight of a face, the sound of a voice, and an assurance that she, at least, believed in him. But there was more material considerations—and she had already contrived to pack a little bag, unseen, with various necessary things—things that would make his wretched situation a little less wretched, if he persisted in hiding in the cave. She had to take it to him—there was no one else. And she had thought of a way.

It was useless to set out again on a long roundabout bike ride—that only meant Gaddy on the trail. But where Oke Wood stretched to the verge of the cliffs, it was possible to scramble down the rocks to the beach, at a distance from Headland House, out of the range of watchful eyes. Margaret had never clambered down that cliff, and indeed such an exploit would have been severely forbidden by Miss Beetle, for it was difficult and might be dangerous. But she had heard that Sparshott boys had done it: and what they could do, she could do. It was the only way, and she had made up her mind to it.

The packed bag she had contrived to drop over a fence, into a hawthorn hedge, where it could be picked up from the road. Gaddy's sharp eye might have gleamed suspicion had she been seen walking out with a bag in her hand.

Now she was only anxious to get away—but if she cut tennis, that might mean suspicion, too. So here she was—playing worse than Becky Bunce herself—and Becky was the worst tennis player at Headland House or anywhere else. Ethel Bent simply stared as Margaret failed to deal with Becky's clumsy service—Dolly Brace sniffled with scorn.

"Pull up your socks, for goodness sake, Meg!" she exclaimed, "are you going to let that little tick beat you?"

"Dorothy!" came a stern voice.

"Oh, kippers!" ejaculated Dolly, in dismay, at the sound of Miss Gadsby's voice. It was injudicious to ejaculate "Oh kippers!" in the hearing of Miss Gadsby, but Dolly ejaculated before she thought, as was very often the case.

"Dorothy! What did you say?"

It was really too bad for the Gadfly to buzz-in on the tennis court. Miss Hatch was Head of the Games, and Miss Hatch, in Dolly's opinion, was quite enough to endure. The Gadfly was unnecessary and superfluous. Still, Gaddy liked to keep an eye on the girls of her form: and perhaps, too, she wanted to ascertain that Margaret Ridd was there, and had not gone out of gates on some wild-goose chase on account of that wretched brother of hers.

"How many times, Dorothy, have I warned you not to speak in that exceedingly slangy and unladylike manner?" asked Miss Gadsby, magisterially.

"I—I don't know," mumbled Dolly, "hundreds, I expect."

"When Miss Match gives you leave to go, Dorothy, you will go at once to your study, and write out twenty times, 'I must not be slangy.'"

"Oh, Miss Gadsby! But—but you ain't slangy!" gasped Dolly.

"Wha-aa-t?" almost howled the Gadfly.

"I mean, you're not—I didn't meant to say 'ain't,'" stammered Dolly, "You're not slangy at all, Miss Gadsby. I—I shouldn't dare to write out twenty times that you must not be slangy, Miss Gadsby."

There was a trill of laughter round the tennis court. Poor Dolly was not quick on the uptake, and she was misunderstanding again. If anything was to be misunderstood, Dolly never failed to misunderstand it.

"You—you—your obtuse girl!" gasped Miss Gadsby, "I did not say I must not be slangy, but that you must not be slangy. You are to write out the sentence, 'I must not be slangy. Do you understand now?'"

"Oh, yes, Miss Gadsby. But it seems impertinent to me to write that!" faltered Dolly, "shall I put in your name?"

"My—my name?" stuttered Miss Gadsby.

"I mean, shall I write 'You must not be slangy,' or 'Miss Gadsby must not be slangy'?" asked Dolly.

"Upon my word!" gasped Miss Gadsby.

"Ha. ha, ha!"

The Gadfly gave quite a glare round at laughing faces. But she could not bark "Silence" as usual: she was not on her own ground. In the form-room, the thunder would have rolled: but on the tennis court, Miss Hatch was monarch of all she surveyed, and Gaddy was too strict a disciplinarian herself, to overstep another mistress's province.

"I will speak to you later, Dorothy!" she gasped: and she stalked away, leaving the girls still laughing.

"Oh, my hat!" said Dolly, "now the Gadfly's got her rag out. I had to ask her, hadn't I? Fancy her telling me to write out that she must not be slangy?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Game!" squeaked Becky Bunce. And Margaret Ridd retired, hopelessly beaten by the triumphant Becky.

"You do not seem in your usual form, Margaret," said Miss Hatch, kindly, "is anything the matter?"

"I—I have a little head-ache," stammered Margaret.

"Then you had better go and sit in the shade," said Miss Hatch: and Margaret gratefully retired to sit in the shade. But she did not remain sitting in the shade long. Ten minutes later she was outside the gates, and walking along the lane towards the village.

She glanced up and down the lane, before she picked out the bag that had been dropped into the hawthorns. Her face coloured as she did so, for her whole nature shrank from anything secret or surreptitious. But there was no help for it—she had to keep Reggie's secret, and the slightest suspicion of where she was going would have knocked her plan to pieces.

Bag in hand, she hurried up the lane, and turned from it where a stile gave admittance to a footpath in Oke Wood. She was glad to get under the thick old trees in the wood, out of view if there were keen eyes about. The wood was out of bounds for Headland House girls, until such time as Sidney Harris had been taken care of by the local police. But Mr. Boxer had had no luck so far in looking for Sidney Harris. Perhaps that was partly because Mr. Boxer was stout and slow, and, moreover, had a great deal of his time taken up by hoeing the weeds in his vegetable garden. Mr. Boxer was prepared to deal with Sidney Harris promptly and effectively, if he saw him—but unless Mr. Harris walked into Oke, Mr. Boxer did not seem likely to see him.

Margaret stood under the trees, and glanced into the deep shadows of the wood, and the thought of the ruffianly tramp came into her mind, and she shivered. But she had to carry on—she could not let down that wretched boy skulking in the cave. Suddenly, she gave a little jump, and blotted herself from sight behind a tree-trunk. A massive figure had appeared in the lane, heralded by a sound of heavy tramping footsteps. Margaret, from the trees, had only an instant's glimpse of Miss Gadsby, before she blotted herself from sight. If Gaddy spotted her—

But Miss Gadsby, keen as she was, could not see through the massive trunk of an oak tree. She passed on, walking slowly, her eyes about her, but she did not dream that she passed within a few yards of Margaret Ridd.

Margaret's heart beat painfully.

She could hardly doubt that Miss Gadsby knew she was out of gates, and had taken a walk in the same direction, thinking of her. If she did not find her in the village—the end of bounds—would she come back, and look in the wood? The mere thought was enough to hurry her on her way.

With beating heart, she threaded her way among oaks and beeches and tangled underbrush. The wood was thick, and once away from the footpath, she was not sure of her way, though she knew that she was going towards the cliffs. She had never explored this part of Oke Wood before—never even dreamed of that scramble down the rugged cliffs, till the present necessity came. But she faced the task before her with a cool

head, though her heart beat fast. It was some distance to the cliffs, and the wood seemed interminable.

She paused at last, in an open little glade, to look about her. Thick trees and underbrush surrounded her, innumerable birds twittering in the branches. As she listened, there came faintly, from the distance, the echoing boom of the sea on the shore. The sound told her her direction: and she was about to push on again, when another sound, closer at hand, caused her heart to leap.

It was the sound of someone pushing through the thick underwood, at a little distance, and coming in her direction.

Ten to one—a hundred to one—it was only some woodcutter, or perhaps a schoolboy from Sparshott. But the evil shaggy face of the tramp was before her mind's eye—and if it should be he—! For a moment or two, she hardly dared stir: while the rustling and tramping sound came closer. Then she cast her eyes round her almost wildly for a place of concealment. It was useless to run—in the thick wood—if it was that ruffian, she would be heard, overtaken. She was close to a thick beech with low branches that almost drooped to the ground: and, hardly stopping to think, she grasped a branch, and swung herself lightly into the tree. In the thick foliage she was invisible in a moment, and there she crouched, silent, holding the bag in a convulsive hand, listening.

A low grunt came to her ears—the man, whoever he was, was close at hand. Peering through the thick leaves, she watched hardly daring to breathe. A battered bowler hat caught her eyes—the next moment, she glimpsed an evil shaggy face under it, and was thankful from the bottom of her heart that she was hidden from sight. In silent fear she watched the ruffian as he emerged into the little glade, and waited for him to pass on.

It was he—Sid Harris, the tramp—the brute who had tried to rob the schoolgirls on the beach: who had penetrated into Headland House in the dark and frightened poor Dolly. There he was, in the sunlight that glimmered down through the thick branches, evil, unclean, and looking more savage and discontented than ever. She waited in terror for him to pass on his way.

But he did not pass on. He stopped, and stood looking about him with evil eyes, and for a terrifying moment, she dreaded that he suspected that someone was there. But it was not that. Mr. Harris was looking for a comfortable seat: and after taking his survey, he threw himself down at the foot of an oak, not three yards from the beech that hid the schoolgirl in its branches, and leaned back against the trunk, with another grunt.

Margaret's heart almost died within her. He was not merely going through the wood, as she supposed—he had come there for some purpose. He showed no sign whatever of going on his way. He took a short black pipe from his pocket, muttered an oath, and put it into his mouth, but he did not light it—it was empty, and apparently there was a shortage of tobacco. He grunted, cursed again, and settled down with his back to the tree—evidently to wait. Why he was waiting, in that lonely spot, Margaret could not guess: but she knew that she dared not let him discover her there, and she tried to suppress her breathing as she crouched hidden in the thick foliage of the beech.

Long minutes passed—long, long minutes. Every now and then, Mr. Harris stirred a little, and seemed to listen. Margaret realised at last that he was waiting for someone to join him—



that little glade in the heart of Oke Wood was a place of appointment.

She could almost have cried as she realised it. How long was she to be kept there, hiding in the beech, while the time was passing? Even without losing a minute, she had barely time to clamber down the cliff, reach the cave and see Reggie, and return to Headland House for lock-ups. She had had to risk being late—and now time was being wasted—and she dared not be very late. It would lead to inquiry, it might lead to the discovery of her secret. If this brute remained much longer, her plans for that afternoon would be washed out—Reggie would have to wait in his misery and solitude another day! She watched, her heart heavy—but the tramp remained where he was—and the long, long minutes lengthened and lengthened. Almost half an hour had elapsed, when there was, at last, a sound of someone coming through the thick wood, and Sid Harris stirred, and stared round, and called out:

"This way! 'Ere I am, Charlie! Got the baccy? For the love 'o Mike, say you've got the baccy."

### MARGARET MAKES A DISCOVERY.

Margaret Ridd hardly breathed.

Under the branches that hid her from sight, a squat form slouched. She glimpsed a short squat figure and a ragged cap—that was all she could see of "Charlie." Evidently he was some pal of Harris's: and of the same kidney. It came into her mind that Harris, aware that the village policeman was looking for him, dared not venture into Oke. That was why he had been sucking at an empty pipe till "Charlie" came. That was why he was in this lonely spot to meet "Charlie." Mr. Harris's manners and customs often made him coy about meeting the public gaze—especially the gaze of a policeman: and since Miss Gadsby had reported his conduct to the police, Mr. Harris was understudying the shy violet!

"'Ere you are, Sid!" said a husky voice.

A packet was tossed to Mr. Harris. Charlie leaned on a low branch of Margaret's beech, hardly six feet from the girl in the foliage. She dreaded that her breathing might reach his ear.

Harris gave a grunt of satisfaction, as he crammed tobacco into the dirty bowl of his pipe, and jammed it home with a horny thumb. There was a scratch of a match, and a scent of smoke. Charlie lighted a cigarette.

"Struth!" said Mr. Harris, "I wanted that, Charlie Slagg—I wanted it bad! Twice I nearly run into that fat copper, Charlie. Miss Ugly-Mug put him arter me. Blow 'er and her ugly mug."

Margaret guessed that he was alluding to Miss Gadsby.

"You better beat it, Sid," said Slagg, "That village copper's been passing the word round—there'll be a lot of coveys watching for you. If I was you I'd 'op it into the next county."

"'Ow's a covey to 'op it?" growled Mr. Harris, "Wish I'd gone last night, now—but I fancied there might be something to pick up at the girls' school—them young misses looked like they was well off, and a covey might have had luck. If it was only a bike left out, or even a tennis racket, it would 'elp a covey on his way. But my luck is 'ard, Charlie—it is that! Somebody started screaming, and I had to 'ook it without so much as a pot of flowers from a winder-sill that a covey might 'ave sold for a tanner. Some blokes 'ave 'ard luck, Charlie. Soon as it's dark I'm going—but 'ow's a bloke to 'ook it by daylight, with them 'ounds looking for a bloke? I tell you, I stopped at a cottage

this morning, to ask for a drink o' water, and p'r'aps with my eye on the clothes-line, and the woman screams out, "That's the man Mr. Boxer told us about!"—and a man comes round with a pitchfork, and I tell you, Charlie, you couldn't have seen me 'eels for the next few minutes."

"'Ard lines, ole man!" said Charlie. "But you better 'ook it as soon as it's dark—and I advise you to do a good ten mile afore you stop."

"Leave it to me," said Mr. Harris, "but a bloke's strapped, Charlie. 'Ow much can you lend a bloke till our next meeting, ole man?"

"Nix!" said Charlie, briefly.

Mr. Harris grunted, and gave attention to his pipe. Charlie Slagg finished his cigarette, and detached himself from the beech.

"'Old on," said Sidney Harris, at these signs of departure. "'Old on, Charlie. I got something for you to do, and 'arf a quid for yourself."

"Give it a name," said Charlie.

"I can't go to a blinking shop to change a blinking note," explained Mr. Harris, "but you can, Charlie. I want a fiver changed."

"Oh, my eye!" said Charlie, with a whistle. "Where did you pick that up, Sid?"

"Never you mind," said Mr. Harris, darkly, "p'r'haps I got it by 'ard work! P'r'haps I didn't! Anyways, I got it. But what's the good of a blinking fiver if you can't get change for it? You take it to the shop in Oke, Charlie—"

"I wasn't born yesterday, Sid!" answered Mr. Slagg, "you don't ketch me passing no pinched fivers. 'Tain't like a pound note. People looks at fivers—and looks at the bloke changing of 'em, too. And mebbe they asks the bloke to wait for the change, and 'phones for a copper! I know!" He chuckled, "No changing fivers for me, Sid! I ain't dressed for the part, nor you neither."

"Don't I know it," grunted Mr. Harris, "I s'pose I got to keep that fiver till I hit Darnwood, where I know a bloke as keeps a pub, as will take it off my 'ands for three pound or so, and no questions asked. But that's a good twenty-five mile, Charlie. Look 'ere, if you'll chance it, I'll go 'arves—straight."

"Not at a gift!" said Charlie, "it ain't three months since I come out, and I don't want to go in agin yet, Sid."

"It's 'ard," said Mr. Harris, "a bloke with a fi'pun' note in his pocket, and not the price of a drink about him! I'd take a quid for that fiver, Charlie, if you was like taking a sporting chance on it."

"Where'd I find the quid, though?" said Charlie. "I'll take a sporting chance on it if you'll take ninepence. That's my limit."

"Oh, go and boil your 'ead!" growled Mr. Harris, "I can get three pun' for it the day arter to-morrow—at least two pun' ten. Though 'ow a bloke is to carry on till then without a drink, 'evvings only knows."

"Cheerio," said Charlie, "I got to be going, Sid. You 'ook it as soon as it's dark—that's my tip."

"Trust me!" grunted Mr. Harris.

The squat form and the ragged cap disappeared from Margaret's eyes. There was a rustling in the wood, dying away in the distance. Margaret longed to see Mr. Harris take his departure also. But there was no sign of departure about Mr. Harris. Instead of that, he put his pipe back into his pocket, stretched his shaggy, ungainly form in the thick grass under the oak, and

rested his tousled head on his arm. That did not look like departure.

"Oh!" breathed poor Margaret.

From the talk of the tramps, she knew that Harris intended to remain skulking out of sight, till dark, when he was going to take to the open road again. This little shady glade was as secluded a spot as he could have found for skulking, and it looked as if he intended to remain there till it was time to tramp. No doubt it was one of his ways to sleep by day, as he was so often active in the night hours. Plainly he had settled down now to sleep in the wood. He was not going—he was staying, and Margaret was still a prisoner in the beech.

She wondered desperately what she could do. The expedition to the cave was impossible now—too much time had been lost. It would be lock-ups at Headland House before she even reached the cave, if she went on. She had to get back to the school and Reggie had to wait till another day. But how was she even to get back to the school?

That fearful man was glued to the spot till dark. She could tell, from the heavy breathing that reached her, that he was already asleep. But if she stirred—and if he awakened—!

She was sick with disappointment and terror. She could not remain much longer—she could not think of the cave now, but she had to get back to school. What would happen if she was missing at dark? She had to go. But at the thought of venturing from her hiding-place, with that ruffianly brute so close at hand, her heart failed her.

She sat in a forked bough, the foliage thick about her, trying to think it out. Sid Harris's heavy breathing came continuously to her ears. If he slept soundly—very soundly—she might make the venture—creeping away silently, inch by inch, so as not to awaken him. The bag she could leave in the beech: it was easy enough to collect it the following day, and if he heard her, and she had to fly, she did not want to be burdened. Dared she risk it?

Snorrrrr! A deep rumbling sound came from the direction of the sprawling tramp. It was a loud and heavy snore, and it was repeated. Mr. Harris, clearly, was safe in the embrace of Morpheus, if that snore was any indication.

It was more than half an hour since "Charlie" had gone. There would be no danger of running into him in the wood. If she could get away without awakening the sleeping ruffian—!

She resolved at last. Leaving the bag in the forked branch, she stirred, as silently as she could, and lowered herself to the greensward below the beech. Her eyes were fearfully on the sprawling figure so near at hand. But if she made any sound, it was not sufficient to disturb the tramp. Sid Harris slept and snored on, while Margaret, her heart beating in great throbs, tiptoed away from the spot.

She longed to run—but she knew that it would not do. She had to be silent. Slowly, silently, she crept away, as far as the edge of the glade. Then, some sound was unavoidable, as she pushed into the underwoods, and they swayed and rustled. But the sound was slight, and Sid Harris was sleeping fast. Slowly, with almost the stealth of a Red Indian, the girl crept away through the wood, breathing more and more freely as the distance increased between her and the sleeping tramp.

At length, it seemed safe to push on more boldly and she hurried her steps. She panted with relief as she emerged, at last, into the footpath, and saw the stile on Oke Lane in the distance.

She hurried on as far as the stile. She was safe now: and

she leaned on the stile, panting, almost overcome by the stress of what she had been through. And now that the danger was over, a thought that had been incessantly at the back of her mind since she had heard Harris speaking to the other tramp, came foremost—a strange and startling thought. Harris had spoken of a five-pound note in his possession. It was obvious that it was a stolen banknote. A banknote for five pounds had been stolen at Sparshott School a few nights ago. Was it possible—?

Was it? Margaret Ridd had a clear and quick mind: and now that the stress of danger and escape was over, she could think it out clearly. Was it possible—was it not, on the other hand, clear and certain? What had happened at Headland House the previous night, when poor Dolly had been so frightened, was the clue to what had happened at Sparshott School, on the night Reggie had played his mad prank in his form-master's study.

Harris had crept into the precincts of Headland House, in the dark, to "pinch," as he would have called it, anything that he could lay his hands on. Had he done that very thing at Sparshott School, on the night of the theft? Reggie had said that he fancied there was someone in the quadrangle, after he pitched Lamb's writing-case from the study window. Not a boy or a master—but suppose it was that wretched tramp, lurking about the buildings in the dark, with the object of theft, as he had lurked about at Headland House. In that case—. It was easy to picture the man, the writing-case falling perhaps at his very feet, grabbing it up and escaping with it. Later, when he examined his plunder, he would find the banknote—the writing-case he might throw away, or he might have it still on him, in the hope of selling it for a few shillings—anyhow he had the banknote. One thing, at least, was assured, from his own words—he had a stolen five-pound note in his possession. Was it Mr. Lamb's missing banknote? Hope, no doubt, coloured Margaret's thoughts—but she believed that it was.

Oh, if only that was the truth—if only it was! Reggie cleared—that dreadful suspicion lifted—Reggie back at school, his name unstained! But—!

"Margaret!"

A cold, hard, steely voice interrupted her thoughts. She lifted a startled face, and stared at Miss Gadsby, in the road on the other side of the stile.

#### NUMBER 000111445.

Miss Gadsby glared, rather than looked, at Margaret Ridd. Since Mr. Lamb's visit to Headland House, her manner to the girl had been unusually kind. But there was no kindness in it now. Her face was hard as a rock, her grey eyes gleamed like steel, her firm lips were set. Never had the Gadfly been seen to look so terribly grim.

"Margaret! You have been out of bounds! You are out of bounds this moment!"

"Yes, Miss Gadsby!" faltered Margaret. "I—I—."

"Is your brother in the wood?"

"No!" gasped Margaret, "No! No, Miss Gadsby. I—."

"I have not the slightest doubt," said Miss Gadsby, icily, "that you have been seeking, Margaret, to establish communication with the boy who has run away from Sparshott School—and not for the purpose of reporting to me where he may be found. Is that true or not?"

"I—I—I—!" stammered Margaret.

"Answer me—yes or no?"

"Yes!" faltered Margaret.

"I was sure of it! Very well! You will now return with me to Headland House, and you will be placed in detention until Reginald Ridd has been found," said the Gadfly, grimly.

"Oh, no, Miss Gadsby," panted Margaret, "but—but—"

"Come!" snapped the Gadfly. "Get over that stile immediately, and return to Headland House with me. You will remain within gates—"

Margaret's face was white. She was almost desperate. Gadfly or no Gadfly, that matter of the stolen banknote had to be cleared up—before Sidney Harris disappeared from the neighbourhood. It was not easy to face Miss Gadsby in her majestic wrath: but Margaret found the courage to do so.

"I—I must go into the village—!" she breathed.

"What?" The Gadfly seemed hardly able to believe her ears, "I tell you—I command you—to return immediately with me to Headland House—and you tell me you must go into the village. Have you taken leave of your senses, Margaret Ridd?"

"N-n-no! But—oh, do listen to me Miss Gadsby," breathed Margaret, "the tramp—that awful man Harris—is in the wood!"

Miss Gadsby started.

"You have run such risks! You utterly foolish girl! You have seen him?"

"I—I hid in a tree," faltered Margaret, "he did not see me. But—but I heard—oh, Miss Gadsby, I must go into the village—I must tell Mr. Boxer—"

"You may tell me, if you have anything to tell!" snapped the Gadfly, "I am the best judge whether Mr. Boxer need be told."

Margaret was nothing loth. Breathlessly she poured out the tale of what she had heard, in the branches of the beech. Miss Gadsby listened to her without a single interrupting word. Margaret leaned on the stile, breathless, excited—but Miss Gadsby stood like a ramrod, disdaining stiles. But the grim wrath had faded out of her stern countenance.

"So—so you see, Miss Gadsby," Margaret wound up, panting, "I—I must tell Mr. Boxer, before that dreadful tramp goes. That banknote—do you not see?—I—I believe that it is the one that is missing at Sparshott."

Miss Gadsby stared.

"What? Why do you think so, Margaret?"

"Reggie threw the writing-case from the window in the dark—it was picked up by—by someone who kept it—"

"That is his story, at all events."

"Oh, Miss Gadsby, it is the truth!" exclaimed Margaret, eagerly, "Don't you see? If that horrid man was hanging about the school in the dark—just as he was hanging about Headland House last night—and he has a stolen banknote! It is a note for five pounds! Oh, Miss Gadsby, doesn't it look—?"

"Upon my word!" said Miss Gadsby, "Margaret, it is possible—at least possible—that you are right! Where is this man?"

"In the glade—about half a mile—" Margaret was interrupted by Miss Gadsby swinging over the stile, and landing beside her.

"Show me the way!" commanded Miss Gadsby, taking a business-like grip on her heavy walking-stick.

"Oh!" gasped Margaret, "I—I—hadn't we better fetch Mr. Boxer? Hadn't we—"

"The man may be gone before Mr. Boxer can get here," said Miss Gadsby, calmly, "he may change his mind about waiting till dark—or he may go prowling about the cottages on the

edge of the wood—if there is anything in what you have told me, Margaret, there is no time to lose. You can find the place?"

"Yes, easily: but—"

"Lead the way!" commanded Miss Gadsby.

There was no demurring further when the Gadfly spoke in that tone. Margaret obediently led the way back into the wood. Undoubtedly she would have liked Mr. Boxer, with his official truncheon, on the scene. But Miss Gadsby seemed to feel no need of assistance from the police force. Miss Gadsby seldom needed assistance of any kind. She was a most self-helpful lady.

Margaret breathed quickly, as she threaded her way through the dusky wood, back to the spot from which she had been so glad to escape. Miss Gadsby marched after her like a British Grenadier, stick in hand. Indeed it might almost have been supposed that the Gadfly, like a war-horse, snuffed the battle from afar.

The sound of a snore greeted them, as they reached the glade. In the hours that yet remained before dark, it was probable that Mr. Harris might have wandered from the spot, if only to "pinch" a few trifles from the cottage gardens that backed on the wood. But he had not wandered yet—there he still lay, as Margaret had seen him last, fast asleep and snoring.

The schoolgirl could not help looking at the ruffian in dread. But Miss Gadsby was quite unconscious of dread. She strode across the glade towards him: and the tramp of her large feet in their hefty boots caused Mr. Harris's snore to cease. He awakened, grunted, and sat up.

"S'elp me!" said Mr. Harris, rubbing his eyes, and staring at the stalwart form-mistress of Headland House, "Missis Ugly-Mug, blow me!"

"Get up!" snapped Miss Gadsby.

"Look 'ere, marm—!"

"I said get up!" snapped Miss Gadsby, who was probably neither pleased nor flattered by the name Sid Harris had bestowed on her; and as Mr. Harris did not immediately get up, she gave him a poke with the walking-stick, which elicited a frightful yell from Mr. Harris. He bounded to his feet, yelling, and made a spring at Miss Gadsby like a tiger.

The walking-stick fairly flashed in the air, and caught Mr. Harris on the side of his head. He rolled in the grass, yelling still more loudly. Miss Gadsby stooped, grasped his collar with her left hand, and with a single swing of her powerful arm, landed him on his feet.

"Now come!" said Miss Gadsby.

"I ain't coming with you, Ugly-Mug!" roared Mr. Harris, "Leave a covey alone! I ain't coming—Oh, crimes, keep that stick away! Keep that blinking stick away, I says. I'm coming, ain't I? Ain't I acoming, marm?"

And Mr. Harris came. Even without the stick, probably Miss Gadsby could have knocked Sid Harris out in a couple of rounds. But the stick settled it. A lady who was characterised as "Misses Ugly-Mug" could not be expected to show Mr. Harris much consideration. And Miss Gadsby didn't. Twice the stick clumped on Mr. Harris's frowsy head: and then he came like a lamb.

At the stile, he hesitated, as if minded to make one more attempt. Miss Gadsby stepped over the stile, and dragged on his collar. Sid Harris came sprawling over, and was once more marched on in the Gadfly's iron grip. Margaret followed—but soon she was not the only follower. Two or three people in the lane, after first staring at the strange procession, joined it, and

followed on: and as they neared the village, children gathered round. It was quite a party that arrived, at last, at Mr. Boxer's cottage next to the village post office.

Mr. Boxer came to his door—and almost fell down at the sight of the tramp, with Miss Gadsby's grip on his collar.

"This is the man, Mr. Boxer!" said the Gadfly, "you will take him into custody." She marched Mr. Harris in, almost knocking over the astonished constable, who backed hastily, "Come in, Margaret! Shut the door."

"My eye!" said Mr. Boxer.

"This man," said the Gadfly, "has a stolen banknote in his possession, Mr. Boxer. You are officially entitled to take charge of it. Please do so."

"My eye!" repeated Mr. Boxer. Sid Harris, for a moment, looked like resisting, as the constable approached him: but a motion of a walking-stick subdued him at once. In a minute more, an old shabby writing-case was disinterred from an inside pocket of Mr. Harris's ragged old coat, and Margaret gave a little cry. She had no doubt whose writing-case that was.

"Examine the contents, Mr. Boxer," said Miss Gadsby.

A banknote rustled a moment later in the constable's hand.

"Look at the number!" said Miss Gadsby, "and kindly tell me whether it is 000111445."

"That's the number, miss!" said Mr. Boxer, examining the banknote.

"Very good! That writing-case belongs to Mr. Lamb, a form-master at Sparshott School. The banknote is his. A boy at Sparshott is under suspicion of having purloined it, Mr. Boxer. I suggest that, as soon as you have placed this man in safety, you communicate immediately with the head-master of Sparshott, informing him that the writing-case and banknote have been found in possession of Sidney Harris, a vagrant."

"S'elp me!" breathed Mr. Harris, "What a wumman! What a shemale! Strike me pink and blue, I'd rather 'andle a dozen coppers nor that shemale! S'elp me."

Taking no notice of Mr. Harris, Miss Gadsby left the constable's cottage, and Margaret followed her, with dancing eyes. It was as if a heavy weight had been lifted from her heart. Her brother was cleared—and it was she who had cleared him. Reggie, in his distress, had run to her for help, as usual—and it had seemed impossible that this time she could help him. But she had!

Miss Gadsby gave her a half-grin, half-smiling look, as they walked out of the village.

"In view of this fortunate outcome, Margaret," she said, "nothing further will be said of your escapade. But—"

"Oh, thank you, Miss Gadsby," murmured Margaret, "but—my brother—"

"That foolish boy may now safely return to his school, if he could be found—"

"I—I know where to find him!" faltered Margaret.

"What?" ejaculated the Gadfly. "You know—?"

"He—he—he is in the cave under the headland," faltered Margaret, "I—I saw him there on Wednesday afternoon, and—and—and—!" She stammered and broke off.

The Gadfly looked at her fixedly. For a moment her look was grim. Then she said, succinctly.

"Then we will go to the cave at once. Come."

Miss Gadsby set off with her long strides. Margaret had to step out to keep pace. But she felt more like dancing than walking by Miss Gadsby's side. Half-an-hour later a pale, grubby, untidy, frightened schoolboy was listening to what Mar-

garet had to tell him, while Miss Gadsby looked on with disapproving eyes—only too clearly not of the opinion that Master Reggie Ridd was worth his sister's anxious affection. Reggie looked a haggard, dirty, untidy object, after his sojourn in the cave: but his face shone through its grubbiness when he was told what had happened.

"Oh, Meg," he mumbled, "Oh, Meg, you've done this for me! Me sticking in this rotten place, and you getting me cleared—oh, Meg! I jolly well knew you'd help me somehow, Meg—I jolly well did! You're only a girl, and you've done this!"

At which Margaret smiled, and Miss Gadsby snorted. Reggie was happy and grateful: but Meg was, after all, "only a girl"—a trifle light as air, as it were, in comparison with a fine fellow like Reggie himself! But Margaret did not mind—though the Gadfly did, and expressed the same with an expressive snort.

"You had better return to your school at once, Ridd!" snapped the Gadfly.

And Miss Gadsby marched Margaret off, leaving Reggie staring.

"Old cat!" murmured Reggie, under his breath. And he started for Sparshott—at a run!

### JOLLY!

"And you never told us!" said Ethel Bent.

"Not your old pals!" said Dolly Brace, reproachfully.

Margaret smiled. No. 8 study was merry and bright that evening. Margaret's face had been clouded of late—but the clouds had rolled by, and it was all sunshine now. Everybody knew the story—at Headland House as at Sparshott—and everybody was talking of it. Girls had gathered round Margaret in bunches again and again, to hear the story: even great prefects of the Sixth Form, like Edith Race, generally too majestic to heed the existence of the Lower Fifth, and deigned to ask Margaret to tell them all about it. Margaret was rather a heroine at Headland House now—though most certainly Reggie Ridd was not regarded as a hero—far from it.

"You should have told us!" said both girls.

"Well, I couldn't!" said Margaret, "But wasn't Miss Gadsby a good sort? Wasn't she—!"

"Oh, no end of a nut," said Dolly, "but you should have told us, Meg. You let me think on Wednesday that you'd stayed behind in the cave to scoff the grub—"

"If the Gadfly heard that—!" chuckled Ethel.

"Bless the Gadfly!" said Dolly, "Bother the Gadfly! And all the time you had handed over prog—"

"The what?" gasped Margaret.

"The prog—all the time, you'd handed over the prog to that precious brother of yours, and never told us. And I thought—"

Margaret laughed.

"We'll have another picnic at the cave next half-holiday. Dolly," she said.

"Good!" said Dolly.

"And I'll get Reggie to come—"

"Won't it be jolly?" said Margaret.

### THE END