

HILDA RICHARDS

BESSIE BUNTER
AND THE
MISSING FORTUNE

CHAPTER I
A Fright for the Fourth

'RIPPING weather!'

'Gorgeous!'

'Just the afternoon for taking some snaps!'

'Rather!'

'And for a picnic!' fat Bessie Bunter put in eagerly. 'I say, you know, dud-don't forget the picnic—'

There was a laugh from the crowd of merry-looking schoolgirls gathered on the steps of Cliff House School, and Bessie Bunter, the fattest member of the party blinked in indignant surprise. 'Well, what is there to cackle at in that?' she demanded. 'It is a ripping afternoon for a picnic!'

'Right, Fatima!' agreed Barbara Redfern, the leader of the party. 'And a picnic there shall be, too. But the main object of the outing is to take snaps. That's why I've brought my camera.'

As a matter of fact, they all had cameras-except Bessie.

Bessie's camera had departed during the winter in exchange for a few shillings to buy tuck. 'Well, what are we waiting for?' the fat one exclaimed impatiently. 'And, I say, where are we going? I hope it's not too far, you know. I'm famished as it is!'

There was another laugh at that. Trust Bessie to put her appetite first! The beauties of the afternoon, the thrill of picture-hunting, were considerations which fat Bessie completely ignored. A picnic was in prospect, and a picnic was Bessie's immediate and only ambition.

'We're waiting for Marcelle,' Barbara Redfern explained, and glanced over her shoulder into the school. 'She forgot her camera, and has gone to her study to fetch it. But here she is,' she added, as there was a step in the hall and a girl came out into the sunshine of the afternoon.

The crowd turned. There were eight of them altogether. First Babs, of the dancing blue eyes and the waving brown hair.

Next Mabel Lynn, Babs's golden-haired lieutenant, a blazer carried upon one arm.

Then Clara Trevlyn, the reckless tomboy, who, disregarding the warmth of the day, had donned a suit of hairy-looking tweed-simply because it happened to be the outfit nearest to hand. Then there was Leila Carron, the elegant American junior, groomed, as usual, as if for a visit to Mayfair.

Next came Janet Jordan, fair and smiling. Then gentle Marjorie Hazeldene, whose usually pale cheeks held an animated touch of colour. With her was Lucy Farraday, tall, willowy, her sallow features as usual bearing that impress of anxiety so characteristic of them.

And lastly, but not to be forgotten, round, short, fat, and already perspiring, Bessie Bunter.

They were all members of Cliff House's Fourth Form, and for five minutes they had stood on the steps of the school.

The girl who joined them now was also a member of the Fourth Form-small, petite, neat, her pretty little face framed in a mass of jet black hair, a slightly olive tint in her complexion.

She was Marcelle Biquet, the Fourth Form's acquisition from France.

'Oh, there you are!' Bessie said impatiently. 'We're waiting for you, Marcelle—'

Marcelle smiled. It was a wistful smile, lacking its usual dazzling spontaneity. Marcelle, in fact, looked worried.

'I sorry I am late,' she said. 'I forget ze camera because I look for ze lettaire. I not keep you waiting-no?'

'No; of course not!' Babs laughed. 'But why the frown, Marcelle? Nothing wrong, I hope?'

Marcelle rather forlornly shook her head.

'Mais non,' she replied. 'It ees zat I am little worried, n'est ce pas? My papa, you know—'

'Oh! Not ill?' Babs asked quickly.

'I do not know,' Marcelle replied. 'It ees zat I haf not heard from him for two days. Always on Monday papa send me ze lettaire, and zis week ze lettaire he not send. So I am worry, n'est ce pas?' She blinked hopefully at Babs. 'Ze lettaire - it will come?' she asked anxiously.

'Oh, yes, it's sure to come!' Babs said comfortingly.

'Of course,' Bessie put in. 'Don't you worry, Marcelle! It's the postal authorities, you know. They're always keeping my letters like that, you know. Jolly slack, if you ask me! Why, I've been expecting one myself all this week - one with a postal order in it, from one of my titled relatives. I think it's scandalous the way they hold these postal orders back! I'm seriously considering wiring the Postmaster-General about it! '

But Bessie's friends only smiled at that. Bessie Bunter's delayed postal orders were rather a hilarious legend in Cliff House. 'But papa-nevaire before haf he failed to write me on ze Monday,' Marcelle argued. 'I am in wonderment! I am distraught. I think him ill. But if papa ill, mamma would write. Oh, I am ver' worried! '

And Marcelle blinked unhappily.

Babs looked concerned. Leila, who shared the same study with Marcelle and Jean Cartwright, the Scottish junior, frowned in faint perplexity. Leila knew Marcelle's little habits better than most. She knew how eagerly the little French girl looked for that letter and with what unfailing punctuality it usually arrived.

Not since Leila had been in Study No. 3 with Marcelle did she remember Marcelle's letter from her father failing to reach her by the first post on Monday morning.

'Sure, something must have happened,' she opined. 'Perhaps there's been a fog in the Channel.'

But Marcelle shook her head.

'Zere has been no fog in ze Channel,' she said. 'Ze reports of ze wezzer-I study heem. But que voulez-vous?' - with a shrug. 'Let us to ze photography. I haf my camera.'

There was a movement. The party was now impatient to get along. But ere it moved there was another step behind them. A cheery voice hailed them.

'What cheer! Whither away, my merry Spartans?'

And a smiling, cool-looking, immaculately clad girl, dressed in a costume cut on the very smartest lines came strolling into the sunlight. She carried a light cane.

It was Jemima Carstairs.

'Bright-what?' Jemima smiled, beaming at the group. 'What-ho the cameras! Snapshots on parade-what? Whither away?' Babs smiled.

'Down to the caves. We're picnicking there, and taking a few pictures for the school competition at the same time. Like to come, Jimmy?'

Jemima sighed, shaking her sleek, Eton-cropped head.

'Thanks awfully, but couldn't!' she replied. 'Like to. Awfully charmed for the invitation-what? Fact is,' she added confidentially. 'I've got to totter along to Friardale Station to see the guv'nor. Wire-look!' And, diving her hand into one immaculate pocket, she produced a telegram.

'Oh, bad news?' Babs asked sympathetically.

'Well, not exactly,' Jemima answered cautiously. 'Not frightfully welcome, though-what? The guv'nor's been called away to Nigeria. Got to stagger off right away, and wants to see his darling little Jimmy before he steps aboard the heaving barque!

Tough luck-what?'

'Jolly tough!' Janet Jordan sympathised.

'My brother Jack's in Nigeria, too,' Clara Trevlyn broke in interestedly. 'He's at Lagos at present. What part is Colonel Carstairs bound for?'

'Not a notion,' Jemima answered cheerfully. 'Fact is, I don't believe he knows himself. If he does he's probably forgotten by now. The old grey matter slips up a bit at times-what?' And Jemima carelessly tapped her temple to illustrate the point. 'Still, if you spartans will honour me with your company I'll crawl as far as the gates. Phew! Is it warm, or is it the sight of dear old Fatima that makes me feel faint?'

'Oh rur-really, Jimmy!' Bessie protested.

'Cheer-oh! No offence!' Jemima beamed. She swung her cane. 'Well, let's beetle-what? The rendezvous is-where did you say, Babs? The caves? If you're parking there for the afternoon—'

'We are,' Babs said.

'Topping! Then perhaps if I can muster strength and energy after the tearful family parting, I'll reel along and join you,' Jemima offered. 'I've got a burning ambition to be photographed alongside Bessie. The photographer must stand a long distance off-say half a mile or so - and I'm sure she'd get us both in.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

And with that retort Jemima parted from Babs & Co. The straggling group of girls set off on the short walk down to the sea. A few minutes later, they stopped.

From where they stood they could see plainly the jagged, wicked-looking points known as the Black Rocks, and farther to the left, sombre and treacherous even on this heavenly afternoon, the black,

crumbling cliffs of Belwin Island protruded grimly from a smother of restless foam which boiled around its feet.

Here, indeed, was the most treacherous part of the Kentish coast. It was usually given a wide berth by passing ships. But half a mile out at sea, in a channel between Belwin Island and the mainland, a magnificent white steam yacht majestically rode at anchor.

'My hat!' Mabel Lynn exclaimed.

They all stared. Not for many months had the Cliff House girls seen any craft larger than a motor-launch in that part of the bay. The yacht was big, and it must have been handled by extremely skilled navigators to have been steered into such a channel. It was, in fact, in the only deep water which ran hereabouts.

'A yacht,' stuttered Clara Trevlyn. 'How the dickens did they get it there?'

'Isn't she a beauty?'

'Whose is it?'

'But I say - Oh, goodness, what's the matter with Marcelle?'

For Marcelle was gesticulating excitedly.

'Look! It ees ze boat of France! It ees ze French boat!' she exclaimed excitedly. 'Ze flag!'

They looked again. Sure enough the tricolour of Marcelle's native country fluttered from the mast.

'So it is,' Mabel Lynn said.

'We may get a snap from behind one of the rocks on the beach,' Babs said. 'If we can only find some shade to stand in. My hat, I know! If we stand inside the caves we can get a ripping picture. Come on!'

And the girls, full of excitement at the opportunity of obtaining such an unusual picture, hurried on.

'But I say!' yelled Bessie. 'Here, don't run like that! Babs, old thing-Babs, you darling! Oh crumbs! Babs, you cat! Wait for me!'

But they did not wait for Bessie. They put on a spurt. Bessie knew where they were going, and she could be safely left to follow. They hurried on, leaving the fat one rolling and bellowing in the rear.

Presently they reached the steep path which led at a precipitous angle down the face of the cliffs, and in another ten minutes had landed on the shingle beach below.

'Ripping!' exclaimed Babs, with sparkling eyes.

The yacht was near now. It certainly made a graceful picture as, at anchor, it rocked gently in the shallows of the bay. It was not white, as it had appeared from the cliff above, but cream, its lines picked out in black and gold. The name, executed in gold and black, could be plainly read from that distance.

'Catherine,' spelled Babs. 'Pretty name.'

'Pretty boat, too,' commented Janet Jordan. 'Think we can get a snap, Babs?'

'From the caves - yes,' Babs said.

They turned, facing the cliffs, and the caves which Babs mentioned, four yawning chasms of blackness.

There were grim stories told of those caves, which were reputed in the neighbourhood to have been the lair of both pirates and smugglers in their day. The largest one, named Monks' Tomb, was popularly supposed to be haunted.

It was said, in fact, that there were secret passages leading into the caves from the old ruins of Monks' Folly, directly above, and legend had it that a long-dead knight, Baron Sarr, had once massacred the monks of Cliffe Abbey, and then had carried their bodies, by means of the secret passages, into the large cave to bury. That, indeed, was the reason for the large cave's grim name.

A few yards inside Babs paused. 'Here,' she said, 'this rising spot!'

'Oh, fine!'

It really was. The view presented was magnificent. Through the mouth of the cave the yacht presented a perfect picture, set in a rugged frame of black.

Babs stood in position, glancing into the view-finder of her camera. She pressed the catch. There was a click.

At the same moment Lucy Farraday gave a startled little jump.

'What was that?' she asked.

'What?'

'Listen! I heard something!'

They paused. Lucy, fear in her face, had half-turned towards the interior of the cave - a wall of utter darkness, in which nothing could be distinguished. They stood for a moment, tensely a-thrill, listening with strained ears.

'There's nothing—' Clara Trevlyn began, and then stopped. 'My hat!' she broke off in a whisper.

For plainly through the gloom, seemingly infinitely remote and far off, had come a sound.

A wailing, gasping, heart-rending sound-the sound of a human being in pain and distress!

The Cliff House chums looked at one another with startled eyes. Then Babs shut her camera with a snap.

'Somebody needs help!' she said briefly. 'Let's see if we can do anything!'

CHAPTER II
Surprising End to a Picnic!

'BLOW!' said Bessie.

She said it in a very exasperated voice indeed, and she said it rather palpitatingly. For Bessie was in the act of climbing down the steep cliff path which led to the beach, and Bessie was very hot and rather bad-tempered.

Bessie was not an athlete, in spite of her boast at Cliff House to the contrary. Bessie liked to give accounts of her valour, but actually Bessie was timid to a degree.

And Bessie would not trust to her feet alone in climbing that cliff. Safety first was Bessie's motto, and she was going down it on hands and knees, clutching at every tuft of grass.

Fat Bessie certainly would have roused Clara Trevlyn to scorn had the tomboy seen her. Clara, reckless to a degree, had just run full pelt down that slope, steep though it was.

'Blow!' Bessie muttered again.

A last grunt, and she scrambled to safety, flicking her hands together to rid herself of the chalk-dust that lay thickly upon them. Then, oblivious of the fact that the chalk-dust still adhered, brushed down her clothes with the same hands. After which she adjusted her spectacles, which had become awry during her palpitating climb, and blinked along the beach. She stared.

'Mum-my hat! Where have they gone?' she muttered.

For of the chums she had expected to see there was no sign. Bessie blinked again. She looked along the beach. She looked at the yacht. She saw figures moving about on the decks there, but she knew they were not Babs & Co.

Bessie had not heard or had not heeded that suggestion of Babs's to take photographs from inside the caves, and she thought at least that Babs & Co. might have waited for her. Bessie felt utterly furious.

'The mean cats!' she muttered. 'The mean things! I know! They've grabbed the picnic hamper, and they've gone off somewhere to have a secret feed without me!' Her fat features stiffened into a mask of indignation. 'And those are friends!' Bessie told the rocks bitterly. 'Friends, you know!'

But she broke off there, her eyes attracted by a movement on the water. Then she blinked again. A rowing-boat had just rounded the headland from the direction of Sarmouth, and a youth, in white uniform, pulling leisurely at the oars, was grinning towards her.

Bessie recognised the youth as one of the assistants from the catering stores. A large picnic basket was conspicuously jutting up from the boat.

'Hallo, Miss Bunter!' he hailed.

'G-good-afternoon!' Bessie answered with dignity. 'I say—'

'I've brought that hamper for Miss Redfern,' the boy said, and, shipping his oars, sprang ashore. 'She ordered it by phone. Is Miss Redfern here?'

Bessie looked at the hamper again. She found her mouth watering suddenly. Bessie was hungry. Whatever other purpose the chums had in mind, Bessie's one aim and object in accompanying them on this trip had been the picnic.

'Oh, leave it!' she said carelessly. 'I'm expecting Babs-Miss Redfern, you know. Put it' - and Bessie gazed round for a site, then spotted the cliff, the foot of it bathed in a welcome pool of shade - 'put it there - out of the sun!' she ordered. 'I'll attend to it. You'll call for the hamper later?'

'At five o'clock.'

'Right-ho!' Bessie said. 'Mum-my hat! I say, buck up, you know!'

'All right, miss!'

And the boy lugged the hamper to the spot indicated, just at the entrance to Monks' Tomb.

There was the light of hunger in Bessie's eyes as she rolled towards the hamper, making her forget the ghostly legend of the cave which she had selected to indulge in her private snack.

The boy, with a shrug as he saw that no tip was forthcoming, climbed disconsolately back into the boat and pushed off. But Bessie, opening the hamper, felt her mouth water.

'Oh, mum-my hat!' the fat one murmured.

Her eyes gleamed behind her spectacles as she saw the good things inside. Tongue, ham, tarts, jam, a beautiful pie, bread-and-butter, tomatoes, and cream. What a feast, indeed!

The heart of Bessie was made joyful at once. Vanish at once did Bessie's lethargy and her grievances as she spread the picnic cloth on the smooth sands. There was ginger-beer and lemonade in bottles; milk, too.

Bessie beamed. What a feed! Wasn't she just going to enjoy herself!

She spread the cloth, laid it. Then she glanced round, hoping against hope that Babs & Co. would not appear before she had taken the edge off her appetite. She smiled with quiet satisfaction as she sat down.

Another moment, and the picnic commenced to disappear at an incredible rate.



Poor old Bessie looked like a walking food counter

While in the cave, unsuspected by Bessie—

Cold and sinister, the darkness hemmed in the Cliff House party, as, with Babs and Clara at their head, the girls pushed on into the forbidding interior.

On, on they went. The darkness was growing deeper and deeper and more impenetrable, seeming to wrap them round like some tangible thing. Then suddenly Clara stopped.

'Babs, is it any use going farther?' she asked. 'We can't see a thing. We should have brought torches.'

'Well, we would, had we intended to explore the caves,' Babs replied. 'But we heard something—'

'But it's silly! Blessed if I don't think we half imagined it!

Let's shout. If there's anybody here they'll answer us.' The party stood still.

'All right. Go ahead,' Babs said. 'You've got the loudest voice, Clara!'

That was a doubtful compliment but Clara did not seem to mind.

She lifted up her head.

'Hallo!' she roared. 'Who's there?'

'Oh, crumbs! My hat!'

For the echoes that came roaring back were positively thunderous.

'Who's there?' roared Clara again.

They stood waiting until the echoes had died away. But no answering voice reached them.

'Wash-out!' grunted Clara. 'Shall I try again?'

'Oh, please don't!' Lucy Farraday cried timidly.

'But—'

And there Clara stopped, stiffening suddenly. They all stared. For, from in front of them came a sound. It was a ghastly, ghostly sort of sound, starting as a moan, rising to a scream, and finally ending in a blood-curdling, awful shriek such as, surely, no human ears had ever heard before.

It filled the cave. It seemed to howl and laugh at them from all sides, from above, below. Even Babs, iron-nerved as she usually was, shivered.

'Whe-e-e-e-e-e!'

In startled fear and amazement, the Cliff House Party gazed into the blackness in front of them. Lucy Farraday gave a faint, shuddering cry; Marjorie Hazeldene gasped. Leila Carroll could plainly be heard, in the spellbound moment of silence which followed, to grit her teeth. Then it came again:

'Whe-e-e-e-e-e!'

'Oh!' gasped Marjorie.

'Look! Run!' shrieked Lucy Farraday.

They turned. Babs shouted. Then she, too, felt her scalp prickling. For now, emerging from the darkness in front of them, something was moving—was taking shape.

Eyes wide with horror, the party gazed. Something gleamed; was coming towards them, seeming to take shape as it approached. They had a glimpse of a ghastly white face.

'Run!' shrieked Lucy Farraday again. 'Run! It's the ghost!' Fear gripped them all. Panic lent them wings. They turned about, flying like the wind for the exit of the cave.

Never on the running track had those girls moved so fast. They simply hurtled along. They reached the entrance of the cave and ran on, still blind to all objects by reason of their sudden emergence into sunlight.

Then Lucy Farraday, who was leading, gave a shriek and went tumbling forward. Marjorie, hot on her heels, came after her, and, unable to pull up in time, went crashing on top of her. Mabs followed. Leila sprawled on top of Mabs. In a struggling, wriggling heap they sprawled and panted.

'Oh, crumbs!'

'Get off!'

'Take your elbow out of my eye!'

'Ow! Oh, dear!' came a gurgling voice from beneath the mass. 'Ow! Gug-gug! Oh, dud-dear! I'm dead! I'm dying! The pic-picnic's ruined!'

'Bessie!' exclaimed Babs.

'Oh, goodness! I say, sort yourselves out!'

The girls jumped as though electrified, staring at the hummocky mass of humanity upon which they had so blindly fallen.

Bessie slowly sat up.

Clara Trevlyn forgetting her experience of a moment before, went off into a helpless shriek of laughter. 'Oh, my hat! Look at her!'

'Oh, goodness! Ha, ha, ha!'

The party held its sides and roared. Leila laughed until she had a 'stitch.'

For Bessie certainly did present an amazing sight.

The fat one, taken utterly by surprise by that avalanche of girlish humanity, had been precipitated right into the middle of the picnic. She had fallen with her face in the butter, half a pound of which had spread itself violently over her fat features.

A jam-tart stuck lovingly over one eye, and the milk which had poured itself over her hair was running down her face in streams. 'Oh, crumbs, I'm dying! Ow! Oh, dud-dear! What are you all laughing at, you grinning sillies?'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'You mum-might have killed me!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'You might have broken my glasses, and if you'd broken my glasses someone would jolly well have to pay for them!' Bessie howled, wrathfully removing the jam-tart. 'Ugh! Can't you stop grinning, you cats?'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Look here—'

'We're looking!' wept Clara Trevlyn.

Bessie glowered.

'Funny, isn't it?' she howled.

'It ees! It ees ze funniest zing I ever did see!' hysterically giggled Marcelle.

'Oh, dear!' gasped Babs. She wiped the tears from her eyes. 'Come on, Bessie! My hat— Oh, ha, ha, ha! You'll be the death of us, yet!'

'And you were jolly near the death of me!' Bessie grumbled wrathfully.

'Oh, crumbs! I fuf-feel as if every body in my bones is broken - I mum-mean, every bone in my body! Phoo! That butter's made me feel sick, you know!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

They yelled. But between them they got Bessie to her feet, dusted her down, wiped ham, jam, butter, and cake-crumbs from her face, and generally restored her to good temper again. Then, very dolorously, they looked at the picnic.

It was a wreck!

Most of the butter had been transferred from Bessie's countenance into the sand. The pie, severely trodden on, bore only a faint resemblance to its former glory. The loaf was squashed, and sandy, too. The tarts, mixed with the milk and salt, were obviously past redemption.

The only thing which seemed at all edible, indeed, was a pot of chicken-and-ham paste. The party blinked.

'Well,' said Babs, 'the picnic's done for, girls!'

'Oh!' And Bessie looked at the cloth. Her fat face registered the keenest dismay. 'Oh, I say, and I had only just started!' she said dolefully. 'That is, of course, I-I was going to start when - when you came,' she added hastily. 'Oh, crumbs, dud-don't look at me like that, Babs! I wasn't eating anything, you know. I-I wouldn't dream of having a snack while I was waiting for you, you know.'

Babs sighed. She shook her head.

'So you were scoffing the feed on your own!' she exclaimed. 'Oh, Bessie!'

'But I wasn't. Really, Babs, I hope that-that such a thing is-is beyond a Bunter!' Bessie said, with dignity. 'I-I just had to have a snack, you know, after that run and-and that climb, and all that. But I didn't mean to eat anything!'

'But you were out to wolf the lot-what?' Leila Carroll put in.

Bessie looked apprehensive.

Then Marcelle, who had been gazing out at sea, gave a sudden exclamation.

'Look!' she cried. 'Ze boat-it come!'

They all turned, shading their eyes. For the launch was casting off from the yacht Catherine, and in the launch were two men and a girl. And the girl, as if recognising them, was waving a hand. 'Who is she? You know her, Marcelle?'

But Marcelle very perplexedly shook her head. 'Non!'

'But she wants us! She's calling to us!'

That was obvious. With renewed interest, and not a little curiosity, the girls stood and waited.

OUTWARDLY cool, urbane, and unruffled, Jemima Carstairs stood on the platform of the Friardale Station as the train from Court field came in.

Seeing her, nobody would have guessed the emotions tugging at Jemima's heart.

Not by a flicker of an eyelid did her face betray a sign. But inwardly Jemima was suppressing a fierce desire to give way, for Colonel Carstairs, that dear father whom she so flippantly referred to as the guv'nor, was paying a flying visit, which might be his last for months to come.

Jemima had heard all about his appointment before the receipt of the wire that afternoon, but, being Jemima, she had said nothing.

Now the dear old guv'nor was coming to say good-bye-to vanish out of his daughter's life, perhaps for years.

'Chin up, Jimmy!' Jemima muttered to herself.

The train came to a standstill. Doors banged, opened, and slammed to again. A voice rose, telling passengers that this was the station of Friardale.

Jemima, in the most calculatedly careless manner, strolled along the platform, twirling her cane, her desire not to show emotion, making her step almost jaunty.

A door in the train opened, and Jemima narrowly missed hitting under the chin with the point of her cane the man who came out of the carriage.

She stepped back.

'I beg your pardon-what?' she murmured.

The man stared at her, jerking back his head. Jemima, staring back, grinned affably. Yet she couldn't help wondering what such a man was doing in Friardale. For that he was a foreigner was beyond doubt-a Frenchman at that.

He wore a black hat with a rather wide brim, and had a thin, black moustache, fiercely waxed. His eyes rested upon her for an instant with a strange glitter. Then he smiled.

'Pardon, m'selle!' he said, and, raising his hat politely, stepped on to the platform, making way for another man emerging from the same carriage, at sight of whom Jemima gave a joyful cry of surprise.

'Why, guv'nor!'

'Jimmy!' Colonel Carstairs exclaimed, and came forward, gripping his daughter's slim, gloved hand. 'Jove, it's great to see you!' he muttered.

'Chin-chin!' Jemima returned unemotionally. 'Ahem! I write with that hand,' she pointed out, as the colonel still retained it. 'Thanks awf'ly! Well, it's great to see you, too - what? How's the old world and everything?'

'Oh, so-so!'

'Nice weather-what?' Jemima asked as they walked towards Coleman's Tea Rooms in the middle of the High Street.

'Yes, very, isn't it?'

'Isn't it?' Jemima murmured dreamily, and relapsed into silence again. 'Have a good journey?' she asked at last.

'Eh?' The colonel came out of a brown study. 'Oh, the journey!' he said. 'Yes, I enjoyed it. Fine! By the way, Jimmy—'

'Ha, ha! Now you're going to say something!' Jemima prophesied.

'Not much. But you saw the chap who got out of the carriage in front of me?'

'I did. Foreign-looking spartan.'

'You know who he is?'

Jemima scratched her chin.

'Not being possessed of an album of all the most distinguished gentlemen in the world-no,' she said. 'Who was he? Don't say he was the Prime Minister in disguise!'

'No - seriously, Jimmy. You've heard me speak of Duprez?'

'Duprez?' Jemima looked up quickly. 'You don't say—'

'I do, Jimmy. It's the same!'

'Odds bods!' whistled Jemima, and for the first time a hint of excitement showed in her face. For she had heard her father speak of Alphonse Duprez-not once, but many times.

There had been a time in Colonel Carstairs' adventurous life when he had been in the Secret Service, and during that time he had had cause to pit his wits against a band of clever international crooks, of whom this Duprez was the head. The crooks had won. It was a blow from which Colonel Carstairs' pride had never completely recovered.

'Duprez-here?' Jemima looked animated. 'Guv'nor, what's his game?'

The colonel smiled rather grimly.

'I don't know. But I'd like to. Jove, Jimmy, wouldn't I give something to lay that fellow by the heels. I haven't seen him for ten years; but it's the same - I swear it! I almost feel sorry now that I've got to go away. I owe that fellow one, and I've always vowed I'd repay it. He's clever.'

They talked of the Great Duprez-head of a daring gang of international crooks-a man well known to the police of every country in Europe, yet so clever that the police had never been able to get sufficient evidence on which to convict him.

By the time tea was finished she knew all about Duprez, and she was more aflame than ever for her father's sake that he should have failed to be the man who had caught out this arch-rogue - Duprez.

The time passed all too quickly to Jemima. As her father was leaving England that night he had to catch the next train back to London. In thoughtful silence they returned to Friardale Station, to find that the train was already in.

A final kiss, a last firm handshake, and Colonel Carstairs stepped into a compartment.

And Jemima, whistling to herself, swung on her way.

But as she went she thought of her father, of that Duprez whom she had so narrowly missed hitting with the cane.

He'd dished the guv'nor, had he? And he was here in Friardale. Jove, if she could meet him! If she could strike a blow for the good old guv'nor in return.

She went on, reaching the top of the cliffs above the caves. She looked down, frowned at sight of the yacht, and then gave out a cheery 'Hallo!' as she saw her friends on the beach. A motor-launch was in the act of mooring near them, and two men and a girl were jumping out.

As the 'Hallo!' was not answered, Jemima went slithering down the path.

'What cheer!' she hailed. 'Couldn't you hear my strident voice-or am I developing tonsillitis? Friends, I am here!'

Babs & Co. turned. At the same moment there was a step behind Jemima, and another figure came slithering on to the scene. Jemima turned with a bland smile, and then jumped.

For the figure was that of a man-a man in a black hat with a thin, waxed moustache.

CHAPTER IV Discoveries on a Yacht!

THE man saw Jemima at the same moment as she saw him. He elevated his eyebrows in recognition.

'Ah, my little lady of the station!' he said cordially and raised his hat.'

'The pleasure is yours!' Jemima returned shortly. 'Nice day - what?'

'Very!' The man glanced at her curiously, smiling as Jemima adjusted her monocle, and little guessing how that girl was tingling at sight of him. 'These are your friends?' he questioned; and though his manner was French, and there was just the tiniest foreign flavour in his speech, his English was faultless. 'I see my friends, too, he added. It seems that we are destined for each other's company. Your name-if I may have the pleasure?'

'Oh, Jemima!' Jemima said. 'Jimmy to my friends.'

'Thank you! I call you Jimmy!'

'I said-to my friends,' Jemima replied distinctly. 'We can hardly be friends upon about two seconds' acquaintance - what? Your name?'

Just for a moment the man hesitated. 'DuPont!' he said.

'Pont?' Jemima inclined her head. 'DuPont!' he repeated, with emphasis.

'Thank you!' Jemima smiled quite charmingly. 'French, perhaps?' she asked.

'Precisely!'

'Cheers! Marcelle is French, too. But come along.'

And she inclined her head towards Babs & Co., who were now talking with the two men and the girl who had arrived in the motor-launch from the yacht.

'Hope we're not butting in,' Jemima said; 'but allow me to introduce Mr. DuPont to you. You did say "pont," didn't you?' she asked. 'Yes, DuPont. French-like Marcelle. Mr. DuPont, one of your Jolly old countrywomen - Marcelle Biquet of Paris and Cliff House. Cheers! Marcelle, step forward! The stage is yours!'

The Frenchman gave a faint start at the mention of Marcelle's name. He bent very effusively over the hand which Marcelle offered.

'Pleased to meet you, m'selle,' he murmured. 'You do not know me - eh?'

Little Marcelle shook her head. 'You do not remember?'

Mystification shone in Marcelle's eyes. 'Non.'

'Well, how should you?' he laughed. 'It is many, many years since you sat upon my knee. You were an infant then; but so charming. I have been away-abroad. But your father!'

A sudden hint of excitement came into Marcelle's eyes. She looked eager.

'Papa-you know heem?'

The man who called himself DuPont smiled.

'But two hours ago I was talking to him,' he replied.

The Cliff House chums gathered round at that. They regarded Monsieur DuPont with a new interest.

He was a fascinating personality. There was something about him which they all liked at once - a free-and-easiness, a certain debonair quality which fascinated them.

But in view of Marcelle's anxiety about her father, his last statement invested him with an even greater interest.

Marcelle's dark eyes lit up.

'Papa! You talk wiz heem? You see heem?' she asked eagerly.

'But where?'

'In London.'

'London?'

'Yes,' the man answered. 'Your father and I are great friends,' he said. 'I met him in Paris last week. He was anxious to get to London urgently on business - what business I do not know, because I am interested in your father only for his friendship. I put my yacht at his disposal' - he nodded towards the bay— 'and voila, here we are!'

'Oh,' exclaimed Marcelle, and rather tremblingly regarded the man, 'zat was ver', ver' kind of you!' she said. 'Eet is zat papa haf been worried over his beeziness zat I do not hear from him - yes?' she asked. 'I receive not ze lettaire he send every Monday.'

'That is the reason, I have no doubt,' the other put in. 'But, as a matter of fact, I have a message for you. I have brought my yacht here because I wished to get to Cliff House to see you. I was requested by your father to tell you that he will return in a day or two. But I am honoured to meet you again!' And he bowed and smiled so charmingly that the whole party was dazzled. 'But your friends, Marcelle! You have not introduced me.'

The party was introduced. Babs & Co. had already made the acquaintance of the two men and the girl, though they had not been introduced by name.

Apparently, the girl and the men had watched the mix-up in the cave from the yacht, and, thinking something very much amiss had happened, had put for the shore in the hope of assisting. Jemima learned that the girl's name was Yvonne DuPont.

'Charmed!' Jemima murmured, shaking her hand. 'Mr. DuPont's daughter, of course?'

'Naturally,' the girl said.

'Perhaps you will do me the honour of coming back to the yacht, Marcelle,' Mr. DuPont said. 'Bring your friends as well, of course. As you have so unfortunately wrecked your own tea-party, perhaps you would take tea with me?'

'Oh, I say, that's ripping!' Bessie Bunter put in.

But Babs, dimpling acceptance, paused.

'Thanks!' she said. 'But wait a minute. What about the person in the caves?'

Mr. DuPont gave a faint start. Jemima, watching him, polished her monocle thoughtfully.

'The person in the caves?' DuPont repeated.

'Yes.' And Babs went on to relate their adventure. 'We heard a moan and terrible shrieks, and then we saw a figure.'

Mr. DuPont smiled.

'Your fancy, perhaps,' he suggested lightly. 'But, still—' He looked at the two men from the launch, both Englishmen dressed in white uniform. 'Sandy! Tex! Perhaps you will go into the cave and take a look round,' he suggested. 'If anyone is there, bring them back to the yacht. But now, girls, you are my guests. Jump in!'

The launch was big and roomy. The party was large, but there was sufficient room for all of them, despite Clara's argument that Bessie occupied the space of three.

Soon they saw sailors on the deck of the *Catherine*, dressed smartly in white suits, with peaked caps. They caught the glint of polished brasswork, reflecting with brilliance the rays of the sun. A collapsible steel ladder rattled downwards from the upper deck.

The chums beamed. They were entranced. Interestedly they gazed round the yacht-along the gleaming deck, at the spotless paintwork, at the glittering brasswork. Sailors moved about, pulling up to salute smartly as Mr. DuPont gazed towards them. The ship was evidently an expensive vessel, and its crew remarkably well trained.

'Marvellous!' Marcelle exclaimed, with rapture. 'I see nozzings like it since I go on ze liner last year for ze cruise! And papa - he came from my France in this?'

'He did.' Mr. DuPont smiled. 'You may see him tomorrow or the next day,' he promised. 'You will like that?'

'I lof it!' Marcelle said ecstatically. 'But you say papa is here on beeziness. But what beeziness? I not understand.'

Mr. DuPont shook his head.

'I did not ask him,' he replied. 'But your father is a famous jeweller in Paris, is he not? It was in connection with his business, of course. Now, let me see! He mentioned calling at the bank. That would be the Banque de France, would it not?'

'No.' Marcelle shook her head. 'It ees ze private bank - ze Excelsior.'

Jemima, glancing at DuPont, did not miss the satisfied gleam that came into his eyes.

'Perhaps' - Mr. DuPont paused - 'perhaps you could get in touch with him?' he suggested. 'And yet-I don't know. He did mention the name of the manager, but I have forgotten it. He and the manager are friends, I understand.'

'Yes, yes. I haf often heard Papa speak of ze bank manager,' Marcelle agreed.

'I was thinking - you might write or send a wire,' Mr. DuPont went on, 'if you sent it "care of the manager." What is the manager's name, by the way?'

Again Marcelle shook her head.

'Vraiment, I do not know.'

'Sure?'

'I am sorry. I do not remember,' Marcelle said. 'But wait! I haf a lettaire from papa at school - in my bureau. Zere, I zink, he mention ze name of ze manager who ees ze friend. I send it when I get back, n'est ce pas?'

'Yes,' Mr. DuPont agreed. 'When you write, tell him you have seen me. But now, perhaps, you would like to look round?' He turned, beckoning to Babs & Co., who were following behind. 'This way, girls!' he cried. 'Yvonne, will you slip along and see the chief steward? Tell him to serve tea on the after-deck!'

Yvonne nodded. The man, with a cordial smile, led the way down a brass-railed companion into the interior of the ship. A row of neat, white-painted cabin doors met their eyes.

'These are the living quarters,' he said. 'Over there is the music-room. We have a piano aboard, of course, and a gramophone. Upstairs, in the wireless cabin, we have a receiving and a transmitting set, fitted with television. I will show it to you afterwards.'

The Cliff House chums were entranced. Step by step they followed their host through the lovely yacht, excitedly discussing its wonders and its beauties as they peeped from cabin to cabin. It seemed to them like a dream ship.

Only one member of the party did not say anything. That was Jemima.

She strolled along in the rear of the rest quizzically examining each apartment. The smoke-room, the lounge, the rest-room, the library and the dining-room were visited each in turn, and then they all descended into the crew's quarters—a series of trim cabins, neat and spick and span and orderly.

Mr. DuPont opened the door of each, showing them round. But at the end of the corridor he paused. There was a door there, shut. He gave it one look, hesitated, and then turned.

'Well, shall we go back?' he asked. 'I expect tea will be ready.'

'Oh, good egg!' enthused Bessie.

They turned about. Jemima stood still, fingering her monocle.

She waited until the rest of the party had passed her, and then casually lounged in the rear until the bottom of the companion-way was reached. But there she paused, allowing the others to ascend. She stopped, as though fumbling with her stocking.

Babs, turning with one foot upon the bottom step of the companion, looked round. 'Jimmy, coming?'

Jemima frowned ferociously.

'In a minute. Dash it, I can't do my stocking up with everybody looking on, what?' she said. 'Worst of these gadgets!'

'Oh, I see!' laughed Babs, and flew off after the rest of her chums.

But when she had disappeared, Jemima straightened up. She adjusted her monocle, gazed thoughtfully up the companion, and then, turning, strolled without hurry to the door which Mr. DuPont had not opened.

She pushed at it. It opened at her touch. Jemima peered in and then, with a quick glance along the deserted corridor, slipped into the tiny cabin on the other side, and allowed the door to swing to after her.

'Aha!' she breathed.

She looked round. Behind her monocle her eyes gleamed faintly. For this was not like the rest of the cabins which she and her chums had viewed.

It was clean, but it was not orderly. A wire bed stood in one corner, raised a few inches from the floor by trestles, and on that wire bed was an untidy mass of blankets covering a straw mattress. There were crumbs on the floor.

'Interesting, what?' Jemima murmured.

She gazed with absorption round the room. A tiny porthole, high in the wall, dimmed the light which filtered in from outside. But it was sufficient to show Jemima, just above the bed, a stout hook which had been screwed into the wall, and from which hook depended a length of thick chain ending in a steel bracelet.

Jemima's eyes lit up. 'H'm!' she said.

She stepped across to the chain. She took it in her hands. The bracelet at the bottom was fitted with a lock, and Jemima needed no telling to what use it had been put.

Her eyes gleamed with suppressed excitement now, for it was borne upon her that someone had been in this cabin - that someone a prisoner, chained for safety to the wall. But who? 'Mystery!' Jemima decided. 'Still, no harm in having a look round, what?'

She gazed down at the tumbled pile of blankets on the bed, moved one aside. And for the second time she started as she saw, peeping from between the bottom blanket and the mattress, the edge of a sheet of paper. She plucked it quickly from its hiding-place.

'Aha! The plot thickens!' the immaculate one muttered.

She held the paper up. It was a leaf from a notebook, evidently hastily torn across. There were several lines of writing on it, in a peculiar hand, the letters moving in all directions and oft-times irregular and jerky.

Jemima screwed up her face. The writing was in pencil, and was, as she saw at a glance, written in French. But it was not easy to read in that dim light.

She took it nearer the porthole.

'Jolly little document, what?' she murmured.

But she read it. Jemima was not considered one of the brightest scholars at Cliff House, chiefly because she found lessons such a fag; but at languages she really did excel. French was almost as easy to read, to Jemima, as English.

She read, translating as she went along: 'To whoever may find this,' the note ran. 'I, Andre Biquet, jeweller of the Rue de la Paix, Paris—'

Jemima jumped.

'Marcelle's father!' she exclaimed.

'—am a prisoner on board the yacht *Catherine*. I was kidnapped in Boulogne on the night of June 1st. A consignment of valuable jewels, totalling in value some fifty thousand pounds, have been wrested from me by force. I earnestly ask—'

There the writing ended.

'So, so!' muttered Jemima, and she thrilled. For now she knew why Alphonse Duprez was in the district. Now she knew why he had shown such an absorbed interest in Marcelle Biquet.

Marcelle's father—a prisoner on this yacht, with fifty thousand pounds' worth of jewellery in his possession! Marcelle's father, chained here, agonisingly writing this message with his one free hand—perhaps in the dark, in the intervals when he was not watched!

But how had Marcelle's father hoped to get that ashore?

How—

Jemima's eyes shone suddenly as hard as steel.

Duprez! This was the man who called himself DuPont. This was his latest coup. She had discovered it. DuPont was seeking to rob the father of one of her friends - was actually using that best friend for his own purposes.

She stood for a few moments, a truly intense expression on her face. Then she smiled. Carefully fiddling with the torn sheet of notepaper, she slipped it into her pocket and trod towards the door.

She opened it.

And then for a moment she recoiled. For, facing her, her face full of suspicion, a cold, hard gleam in her grey-blue eyes, stood Yvonne DuPont!

CHAPTER V

Where is Jemima?

'OH!' said Jemima, and fixed her monocle in her eye. 'Ahem! Nice boat, what? Jolly, eh? Life on the rolling waves, and all that sort of thing! What ho for the jolly old Jolly Roger—'

Yvonne eyed her suspiciously.

'What were you doing in that cabin?' she asked.

'That - Oh, this place!' Jemima looked surprised. 'Just popped in, what? Sometimes have trouble with the old stockings in public, what? Looks untidy - one's stocking hanging like a concertina round one's ankle! Ever had trouble with your stockings?'

Yvonne gave her a hard look.

'Is that all you went in that room for?'

'Well, I might have gone in there for a quiet sleep!' Jemima said cheerfully. 'If I've been trespassing I apologise.'

Nobody, not knowing Jemima and seeing her then, would possibly have imagined the keen mind working under the cover of that innocently idiotic expression of hers.

'Oh, no, no!' Yvonne said, but she bit her lips. 'As a matter of fact, that room isn't open as a rule. It-it's a sort of punishment-room,' she explained. 'But tea's ready.'

'Oh, good!' Jemima beamed. 'I could nibble at a slice of bread-and-butter. I might even manage a ham sandwich, what - if there's any ham, and if there's any strength in my arm to lift it. Yoicks! So that's the ship's prison, is it? Well, we have to learn, what? Thanks for explaining—'

'Oh, not at all!' Yvonne said shortly.

And her suspicions entirely set at rest now, she led the way to the after-deck where a table had been laid and the Cliff House party was seated to a merry meal.

After a wonderful tea, the girls had another look round the beautiful yacht.

It was getting on, then, and as the girls had passes which expired at six o'clock, a move had to be made. A regretful party, they assembled on the upper deck.

'Well, it's been ever so jolly,' Babs assured Yvonne and her father, 'and thanks awfully! If you are stopping here for any length of time you must come and look us up at Cliff House. We'd be pleased to see you.'

'Yes, indeed!' Marcelle exclaimed. 'Yvonne, you moost come - to see me,' she added. 'I haf so many zings to talk about.'

'Oh, thank you!' Yvonne smiled. 'I should love to,' she said. 'When?'

'When you like. Now?' Marcelle suggested eagerly. 'I like to show you over ze famous school.'

But Yvonne shook her head, laughing.

'I'm afraid I can't do that,' she said, and then caught a look from her father. 'Well, soon,' she promised. 'Sooner than you think, perhaps. Good-bye now.'

They shook hands. In a laughing group they tumbled into the launch and were rushed ashore, waving to the figures of Yvonne and her father as they stood by the taffrail, fluttering handkerchiefs. Outside the big caves they alighted.

'Well, that's over!' Babs said regretfully. 'What a pity! Still, it was lovely, and Mr. DuPont and Yvonne are awfully nice. I hope we shall see more of them.'

They were all agreed on that point.

They set off for the school, climbing the steep cliff path. But, as they turned with their faces towards Cliff House, Janet Jordan suddenly stopped.

'My hat!'

They all paused.

'What's the matter?'

'Jemima! Where's Jemima?'

And they gazed blankly at one another. For Jemima, their chum, was not with them. Nor, indeed, did they remember having seen her from the moment of saying good-bye.

Where was Jemima?

CHAPTER VI No Joke for Jemima!

JEMIMA was still on the yacht.

Jemima, as a matter of fact, had slipped away while the goodbyes were being said - having taken an opportunity to say her own good-bye first. Unnoticed, she had disappeared down the companion-way, and at the moment that the Cliff House chums were stepping into the launch was actually in Yvonne's cabin.

There was much which Jemima suspected. There were a great many things, however, which were not clear. It was obvious that M. Biquet had been brought from France a prisoner on this boat. But where was M. Biquet now?

Events seemed to suggest, too, that Alphonse Duprez, although he had the Biquet jewels, had not yet disposed of them, otherwise why should he be imperilling himself by remaining in this vicinity?

And why those questions of his to Marcelle concerning the name of the manager of M. Biquet's bank?

Those things Jemima had to find out. Once she knew, she would feel herself on firmer ground. The jewels, if possible, she had to recover. M. Biquet, if she could find him, she must free.

So while Yvonne and her father were waving their farewells to the Cliff House chums, Jemima was busy in the cabin which had been pointed out to her and Babs & Co. that afternoon as belonging to Yvonne herself.

It was a neat, trim cabin. There was nothing in it to suggest that it belonged to the daughter of a cunning criminal. But Jemima was not looking for obvious signs, and did not expect to find them.

She stepped into the cabin, closing the door behind her, never noticing, in her absorption, the soft click it gave.

She looked around her.

At one side of the cabin, under the porthole, stood a desk. It was entirely bare, save for a sheet of blotting-paper and an inkpot, but a drawer set in its centre seemed to suggest possibilities.

Jemima's eyes gleamed. She stepped over to it. 'Aha!' she muttered, as she opened the drawer.

For a litter of paper came to her eyes - sheets of paper, covered with handwriting in French.

Jemima picked up several of the sheets. She examined them closely. Then she gave a whistle.

'Phew! So this is where our spartan Yvonne fits into the picture! Forgery - what?'

There was a resemblance on each of the sheets to that same distraught handwriting on the piece of notepaper she had found in the cabin of the prisoner. It was obvious that Yvonne had been carefully copying Marcelle's father's handwriting.

Jemima commenced to read, construing into English. 'Dear—' And then there was a blank.

'Dear who? Odds bods, got it!' Jemima murmured. 'That is why they tried to quiz Marcelle. They know that the manager of the bank is a friend of Marcelle's father. They know, in that case, that if Marcelle's father wrote to him he would address the manager by his name. Eureka! Daylight begins to dawn. Read on, Jimmy, my sleuth!'

'Dear —, — I am sending the jewels by special messenger.

The man's name is DuPont. He is one of my friends, and you can trust him implicitly. He knows all about the transaction. I regret it is not possible for me to come myself; but I have sprained an ankle and cannot move. As it is necessary for me to get back to France, will you kindly give Mr. DuPont a cheque for the fifty thousand pounds, which is the price we agreed upon, made payable to me. Do not cross it, however.

'Your sincere friend,
'ANDRE BIQUET.'

Jemima's eyes gleamed.

'One to yours truly,' she murmured. 'Artful little game.'

DuPont takes the jewels to the bank manager with this forged note. Then, recognising M. Biquet's writing, the bank manager hands over the cheque. Nice little scheme. So simple. But the missing link is the bank manager's name. Aha! Now we're getting somewhere.'

She started then as footsteps were heard outside, hastily ramming the forgeries back into the drawer. With quick decision she dived behind a curtain in the corner of the room, hiding herself among Yvonne's clothes which hung there.

But the footsteps stopped at the door of the next cabin. There was a rattle as the door opened. Jemima heaved a sigh of relief. 'Phew! Reprieved! They're not coming here!'

She stood still, listening. Now from the next cabin voices reached her ears. The voice of Alphonse Duprez himself, and of his daughter Yvonne. The dividing wall, thin in construction, brought every word plainly to the ears of the Cliff House girl.

'You'll go to Cliff House,' Duprez was saying.

'But when?'

'Now.'

'But it might look—'

The man laughed.

'Not it. Yvonne, am I a fool? I have planned everything. I planned it even as we sat at tea. You have an excuse to go to Cliff House.'

'An excuse?'

'Marcelle's camera. I took it when she wasn't looking. The little fool was so excited that she never even noticed she left without it. So things are easy. Now listen! Take the camera back. Ask for Marcelle. Tell her she left her camera.'

'Ho, ho!' muttered Jemima.

'That gives you the excuse to get into the school,' Duprez went on. 'Then get Marcelle alone-in her study-and after that make some excuse to get her out of the room. Search the bureau for the letter. We can't send that letter to the bank until we know the manager's name.'

'Right! I understand.'

'And you'll manage it?'

'Easily!'

'Good! The sooner the better. To-morrow I will take the letter and the jewels. To-morrow night, when the tide is at the full, we set sail; and in France I cash the cheque, you forging the signature on the back. As for Biquet—' He shrugged. 'Well, we will decide what to do with him later.'



Jimmy had locked herself aboard the sinister yacht!

There was a movement.

Jemima polished her monocle. Now she knew she would have to be careful. Yvonne would be coming into her cabin to change for her visit to Cliff House, so she must get out quickly. She must get to Cliff House before Yvonne. Not if she could help it should Yvonne get the letter from Marcelle's bureau.

She tiptoed towards the door, and then, turning the knob, she paused.

For the door, though she tugged it towards her, remained fast.

Jemima gave a start. Then she pulled a face. She peered forward, examining the lock, and, straightening up, whistled softly in dismay. For she saw now what she had not guessed before. The door had an automatic lock, and, though it could be opened from the outside with readiness, it could not be opened from the inside without a key. And that key, obviously, was in the possession of Yvonne.

Jemima was a prisoner on this yacht of villainy - a prisoner by her own blunder!

'Oh, Marcelle, seen Jimmy?' Marcelle shook her head.

'No. She haf not arrive?' she asked.

'No.'

Babs & Co. were worried, for they had returned to Cliff House and there was still no sign of Jimmy.

'Nor my lettaire,' Marcelle said, with a sad little shake of the head. 'Nor ze telegram from papa. And I have lost my camera. Ze so beautiful camera wiz ze red case that papa bought me on my anniversary.'

'Oh, crumbs! What hard lines, Marcelle! Cheer up, old thing!' Marcelle smiled faintly.

'It ees zat I am cheer up,' she said quaintly. 'Ze camera I care not mooch about. But ze lettaire and ze wire - ah, zat break ze heart of me! Babsie, you zink it may arrive?'

'Oh, surely!' Babs said comfortingly. 'The post office isn't closed yet.'

'Zank you,' Marcelle said gratefully. 'I go, zen, and look for ze boy in ze hat who bring ze wire. I wait for heem at ze gates, near ze tuckshop, so zat I see heem as soon as he come. Au revoir! '

'Au revoir!'

'But, I say, hold on a minute, Marcelle!' Bessie Bunter said, with sudden anxiety. 'Ahem! Did you mention tuckshop?'

'I say I wait at ze tuckshop,' Marcelle said.

'Oh, good!' Bessie said with satisfaction. 'We'll have a snack together, then. I mean, of course, I couldn't bear you to wait there all alone, old thing, so I'll come and keep you company. Oh, no, don't thank me!' Bessie went on hastily, as Marcelle opened her mouth. 'It's a pleasure, I assure you. Anything for a friend. And Babs will do my prep for me. Won't you, Babs?'

'Why, you schemer!' Babs gasped.

'There you are, I told you so! A real sport, Babs!' Bessie said magnificently. 'Well, that's settled, then. Come on, Marcelle, we'll go now. I'll have a ginger-pop,' she added. 'We can stand in the doorway of the tuckshop, you know, and watch the gates. Tell you what,' she added generously. 'I'll stand treat!'

Marcelle's eyes opened.

'Zank you, Bessie! Zat is ver' kind of you.'

'Kind? Not at all,' Bessie explained expansively. 'Not at all.'

Nun-not a little bit. We Bunters are renowned for our generosity, you know. But— Ahem!'

And Bessie paused.

'Watch out! This is where the catch comes!' Clara grinned. Bessie sniffed with dignity.

'There's no catch,' she said. 'I mean, I like Marcelle. Dud-don't I, Marcelle?'

'Oui - yes. I hope so,' Marcelle agreed.

'And you like me?'

'Ah, mais oui - of course!'

'Oh, good! I mean, of course!' Bessie said hastily. 'Then, in that case, old thing, perhaps you wu- won't mind doing me a small favour. The fact is, you know I've been expecting a postal order.' A perfect howl went up from the inmates of Study No. 4.

'Blessed if I can see what there is to laugh at in that!' Bessie said peevishly. 'I said I've been expecting a postal order. Well, I have, bother it! I have, so you needn't cackle like that. I think I mentioned it this morning, Marcelle.'

'You did, and yesterday morning, and the morning before that, and every morning since the term began!' gurgled Clara.

'But, as a matter of fact, I've been disappointed.'

'Oh, never!' scoffed Mabel Lynn.

'Some unexpected delay on the part of the postal authorities.'

'Or the sender!' put in Babs.

'Look here—' roared Bessie.

'Ha, ha, ha! '

'Take no notice of them, Marcelle!' Bessie said disdainfully. 'They're jealous, that's what it is. They know what ripping postal orders my titled relatives send me, you know, and so they like to make fun when - when there's a delay. Ahem! Well, as I said, I'll stand treat if you'll cash my postal order in advance. Of course, I'll give it to you as soon as ever it turns up—'

'If ever!' Clara Trevlyn put in.

'I lend you a sheelling,' Marcelle offered. 'Zen you stand me treat when ze postal order arrive. But come on, Bessie! We go!' And Bessie, with a haughty tilt of her snub nose at her chums, went. While they, still laughing, followed more leisurely.

Arm-in-arm, she and Marcelle strolled down to the tuckshop.

The tuckshop was near the gates, and, as Bessie had taken pains to point out, the door of the tuckshop overlooked the gates. They were about to stroll into that establishment when Marcelle suddenly clutched the fat junior's arm.

'Look-look!' she cried excitedly.

'Eh-what?' And Bessie blinked towards the gates. 'Oh, dear!' she gasped. 'Yvonne!'

For it was the girl from the yacht - cool, pretty - who was sauntering through the gates. Marcelle's little face lit up. 'Yvonne! You com' to see me?'

Yvonne smiled.

'Well, in a way,' she said. 'But I came really to bring you your camera. You left it on the yacht, you know.'

'Oh!' Marcelle gasped. 'Oh, zank you - zank you! I miss eet. I not remembaire zat I leave eet on ze yacht. But you,' she exclaimed delightedly - 'how kind it ees zat you bring eet back! But, see com!'
she added, tugging at Yvonne's arm. 'You in no hurry - no?'

'No,' Yvonne laughed.

'Zen I show you ze school?' Marcelle asked. 'I haf one hour before ze call-over. You com' to my study and talk wiz me-eh? But com' first to ze tuckshop, and haf ze geenger-beer!'

And, seeing that Yvonne was quite willing, Marcelle rapturously tugged her into the tuckshop, into which Bessie had already disappeared, the rest of the chums following.

Marcelle was excited. She was proud of Yvonne. Yvonne so pretty, so accomplished, speaking such perfect English, was, she felt, a credit to the country to which they both belonged.

It was not often that Marcelle had an opportunity to entertain a French friend from outside the school, and during her short acquaintance with Yvonne she had grown very fond of that girl, never realising the real treachery which underlay that charming exterior. And Yvonne really could be charming.

The ginger-beer was drunk, and voted good. The tarts were eaten, and voted excellent.

But it was Yvonne who insisted upon paying, Yvonne who left behind half-a-crown in order to keep Bessie employed in the tuckshop, and afterwards strolled with Marcelle, at the little French girl's eager invitation, to her study.

But in the tuckshop Yvonne also left something else. She mentioned it as soon as she entered Marcelle's study.

'Oh, dear!' she exclaimed, in sudden distress. 'I shall have to go back!'

'Back? Back to ze yacht?' Yvonne laughed.

'No; to the tuckshop. I left my handbag behind.'

'Oh, zat is unlucky!' Marcelle said. 'But, see, you seet down - in ze easy-chair, I run back. It ees ze honour to breeng ze bag for you! Seet here!' And Marcelle, in her excited, fussy little way, patted the cushion of the armchair and beckoned the other forward. 'I absent myself four meenutes only,' she promised.

Yvonne smiled. She sat down. But as soon as ever she heard Marcelle's footsteps die to silence in the corridor she rose again. She went to the door, which Marcelle had left open, closed it, looked for the key, and pulled a face when she saw that it was not in the lock. Still, never mind! Marcelle was out of the way, and while Marcelle was out of the way she must act.

The bureau! Marcelle's letters! One of those letters gave the name of the banker to whom she must write!

The bureau stood in a corner near the window. With one eye on the door, the French girl tripped across to it. Her breath came a little faster as she threw down the flap and searched among the contents beneath. And then her eyes gleamed.

For there, neatly tied round with blue ribbon, were the very letters of which she was in search, carefully, neatly, lovingly kept together. Her hand trembled slightly as it thrust forward to take them.

CHAPTER VII Just in Time!

IN the meantime, what had happened to Jemima?

Jemima, on the *Catherine*, faced by the locked door, hearing the sounds of movement in the cabin next door, was in the biggest quandary of her life. She knew that any minute that door might be opened from the outside, that Yvonne might come in.

'Action!' Jemima muttered.

She turned, looking towards the porthole. The room, except for the curtain, held no place of concealment, and the curtain, for obvious reasons, was out of the question now.

Outwardly Jemima was still as cool and as collected as ever, but inwardly her heart was racing. For she had no illusions as to what would happen to her if she were caught.

The porthole was her only chance.

Jemima stepped across the room and opened the porthole, gazing out towards the shore. There was a noise below. Something rattled from the deck above, snaking past her eyes.

Jemima drew back as she realised that it was the steel collapsible ladder, lowered for the benefit of the officers returning in the launch, which had just seen Babs & Co. off.

Quick as thought, she flattened herself against the wall as two shapes ascended, climbing upwards past the porthole on their way to the deck above.

'Ahoy!' Jemima muttered. 'Jimmy, is this your chance?'

She peered out again. Originally her intention had been to lie hidden in the yacht and wait for nightfall. But circumstances and the need to get back to Cliff House had put an end to that little plan.

She gazed below. The launch rolled on the surface of the water, moored to the steel ladder. It was a roomy launch, and Jemima had already taken stock of it, had mental details of its construction in her mind.

She knew that if she could get to the ladder she could reach the launch without being seen from above, owing to the sloping sides of the yacht. But the porthole had not been meant as an emergency exit.

'Tight squeeze!' Jemima muttered.

But the task of getting through that porthole was not nearly so difficult as she had imagined. She got through without any terrible effort, skimmed like a cat down the ladder outside, and reached the launch.

'Well, here we are!' she muttered. 'What next, old monkey?' But she knew. Jemima had a brain capable of very quick and very clever thinking when she liked to exercise it. Her plans were cut and dried.

She knew that in a few minutes the sailors would be back in the launch in order to take Yvonne to the mainland for her journey to Cliff House. Jemima's intention was to go with that party.

At the back of the launch was a big locker. Jemima threw the lid open.

'And now for my famous sardine trick!' she muttered.

Into the locker she bundled, coiled up on the floor at the bottom. The space was small and cramped, and she had to curl herself into a ball to accommodate her slight bulk. But it was done.

Cautiously she pulled down the lid, allowing it to fall with the flat of her hand pressed beneath it to prevent its banging as it made contact. Then, breathing hard, she lay still, waiting.

Presently the launch gave to the pressure of footsteps, voices reached her ears, and the engine was started up. She felt the launch moving beneath her, felt it shooting forward, heard the rush and gurgle of the water as the keen nose of the boat threw it up on either side.

'Hurrah, we're off!' Jemima muttered.

Chug, chug! went the boat.

Jemima shifted a little. She cocked her ears, listening. The water, rushing by, drowned sound, but among the roaring she caught voices. She wished she knew what they were talking about. Every word she could glean from the enemy camp might be of the utmost value to her now. Dare she risk just a peep?

She dared.

Very cautiously Jemima pushed the lid of the locker above her head.

It opened an inch. Raising her head, Jemima peered through.

She smiled gently as she saw that the backs of the two ship's officers and Yvonne were towards her, and they were talking. The men were Tex and Sandy. Sandy, the wheel in his hands, was talking.

'We'll go along to the cave,' he was saying. 'Might wake the old chap up a bit. Narrow shave with those kids. Didn't he yell! We won't let him do that again! '

'You're bringing him back tonight?' Yvonne questioned.

'Yes. The boss wouldn't have him on the yacht during the day - in case some nosey-parkers came shoving their oars in. The yacht is attracting attention hereabouts, and the boss is afraid some of the officials might start quizzing. Still, we'll trip along and have another look at him now! '

He turned very quickly. Jemima soundlessly dropped the lid back into place. So she had learned something. There was a prisoner in the caves, and that prisoner, if she made no mistake, was Marcelle's father!

Hidden aboard the yacht during the night, hidden in the caves during the day. Duprez worked well, and thought fiendishly. Outwardly his yacht was an innocent vessel, open for all to inspect. But what secrets it contained!

More than ever did Jemima realise she would have to be careful.

But now the boat was grounding. There was a bump, the engine stopped. Voices again, movements - a swaying of the launch and heavy steps which suggested the crew were disembarking.

Jemima lay still, waiting until the voices she now heard should die away. She knew from the snatch of conversation she had overheard that, as soon as Yvonne had disappeared, the two men were going to the cave.

Marcelle's father was in there. Marcelle's father had screamed.

What had they been doing to him?

In the locker Jemima gritted her teeth. Not like Jemima that, but the realisation of the vast plot in which she was now involved was beginning to have an effect even on Jemima's cold-steel nerves.

Still, there was no help for it. She must lie low. And, meantime, Yvonne was speeding to Cliff House - to get that letter. In the locker Jemima was doing some incredibly swift thinking; debating many a course of action.

The secrets she knew. What should she do?

The gang had Marcelle's father. It was a case obviously for the police.

The police!

Jemima thought of that. Was it her duty to call in the police?

But, no! Duprez was too artful, too clever. Her father's past experiences were in her mind.

This man, slippery as an eel, cunning as a monkey, had no doubt provided for every contingency. It was Duprez's way to think out every possible detail beforehand, to arrange for the probability of things happening. If she called in the police-what then? They would go to Duprez's yacht. They might search. But Duprez was too clever to allow them to find anything.

Even the evidence of the note, which she had in her possession, Jemima did not trust. Duprez, presumably, knew nothing about that note, but Duprez would find some way of accounting for it.

Her best course, Jemima felt, was keeping what she knew to herself, by working on her own. The thing Duprez would not have calculated for, which he could not possibly guess, was that a schoolgirl was matching her wits against his. That was her safety point, the fact that Duprez did not guess. That, even if he did, he would not be afraid of her. She must work-alone!

Ah!

The men were moving away. Jemima heard plainly their heavy boots crunching the shifting shingle of the beach.

Up went the lid. She sighed with relief as she saw the two men disappearing in the direction of the large cave. She straightened up a little, waiting until they had entered the cave, then she slipped from the launch.

She would have to run-run! 'Oh, by Jove!' Jemima gasped.

But urgency was the order, and urgent she must be. What a shame she was so off the beaten track! No chance of a lift, and Cliff House was two miles away. Well, it had to be done, so she must do it. Half walking, half running, Jemima set off, shooting across the grass towards the road.

And in what seemed an incredibly short time, Jemima was dashing across the quad of the school. Her eyes suddenly gleamed, for coming out of the school in a great hurry was Marcelle Biquet.

Marcelle's big, dark eyes opened in wonder. 'Jimmy!'

'What-ho, there!' Jemima gasped. 'Marcelle, is Yvonne in the school?'

'Oui, oui,' Marcelle nodded, in wonderment. 'She ees in my study,' she said.

'Right! She's in there now?'

'Oui!'

'Good!'

Up the stairs she went, two at a time.

She reached the Fourth Form corridor without stopping, hurled herself in Study No. 3. Yvonne was there at the open bureau, in the act of extracting a packet of letters. Like a flash Jemima raced across the study.

Yvonne, with a startled gasp, turned, the letters in her hand. 'Thanks!' Jemima drawled.

And before the other could prevent her she snatched at the letters, ramming them into her pocket.

The French girl wheeled, fury in her face, her eyes two glittering points of light. For a second there was a pause while Jemima, breathless but calm to the last, backed towards the open window. Then Yvonne leapt.

'Give me those letters!' she grated. 'I think not,' Jemima laughed.

And as the girl sprang she put out one foot. Yvonne went sprawling across the room.

At the same moment the door opened. The startled face of little Marcelle peered in. She gave an exclamation at the sight of the fallen Yvonne. Quickly she looked at Jemima.

'Oh, what ees ze mattaire?' she cried.

'The matter?' Yvonne sat up furiously. 'The matter is that I have been insulted and attacked!' she said furiously. 'That girl is mad!'

'But I not understan'!' Marcelle cried in amazement. 'Jimmy—'

But Jemima only laughed. With her hand behind her, she had worked the bundle of letters on to the window-sill. Those letters, she felt, would be safer out of the way until Yvonne had left the school. She swung forward now.

'What is there to understand?' she asked lightly.

'But—' Marcelle looked bewildered. 'Jimmy, you—'

'Chin up!' Jemima said nonchalantly, and put her eyeglass into its accustomed place. 'No cause for alarm, old spartan-none at all! Yvonne and I - we were having-well, a spot of argument, what?'

And she smiled at the French girl.

But Yvonne, for a moment glaring at her, showed her teeth; her eyes flamed.

'We were having no argument! You insulted and attacked me!' she cried. She paused. 'Because I am French and strange to this school you thought you could play a trick upon me. I am sorry now I came!' she added haughtily. 'I see that I made a mistake. Marcelle, good-bye!'

Marcelle looked stunned.

'Yvonne, you not go? You not leave? You haf no quarrel wiz me?'

'I am sorry. I must go,' Yvonne said stiffly. 'But—'

'You may come and see me - on the yacht. I like you, Marcelle, but I do not like the treatment your friends give to me. Good-bye!'

'Good-bye!' Jemima mockingly answered.

But Yvonne, with an angry glance at the Eton-cropped girl, went out. Marcelle uttered a distressed cry and ran after her. 'Yvonne! Yvonne, please-please let me explain!'

Their footsteps died out down the corridor. Jemima stood still.

Then she frowned.

'Artful-artful! Now, what's the little germ in Yvonne's mighty brain? And what causes her to leave without the letters? Grey matter to the fore, Jimmy. Put yourself in her place. She couldn't very well ask for the letters in front of Marcelle, naturally. Then she's trusting to luck to get them some other way. H'm!' And Jemima thoughtfully walked to the window; glanced at the sill. Then she frowned. For the letters were not there!

'Awkward!' she murmured.

She leaned over the sill, peering down. Then she pulled a face.

For she was just in time to see the letters - vanishing for ever!

For they had slipped from the sloping window-sill, dropping into the funnel-shaped top of a main drainpipe which caught water from the roof.

Even as Jemima watched, the bundle of letters was carried down the wide funnel.

They disappeared. 'Gone!' muttered Jemima.

She stared at the water-pipe. They were gone-no doubt about that. For that water-pipe was sunk into the ground, where it joined the underground drain, and doubtless the letters by now were being whirled towards the sea.

For a moment Jemima felt compunction. Marcelle had treasured those letters, and now they were lost for ever.

'Poor kid!' she muttered. 'Still—'

She stood up. Poor kid! But was it not the best thing, in the circumstances? While they existed there was peril for Marcelle.

Perhaps it was for the best. It was for the best. And Jemima slowly smiled. She had vowed that she would baffle the plotters. She had vowed they should never have those letters. She had won.

'First round to you, Jimmy lad!' she muttered triumphantly to herself. 'But now there are two more rounds to play. First, get Marcelle's father from the clutches of those scoundrels. Second, rescue the fifty thousand pounds' worth of jewellery. Tough task, old spartan, but you've got to do it. And you shall do it-for the old guv'nor's sake! '

And she laughed softly, thrillingly, rather as if she were enjoying the prospect of pitting her wits against the scoundrels' wits again.

But then a serious frown came into her calm face. A glint showed in her cool, grey eyes. She had won the first round - yes. But that was the easiest.

The tasks she had set herself now were increasingly hard, especially as from this moment she would be suspected by Alphonse Duprez. Jemima, however, had a cool confidence in herself. One girl - against the most desperate criminal in Europe!

Jemima sighed.

'Let 'em all come!' she muttered. 'Hard work and hard knocks.'

The question is-what next? What of Marcelle? Should I tell her what I know?'

She debated the point. Then she felt in her pocket for the message which Marcelle's father had tried to complete. She searched hastily.

'That gone, too!' she muttered, and thought. 'What a life! No proof now!'

It was obvious that she had lost it. But its loss confronted Jemima with a serious difficulty. For that meant now that she had lost what might constitute her only proof that Marcelle's father was in the hands of those scoundrels on the Catherine.

And if she told Marcelle, how was she to prove it? And how would Marcelle - excitable, emotional - take it? Caution had to be her watchword - and to be cautious Jemima must keep things to herself until she had the gang tied up. Marcelle, in the present circumstances, was the last girl likely to exercise caution.

As if she wanted any confirmation upon that point, the voice of Marcelle, raised in excited anger, came to her ears through the open window from the quadrangle below.

'Jemima, she insult my friend from la belle France! I go, I see her! I tell her what I zink of her, and zen I spik to her nevaire again! I go!'

Jemima sighed.

'More trouble!' she muttered, and polished her eyeglass. And then she stiffened, as hurried footsteps were heard in the corridor outside.

Marcelle was coming to demand an explanation. What could Jemima say?

CHAPTER VIII No Good for Jemima!

'MARCELLE! '

'Just a minute, Marcelle!'

'I say, you know, don't do anything rash, Marcelle!'

'Jemima didn't mean anything.'

'Non, non, non!' Marcelle Biquet cried furiously. And, with flashing eyes and colour-mantled cheeks, tore herself angrily from the grip of the four girls who would have detained her. 'I go to see Jemima now!' she announced passionately. 'I go to tell zat girl what I zink of her!'

'But—'

'My countrywoman she haf insulted,' Marcelle went on. 'My countrywoman she haf attacked. She t'ink it ees ze joke-a joke!' And Marcelle spluttered angrily. 'Is eet ze joke zat Jemima upset ze French girl who come to ze school to see me because she ees ze friend of mine?' she asked bitterly. 'I go! Excusez moi!'

But the four girls who stood in Marcelle's path in the Fourth Form corridor of Cliff House School, showed no inclination of allowing Marcelle to go.

Babs frowned.

'Look here, Marcelle—'

'Non! I not look anywheres!' Marcelle cried angrily. 'Let me pass, s'il vous plait! I am in ze hurry! I go to—'

'Not yet.' Babs spoke calmly. 'First of all you're going to explain, Marcelle. Jimmy wouldn't have behaved to Yvonne DuPont as you say she did without reason!'

Marcelle's black eyes flashed.

'I tell you she insult her!' she cried angrily. 'Voila! Did I not see? I com' into my study and zere was Yvonne - on ze floor. Jemima was in ze room. Jemima attack her - oui! My eyes - I could not believe zem, but eet was true. Yvonne, she was ver' offended. She go back in what you call ze great huff. Now I return to ze study to find Jemima.'

'And start a first-class row,' Clara Trevlyn said.

'She insult my friend,' Marcelle defended with dignity. 'Well, Jimmy's your friend, too.'

'Jemima no longer my friend!' Marcelle contradicted.

'Oh, tut, tut, tut!' came a shocked voice behind the four. 'Too rash, mon enfant-child. Do my ears deceive me, or is it my own ancestral name I hear being taken in vain?'

Marcelle's eyes flamed. Babs and her three companions turned. 'Why, Jimmy!' Babs cried.

'Jemima—' Marcelle began very angrily. 'Look here—'

'Whoa!' Jemima Carstairs exclaimed. 'One at a time, what - as Nelson said when he took the Khyber Pass! Or wasn't it Nelson, Bessie?' she asked the fat girl, who was blinking at the unruffled Fourth Former through her thick round spectacles as though she could hardly believe her eyes. 'No, never mind, old spartan. You'll get brain fever if you think like that. Well, now,' she added, as she stuck the monocle into one eye and beamed upon them, 'What's the jolly old inquisition? You speak, Babs.'

Babs helplessly shook her head. She had to smile. 'Marcelle says that you insulted Yvonne DuPont.' Jemima looked shocked.

'Dear, dear!'

'Did you?'

'Well, hardly. I said one or two things, perhaps.'

'Marcelle says you attacked Yvonne.'

Jemima sighed.

'Too bad,' she cried - 'too bad! How one's motives can be misconstrued, to be sure. I did not attack, but - well, there was a little - what shall we call it? - argument. Yvonne fell over—'

'She say you push her over!' Marcelle cried angrily.

'Girl has imagination, obviously,' Jemima commented.

Babs, especially, felt surprised. Now looking back upon events, she decided that something strange had happened to Jemima. Jemima, in fact, had not been the same girl since she had seen her father off at Friardale Station that afternoon.

There had been something altogether mysterious in her conduct; there had been a strange coldness in her manner towards Yvonne DuPont, whom they had all met that afternoon for the first time, and who had entertained them very lavishly upon her father's yacht, the *Catherine*, which was moored in the bay.

And now Babs remembered it, Jemima had not been with them when they had left the yacht. She had returned somewhat excitedly, and in a great hurry, only ten minutes ago.

Babs frowned. She felt intrigued. Troubled, too. 'You insult Yvonne!' Marcelle was shrilling.

'Perhaps.' Jemima shrugged again. 'No offence, Marcelle,' she said. 'Sorry to have trodden on your jolly old corns and all that - what? But' - and she smiled - 'but let's not prolong the discussion.'

'I demand ze apology!' Marcelle said fiercely. Jemima looked pained.

'Oh, I say, now, don't ask for the impossible - what?' she pleaded. 'Marcelle, I love you dearly—'

'You apologise to my friend!' Marcelle persisted stubbornly.

'Sorry, my old Marseillaise—'

'At once!' Marcelle cried. 'Eef you not apologise, Jemima, zen I nevaire speak to you again!'

'Oh, I say!'

'Marcelle!'

'Go easy!'

But Jemima smiled.

'By-and-by,' she promised. 'When you're more sure that an apology is needed, Marcelle - what? When' - and here Jemima glanced at the French girl very queerly indeed - 'when you hear from your father, say.'

Marcelle started at that. And momentarily the anger faded out of her eyes. Her father! Marcelle was concerned for her father. 'What haf my papa to do with it?' Marcelle demanded. Jemima shrugged.

'Well, nothing perhaps. And then, again, perhaps something - what?' she asked enigmatically.

'There's something wrong with Jimmy!'

Barbara Redfern made that remark.

She made it in Study No. 4 while she and Mabs and Bessie were doing prep. Mabel Lynn, her brow corrugated over a mathematical problem, looked up and nodded absently. Bessie, in the throes of the 'French Revolution,' groaned.

'There's something wrong with Jimmy!' Babs repeated.

'Yes. And there's something wrong with this blessed logarithm!' Mabs muttered worriedly. 'Did you say something, Babs?'

'It's not like Jimmy to upset Yvonne,' Babs went on. 'It's not like her to fall out with Marcelle.'

'Well, Babs, what's the problem?' cut in Mabs.

'Nothing. I was just putting two and two together,' Babs said. 'It seems clear now that Jemima didn't leave the yacht when we did. She stayed on until later. And then she' rushed back to school just in time to have this row with Yvonne. Why?'

Mabs looked thoughtful. 'Well, why?'

'I don't know!' Babs looked a little worried. 'Jimmy might seem a duffer at times, but we know she's not. There's something about that yacht which we don't know - and which she does.'

At the same moment the door opened. A bright though worried little face peered in.

It was Marcelle Biquet. Babs looked up.

'Come in, Marcelle.'

'Not com' in. I jus' want to spik wiz you,' Marcelle said. 'My lettaire, Babsie - eet haf not come. Nor has ze telegram.'

'Oh!' said Babs.

She glanced sympathetically at the French girl. She knew that Marcelle was feeling worried about that letter. It was Wednesday now, and it had not arrived yet.

'You zink it will come?' Marcelle asked, with a pathetic faith in Babs's power to give confidence.

'Well, it's too late to-night, of course,' Babs said. 'But I shouldn't worry, Marcelle. Perhaps by first post to-morrow—'

'But I do worry,' Marcelle said. 'My papa - it is not like him. I—' And she stopped there as footsteps sounded behind her, and Jemima looked in.

Marcelle stiffened. Her cheeks went crimson, and she frigidly drew to one side.

Jemima eyed her.

'You going in, or coming out?' she asked affably. 'After you.' Marcelle's answer was to toss her head and stride off down the corridor.

'Cross-what?' Jemima said. 'Poor old Marcelle! Well, she'll get over it, I expect, especially when— Ahem! If you merry old cripples have finished prep I thought one of you would like to join me in a game of draughts, or something energetic, in the Common-room-what? You, Babs?'

'Well, I've finished,' Babs said. 'Mabs—'

'Oh, I shall be hours!' Mabs groaned. Bessie blinked up.

'Oh, really, Babs, if you've finished, you ought to come and do my prep!' she cried. 'Tell you what,' she added generously. 'You finish my prep and I'll go and play draughts with Jemima! You know what a dab I am at draughts!'

'Stick to prep, old thing,' Jemima advised seriously. 'Babs—'

'Coming,' said Babs.

'But what about my prep?' howled Bessie.

'Oh, burn it!' suggested Jemima cheerfully. 'Or eat it!' And, leaving Bessie glowering, the two quitted the room.

But outside, Jemima gripped Babs's arm. She did not head towards the Common-room, but turned the captain of the Fourth in the opposite direction. Babs looked surprised.

'Jimmy—'

'All right,' Jemima breathed, 'that was bluff. Babs, come to my study, will you? I want to talk to you. I want,' Jemima said, a steely glint coming into her grey eyes, 'to tell you a story. But I'm only going to tell it to you on one condition.'

'And that?' Babs asked.

'Is that you promise on your honour before I start, not to breathe a single word of what I say. I may need your help, Babs.'

'Lead on,' said Babs quietly.

CHAPTER IX
A Well-earned Sixpence!

JEMIMA'S conduct, when she reached the study, was certainly peculiar. She held the door open for Babs to enter, and then carefully locked it.

For a moment she stared into the fireplace. And now Babs, looking at her, rather wondered at the change which came over her-the sudden fierce flash in her eyes, the hardness of the outline of her face.

'The story,' Jemima said, 'really begins ten years ago. Heave your mind back into the past, if you can, Babs, and behold my father - then Captain Carstairs, at that time in the Secret Service. This isn't his history, so we will draw a veil over his exploits there, forsooth!'

Babs looked puzzled, but she did not interrupt. She knew that Jemima would tell the story in her own way.

'For his service in the Secret Service the gov'nor was decorated,' Jemima went on. 'He did many things-and most of them successfully. But there was one thing he did not do, which brings us to the point. He allowed a crook - an international crook of world-wide repute - to slip through his hands. The crook's name was Duprez.'

'Yes?' said Babs, faintly wondering.

'The crook was clever,' Jemima went on. 'So clever that he has never been caught. He has planned some of the most daring coups in the criminal history of Europe, and got away with all of them. He dished the gov'nor, and the gov'nor never got over it - and never will. Unless,' Jemima added softly, 'his little daughter does what he failed to do!'

Babs looked startled. 'Jimmy!'

'One moment, one moment!' Jemima shook her head. Then she leaned forward. 'Babs, Duprez is here! Duprez is on the verge of making a new coup!'

'Here?'

'Not two miles from this school!'

'But where?'

'On the yacht! His name now,' Jemima said grimly, 'is DuPont!'

Babs sat stunned.

'You mean-Alphonse DuPont - Yvonne's father?'

'The same!' Jemima smiled. 'Surprising, what? But it's true. I met him for the first time at Friardale Station this afternoon. The guv'nor, to whom I was bidding a fond and tender farewell, pointed him out to me. The next I saw of him was on the beach, inviting you and the others to go aboard his yacht.'

Babs looked, felt bewildered. 'And—'

'Shush! Listen!' Jemima smiled. 'There are many things you have wanted to know. Now this is where your Uncle Jimmy tells you. I have discovered things, Babs-many things. Things which are true. You know Marcelle is worried over her father?'

'Why, you don't mean to say—'

'I do! Marcelle's father is in DuPont's hands. He is DuPont's prisoner!'

Babs felt her brain whirling.

'Marcelle's father is a jeweller. He was on his way to England to sell fifty thousand pounds' worth of jewels to a friend of his - the manager of the Excelsior Bank in London. DuPont kidnapped him. DuPont intended to go to London with a forged letter to the bank manager and collect a cheque in return for the jewels. But, unfortunately for DuPont, he did not know the name of the bank manager, who is Mr. Biquet's personal friend. Marcelle had the name in a bundle of letters which was in her bureau. That is why Yvonne came here - to snaffle the letters. I stopped her.'

A light dawned upon Babs.

'And that is why you stayed behind on the yacht?'

'Practically. I spent the time there getting wise to the little game,' Jemima said. 'I was keen on catching out DuPont, partly for reasons of jolly old family pride, and partly to help Marcelle. I've done it. They haven't got the bank manager's name and won't get it, because those letters have now gone for good. But they won't stop at that; they'll try some new dodge. And meantime,' Jemima added seriously, 'they've still got Marcelle's father.'

Babs drew a deep breath. It sounded incredible, preposterous.

But, looking at Jemima's keen, intent face, remembering now the events in the afternoon in this new light, she had to believe in its truth. She began to experience a tingling sensation.

'But, Jimmy, the police!'

Jemima smiled sadly, shaking her head.

'I waited for that question,' she said. 'No, Babs. DuPont is too clever for the police. For years and years he has baffled them. He looks ahead and thinks ahead, and makes his plans cleverly beforehand. I hope to catch him out, knowing he doesn't realise a mere schoolgirl is working against him. He does not know that I am the daughter of Colonel Carstairs. And supposing the police were called in - what could I prove?'

'Well, they'd search the yacht.'

'They would,' Jemima smiled whimsically, 'and they'd find nothing,' she explained. 'Marcelle's father is hidden on the yacht at night-time only. In the day-time he is kept in Monks' Tomb, the big cave beneath Monks' Folly. You remember you heard a cry when you were in the cave this afternoon. That was Marcelle's father. But, meantime, I can't prove a single thing. I am telling you, though, and I know it to be true. Which means,' Jemima added, with a steely glint in her eyes, 'that I've got to carry on.'

'But, Jimmy, if these crooks are so desperate—' Jemima shrugged.

'Got to be faced,' she said coolly. 'No shirking, what? That, in a way, is my advantage. I'm just banking on the fact that DuPont will disregard me, as I'm a schoolgirl. He doesn't know that I know anything of his plans. He would suspect me if I went to the police, as you suggest. Then everything would be U.P. My chance of squaring the old gov'nor's trip-up, and all that sort of thing, would be dead off, and Marcelle's father would-well, I don't like to think what might happen. But I'm working things out in my own feeble little way, and I've got a decided feeling that Mr. Duprez will have another shot at getting that cheque. And something,' Jemima added, swinging her legs, 'tells me that he will try through Marcelle. So, Babs, we've got to watch Marcelle.'

Babs nodded.

'I suppose,' she suggested, 'you couldn't tell Marcelle?'

'Not a chance,' Jemima said. 'You see how she regards these DuPonts - as friends. Marcelle would think I was making it up. The only thing that will convince Marcelle is the sight of her father. But now,' Jemima added, leaning forward again, 'this is where you can help me, Babs, if you will, and this incidentally, is where I'm one up on the gang on that precious yacht.'

'Yes?' breathed Babs.

'The cave, Monks' Tomb, is connected with Monks' Folly by a secret passage. We both know it. My idea,' Jemima added softly, 'is to go to the cave to-night and find out exactly in what part of it they are holding M. Biquet during the day. What happens after that depends, but it will be useful to know exactly how far the hiding-place in the cave is from the secret door that leads down from Monks' Folly. But it's a big thing even for a Carstairs to tackle, what? If you'd care to come—'

'Jimmy, you know I'll come!'

'Thanks. I thought so.' Jemima smiled. 'You're a spartan, Babs. And you'll keep your promise? Not a word to anyone?' 'Not a word.'

'To-night, then?'

'To-night,' Babs said.

But when Babs went back to her own study she frowned. She had given her word not to speak of Jemima's secret, but she was not blind to the danger, the risk that Jemima was running, that she herself intended to run with her. Babs was nothing if not practical.

She thought, frowned. Then she drew a piece of paper towards her.

The study was empty, and for ten minutes Babs wrote busily.

Then, having finished her writing, she folded the paper, placed it in an envelope, and wrote upon it.

She went to the bookcase, took down 'Smith's Ancient Geography,' and put the envelope and its contents between the leaves.

She sat down again, drawing another piece of paper towards her. On that she wrote: 'This will be opened only in the event of Jemima Carstairs and myself being missing from school. A full statement of what we are doing and our probable whereabouts is between the leaves of "Smith's Ancient Geography." Take that letter to Miss Harper.'

She enclosed the letter in another envelope. At the same moment there came a tap on the door.

Babs stared up guiltily. Then she nodded quickly as her sister Doris came in.

'Hallo!' she said. 'You wanted me, Doris?'

'Well, yes, Babs, I wanted to borrow sixpence - please,' Doris said.

Babs smiled. To Doris's amazement she felt in her pocket and put sixpence on the table. Usually it was not so easy as all that for Doris to extract a loan from her sister.

'Oh, I say!' Doris exclaimed. 'Oh, Babs, that's frightfully decent of you! I'll let you have it back on Saturday.'

'Keep it,' Babs said. 'But, meantime, Doris, will you do something for me?'

'Why, of course, Babs!'

'And say nothing. You understand?' Doris's eyes opened.

'Why, is it a secret?'

'Yes.'

'Oh, what, Babs?'

'I'm sorry, I can't tell you,' Babs said. 'The secret isn't mine.'

But I know I can trust you, Doris. You might be a scamp, but you'd never let me down. Take this letter. Keep it, but don't breathe a word to a soul that you've got it. And - and if,' Babs added awkwardly, 'I - I'm missing from school at any time, open it and read it, that's all.'

Doris took the letter, gazed wonderingly at her sister, and shook her head.

'I say, are you going potty in your old age?'

'No. Serious, Doris.'

'But why should you be missing?'

'Now, look here. Do you want me to take that sixpence back?'

'Oh, crumbs! Rather not!'

'Then don't ask questions.'

'Right-ho!' Doris grinned. 'Rely on your dee'ar sister. And I'll save you a spot of slab chocolate, Babs. Bye-bye!'

CHAPTER X An Exciting Excursion!

'WHAT cheer, Babs! Awake, old spartan?'

'Yes.'

'That's the stuff! What's the time?'

'Half-past ten.'

'Safe, what? Feeling fit, old thing?'

'Rather!'

'Then up you get. Don't forget the torch.'

Together they stepped into the corridor outside. It was a risky undertaking at that time of night, for though every girl in the school was in bed, a great many of the mistresses were still up.

At the bottom of the stairs a light shone beneath the door of Miss Bland's room, and they crept past, holding their breaths in case that door should open and the Fifth Form mistress appear.

A feeble moon threw patches of light across the floor from the windows, shining on the suits of armour and the busts of celebrities which stood about, imbuing them, for the time being, with ghostly life.

Babs shivered a little in spite of the warmth of the air.

But all was well. Safely they negotiated the window, safely dropped into the quad. The night was warm, and fairly light, but it was misty - a faint mist, born of the sea spray and the warm air which condensed about them falling like thin rain.

'Well, we're out of that - what?' Jemima chuckled. 'Nice night for a walk. Nasty mist, though!'

They stepped out, taking the path that led through the south copse of Friardale woods to the path that ran along the cliff top. It was dark in the woods-eerily dark-and the mist, thickening as they walked, took on grisly shapes as it floated among the branches of the trees.

They breathed in, taking hearty gasps of the air. Now, before them, they saw the sea, glistening in the grey light. To their ears came the faint roar of breakers, half a mile to the front of them. Far out to their left a red light winked at sea and disappeared.

'The *Catherine*!' Babs said. 'That's her light.'

'You're right,' Jemima approved.

They looked towards the light again as they walked along.

Now it flashed again, then again. A third time its bright red blaze bit into the darkness.

'Signalling!' Jemima said. 'By Jove!'

'To whom?' Babs asked.

'The caves, maybe,' Jemima replied. Unconsciously they hurried, drawing nearer and nearer. The light did not appear again, but now they were close enough faintly to make out the white lines of the *Catherine* as she rolled at anchor, with the towering black lines of Belwin Island throwing it into relief as background.

Then suddenly Babs stopped, gripping Jemima's arm. 'Look!' she whispered.

They were on the cliff top now. Jemima, staring out in the direction of Babs's pointing finger, adjusted her monocle. Plainly now they saw the *Catherine*, riding like some phantom ship out in the bay. It was a mile away, but clearly discernible. They could even see the faint glow of light which came from the cabins on the upper deck. But it was not the yacht which had excited Babs's comment.

'The launch!' Jemima whispered.

They saw it plainly-the launch putting off from the yacht.

They saw it first as two white lines of foam, with a travelling speck between the lines. Then they made out its outline.

A tiny glow came from amidships-plainly someone in the act of lighting a cigarette or a pipe. The two girls looked at each other.

'It's coming to land!' Jemima whispered. 'Gadzooks, the prisoner!'

'Marcelle's father!'

Babs flushed. Her pulses raced with sudden excitement. Now she understood the meaning of those signals. The launch was putting off to collect Marcelle's father, who had been held in the cave all day long. Those lights had been a signal to his gaolers in the cave.

'Babs,' Jemima whispered. 'Yes?'

'The cliff path's here. Let's get down. I've a fancy for a little look at Marcelle's father. It might not be Marcelle's father, of course. But I'm not a Carstairs if it isn't. Still, seeing's making sure - what?'

'I'm on!' Babs agreed.

'Good old spartan! We take the cliff path down. This way!' And Babs, thrilling, followed Jemima as she led the way.

The cliff path was steep. As it was chalk, and moist from recent mists, it was slippery, too. There were breathless moments in the darkness when they had to crawl on all fours. Once Babs tripped, and almost went tumbling headlong, only Jemima's sudden grip saving her.

But inch by inch they descended, finally reaching a little veranda of rock ten feet above the beach, and entirely hidden from the view of anyone below by the jutting balustrade of chalk rock which hemmed it in on the sea side. Together they rose, peering over.



The lifeless figure was dragged across the beach

They saw the launch plainly - two men in the bows, the white-clad figure of a girl in the rear. The girl's figure they recognised at once as that of Yvonne DuPont.

In fascinated silence, the two girls watched.

Now, stumbling towards the launch from the direction of the big cave known as Monks' Tomb, from their left, came three figures. Two were stalwart seamen. They supported a third-a man whose figure wilted and drooped between them, whose resistless legs stirred the shingle as he was dragged along.

They watched, Babs's eyes now burning with anger.

They saw M'sieur Biquet dumped into the launch, heard his feeble, frightened whimper as he crashed into the bottom of the craft.

The sailors clambered in. Yvonne took the tiller, the launch backed out, swept round in a graceful semicircle, and chugged back in the direction of the yacht.

For a moment the two girls did not speak. Then Jemima turned.

'You saw, Babs?'

'Yes, I saw,' Babs said thickly. 'Well, do you believe now?'

'I do,' Babs answered. 'The cruel scoundrels!' she burst out. 'Jimmy, is there nothing we can do?'

'What-ho!' Jemima replied. 'And we're jolly well going to do it - right now, old spartan. This way! Into the cave, and find out how the land lies! Once we know that, we can plot and plan - what?'

Babs nodded.

Together they stepped across the shingle, entering the yawning mouth of the giant cave.

A turn took them out of sight of any possible watcher from the shore, and not till then did Jemima switch on her torch.

It wavered revealingly in the vast cavern.

The light of Babs's torch was added to it. The two girls shone the beams of light up and down the walls. Nothing there. They walked on, extinguishing the torches in unison once more.

The atmosphere was chilly. The faint breeze, blowing in from the sea, found the hollows and the corners, and whirred and whistled with ghostlike voices. Still nothing.

'Go on!' Babs muttered.

A few more paces they progressed. The cave was growing narrower now. Babs knew that they must be near the spot where a secret door they had discovered before was hidden, and flashed her torch once more. Gleaming frosty white, the towering wall frowned down upon them. Jemima gave an exclamation.

'Babs. Look!' she breathed.

Babs halted, throwing the beam of her torch to join the shaft of light that Jemima's was making. Now she saw, and, seeing, frowned. In the wall there was an alcove cut deeply into the rock, and in that alcove were signs of recent habitation. A blanket lay, rolled and ruckled, on the floor near a stool, and there was a basket such as food might have been carried in.

Gingerly the two girls stepped forward. Jemima halted, suddenly pointing to a stout hook driven into the wall. A length of chain hung from the hook, and on the end of the length of chain a steel handcuff.

'My goodness, what's that?' Babs gasped.

'Need you ask?' Jemima's face was grim. 'There's a replica of that in a cabin on the yacht - the cabin in which they keep M. Biquet o' nights. They chain him to the wall.'

'The brutes!' Babs flamed.

'As you say,' Jemima nodded. 'So this is the spot,' she said. 'This is where they keep him during the day. He lies on this blanket, I suppose. The stool is used by the gaoler. So far, so good. Babs, where's the secret door?'

'Here!' Babs cried.

She knew the spot now. She wandered along the wall for a few paces, then pressed on a small, out jutting piece of rock. Immediately, without a sound, a circular hole appeared.

Jemima's eyes gleamed.

'Good!' she said. 'Close the door, old thing! Now, listen! Supposing a girl stood at the door; the gaoler, sitting here, couldn't see her. H'm!' She frowned. 'Babs, supposing that girl had a rope, and could lasso the gaoler?'

'But you couldn't!' Babs cried.

'No, I couldn't. But I know someone who could,' Jemima murmured - 'Clara Trevlyn!'

'My goodness!' Babs whistled.

And she stared at Jemima with dancing understanding in her eyes.

'You mean, lasso the gaoler, take from him the keys of the handcuffs, and free Marcelle's father?'

'What a brain!' Jemima murmured admiringly. 'But then?'

'Then,' Jemima announced calmly, 'we take Marcelle's father to Cliff House School!'

'But how?'

'Oh, by car!'

'Jemima, we couldn't!'

'Couldn't we?' Jemima laughed softly. 'We could - and shall,' she said. 'We've just got to prove to Marcelle what a little chump she is. We've got to get M. Biquet out of the clutches of those rogues at the same time. And once we've got him' - Jemima's eyes gleamed - 'the gang is done for! The story he can tell, backed up by what we've seen— But let's go now,' she added. 'We'll discuss the details as we go along.'

And Babs, glancing at her chum excitedly, followed Jemima as she turned. It seemed a simple scheme. It seemed too really simple to be true. But like all simple schemes, it bore the promise and the hall mark of success.

'When?' she asked.

'To-morrow,' Jemima replied. 'And in the meantime' - she frowned - 'in the meantime, we've got something else to do.'

'What's that?'

'By some means get hold of that fifty thousand pounds' worth of jewellery which Alphonse Duprez has stolen from Marcelle's father! Now-back to school!'

CHAPTER XI A Fateful Plot!

'MARCELLE! Marcelle, wake up! '

And Grace Stanforth Gregory, the prefect on Lower School duty for the day, shook the slender shoulder of the little French girl as she lay sleeping in her bed in the Fourth Form dormitory.

It was the following morning. Marcelle opened her eyes. 'What eez ze mattaire?'

'You're wanted.'

'I?'

'Yes, you!' Grace cried. 'You're wanted on the phone. Your father—'

Marcelle sat up with a jerk at that. In an instant all the sleepiness left her eyes. She stared with incredulous joy at the prefect.

'My papa?'

'Your father - yes! He is phoning from London,' Grace answered testily. 'Nice time of the morning to phone, I must say,' she added grumblingly. 'Blessed if I'd allow you kids to use the phone if I were headmistress! You'd better buck up!'

But there was no need to tell Marcelle to do that. The mere mention of that dear father of hers had woken her to instant life.

But Jemima and Babs, raising their heads above the sheets, looked queerly at each other.

Marcelle's father - phoning from London! When only last night they had seen him, weak and helpless, being carried a prisoner aboard the yacht in the bay.

'The new move!' Jemima muttered.

She winked at Babs, jerking her head. It was a subtle movement, not seen or understood by anyone else in the dormitory. But Babs was quick to grasp its significance.

Alphonse Duprez was on the move again, and was using Marcelle as one of his pawns. For, obviously, it was impossible for M. Biquet to be phoning from London.

Babs slipped out of bed, joining Jemima as that girl thrust back the clothes. Jemima looked quickly up and down the dormitory.

'New doings,' she announced. 'Methinks I scent another plot, Babs. Go downstairs, seeing that Marcelle's fallen out with me. She's not likely to tell me what's it's all about, but she'll tell you. Savvy?'

'O.K.!' Babs said briefly.

She flung her dressing-gown round her, following Marcelle as the excited little French junior went pelting down the stairs. She called to her: 'Marcelle!'

'I not stop-not for one moment!' Marcelle cried wildly.

'Babsie, excuse me! But my papa - he is well! I go to phone!' And Marcelle laughed. 'But you com' wiz me. You stay wiz me in ze Prefects'-room while I spik to my so dear papa over ze wires - yes,' she added, with a delicious laugh.

'Very well!' Babs smiled.

And she rushed into the Prefects'-room on the heels of Marcelle, while the French girl, bubbling over with excitement and happiness now, gave a delighted cry as she beheld the instrument, and quiveringly held the receiver to her ears.

'Yes, yes, yes?' she called excitedly. 'Papa, it ees Marcelle!'

Babs paused.

A metallic voice came through from the other end. Marcelle grasped the receiver tightly. A torrent of words clacked in metallic incoherence through the wires, and Marcelle's face lit up. She spoke back quickly - in excited, voluble French - so quickly, indeed, that Babs, even though she was fairly good at French, could not follow all of it. Marcelle laughed happily.

'Ah, oui, oui!' she said once. 'The yacht-yes, I understand, papa!'

Babs's eyes gleamed with interest. The yacht!

'In an hour,' Marcelle said next. 'Yes, I leave for London this afternoon. Goody-bye, papa darling!'

She put the receiver on its hook, her little face transformed with happiness. She saw Babs, and, impulsively rushing forward, caught her by the shoulders.

'Babsie, you hear?' she asked. 'Papa! You say I hear from heem - yes, I haf hear from heem! He ees in London-on ze business. And Babsie, I go to London, too!'

Babs felt startled.

'You?'

'Oui, oui!' Marcelle laughed. 'I go tout de suite-at once! Papa-he make ze arrangements on ze telephone with Miss Primrose. He say heem leave somezings on ze yacht - a parcel. I go to ze yacht and I collect ze parcel and take it to heem - at once! Oh, Babsie, I am so ver' happy!'

And Marcelle, to show her happiness kissed the leader of the Fourth Form soundly, whirled her round and round and then, with a glad laugh, bolted back to the dormitory.

But Babs stood still. She looked stunned.

Then, quick as thought, she sprang to the telephone, picking up the receiver. She pressed the hook frantically.

'Hallo' came the voice of the operator.

'Operator-please, quickly!' Babs exclaimed. 'I want you to trace the call that just came through for Miss Biquet, please. Was it from London?'

'Yes, from Victoria!'

'Oh, thank you!'

And Babs, hanging up the receiver, felt baffled. The suspicion had been in her mind that the call had been put through from a place much nearer than that.

So M. Biquet was actually in London! Or was the caller one of the gang?

There was a step outside. A girl, with gleaming monocle in one eye, peered in. She smiled. It was Jemima.

'What cheer, Babs! Any news?'

'Yes,' Babs said. 'But I don't understand it quite, Jemima.' She explained what had happened. 'I suppose the call really was a fake?' she added.

'Not a doubt,' Jemima replied. 'DuPont leaves nothing to chance. He knows as well as you or I that calls can be traced - which, by the way, was smart work on your part, Babs. He's sent someone to London specially to put that call through. Spot the call-box - Victoria, near the station. But wait - this wants looking into. Whoa!'

'Jimmy, oughtn't we to stop Marcelle? Oughtn't she to know?

If she's going aboard this yacht—'

'Eh-yes! Just a minute! I'm trying to work it all out!' Jemima said. 'Bit tough on the old grey matter, calling it into action so early in the morning - what! But these things have to be done. Now, what would the gov'nor have done in a case like this?'

'Oh, Jimmy, don't rot!' Babs said agonisingly.

'Rot? Rot, bejabbers!' Jemima shook her head. 'The old gov'nor had a maxim - always put yourself in the other fellow's place; and that's what I'm trying to do now, forsooth! Look here!' Her eyes grew keen. 'DuPont's fixed with the headmistress as well as with Marcelle?'

'Yes.'

'Right! Then there'll be no danger to Marcelle going aboard that yacht.' Jemima considered. 'She's going there now to collect a parcel, you say? Good! Let her go; let her collect it. And if she's not going to London till this afternoon she'll come back to the school. Aha, now I see daylight!' Jemima went on dramatically.

'You mean there'll be no harm happening to Marcelle until she gets to London?' Babs asked.

'True, my dear Watson, true indeed!' Jemima agreed. 'Now let us think. Marcelle returns to Cliff House - with the parcel. Marcelle goes to London - with the parcel. Marcelle thinks that she'll meet her father there - which we know she won't. That's where the catch comes in. And that's where the danger to Marcelle is going to lie. Right. Then we've got to prevent Marcelle from going to London.'

'But how?' Jemima shrugged.

'Snaffle the parcel when she returns here with it!'

'But, Jimmy—'

'Well, what else? If she hasn't got the parcel she can't deliver it, can she? I'm not good at Euclid, but that seems fairly simple, to my way of thinking. There'll be ructions, of course, but that can't be helped. It's for Marcelle's own sake.'

Babs nodded.

'But suppose she insists upon going back to the yacht and reporting the loss? She may.'

'She may, certainly.' Jemima frowned.

'That's awkward,' she admitted; 'decidedly awkward! Of course, it's no good trying to tell Marcelle that the DuPont crowd are villains, but - Eureka - got it!' Jemima broke off.

'The idea. See, we've got to convince Marcelle,' Jemima said tensely. 'If we produce her father - as we saw him last night - then she'd believe - what? But—' And Jemima stopped, still looking at Babs very curiously indeed. 'I think I know how it can be arranged,' she said. 'I think I can see—'

'But how?' Babs asked anxiously.

To that question Jemima only shrugged. She shook her head. 'Babs, do you remember you promised not to ask awkward questions?'

'Yes; but—'

'Then leave this to your Uncle Jimmy - what? She knows!' Jemima said cheerfully. 'In the meantime, come and help me dig out Clara. I'm rather anxious to know whether she can still do that lassoing trick she used to be able to do. After that,' Jemima said, 'we'll have another talk.'

And that was all Jemima would say. Babs, gazing at her, shook her head hopelessly. There were times when she felt she would never understand the Eton-cropped elegant one of the Fourth.

At the same time Alphonse Duprez was leading the trusting Marcelle along the deck of the beautiful yacht *Christine*.

Without hurry he led the way down the companion into his cabin - a big, roomy, well-furnished apartment, its floor thickly carpeted, and furnished plainly though in the most exquisite taste. He beckoned Marcelle to an easy-chair.

Marcelle sank into its depths with a little sigh of rapture. 'Oh, lovely!' she exclaimed.

'Make yourself comfortable,' Mr. DuPont said. 'There is no hurry. But I have something very important to say to you, Marcelle, so please listen carefully. Yvonne, will you get the parcel which M'sieur Biquet left behind when he left the yacht? Thank you!'

Yvonne handed him the parcel - oblong in shape and neatly done up in brown paper with both ends sealed. Marcelle regarded it curiously.

'It is that?' she asked.

'It is important-valuable.' DuPont paused impressively. 'You must take care of it, Marcelle, for its contents are valuable. Your father's instructions are that you take this to the manager of his bank, who knows you by sight. You have met him?'

'Yes.'

'But you do not know his name?'

'I forget,' Marcelle explained. 'I only met him once - in Paris, at my home.'

'Very well. Then he will know you. Your father has already told him to expect you. You will give him this parcel, and in return he will give you a cheque.'

'But my father?' Marcelle cried.

'Your father is busy in another part of London. But when you have got the cheque you will go on to Victoria Station and meet him there. Here are his instructions.' And he carelessly flipped over to the French girl a telegram, bearing a London postmark, which had arrived that morning. Marcelle read it with curiosity: 'Give parcel and instructions to Marcelle. I will meet her at Victoria Station under the clock at 5 p.m. - BIQUET.'

'You understand?' DuPont pressed.

'Perfectly.'

'Splendid. But take care. When you have got the cheque take a taxi to Victoria. You can get one outside the bank. Your father is entrusting you with this matter because he is so busy elsewhere in London. He is relying upon you. Do not fail him.'

'I will not!' Marcelle cried, her eyes sparkling. 'But after I meet him at Victoria—'

'You will return here with him.'

'Oh, very good!'

'And now' - DuPont rose - 'here is the parcel. You will catch the two-thirty train from Friardale Station. I am instructed,' he said thoughtfully, 'to give you money for your expenses. Your father will settle with me later. Take that.'

He put into her hand a five-pound note.

Marcelle tremblingly put it in her pocket. Then she took the parcel, and, accompanied by DuPont and his daughter, went up on deck. Five minutes later she was in the launch for the mainland again.

But this time Yvonne did not go with her. She stood looking at her father as they both leaned over the rail, watching the launch plough its way shorewards through the water.

'But what happens to her once she's got the cheque?' Yvonne asked.

'Arranged, Yvonne, arranged!' The man smiled meaningly. 'The taxi which she will hire will be conveniently waiting outside the doors of the bank. It is driven by one of my men, but it will not take Marcelle to Victoria-no!'

'Then where?'

He laughed.

'Impatient for details, aren't you?' he asked. 'As a matter of fact, it will bring her back here. Then we take the cheque and disappear! After that—' he shrugged. 'Well, after that we shall just have to decide what to do with both of them. But they must disappear - you understand - disappear. Perhaps we will lose them in South America!' he added.

And Marcelle, meantime, all unconscious of the fateful plot, full of joyful excitement, was chugging towards the shore.

CHAPTER XII

Clara Ropes in Bessie!

'JEMIMA,' Miss Matthews reproved, 'you are not paying attention!'

'Oh, by Jove! Sorry, Miss Matthews!'

'Please concentrate!' Miss Matthews said sternly. 'Barbara!'

'Yes, Miss Matthews?'

'Please do not stare towards the window!'

'Sorry, Miss Matthews!'

'And Clara!'

'Oh, crumbs!'

'What are you writing?'

Clara crimsoned.

'Oh, nun-nothing, Miss Matthews!'

'Then please put it away.' Miss Matthews frowned. 'This is the third time I have had to reprove you three girls,' she said. 'See it does not occur again.'

The three sat silent, though Clara pulled a rueful face. The rest of the Form glanced towards them, and perhaps wondered a little, for usually Babs, Clara, and Jemima, were three of the best behaved girls in the Form, especially when Miss Matthews was taking lessons. For Miss Matthews was a favourite with the three.

But truth to tell, each one of them was feeling restive and unconcentrated this morning. How could they be otherwise?

For only two hours separated them from what might prove to be the greatest adventure of their careers.

Clara now knew something of the story, though Jemima had not told her all. Tomboy Clara, ready for any adventure, had professed her willingness at once to join in, and before morning lessons all details had been arranged.

At break Clara was to demonstrate her nearly forgotten art of lassoing once again. At dinner-time, with a reckless disregard for regulations, she and Babs were to go off to Monks' Folly and there await Jemima. What Jemima's plans were the Eton-cropped one had not divulged. She seemed to have some mysterious purpose of her own.

But Babs was feeling worried. Knowing now the desperate nature of the enterprise upon which she and her chums had embarked she was glad that she had left that letter with Doris.

Remembering the pitiful prisoner on the beach last night, she was resolutely determined to see the adventure through, but she could not help but wonder what might happen if there was a hitch of any description. Practically everything depended upon Clara's skill with the lasso. Once let the gaoler of Marcelle's father become alarmed—

Babs tightened her lips.

But Clara, in the desk behind her, was not thinking at the prospect of excitement to come. Clara, immensely flattered that she had been asked to demonstrate her skill with the lasso, was determined there should be no hitch.

It was an art in which the tomboy had attained a considerable degree of proficiency in the past, but Clara and her lasso had become such a nuisance that, for the sake of peace and quietness, she had been forced to abandon the pursuit.

But Clara had no doubt that her skill would come back, and was eagerly awaiting the break in order to prove it. She had the rope concealed in readiness in her study. That, indeed, was the subject of the note she was writing surreptitiously now.

Jemima was far away. Jemima, under cover of reading her history book, was drawing diagrams and making plans. Jemima had her own little scheme to carry out.

The lesson dragged on. To Babs and Clara and Jemima the minutes seemed like hours. Each moment that passed added to the tumultuous excitement which filled them, and it is certain they could not have held out much longer when the break-bell went.

In an excited throng the Form crowded into the corridor outside.

'Got it, Clara?' Jemima asked.

'Rather! In my study. You go down in the quad. I won't be a minute.'

And with a whoop, Clara raced off.

Jemima joined Babs and Mabs - Mabs, who frowned a little, not understanding. Mabs, of course, knew nothing, though it was not often that she and Babs had secrets from each other. But Babs had not told her golden-haired chum because the secret was not hers.

'Tuckshop, Babs?' Mabs asked. 'I could eat a bar of chocolate.'

'M'yes, so could I, you know,' Bessie Bunter put in hopefully. 'That's awfully sporting of you, Mabs. Yes, I'll have a bar of chocolate, with pleasure. Two bars, if you like,' she added generously.

Mabs glared.

'I wasn't aware that I asked you,' she said pointedly, though not unkindly.

'Oh, really!' Bessie blinked. 'I say, you know, that's mean.'

You said, as plainly as anything, "Would you like a bar of chocolate, Bessie?" Babs heard you - didn't you, Babs?'

'No, I didn't,' Babs laughed.

'Oh, really, you know! Well, if it wasn't Mabs, it was Jimmy.'

'Guess again, old fatima!' Jemima replied.

'Oh crumbs! Well, somebody said it, you know,' Bessie said aggrievedly. 'And I think it's mean, anyway, if you're going off to feed yourselves with chocolate, leaving me here famished and starving and hungry!'

Jemima laid her head on Babs's shoulder and pretended to weep.

'Boo-ooh!' she sobbed softly. 'Bessie, wring not this tender heart of mine. Ow-wow! Oh, help me up, someone! Bessie, old thing—'

'Look here, you know—' Bessie expostulated wrathfully.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

But at that moment there was a shout farther down the corridor. A victorious shout it was, followed by a triumphant 'Whoops!' Something swished in the air above Bessie's head, and fell over her head and shoulders.

'Got her!' cried Clara Trevlyn triumphantly. 'How's that?'

'My hat!'

'Here, I say, you know, what the dickens are you doing to me?'

Bessie yelled. 'Ha, ha, ha!'

Bessie glared in speechless wrath.

'Okay, Fattikins!' Clara grinned. She came forward, gathering the end of the lariat which had neatly pinned Bessie's arms to her sides as she came. 'Good shot, wasn't it?' she asked. 'Not so bad for a first throw. Sorry, Bessie!'

Laughingly she released the fat junior. The four of them pelted down the corridor. Bessie ran after them. 'But, I say, what about the tuckshop?'

'Blow the tuckshop!'

'Oh, really, you know—'

'Here you are, Bessie! One bob!' Jemima said, and flicked the coin towards her. 'You can let me have it back out of your next hundred-pound postal order from Lord Dustbin de Bunter!' she exclaimed, as Bessie, with a hasty word of thanks, scuttled away.

For Bessie, ill receipt of a shilling, with only ten minutes in which to spend it, had lost all further interest in the proceedings.

And the chums, in fact, had lost interest in Bessie. 'I'll do?' Clara asked.

'Couldn't be better,' Jemima agreed.

And so it was settled. If Clara could rope the guard at the caves as well as she had roped Bessie, all would be well . . .

'All ready?' Jemima asked. Babs and Clara nodded.

Morning lessons were over, and, by pre-arrangement, the three had met in Study No. 10 - the only untenanted study in the Fourth Form corridor. Babs and Clara were dressed for going out, and under her arm Clara carried a rather conspicuous brown-paper parcel, from one end of which a protruding strand of rope advertised the contents.

'Right, then you know what to do,' Jemima said. 'Get along to Monks' Folly, but take care you're not spotted from the yacht as you enter the place. Wait for me there.'

'But why aren't you coming now?' Babs asked. 'Oh, just something to attend to first - what?'

'But what?'

'Be good, and I'll tell you later. By the way, do you know if Marcelle has come back?'

'Yes, she's just returned.'

Jemima nodded. A satisfied little gleam came into her eyes. 'Oh, good!' she breathed. 'I - er - well, I just want a word with Marcelle. Right you are, then. Sneak out, and get to the Folly. But caution - what? I'll toddle along in half an hour.'

And she smiled in that enigmatic way of hers, screwed up her face, and beamed. Clara shook her head. Babs gazed at her despairingly. But Jemima, for the time being, was their leader, and they had to obey.

Jemima, having waited until they had left the room, lounged out of the study bound for Study No. 3, farther along the corridor.

That study was Marcelle's!

CHAPTER XIII Just Jemima's Way!

RATHER breathlessly, Marcelle was explaining to Leila Carroll and Jean Cartwright, her two study chums, the great good fortune which had befallen her. The little French girl was excited to a degree.

'I am to go to ze great city of London!' she said enthusiastically. 'Zere I meet Papa again! Oh, I am so happy!'

'Jolly lucky, I'll say,' Leila commented. 'Gee, why doesn't my pater come to London? It's not fair. You having a swell time in London, while we swot in the class-room at lessons. Oh, gee! Suppose you couldn't get permission for me to come with you?'

'Or me?' Jean Cartwright put in.

But Marcelle shook her head seriously.

'Non. I am sorry. I ver' much like zat you and Jean come wiz me,' she said sincerely. 'We haf such lots of ze fun, eh? But I must hurry. Ze train-eet go at half-past two, and I must change my blouse. Ze parcel.' And Marcelle nodded towards the little parcel she had brought from the yacht. 'I must take ze parcel to ze bank and deliver heem for papa!' she explained enthusiastically. 'And zen I take ze taxi.'

'My hat!'

'Style, I'll say!' Leila opined.

Marcelle laughed deliciously.

'Zen I take ze taxi and go to ze great station of Victoria,' she said. 'And zere I meet papa. But I must hurry. I must have ze clean blouse.'

'Any help?' Jean asked. 'You'll have to buck up, you know, if you're going to catch the two-thirty.'

'I'll say!' Leila agreed.

'I'll come up to the dorm and give you a hand,' Jean offered.

'Never mind that old parcel. Leave it here. Leila will look after that, won't you Leila?'

'Sure!'



The box was full of jewels - and all of them stolen

Marcelle hesitated. She glanced at the parcel on the table, then at the clock. As Jean said, she would have to hurry, for she had to change, and, as the buses were not running to-day, she would have to walk to Friardale Station - a good twenty minutes, even if she took the shortest cut. Jean's assistance, in her present excited frame of mind, would save her a great deal of worry and trouble.

'Zank you,' she said. 'Ze offer I accept. But come.'

And, tugging the Scots girl urgently by the sleeve, she pulled her from the study.

Outside, a girl who had paused at the door, drew back, turning carelessly, as though she had just passed. Marcelle saw her. For a moment a frown came over her olive face. Then she shrugged.

Jemima - for the girl was she - beamed.

'Hallo, kids! In a hurry - what?' she inquired pleasantly.

'Hurry!' Marcelle muttered.

And, still tugging at Jean, who paused to flash back an apologetic smile in Jemima's direction, she raced on.

Jemima stood still. Then her eyebrows went up as her gaze followed the two figures down the corridor. Thoughtfully polishing her monocle, she walked to the end of the passage, and then slowly returned, pausing at the door of Study No. 3. She knocked and entered.

Leila, left alone in the study, looked up with a start. 'Gee, Jimmy - you! What's the racket?'

'Just staggered in - what?' Jemima murmured, but her eyes fastened for a moment on the parcel on the table. 'Met Marcelle and Jean,' she explained. 'I should think they are in need of your assistance. Thought I'd just intrude and let you know.'

'Oh, thanks!' Leila said unsuspectingly. 'Marcelle is excited,' she explained, 'because she's going to London.'

'Shouldn't wonder,' Jemima replied.

'I'll go up there now,' Leila said. 'Oh, Jimmy, you might just hang on here and look after that parcel.'

'Pleasure!' Jemima drawled.

But as soon as Leila had departed from the study, she took up the parcel, shook it, and then weighed it in her hands. Then for a moment she stood in thoughtful silence.

'Now what?' she murmured. 'Marcelle's taking this to the bank, is she? Why should she take it to the bank - unless it contains something valuable? Gadzooks, I see the plot! Ho, ho, ho! The jewels!'

She whistled softly. Inwardly she was seething with excitement now. Knowing something of Alphonse Duprez's methods from her father, warned Jemima.

Duprez was not a criminal who did things in the obvious way.

To send the daughter of the very man whom he had robbed innocently to collect the proceeds of the robbery was very much in keeping with his character.

This box contained the jewellery. Marcelle was to take it to the bank to collect the cheque. The very fact that the daughter of his client acted as M. Biquet's messenger would disarm the bank manager of any suspicion.

What a plot! And yet all so apparently innocent on the surface - all so sublimely simple.

Jemima's eyes gleamed.

'Cute!' she murmured. 'Dashed cute! But it's not going to happen, Mr. Duprez! Not this time. I've beaten you once. I'll beat you again. I'll take these jewels-what? I think, my spartan crimemonger, that the game is mine!'

And Jemima chuckled.

Quickly she thrust the parcel beneath her blazer. Nonchalantly then she strolled out of her study, returning to the deserted No. 10. Once there, she locked the door.

What a plot! And yet all so apparently innocent on the surface done in ordinary circumstances. But these were not ordinary circumstances, and Jemima, above everything else, wanted to make sure.

The box was not her property, but neither was it the property of Alphonse Duprez; and as the box was Duprez's method of betraying Marcelle, Jemima had no compunction.

Ruthlessly she broke the seals of the parcel, tearing away the wrapping. A small cardboard box was revealed. 'Ah!' Jemima muttered.

She took off the lid. And then held her breath.

In that moment Jemima, usually so composed, so utterly cool, never put out in the most tremendous crisis, could have cried aloud. Her hands shook as she gazed upon the contents of that box.

Beautiful gems - flashing diamonds, winking rubies, gleaming emeralds, lying there upon a bed of white cotton-wool!

These were the prizes for which Duprez had schemed, which Duprez had won, and which, through the agency of Marcelle, he was now intent upon converting into cash. And she had them. She had beaten Duprez!

'One up to you, Jimmy,' she muttered. 'By jove, if only I could tell the old guv'nor!'

She paused a moment, fastening the lid on the box again. It was dangerous to keep the jewels, she knew. She must hide them. But where?

Quickly Jemima looked round, frowning thoughtfully. The study, empty, was bare and unfurnished, and badly in need of redecoration. In one corner, however, stood a cupboard. The cupboard revived a memory. Quickly she stepped across to it.

The cupboard was movable, but it was as tall as the girl herself, and required some effort to move. But Jemima was capable of surprising strength when she was called upon, and knew that behind the cupboard was a gaping hole in the plaster of the wall.

With an undignified grunt she slewed the cupboard round, disclosing the hole. Quickly she put the box into it, scooping out a little dried plaster to make it fit. Then, breathing rather heavily, she heaved the cupboard back into position.

'Phew! Hercules!' the Eton-cropped one muttered.

She looked round. The string and the wrapping of the parcel caught her eyes. She snatched them up, screwing them into a ball which she rammed into the wastepaper-basket.

A last look round the room, and then, fixing her monocle into her eye, she sauntered carelessly towards the door, opened it, and strolled without hurry into her own study, just across the corridor.

She had not been there two minutes when the door was thrust violently open.

Jemima looked up, her eyes elevating in surprise. 'What cheer, Marcelle! This is a pleasant surprise!'

But Marcelle stood at the door, her face almost purple with anger, quivering from head to foot. Her black eyes flashed. 'Jemima, what haf you done wiz my parcel?' she demanded passionately.

At that very moment Babs and Clara, one watchful eye upon the white yacht moored in the bay, were stealing quietly, stealthily into the ruins of Monks' Folly.

CHAPTER XIV No Trip for Marcelle!

'PARCEL?' Jemima shook her head. 'Come in!' she invited.

'I not com' in. I am in ze great hurry,' Marcelle said furiously. 'Where ees my parcel? It ees zat you gif it to me-queeck!' Again Jemima shook her head. She regarded the little French girl curiously.

'I perceive,' she said tolerantly, 'that you are excited, Marcelle.'

'You haf taken ze parcel! I know!' Marcelle's eyes flamed. 'It may be ze joke to you, but it ees not ze joke to me!' she cried incoherently. 'You do not deny it - non! Leila, she tell me. Leila leave you in my study wiz ze parcel! '

'Well, that's true,' Jemima confessed. 'Yes, I admit that, old spartan. But calm yourself - do! Cool down-what? Have a ginger-beer.'

'I want not ze ginger-beer!' Marcelle choked.

'Well, come in.'

'You haf my parcel!'

Jemima shook her head. 'No!' she replied, with truth.

'You know where it ees! '

'Well, I may,' Jemima replied cautiously.

'You took it!'

'And there might be something in that, too,' Jemima confessed.

'Where ees it?'

Jemima rose with a sigh. Marcelle, in her excitement, had stepped farther into the study, her eyes gleaming, her small fists clenched. Jemima sighed.

'Come right in,' she invited affably. 'Don't be nervous-what?'

Now make yourself at home. Sit down!' She stepped behind the French girl suddenly. Swiftly she sprang towards the door, turning the key and putting it in her pocket. 'Now!' she said grimly.

Marcelle stared. 'What for you do zat?'

'Because,' Jemima said, 'I want to talk to you, Marcelle.'

'But I am een ze hurry,'

'Sorry! But this is more urgent than your hurry. And you can't go to London without that parcel - what? I might as well tell you-at once-that I have the parcel.'

'You take eet?'

'Yes, I took it. And I've hidden it.' Jemima nodded. Marcelle's eyes blazed.

'Zen you are ze t'ief! '

'Hardly. I wouldn't describe myself like that-what?' Jemima replied. 'Marcelle, I've taken that parcel for a reason. To help you. I'm going to give you a chance to be sensible, and do the right thing. I hate to shatter some of the innocent ideals you have been cherishing, but I'm going to tell you things. In the first place—'

'I am in ze hurry!' Marcelle persisted.

'In the first place,' Jemima went on, unmoved, 'the dear DuPont people you are so fond of are nothing but a pack of scoundrels. They are trying to rob your father, Marcelle.'

Marcelle quivered.

'I do not believe eet!'

'Furthermore,' Jemima went on unheedingly, 'they have kidnapped your father, and are holding him a prisoner.'

'Zat ees ze one great beeg fib!' Marcelle broke in passionately.

'How can you say zat when I go to meet papa at ze station?' Jemima smiled pityingly.

'You believe that?'

'Yes. I believe eet.'

'And nothing I can say or do will convince you otherwise?'

Marcelle eyed her with scorn.

'Nothing zat you say or do conveence me any more!' she declared defiantly. 'You tell me yourself zat you are ze t'ief. You try to deescredit my friends before me. I am 'shamed of you, Jemima Carstairs. I hate you! I hate you - oui!' And Marcelle's colour came and went. 'Now gif me ze parcel! '

Jemima sighed.

'Supposing,' she asked, 'I don't give you the parcel?'

'Eh?' Marcelle's eyes opened. 'But you will - you moost!' she cried distractedly. 'I haf ze appointment to keep. I haf ze train to catch. Eef you not gif me ze parcel, how may I go to London town to meet papa?'

Jemima smiled; she turned.

'Exactly!' she returned. 'How may you?' She stopped suddenly, standing very upright, very erect, before the French girl. 'Marcelle, if you go to London, I have an idea we may never see you again,' she said.

'You are ze great fool! '

'And so,' Jemima added coolly, 'I am going to prevent you from going to London! '

'Indeed! That is ver' interesting,' Marcelle said, drawing herself up.

'I am going out,' Jemima went on. 'I am going, I hope, to see your father. He is, contrary to your belief, in this neighbourhood, and in very sad need of friends. If you like, Marcelle, you can come with me.'

Marcelle looked impatient.

'Why you tell me ze fairy tale?' she demanded peevishly. 'It ees zat you haf joked enough wiz me, Jemima. I go! Gif me ze parcel. Eef you not gif me ze parcel, I go to ze headmistress.'

'You mean that? You really will go to Miss Primrose?'

'I mean eet! I will - I will!' And Marcelle stamped her tiny foot.

'Too bad!' Jemima sighed. 'Well-well, I hate violence - what? But as you force me to it, Marcelle - well, I mean, there's nothing else for it - is there?' Jemima asked resignedly. 'Look there!'

She pointed to the bookcase. Marcelle, a puzzled light in her eyes, twisted round, staring. Jemima caught in her breath, at the same moment gently whisking the silk table centre from beneath the vase of flowers that stood on the table. The vase toppled over with a faint crash.

At the same moment Jemima sprang.

Marcelle, hearing the clatter of the fallen vase, half-turned.

Too late!

For suddenly, from out of nowhere it seemed, a cloth fluttered before her eyes, and, falling over the lower part of her features, draped itself over her mouth. Marcelle gave an inarticulate gulp as her head was jerked back. She felt the cloth caught at the back of her head and knotted there, tightly and firmly.

Marcelle's eyes blazed. Passionately she raised her arms to tear the gag away. But before they reached her face two slim hands, cool and strong, caught hold of her wrists. Marcelle found herself swept off her feet, found herself toppled sideways into the armchair. Quick as thought Jemima snatched off the French girl's girdle, pinioning her arms to her sides.

That done, she tied the girdle into a series of careful knots. 'Smart work-what?' she asked, straightening up. 'Sorry, old spartan, but you made me do it, you know. Are you comfy there?' she added concernedly.

'Gug-gug!' came furiously from Marcelle.

'All serene! But thanks for the assurance!' Jemima beamed, and polished her monocle thoughtfully. She shook her head. 'Why do you make me do these things, Marcelle?' she added sadly. 'Much better to come quietly - what? Still —' She paused. 'The Form's at dinner now,' she went on. 'That means I can leave you in peace and quietness for at least another half an hour. Sure you won't change your mind and come with me?' she added. 'Nod your head if you mean yes.'

But Marcelle furiously shook her head.

'Dear, dear!' Jemima said. 'You are an awkward child, Marcelle,' she chided. 'In that case I shall have to strap you into the chair. Don't worry! You'll be rescued before lessons, and then - well, you can do what you like then!'

With gentle care, still talking, she took off her own girdle, passing it round Marcelle's ankles, and securing them to the stumpy legs of the chair.

'Well, bye-bye!' she added.

She smiled. Marcelle glared back in speechless fury. Jemima shook her finger reprovably, unlocked the door, and stepped into the corridor.

Marcelle, breathing fire and fury, was left a helpless prisoner in the study.

'A quarter to two,' Barbara Redfern muttered. 'Any sign of her, Clara?'

'Not a suspicion,' Clara said.

'Where has she got to?'

But Clara Trevlyn shook her head.

The two of them were in Monks' Folly, the grim old ruin which stood on the edge of the cliffs above the caves, overlooking the bay where the *Catherine* - slim, beautiful, graceful-rolled lazily in the swell.

Clara was anxious. Now that the adventure was so near, the thrill and the anxiety which was consuming Barbara Redfern was beginning to transfer something of itself to her.

Together they had entered the turret, had made sure that the entrance to the secret passage which led down to the big cave, known as Monks' Tomb, was still working.

All was now in readiness, except for Jemima.

'Why on earth she stayed at the school I don't know!' Clara grumbled. 'Why couldn't she come along with us?'

Babs shook her head.

'Don't ask me ' she replied wearily. 'Why does Jimmy do anything? But I with the old fathead would put in an appearance now. If she doesn't buck up, blessed if I don't feel like going down and tackling the job ourselves! '

'Hail, my merry men!' came a drawling voice at the door; and the two turned wheeling round in astonishment as Jemima - cool, debonair, her monocle gleaming with a glistening sheen that showed it had been newly polished - sauntered in. 'Are you getting impatient, or is it that you miss your little Jimmy? Cheers!'

Clara snorted.

'Look here, where have you been?'

'Oh, at Cliff House!'

'But why did you stay there?'

'Oh, just trying my personal appeal upon Marcelle - what? Jemima answered brightly. 'Trying to persuade her to come with me you know. But' - Jemima regretfully shook her head - she wouldn't. Some people will never see sense-what?'

Babs looked at her.

'What happened?' she asked quietly - 'I mean, what really happened?'

Jemima sighed. Then she smiled.

'Well, rather serious,' she said - 'for Marcelle. You see I had an idea as to what might happen. That is why I took the opportunity of getting you and Clara out of the way first. Your tender hearts could not have stood seeing Marcelle trussed up. I had to be firm – what - for Marcelle's sake. But the story is this! '

And Jemima told them.

The two stared.

'At this moment,' Jemima went on, 'Marcelle is probably being rescued and creating a frightful din at Cliff House! She doesn't believe what I have told her, of course. She won't believe it unless we produce her father - and we've got to produce him before she leaves Cliff House. By which you will decide' Jemima added calmly, 'that we have got to get a move on - what? Now, everything ready? Torches?'

'Yes.'

'Got the rope, Clara?'

'Of course! '

'Good! Cast your eyes outside - no, from the other window - and there you will see a car,' Jemima went on. 'I hired it in Friardale. With my own dainty hands I drove it here and will likewise drive it back. Once we have Marcelle's father 'we bustle back into the car, and then heigh-ho for Cliff House! That clear?'

'Yes! Come on - let's start!' Clara cried impatiently.

And Babs, in order to cut the conversation short, stepped towards the fireplace and pressed on a certain stone just at its side. Noiselessly a portion of the wall slid open disclosing a square, dark cavity. '

'O.K.,' breathed Jemima. 'Leave it open old thing - we may be in a hurry on the return journey. Slope' torches, everybody! Babs, you know the passage better than us. You go first.'

Babs nodded. She stepped into the cavity.

Jemima and Clara followed, slipping their torches into their hands.

It was dark in the passage. A chill breath of air blew from somewhere, making them catch their breath. A flight of steps, dusty and worn, led steeply downward, ending in a narrow passage which gave on to another flight. Down, down they went endlessly it seemed, the air growing staler as they penetrated farther into the depths of the cliff.

'O.K.?' Jemima breathed 'What a life, to be sure! Pity those old gentlemen who lived in the castle were so old-fashioned - what? Think what an improvement an escalator would be!' They went on. Now they had reached the last step and found themselves facing a solid wall of chalk. Babs switched off her torch and stepped forward.

'Shush! All lights off!' she whispered.

Out went the torches, plunging them into darkness like ink. 'Manage, Babs!' Clara whispered.

'Yes.'

Babs stiffened. Her finger had found the tiny projection she sought. She pressed.

Not a sound; not a movement. But they all became conscious suddenly that the black wall in front of them had disappeared. The fresh wind, heavy with salt, struck upon their faces. A space of hollow vastness seemed to loom in front of them. For a moment they stood rigid, scarcely daring to breathe, ears astrain.

Then Babs started.

For somewhere near at hand came a sound-a low, feverish murmur. It was followed by a gruff voice.

'Hang it! Stop moaning, can't you?'

The voice came from their left. Now, stepping out from the secret entrance, they clustered together. A little to their left flickered a light - the light of an oil-lamp on the floor. They saw, as a black silhouette, the figure of a man on watch as he stared surlily towards the feebly moving bundle that writhed on the blanket beneath him.

Babs caught in her breath. Clara slipped the rope into her hand. Jemima looked grim.

'Now!' Jemima whispered.

Clara gave a grunt. Up came the rope. There was a swish as she whirled it round her head - once, twice, thrice. The sentry, disturbed, half-turned.

Whiz! 'Got him!'

'Hold him!' gasped Jemima. 'You bet!'

Concealment was no longer necessary. The cave rang with their shouts. Babs could have wept with relief in the second following the capture of the man. Without thinking, she and Jemima rushed forward, piling on the man on the floor.

'Good!' Clara said. 'Collar him! Keep his legs down - don't let him kick! Now I'll show you how they truss 'em up out West - what?' she added, with a chuckle. 'But, Babs - search him - for the keys of the handcuffs.'

But Babs was already doing that. The keys, as a matter of fact, hung round the man's neck. She dragged them off.

While Clara, hovering round, made a very neat job of her work. Skilfully she secured the man's hands, knotting the rope so cunningly that even a Houdini would have found it difficult to get out of it. Jemima sat on his chest, while the man spluttered.

'Tut, tut-naughty, naughty!' Jemima said. 'Speak when you're spoken to, please! Babs—'

'Finished!' Babs laughed.

She had sprung to the helpless prisoner on the ground. The astounded eyes of Marcelle's father looked up at her, dim, hopeless, wonder in their depths. And then, as the light of the lantern fell upon her face, he gave a start.

'M'selle Redfern!'

'Just me,' Babs said. 'M. Biquet, can you help yourself?'

She clicked the handcuffs open, extending a hand. The man rather weakly staggered to his feet. 'All serene?' Clara asked.

'Yes.'

'Then come on; if any of the gang happened to come here—'

That warning was enough to make them serious again, and ten minutes later they were in the car outside, with Jemima at the wheel, speeding as hard as they could go towards Cliff House School.

At that very moment Marcelle Biquet was in the headmistress's study, pouring out her tale of woe.

For Marcelle had been found and freed by June Merrett, who, happening to look into the study, had discovered the awkward fix in which the French junior had been left. And Marcelle was furious.

Miss Primrose was shocked.

'And you say Jemima did this - Jemima?' she asked bewilderedly.

'Yes. She tied me up like ze-ze chicken!' Marcelle exclaimed. 'She steal ze parcel which I haf to take to London. I know not where eet ees, and Mr. DuPont, he will be worried.'

The headmistress frowned.

'Calm yourself,' she said. 'I will send for Jemima.'

But a search of the school revealed the fact that Jemima, Babs, and Clara were absent, for by that time the girls had gone into lessons, and their absence had been noted.

The Head's stem frown grew grimmer than ever.

'It seems,' she said, 'that Jemima has been aided in this mad escapade. These girls have deliberately played truant. If it is a Joke against you, Marcelle, it is a joke for which I can see neither rhyme nor reason. You had better go to Mr. DuPont, I think, and explain matters. Perhaps he can get into communication with your father. Meantime, if the girls arrive I will communicate with you.'

'But ze parcel!!' Marcelle exclaimed desperately.

'The hiding-place of the parcel, if Jemima has hidden it and hasn't it in her personal possession, is evidently known only to Jemima herself,' the headmistress said. 'I advise you to hurry, Marcelle. The parcel may have been valuable - probably was, seeing that you were taking it to a bank. Rest assured I shall deal severely with these girls when they put in an appearance.'

And Marcelle, worried and almost frantic, went.

She rushed out of the school. Bitterly she blamed Jemima as she went. The trip to London was obviously off. She pictured her father waiting, waiting on Victoria Station. In her anxiety, Marcelle was sobbing to herself even as she ran.

But at the gates she paused. A car was coming along the road, and at the wheel of that car was a girl she recognised. She stood still.

'Jemima!'

The car came up. Jemima, from the steering-wheel, looked at her. She applied the brakes. 'Marcelle!'

'Jemima, you - you!' choked Marcelle. 'Eet ees you?'

'Large as life, as beautiful as ever!' Jemima assured her cheerfully. 'And with a lovely present for you, Marcelle.'

'My parcel!'

'Bother your parcel! Look!'

And Jemima turned, beaming over her shoulder. And Marcelle, looking, stared so much that it really seemed that her big eyes would pop right out of her surprised little face.

For there, seated between Babs and Clara, was a man - a dreadfully pale, weary - looking man, his eyes sunken, his cheeks hollow-looking, as he was ill to the point of collapse. Marcelle gave an inarticulate cry.

'Papa!' she cried brokenly, as she stumbled forward.

And at the same moment another car flashed by. In the excitement no one noticed it. No one saw the driver - a girl - who threw one startled, frightened glance towards them.

But the girl was Yvonne Duprez!

Another ten minutes and Marcelle, so recently reviling Jemima, was on her knees, crying her gratitude and asking her forgiveness. For in that space of time much had happened.

The most amazed headmistress in the world was Miss Primrose, the dumbfounded principal of Cliff House. She listened to the story that the three girls, supported by M. Biquet, had to tell.

But there it was - proof indisputable. The story M. Biquet had to tell more than confirmed everything the girls said. The presence of the prisoner, whom they had thoughtfully brought along with them - not knowing what else to do with him - was proof that even Miss Primrose could not gainsay.

And afterwards, when M. Biquet, with Marcelle to comfort him, had been handed over to the care of Mrs. Thwaites and the school nurse, and lay in the sanatorium, Miss Primrose expressed herself.

'It is amazing - amazing!' she muttered. 'Bless my soul, the story is wild, and yet— You have acted bravely, my dears, but you have acted very, very wrongly in taking matters into your own hands like that. This man Duprez is a ruthless criminal.'

'What-ho!' Jemima said. 'He should be arrested!' Jemima chuckled.

'He will be,' she said. 'Oh, don't worry, Miss Primrose! I've already done it!'

'Bless my soul! Done what?'

'Phoned the police. They are coming to Cliff House now.'

'Dear me!' Miss Primrose blinked. 'You are a surprising girl, Jemima - surprising! You think of everything. I congratulate all three of you upon your resourcefulness, upon your courage. But I really must warn you that nothing like this is to happen again.'

She jumped as the door opened suddenly and a maid, looking a little scared, entered.

'Please, Miss Primrose, there is a gentleman to see you. He says he's a detective.'

'Smart!' commented Jemima. 'Got here quickly. What I always did say was that the police have been misjudged.'

'Show him in,' said Miss Primrose.

A tall man breathing in every line 'detective' came into the room. He smiled pleasantly.

'My name is Swinley,' he said. 'Detective-Inspector. I come from the Courtfield police.'

'Oh, yes! You were telephoned for, I believe?'

'That is right.' The man looked towards the girls. 'The chief has sent a detachment of police to the yacht,' he said. 'But, meantime, he requests me to ask these young ladies to come to the police station and make a statement. The matter is rather urgent, Miss Primrose, as we are anticipating the capture of the other scoundrels. May these girls come at once?'

'Why, certainly - certainly!' Miss Primrose said.

'I have a car outside,' Swinley went on. 'I promise you we will not detain them longer than is necessary.'

'Yes, yes, of course!' Miss Primrose said.

'Then, young ladies, perhaps you will come at once?'

'You bet!' grinned Clara.

'What-ho!' Jemima chuckled. 'I only hope,' she added brightly, 'that we're in the station when Duprez and the others are brought in. It will be funny to watch their faces.'

And Babs smiled.

They followed the man out of the room. A powerful-looking car stood in the drive on the other side of the quad, a uniformed driver at the wheel.

'Topping-what?' Jemima asked.

'Rather!'

They jumped in. Detective-Inspector Swinley smilingly opened the door for them as, laughing and chattering, they seated themselves, thrilling now at the realisation of their success, happy, if the truth be told, because they were missing lessons.

But greater than that was the happy knowledge that they had saved Marcelle from an unknown fate, that they had rescued her father, that they had foiled the greatest crook in Europe.

The car bowled smoothly on.

For a few minutes, so engrossed in their own affairs were they, they took no heed of where the car was going. But Jemima, glancing out of the window, uttered a sudden exclamation.

'Ye little fishes! Where's he taking us?'

Babs glanced quickly to her left. Then her eyes opened. For the car, instead of bowling along the road to Friardale was taking the road to Monks' Folly and the coast. The heads and shoulders of Detective-Inspector Swinley and the driver showed through the glass partition in front of them.

'Driver's going wrong!' Clara muttered in amazement. 'My hat, they're taking us to the yacht! But he said the police station, didn't he, Babs?'

Babs nodded. She tapped on the window.

The car stopped. The face of the driver slowly turned.

And then they stared. A gasp came from Jemima. From Clara went up a hiss of surprise; for the features they found themselves staring into-smooth, suave, merciless, smiling-they recognised only too well.

They were those of Alphonse Duprez!

A cry broke from Babs. Sudden beads of perspiration stood out upon her face.

'My goodness, we're trapped! '

Duprez laughed unpleasantly.

'Trapped, indeed!' he said harshly. 'You had the laugh a little time ago. It is now my turn. Young ladies, much as I regret it, I must inform you that you are my prisoners. No, do not trouble to try to escape. The doors are locked! '

And he turned the wheel again, jerking the car into motion.

CHAPTER XV Their Last Chance!

'I SAY! We're going down to the gates!' Fay Chandler chimed in. 'Just to give Jemima, Babs, and Clara a cheer when they come in. Coming, Doris?'

'Yes, rather! Let's go!' Doris said excitedly.

The news of the three girls' thrilling adventure had spread over the whole school, and great excitement was afoot.

There was quite a procession going down that drive in the direction of those gates.

Lordly seniors from the Sixth, Fifth Formers, diminutive Second Form girls - all anxious to get the first glimpse of the heroines of the school, and to welcome them on their return from the Courtfield police station, whither they had gone to give a statement to the police.

Fat Bessie Bunter was there, waddling between Mabel Lynn and Leila Carroll.

Flora Cann of the Fifth was there, strolling down the drive with Mildred Tamplin. Stella Stone and Dulcia Fairbrother and Isobel Drake of the Sixth were there, too. All Cliff House seemed to have but one idea.

Suddenly there was a shout. 'Hurrah! Here they come!'

Everybody stopped at once, staring towards the gates. A fine-looking car had turned out of the road leading to Friardale and was entering through the gates.

In the front of the car sat the well-known figure of Detective-Inspector Winter, of the Courtfield Police. At his side was a plain-clothes officer.

Doris stared eagerly.

'It's the police! But where's Babs?'

'And Jemima!'

'And Clara!'

Inspector Winter smiled at the excitement. 'Are they with you, inspector?' Doris asked.

'I beg your pardon,' he said. 'Ah, you are Miss Redfern's younger sister, aren't you? Where may I find Miss Redfern?' Doris stared.

'But you know!' she expostulated. 'She went down to your police station half an hour ago with Jemima and Clara.' It was the inspector's turn to stare.

'She what?'

'Yes, that's right, inspector.' It was Stella Stone, as head girl of the school, who came forward. 'One of your men - a Detective Swinley - came for them when—'

She stopped as she saw the sudden consternation that came into the inspector's face.

'But we have no Inspector Swinley in the division,' he said. 'And certainly no one had orders to take Miss Redfern or either of the other girls to Courtfield Station. This is some mistake, unless—' He paused and frowned, biting his lips. 'By George!' he muttered.

Stella frowned. 'Inspector—'

The inspector looked grave.

'Something has happened,' he decided. 'There has been a trick.'

Miss Stone, I don't want to alarm you or anybody unnecessarily, but I fear you have been the victims of a hoax. It is a trick Duprez might well think of!' he added bitterly. 'Grimes, drive on! I must speak to Miss Primrose at once!'

The girls fell back.

'But inspector—' cried Doris.

'I'm sorry, Miss Redfern. I will speak to you later. Grimes - quickly!'

Then suddenly there was a disturbance at the gates. The splutter of an engine was heard, and through the gates roared a motorcycle.

A uniformed police-sergeant bestrode the saddle, dropping one leg to the ground as he neared the girls. There was a flutter. Cliff House girls came crowding round.

Mabs recognised the man as one of Inspector Winter's men. 'Why, Sergeant Linguard!' she said.

'Oh, Miss Lynn,' the other gasped, 'is Inspector Winter here?'

'Yes. He's with Miss Primrose. But what's the matter? Any fresh news?'

The sergeant nodded.

'News enough!' he agreed grimly. 'The yacht—'

A sudden silence fell.

'Yes?' Mabs asked.

'We sent a party out to board the yacht,' the sergeant went on, 'but we were too late. The yacht is sailing under full steam straight into the Channel. It's gone!'

'Gone!'

In a breathless whisper the word went round, and there was an immediate buzz.

Alarm leapt into every face. For if their suspicions were true now-and there seemed little doubt of that-only one conclusion was to be drawn.

The *Catherine* had sailed, and, prisoners of the most callous and cunning criminal in Europe, the three Cliff House girls had sailed with it.

Two miles out at sea, fighting a battle with a choppy ocean, the stately *Catherine* plunged upon its uncertain way.

The *Catherine* was a slim, beautiful yacht, built for speed, but rarely ever had the *Catherine* travelled as it was travelling at the moment.

The decks quivered under the throb of its straining engines, and the yacht rocked alarmingly in the swell which the dark clouds were bringing as they rolled up from beyond the coast of France.

A wind had sprung up, howling through the rigging and whistling in shrieking triumph round the cabins on the upper deck.

Look-out men, stationed at all points, anxiously scanned the heaving waters about them.

But in one of those cabins, unheeding the brewing storm, occupied at the moment by problems far more weighty, stood three girls.

They stood together, staggering from time to time as the vessel rolled.

Round the wrist of each was fastened a steel handcuff, a short length of chain securing her to the next girl.

Their uniforms and their badges proclaimed them at once as being pupils of Cliff House School, and though they must have realised the dreadful peril in which they stood, there was no trace of fear on any of their faces.

Rather was there a cool contempt.

They stood before a desk, and at the other side of that desk sat a man - a lean-featured man, whose gleaming teeth were revealed in a smile, whose eyes, dark and glittering, were regarding them, not with anger, but with a mild amusement which had in it a hint of mockery.

By his side sat a girl, fair-haired, but dark-eyed like her father.

Her name was Yvonne Duprez. The man himself was the iron-nerved rascal whom half the police of Europe knew as Alphonse Duprez.

He grinned. 'Well, little girls! '

The 'little girls' stiffened.

Barbara Redfern's blue eyes flashed with the anger and contempt that she felt as they stared back at the man.

Jemima Carstairs, as unconcerned as ever, put her free hand over her mouth as if to cover a yawn.

Clara Trevlyn, her riotous, wind-blown bob looking more unruly than ever, glared back with defiant anger.

But not one of them made a retort to that mocking sally.

'Still untamed-eh?' The man grinned pleasantly. Only the glitter in his eyes seemed to belie the benign smile. 'Here you are, booked for quite a nice trip-eh?' he asked. 'I regret I have had to deal with you somewhat roughly' - with a meaning glance at the fetters - 'but as you have been such very, very naughty children, I deemed it best to be on the safe side. One of you might be tempted to make a swim for the shore, you know - which would be against your best interests in this weather.'

Clara Trevlyn pulled a face.

'Is that all you've brought us here for?' she asked truculently.

'Not at all.'

He smiled again.

'In your own interests I have brought you here-and in mine!' he said. 'The courage and the resource you have shown in getting back M'sieur Biquet and the jewels I relieved him of, are both qualities I admire very much. I will admit, if it pleases you, that you were just a little too clever for me; because, you see, when planning this coup, I had not thought of interference from a parcel of schoolgirls.'

'You have,' he added without anger, 'rather interfered with my plans.'

'Annoying - what?' Jemima murmured.

'Very.'

He glanced at her oddly.

'So annoying that I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to help me in undoing all the mischief you have done. I address myself,' he added, staring at Jemima, 'particularly to you.'

'Flattered,' Jemima said imperturbably. 'Fire ahead, old boy.' 'The question is this,' Duprez went on, 'you have robbed me of fifty thousand pounds' worth of jewels. You have hidden those jewels somewhere. I am no longer interested in M'sieur Biquet, the owner of those jewels. But I want the jewels just the same.'

'And how,' Barbara Redfern asked, speaking for the first time, 'do you propose to get them? The police are already on your trail.'

'True.'

The man laughed.

'And the police,' he added cheerfully, 'have doubtless by now discovered your absence. The police, not being perfect fools, have doubtless concluded that you are prisoners aboard this yacht. 'Which means to say,' he went on, 'following the methods I know the police will employ, that in a very short space of time I might expect half the British fleet on my heels.'

The girls stared at him.

'I don't propose to fight the British Navy,' he added with a smile. 'Indeed I couldn't. On the other hand, I don't propose to get caught.'

'I think,' he added softly, 'that I can give your gunboats a run for their money until nightfall - or until the storm breaks.'

Babs eyed the man. She wondered what was in his mind.

Duprez, considering the desperate position he was in, appeared uncannily calm and unruffled.

'Shall I tell you what I propose to do?' he asked. 'It's a shame, I admit, but the circumstances leave no alternative. When the storm breaks, I'm destroying this yacht, but first I shall take the opportunity of punching a hole in her side.

'She will be wrecked - a pity, perhaps - but it cannot be helped. After which, we shall all take to the boats - at least I hope you will too, but that will depend on whether you are sensible or not. Presume, then, that we all take to the boats. We shall go to a spot where the police would think last of looking for us, and we shall not leave that spot until the jewels are back in my possession.'

Babs looked horrified.

'You mean you will deliberately wreck the yacht?'

'Precisely.'

'You must be mad! '

'Indeed, why?'

'Why, to do that for the sake of fifty thousand pounds' worth of jewels. Isn't your yacht worth more to you than that?'

The man laughed. He turned to Yvonne, who smiled slightly. 'Hardly,' he said suavely. 'You see, I don't mind telling you this now - in the first place, the yacht is not mine. It belongs to - well, to a millionaire.

'I gave myself the pleasure,' he added, with a smile, 'of - of relieving him of it, and I have already decided that holding on to it is likely to become rather a problem. It suits my purpose in these circumstances, to destroy it - indeed, it is very convenient from every point of view. For when the wreck is found, what will be the conclusion?'

It took the idea a few moments to sink into the minds of the Cliff House girls. Then their eyes widened in horror.

'You mean—' Babs gasped.

'I will tell you,' Duprez smilingly went on. 'It will be considered that it went down with all on board - you, me, all of us, will be given up as - lost! '

The three girls stared. Even Jemima looked a little disconcerted. They all knew Duprez as a cool, calculating criminal, but that his villainy could lead him to such depths as these, even they had never dreamed.

Deliberately to wreck the yacht-to allow it to be thought that it had foundered with all hands, while he was somewhere else planning some other nefarious enterprise—

'You scoundrel!' gasped Babs.

'You-you big, flat-footed villain!' Clara burst out. The man laughed.

'It angers you, eh?' he asked. 'Don't let it! I have done rasher things in the past-shall probably do them again. Now listen, and you shall hear the part I have planned for you in this little adventure. I want those jewels. Those jewels are at Cliff House School. Being pupils there, you are in a position to get them back for me - by what means you shall learn later.'

Babs's face flamed.

'Well, I for one will have nothing to do with it!'

'No, nor I!' burst out Clara Trevlyn hotly. Jemima nodded.

'Count me out, too!' she advised.

Duprez's eyes glittered, though the smile never left his face. 'Very well,' he said resignedly. 'In that case, of course, I cannot force you.'

The ship lurched again sending them all forward. There came the sound of spattering rain hissing violently upon the deck above while the wind increased in velocity.

'I observe,' he said, 'that the storm is breaking upon us. It is already beginning to get dark.'

He rose, reaching for his sou'wester.

'In less than two hours this ship will sink,' he said. 'In the meantime, make up your minds - you either give me your word to help or—' he paused. 'You sink with it!'

The eyes of the three girls were round with horror. Of course, he was bluffing - or wasn't he? A ruthless scoundrel such as Duprez was capable of leaving them to drown - unless they could persuade him it would pay him better to take them ashore.

'You'll leave us here?' cried Babs.

'Why not?'

'But - but you couldn't! We should be drowned.' Duprez laughed harshly.

'You have your chance,' he said. 'If you are drowned it's your own fault.'

He rang a bell. A foreign sailor, rough in appearance, opened the door, saluting smartly as he entered.

'Take these young ladies to the lower deck cabin,' he ordered. 'I will attend to them later. Meantime, see that all boats are ready to be lowered at a moment's notice. As soon as it is dark enough, swing her head round for the shore.'

The sailor saluted again. In horror, the girls gazed at one another. But Duprez, as if still amused, merely lighted a cigarette and stood mockingly watching them from the centre of the cabin until the door closed behind them.

CHAPTER XVI
The Last of the *Catherine!*

CRASH! came a wave against the side of the ship, making the woodwork groan. The chain rattled as Babs, Clara, and Jemima were flung together in a heap.

There came a quick pattering of feet along the corridor outside.

Then suddenly the door was flung open.

Alphonse Duprez stood there in glistening oilskins.

'Well, we're going ashore,' he said. 'Is it good-bye, or do you girls intend to help me as I asked?'

'Afraid it must be good-bye,' returned Jemima. 'Though the parting it will grieve me.'

So calm and unruffled was her reply that the man turned in anger from her and looked at Babs and Clara. But if he expected to see any sign of fear, or of giving in there, he was disappointed.

That this man might not be bluffing, but might leave them to their fate, they knew was very possible - but they did not intend to make him a promise they would regret afterwards.

He swung round, as if intending to leave them. No cries came to him, calling him back.

He turned back and faced them again.

'Come out of it!' he snapped. 'You're useless to me, drowned.'

'I'll find some way of making you help me once I get you ashore. Keep together, but get upstairs quickly - into the motor-launch with Yvonne. You've no time to spare! The yacht will be under water in three minutes!'

He seized hold of Jemima's hand, tugging her through the doorway.

But the chums needed no bidding. They tumbled anxiously into the corridor outside, reeling back as the ship lurched. 'Get to the boat!' roared Duprez. 'Yvonne!'

'Father!' came a voice.

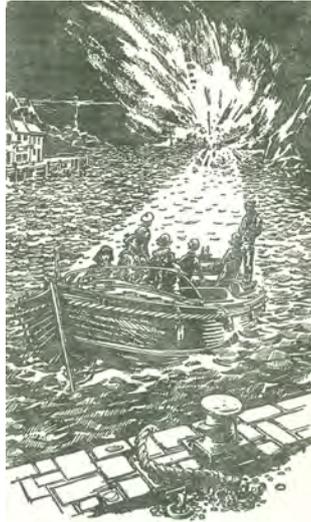
'Come this way!' Duprez shouted.

He switched on a torch, by whose light he now guided them. In stumbling, slipping steps the three girls followed him, sliding on the water-strewn decks, beaten and bruised in the fury of the elements.

They could see nothing, owing to the rain and the darkness.

They could hear nothing save the tumultuous voice of the storm which raged around them.

But presently they found themselves desperately hanging on to the rails; found themselves half-lifted, half-clambering over the side of the yacht. There came a stentorian shout: 'Lower away, there!'



The Catherine had had a violent life – and now she had a violent death . . .

Then down-down into the mass of angry ocean, eyes closed, each praying that they had not escaped death in the yacht to meet it in the launch.

Duprez himself had clambered after them, taking the wheel.

Drenched, they huddled together, tossed this way and that-a pitiful cork on the heaving chest of mighty Neptune.

Only Duprez seemed unmoved. Cool, calm, unruffled, he sat there, eyes skimming the breakers ahead, waiting for his opportunity. The launch chugged into sudden life.

'Hold on!' yelled Duprez.

Then they felt themselves moving. Desperately they clung to the gunwale. Now up, now down, dipping steeply into the trough of the sea, now riding at a steep incline as they rushed towards the foam-smothered crest of some giant wave.

Unheeded, the spray dashed over them, searing their faces, filling their mouths. Every moment they expected to be their last.

How long? How long? Still they went on.

But now they seemed to be running into shallower water. Here the surf boiled less and spumed less; no longer they met those terrible mountains of water.

Babs, staring hard, caught the gleam of a lighthouse; saw, when her vision was not obscured by the salt spray and the foam, winking lights, strung out like a row of illuminated beads before her.

They were near the shore - but what part of the shore? Babs shook her head. She felt numbed, bewildered.

Now frowning cliffs hemmed them in on two sides. The water became calm, and Babs guessed they had chugged into some tiny harbour. A light gleamed in front of her, a hoarse voice called out.

Some instinct prompted Babs to look back. And then her eyes opened wide in surprise.

Some trick of light - a momentary break in the clouds in the middle of the storm - showed her the yacht.

It stood half a mile out, waging its last fight with the sea which for so many years it had so gracefully ridden.

Its nose was down, half-buried in the sea, its stem high out of the water, revealing a still threshing propeller.

Even as Babs watched there came a muffled roar. 'Look - look!' she cried, standing up in her excitement. 'The yacht!'

They all turned. And then they all gasped and quivered. For suddenly, blindingly, there rushed up amidships a great hungry tongue of crimson flame.

It flickered redly, the thunder of its roar echoed back even above the crashing voice of the storm. The yacht seemed to leap in one last convulsive shudder.

For a few seconds its red light flickered around, revealing everything as clear as daylight.

And then the *Catherine* disappeared for ever!

Babs, frozen with awe, saw tiny boats rowing towards them, saw the foam-crested waves leaping and rolling towards the shore. And then she saw something else.

To the left, barely fifty yards away, a gaunt wreck, half-buried in the sand, showed a vivid outline against the black wall of a towering cliff.

'My goodness!' she cried.

For she recognised the old wreck. She knew now where they were.

They had come to Ebb's Bay in Belwin Island, barely a mile from the mainland and less than three miles from Cliff House School!

CHAPTER XVII Where Were They Now?

MORNING.

Calm, bright, a tranquil sun flooding a countryside which glistened after the effects of yesterday's storm, a heat haze on the ground even at seven o'clock in the morning, the birds twittering blithely in the branches, and the gentle murmur of breakers where, a few hours before, the sea had crashed and roared in angry, shattering violence.

Seven o'clock it was, with the sun making golden paths among the scarcely rolling waves, with the white cliff shining, even sinister Belwin Island looking strangely bright after the tumultuousness of the night.

But the little beach on the mainland in front of the caves - the largest and deepest of which was known as Monks' Tomb - wore none of its usual loneliness. It was a scene alive with figures.

Policemen, villagers, girls, and mistresses from Cliff House School stared at the beach—a beach lined with wreckage, with flotsam and jetsam cast up from the storm last night.

In little groups they moved here and there, stooping now and again to pick up some piece of wreckage, stopping now and again to talk.

For the news of the wreck of the Catherine had gone forth.

It had come as a shock to the neighbourhood, but in no place had it arrived amidst such consternation as at Cliff House School.

There were many Cliff House girls searching among the wreckage.

Stella Stone was there in company with Dulcia Fairbrother and Isobel Drake.

Mabel Lunn and Leila Carroll and Bessie Bunter represented the Fourth, and were near Doris Redfern, who, tragic-eyed and shaking, walked as in a dream from place to place.

Miss Matthews was there, with Miss Eva Scott of the Second Form, turning to each other now and then and sadly shaking their heads. It was a slow-moving, melancholy procession.

'Oh, I won't believe it - I won't!' Doris Redfern sobbed.

'Mabs, it's not true. It isn't—'

Mabs's face was pitiful. She turned her head. 'Oh, kik-crumbs!' gasped Bessie.

'Bessie, you don't believe that - that Babs is drowned?'

'Oh, nun-no! That is, I dud-don't know, you know,' Bessie said unhappily. 'She oughtn't to be, you know. She's a Holly good swimmer. I—' And Bessie gulped, putting up a creased wet handkerchief to wipe a furtive tear from her eye.

At the same moment there came a little exclamation from Leila Carroll, walking on in front.

And Leila very quickly stooped and picked up something. 'What is it?' Doris cried.

'Eh? Say, it - it's nothing!' Leila said. She put her hand behind her swiftly. 'Something - well, something I just found, I guess,' she said uneasily. 'Doris, old kid, don't look at me like that!'

'What was it?' Doris challenged fiercely. 'Well, I've told you.'

'Let me see.'

'But, look here - I guess—'

But Doris's little face was aflame. She was shaking in the stress of her tragic emotion. She knew what these others believed - what everyone believed - but she would not believe it, she wouldn't. Nothing so horrible as that could have happened to Babs. It couldn't.

Doris now glared at Leila - rather as if Leila had been her enemy. Then suddenly she jumped forward, snatching Leila's hand from behind her back.

The hand came away with a hat in it - a faded, battered hat, but a hat none the less, easily recognisable as one belonging to a Cliff House girl.

Hurriedly Doris snatched it, turned down the band inside and read the name. She swayed.

'Babs!' she muttered.

For the name, printed there in water-proof marking-ink, was that of 'B. Redfern.'

'No, it can't be!' Doris cried chokingly. 'No, it's not - it's not!' Her voice, high-pitched, rose to a shriek. 'It's not, I tell you!'

And, as though the hat had suddenly become red-hot, she threw it fiercely to the sand.

'Dud-Doris!' muttered Bessie. But Doris sobbed.

'Oh, kik-crumbs! I mum-mean, cheer up, you know,' Bessie said, weeping herself. 'I - gulp - I-I dud - don't believe it, you know. No, Doris, I dud-don't. I - oh-oh-oooh!'

And Bessie, unable to keep up her pitiful pretence, at last broke down and sobbed.

'Oh, Babs! Pip-poor old Babs!' she sobbed.

Mabel Lynn's lips quivered. She looked at Leila. Leila looked away as though shame-faced.

Nearby, Inspector Winter, of the Courtfield police, was talking to pale-faced Miss Matthews. His words, not intended for the Fourth Formers' ears, nevertheless came plainly to them.

'I'm afraid there's no hope,' he said. 'It's obvious what's happened. The Catherine ran into a rock during the storm and just blew up at sea. The hat and coat we've found suggest, as we felt, that your girls were on it. They must have been drowned with the rest.'

'But—' Miss Matthews looked tragic.

'Oh, it's too awful,' she whispered. 'Babs, Jemima, Clara - three of the dearest girls in my Form. Inspector, are you sure there could have been no mistake?'

The inspector shook his head.

Miss Matthews gravely nodded.

'I see, thank you. I will convey the news to Miss Primrose,' she said. 'We had been hoping against hope that - that—'

She stopped, unable to speak for the choking lump that welled deeply in her throat.

Miss Scott comfortingly gripped her arm, and the inspector, with a sad shake of his head, moved away to join his men.

Mabs's fists clenched. Bessie wept copiously and openly, seeming to find a little relief in her tears.

But Doris, who had heard every word of that conversation, stood stock-still, her big eyes glistening and tragic.

She had heard, but still she did not believe. Babs - her Babs, her sister-drowned at sea.

No, no, no! She could not believe that a thing like that could have happened to dear old Babs - her only sister.

'Doris—' Mabs said tenderly.

'No, don't touch me!' Doris cried. 'Don't, don't, don't! You all believe it! But it's not true - it's not true!

'I tell you it's not true!' she shrieked, beside herself, and stamped her foot on the beach. 'Babs isn't - isn't—'

She could not bring herself to say the dreaded word, then, suddenly swinging to Bessie, wept against her. Bessie, looking heart-broken herself, mechanically stroked her head.

Miss Matthews came forward. She sighed very heavily as she saw Doris.

Doris sobbed.

'Doris, my dear. Mabel, take her arm, will you?' she added quietly.

'Yes, come on, Doris,' Mabs said tenderly, and tried to smile. ,

'Cheer up, kiddie! '

'Yes, ch-cheer up, you know,' Bessie sniffed.

'It's not true,' Doris repeated. 'It's not. Babs—'

'Take her away,' Miss Matthews whispered. 'Get her into Miss Primrose's car at the top of the cliff. Bessie, you'd better go, too - all of you. I'll follow later.'

Mabs nodded. Resistlessly now, the Third Former allowed herself to be led away, Mabs holding one arm and Leila the other.

Like a little drooping flower Doris trailed between them, while Bessie, a handkerchief held to her red and shining face, trailed pathetically in the rear.

For in spite of Doris's belief to the contrary, in spite of their own frantic hopes, it was borne in upon the little party that Inspector Winter must be right.

Babs, Jemima, Clara—

Those dear friends, the heroines of so many japes and adventures, such dear companions—

Ah, where were they now?

CHAPTER XVIII Forced to Give In

'WELL, well!' remarked Jemima Carstairs with hollow cheerfulness. 'We live and learn - what? I thought I knew all there was to be known about Belwin Island.'

'And so did I,' agreed Babs. 'And yet—' Clara said.

'And yet, here we are - somewhere in the middle of the island, high and dry, and so snugly hidden that a thousand people armed with dynamite couldn't find us in a thousand years!' Jemima went on. 'Tis a queer world, children!'

And Babs and Clara nodded at that, though the nods were weary in the extreme, and the eyes that regarded Jemima were haggard and red-rimmed in faces of startling pallor.

It was morning on Belwin Island, and yet no sign of that morning were they privileged to witness. They did not realise that barely a mile from them, on the foreshore, searchers were roaming up and down the beach, that search-parties were actually upon the island, darting hither and thither.

For here they were secured, safe and sound from intervention from the outside world - in a circular apartment which even in their misery gave them cause for wonder.

Many, many times in the past had Babs & Co. explored Belwin Island. They had, as Jemima had stated, fancied they had known all there was to be known about it. But Alphonse Duprez, apparently, knew more than they.

How they had got here they did not know. It had all been so impenetrably dark. They had been led through a narrow channel opened out from Ebb's Bay.

And here they sat, clustered round a miserable, flickering oil-stove, in a huge apartment circular in shape, but narrowing at the tip rather as if they were in the centre of an inverted cone.

Babs had wondered. The middle of Belwin Island was occupied by a gigantic hill, cone-shaped, like the interior of this cave, known as Windbell Mount.

People said that Windbell Mount had in prehistoric days been a miniature volcano - that Belwin Island itself, indeed, had been thrown up near the foreshore as the result of volcanic action.

The theory was probably a correct one, considering that the island was not composed of chalk, like the neighbouring cliffs, but of rock that was undoubtedly volcanic in its origin.

But if Windbell Mount had been the centre of the volcano, what was probably the lava, evening a way through the ages, must have left it hollow and cone-shaped.

Babs very shrewdly guessed that they were now seated in the very heart of Windbell Mount.

There was a step behind them. A light wavered up and down in a narrow tunnel, the entrance of which they had not suspected before.

Two men came into view carrying a steaming container full of tea and some roughly cut sandwiches piled on the lid. 'Ho!' one of the men grinned. 'Feeling bright?'

The girls declined to reply.

The two men looked at each other, grinned, put the food in front of the girls, and went away again.

There was a tin mug, floating on the surface of the tea. Babs smiled.

'One cup between three,' she said. 'We'll have to drink out of it in turns. Do you mind?'

'Fill it up,' suggested Clara. 'My hat! Is that tea? Smells good!'

'Rather!'

'Jolly old shipwrecked mariners - what?' Jemima remarked. 'What-ho! I could do with some tea.'

'Fraid I shipped quite a tank or so of salt water last night. After you, Babs.'

'No, you first,' Babs said, and, dipping the mug in the tea with her free hand, handed it up.

Jemima took it. Another time she would have shuddered at a tin mug, but the tea taste was good and appetising.

They gulped it down with thirsty thankfulness, filling up again.

The sandwiches they did not touch, even though they were so hungry.

There was a movement from the far end of the cave. A torch cut a wide beam of light across the uneven floor. Two figures entered - a girl and a man.

Babs stiffened.

'Duprez and Yvonne!' she muttered.

Duprez came over to them. Despite the wild adventure of the night, he seemed his usual debonair self.

Not a hair was out of place. He had shaved, and had - Babs noticed with wonder - put on a blue lounge suit.

He grinned down at them.

'Having breakfast, I see,' he observed. 'Sorry your quarters are not more comfortable. It's the best I could do at short notice because when I fixed up this little hide-out a few days ago I hadn't

bargained for guests. He smiled with faint mockery. 'Careless of me, I admit, but even Alphonse Duprez can't' always foresee everything.'

'What are you going to do with us?' Babs asked quietly.

'Depends upon you - or, rather, upon Miss Carstairs ' the man said. 'The sooner you fall in with my wishes the better it's going to be for all of you. I don't suppose you want to remain here any longer than you can help, eh? Neither do we. I told you I believe my object is the jewels which Miss Carstairs has hidden'

'Well?'

'Well, understanding that, you will also understand why you are here. Miss Carstairs, perhaps you will have the goodness to tell me exactly where you hid them?'

'And perhaps I won't - what?' countered Jemima The man's eyes gleamed.

'Perhaps you will,' he said, 'or perhaps one of the other girls will. Miss Redfern!'

'I don't know,' Babs said with perfect truth - for that, at least, Jemima had not yet told them. "

'Miss Trevlyn!'

'Find out!' Clara growled.

'I intend to. If you know—'

'I don't!'

'I see,' Duprez smiled measuringly. 'So the secret rests with you, Miss Carstairs. You won't tell?'

'Guessed it!' Jemima said admiringly.

'I see!' He smiled again; then suddenly his hand shot out, fastening upon Jemima's wrist.

Jemima gave a little gasp of pain at the cruel pressure the man exerted, and bit her lips. 'Perhaps - now?' he said gently. 'No!' Jemima gasped.

'Or now?' He twisted the wrist.

'You bully! No!' Jemima cried, white to the lips. 'Well, now, then?'

There was a crack from Jemima's wrist. Her face turned deathly pale, but her teeth clenched.

'Dash you - no!'

'Very well!' He smiled ominously. 'I will hold this wrist. I will ask you a dozen times, "Will you?" At each question I shall turn the wrist just a little more - so!'

And Jemima winced, her eyes almost starting from her head. 'And at the end of that time you will probably have swooned from pain,' he said mockingly. 'So save yourself a great deal of agony.'

'No!' Jemima gasped fiercely. 'Oh, you brute!'

'Jemima!' Babs muttered.

'Will you?'

'No! Oh!' And Jemima sagged back limply.

Babs clenched her teeth. From Clara came a hissing gasp. The man in front of her was kneeling, his face twisted into a cruel smile, his white teeth gleaming in the light.

His next 'Will you?' almost brought a shriek from Babs; but Clara, quickly seizing an advantage, acted.

She reached out with her foot, catching the container of hot tea upon the rim. Before Duprez could scramble out of reach it heeled over.

Swoosh!

'Oh!' roared Duprez.

He gave a yell. Spluttering, he went over backwards. Jemima, half-fainting, allowed her hand to drop limply by her side.

But Babs, her eyes blazing with fury, now stood up. With the unfettered hand she grabbed hold of the iron container.

Duprez staggered up, but, as he rose, Babs swung the container, raising it.

A yell of pain, muffled metallically, came from Duprez as the canteen crashed upon his head.

'You vixens!' Yvonne shouted.

She rushed forward. Her hand came round. Babs put up an arm to ward off the blow, but too late. Smack! And Yvonne's open palm caught her across the cheek, sending her staggering backwards.

At the same moment, Duprez, dragging the container away from his head, threw the vessel across the floor and stood up. 'Tex, Sandy!' he roared in fury.

'Aye, sir!'

Running feet were heard from the tunnel outside. Into the glow of the lamp two sailors appeared.

For once Duprez's coolness had deserted him. He pointed with a quivering finger at the three girls.

'Take them to my room! Tie them up!' he raved. 'They have insulted me!'

'Aye, aye, sir!'

'Stand back!' roared Clara, and, quick as thought, grabbed the container.

She had only one hand free, but she swung so expertly that the two men paused. Duprez, beside himself, raved.

'Dolts, fools! Go on, get them!' he shouted.

'I shall throw it!' Clara threatened. 'You come one step nearer—'

And then she gasped. The canteen clattered from her hand.

For Yvonne, suddenly stooping, had picked up a stone from the floor of the cavern.

With unerring aim she threw it at Clara's wrist. Clara gave an agonised cry of pain. At the same moment the two men rushed in. Babs, Clara, and Jemima, though they struggled, were helpless.

Forced along the passage outside the door of the cavern by the sailors, they were suddenly halted in front of another door. The man called Sandy pushed it open and with a heave sent them spinning forward.

The three, falling against one another, shot through the doorway and then stood blinking round in surprise.

'My hat!' gasped Clara.

They found themselves in a square apartment, low-roofed and hewn, apparently from the solid rock. A desk stood in the centre, just as on board the yacht.

There was an easy chair behind it, a wicker chair next to it.

At the far end of the room, neatly folded, was a collapsible bed, its blankets still on. In one corner a porcelain washstand, with a mirror fixed above it, and a shaded electric light above that. Without a doubt, Alphonse Duprez's own room.

'Posh!' Jemima muttered. She had come to while being pushed down the passage. 'Positively luxurious for a place like this. Here, I say!'

But her protest was ignored as she was roughly hurled forward towards the wall. There was a snap behind her. Sandy grinned.

Babs, looking round, saw that the chain which secured the three girls had been hooked to the wall.

Duprez came in, followed by Yvonne. The knees of his trousers showed black where the tea had spilled over them, but evidently he had overcome his momentary bad temper. He was smiling, as usual.

He laughed as he saw them.

'So here we are again!' he chuckled. 'Rather distressing to have to treat you like this. I am sorry, but I must have what I want, you know. I mean to get it. Now to business, Miss Carstairs.'

'Adsum!' Jemima answered.

'You still refuse to tell me where you have hidden the jewels?'

'Yes,' Jemima cheerfully assented.

'Thank you. If you will not speak I cannot force you,' he said.

'But there are ways, Miss Carstairs, and means. One of them I have demonstrated. It hurt, just a little, didn't it?'

Jemima was silent.

'I admire the pluck you showed,' Duprez went on. 'You girls have many excellent qualities. I observe, too, that you are fond of those two friends of yours. Very well. Not willingly, I take it, would you see them suffer as you suffered, if you could help it. Miss Redfern, give me your hand.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Give me your hand!'

'I won't!' Babs gasped.

But protest was worse than useless. Duprez sprang forward. He caught Babs's hand, crushing it in his own grip with a pressure that made the junior captain of Cliff House turn white.

Jemima's eyes smouldered.

'Miss Carstairs can tell you how this will hurt,' Duprez said with a grin.

He twisted Babs's wrist, and Babs gave out a gasp of pain. 'Miss Carstairs, when you are ready, I am prepared to listen, he said. 'Until you agree to tell me what you know I shall go on doing this. Just a dozen times. After that your friend Clara shall discover what this trick feels like.'

He twisted again. Babs almost swooned. Jemima turned white to the lips.

'You rotter!' she muttered.

Duprez laughed. Again he twisted Babs's wrist. 'No!' Jemima panted. 'No - no more! I'll tell!'

'No, Jimmy,' Babs gasped. 'Don't tell him!'

'I will tell,' Jemima said. 'Let her go - please!' She drew a deep breath. 'The jewels are hidden in - in Study No. 10!'

'Jimmy!' Babs gasped.

'They are hidden in a hole in the wall behind a cupboard there,' Jemima exclaimed.

Duprez laughed. He released Babs's hand.

'Thank you. That's better. Now we avoid a great deal of unpleasantness, I trust,' he said. 'Where is this study?'

'In the Fourth Form corridor.'

'And no one else knows of the hiding-place?'

'No.'

'Good!' Duprez frowned.

For a moment he stood, lost in thought, abstractedly taking a bar of chocolate from his pocket and biting at it - a habit of his Babs had noticed, when he was thinking.

'Thank you,' he said politely. 'It remains now to recover those jewels. I am not acquainted with the layout of your school, which is unfortunate, for that means I cannot risk getting them myself. But I have an idea. Barbara Redfern!'

Babs's eyes flashed. 'Well?'

'You have a younger sister at the school - Doris her name is I believe? You spoke about her rather freely when I entertained you to tea the other day upon the yacht. I gather that she is fond of you - that she would do anything for you?'

Babs looked alarmed. Jemima stared. Clara frowned.

'Well, what has Doris to do with it?'

Duprez chuckled.

'Quite a lot, quite a lot,' he said complacently. 'For Doris is going to be the girl to recover those jewels. And you,' he added, significantly, 'are going to ask her to recover them. Now, listen.' And, smiling pleasantly, he took another bite at the bar of chocolate, and then seated himself at his desk.

CHAPTER XIX

News at Last!

'ANY news?'

'No!'

'Oh, how terrible!'

It was afternoon at Cliff House, and normally the girls of that school should have been at lessons. But to-day there were no lessons.

The shadow of tragedy brooded over the school. Girls gathered in the quadrangle and the Common-rooms, speaking in hushed whispers.

In the mistresses' room, the mistresses sat talking in low tones their faces worried and anxious.'

Even the studies were only half-tenanted, for restlessness had come to Cliff House, and girls could neither sit nor stand for any length of time.

Most of them were in the quadrangle, anxiously watching the gates, still hoping against hope, though the worst was now generally feared.

No news had come, and it was now nearly twenty-four hours since the *Catherine* had been wrecked with all hands lost.

And not only all hands, but three of their own school-fellows, too!

It was tea-time, but no one was thinking of tea. Over the whole school hung a tension.

But in the Third Form Common-room one girl adopted a different mien. She went about with her head on high, her lips forced in a firm and obstinate line.

There were tears behind the tragic eyes of Doris Redfern - tears which perhaps it would have been better for her to have shed, but Doris fought them back.

She did not believe - and still steadfastly refused to believe - what the whole school was now gradually becoming convinced of. Babs and Jemima and Clara were alive-must be alive!

Some accident had befallen Babs - that was all.

So Doris said. But in her heart of hearts, Doris was afraid. She buoyed herself up by refusing stubbornly to look facts in the face.

With fierce defiance she scorned the fears of the school, feeling that that was the only way in which she could prevent her heart from breaking.

And she said nothing. But she walked like a figure out of a tragedy.

'Bothered if I know what to do about Doris,' Madge Stevens, her own particular friend said, worriedly, to Fay Chandler. 'What can we do about her?'

'Leave her alone,' Fay said, and added sententiously: 'It's terrible, but while there's life there's hope, you know.'

Madge nodded, though she gulped a little, reflecting that there was no evidence of life.

Doris saw them talking together, saw them looking at her. She glared defiantly in their direction, guessing what they were saying, and then walked out of the Common-room.

But outside, just for a second, her lips quivered, a worried, haggard look came into her pretty, young face.

In front of other girls, Doris could keep up her defiance. When she was alone—

She hurried on to the Fourth Form corridor. The door of Study No. 4 stood open. She went in.

Mabs turned from the window. Bessie blinked up pathetically, sniffing a little sob as she screwed her moist handkerchief into a ball. Doris frowned.

'Goose! What are you crying for?' she asked. 'Wuw-well, poor old Babs—'

Doris's eyes flashed.

'And why, poor old Babs?' she asked. 'Goodness, anybody would think something serious has happened. Just because she's been away a few hours—'

Mabs shook her head. Rather hastily she turned her face to the window again, while Bessie blinked unhappily.

'Well, say something!' Doris cried fiercely. 'Don't dry up!

Everywhere I go in this school now people stare at me, and then shut up and say nothing. There's nothing to get worried about, is there? We've had no proof anything has happened to Babs.'

'Bib-but the wreck, you know,' Bessie faltered. 'And the hat and - and things.'

'Ph, that!' Doris laughed - a harsh laugh quite startlingly unnatural. 'Well, what of that?' she asked. 'Other people's hats have been found on the beach before, haven't they? But that doesn't mean to say that they're drowned. Besides, you said yourself that Babs is a jolly good swimmer.'

Bessie looked concerned.

'Yes, I know. Bib-but if Babs isn't - isn't - oh, crumbs, you know! We should have heard from her, you know.'

'Bessie!' muttered Mabs warningly.

Doris bit her lip. She trembled slightly.

'Well, she-she might have met with an accident,' she said. 'You know how easy it is - it is to meet with an accident.'

She looked, not at Bessie, but right above Bessie's head, her voice cracking a little as she paused to swallow.

'We ought to do something,' she said. 'We ought to go down there, and - and see for ourselves. You're Babs's friends!'

'But what's the good?' demurred Bessie. 'I mean—'

'Well, we might find something,' Doris said feebly. 'We - we might get - get news, you know. It's awful hanging about here, just - just waiting for something to happen, you know. I—' And she stopped there, her voice becoming very quavering and very shaky all at once, and for a moment she looked quite crumpled up.

'Oh, Mabs!' she moaned. 'Doris.'

'Mabs you - you don't think—'

'No, of course not!' Mabs said, biting her lips. 'And you, Bessie?'

'Nun - no,' Bessie said hastily.

'Then - then let's go!' Doris said. 'Oh, dear, let's go - let's go and find something out, shall we? Bessie, you come,' she added.

Bessie rose, glancing at Mabs. But Mabs shook her head. She felt that she couldn't - she dreaded visiting the scene of the disaster again.

'I'll come,' Bessie said. 'I—'

She paused.

'Doris, you're sure you want to go?' she added.

'Yes.'

'Oh, all right, then; but - I say - you - you wouldn't like to gig-go into the tuckshop instead? I'll stand you some tarts if Mabs will advance me some of my postal order, you know. A - a few tarts will fortify you.'

But Doris gazed at her fiercely, and then, to Bessie's astonishment, burst into tears. Bessie stood thunderstruck.

'Doris - oh, crumbs!'

For Doris, with quite uncontrollable fierceness - had strode towards the door. There was a slam as it dosed to behind her.

While in the study Bessie looked at Mabs in astonishment. 'Oh, I sus-say!' she protested. 'I say, you know, what did she do that for? I never said anything.'

Mabs smiled faintly.

'Poor old Bessie!' she said. 'You mean well, old dufferkins, but you're not exactly the soul of tact, are you? To talk about tarts after - after—' she stopped.

Bessie heaved a sigh. It dawned upon her that she had made a mistake.

'Oh, crumbs!' she gasped. 'Oh, dud - dear, you know, I never meant anything-really. I - I only wanted to be helpful, you know.'

'I know.'

Mabs looked gently sympathetic.

'She'll get over it,' she prophesied, 'but the poor kid's all strung up at the moment. Go out and find her, Bessie. Tell her you didn't mean what you said. Humour her, look after her. But don't mention tarts!'

Bessie gulped.

'And above all,' Mabs warned, 'don't say anything about what you believe. But perhaps I'd better come with you,' she added, as an afterthought.

And the two quitted the study on Doris's trail.

While Doris, strolling towards the gates, with some half-formed idea in her mind of going back to the caves, suddenly stopped still.

For a figure had suddenly entered those gates-the figure of a small boy.

Doris recognised the small boy. He was a friend of Bessie Bunter's, and his name was Tommy Snaith.

He had a letter in his hand. He started forward as he saw Doris.

'Oh, Miss Redfern!' he called. Doris stopped.

'Yes, Tommy?'

'This letter,' Tommy said breathlessly. 'I was told to give it to you. The girl who gave it to me gave me sixpence to give it to you.'

'Me?' Doris exclaimed.

She took the letter, gazed at the envelope, and then jumped. A wild excitement sprang into her eyes.

'My hat! Where did you get it?' she asked.

'On the cliffs-a girl with fair hair,' Tommy said, describing Yvonne Duprez though, naturally, Doris did not identify the girl from that description. 'She asked me if I knew you, and when I said, "yes," she asked me to give you this letter, but to say nothing about it to anyone. Look, it's marked "Private"!''

Doris nodded. She was trembling with excitement now. A flush of colour had come into her cheeks, her hand was quivering.

For she had recognised the writing on that envelope. It was her sister, Barbara's.

It was simply addressed to 'Miss Doris Redfern, Cliff House School,' and marked: 'Private - not to be opened by anyone except addressee!' in one corner.

Doris's heart leapt.

She forgot Tommy, forgot Cliff House. She forgot everything in the sudden wild joy that seized her.

She opened the letter, controlling herself with difficulty, as she straightened it out.

'Dear Doris,' she read. 'I am alive and well, despite everything you may have heard to the contrary. But for reasons I will explain to you when I see you, you must keep this fact secret.'

'I cannot tell you much in this letter, but it is important that I should have a packet which is hidden behind the cupboard in Study No. 10 in the Fourth Form corridor.

'Will you get it for me and bring it to-night at half-past ten to Monks' Folly? I shall be waiting for you there at the entrance to the ruins.

'But please, whatever you do, say nothing of this letter; do not let anyone know you have heard from me, or you may ruin everything, and I shall never see you again.

'Clara and Jemima are with me, and they add their wish that you will be secretive over this. Come alone.

'Destroy this note when you have read it.

'Your loving sister,

'BABS.'

'Oh!' gasped Doris, and swayed out of sheer relief. Tommy looked up at her.

'What is it?' he asked curiously.

'Oh, nothing!' Doris laughed - an excited laugh, and the first real, genuine laugh she had enjoyed since yesterday.

'You may go,' she added. 'Wait a minute; here's another sixpence. But say nothing about this letter, you know. You understand that?'

Tommy stared in wonder. 'But—'

'Now go,' Doris said urgently.

And Tommy, gazing at the sixpence in his hand, grinned, touched his cap - for Tommy was quite a polite little boy - and went.

And Doris, reading the letter again, kissed it in rapture. She had barely stowed it away when Bessie and Mabs came upon the scene.

'Oh, Doris! I say, Doris!' Bessie said. To their astonishment, Doris laughed. 'Bessie!'

The two stared. 'Why, what—'

'Bessie, what about those tarts?' Doris exclaimed joyfully.

'Come on, you slow coaches!'

'Tut -tarts?' Bessie stuttered.

'Well, you promised me some.'

'Bib-but—'

'No time like the present,' Doris said cheerfully, 'and I'm peckish, you know. Haven't eaten anything all day. Come on. I'll stand treat if you haven't any money!'

And joyfully, she tugged at Bessie's arm, while the fat junior wondering if she was standing on her head or her heels allowed herself unresistingly to be towed along. While Mabs, standing still, stared.

What had suddenly come over Doris? Why such an amazing change of attitude in so short a space of time?

Mabs did not know, but she felt troubled. It was uncanny - unnatural, she felt. But Doris did not care.

Doris, at least, knew the truth now, and in her overwhelming relief was willing to do the maddest things possible.

Babs was alive. Babs was well. Though Doris did not understand her sister's letter, she did not worry about that. In a few hours she would be seeing Babs, and then Babs would explain all.

That was enough for Doris.

Until then, at least, she would keep the secret Babs so earnestly impressed her to keep in the letter.

CHAPTER XX

The Meeting at Monks' Folly

'CHOCOLATE,' explained Alphonse Duprez, 'is one of my boyhood weaknesses that I have never been able to grow out of. Slab chocolate - milk for preference - is my favourite. I expect that you girls are fond of it, too. Try some.'

And, with a benign smile, he pushed the packet across the desk.

The scene was his room in the underground labyrinth on Belwin Island, and Clara, Jemima, and Babs were there, unfettered at last, but with hope of escape as remote as it had ever been.

A sentry was stationed at the door outside, and the watchful eyes of the arch-criminal never left their faces.

They had been sitting there in silence, wondering what was to be the outcome of all this.

Duprez had made promises, but, knowing the man's treacherous nature, they did not trust him.

He had forced Babs to write the letter, at his dictation, which Doris Redfern had received - a thing Babs would assuredly never have done had she only herself to consider, but the threat of keeping her two chums without food and water until she had signed it, had caused her to give in.

In a few hours she would meet Doris - but she would meet her with a young army of Duprez's men in hiding all round her, and she would be forced to say just those things which Duprez had already drilled her to say. If she did not—

Babs closed her eyes, disdainingly the proffered chocolate with a shake of the head. She knew her part; but how she loathed it.

She was to meet Doris, knowing all the time that a dozen pair of hidden eyes would be watching her. She was to take the parcel from Doris, and watch her until she was out of sight.

If she moved - if she dared even the merest attempt to escape, to warn her sister - Doris was to pay the penalty - to be brought here to share whatever fate awaited Jemima, Clara, and herself.

It was a scheme terrible in its cleverness, its cunning. But it would work.

If she could only think of something. If only in some way she could get a whispered word of warning to Doris when she met her!

But how, knowing that inevitably Doris would pay the penalty?

Even as she sat there, Babs was racking her brain. She had no delusion. She knew that she was up against a man who was desperately clever, who would stick at nothing to gain his ends, who was callous to a degree.

She looked at him again as he sat there munching the bars of chocolate which he took from the box, a mocking smile of amusement on his handsome face as he regarded them.

And a few days ago she had thought this man her friend, had thought him wonderful! How bitterly Babs reviled herself!

'No chocolate!' he laughed. 'Have it your own way. It's quite harmless, if that's what you fear, Miss Trevlyn?' 'No, thanks,' Clara said shortly.

'Jemima?'

'Bad for my figure,' Jemima yawned. 'Besides, I wouldn't think of preventing you from making a pig of yourself,' she added cheerfully. 'Quite fascinating to watch you - what?'

He laughed.

'Still keeping it up,' he said pleasantly. 'Well, Miss Redfern, what about you? I'm sure you like chocolate.'

'Very much,' Babs agreed.

'Have some?'

'Thank you. May I take two bars?'

'Of course. Take half a dozen, if you wish. Plenty more,' Duprez assented genially. 'Fill your pockets.'

'Thank you,' Babs said again; and to Jemima's amazement and Clara's bewilderment, took three bars.

Two she placed in her pocket. The third she started to munch. 'Nice - eh?' Duprez asked, and laughed. 'Made in France,' he said boastfully. 'The best they turn out.'

He looked quickly towards the door as it opened, and Yvonne, in a blue coat and hat, entered.

'Ah, now we have news!' he said. 'Yvonne, you succeeded?' Yvonne peeled off her gloves.

'Yes; I met a boy-a little fellow named Tommy Snaith.'

'And he took the letter?'

'Yes.'

'Good!' Duprez looked pleased. 'Then that's settled!' he said jovially. 'The appointment is at half-past ten. At ten o'clock, Miss Redfern, you will be landed and escorted to Monks' Folly. Six of my men, and myself, will accompany you, and we will hide ourselves near by. You understand that?'

Babs, gulping, nodded.

'Good! Have another bar of chocolate?'

Babs took it. He offered the box to Clara and Jemima, who, however, shook their heads.

But Yvonne was looking at her father, was glancing from him to the Cliff House girls. Babs caught her nod as she jerked her head towards the door.

'Oh, you want me; something private eh?' Duprez said pleasantly. 'Young ladies, I trust you will not mind my absenting myself for a few minutes, but when business calls—'

He spread out his hands. 'If you should decide to attempt to escape while I'm away, kindly remember that there is an armed sentry on the other side of the door. He has certain orders in the event of any indiscretion upon your parts. Au revoir! '

And he smiled charmingly as he left them. The door closed. Clara stared at Babs.

'Babs, why on earth did you take that chocolate?'

'Well, why shouldn't she?' Jemima asked. 'If one is hungry, one must eat. But I confess, Babs—'

'Shush!' Babs said. 'Clara, got a pin?'

'Why, yes.'

'Let me have it.'

'But—'

'Quick!' Babs said urgently.

They glanced at her oddly. Jemima, seeing that Babs had some sort of an idea, smiled.

But Clara fished out the pin, and Babs, bending forward, producing a bar of chocolate, began to scratch on it with a pin.

Clara bent over.

'We are prisoners under Windbell Mount, on Belwin Island,' she read, as Babs carefully scrawled with the pin. 'Fetch police.'

'My giddy aunt!' she breathed. 'Babs, you mean to give that to Doris?'

Babs nodded. 'Shush!' she warned.

And she hastily slipped the bar of chocolate into her tunic again as the door opened and Alphonse Duprez came in.

'Oh, dear!' sighed Bessie Bunter.

And she sat up in the silent Fourth Form dormitory, blinking in woebegone dismay along the rows of white beds.

Bessie was dismal, and Bessie was hungry. For the first time she was conscious of that hunger. Bessie usually felt famished if she missed one meal, but after missing every one during the day she was utterly ravenous.

And Bessie, torn between grief for Babs and her unappeased appetite, could not sleep. She really did feel faint for lack of food, and too miserable for anything.

She knew that she would not be able to sleep until she had satisfied the pangs of hunger which now tormented her.

'Oh, crumbs!' Bessie gasped.

Her thoughts were of food. She remembered, with longing, the untouched pie in Study No. 4. It had been a pie bought by Mabs yesterday to grace the festive board in order to celebrate the triumph of a Babs who had never returned.

It was a big, delicious pie, but probably now going a little stale. Bessie's mouth began to water as she thought of it. Babs; also, would never eat it.

Vision and temptation were too much for Bessie. Succumbing to temptation, she rolled out of bed.

Hunger consumed Bessie. She groped uncertainly for her dressing-gown, instead found her tunic. She was in too much of a hurry, now, however, to worry about the dressing-gown. The first garments which came to hand were good enough.

Hastily, she slipped the tunic on, and then, slipping her feet into her plimsolls - for Bessie's bedroom slippers she had left in the bath-room- she tiptoed towards the door.

Outside in the corridor the moon shone with brilliance through the widows. On a normal occasion, Bessie would have been afraid of the darkness, but desperate hunger now drove her on.

She reached the top of the stairs leading down to the Fourth Form corridor; without pausing she descended. But at the bottom of the landing, which overlooked Big Hall, she paused.

Bessie's heart suddenly seemed to jump into her mouth. What was that?

For sounds - a stealthy shuffling - had caught her ears. 'Oh, dud-dear!' stuttered Bessie.

She hesitated. For a moment she deliberated upon the wisdom of making a speedy dive back to the dormitory. But hunger consumed her, and she lingered, glancing quickly into the hall below.

She had taken the precaution of donning her spectacles, without which she was as blind as a bat, and she started violently as she caught sight of a moving figure among the shadows.

Bessie stared. The figure was a girl - dressed for going out. 'Who—' Bessie muttered.

And then she jumped again as the figure glided past one of the widows and was for a moment thrown into startling relief.

It was making for the narrow corridor to the right where, as Bessie well knew, stood the window which girls in the habit of breaking bounds, used.

But fear deserted Bessie then. Even her appetite was forgotten in the momentary disturbance the sight of that slight figure caused within her.

She blinked again.

No; there could be no mistake. She recognised the girl. 'Doris Redfern!' the fat one muttered.

She watched now as she saw Doris sidle off into the shadows of the corridor. A strange, unaccountable fear suddenly took possession of Bessie.

She remembered Doris's strangeness of the afternoon outside the tuckshop.

She and Mabs had talked about that, and, though neither of them had voiced the fear, there had been a very real belief in both their minds that grief over her absent sister had momentarily affected Doris's mind.

Doris, they felt, was not wholly responsible for what she did and what she said.

'Mum - my hat!' stuttered Bessie.

'Where was Doris going? What was she - a Third Former - doing, breaking bounds at night?

Uneasiness came to Bessie Bunter. She was fond of Doris. She would have hated her to do anything rash or reckless. It dawned suddenly upon the fat junior that she was the only one who knew of this escapade-the only one who could prevent Doris from doing whatever it was she had set her heart upon doing.

For Babs's sake, she must do it. For Babs's sake she must prevent Doris from making a little fool of herself.

Hunger once again became forgotten in the stress of this new excitement. Bessie, inspired by her sense of duty, her friendship for the Third Former, forgot everything.

She forgot even to be afraid. Anxiety, concern for Doris over-mastered every other emotion.

'Oh, dud-dear!' the fat one quavered.

She was instantly aware that she was dressed scantily. She was aware that the shoes on her feet were hardly the footwear in which to undertake a cross-country quest.

She was aware that she was without coat, without hat.

But Bessie, inspired by a fine sense of duty, took no heed of those things. She turned from the dark entrance to the Fourth Form corridor and made her way into the Big Hall, tiptoeing across it to the window.

Fearfully she blinked out.

But she saw nothing of Doris. She did not expect to. Doris, obviously bent on breaking bounds, was using the usual route, keeping in the shadows of the school building, making for the gap in the hedge.

Just for a minute Bessie hesitated, and then, with a resigned sigh and a tremendous effort, hoisted her bulk through the window, dropping into the quadrangle outside. She turned.

Just for a moment she saw Doris, a black shadow against the hedgerow.

'Oh, I sus-say,' Bessie murmured.

But valiantly now she went in pursuit. She went to the hedge-row, crawled through it, to see Doris a hundred yards ahead, making for Friardale Woods.

Bessie's heart missed a beat, but her sense of duty was uppermost now, and she lumbered in pursuit. Something warned her not to yell.

Perhaps, she reflected, Doris was merely sleep-walking, in which case it would be dangerous to rouse her. She blundered on.

Now Doris had disappeared in the woods. But the sound of her footsteps guided Bessie. Breathless, panting, the fat Fourth Former pelted on.

Doris was two hundred yards ahead when she got clear of the wood, making in the direction of Monks' Folly. Before her, bathed in a glorious moonlit glow, stretched the rolling sea, mercurial, calm, just heaving with gentle life.

Bessie wheezed and puffed and blundered on.

'Crumbs, she's going to the Folly!' Bessie muttered. 'To the caves!'

Now Bessie was sure Doris was sleep-walking. Supposing Doris fell over the cliffs! Supposing—

Bessie shook, hastening her steps. Doris strode briskly on.

Bessie panted again and again. She glanced nervously from side to side, but she did not give up. She must save Doris!

She blundered on.

Now ahead, sinister and gaunt, silhouetted against the moonlight, looking like some phantom perched upon the edge of the cliffs, loomed the sombre ruins of Monks' Folly.

Bessie shuddered.

She hated the place, even in the daylight, with its legends of ghosts and spooks. But Doris was making straight towards it. Now she was disappearing into its shadows. Bessie gulped.

'Oh, crumbs! Oh, dud-dear!' she gasped. 'Oh, I kik-can't go in there!'

But she could-and she must! By no means was Bessie brave, but there were times when she could be utterly unselfish in her concern for another, and this was one of them.

She tottered on, painfully aware that the stones were piercing through the soft rubber soles of her shoes. With her heart in her mouth, she reached the ruins, glancing up in fearful awe at the grim tower, broken in places, which loomed above her.

Her teeth chattered.

But she lumbered forward, almost colliding with a piled-up mass of masonry. Fortunately for her, her rubber-shod feet made no sound in the darkness, and the debris, wedged together by age-old growths of weeds and creeper, moved by not so much as a stone as she pushed her tottering way through it.

Now, ahead of her, she heard the murmur of voices, saw a patch of moonlight. Hastily, heart in mouth, her tongue dry in her mouth, Bessie scrambled towards it.

Then she stopped. And she blinked.

And suddenly her mouth opened. A thrill of fear ran down her spine. Her eyes grew wider - wider and wider until it seemed they were in danger of popping out of her head.

She felt an uncanny sensation in the region of her spine. Her hair seemed to prickle and rise upon her head. She tried to shout, but no words came. All she could do was to stare in paralysed, hypnotic horror.

And well might Bessie stare. For surely no girl had ever witnessed such a terrifying sight as this. For there, in the clearing among the ruins, stood two girls talking to each other.

Doris Redfern was one. The white moonlight shone with sickly pallor upon the face of the other. And that other - Bessie almost fainted - was the face of the girl who had been drowned at sea last night!

Barbara Redfern!

'Babs!' Doris exclaimed joyfully.

And she rushed forward, her face alive with sudden joy, her arms outstretched.

'Babs! O, Babs darling, is it you!' she exclaimed. 'Babs—'

'Wait a minute!' Babs's face worked, mindful of her instructions, mindful that from the ruins hereabouts half a dozen pairs of eyes were staring at her, that half a dozen desperate men were willing, at the first hint of any subterfuge on her part, to carry out Duprez's threat. She put out an arm.

'Wait a minute, Doris! Don't—' Doris stopped, staring in amazement.

'But Babs, aren't you pleased to see me?'

'Of course, you dear little goose!'

'Well, aren't you going to kiss me?'

Babs hesitated. She looked to one side. There, standing against the wall, hidden from Doris, stood Alphonse Duprez. He nodded. 'Yes, of course!' And Babs, bending forward, kissed her sister. 'Oh, it's good to see you again,' she said. 'But, Doris, have you got the packet?'

'Yes.'

'Oh, good!'

'But I'm jolly well not going to give it to you,' Doris said, 'not until you explain yourself! Half the school's frantic, thinking that you and Jimmy and Clara went down with the yacht. They've given you up.'

She gulped a little.

'I must admit that I was beginning to give you up, too, until that note arrived.'

Babs smiled tenderly. She looked towards Duprez again.

Duprez had posted his men in that spot; she was to take her orders from him, a pre-arranged code of nods and headshakes having been made.

He said nothing, but just nodded approvingly. Babs was playing his game to a nicety. The more natural she was, the more it suited his purpose.

But how Babs was acting now! She had to pretend in front of her sister. She had to pretend, not because she wanted to, but for Doris's own sake.

Doris did not suspect. Doris did not know that unless Babs obeyed instructions in every detail, Doris herself would be made to suffer - would be carried back to Belwin Island to share whatever fate awaited Babs and her two chums there.

Not if he knew was Alphonse Duprez going to allow these girls any avenue of escape. His eyes, cat-like, never left Babs. 'Well, what's the game?' Doris demanded.

Babs produced a bar of chocolate and nibbled the edges.

'Well, nothing,' she said. 'I - I can't very well explain to you now. But it's all right - Jimmy and Clara are safe - so am I. But - well, it's rather a secret, you understand? It's a lot to do with that packet—'

'But you can tell me,' Doris pouted.

'Of course - but not now. It would take too long. Now, look here, be a good kid and don't ask questions,' Babs said. 'Where's the packet?'

Doris shook her head. She stared in puzzlement at her sister, Babs was altogether unusual and strange.

But Doris frowned.

Very deliberately Babs munched the chocolate.

While Doris, still shaking her head, produced the packet of jewels. She did not understand, but she had faith in Babs. If Babs chose to act in this funny way, then Babs, obviously, had a reason. She was about to hand the packet over when she stopped.

'I say, is that chocolate?' she asked eagerly.

'Yes.'

'Plain or milk?'

'Milk,' Babs said. 'It's jolly nice. Like a bar?'

'Oh, gosh, yes! You know I adore slab chocolate! I've had nothing to eat to-day except for some tarts that Bessie and Mabs treated me to. Oh, thanks!' And Doris handed the packet over and seized upon the bar of chocolate which Babs handed back with ecstasy.

'Smells nice,' Doris said. 'Whose make?'

'Oh, French make,' Babs said, and watched trying agonisingly to signal with her eyes for Doris not to eat it.

But Doris, naturally, was not aware of the significance of that bar of chocolate. She did not know that a vital message was scrawled upon its back-she did not even notice that Babs handed it to her the wrong side up.

And Babs, watching her, felt her heart sink as Doris prepared to convey the chocolate to her mouth. Another moment and Doris would have bitten off the end, and Babs's little subterfuge would have been lost completely.

But at the very moment that Doris raised the bar to her lips something happened.

From behind Doris came a sudden wild shriek.

'Ow! Ow! Gug - goodness! Dud - don't eat that chocolate, it's gug - ghostly chocolate, and you'll turn into a gug - ghost! Oh, Babs's ghost! I can't bear to look at it. Save me, somebody sus - save me!'

'Bessie!' cried Babs.



'H-help! It's a ghost!' cried Bessie

Out of the corner of one eye she saw Alphonse Duprez start.

He looked away just for a second, and that was Babs's opportunity. She bent forward, inwardly blessing Bessie, though sorry for having given her a fright.

She knew at that moment that the attention of the gang would be concentrated on Bessie.

'Doris,' Babs whispered desperately. 'Don't eat that chocolate!

Slip it in your pocket as if you mean to eat it later - read it before you eat it!'

Doris wheeled. She glanced, startled, at her sister. And then she saw Babs's face, saw the wild look in her eyes.

Then for the first time Doris knew that everything was not as it should be - that Babs had given her a message. She understood - almost imperceptibly she nodded.

While Bessie, shrieking at the top of her voice, went wailing and shouting down the path which she had just lately traversed.

Bessie was not fond of ghosts, and Bessie actually did believe that it was the ghost of Babs she had seen talking to Doris Redfern.

'Bessie,' Doris said. 'She must have followed me - the silly chump thinks that you're your own ghost, Babs!'

She looked at the chocolate, then slipped it into her pocket.

'I'll eat that on my way back' she said 'Babs won't you come back?'

Babs, aware that Duprez was watching her again, shook her head. Duprez, indeed, perhaps a little shaken by that unexpected incident, was signalling impatiently for Babs to end the interview.

'I can't!' Babs said. 'I can't explain, but - well, you'll understand when you know. Thanks for the parcel - and be careful going back. Good-night!'

She bent forward, kissing Doris once again. But Doris, trouble in her eyes, hesitated.

'Babs, can't I come with you?'

'No, dear.'

'But—'

'You can best help me by going back,' Babs said. 'Good-night, kid.'

'Good-night, Babsie!' Doris whispered huskily, hesitated for a moment, then turned on her heel. Babs stood watching her.

That was part of the programme which she had been instructed to follow out. Until Doris was out of sight the gang dare not reveal themselves.

But Babs, having succeeded in one part of her mission, was determined now to succeed in the other.

She had made up her mind. She had made her plans- desperate if you like - so desperate that she had not even dared to breathe them to Jemima and Clara.

But she had saved Doris. Now, if it was at all possible, she meant to save her chums and herself.

With the precious packet in her hand she stood watching Doris, stepping just a little nearer the cliff. A hissing warning came from Duprez, but Babs affected to take no notice.

She stood gazing, as though anxious to catch a last glimpse of her sister, stepped a little farther towards the edge of the cliff. Doris, then, was a good hundred yards away, a rapidly disappearing speck.

'Miss Redfern,' Duprez commanded, 'come back!'

Babs drew a deep breath. She turned to the ruins. She had quite twenty yards between herself and the gang. Her mind was made up.

Now was the moment for action - now she must take what might prove to be the biggest risk of her life. She stepped towards the cliff.

'Miss Redfern, bring me the packet!' ordered Duprez.

'Find it!' cried Babs.

She raised her hand. Just for a second she stood outlined against the shimmering sea. The box was in that hand, and suddenly Babs threw outwards, as hard as she could aim.

The box left her hand, but even as it left, Babs turned quickly, fleeing along the grass as fast as her feet could carry her. There came a roar from Duprez.

'After her - get down and find the jewels - she's thrown them to the beach!'

There was confusion in the gang immediately. Duprez, his teeth flashing in a snarl, ran into the light. Babs, making the most of her advantage, pelted off as fast as she could go.

Duprez gave a roar - while another man thundered in pursuit. Babs ran breathlessly. Doubling suddenly on her tracks, she bolted into the thick, ink-like shadows of the Folly. Behind her came thudding feet.

'Get her!' yelled Duprez. 'She went this way! She's going to hide!'

But as she ran Babs smiled grimly. In one respect, at least, she had an advantage over the thieves. She knew Monks' Folly-they did not.

Yesterday she and Jemima and Clara planned the daring coup which had led to the recovery of Marcelle's father - and they had been able to make a success of that coup because of a certain secret passage in the Folly, known only to them.

'I'll do it!' Babs vowed.

She had got to do it now. She did not hesitate. Every second was precious, she knew, but let her elude those pursuers for a mere second and she could do what she had set her mind upon doing.

Up the steps of the ruined castle she flew breathlessly, up again, along the vaulted corridor that led to the turret-room at the end. She heard her pursuers thudding in her wake.

'Which way?' roared Duprez. 'She came in here.'

Babs chuckled again. Now she was at the door of the turret-room. She pushed it open, hurrying in the dim light that filtered through its slit of a window towards the fireplace.

She knew where to press. She pressed. Outside the footsteps were thudding towards the door.

Babs felt rather than saw the secret stone move open.

She stepped in. Now the footsteps were outside. She heard Duprez's voice again as she pushed the secret door to, and breathed a sigh of relief.

She had beaten them. They, at least, would never find this secret.

'Oh-phew!' she gasped.

She stood for a moment recovering her breath. Muffled to her ears came the sounds from the other side of the wall as her pursuers searched. She smiled grimly.

So far all had gone well, but the ticklish part of her task was still to come. Here it was dark - inkily dark - and because of the slippery nature of the steps which led downwards, she had to exercise caution.

But Babs was not daunted. She went on. In pitch darkness she descended, tracing her way down flight after flight until, finally, she reached a blank wall.

But again she felt and pressed upon a projection. Again the wall opened to allow her to pass through it. She stepped through, closing the secret door behind her.

Now she was in Monks' Tomb, the great cavern from which, yesterday, she had helped to rescue Marcelle's father.

She remembered something now, and, stepping to the left, groped her way towards the alcove which had been his hiding- place.

Marcelle's father had been watched by one of the sailors from the doomed yacht, and that sailor, when lassoed by Clara, had had a torch. Babs remembered now that they had never recovered that torch.

She bent down, her hands groping around. They touched something soft and yielding-the blanket upon which Monsieur Biquet had lain.

She bumped against the stool which had been used by his gaoler, and cried faintly in the darkness as it clattered over on its side.

She found the lasso, and then, groping beyond that, thrilled with inward rapture as her fingers closed upon something hard and cylindrical in shape.

'The torch!' breathed Babs.

It was! Breathless she rose to her feet. She flashed it on to make sure it was working, and actually laughed in triumph when a broad beam of light flooded out at her feet. But she did not use it; she put it in her pocket after she had switched it off.

Now—

Ahead of her, she saw the faint glimmer of moonlight upon the stairs. Cautiously she stole forward, now and again her feet tripping on some unevenness of the surface.

Very soon she had reached the mouth of the cave, and, pausing in the rock shadows, surveyed the moonlit beach in front of her.

Her eyes lit up as she saw the launch which had brought her here, grounded in the surf, unattended.

Two hundred yards to her right, four men walked the beach, searching for the lost jewels.

'Now's my chance!' muttered Babs.

She watched the men, then made a run forward, throwing herself in the shadows of the launch.

With fast-beating heart she watched the men; but they, apparently, had not noticed that wraithlike shadow shoot across the beach for they were grouped together excitedly now, examining something which one of them had picked up. The jewels, of course. Babs was glad.

Now she crept upwards. In the back of the launch was a locker.

Jemima had used that locker on a similar excursion to this. She hoisted herself up, her heart pounding, lifting the lid of the locker to squeeze into it.

Unseen, she dropped into the locker, curling herself into a ball.

The lid dropped upon her.

Barely two seconds later came the thudding of feet.

'She got away!' Duprez said savagely. 'That means she'll go to the police. She'll tell them. Quick - get aboard, everyone. We've got to clear out of it! The jewels safe?'

'Yes. We found—'

'Hand them to me. Thanks! In you go, all of you! And for the love of Harry look smart! Get back to the island and grab those two other kids! Man the motor-launch and get out! Clear everything out of the cave.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well, hurry! We've got about half an hour.'

The boat heaved and jerked as the men clambered into it; the engine roared. Babs, in the locker, smiled grimly. Half an hour. Somehow - in some way - she had got to devise an escape for Jemima and Clara.

And, if possible, recover those jewels-for the jewels were the property of Marcelle's father.

CHAPTER XXI Accounts Are Even!

'DUD - DORIS!'

Doris Redfern paused.

'Bessie!'

Bessie had stopped three hundred yards down the road. She had stopped because her feet refused to carry her any farther.

She had stopped, too, wondering rather ashamedly if, in giving way to her fright, she had deserted Doris.

She had been on the point of summoning her courage to return, when Doris herself had appeared.

'Dur-Doris!' she said. 'Oh, dud-dear! What a fuf-fright I've had! Babs—'

'You saw her?' Doris asked quickly. Bessie shuddered.

'I - I saw her. Fancy you talking to a ghost, you know! It was awful! It - it glared at me with big eyes, and there was fur - fire coming from her mouth!'

Doris smiled.

'To say nothing of snakes crawling in her hair, and smoke coming from her nostrils?' she asked. 'Oh, really you know.'

'And you saw me talking to her?'

'Y-yes.'

'Well, cheer up!' Doris said. 'That was Babs. No ghost, but Babs her real self. And—' she paused. 'Bessie, Babs gave me a piece of chocolate.'

Bessie blinked.

'It's - it's not gug-ghost chocolate?' she asked.

'No, of course not, you goose.'

'Oh, I sus-say, that was nun-nice of her, wasn't it? I mum-mean I could just eat a piece of chocolate.'

'Not to eat-to read,' Doris said. 'Bessie, look here.'

Doris produced the chocolate, turning it towards the moon so that the light shone upon it.

'There's some writing on it, but I can't see it in this light. Got a torch?'

'No, but I've got a match,' Bessie said. 'I-I always carry matches, you know, because of lighting the study fire for tea.'

'Strike one!' Doris ordered.

'But why should Babs want to write on chocolate?' Bessie grumbled. 'And why did she want to stand there giving me a fright like that? Really you know, I think it's jolly inconsiderate, especially as - as I've got a weak heart. Supposing I'd fallen down dead!'

'Strike the match!' Doris said impatiently. 'But—'

'Bessie—' Doris looked at her. 'Don't be a chump!' she said. 'Don't you understand? There was something funny about Babs - something queer. She stood there as though half afraid to speak most of the time. There's a message on this chocolate. Now, strike the match - quick! It may be a matter of life and death!'

'Oh, crumbs,' whispered Bessie.

She got out the matches and struck one. The feeble flame flickered upon the surface of the chocolate bar as Doris held it near. 'My hat!' Doris exclaimed.

'Why, what's on it?'

'Listen. "We are prisoners beneath Windbell Mount on Belwin Island," Doris read. "'Fetch police." Bessie, its—'

Bessie blinked.

'Bessie, don't you see?' Doris exclaimed excitedly. 'Duprez has got her. He's holding her there. My hat! I see it now. That box - the jewels are in it. Duprez forced Babs to write that letter to me. Here, Bessie, you get back to Cliff House.'

'But wuw-what—' the bewildered Bessie stuttered.

'Tell them there. Tell Miss Primrose!' Doris gasped. 'quickly! Tell the school that Babs and Jimmy and Clara are alive and well - tell them where they are - tell them to bring a car or something. My hat! '

'But where are you going?' Bessie gasped. 'To Courtfield - to fetch the police!'

And, leaving Bessie blinking, Doris broke into a run. Bessie stared after her, gulped, and then, suddenly realising the nature of events which were taking place around her, headed for Cliff House School.

Very cautiously Babs pushed up the lid of the locker on the launch.

Then she breathed deeply as she gazed around her.

The moonlight shone upon the sea, turning it into a vast lake of rippling gold. It gleamed upon the old hulk, half-buried in the sand, that stood nearby.

It shone upon the surface of the sheer cliff-face, towering up in sinister grandeur above her head.

But all was silent. Not a sound save for the lap and gurgle of the waters in the bay disturbed the silence.

The crew of the launch had gone. Less than three minutes ago they had departed in a frantic hurry and palpitating fear.

For once in his career of crime Duprez was concerned. And Duprez, now having got the jewels back, was as anxious as possible to shake the dust of the island from his feet.

Farther out in the bay, moored there, six motor-boats rode at anchor. It was by means of those boats, brought from the yacht that Duprez intended to escape.

The launch in which Babs was hidden at the moment, however, was his only means of getting out to them. Rob him of those motor-boats and Duprez and his gang were utterly helpless.

Babs's eyes gleamed.

Now she clambered from the locker. With a quick glance, round she climbed into the pilot's seat of the launch.

Her breath was coming a little faster as she sat down, glancing excitedly at the controls before her. Elation was in her heart. She could foil Duprez - she would foil Duprez.

Babs knew a lot about motor-boats - a knowledge which she blessed now. Jimmy Richmond, her boy friend at Friardale School, had one, and Jimmy had often shown her how to control it.

On many occasions Babs had taken charge of the boat. She and Jimmy had taken it in turns to steer and pilot, and had spent many happy half-holidays, in company with their chums, chugging about in this very bay.

How well that knowledge served her now!

Cool, calm, yet inwardly seething with excitement, she touched the controls. The boat roared into life, its exhaust sending out a choking cloud of smoke.

Babs smiled grimly. Now she had the thing under her control.

With eyes fixed ahead, she sped towards the other six boats.

There was a commotion on the shore of the island behind her.

For a moment she looked back.

A crowd of shouting, gesticulating figures, waving their arms wildly, stood on the beach of the bay.

Babs laughed. She was in deep water now. She flung a glance back, mockingly waving one hand. Now she had reached the other boats. She stopped the launch, scooped up a convenient spanner, and jumped into the first of the other boats.

'Beaten them!' she chuckled.

The roars from the beach were louder. One or two of the men were hurriedly flinging off their shoes and jackets, determined, obviously, to make a bold last desperate endeavour to save the boats by swimming out to them.

But Babs laughed. She was a good hundred yards from the shore. She knew she could do her work in a few moments.

In a very businesslike manner she gripped the spanner. The boats were ordinary racing-boats, with an outboard motor fixed to each. Each had the usual bung at the bottom.

With one swift blow of her spanner Babs knocked the bung clean through the bottom of the first boat.

Now she must work quickly. The water began to pour in. Half a dozen swimmers were starting out with strong strokes from the shore. And she must get back to the launch.

Quickly she jumped from boat to boat, smashing out the bungs, and, as each began to fill with water, she laughed. Here was the last!

Smash!

And out went the bung!

Babs was jubilant now. The men were still swimming towards her, but the foremost of them had a good fifty yards to accomplish, and by that time the boats would be deep enough beneath the water.

Three of them had already sunk. The one on which Babs now stood was sinking fast. Babs did not hesitate. She took a header. She must swim back to the launch, which had drifted a little away.

Splash!

'Hi! Stop-stop!'

A few swift strokes brought her back to the launch. She clambered aboard it. The first man was ten yards away now - was overhauling her.

Babs knew a sickening moment as she grabbed at the controls, and the launch began to move. A quick, frantic tug, and she was chugging out of the bay.

Shouts, yells came from the beach.

But the last boat had sunk. It disappeared even as the first desperate swimmer reached it. The roar of the launch drowned all other sounds.

Out to sea Babs headed, steering the little craft round the island. Now she saw the mainland and the village of Sarmouth, gleaming lights three-quarters of a mile ahead.

She took out her torch, flashing it as a signal. From the shore came an answering signal.

'Good!' breathed Babs.

She flashed again - dots and dashes this time - spelling a message: 'Come quickly!'

An answering signal; 'Coming!'

With the nose of the launch set towards the shore, Babs chugged on. Now she could see the mainland. In the moonlight she saw figures - dozens and dozens of them - waving to her. She caught the glimpse of white faces.

A speck to her right made her turn. She saw the big lifeboat from Sarmouth Coastguard Station launched into the water. The helmets of fifty policemen caught the glint of the moonlight. They were extra policemen who had been billeted in the district lately during the police hunt for Duprez. They had been due to leave on the morrow, as Duprez had been thought to be drowned. Fortunately, they had not gone yet.

Babs turned towards the lifeboat.

She drew near.

Inspector Winter stood in the bows. He stared at her eagerly.

'Miss Redfern!'

'O.K.!' laughed Babs. 'You'll get the gang. They're on the island with Jemima and Clara. I've sunk their boats, and they can't get away. But hurry! They may injure Jemima and Clara!'

'Not they!' called back Inspector Winter. 'If Duprez thinks he's caught, he's too far-seeing to make things worse for himself.'

The lifeboat passed on.

Babs chugged on her way until she reached the shore. And then she stared, her face lighting up.

Half Cliff House seemed to be there. There was Bessie, shrieking with delight; Miss Primrose, gazing anxiously to sea; Marjorie Hazeldene, Mabs - all of them.

'Girls!' she cried.

Babs waved a hand.

'Babs, Babs, Babs!'

The girls shouted. They almost went wild with excitement. Babs laughed deliciously as, with reckless disregard for the launch, she shoved its nose deep into the sand.

Dozens of girls came charging forward, too wildly excited even to heed the water which splashed about their feet. There were cries on all sides.

'Babs!'

'It is Babs!'

'How lovely to see you!'

Babs was almost pulled from the launch. Laughing breathlessly, she was tugged on to the beach.

And then suddenly she found herself confronting Miss Primrose. Miss Primrose's eyes were moist, her hand was shaking. She said nothing; but, extending one hand, put it upon Babs's head. 'Barbara,' she cried brokenly. 'Barbara, you are safe!'

'And wet!' said Babs cheerfully.

'And Clara and Jemima?'

'Will be here, I hope, in a few minutes,' Babs replied.

And they were. Half an hour later the lifeboats returned with Jemima and Clara, safe and unharmed. With Alphonse Duprez and Yvonne, too, both handcuffed.

Behind them came the crew, now safely under arrest at last.

What scenes there were! What wild enthusiasm!

'Well,' Duprez said, 'you've done it, Jemima - you and your friends. I've dodged the police, and baffled the brains of the police forces of Europe for ten years. I never thought a pack of schoolgirls would be my downfall.

'But good work - good work!' he added approvingly, and mockingly smiled. 'You have my congratulations.'

'Thanks.' Jemima smiled.

'And I hope,' he added meaningfully, as he was taken off, 'that we shall have the pleasure of meeting again. I think,' he added softly, 'that we shall.'

'In the witness-box - at your trial - what?' Jemima asked.

'In happier circumstances, I hope,' he returned coolly. 'In circumstances where I shall be free to act. In circumstances which, I hope, may lead to my squaring the accounts. Adieu!'

And, with a mocking smile, he was led away.

'And so goes the old master-criminal,' Jemima said. 'Well, well, what a life! But we dished him as we said we would - what - thanks to Babs! Miss Primrose.'

'Thanks first of all to Jemima,' protested Babs. 'Duprez was first and foremost baffled by Jemima.' Miss Primrose smiled.

'Yes, Jemima?'

'May I be absent for half an hour?'

'For what reason?'

'I have a message,' Jemima murmured - 'a very urgent message to send to the boat on which my guv'nor is travelling to Nigeria. I want to break to him the jolly old news, and tell him that accounts are squared at last.'

And, needless to say, Jemima got the permission, for all of Cliff House, including its headmistress, was proud of the fact that one of the cleverest scoundrels in Europe had been baffled by a pack of schoolgirls.'