

BARBARA REDFERN'S SECRET!

A Magnificent, Long, Complete Tale of the Girls of Cliff House. Complete in this Issue.

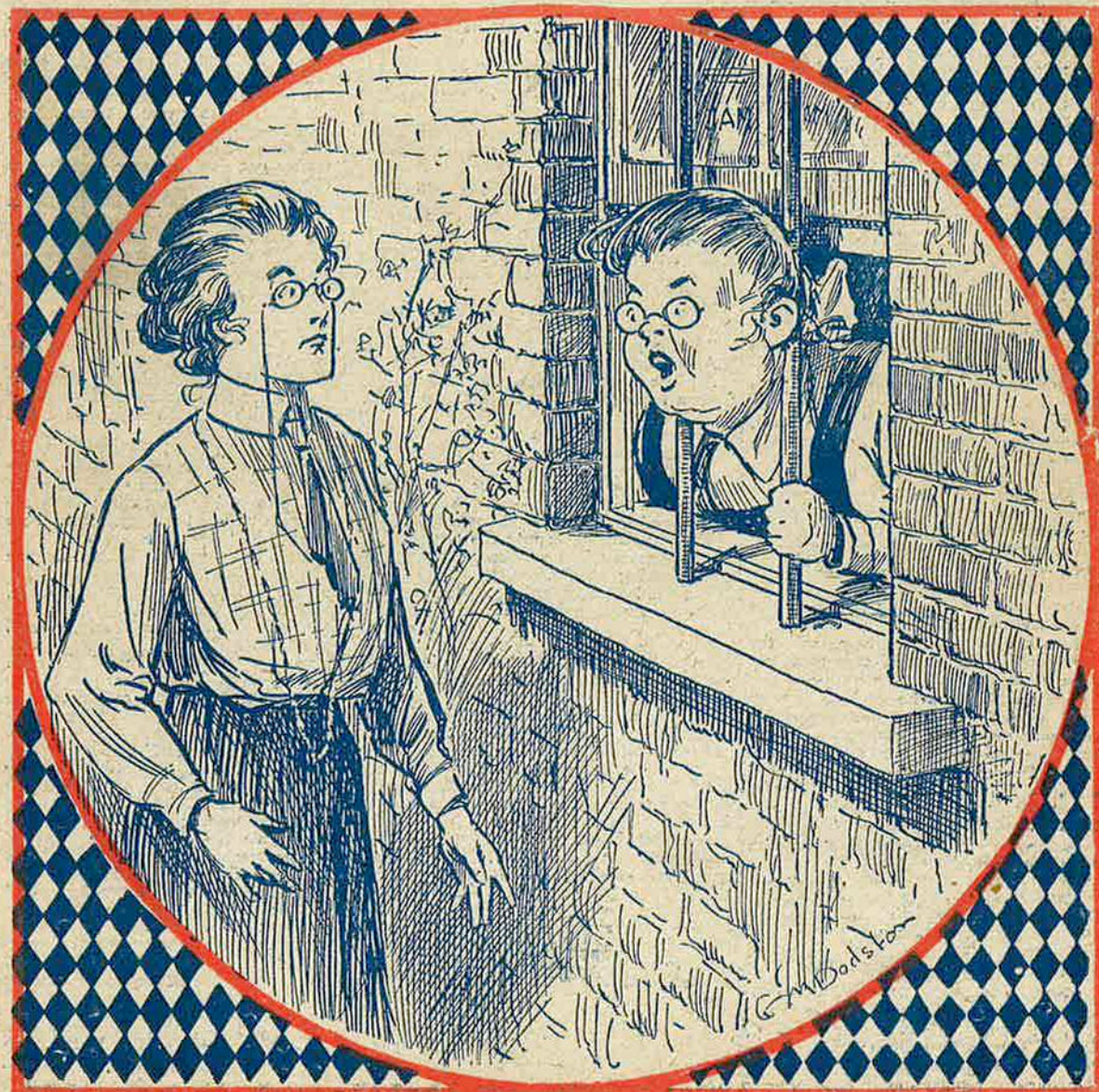
THE SCHOOL FRIEND

Every $1\frac{1}{2}$ Thursday

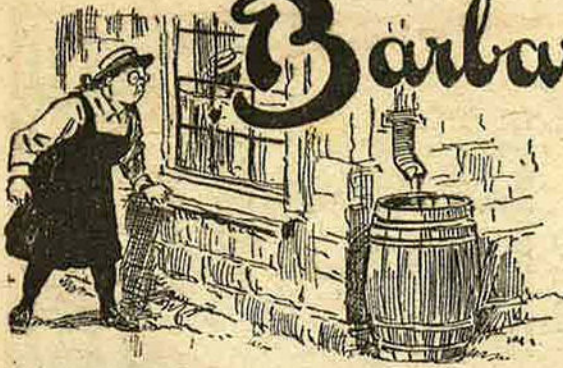
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BESSIE BUNTER IS FIRMLY FIXED!



Barbara Redfern's Secret!

A Magnificent, New, Long, Complete
Story of the Girls of Cliff House.

BY

HILDA RICHARDS.

The Thief in the Night.

BOOM!

Barbara Redfern, of the Fourth Form at Cliff House, sat up in her bed, listening.

But it was not the slow, deep note of the midnight bell that kept her on the alert.

The chiming of the clock ceased, and still she sat there, listening.

Surely somebody was moving about the house, downstairs!

Babs must have been sleeping very lightly when a sound awakened her.

After awhile she had heard more sounds—very faint, yet distinct.

They were like a hard scraping or gnawing, and they might have been only a rat, attacking the old oak of a downstairs passage.

And then another sound had come—a jingling clink, like a key falling to the ground.

The last sound had seemed very queer to Babs. So she waited and listened now.

All was utter silence, yet she was still far from satisfied.

She decided to creep to the head of the stairs and listen again.

If everything seemed all right then, she could return to her bed and snuggle down once more.

Softly she slipped from between the warm sheets, put on a few things to guard against a chill, and tip-toed across the dormitory.

Every other bed had its occupant—Babs noticed this—and all seemed to be sleeping soundly.

Opening the door, Babs passed to the top of the staircase.

It was very draughty here, and the movement of such a cold current of air increased her suspicions.

How could there be such a strong draught in the house, unless a door or window were wide open downstairs?

"I'm going down," Babs said to herself. "This may be some midnight jape! If any girls from the other dormitories are up to any tricks, I shall be able to put a stop to their little game."

And so she passed down the stairs with the greatest stealth.

Again and again she paused to listen, but now there was no sound to make one suspicious—only that strong draught, coming steadily from below.

This seemed to grow stronger as Babs neared the ground floor.

Reaching the bottom of the staircase, she peered this way and that.

And now it was possible for her to trace the source of the cold draught. It faced her face as she turned towards a passage leading to the back-door.

Barbara was not a bit afraid. She



made for the passage at once, feeling sure the end door was open.

And then suddenly the strangest sound of all startled her.

Somewhere at the end of that back passage a girl was crying softly.

Babs turned into the narrow corridor, and saw at once that the end door was indeed wide open.

Bright moonlight was streaming in, but still she could see nobody.

"Who's there?" she whispered, beginning to feel just a little uneasy.

She felt that it must be one of the Cliff House girls who was the cause of this midnight mystery.

How else could one account for that girlish whimpering? And yet—

"Oh, my word!

A startling thing had happened. All in a moment a figure had emerged from a cupboard to the right of the passage.

It was the figure of a girl, about Babs' own height and build.

"Stop!"

As the sharp command came from Barbara's lips the mysterious little crawler turned and looked along the passage.

Then, darting back into the cupboard, she re-appeared in a moment, carrying a weird-looking bundle.

The load was heavy.

She staggered a little as she slung it on to her back and made for the open.

Babs ran in pursuit at once.

"Stop! Come back!" she pleaded. "You little duffer! What are you playing at?"

But the words had no effect. Reaching the doorway, Babs saw the other girl hastening off with the bundle.

The whole thing was amazing. For a Cliff House girl to be acting like this, in the middle of the night, it was sheer lunacy!

And then Babs, dashing into the open and overtaking the fugitive, got the biggest shock of all.

The other girl was not a Cliff House girl at all!

She was a ragged little thing, with a pinched face that was white with terror.

"I've caught you!" burst out Babs excitedly, as she grasped the unknown one by one arm. "Who are you? What does this mean?"

"Oh, let me go—let me go—"

"With that sack you are holding? Not likely," said Babs. "Why—yes, you were in the silver cupboard! You have been stealing the silver!"

The only answer was a sudden burst of weeping.

"Look here," said Babs quickly, "this won't do! The idea of a kid of your age being a thief! Aren't you afraid of being caught and sent to prison? I must have that sack—"

"No, no—"

"Surely you don't suppose I am going to let you steal the school silver?" said Babs. "If you struggle, I shall call out for help, and then—"

"Oh, don't—don't do that!" came the whimpering cry. "It would be worse than anything. Father would come—he is close at hand, hiding, waiting for me—and father would nearly kill you. He will kill me, if I go to him without the silver!"

"What!"

"It's true! He made me steal the stuff. He brought me here. He opened the doors with skeleton keys, and I had to do the rest!"

"But, why?" gasped Babs, aghast.

"Because it 'ud be safer for him. I'm only a girl, like you, and this is a girls' school. I've had to wear shoes the same as you girls wear. Father got them from a rubbish bin."

"What's your name? Where do you live?" demanded Babs.

But the girl, who was crying bitterly, only shook her head.

Babs, still holding her firmly, peered closer at the white face.

"I've seen you somewhere," she said.

"I—I—my word, I remember now! I've seen you at that thatched cottage on the coast road—the lonely cottage—"

"Oh, no—"

"Don't tell untruths!"

"I'm sorry! Oh, I wouldn't tell lies or steal, if I could help it. This is the first time, indeed it is! But father has been getting more cruel than ever, and mother—she's too ill to leave her bed now, he's treated her so badly! What am I to do—what am I to do?"

"Poor kid, I do feel sorry for you!" blurted out Babs. "Oh, what a shame it is. Look here—listen. We must be quick, if I am to save you, and I want to do that. Give me back the silver, and I'll return it to the cupboard. And then you slip away and tell your father that if he dares to hurt you I'll speak out and the police will have him sharp!"

"The police! Oh, but you won't—"

"No, for your sake, I'll say nothing—nothing, if only your father will let you alone. And you say your mother is ill!"

"Yes. It's like a fever; she's burning hot, and can't sleep, and I can't give her the food she needs. Oh, miss, you wouldn't keep me here like this if you knew everything! Let me go—"

"I will, but I must have the silver!"
"No!"
And the girl hugged the heavy bag desperately.

"I can't give it up! I'm thinking of mother. If I fail, then father will lash out at her as well as me! It's always like that. Hark! Oh, he's coming!"

"Where?" gasped Babs, with a sudden thrill of fear.

"There—behind you! Look out!"
Babs spun round, fully expecting to see a burly ruffian ready to spring upon her as he skulked near the house wall.

At the same moment she received a sharp push from the other girl, who dashed away with the sack.

Babs only just saved herself from sprawling, for she had been taken quite off her guard.

Recovering her balance, she turned and saw the fugitive running straight for the garden wall.

Sheer desperation must have given the girl such speed.

Despite the load which she still carried, she was a match for Babs in the race.

And now, to Barbara's dismay, a man's head and shoulders showed along the top of the wall.

The girl was running straight towards him.

His long arms reached down, one hand grabbed at the sack, the other simply clawed the girl by her dress and dragged her from the ground.

In a moment all was over. The stolen silver, the panting child, and the man himself—they had vanished, and Babs was alone in the moonlit garden!

"Gone—beaten after all!" she exclaimed ruefully. "Oh, what a mess I have made of it. And now what am I to do? That poor little kid—but was she only tricking me? No, no. I'm sure she was half dead with shame and fright. The story she told me—her poor mother! Oh, how awful—how sad!"

For a moment she stood there and listened, but not a sound came from the other side of the wall.

Then Babs shivered. It was cold out there, and she was lightly clad.

"I must go back to bed," she decided quickly. "It's no use. I simply can't give the alarm and get that poor kid into trouble! I must hold my tongue, and try to get the silver back myself—try to save her, too. I must do that. After what she told me, it's up to me to help her. She wouldn't tell me, but I know where she lives. I've passed the cottage often. And if there's no hue and cry to-night, the man will think he is safe!"

She nodded and smiled to herself as ideas came rushing into her mind.

"Yes, that's the thing to do! And shall I tell Mabs, and get her to help me? No. I might get Mabs into trouble—supposing things went wrong. I must manage all alone."

Quickly she retraced her steps, entered the house, and locked the back-door after her.

Then she stole upstairs to the dormitory.

Less than a minute later she was between the warm bedding again; but it was to be a long, long while before sleep came to her.

The strange adventure—so swift and dramatic in its happening—had left her very excited.

And now and then she had sudden, uneasy fears that the affair should not have ended like this—fears that she was

chancing too much for the other girl's sake.

But always those fears gave way again to the feeling of deep pity.

It seemed to Babs she could still hear the agonised weeping of the thief's daughter, and her pitiful cry of appeal.

And so, for good or ill, the night passed with no hue and cry amongst the inmates of Cliff House School, and at last Babs herself fell asleep, whilst downstairs a cupboard door stood wide open, revealing rilled shelves!

The Case Against Barbara Redfern.

"YARROOP!"
"Hush! Be quiet, Bessie Bunter!"
"Well, stop pushing and squeezing! I've got no room!"
"Keep still—"

thrilling affair that had brought this excited crowd together.

"Gug-gug-gracious, I can't breathe!" spluttered Bessie Bunter. "I— You-ow-ow!"

"She'll get the whole lot of us turned away," said Mabel Lynn, as Bessie Bunter resumed her struggles. "And we shall never know why Babs has been sent for!"

"You're squashing me, I tell you!" roared Bessie.

"Do be quiet, Fatima! Remember, Miss Primrose is in that room, and if she hears, you'll land us all in trouble."

The fat girl gave a gasp for breath.

"I wonder if it will all be over by dinner-time?" she muttered. "It will be rotten if we all miss our dinner."

"All you think about is eating!"

"Well, we sha'n't do Babs any good by starving! And I happen to know there's minced beef—"



"I've caught you!" exclaimed Barbara Redfern, grasping the girl by the arm. "Who are you? What does this mean?"

"How can I keep still, when I'm squashed!" burst out Bessie Bunter, the fat girl of the Fourth Form. "Oh, dear—ow!"

"Wow! Yarroop!"
"Hush!"

Bessie Bunter's fat face, adorned in a pair of large spectacles, was red with heat. And no wonder. She was only one of the many Cliff House girls who had swarmed into the passage leading to the study belonging to Miss Primrose, the headmistress of Cliff House.

"Hush!" said somebody again. The crowd was very excited.

All sorts of wild rumours were afloat in the school.

Classes this morning had been a mere farce.

There had been a burglary in the night, and the school silver was missing. So much was definitely known.

But it was a recent development in the

"We'll make mince beef of you, if you don't keep quiet!"

"And marmalade pudding to follow," said Bessie Bunter. "Marmalade pudding is—ow, you cat! Leggo! Yarroop!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"Hush! Look out!"

There was a sudden breathless silence as the door of the headmistress's room opened a foot or so.

"Is Marcia Loftus there?" called Miss Bellow, the Fourth Form mistress.

It was she who had taken Babs before Miss Primrose directly after morning school.

"Yes, I'm here, Miss Bellow," said Marcia Loftus.

"Come this way, Marcia!"

The girl in question wriggled out of the staring crowd and hastened to the door.

After she had entered the headmistress's study and the door had closed

again, some queer looks were exchanged amongst the Fourth Formers.

"Marcia's in it, then!"
"Bad look out for Babs!" muttered Mabel Lynn.

Marcia Loftus was not one of the best natured girls. Once or twice she had been guilty of little acts of bullying.

At this moment she was standing in the headmistress's private room, facing Miss Primrose, who was sitting at a desk.

To the right of Marcia stood Barbara Redfern, and the light from the window fell full upon both girls' faces.

Babs was very pale. Marcia, on the other hand, seemed to have a changing colour.

"Now, Marcia," said Miss Primrose, in her quiet, kind way, "tell me exactly what you know, please."

"It is not much," said Marcia. "I woke up in the night. I couldn't be sure, but I thought I heard sounds downstairs. Then I heard somebody else get up and go down. I wondered who it was, and I waited and watched, pretending to be asleep all the time. It was quite a little while before she came back."

"Did you see who it was, then?" asked Miss Primrose.

"Yes."
"You are sure in your mind—"

"Positive, Miss Primrose! I wouldn't say it, if I were not quite certain."

"I hope not, Marcia. Well, who was it?"

"Babs—Barbara Redfern, please."
Miss Primrose nodded.

Miss Bellow, standing by the door, gave a little sigh as of distress.

The Form mistress was very fond of Babs.

"You hear what Marcia says, Barbara?" said Miss Primrose quietly.

"Yes, Miss Primrose."
There was a pause.

"You did not tell me that you got up and went downstairs in the night. Why didn't you tell me that, Barbara?"

"Please, I—"
"Oh, don't hesitate any longer, Barbara! That is not doing you any good."

Babs coloured suddenly to the roots of her hair.

Her dark eyes, usually so full of the sparkle of fun, gave a flash of defiance.

"I am afraid nothing I can say is going to do me any good," she answered, a little sullenly. "That is why I have decided not to try to explain."

"Barbara Redfern, you are very rash!" said Miss Primrose. "This is a most serious matter for the whole school, and particularly serious for you. If you are unable to tell me—if you refuse to speak—then what am I to think?"

"That I am a common thief, I suppose," said Barbara miserably. "But I should have thought you would have known me better than that, Miss Primrose!"

The headmistress was silent, pursing her lips.

She was of a mild, kind disposition, but at this moment she felt she must show stern disapproval of the pupil who had been brought before her.

Miss Bellow came across the room.

"Now, Barbara," she pleaded softly, "be a good girl, and try and see things from our point of view. Miss Primrose has always trusted you and liked you, just as much as I have. And you know, Barbara dear, I am very fond of you."

Babs did not reply. She hung her head, and fixed her eyes on the carpet.

"Now, you are going to tell us, Barbara?" said Miss Primrose, in kindly tones. "You have thought it over, and—"

"No, Miss Primrose," said Babs. "I can't tell you anything—I won't!"

Miss Primrose shook her head sadly, and turned to Marcia.

"You had better go," she said. "You have nothing more to say about this affair?"

"No, Miss Primrose. I am sorry—"

"I can quite understand you are sorry for Barbara. It has not been a pleasant thing for you, Marcia, to have to give this evidence against her!" said Miss Primrose. "Please don't say anything about it to the other girls!"

Marcia went out, carrying her head high as she swept through the eager crowd in the passage. She felt her own importance, and enjoyed it.

"Now, Barbara," resumed the headmistress, directly the door had closed, "listen to what I have to say. Last night, as you are aware, a robbery took place in the school. I have lost a large amount of valuable old silver, and when the theft was discovered, first thing this morning, I at once thought of sending for the police. Then I heard through Miss Bellow that she had been informed about your strange conduct, and your refusal to give a simple explanation that would have cleared you at once."

Miss Primrose coughed.

"I could not believe it possible that you had anything to do with the affair," went on the headmistress. "But I did not dare send for the police until I had myself tried to get an explanation from you. I have had you here, and questioned you, but all to no purpose. On the other hand, Marcia Loftus has given her evidence, and there are too points that seem highly suspicious. One is that you said nothing about being downstairs in the night, until Marcia was brought here and spoke of seeing you steal out and back again. The other point is that the theft was committed by or with the aid of somebody in the house. There are no marks of a jemmy anywhere. I might have supposed that skeleton keys were used; but your absence from your bed last night, and your refusal to explain why—"

"I have a good reason for refusing, Miss Primrose," said Babs.

"I cannot believe it!" said the headmistress. "I am sorry, Barbara, but I cannot see what possible good can come of your acting like this. I feel very annoyed. I ought to send for the police. Delay is a mistake in a case of this sort. But your perverse attitude is holding me back."

It was Barbara's turn to purse her lips. She had raised her head now, and was looking as defiant as ever.

"I will give you time to think it over," said the headmistress.

"Thank you, Miss Primrose," said Barbara. "But I am afraid that won't be any good. You see—"

"Well, what?"

"I—oh, I can't explain! I haven't!"

"That in itself is a damaging admission," said Miss Primrose austerely. "You know a great deal about this affair, and you are refusing to speak! Barbara, I give you a final warning. You will have the remainder of to-day in which to come to your senses. If, by this evening, you still maintain this suspicious attitude, I shall have to take serious steps. I shall communicate with the police, and I shall wire to your people. That is all."

"Thank you, Miss Primrose."

The headmistress turned to the Fourth Form mistress.

"Miss Bellow, this girl is not to return to her duties. She is to be kept apart from the other girls," she said. "She will remain in the special detention room on my side of the house."

"Very well," nodded Miss Bellow.

"Come, Barbara!"

"She may get any little thing she wants from her study," said the headmistress, "but she is to be in that room I have consigned her to within ten minutes."

"You hear that, Barbara?"
"Yes, Miss Bellow!"

"Meet me there, then, in ten minutes' time!"

"Yes."
And Babs went out alone, bracing herself to meet the crowd on the other side of the door.

Loyal Chums.

"BABS—"
"Do tell us, Babs!"
"Leave Babs alone! She is going to tell me! She—"

"Doesn't she look pale! Oh, Babs, what has happened?"

"Please don't push, you girls," pleaded Barbara Redfern, as the Fourth Formers surrounded her, and bombarded her with questions. "I want to get out of this."

She was trying to steer a way through the eager mob, but there was to be no shaking them off.

"Babs—"
"Give her air!" was the jesting cry from somebody at the back.

But nobody laughed. And Mabel Lynn, closest to Babs at this moment, flashed round angrily.

"I wouldn't hit a girl when she's down!" cried Mabs. "But what a silly I am to take any notice; it is only Marcia Loftus! You don't care, do you, Babs—not while you have all of us?"

"Hear, hear!" said Bessie Bunter, rolling through the press like a great ship in a storm. "Fancy talking about giving anybody air! Much better give her dinner."

"You're always thinking about food," said Clara Trevlyn.

"No, I'm not, so there. I've been thinking about Babs all the morning. It's all right, Babs," cried the fat girl of the Fourth. "Cheer up. I'm going to look into your case!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"You can laugh, you girls—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"But Babs is not laughing—are you, Babs?"

And indeed she was not.

Her olive cheeks were deadly white, her lips were firmly set as she struggled along the passage and up the stairs, with the great throng all about her.

Mabs was keeping close to her, and Bessie Bunter wanted to do the same, but couldn't.

They were a bit steep, those stairs, and Bessie Bunter's breath was short.

"I don't know why I get so puffed walking up these stairs," she panted, stopping on a half-landing. "It must be over-work. It's a shame the way they cram you at this school."

"It's a disgrace the way you cram yourself with food," said Dolly Jobbing.

"I like that," cried Bessie indignantly. "I haven't had a—"

"You've had two glasses of milk and three buns this morning. And I saw you with a bar of choc—"

"I haven't had a single—"

"And I saw her eating a jam tart on the sly!" said Clara Trevlyn.

"If you will let me speak," Bessie almost howled above the accusing uproar. "I was going to say I haven't had a single—"

"And who finished the marmalade at breakfast?" said Marjorie Hazeldine.

"Bessie Bunter!"
"Not a single—!" blurted out the fat girl.

"Who took the last plateful of porridge?"

"Bessie Bunter!"
"I have not had a single remittance for a week!" shouted Bessie Bunter. "That's what I've been trying to tell you. Now, if any of you girls care to lend me—ow! Leggo! Yarrough!"

Somebody, instead of lending Bessie Bunter a shilling as she was going to request them to, had given a sharp tug at the fat girl's plait, "just to go on with."

But Bessie and her weakness for the flesh pots of Cliff House were of minor importance this morning to the Fourth Formers.

Barbara Redfern was in disgrace; that was the matter that was engrossing their attention.

And so the crowd swarmed on again, trying to squeeze itself at last into Study No. 4, where Babs herself was getting together a few of her things.

"What's she doing? What's that for?" whispered those at the back, as they stood on tip-toe and looked over the heads of the girls in front.

"Do keep back, some of you," pleaded Mabel Lynn. "This study is not meant to hold the whole Form. It's mine, and Babs, and—"

"It won't be mine much longer, Mabs," said Babs, bitterly. "I'm going

"What! You're going home?"
"No—at least—oh, I don't know! I've got to be separated from you, that's all, at present."

"Oh, Babs, what a shame! But—"
The whisper went round again. Those girls who had been unable to get past the door, getting a very exaggerated version of the news.

"Expelled!" said one.
"Babs has got the boot!" cried another, whilst a third girl chimed in with: "Good gracious! She's expelled from the school!"

"No, she isn't—not yet," Babs herself cried out, turning towards the door with her armful of things. "But I want to be quite plain with you, and I want you to be frank in return. You know what has happened—about the silver, I mean. Well, I'm mixed up in the affair, you girls, and—"

"Sneak out, Babs!"

"Hush! Give her a chance!"
"And I haven't been able to clear myself," said Babs, the colour coming back to her cheeks in a crimson flush.

"Is it because you can't clear yourself?" inquired Marcia Loftus.

"Yes, Marcia."
"Then why didn't you say so at once! It seems to me—"

"Quiet, Marcia! Who wants to hear what you—"

"Go on, Babs!"

"I was going to tell you all, I simply can't clear myself," said Babs, in a very low voice. "But you know me. I hope most of you can trust me—"

"Most of us!" burst out Mabs. "We all do, don't we, girls?"

The answering cry was a little confused, and Babs gave a sudden wince.

She put her armful of things on a chair, and pushed her way into the passage, where there was more freedom.

"I've only a minute," she said quickly.

"After that I shall be alone in another part of the house. Girls, I—I can't go until I've had it straight from you all. Do you trust me, or don't you?"

"Of course we do—all of us!" cried Mabel Lynn staunchly.

"That is not good enough," said Babs quietly. "I'd like to have it from each one of you. It's going to be a good deal

to me, when I am all alone. Do you trust me, Clara Travlyn?"

"Absolutely, Babs!"

"And you, Dolly Jobling—and you, Nancy Bell?" Babs's pointing finger was levelled at each of the girls in turn.

"And Cissy Clare—do you?"

"Rather, Babs!" was the cry.

"And you—and you—and you?"

"Yes, Babs!"

"Bridget—"

"Faith, an' intoirly I do!" cried Bridget O'Toole, with her best brogue.

"Shura, and I could niver mistrust anybody without I doubted them—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hush!"

The pointing finger was levelled at one girl after another, and all gave the same emphatic answer.

Then at last it came to Marcia Loftus's turn.

"You, Marcia?"

"You have shared the study with Babs and me—"

"I've never shared much else, anyway," said the fat girl, huffily. "I'm sure there have been lots of times when you might have offered me a snack—even a little bit of sugar for my polly—and you haven't! I'm not greedy, but

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But—"

"You are always hungry, eh?"

"I sha'n't take any notice of you girls," snapped Bessie. "As for Babs, I think she has done the wrong thing by refusing to explain. It may mean a lot to her in the end. She may miss her dinner—we'll all miss our dinners, in fact, if we don't look out. But I forgive you, Babs. I am still your friend, in spite of the cloud you are under. I'm going to try to solve the mystery and clear your name. I will do that for you, Babs, but not until after dinner!"

"Hark at her!" burst out the crowd, in derision. "Check—impudence! If I were you, Babs—"

"Oh, it's all right," said the unhappy girl, with a forced smile. "I must be going now. There's only one more to ask. Do you trust me, Mabs?"

"Trust you? I should think I do!" cried Mabel Lynn, with shining eyes.

"But, Babs, I'm so sorry. I wish we were in this together. We have always been such good chums, and now you have to go, and I shall be alone—"

"You won't!" shouted Bessie Bunter. "You've always got me, and my parrot!"

"Babs, dear," went on Mabel Lynn, ignoring Bessie Bunter, "won't you tell me everything? I wish you would, Babs."

"I can't—"

"She daren't!" called out Marcia Loftus, from the back. "She daren't tell any of us. And then you wonder that I'm suspicious! Perhaps you wouldn't wonder so much, if you knew as much as I know. Well, I'm off!"

The parting shot had told. A few of the girls looked after her as she swung off down the passage, and their eyes betrayed a new uncertainty.

A bell rang downstairs, and Bessie Bunter rolled forward at once, crushing through the crowd like an elephant through the jungle.

The crowd broke up and began to disperse; but Mabel Lynn still kept close to Babs.

"Let me carry your things for you, Babs," she said. "Let me help you somehow."

"No, Mabs," said Barbara. "It's a very good of you, but I've got to go alone. Good-bye! Don't wait for me. Your dinner—"

"I don't want any dinner—I couldn't eat it!" cried Mabs.

And then suddenly she darted from the room and ran after her schoolfellows.

"Stop—stop a moment!" she pleaded.

"All of you who are Babs's friends, stand up for her now! She's coming at once—here she is! Quick, all of you, before she's gone. Just to show we believe in her—hip, hip—"

"Hooray!" yelled the whole crowd; and the cheer rang through the house and was heard by all downstairs. Heard, too, by Miss Primrose, alone and anxious in her private room.

"Babs for ever—good old Babs!" cried Mabs, leading the cheers with waving hands. "Hip, hip—"

"Hooray—!"

And between the double line of shouting girls passed Babs, walking blantly with her armful of things.

It was perhaps the bitterest moment of her young life. But it was the proudest moment, too!

THE SCHOOL FRIEND.—No. 7.

OUR PORTRAIT GALLERY!



No. 7.

MARCIA LOFTUS.

"Oh, well, yes. I suppose so."

"Do you trust me, really?"

"Well—"

"Do you think I am a thief, Marcia?"

"It seems hard to believe—"

Babs gave a bitter smile.

"It seems hard for you to believe that I am not a thief," she said. "Very well, that's one! Any others?"

There was no reply. For the moment, at any rate, there was only one doubter.

But Babs hadn't finished yet. She had almost forgotten Bessie Bunter.

"You know the position, Bessie—"

"Yes, it's dinner-time, and I'm hungry," said the fat girl promptly. "But

"Ha, ha, ha! Just like Fatima!"

"You girls are never happy unless you are grinning like a lot of Cheshire cats," said Bessie Bunter. "I suppose anybody can remark that it's dinner-time, and—"

"You trust me, Bessie?" said Babs.

"You don't think I stole the silver?"

Bessie moved the spectacles on her nose. Then she did her best to look wise and solemn.

"There is a lot in this case that is queer," she said. "No, Babs, I don't like to think—"

"That's as bad as Marcia!" put in Mabs angrily. "Bessie, after the way

Two Kinds of Jam.

"CLUES!"

Bessie Bunter whispered the word to herself.

"If only I could find a few clues! Detectives in stories always find clues," she said. "There must be some clues here, if only I look long enough!"

Bessie was certainly very close to the scene of the previous night's robbery. She had made her way in secret to the end of this rather dingy passage.

There was a cupboard here—the cupboard from which the silver had been stolen.

Also, there was a pantry, where jams and pickles and other things were kept in store.

Bessie was in the pantry, hunting for—well, certainly not for clues!

"It is just possible," she reasoned, sucking the jam off a big spoon, "that the door left open may have been a blind. I wonder if the thief really came through that tiny window?"

Stowed away under the bottom shelf there was a broken-backed chair.

Bessie pulled it out and set it under the high window, then perched herself with great care.

The window was level with the topmost shelf, which was crowded with glass jars and earthenware pots.

It had two bars to it, that window, but they were rather far apart.

"Let me see—my word, pickled onions!" said Bessie, as she shifted the jars to one side. "Ugh—horrible! The vinegar's gone bad—Grrrrgh! I must take the taste out of my mouth, after that!"

And she wielded the jam-spoon again. Then she concentrated her master mind upon the sensation of the day.

That window—yes; somebody might have removed one of the bars, and put it back again!

Reaching as high as possible, the fat girl of the Fourth examined the bars carefully, but they seemed to be firmly cemented into the brickwork.

But someone might have tried to enter this way, and in trying, might have left clues—footprints on the earth outside.

Seized with this idea, Bessie stuck her head between the two bars, to get a look at the ground outside.

All that Bessie saw, however, was Miss Bullivant, taking a walk in the open.

"My goodness!" gasped Bessie. "If the Bull sees me—"

And she jerked back her head.

It was rather odd, but the jerk did not serve the purpose.

Bessie's head still remained between the bars.

"My g-g-g-goodness! I'm s-s-s-stuck!" she gasped.

"Good gracious!" gasped the drill-mistress of Cliff House, turning on the garden path to behold a fat face screwed up with pain and heat. "Child, who are you? Speak!"

"Ow!" squealed Bessie.

"Can it be—it is! Bessie Bunter!" cried the Bull, and she bore down upon the face at the window like the proverbial bull at the gate. "Disgraceful—the pantry window! What are you doing there?"

"Please—ow—Miss Bullivant, I'm trying to g-g-g-get out!"

"How did you get in?"

"I—I—I dunno, Miss Bullivant. It was easier than it is to—ow!—get—yoop!—out!"

"Bessie Bunter—"

"Oh, don't speak, Miss Bullivant—I'm only standing on the edge of the chair," wailed Bessie, squirming. "If it moves another inch—Oh, dear!"

Miss Bullivant was at a loss for words.

THE SCHOOL FRIEND.—No. 7.

She was swelling with anger, but she could not find a means of expressing it.

So she stood and glared, whilst Bessie wriggled and squirmed, her little round eyes blinking in miserable helplessness at the angry teacher.

And then suddenly another voice spoke in tones of horrified surprise.

"Bessie Bunter!"

"Ow!"

"Bessie, you naughty girl!" cried Miss Plummy, the cookery mistress, standing spellbound at the pantry-door. "How dare you? You've jammed this spoon, and your hands and clothes. And now you've jammed your head!"

"Yes, Miss P-P-P-Plummy!"

"Dear, dear—"

"Ow, don't—please go away! That's not the way to help anybody—making them flustered! My head's getting bigger an' bigger. Oh, my poor ears! Oh!"

Miss Bullivant, in the garden, took a furious turn on the path. Then she stopped and looked at Bessie again.

The fat girl's head was still held fast.

Piper the school-porter, was going past a little way off, with a wheelbarrow.

"Piper! Come here, this instant!" exclaimed Miss Bullivant.

Piper came, saw, and scratched his head.

"Well, I'm blowed!" he said. "That's funny!"

"Funny!" burst out the Bull. "It is scandalous! Don't stand there, man, grinning! Do something. The child is in pain, and—"

"She's been eating my jams and pickles!" called Miss Plummy from the pantry.

"Ah!" said Piper. "That accounts for it! The pickles 'ud give her the pain.

And the pain might account for the jam—not the jam in the jars, Miss Bullivant, if you understand me. The jam—er 'ead; what I mean to say, the way she's stuck!"

He went nearer for a closer inspection.

"If it weren't for her ears, now! They're a bit orkard. But otherwise she could manage, with a bit of a wrench. You try, Miss Bessie. Never mind your ears! Just forget about sich silly things as ears! Now then!"

"Ow! Yarrough! Yow-ow-ow!" shrieked Bessie frantically.

"Piper! Smash the bars!" cried the Bull. "You're worse than an idiot! We must smash the bars! Fetch a hammer—I mean a chisel—"

"Yes, mum!"

"Fetch both, Piper, quick!"

"Yes, mum."

But other assistance was at hand by now—more to Bessie Bunter's horror than relief.

Miss Plummy's outcry had been heard indoors, and suddenly the passage was swarming with Fourth Formers, all of whom burst into yells of laughter when they discovered the fat girl's plight.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Now, girls!" pleaded Miss Plummy. "Not so much noise, please. How in the name of goodness are we going to rescue Bessie?"

"I know!" cried Mabel Lynn.

And with the word she stepped forward, reached up a hand, and grabbed at the prisoner's plait.

"Come on, Fatima!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Try again—now!"

"Ow, leggo—ow! I'm slipping—I—oh, dear, help. Leggo!"

Mabel jumped back as Bessie, head and all, came away from the window all of a sudden.

The chair tipped over, and the fat girl crashed to the ground with a last dismal howl.

In a moment the merry crowd beheld

another head between the bars, and this time Miss Bullivant was facing towards them.

"Miss Plummy—girls!" cried the Bull. "What is the meaning of this disgraceful exhibition. It is—er—gracious me! I'm stuck! I can't move my head! Help!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The peals of laughter were loud and long. It really was funny that the Bull, after looking on at Bessie in distress, should in turn go and get her head stuck in exactly the same way.

"Silence!" raved the Bull, glaring as she wriggled. "Miss Plummy, help me, please. I'm in pain! What—who is that in the garden?"

It was Piper, with a hammer and chisel.

"Go—go away, man, away with you!" shrieked Miss Bullivant. "I will extricate myself! Girls, stop your unseemly laughter! I—oh! What a relief!"

With a desperate wrench, Miss Bullivant had managed to wrench her head free. Her red face vanished from sight. Next moment there came an excited cry from the passage.

"Miss Plummy—quick! Look here!"

It was Mabel Lynn who spoke.

She was standing at the entrance to the silver cupboard, the door of which was wide open.

"There—on the tiled floor!" she cried, pointing.

The other girls swarmed close to get first peep, and Miss Plummy had a difficulty in getting to the spot.

But when at last she was standing close to the excited schoolgirl, one swift glance was enough for her eager eyes.

"The marks of rubber shoes!" she exclaimed.

"Tennis shoes!" chorused the Fourth-Formers. "And shoes like most of us wear—a small shoe, too!"

"Small enough to be Barbara Redfern's!" suggested a voice from the back, rather sneeringly.

Miss Plummy turned sharply.

"Marcia Loftus, that is unkind of you!" she said reprovingly. "It is true there are the distinct marks of rubber soles, with the same ribbed pattern that we all know so well. But most of you have shoes like that, and Barbara—"

"Oh, I was only joking," blustered Marcia, turning away.

"I hope you were," said Miss Plummy gently.

She bent closer, asking the girls to stand back to give her more light.

Finally she obtained a candle and examined the tell-tale imprints with still greater care.

There were several of them, all of recent origin, for, in addition to the imprint that had been wet and had since dried, there were grains of grit adhering to the tiles.

Miss Plummy knew that the cupboard was swept out everyday, when the passage was also cleaned; but the place had not been touched by cleaners this morning.

"Somebody wearing a girl's tennis shoes was here in the night," said the cookery mistress, with conviction. "She came in here, after being about on dewy ground out of doors. It is strange!"

She blew out the candle.

"Off with you, girls," she said. "I must report this at once to Miss Primrose. It has something to do with the theft."

Mabel Lynn frowned to herself as she followed her friends up the passage.

"It couldn't be helped," she muttered. "If I hadn't drawn attention to the foot-prints, then somebody else would have done so. But, oh, it's bad for Babs!"

From Bad to Worse!

LATE that afternoon Bessie Bunter got hold of a startling bit of news. And with the news she hit upon a little plan.

It was tea-time, and some of the Fourth Form studies were full at present; for tea in study was one of the Fourth's proudest privileges.

And this afternoon there would be tea, any amount of serious talk about the theft, and the strange position of Barbara Redfern.

This was Bessie's chance, and she was going to make the best of it.

She went upstairs and stopped at the first study she chanced upon. It was No. 7, and here a little party was being held by Marjorie Hazeldene and Clara Trevlyn and Dolly Jobling who was cooking for the party, as usual.

The visitors were Bridget O'Toole, Annadale Hitchens, Cissy Clare, and Meg Lennox.

"We are all solid for Babs here, we may tell you."

"Hear, hear!" cried the tea party. "Yes, Babs for ever!" agreed Bessie heartily. "I have always said it. I am doing the best for Babs, you know. Look at that clue I found this afternoon—"

"The footprints in the cupboard?" exclaimed Clara Trevlyn. "You—you never found them. It was Mabs!"

"If I hadn't gone to the spot in search of clues—"

"And jam and pickles—"
"And if I hadn't got my head stuck in the window by accident—"

"Yes, if you hadn't got it out again, you'd still be there, and that would be a relief to us!" said Clara in her blunt way. "Run away, Fatima!"

"Does everybody like their sausages brown?" called out Dolly Jobling.

"Both sides!" sang out the party. Bessie sighed.

"It's a bad time in the year for soss

girls," said Bessie, "Miss Bellew met me, and—"

"Hot plates—quick!" called out Dolly Jobling, standing over the sausages.

"And she asked me to take a book to Miss Primrose," went on Bessie. "I took the book, of course, and—"

"Does everybody take milk?" asked Marjorie Hazeldene.

"And—"
"Sugar, too? Good!" cried Marjorie.

"Hurry up the sossies, Dolly!"

"And when I got to Miss Primrose's private room, there was a—"

Crash!
"My word!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
Dolly's habit of dropping things had asserted itself once again. She had dropped the frying-pan, and sixteen sausages were adorning the carpet.

"Bother!" she exclaimed. "That all comes of Bessie Bunter standing there talking. Run away, Fatima!"



As Barbara Redfern crossed the quad in charge of the Sixth Formers, all the girls thought that she had been found out—that she was guilty of stealing the headmistress's silver. "She'll be expelled," cried one of the juniors.

"I say, you girls," said Bessie Bunter, looking into the study.

"Full up inside!" sang out Clara Trevlyn, as Bessie tried to roll in.

"But, I say, I've got a bit of news—"

"We've got sausages for tea, and that's better," said Clara. "Clear out, Fatima. Nothing doing!"

Bessie felt desperate.

The sausages were sizzling over the oil stove which Dolly Jobling had borrowed from somewhere, and there were cakes on the table, too.

"I've got news about the robbery! Nobody else knows! I only heard it by accident! If you like, I'll stop and tell you!"

"Are you still backing up Babs, or have you turned against her?" demanded Marjorie. "There are some girls who have begun to change already. Are you one of them, Fatima?"

"Well—"

sies," she warned the others. "They're so apt to turn. And two each—does it run to two each?"

"With a couple over—yes!"

"I hope you won't be ill," said Bessie.

"I wouldn't eat two sausages, if I were you."

"No; you'd jolly well eat the lot. Ha, ha, ha!"

Clara's retort drew a peal of laughter, but Bessie stood her ground.

"I'll tell you the news," she said, playing her master card. "It's about the robbery—"

She paused there. Nobody seemed to be listening.

The exciting moment had arrived when the tea must be made and the sausages served up.

Marjorie signed to the guests to seat themselves.

"As I was coming across the yard,

"But you want to hear my news!"

"We don't!"

"Well, I want to—"

"You want to have a share in the feed, and you won't get it!"

"I want to tell you. I must. I feel it is a sort of duty!"

"Nonsense!"

"Listen to me!" snapped Bessie Bunter. "When I got to Miss Primrose's private room there was no one there. I went in and put the book down, and then I saw on her table—"

"Two sausages to each plate, that's right," said Dolly Jobling. "I'm sorry I dropped them, but—"

"I saw a letter that had been opened and was lying there," continued Bessie Bunter, in spite of the fact that most of the girls were ignoring her. "It was from someone in the village, and it was marked 'Private.'"

THE SCHOOL FRIEND.—No. 7.

"So you read it!" cried Clara Trevlyn indignantly. "Of course you would!"

"It was about last night. The writer said he didn't know if it was quite his business, but he felt he ought to let Miss Primrose know that last night he saw a girl out and about in the dark, close to the school. And so he said—"

"The sausages are prime!" said Meg Lennox.

"Rather!"

"You'll like the cake afterwards," said Marjorie. "Clara's aunt sent it. Have the odd sausage, Bridget?"

"Faith, Marjorie dear, but shure and I couldn't!" said Bridget. "I nivver ate more than wan sausage in me life, except when I was rale hungry and managed four!"

Bessie Bunter glared at the girls, and faking off her glasses, rubbed them.

"That kettle's boiling again! We'll have another cup in a minute," said Marjorie cheerfully. "Hallo, is that you, Bessie Bunter?"

The whole party now looked at Bessie, as if for the first time.

"Why, how long have you been there?" they cried.

"Don't be funny, you girls! I came in—"

"Uninvited, of course!"

"And I've been telling you the news all this time!"

"Oh, indeed. And have you finished?"

"Yes."

"Well, we haven't! Cut that cake, Clara, please. Anybody want more tea?"

The tea cups rattled and clattered as they were passed up. And all the time Bessie stood there by the door, with a heart as heavy as lead. She had played the master card, and lost!

"What I have been telling you, it bears out what Marcia—" began Bessie.

"Don't mention Marcia here!"

"I'm only doing my best for poor Babs. If I can prove her innocence—"

"And get a free tea into the bargain. Oh, we know! Now, look here," said Clara firmly, "who was that letter from, Bessie Bunter?"

"The man didn't give his name. He signed himself 'Wellwisher.'"

"Then what do you mean by coming here and spreading false rumours—repetitive information that isn't touched for. Making things worse for Babs?"

"I'm not!"

"You are!" cried Clara, pretending to be very fierce. "What do you think of it, you girls?"

"Shocking!"

"Disgraceful!"

"I tell you I'm trying to clear Babs!" vowed Bessie.

"Run away!"

"But—"

"Oh, give her the frying-pan to keep her quiet," said Clara. "There's a little grease—"

"Good idea," said Dolls Jobling. "To-day's great thought: Sausage grease for greedy girls!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Cats!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wish I'd never told you the news!"

"Ha, ha, ha! But you have told us, Bessie, and so now you can go! Good-bye!"

Slam!

"Ha, ha, ha!" pealed the merry tea-party, as Bessie, mad with vexation, vanished from the scene and banged the door behind her. "Now for the currant cake!"

But at this moment the study door flew open again, and a wild, little figure burst upon the scene.

It was Mabel Lynn. Her face was

quite white, and she was out of breath with running.

"Oh, whatever do you think has happened, girls?" she cried. "It's awful!"

"Sit down, Mabs!"

"Yes, have some tea, Mabs—"

"I—I can't. I don't want anything. I'm too upset! It looks so suspicious, and yet we know Babs can't have had a hand in stealing the silver!"

"Well, what's the matter?" pleaded Marjorie. "Is it about the letter from Mr. Wellwisher? If so—"

"I don't know anything about any letter from anybody," burst out Mabs.

"I only know that Babs was told to keep to the spare detention-room in Miss Primrose's part of the house. And now, I've just heard the news—it'll be all over the place in a minute!"

"Babs has locked herself in?"

"Nothing of the sort!"

"She's going to starve herself?"

"Rubbish!"

"Then what has Babs done?"

And like a bombshell came the answer: "Bolted!" cried Mabs. "Babs has run away from the school!"

Mabs Makes a Discovery.

BARBARA REDFERN had run away from Cliff House, and had left no clue behind her.

That was the still stranger bit of news which spread like wildfire through the school before the evening was over.

Cliff House was in such a state of excitement as it had seldom known before.

Prep. was scrambled through anyhow; all order went by the board, so absorbed were mistress and mistresses alike in the sensation of the hour.

Babs had fled the place, and there was not a clue to her whereabouts, nothing to show how she had contrived to slip away like this.

What did it mean?

What could it mean, hinted Marcia Loftus to one or two of the waverers, but that Babs must be really guilty after all.

Nothing was more conclusive than the flight of a suspected person.

And the waverers felt their last shred of faith in Babs vanish as they listened to this bit of reasoning.

There were others, however, who were for sticking to Babs through thick and thin.

And so bedtime found the Form divided into two distinct camps—those who were pro-Babs, under staunch Mabel Lynn, and those who had gone over to Marcia Loftus.

"Understand," said Miss Bullivant, giving a solemn look round the dormitory after she had shepherded the girls upstairs, "if there is any talk to-night I shall report it. Not a word—not a whisper. I shall return in ten minutes!"

The angular figure of the drill and maths mistress stalked from the room, and for a minute afterwards there was silence.

Then Bessie Bunter spoke.

"Treating us like a lot of kids," she burst out. "If they would only let us do something, the trouble would soon be cleared up. I've got an idea, myself—"

"What is it, Fatima?" chorused the Fourth Formers.

"Not so much of the Fatima, you girls!" snapped Bessie Bunter. "And you don't suppose I'm going to give my ideas away?"

Clara Trevlyn chuckled.

"You gave away a nice bit of news—free, gratis, and for nothing."

"Cats! To eat all those sausages—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, the news was nothing compared with my idea. I believe I will work, and in the morning you'll find that I've done more than all the police and all the detectives could do."

"Bessie's only going to prove what we all know already—that Barbara Redfern did have a hand in the affair," sneered Marcia. "Nothing clever in that!"

"Nothing fine in saying a thing like that, either," spoke up Mabs, coming across the room. "And I for one won't let you say it, Marcia!"

"You? Oh, go to bed!"

"I shall not go to bed to oblige you!" said Mabel Lynn hotly. "You are free with your remarks just lately. And when they happen to refer to poor Babs I—"

"Poor Babs! Poo!" sneered Marcia. "There are plenty of us here who know what to make of things now."

"There are just six of you—"

"Yes, but those six are the only ones who count! The rest of you are mere stupid!"

"What!" howled the pro-Babs party.

The two camps rallied at once, and only Bessie was left standing in a rather undecided position between them.

"You are on our side, aren't you, Bessie," said Mabs.

"I—er—yes. My idea is—"

"Our idea is that Babs Redfern is quite innocent," said Mabs, in the same firm tone as before. "Do you or do you not side with us?"

"Bessie is like the rest of your lot," said Marcia. "At heart she feels Babs innocent—"

"No!" cried Bessie. "At least—er—you see, girls, my idea is that a lot has yet to be proved against Babs. I mean in her favour, of course!"

"Come over to our side," said Marcia. "You know you want to."

Marcia was keen on getting recruits just now.

"What do you want, Bessie?" demanded Mabs.

"Well, I want to go downstairs to the pantry—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You needn't grin, you girls," said Bessie Bunter. "Going down to the pantry is part of my great idea. I know I have a lot of the detective in me. Only let me get on with my idea, and—"

"And I am positive you will find Babs is guilty," struck in Marcia Loftus, purposely "riling" Mabs.

Mabel Lynn stepped forward.

"Marcia Loftus, you are a horrid, mean thing!" she said.

"And you are a little idiot!" sneered Marcia. "Your poor Babs—poo!"

That settled it.

In a moment a battle was raging—and, unluckily for Bessie Bunter, she caught the brunt of it, being between the two parties.

Pillows that were nearest to hand had been snatched up, and now the centre of the room was a scene to make one dizzy.

"Ow!" howled Bessie, rolling and diving this way and that. "Lemme get out of this! I—"

Whack! Thud!

"You—ow—ow!"

Nobody heeded Bessie's cries.

It was no ordinary good-tempered encounter; feeling was running high, and the pillows were whirling fiercely.

Biff! Whack!

Then suddenly there was a heavy thump as Bessie sat down.

"Ow! Stop it! Help!" she gurgled,

hiding place, and was satisfied that nobody would find the sack amongst that thick clump of uninteresting evergreens. And so she was going to wait until she had seen Babs again, and find out what was the best thing to do about the whole affair.

Mabs needed a little success to comfort her that morning.

Bessie Bunter's glaring looks in class were nothing to bother about; but the other girls—it was a bitter blow to realise how their faith in Babs had died, and how even she, Mabs, was regarded with mistrust.

It made her shiver a little when she thought of the risks that were being run—the sack of silver in the shubbery, and the coming visit to the thatched cottage with money and food for Babs.

Let any of the girls get wind of these things, and that would be the finish!

But about the secret visit to the cottage Mabs had already made her plans. To-day was a half-holiday.

It was not very nice weather either. A misty drizzle was about, blowing in from the sea, and the girls disliked that more than actual rain.

Not many of them would be out of doors this afternoon.

And the misty drizzle itself would help to screen Mabs' movements once she had got clear of the school.

Directly dinner was over, she made ready for the daring adventure.

Her plan was to disarm suspicion by not putting on a hat as if she were going for a walk. Instead, she caught up a waterproof cape and flung it over her head and shoulders, in a way the girls often adopted when they were running out on a short errand on a wet day.

In this fashion Mabs slipped away without attracting attention, and a minute later the cape was covering the small bundle of food which she had retrieved from its hiding-place.

The coast road linked Friardale with the neighbouring seaside villages. It could be reached by a roundabout way over the fields, and this was Mabs' route this afternoon.

The friendly mist came down in a thicker and colder drizzle, and she soon felt she was quite safe—not a soul was about on such a nasty afternoon.

If any girls ventured down town, they would certainly take the main road.

And then suddenly, as Mabel Lynn gave one of her many anxious glances behind her, she could have cried aloud with dismay.

There, in the next field, was Bessie Bunter—and Bessie was giving chase!

"Oh, the horrid little duffer!" fumed Mabs. "She must have been spying on me from one of the windows. The sneak!"

"Mabs—Mabs!"

The fat girl of the Fourth, as she came in pursuit along the fieldpath, was waving her hand wildly.

"Stop! I've caught you now, Mabs!" she shouted.

"Not yet, my dear," said Mabs to herself, and she took to her heels.

"You've got my cake—stop!" yelled Bessie Bunter. "You've got the parcel!"

"This parcel is for Babs," Mabs laughed again to herself, as she raced across the field. "And Babs is going to get it!"

Bessie "Blabs!"

BESSIE BUNTER had more determination than breath.

"Stop—stop!" she panted, struggling along as fast as her fat legs would carry her. "Oh, I'll make you pay for this, Mabel Lynn! Cheat—yah!—cat!"

The drizzle had been settling all day on the clayey path.

Bessie's feet slid suddenly from under her, as if she had been on ice, and down she went.

"Ow! My word! Groooogh!"

At that moment, Mabel Lynn, clambering over the stile at the far end of the next field, looked back and waved a mocking farewell.

Then she ran on again.

"Cat! Cheat!" wailed Bessie, struggling up in a nice state of muddy plaster. "But I won't be done out of my cake!"

And on she rolled once more, with a nasty elither at every sixth step.

Then, as she came to the stile giving access to the next field, she pulled up with a sudden gasping:

"Oh!"

On the other side of the stile there was a cow. It was a very big cow, with very long horns.

It didn't look a nice kind sort of cow at all. It looked rather wild, in fact.

No. 8 of

THE SCHOOL FRIEND . . .

ON SALE
NEXT THURSDAY,
WILL CONTAIN

"A Visit from Aunt Betsy!"

A Splendid, Long, Complete Story of The Girls of Cliff House.

By HILDA RICHARDS.

AND

Another Magnificent Instalment of

"The Girl Crusoes!"

By JULIA STORM.

"Shoo! Get out!" panted Bessie, from the safe side of the stile.

The cow came nearer, then gave a fierce sniff.

"Oh, dear!" groaned the fat girl. "This is Mabs' doing—running across the field like that! All right, Mabs, I'll—Wow! Shoo! Get away!"

The cow had come right up to the stile, and was putting its head over the top bar.

"Shoo!" said Bessie Bunter.

"Whurroof!" snorted the cow.

Bessie was desperate. She could not afford to be baulked.

She turned aside and broke a branch from a bush in the hedge, and waved it in the cow's face.

The cow began to eat the branch.

"Oh, that's all right!" said Bessie, feeling braver. "So long as it eats, it must be all right!"

Still munching at the foliage of the branch which Bessie was holding, the cow backed a little, and that gave the fat girl more courage than ever.

Very gingerly she began to negotiate the stile, whilst at the same time she fed the leaves to the queer beast.

And then, suddenly, at the critical moment when Bessie was half over the stile, the cow skipped about after the manner of her kind.

"Wow!" yelled Bessie, falling off the stile into the field.

She quite thought her last moment had come, but, when she opened her terrified eyes, it was only to see the great beast trundling away.

Bessie got up, muddier than ever, and began to run on again.

Mabs was out of sight by now, but there was always the chance of coming upon her by surprise.

"And I will catch her!" vowed the fat girl savagely. "She's cheated me out of that cake, and I'm going to make her sit up for it!"

Panting with breath, she got to the quiet coast road at last, and then it was a puzzle to know which way to take.

"Now I wonder," she muttered, her little eyes twinkling with cunning, "I wonder which way Mabs has gone? Into the village? No, she wouldn't have gone there! I'm sure she is meeting Babs, and Babs can't be in Friardale!"

So she turned to the left along the road, getting more and more ill-tempered as she puffed along in the falling drizzle, with no sign of her quarry.

At last, a full mile out from Friardale, the baffled girl came to the first habitation—a ramshackle thatched cottage, that looked as if it were falling to ruins for lack of a tenant.

But smoke curled from the one crooked chimney in the rotten thatch, and across a diamond-paned window there was at least a rag of curtain.

Just as Bessie was passing in the road, she saw a face appear at the window.

It was a girl's face—the thin, pale face of some neglected child of very poor parents, anybody else would have decided, with a touch of pity.

But Bessie hardly gave a thought to the girl at all. She was fuming to herself about that cake, and the way Mabs had given her the slip.

After she had gone a little further along the road, the sky darkened still more and the drizzle turned to rain.

"Bother it!" snapped Bessie. "But I'm not going back the way I came. That horrid cow—and besides, I might find some other girls in the town, and then I might get tea out of them!"

She turned back, keeping close to the big hedge as a shelter from the rain.

In this manner she drew level with the old cottage again, and all of a sudden her mouth fell open in a soundless gasp.

There was another face at the window—the face of Mabel Lynn!

It was withdrawn in a flash; but Bessie was sure of what she had seen.

Mabs was in the cottage—she had come to the window to take just a peep at the road!

"Oh!" burst out Bessie at last. "Now, I've got her—and Babs, too! Now for that cake, and a share in the rest of the food!"

She rolled up to the front door of the cottage and banged at it with one hand.

"It's no use. Come out, Mabs!" she shouted. "You're caught!"

There was a moment's delay; then the door was dragged open on its rotten hinges, and the cottage girl showed herself.

"Afternoon, miss," she said timidly.

"I want to speak to Mabs and Babs!" burst out Bessie. "I'm coming in—"

"Oh, no, miss, you can't! Who is Mabs, please?"

"One of the girls from the school, like me, only thinner!"

"Thinner?" The cottage girl seemed inclined to smile.

"Well, not so well built, then!" cried Bessie. "Don't bandy words! Who else is in there? I want Mabs! Mabs—Mabs!"

The girl started to close the door.

"Your friend ain't here," she said. "Go away! It's not your place. It's

mother's and dad's, and dad will be angry if he sees you here. Go away!"

"No fear! I—"
"You'll have to!"
"Yow-ow-ow!"

Bessie was surprised at the strength of the cottage girl's arm. It gave her a sharp push, and she sat down on the cobble.

Skam!

That was the door.

A bolt was shot, and Bessie, looking fatter than ever as she swelled with rage, could only struggle to her teat again and stare helplessly.

"All right, you cat! All right, Mabs!" she yelled, after banging in vain at the door. "I'll pay you out for this. I'll go back to school and fetch the whole lot of 'em here—Miss Bullivant and all, I will! Then you'll see!"

And she ambled off through the rain, determined to carry out the threat.

"Hallo!" cried a cheerful voice, a minute later, as the fat girl was rounding round a bend in the road. "There you are, Fatima."

"Mabs! Why—er—"

"You look surprised!" said Mabel Lynn, calmly jumping down from a recess in the bushes on the bank. "Nice game of hide and seek we've had—and I've won! Ha, ha, ha!"

"You haven't! You can't trick me!" said Bessie. "You were in the cottage."

"Cottage?" ejaculated Mabs. "My word, she's off her head again."

"I saw you at the window. You—"

"More nightmare! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Mabs, you cat! Where is Babs? Where's that parcel of food? I'm going to tell about you! You see if I don't!"

"Now, Bessie, take a bit of friendly advice," said Mabs. "You only made a silly duffer of yourself, last night, with your stories about me and a sack of silver and— Ha, ha, ha!"

"It was all true, and the girls believe it, if Miss Primrose doesn't!" exclaimed Bessie indignantly. "I wouldn't hold my tongue now, not for cakes, or cheese, or anything! If you were to offer me five shillings, until my next remittance—"

"Don't be afraid," said Mabel Lynn. "I'm not going to offer you five shil—"

"Half a crown, then?"

"Hallo! I thought you were above bribery?"

"So I am! I—I— Look here, Mabs," said Bessie Bunter, "are you going to lend me a few shillings until my remittance comes?"

"I can't. But I'll stand you a supper, the night Babs comes home to the school," said Mabs. "Only, you mustn't make an idiot of yourself by saying what you fancy you saw!"

"You've no food on you, now? No money, either? Then I sha'n't hold my tongue, so see! It's a disgrace," cried Bessie, with a great air of virtue. "Having to be at a school with thieves, and no one to borrow a few shillings from either. I've done with you, Mabel Lynn, so now you know!"

"Good-bye, then," said Mabel Lynn. Mabs spoke with a smile at her lips; but in secret she was very uneasy.

Bessie Bunter was bound to talk. And supposing this time her story was believed?

"Bessie—Bessie, dear!" cried Mabs. "Well?"

"I'll tell you what we will do," she said. "Let's hurry home, and I'll try and get something nice for tea."

"Not good enough," sniffed Bessie. "And there's a cow, that way you are going. I'm going to the village! I've got plenty of friends, and you haven't, now. They've all turned against you—and no wonder!"

"Bessie—"

THE SCHOOL FRIEND.—No. 7.

"Don't speak to me!" snapped the fat girl.

And she tilted her nose in the air and strode on, defying the rain, whilst Mabs halted by the stile.

"Bother!" Mabs said to herself, frowning, when she was alone. "Oh, what a nuisance it is, that kid always butting in! But I'll get back to school before her, and that may check the mischief! I've had wonderful luck, really. Just now, for instance. How I managed to slip out of the back door of that cottage whilst that poor little kid was tackling Bessie at the front!"

But the luck was changing at last, and Mabs, hurrying across the fields for home, would have been far from happy in her mind had she known that Bessie Bunter was already "blabbing."

At the entrance to the straggling village, the fat girl caught sight of two Cliff House girls—Stella Stone and Isabel Drake.

She ran towards the two monitresses, with a big grin on her face.

"Come on, quick, you girls!"

"Are you speaking to us?" said Stella icily.

"You've got to come with me!" spluttered Bessie excitedly. "I've found it out! I know where she is! I ought to get a reward for this! Babs is the thief, as we always knew. And Mabs is in it, too! Babs—"

"Whatever are you talking about?" demanded Stella Stone.

"I tell you I know where she is—Babs, the thief, the girl who stole the silver!" said Bessie Bunter haltingly. "Come on—quick!"

"Where?" cried the two Sixth Formers, curiosity getting the better of dignity. "Bessie Bunter, if this is one of your idiotic notions—more nightmare—"

"It's not! Babs is hiding at the cottage—that thatched cottage up the road!"

Stella Stone turned and looked at Isabel Drake. There was a moment's pause. Then Stella spoke.

"I don't like this!"

"Neither do I!" said Isabel.

And next second they were racing up the road.

Run to Earth!

BESSIE BUNTER was sorry to see the two senior girls running so fast.

For one thing, she could not keep up with them as they raced for the cottage, and for another thing, Bessie had a sudden fear that after all she had been too hasty.

Was Babs really hiding at the cottage? How annoyed the proud Sixth Formers would be if they found they had been given a false alarm.

But it was too late, now, for regrets. Stella and Isabel scurried along, whilst the fat girl of the Fourth rolled after them, puffing for breath.

At the same moment Stella and her companion reached the cottage. Stella tried the latch, but the door was made fast.

She knocked, but nobody answered the summons.

"Queer!" said the chief monitress. "I tell you what, Isabel, we'll try a little dodge. You keep on knocking, whilst I creep round to the back!"

Isabel gave a nod of approval, and started to rap on the front door.

Meanwhile, Stella, avoiding that side of the house where the window was, and keeping close to the walls, worked round the rear.

"Actions first—apologies afterwards!" said Stella to herself.

And she tried the back door.

It opened before her, and next second she had stepped into an untidy sort of scullery.

Between this dingy place and the main room an old blanket had been hung up for a curtain.

Stella pushed the rag of a thing to one side, and walked boldly in.

"Babs!"

The intruder's cry of blank amazement was followed by a little gasp of dismay from the cottage girl, who was on guard at the front door.

But Babs herself was silent. Babs, standing erect and defiant, in a shadowy corner of the room!

"So Bessie Bunter was right! You are here, in hiding!" said Stella Stone at last. "Oh, Barbara, this is dreadful!"

Still the runaway was silent.

Stella turned to the cottage girl.

"Unlock that door and let my friend in," she said. "We are monitresses up at the school, and we have the right to come in. This girl you have been hiding belongs to our school."

The poor, neglected-looking child seemed too dazed to understand.

She stared in terror at Stella, who had just gone to the front door and unfastened it herself; but just then Isabel Drake entered at the back.

"Great goodness!" cried Isabel, seeing Babs. "Here's a nice thing!"

"It beats all," said Stella. "Look at this place—the dirt and poverty; and Babs has actually got these people to give her shelter! I—oh, here's Bessie Bunter," she broke off angrily, as the fat girl suddenly loomed through the back doorway. "Run away, Bessie!"

"What, me clear out, when it's thanks to me you've caught her!" panted Bessie. "Not likely! So there you are, Babs! And now where's the parcel of food that Mabs brought you just now, and where's the sack of silver? I say, you girls, catch hold of her—you ought to! She's our prisoner. She's the thief!"

"Hold your noise, Bessie Bunter! You—"

"Of course she's the thief! Haven't I said so all along! Look in the next room, and you'll find the sack of silver, perhaps! She stole it, anyhow, and—"

"No!"

The one word came in a piercing cry from the cottage girl.

"She never stole the silver, so there!" she exclaimed. "She's a good, kind little lady, and you sha'n't call her a thief in my hearing!"

"Oh, never mind what they call me, Winnie dear." Babs spoke at last, very gently. "Let's keep calm and not make a noise, because of your poor mother. What a shame it is, this, just when I'd got her to sleep."

"Aye, 'tis a shame indeed," said Winnie passionately. "To come bursting in like this, and to say such things about you! After all that you have done for us—for me, an' poor mother—"

"What has Barbara done for you?" asked Stella quickly. "I don't think you quite know how things stand. We had a theft at the school, and Barbara was suspected of being mixed up in it. Then she ran away—and now we find her here! Barbara, you know what it means, anyhow. You will have to come back with us, and you may think yourself lucky the police have not got you!"

"The police can't touch her—they sha'n't!" cried Winnie. "I'd rather they took father and sent him to prison, though I know it would kill poor mother. It's what Babs has been trying to do all along—to keep the police out of it. Oh, why did you come to-day! If only you hadn't found out till to-morrow, then the

trying to crawl out of the fray. "Yar-roh! You're squashing me! Yoop!"

Biff!

Thud!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Marcia was down now, laid low by a well-aimed hit that burst Mabs' pillow.

But Mabs did not mind. It was not her pillow. And she had defeated her opponent in fair combat.

"That will teach you, Marcia Loftus, not to say nasty, spiteful things about my friends," she said. "And now—"

"Look out—the Bull!"

"Oh, goodness!"

In a twinkling the battle ceased and there was a wild scramble for bed.

But Miss Bullivant's stealthy step had been extra cautious to-night. She was inside the dormitory almost before the last feather from the burst pillow had settled upon the floor.

"It is useless," said the Bull grimly, "to try to deceive me. I see feathers! I see beds disordered! I see one of the worst offenders, here—you Bessie Bunter—"

"Please, Miss Bullivant—"

"Silence! The heated appearance of your countenance, Bessie Bunter—it proclaims your guilt," said the Bull. "You have been the participant in—perhaps the instigator of—an unseemly disturbance. Did you speak, Mabel Lynn?"

"Yes, Miss Bullivant! Please, Bessie Bunter is not to blame. She was only in the way—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence!" rapped out the Bull.

"How dare you girls laugh! At such a time as this, when our minds are obsessed with one sad thought and our hearts are—ahem!—possessed with one—er—"

"Great idea. Yes, Miss Bullivant. My idea—"

"Bessie Bunter, when I need your suggestion for the right word, I will ask for it," snapped Miss Bullivant. "Go to your bed! Mabel Lynn, I shall report this in the morning. I am surprised, grieved, that you should have been the originator of this disturbance. A pillow fight, tush! In my younger days, when I was a girl, we were above such things. We were ladies then. But that, alas, was long ago!"

"Centuries ago!" muttered Mabs. "Who spoke then?"

The question was not decided, for at any rate nobody spoke now!

"Not a word!" said the Bull, moving towards the door. "You are none of you ready for bed yet, and I must return again in two minutes. Two minutes, and then I shall turn out your light!"

She vanished, and the solemn warning had its effect.

There was no more talking, but with all haste the girls prepared for sleep, most of them wondering what the morrow would bring forth in connection with the mystery of Barbara Redfern.

"Poor Babs!" was Mabel Lynn's sad thought, as she turned back the bedclothes to dive between the sheets. "If only she had not run away! If only she had—"

The murmur was broken by a sudden little gasp of surprise.

In the centre of the bed there lay a tiny envelope.

Mabs had seen it a moment after she turned back the coverings, and now she snatched up the missive.

Her own name was written on the envelope, and in the top left-hand corner there was the single word:

"PRIVATE."

Mabs gave a furtive glance across the room, but none of the girls appeared to have noticed her strange discovery.

She got into bed quickly, snuggled

down, and tore open the letter, stifling the crackling of the paper with the bedclothes.

Then, knowing that in a minute or so the light would be gone, she read the startling message:

"Dear Mabs,—I am leaving this little note in the only place where you are certain to find it to-night. I couldn't get to your study, and the dormi is the only other place.

"When you get this it will be bedtime, and I shall have run away from the school.

"Mabs dear, I know you will trust me still. But I want you to do more than that. I want you to help me.

"To-night, exactly at twelve o'clock, I want you to slip down to the back door and unlock it. I cannot say why I am asking you to run this risk, because things may go wrong. But do your best for me, Mabs, and I will never forget it.

"Not a word to anybody else!

"Don't forget—midnight!"

"Your unhappy,

"BABS."

Bessie Bunter's Bargain.

THAT was all.

It was quite enough, certainly, to leave Mabel Lynn full of amazement.

But why no explanation, no hint even, as to what was to happen when the back door was unbolted?

"Things may go wrong," Mabs turned those words over in her head. She was quite ready to admit that things might go wrong. They might go wrong with her, as well as with poor Babs!

And if they did, where would she be then? As much in the dark as ever!

What a pity Babs had not given her an explanation!

But to harbour thoughts like these was to be disloyal to the runaway, and Mabs would not be that.

Her mind was already made up. She would obey the urgent appeal for help, and chance what happened.

The back door at twelve o'clock! What a strange order it was!

Had she only to unlock it and then return to bed? Or would she unlock the door to find Babs there?

One thing, at any rate, was fairly clear from the letter. Babs was not far away to-night.

She had not slipped off by train, as some had suggested, to return to her people.

The dormitory was perfectly quiet when Miss Bullivant came back.

Without a word, the drill mistress turned out the light and stalked off, and after that Mabs could only lie and wait for the fateful hour.

One by one the girls were dropping off to sleep.

They had talked and talked about the strange affair until they were dead-tired of arguing.

Mabel Lynn even wondered, with a slight sense of dread, whether she herself would be asleep before the midnight hour came.

She also was very tired after the excitement of the day. And it was such a long while to wait.

But she must never fail Babs! No, that would be too bad!

Luckily there was the bell in the old tower to chime the passing hours.

It seemed an age before its slow strokes came to Mabs, and even then they only numbered eleven.

Eleven o'clock—another hour yet!

She turned on her back and remained thus, staring up at the ceiling so as to keep her heavy eyelids from closing.

How very quiet the house was now!

She could hear the breathing of the other girls as they slumbered peacefully, but apart from that there was a solemn hush.

The clock chimed again; that was the half-hour. Thank goodness, there was not much longer to wait.

One of the other girls stirred and then mumbled in her sleep.

She was close to Mabs—in the next bed but one.

The incident rather scared the waiting girl, and she turned over again, to lie more naturally on her side, with her back to the larger part of the room.

And she drew up the bedclothes, half covering her head, so as to complete the appearance of being fast asleep.

But the other girl's restlessness passed off, and again there was nothing but measured breathing to disturb the brooding silence.

Then at last the hour struck—midnight!

Mabs barely waited for the last stroke to die away. She had to act quickly now.

Rising cautiously in her bed, she peered about her in the darkness.

All was safe; she felt sure of that.

And so, slipping from between the bedclothes, she threw on a few things and then crept to the door.

Once clear of the room, she quickened her movements, flitting swiftly down the stairs.

The staircase and passages were in darkness.

She groped along, knowing every step of the way.

Then, as she came to the rear part of the house, the pale moonlight helped her as it shone through the windows on this side of the building.

Now she was in the narrow passage leading to the rifled cupboard and the back door.

Here all was groping darkness again, for the door at the end had no glass in it.

Her heart beat rapidly.

What would follow the unlocking of that door? Was she supposed to take a peep into the open? She must!

Clink!

What was that?

She came to a dead stop, full of sudden alarm.

She was on a level with the two cupboards now, and the sound had come from the one on her right—the small store-room.

Surely nobody was in there at this hour of the night?

The cat, perhaps, prowling amongst the shelves. It must be the cat!

With this comforting thought, she pushed open the door, and next moment her parted lips let free a gasp of surprise.

"Bessie!"

"Goo-goo-goodness! Who's that—Mabs? How you frightened me!"

"What are you doing here, Bessie Bunter, at this unearthly hour?" demanded Mabel Lynn.

"I might ask you that!" said Bessie Bunter, as she stood and stared at Mabs.

The fat girl was all in white, and the moon was shining through the tiny window with the bars.

"At the jam again!"

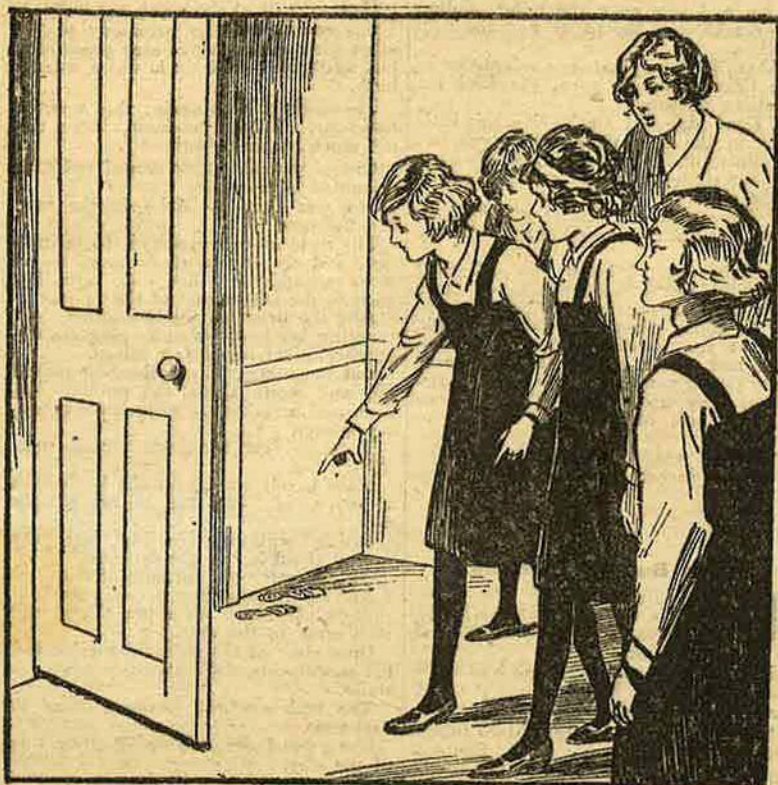
"I'm not!"

"The pickles, then!"

"What sibs! I—"

"Hush!" whispered Mabs. "You are a most awful greedy thing, to get up in the night and come down here just to lick jam off a spoon!"

"Don't you talk to me, Mabel Lynn!" said Bessie defiantly. "I'm not here for the jam at all, or the pickles. This is my great idea."



"Look!" exclaimed Mabel Lynn. "The marks of rubber shoes!" "They're small enough to be Barbara Redfern's," said Marcia Loftus sneeringly.

"Why, there's a big spoon in your hand now!"

"Oh, that—that's only for protection!"

"Bessie!"

"If you don't choose to believe me, you needn't. I know what I'm about. I'm waiting to catch Babs."

"What?"

"Oh, you are like all the rest—too dense! You couldn't get an idea or a theory!" said Bessie Bunter loftily. "I'm working on a theory. Babs has run away. She can't have gone far, and she's bound to get hungry. She'll break into the house to-night, and rummage round for food, and then I shall catch her!"

Mabel Lynn drew a long breath. It was quite clear that Bessie Bunter had another motive for this midnight excursion apart from the primary one of sampling jam.

She really did expect Babs to return in secret to the school, and perhaps that was really what Babs intended to do!

The appeal to Mabs to unlock the back door—was this the explanation?

"Get back to bed, Bessie Bunter!" urged Mabs.

"Get back to bed yourself!" retorted the fat girl.

"You have no right to be down here!"

"And neither have you!"

Mabs was in a fix, and she knew it. It was just like Bessie to butt in at the wrong moment.

"It's rather queer," said Bessie, after a pause. She was looking at Mabs with those cunning little eyes of hers. "You didn't know I had come downstairs? I'm sure you never saw me leave the dormitory. And yet you are here! What for, Mabs?"

"Never you mind!"

"I shouldn't be surprised if you are mixed up with Babs! My word! Won't

you get in a row if you are found out! You must have come down here to help Babs!"

"Bessie, you—you—"

"It's awkward me being here first, isn't it?"

This was an ugly hint.

It meant that Bessie Bunter, with her eye on the main chance, as usual, was out to make a hard bargain.

And, sure enough, her next words confirmed the fear.

"What'll you give me," she said, "if I go upstairs and ask no questions, and never tell, and—"

"I'd like to pull your hair, you little duffer! Go away!" said Mabs, really wild with rage. "Oh, I hate you!"

"I don't see why I should go, just to please you!" chuckled Bessie. "I've got my own game to play. I've caught you, and now I'd like to catch Babs."

"Look here, Fatima! Do be a decent kid for once! Go upstairs now, and I'll follow in a minute."

"Oh, no! I'll stay here—"

"Bessie, you—you— Oh, look here! Do go! Then I'll give you something to-morrow. I expect a parcel—"

"Eh?"

"There's a cake in my study now," said Mabs, in sheer desperation. "You can have a bit."

"How much?"

"Oh, take the lot—only clear out!" Bessie licked her lips. She was tempted by the bait, that was clear.

"Is it the end of that mouldy plain cake you and Babs got tired of?" she asked.

"No; it's another, hardly touched. Plum cake!"

"Any icing?"

"Inches!"

"And I can have the lot, can I?"

"Oh, yes! Only go, before you get caught," said Mabel Lynn. "I'll follow

in a minute. And, of course, you'll say nothing about this, Bessie?"

"All in return for a bit of cake!" said Bessie Bunter. "I don't know so much! Isn't there anything else besides the cake?"

"What? You greedy little duffer! There's a box of choes. But you can't have those!"

"Then I don't see how I can hold my tongue," said Bessie independently. "I've got to look after myself. I may have caught my death of cold, standing here arguing with you. You are so unreasonable!"

"Oh, have the choes, as well, and—"

"Good!" chuckled the fat girl of the Fourth, with another smack of the lips. "Well, I'm off! By the way, if anybody says anything about these jumpots in the morning—well, it's nothing to do with me. It's your look-out—not mine. He, he, he!"

Mabs could have darted after the fat figure as it retreated, and pulled it backwards by the tempting plait of hair.

But she checked the desire, waiting impatiently until the figure in white had passed upstairs.

Then, treading softly in her slippers, she crept to the back door and drew the bolts.

Then she turned back the key of the lock, paused a moment in breathless uncertainty, and at last opened the door a few inches.

"Babs!" she whispered, very faintly and eagerly. "Babs!"

There was no answer.

She opened the door a little wider and peered out.

The moon was still shining brightly, and next moment she gave a gasp of surprise as she saw a bulky object lying just outside the door.

Pouncing forward, she found that the object was a dirty sack, tied at the top with string.

She picked it up, and the action caused a clinking together of some metal objects inside the sack.

Then another look at the find revealed a small hole in the bag.

She widened the opening with her fingers and peered in.

By the light of the moon she caught the gleam of silver.

"Good gracious!" she gasped. "It is all the stolen stuff! It has been left here for me to find when I opened the door. And now—"

A sudden, faint call sounded from the open, barely louder than a stage whisper. "Mabs—quick!"

That was Babs at last—here in the school grounds!

Still hugging the sack, Mabel Lynn slipped into the open and peered around.

From a shadowy corner of the building came the eager cry again:

"Babs—quick!"

Now she saw the runaway, standing close against the house in a dark angle of the walls. In a moment the two girls were together.

"Babs! Oh, I'm so glad to see you! Did you—"

"I brought back the silver—yes. I want you to see that it comes to no harm," said Barbara Redfern, speaking rapidly. "If you have a chance, put it—"

"But you, Babs? You are coming back with me? You must!"

"No; I can't—not to-night! Oh, I don't know when I shall be back! Have you any money on you, Mabs?"

"Money?" gasped Mabel Lynn.

"Why, whatever do you want money for, Babs? And you don't suppose I would have money about me when I'm not fully dressed?"

"No; of course— Oh, I'm so flustered," faltered Babs. "I hardly know

what I'm saying! Listen, Mabs! We can talk for a minute in safety!"

Mabs hesitated. She was thinking of Bessie Bunter. But Bessie's greed had been aroused by the promised cake. It was all right—Mabs was sure.

The fat girl had already gone off to make quite certain about that cake!

"Yes, we can talk, and you must tell me everything, Babs," she said.

"I wish I could," said Barbara softly. "Perhaps I will, and chance it, Mabs! But first of all I want money. There's some of mine upstairs in the study. And isn't there some food—a cake—anything?"

"You're starving?"

"No; it isn't—it isn't that I am hungry. But I want all I can get. Mabs, do try and let me have that money! There's twelve shillings at least in the—Hark!"

The two girls started as suddenly a loud, alarming crash sounded from the house.

"Ow!"

"Bump! bump! bumpity! bump!"

"Ow-ow! Help! Owl! Yaroooh!"

Thud!

The sack of precious silver fell from Mabs's hands, but she caught it up again.

"My word! That's Bessie!" she groaned. "And she has fallen downstairs! Oh, what will we do now! Babs, don't go!"

"I must! I must never be caught!" cried the runaway. "Listen, Mabs—I'm off! Trust me still, and help me!"

"I will!"

"The money and all the food you can get! Bring it to the thatched cottage on the coast road to-morrow."

"Thatched cottage! Which one?"

"There's only the one, and you know the road I mean. You can't go wrong! But, whatever you do, don't let anybody see you! Now I'm off!"

"But, Babs—"

The whispered entreaty fell on deaf ears. Babs had flitted—and not a moment too soon, either!

Even as Mabel Lynn stood there, in a state of utter bewilderment, there came the soft thudding of many bare feet and the banging of doors all over the House.

Then a host of voices raised their wild outcry.

"What's the matter?"

"Who is it?"

"Burglars again—thieves!"

"Help—help—help!"

Well Done, Mabs!

"GIRLS, keep calm!" exclaimed Miss Bullivant, dashing about an upper landing in a very excited way. "Above all, let

us keep calm! Give me a candle—give me a poker!"

"Thieves. It's burglars again! Hark!"

"Ow! Yow-ow-ow!"

"Somebody is being killed!"

"Keep calm—candle—poker—ah, at last!" panted the Bull, as two of the bigger girls hurried forward with the desired articles. "Who goes there? Speak!"

"Ow, Miss Bullivant! Yaroooh!"

"What—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" went up the sudden peal of laughter. "Bessie—it's Bessie Bunter, again! Ha, ha, ha!"

"But—but—" stammered Miss Bullivant, still going very cautiously down the stairs. "Merciful goodness—"

"Ow, Miss Bullivant! Ow! I'm hurt! My back—"

"Child!" burst out the Bull, holding the candle at arm's length as she stopped on the bottom stair.

Bessie was still rolling about the floor, her fat face making the most awful contortions.

"Speak!" cried the Bull. "Where is the pain, the injury?"

"My back—I mean, my leg. I've broken a bone somewhere! Ow!"

"Lie still, Bessie."

"Wow!" howled the fat girl, promptly struggling up. "I shall have to go to hospital and have chicken jelly and custard! I'm in awful agony! Grooogh!"

"Is your back really hurt?"

"I dunno, Miss Bullivant."

"Is your leg hurt?"

"I—ow!—I dunno, Miss Bullivant!"

"Then where's the pain?"

"Here, Miss Bullivant—ow!" wailed the fat girl, pressing the region below her chest. "It's no joke to fall downstairs on an empty stomach. And I had such a little supper!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked the Cliff House girls, swarming on the staircase. "She's not hurt at all—only in her feelings, perhaps!"

"Cats!" cried Bessie Bunter. "I've had a most awful upset. I've seen things—people—"

"What! Where?"

"I've seen the thief with the silver! It's in a sack, and Mabs has got it now!"

shouted Bessie. "She's outside the house. I saw her pick up the sack, and then slip out to have a word with the thief!"

"Bessie Bunter, you've been dreaming!" cried the Bull angrily. "This is monstrous!"

"It's true, Miss Bullivant!" said Bessie Bunter. "Go and look, and you'll find the back door open! Babs has been here, and Mabs has spoken to her. Babs is the thief, and I call it a disgrace that I should be at a school where there are girls who steal!"

"Silence!" cried the Bull. "I will

not endure this shocking talk, engendered by indigestion and nightmare! Were you walking in your sleep, Bessie Bunter?"

"No. At least—I dunno, Miss Bullivant," faltered the fat girl, beginning to wonder how else she was going to account for her fall downstairs. "Perhaps I did walk in my sleep. Anyhow, I fell downstairs. And I'm hurt! Yow-ow-ow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Miss Bullivant gave Bessie an impatient push to one side, and then stalked towards the passage.

In the meantime, Stella Stone, as chief monitor, had taken it upon herself to explore in other directions.

She had gone to the front of the house, one or two other Sixth Formers keeping her company, and they had opened the front door and peeped out.

But there had been nothing there to arouse suspicion.

"Hallo! What does that mean?" exclaimed Stella, as a fresh outcry came from Miss Bullivant's party.

And in their eagerness to turn back and rejoin the others, the Sixth Formers forgot to close that front door again.

A lucky thing for Mabs, that oversight!

Like a little hunted thing she had been shrinking further and further from the back door as she heard the uproar that went on.

Then, suddenly realising that she still clutched the sack of silver, she had made up her mind about one thing at least—if she was to be caught, she would not be caught with the stuff in her possession!

So, in sheer desperation, she had hidden the sack in the safest spot she could find—the heart of a very thick clump of young overgreens.

Only a moment or so later she heard, from a safe distance, the front door un-



"All I have to say is—Ow! Yow! Yaroooh!" shouted Bessie Bunter, as she took one step too many, and fell off the platform. "Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the Fourth Formers.

bolted and flung open. This side of the house was in darkness. Two or three bigger girls peered out, then suddenly withdrew.

Mabs wondered if they had gone away. Unless she managed to slip in at the front door, whilst everybody was at the back, she must certainly be caught!

It was her one chance, and she risked it. Creeping close to the open door, she ventured a peep.

The coast was clear!

Into the hall she darted. At the worst, she could never be accused of having been out of the house. But luck, as it happened, was to be all in her favour.

Miss Bullivant had drawn all the girls to the back passage, as she advanced to continue the search, and Mabs was able to slip upstairs.

Half-way to the dormitory she got a scare and had to hide behind the curtains to a big window as some of the other girls, with Miss Bellow at their head, passed down, chattering excitedly.

It was a critical moment! But nothing happened, and a few seconds later the daring Mabs was alone in the deserted dormitory and snug between the sheets.

It must have been ten minutes later when Mabs had first warning of the Fourth Formers' return.

The girls were being shepherded back to bed by Miss Bullivant, who was booming out all sorts of threats.

"A disgraceful disturbance, a piece of unwarranted disorder," she cried, following up the girls as they came swarming in. "It is due entirely to you, Bessie Bunter."

"Oh, really, Miss Bullivant, please

"I shall report this matter to Miss Primrose in the morning! Your story is a tissue of—"

"Tishoo!" sneezed one of the girls.

This set the Bull off in another direction.

"You will catch your deaths of colds! To bed at once!" she cried. "Silence, all! Bessie Bunter, I repeat, your story about Mabel—where is Mabel Lynn, by the way?"

And then a sleepy little figure rolled over in its bed and answered drowsily.

"Oh, dear, is it time to get up?"

The whole crowd stared, and then there was another peal of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha! Why, Mabs has slept through it all! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Slept through what?" said Mabel Lynn.

"I was dreaming that I was at a circus, and the performing elephant fell off the trapeze—"

"Ha, ha, ha! That was Bessie, Mabs, falling downstairs!"

"Silence!" cried the Bull. "To bed, all of you! I shall not leave you any light. You must get to bed in the dark. And in the morning I shall report this—"

—or—unseemly disturbance."

"Report away!" burst out Bessie Bunter, directly the drill-mistress was out of the room. "I can do some reporting, come to that! Mabs, you little cat! How can you pretend you've been sleeping when—"

"My dear Fatima, what in the world

"You know you're mixed up in the theft, along with Babs," cried Bessie Bunter. "You had a sack with the silver in it! I came back and spied, after you had got me to go away. And I would have kept on spying, only you'd promised me the cake, and—"

"Sack—silver—cake?" exclaimed Mabs.

"What, in the name of goodness—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Be quiet, Bessie Bunter!" said Marjorie Hazeldene. "If I had had

THE SCHOOL FRIEND.—No. 7.

nightmare and walked in my sleep, I'd make the best of it by going to bed now, instead of insulting people!"

"Who's insulting people?" demanded Bessie Bunter. "I'm being insulted, by having to stay at a school where there are thieves! I think it's a disgrace, having to share a study with Babs and Mabs!"

"You can always find another," said Mabs, giving her pillow a shake. She settled her head after that. "I'm going to sleep again, anyhow. Good-night, all!"

"A downright insult!" went on Bessie Bunter.

"So it is, Bessie!" put in Marcia Loftus. "I quite believe what you say. Do all you girls mean to tell me that there is nothing in what Bessie Bunter says? Mabs couldn't have slept through that row we all made! She has tricked us, and I, for one, believe she and Babs stole the stuff between them!"

Mabel Lynn gave a defiant snore.

"You don't know what it is to sleep well," she called to Marcia cheekily. "You should have a good conscience, like me!"

"Good conscience! Poo!"

There was silence after that.

The other girls had become rather grave, and Mabs, as she lay with her face averted from them, felt that they were looking at her suspiciously.

Perhaps, by the morning, the whole school would have turned against her, as well as against Babs! Well, that couldn't be helped now!

"It's all for Babs' sake," she told herself, with set teeth. "And I won't fail her—I won't!"

A Parcel for Babs!

WHEN Bessie Bunter opened her greedy little eyes next morning, her first thought was for the cake that Mabel Lynn had promised her.

But Bessie, as the result of her disturbed night, had slept on this morning.

Most of the other girls were already dressed, and there was the risk of being late for breakfast. Bessie was not going to have that.

She scrambled into her things and hurried down to the dining hall, and it was not until half an hour later that she was able to see about that cake.

By this time it was known in the school that Miss Primrose had given her verdict on the previous night's sensation. It was a case of nightmare on the part of Bessie!

But the talk at the breakfast table showed that the girls, for their part, held a different opinion.

In a word, it was as Mabs had feared. She was as much "in for it" now, as Babs, against whom nearly all the girls had turned, because the runaway's guilt seemed so plain.

Bessie Bunter rolled away to Study No. 4 after breakfast, and there she found Mabs doing up a small parcel.

"Hallo," said Mabs. "Feel better after your bad night?"

"Oh, really, Mabel," said Bessie. "I'll feel better when I've got that cake—"

"Cake? What cake?"

"The one you promised me last night."

"My dear girl, you must be dreaming."

"No, I'm not!"

"Well, you were last night—ha, ha, ha! Quite a bad case of nightmare, I'm told!"

"Look here, Mabel Lynn, where is that cake?"

"If you can find a cake anywhere in this room, you can have it," said Mabs, smiling as she tied the last knot round

her parcel. "Look in the cupboard—or behind the pictures—"

"You promised me a cake for holding my tongue—you know you did!"

"But you are not holding your tongue. You are using it—too much, Fatima," said Mabel Lynn blandly. "What with your tongue and your teeth, you'll wear your mouth out, and then where will you be?"

"I shall tell about you, that's all!" cried the fat girl, wild with disappointment. "You cheated me! It's a shame! First I have to put up with being at a school with thieves, and then I get cheated! I sha'n't stay here!"

"Well, run away then, and—"

"I want my cake! Look here, what's in that parcel, Mabel Lynn? I believe it's food!"

"Food—you're always thinking of food—"

"And, what's more, I want some!" said Bessie Bunter. "I shall tell about you, if you don't give me my share. Who's that parcel for? I believe it is for Babs!"

Mabs began to feel rather uneasy now. Bessie Bunter, in her clumsy way, was getting hot on the scent. She must be got rid of, somehow.

"Did you see Marcia Loftus?" asked Mabs. "She was here a minute ago."

"Was she? Asking for me?"

"Yes. I expect she wants you to move into her study," said Mabs. "You've got two minutes before school. Look sharp. I don't like Marcia myself, but she keeps a good trunk-box!"

This was true. Bessie worked her greedy lips.

"I believe you are kidding," she said suspiciously.

"Well, go and see. By the way, Marcia was admiring your parrot when she was here. Perhaps she wants to buy it."

"Really?" exclaimed Bessie Bunter. "Well, I don't want to sell it. But I don't mind renting it to her for a few shillings. I'll just pop along and see her."

With that Bessie took up the parrot-cage and rolled away with it, the evil bird tumbling about in a flutter during the voyage down the passage.

"Hallo!" said Marcia, as Bessie entered Study No. 3 with the famous pet.

"What do you want?"

"My parrot—"

"How can you want your parrot, when you've got it?"

"But don't you want to buy it?"

"What! I wouldn't have that parrot as a gift," said Marcia. "I was thinking just now, when I looked in at your den, what a hateful, wicked, hideous—"

"Mabs sent me here. She said—"

"Mabs wanted to get rid of you and the parrot as well. That's pretty clear!" said Marcia with a grin.

It was clear enough to Bessie now, and she almost turned pale.

Without another word she toddled back to her own den, bearing the cage with her; but she was too late.

The bird—not the parrot, but Mabs—had flown! And the suspicious parcel had gone with her.

"Sold!" cried Bessie Bunter savagely. "Oh, the awful cat! But I'll pay her out for all this! I'll see what she does with that parcel before the day is out. I'll have her yet!"

Meantime, Mabel Lynn was chuckling to herself over the way she had again handled the fat girl of the Fourth.

She had smuggled the parcel of food out of the study, and now it was hidden in a certain safe corner, ready for the next move.

As for the silver, Mabs was leaving that alone for the present.

She had paid a cautious visit to the

police couldn't have touched father! He'd have been too far away by then!"

She burst into tears as she finished, and suddenly Stella Stone crossed the room and laid a kind hand on the poor girl's heaving shoulders.

"There, there, don't cry," she said kindly. "Tell us all about it—"

"And where the parcel of food is," chimed in Bessie Bunter. "We must have that parcel! There's a cake of mine that I want!"

"Hold your noise, Bessie," snapped Bessie Stone. "Now, Winnie, let's have the whole story. Who stole the silver?"

"I—I did!"

"You—a little thing like you!"

"But it was father who made me do it! I hate stealing as much as anybody. But he wanted to do it safely, and so he dragged me into it, because it was a girl's school, and I'm a girl myself," faltered Winnie. "He'd got some old tennis-shoes that had been thrown away up at the school, and he made me wear them. And then he took me up in the night, and after he had opened the doors with skeleton keys, then I had to creep in and fill the sack with silver. He was keeping away from the place then."

"I was very frightened, and I wanted to cry, but I didn't dare disobey, or he would have killed me, I think. He's been so cruel to me always, has father—to me and mother, too. So I took the stuff, and then suddenly this little lady caught me. She wanted to take back the silver and let me go, but still I was too frightened about father, so I pleaded with her, and I know now that she was sorry for me. But she would have taken the silver all the same, only I tricked her, and got away with it."

"Is this the truth, Barbara?" asked Stella Stone.

"Yes," answered Barbara softly.

"And then, next day, the young lady—Babs, as you call her—she turned up here after dark," Winnie went on. "She had waited and watched until father went out. She said that unless she could have the silver back she must give the whole story away. Mother was ill, and I had to decide for myself. I gave in, because I could see that the young lady was mixed up in it now, and I couldn't bear that she should suffer for us. She got the silver from the place where father had hidden it in the thatch, and she ran off with it. I had made her promise not to say a word to the headmistress, and so she told me she would come back and face father with me, and she would help me to nurse mother—get money and food for her. And so she did!"

"And your father?" began Stella Stone.

"He's run away," said Winnie bitterly. "He came back whilst Babs was up at the school, returning the stuff, and she never saw him. I told him everything myself. He knocked me down, and I sort of fainted. Then, when I came round, he had got a bundle together and was just going. He said he would never come back, he was sick of me and mother! He was very frightened, I'm sure, and he's a long way off by now, and it's certain they'll never catch him, if he can have another day."

The poor girl paused for breath, and in the interval of silence Stella crossed to the door of the adjoining room and pushed it open.

Isabel Drake followed, and what the two girls saw as they paused on the threshold of the room drew a cry of pity from them.

On a miserable pallet lay the frail figure of an elderly woman.

Rags of blanketing covered the wasted form, and the face of the poor creature, as she slept from sheer exhaustion, looked ghastly in the light from the window.

"Oh, poor soul!" cried Stella. "And it is for her sake and Winnie's that Barbara has done so much! Barbara—"

"I'm here," came the quiet answer from the doorway.

When Stella spoke again, it was in a deep whisper.

"Barbara," she said, "you are a brick! There's a lot to be cleared up yet; but that is Miss Primrose's business, not ours. Come along. We are going back to the school right away!"

And half an hour later the party of four arrived at the school gateway—the two mistresses, with Babs walking between them as if she were a prisoner, whilst Bessie Bunter brought up the rear, with a proud smile on her fat face.

Their arrival came at a moment when most of the Cliff House girls, "fed up" with an afternoon indoors, were taking a breather before tea.

The rain had ceased, but the ground was too wet for any games, so the girls were merely idling about at that instant when Marcia Loftus raised the first shout.

"Why, it's Babs!" she cried, pointing to the advancing party. "They've got her at last—found her—"

"Great goodness—Babs! And she looks like a prisoner!"

"That's what she is!" went up the cry. "They've caught her, and she has confessed! Now for a big scene in hall!"

"Rather! She'll be expelled!"

"Serve her right! But who would ever have thought it!"

The four had passed in at the gateway, and now they went swiftly by, Stella Stone and Isabel Drake striding along with head erect, in a striking contrast with Barbara Redfern.

Babs was looking down, and her face was very white.

In silence the big crowd stared at the runaway.

Marcia gave one sneering little laugh, but the rest were content for the present to confine their disgust to looks.

On every face in that great crowd of Cliff House girls there was an expression of hostile contempt.

Found out—caught at last—guilty! And the culprit was one of their own number!

What a disgrace to the school, what a penalty she deserved! Well, she was going to get it!

And then the crowd's mood changed as Bessie Bunter caught their attention.

Bessie was toddling along as fast as her fat, little legs would carry her, so as to keep up with the others, and, with her nose in the air and a proud smile on her round face.

"Ha, ha, ha! Left—right, left—right," cried the crowd. "Keep in step, Fatima! Where's your truncheon, Bessie?"

Bessie's only reply was to tilt her fat chin a trifle higher.

"See the conquering hero comes! Ha, ha, ha! Did you catch her, Bessie? My word, isn't she proud!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Left—right, left—right! Hooray!" went up the mocking cheer. "Bessie Bunter has solved the mystery, and caught the thief. Well done, Fatima!"

Still Bessie only smiled.

"Of course," she was saying to herself, "I shall have to make a speech about it all. But that will come later!"

And it did.

Facing the School.

TINKLE-tinkle-tinkle!

"Silence, girls!"

"Hush!"

Tinkle-tinkle-tinkle! sounded the little bell that Miss Bellew was shaking, as she stood at the head of the tea-table.

"You will dismiss at once, and muster in the big hall," cried the Form mistress, reading from a slip of paper which had just been brought to her. "No girl is to be absent on any account!"

"Hear that?" burst out several of the excited Fourth Formers, as the rush for the door set in. "It's expulsion for Babs, before the whole school! 'Nobody to be absent!'"

"Who would want to be absent?" said Marcia Loftus, as she pushed amongst the crowd. "A thing like this doesn't happen every day. But what a disgrace!"

"So it is!"

"And we all thought so much of her! After this—"

"Take it easy at the back! Stop pushing!"

"Well, look sharp in front!"

So, in the wildest state of excitement and eagerness, the girls swarmed for the hall, and a minute later the whole school was there, filling the place with a great shuffling and whispering.

"Where's Mabs? She wasn't at tea."

"Oh, Mabs is in it, too, you may be sure of that," said Marcia answering the question that was being voiced on all sides. "She was sent for by Miss Primrose, and—"

"Silence, all!"

"Has anybody had a word with Bessie Bunter?"

"No. Bessie Bunter's missed her tea! Fancy—"

"Silence!"

The whispering died away at last.

All eyes were turned in one direction, watching the corner doorway through which Miss Primrose and her staff were expected to appear, with the culprit in their midst.

At the far end of the room the floor was raised a little, so that what took place would be plain for all to see.

The corner door had opened, and now the parties in the last great scene were filing on to the dais.

Miss Bellew came first, then Barbara Redfern; then more of the Form mistresses, and Mabel Lynn amongst them.

Stella Stone and Isabel Drake followed a moment later, and Bessie Bunter—yes, even she was to be seen now, proudly taking her place before the waiting school.

But Miss Primrose—where was she?

Again the whispers broke out, and again there was a sharp call for silence. And then Miss Bellew spoke.

"Girls of Cliff House," she said, stepping forward, "I have been deputed to speak to you in place of Miss Primrose, who is too unwell to be here. I am not going to detain you a moment longer than I can help. You all know the circumstances under which Barbara came to be suspected of the theft of valuable silver articles belonging to your headmistress. That stolen property, let me say at once, has been recovered, and it is undamaged. As for the thief—"

Miss Bellew paused, to beckon Babs to her side.

Through the great meeting a faint sighing sound seem to pass and then die away. Not a movement was heard.

"Everything pointed to the guilt of one person—the girl whom you see before you," said Miss Bellew, her voice growing stronger. "Most of you, I under-

stand, had come to the conclusion that she must be guilty, having committed the theft in a moment of mad folly and weakness. It is now my duty to tell you that Barbara Redfern was NOT guilty! She is——

"Not guilty!"
"Barbara is entirely innocent! Not only so, but from first to last her strange actions can be accounted for in a way that reflects the utmost credit upon her! I will show you how gravely we have wronged Barbara Redfern!"

And in a few words the story was told, whilst the bewildered listeners held their breath and gasped in amazement.

"I have one or two things to add as regards what is yet to be done," said Miss Bellew, hurrying to a finish. "The woman at the cottage is very ill, and she will be sent away to be cared for. Miss Primrose does not intend to set the police after the woman's husband, but if he dares to come back at any time, he will be arrested at once! As for the girl Winnie, for the present, whilst her mother is away, she will remain at this school, filling a suitable position which your headmistress will find for her. And remember, girls, Winnie, although she will not be one of you, is to be treated kindly. There is no stigma attaching to her whatever. She was acting under the compulsion of a brute who was her cruel stepfather, and now we all want you to give her a chance."

"So we will. Hear, hear!" burst out the girls of Cliff House, relieving their pent-up feelings at last.

"As for you, Barbara Redfern," concluded the speaker, turning with a smile to Babs, "I wish to join in Miss Primrose's regret that we did you so great an injustice."

"Hear, hear!" exclaimed the Fourth Formers.

"Hoorah!"
And with the wild cheering there arose the cry:

"Speech—speech, Babs!"
But Babs only laughed as, turning quickly, she ran to Mabs and caught her by both hands.

There were louder cheers then, for all had heard about the part which Mabs, too, had played. And it was remembered that from first to last she had been loyal to her chum.

"Hoorah for Mabs! Speech!"
"Very well, you shall have one," laughed Mabel Lynn, pulling Babs forward. "There has been a lot of ill-feeling, girls, but perhaps that was only natural, seeing how black the case was against Babs and me. Anyhow, we are going to forget it this evening—aren't we, Babs?"

"Rather!"
"But," went on Mabs, with a smile, "there is one thing we must not forget. That is, the part played by Bessie Bunter——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"Bessie is here now, and I call upon her for a modest speech," said Mabel Lynn.

"Hoorah!" shouted the crowd, as Bessie promptly rolled forward, looking as proud as ever.

"Ahem!"
"Where's the pain, Bessie? Who fell down the stairs and smashed the floor?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"Fellow members of Cliff House School——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"I should just like to say one thing. I am very sorry, girls, that Babs was ever found guilty——"

"What! Sit down! She hasn't been found guilty!"

"I mean—or—very sorry that Babs was ever suspected by you! I know she was innocent——"

"Why, you always said she was——"

"Yes, I always said she was innocent!" said Bessie Bunter. "And I proved it. I—— Will you kindly let me speak? Stop throwing things! Will you—— I say, will you kindly——"

"Clear out!"
The uproar was terrific now. But Bessie held her ground.

"From the very first, girls, I made up my mind to solve the mystery," she went on. "That night when I——"

"When you fell downstairs!"
"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Girls, will you kindly—— I say, will you——"

Bessie Bunter stepped closer to the edge of the platform.

"All I have to say is—— Ow! Yow! Yooooop!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the others, as Bessie took one step too many and shot headlong off the platform. "That's the end of Bessie Bunter's speech! Ha, ha, ha!"

And so it was.
By the time she had struggled up again, the crowd had started to swarm after Mabs and Babs, who were making for their study.

"Well, Babs," said Mabel Lynn, five minutes later, as they slammed the door behind them. "It's all over at last, and here we are again. But what a time you have had! I did my best to help you, but—— Keep out there! Who is it?"

"Me," said Bessie Bunter, rolling into the room. "I want my cake! I want—— Ow! Wow! Leggo my plait!"

"Now, just you listen to me," cried Mabs, still tugging at the unlucky rope of hair. "Do you or do you not lay claim to any cake? Answer!"

"Ow!"
"Yes, or no, Bessie?"

"Ow! Leggo! Yes, I do—I—ow—I—don't! Who wants your mouldy cake? Leggo!"

"And do you or do you not apologise to Babs for the wrong you did her?"

"Ow!"
"Yes, or no, Fatima!"

"I—— Ow! What wrong did I ever do Babs?"

"You didn't trust her. You were sure she was guilty."

"Never! Anyhow—— Wow! Anyhow I—ow—I do apologise! Yes! Leggo!"

Mabs let go. And then, as Babs opened the door, Bessie Bunter found herself propelled, by a great push, into the passage.

Thud!
"Wow!"
Slam!

Mabs turned the key in the lock, then faced about with a smile on her face.

"I've had enough of Bessie Bunter for to-day," she said. "And I want you to myself, Babs, for just an hour or so."

Babs took a sudden step forward and held out both hands. Her eyes were very bright.

"What a chum you are!" she cried. And there was no doubt that Mabel Lynn had proved herself to be the most loyal of chums.

THE END.

(Another long, complete story of the Girls of Cliff House, entitled "A Visit From Aunt Betsy!" in No. 8 of "The School Friend," on sale Thursday next. Order your copy in advance to avoid disappointment.)

THE EDITOR'S CORNER.

"A VISIT FROM AUNT BETSY!"
By Hilda Richards.

The above is the title of next Thursday's long, complete tale of the girls of Cliff House, and it is a story you are all sure to like. A spirit of rivalry between Babs and Mabs and Marjorie Hazeldene & Co. is introduced into this story. Of course, there is no bad feeling, but one study is continually trying to get the better of the other.

To whom success falls you will learn next Thursday. You will also learn who Aunt Betsy is, and you will read how great preparations are made for her reception; how Babs and Mabs find themselves in an awkward situation through something that Bessie Bunter does; how Aunt Betsy calls upon Marjorie Hazeldene & Co. and astonishes them by her strange behaviour; how Marjorie & Co. discover that they have been japed by Babs, and of the awkward situation they find themselves in when they endeavour to get their own back. Altogether, this is a very exciting and amusing story, and one that on no account should you fail to read.

Of course, there will be another splendid long instalment of our magnificent adventure serial,

"THE GIRL CRUSOES!"
By Julia Storm,

in our next issue. I am very glad to say that Hilda, Pat, and Joe are firm favourites with all of you, and, therefore, the adventures which befall them in our next instalment are bound to interest you. I will not tell you the nature of these adventures; they will come as a surprise to you next Thursday.

DO YOU LIKE YOUR SCHOOL HAT?
South Norwood.

"Dear Editor,—I like the SCHOOL FRIEND very much, as I am fond of reading. But what I want to write about is the dreadful school-hats we have to wear. Do you think you could do something to do away with them for something more sensible?"

"I don't know a single girl who likes them. They are stiff, hard, uncomfortable things, that give one a headache, and do not shelter the head from the sun. In fact, they are stupid hats, and not a bit useful in any way. They blow off if there is any wind. Please do what you can in this matter."

"Yours sincerely, G. PHILIPS."

I publish the above letter because I consider that it will interest all my schoolgirl readers. Of course, there is nothing I can do to oblige Miss Phelps, but, all the same, I should very much like to have other readers' opinions on this matter. Do you like your school-hat? Write and let me know. It will be very interesting to see how many readers agree with Miss Phelps, and how many are satisfied with their hats.

HAVE YOU WRITTEN TO ME?

There are still a number of readers who have not yet written to tell me what they think of the SCHOOL FRIEND. I hope these readers will not delay writing much longer. I want to have your candid opinions of our new paper. If there is anything that does not appeal to you in the SCHOOL FRIEND, do not hesitate to mention it. I always appreciate adverse criticism as well as criticism of a favourable nature.

REPLIES IN BRIEF.

Allie M. (London).—How much does it cost to feed Bessie Bunter for a week? My dear reader, I am not good at conundrums. This is quite beyond me. At any rate, I should not care to keep her. Would you?

A. T. (Bradford).—Do the girls at Cliff House keep pets? You wait and see. There is a splendid story coming shortly, entitled, "The Cliff House Pet." Now, I wonder whether you can guess the last word!

When Writing to YOUR EDITOR,

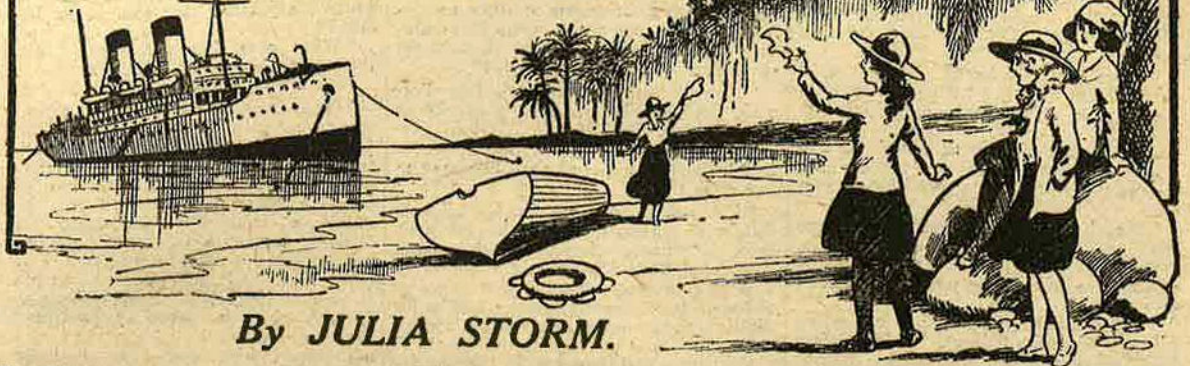
address your letters:

The Editor, "The School Friend,"

The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

THE OPENING CHAPTERS OF A SPLENDID ADVENTURE SERIAL!

The Girl Crusoes!



By JULIA STORM.

The Chief Characters in this Story are:

HILDA, PAT, and JOE, three plucky school-girls,
 MISS STRONG, a brave, good-natured school-mistress,
 MISS WHIFFEN, a nervous schoolmistress, and
 MADEMOISELLE LA TOUCHE, whom the girls call Touche, and who is even more nervous than Miss Whiffen.

The Utopia, a great Australian liner, is stopped on its voyage across the Pacific Ocean by a powerful German cruiser. The German officer in charge orders every man on Utopia to leave the ship, and then sails away, leaving a band of schoolgirls and several schoolmistresses on board the Utopia, without a single man to work the ship.

A tremendous storm comes up, and Miss Strong and Hilda, Pat, and Joe take charge of the steering-wheels, and set the ship running straight before the storm. For two days and nights, whilst Miss Whiffen and Mademoiselle la Touche and the rest of the girls are lying in their cabins, they stick to their task, and at length steer the vessel into a lagoon, and discover, to their immense satisfaction, that land is at hand.

"It's a desert island!" said Joe, as she slips into her berth, thoroughly exhausted after her exertions. "We'll call it Diamond Island!"

Later on the girls start to explore the island, and make some very surprising discoveries. One night Hilda, Pat, Joe, and Miss Strong go out to sea and come across a boat containing two black girls in an exhausted condition. They take them back to the ship, and Miss Strong and Joe stay up to look after them, for the black girls are in a bad way.

(Read on from here.)

A Shock for Mademoiselle.

Joe was told off to feed Melita, the bigger girl, with beef-essence.

Both the castaways were almost finished with exhaustion and exposure; but Melita, the older and stronger of the two, had suffered less than her little companion.

For several hours it was a struggle to keep the little one alive.

Several times the little heart that fluttered feebly as a nestling bird under that black skin, nearly stopped.

But the resources of a well-found ocean steamer are many, for they are the resources of civilisation.

Under ordinary circumstances the child would have died in the night; but Joe, slipping off to the surgery, came back with a cylinder and gas-mask for administering oxygen.

The little one's heart was kept going, and they managed to feed her through the night.

The dawn was breaking when Miss Strong laid the child on the couch, and carefully wrapped her up in blankets.

The heart was beating now with a steady pulse.

Melita was sleeping tranquilly, and barely woke when Joe spooned beef-essence and water through her parched lips.

"The little one will live now, Joe," said Miss Strong, with a huge sigh of relief.

Her face was pale and drawn with the anxiety of the night as she looked down on the two sleeping girls.

Joe had always liked Miss Strong; now she was near adoring her.

She did not know why, but a hot, prickling feeling started at the back of her eyes, and a great lump rose in her throat.

She wanted to cry, and she did not know why.

Mostly it was out of the sheer happiness that she had helped the schoolmistress to save human life.

Miss Strong saw Joe's face twitching, and read her feelings like an open book. She patted Joe's shoulder tenderly.

"Run along to your cabin now, Joe," she said. "You must get some sleep. I can manage with these two now. And you will find that they will recover ever so quickly. In a day or two they will be running about the decks, and getting into mischief. Now, go along to bed, Joe dear!"

She kissed Joe tenderly, and Joe walked away to her cabin, as the red dawn flushed sea and sky, feeling that there was a new bond between her and her mistress.

Together they had saved life. In a few hours' time she was about again.

A cold plunge in the swimming-bath put new life into her.

And presently the girls, one by one, began to make their appearance on deck, wondering why Joe was not getting up steam on the donkey-boiler, ready to resume the tremendous activity of the previous day.

Joe said nothing about the rescue of the night.

Her other companions were still fast asleep; and, having peeped into Miss Strong's cabin, she had found her with her two patients, all sleeping tranquilly.

All that Joe said was that Miss Strong had had a disturbed night, and was not up yet, and that she was not going to start any sort of work on the ship, for fear of waking her.

So the girls went quietly about the decks.

They were all slow in making their appearance this morning, for the tremendous work of the previous day had

told upon them.

Nor had Miss Whiffen or mademoiselle made their appearance.

They, too, were oversleeping, after the fatigues of discharging the ship.

Breakfast was late, and only then did mademoiselle appear, looking graceful and languid and rather pale.

"How are you this morning, mademoiselle?" asked Joe.

Mademoiselle sighed.

"My dear Josephine, I am broke in 'alves!" she said. "Zis work of dockkaire, 'e is too much. I cannot carry ze 'ouses. I should navvair do for what you call 'im—ze assistant of ze brickla-ire or ze navvce. But Mademoiselle Strong, she 'ave not yet arise from 'er cabin."

It was just at this moment that Miss Strong's voice was heard calling from her cabin, asking that someone should bring her a cup of tea.

"Voila!" exclaimed mademoiselle. "I will serve Mademoiselle Strong wiz ze tea. Give me leetle tray, Josephine, Give me serviette and ze brioche—what you call 'im?—ot roll."

Mademoiselle made up a dainty little breakfast-tray with true French taste and neatness.

She balanced it on her hand like a practised waitress, and made for the curtained door of Miss Strong's cabin.

"Good-mornceing, mademoiselle!" she called outside the cabin. "Permit me to enter. Be'old your leetle breakfast!"

She pulled back the curtain, and then staggered, with a faint scream.

The tray crashed to the deck, smashing the cup and teapot, and sending Miss Strong's little breakfast flying in all directions.

"O-o-o!" cried mademoiselle, clapping her hand on her heart. "Les sauvages! Ze sauvages, zey 'ave come at las'!"

There, in Miss Strong's bed, was sitting up an object which in the unwarned Desiree la Touche might well have inspired a shock of fear.

It was Melita, ever so much better, wrapped in a pink shawl, with her frizzy wig standing up in a huge aureole or nimbus.

Melita was grinning from ear to ear with delight at the pink shawl which Miss Strong had wrapped about her.

The Solomon Island belle is not a beautiful creature.

Melita's face could only be compared to the sole of a black indiarubber shoe.

She was of an intensely black complexion.

Christie, who came from the neighbouring island of San Christoval, or St. Christopher, was more of a coffee colour.

She was still sleeping, and did not wake at mademoiselle's scream.

Miss Strong turned at the cry.

"Do not be alarmed, mademoiselle," she said. "These are our new girls!"

"Good gracious!" exclaimed mademoiselle. "But where did they come from, mademoiselle? Did they drop from the sky?"

"Have you not heard about them?" asked Miss Strong. "They came in a canoe. It is alongside now, by the ladder."

As a matter of fact, mademoiselle had not seen the canoe, for Joe had moored it, and had moored it astern of the great ship.

"No, I did not know zat ze savage have arrive!" exclaimed mademoiselle. "It was great surprise when I see mademoiselle zo golliwog in your bed. Look! She smile!"

"We found them adrift in a canoe last night," said Miss Strong. "It was after you had all gone to bed. So we did not disturb you. Both the poor things were suffering intensely from thirst and exposure, and this little one was very ill in the night. But she is ever so much better this morning, and Melita here is getting quite well. I think that she will want some breakfast. But I think that she had better start only with a little Bengel's food."

"Zo poor leetle sings!" exclaimed mademoiselle. "For why did not Joe tell me! I should not 'ave then let fall ze tempus an' ze equipage of your breakfast. I will go for to make you anozer breakfast, and to make for ze leetle one ze Bengel food."

And she bustled off, full of desire to help.

"Josephine," she said severely, as she paused at the breakfast-table, "for why did you not tell me zat ze savage young ladies zey 'ave join' ze ship?"

A cry of wonderment went up from the girls who had assembled about the breakfast-table.

None of these had heard of the adventure of the night, and none of them had seen the great war-canoe, which was moored astern under the counter of the Utopia.

"Who are they, Joe?" cried one.

"Where did they come from?" demanded another.

"Are they nice girls?" demanded Gladys Knox, who was always very particular with whom she mixed.

Joe could not help laughing at this last question.

"I don't know whether you would call them nice girls, Gladys," she answered. "One of them comes from Malaita, where all the best people are head-hunters; and the little one comes from St. Christoval, where the natives are said to be very dangerous and savage. But I don't think that either of them will bite us. You had better be civil to them when you meet them. For all I know, they may be Solomon Island princesses."

The Decauville Railway.

GR^{EAT} was the excitement amongst the girls when the story of the coming of the two castaways to Diamond Island was told.

Joe had to relate it over and over again across the breakfast-table, with every detail of their appearance and their rescue.

And greater still was the excitement when it was realised that these were real

savages, the daughters of head-hunters and savage warriors.

"I know exactly what Melita's papa is like when he's at home in the Solomon Islands," said Pat. "He wears a great plaque of mother-of-pearl on his chest, inlaid with a carved bit of polished turtle-shell. He walks about all day with a big, carved club and a sheaf of spears; and if he meets another gentleman that he does not like, he clubs him over the head—that is, if he doesn't get clubbed over the head himself!"

"How terrible!" exclaimed Lily Parsons, the girl who was always known as the "perfect little lady." "What perfectly dreadful people! They must be awful girls! I hope we shall not have to mix with them."

"I don't see why we shouldn't," said Pat, with a roughish twinkle in her grey eyes. "Shure, they're black young ladies, an' Melita is about the colour of Touchy's velvet dress. But they're Solomon Island gentlewomen; and as for Melita's papa—well, Lily, you are always telling us about your uncle, the major!"

"But he's a real major, in the regular Army!" replied Lily, with a sniff of indignation. "Surely you are not going to compare him with a horrible savage who walks about all day with a ring through his nose and a club in his hand!"

"But maybe Melita's papa is a major in the Solomon Islands army," said Pat. "The mere fact that he wears a plaque of pearl-shells as big as a soup-plate on his chest shows that he is an officer, and has killed a man. And as for his club—Your uncle has a club, hasn't he?"

"Of course he has," replied Lily Parsons eagerly. "He belongs to the United Services and the Junior Army and Navy!"

Pat nodded.

"My uncle belongs to the Civil Service Stores," she said gravely. "He hasn't got a ficket, but he always says 79,423 when he is asked his number. And if he has got a club, so has Melita's papa. He belongs to what they call the Suque. That's a very exclusive club in the Solomon Islands. That's where they have their cannibal feasts!"

Lily Parsons shuddered.

"I am sure these black girls are going to be dreadful!" she said.

"Try to look on the bright side of things, Lily," put in Joe. "For all you know they may be princesses in their own country. Then you will have to curtsy every time you meet them, and address them as 'Your Royal Highnesses!'"

Lily Parsons looked doubtful at this proposition.

She was an arrant snob, and if the black ladies were the daughters even of a nigger chief, she was quite ready to make up to them.

But the curiosity of the girls was not to be satisfied concerning the two black girls in Miss Strong's cabin—at any rate, not that morning.

Miss Whiffen was appointed to be their nurse.

She was both kind and careful.

But even she had a shock when she saw the grinning black face of Melita propped up on the white pillows, and looking twice as black by contrast.

Melita's hair was wonderful.

It stood right up on end, a foot high, and her ears were pierced for ear-rings.

Christie, the little girl, was still sleeping the sleep of utter exhaustion, and only roused slightly when food was brought to her.

But both girls were recovering fast, with the wonderful recuperative powers of the savage, who is used to long spells

of fasting and thirst which would kill a white man or woman.

"My dear," said Miss Whiffen gently to Melita, as she took over the charge of these interesting patients, "do you understand English?"

Melita nodded.

"Yaas," she answered. "You Mary fella. Me Mary fella. You Number One white Mary fella. Me poor black Mary fella!"

"What ever does she mean?" asked the wonderstruck Miss Whiffen.

Miss Strong smiled.

"Mary fella, or Mary fellow, means a woman or girl," she said. "Probably the first white man who ever landed in the Solomons called the first woman he met 'Mary.' So a woman has been called a Mary fella ever since. It is really a wonderful language, Miss Whiffen and as a teacher of languages you will find it most interesting. I have often heard of it, but I have never heard it spoken before. It is like the pidgin English which is spoken by the Chinese. Have you never heard the story of the sea-captain who wanted to send for a black chief, who was up on deck, to come down to the cabin?"

Miss Whiffen shook her head.

"Why," continued Miss Strong, "he called to his Chinese steward: 'Hi, boy, go you topside catches one-pieceo king!'"

Miss Whiffen only turned up her eyes at this story.

"It's a terrible language!" she murmured. "I am sure I shall never learn it."

But Miss Strong only laughed.

"I was going to try and speak a little to Melita," she said. "I want to find out how the two girls came to be drifting across the seas in the canoe. They must have been at sea a long time."

She leaned over Melita, and arranged her pillows.

"Melita dear," she asked, "spoonum you tell Mar's Mary fella how you come to be adrift in canoe?"

Melita nodded.

She seemed to understand all right.

"Me Klistian," she said. "Me mis-saryary girl."

Miss Strong understood.

"You see, Miss Whiffen," she said, "Melita is a Christian, and she has been in touch with one of the missions on the islands."

The black girl nodded once more.

"Missionary man, 'im good man," she said. "Him Number One big mar's white fella. German, 'im bad man—no good!"

"And Christie—was she a missionary girl, too?" asked Miss Strong, pointing to the little sleeping figure on the other bed.

Melita nodded vigorously.

"She Klistian," she said. "She plenty good girl—very much good girl!"

"You see," explained Miss Strong, "these two girls are great friends, and they must have been brought together at some time in some missionary school, although they belong to different islands, and although their tribes would be in deadly enmity. Melita is a Malaita girl, and Christie is a San Christoval girl. I remember hearing that no native of San Christoval is safe on the Islands of Malaita, or vice-versa. These people just hunt strangers for their heads."

"My papa fella, he got plenty head in him hutch! Plenty head belong him!" said Melita.

Miss Whiffen shuddered.

Pat's jestings about Melita were fairly true, after all.

Melita was proudly announcing that her papa had plenty of heads, just as a

daughter of a British officer might proudly announce that her father had the Military Cross and the D.S.O.

She wanted to explain to these English ladies that she, too, was a lady in her own island, and of a good old fighting family.

Miss Strong explained this.

Then, bit by bit, in fragments of broken English and many signs, she got the story of the canoe out of Melita, piecing the fragments of the yarn and its halting English together with the skill of a highly-trained schoolmistress.

It appeared that Melita had been to the mission schools for a while.

Then her tribe had shifted its grounds, and had moved.

Chrissie's father and mother had been killed by her tribe, and Chrissie, being spared, had been brought up from a baby amongst them—although she was one of the hated San Christoval folks—and had been adopted by Melita as a playfellow.

Now, canoes are tabu, or forbidden, to women and girls in the Solomon Islands.

For a woman or a girl to be caught in a canoe means a tremendous thrashing for the delinquent.

they would, according to tribal custom, have sanctuary. They would simply become members of the other tribe."

"How interesting!" said Miss Whiffen.

"But the canoe was caught by the wind, and blown out to sea between the reefs of the lagoon," continued Miss Strong. "There were water and drinking-nuts and some food in the boat, and they drifted on, and drifted on for days. Melita says a 'moon.' That means from full moon to full moon. For a whole month those two poor children have been adrift at sea in the open canoe!"

"Poor things!" sighed Miss Whiffen, looking at Melita sympathetically.

"It would have killed any of our girls in the first week," said Miss Strong. "But these children are tough. They are the survival of the fittest, and they did not die. There was tutao, or pounded breadfruit—which keeps a long time—in the boat, and their water lasted out, and they got caught in some heavy rain-storms. So they kept alive, drifting on, and drifting on, till last night they drifted in towards this island, and, providentially, we saw them. Another twelve

that this had been upheaved at some time by the volcanic forces, whose work was everywhere apparent on Diamond Island.

And she pointed out, too, that it made an ideal bed for a railway, for it needed no smoothing, and the sections of rail laid quite smoothly on it, as though on a prepared railway-bed.

Nor was there any need to cut down any of the cocoa-palms in the palm grove that grew on this shelf.

All the girls had to do was to divert the line slightly here and there, to avoid a few palms which, after the fashion of the cocoa-palm, had grown out as near as they could to the sea.

And the girls laughed merrily as they turned into platelayers, putting down length after length of the Decauville Railway, in a style that would have made a gang of professional platelayers envious.

They worked in such style that, before the ship's bell rang, recalling the working-party for the midday meal, the rails were laid along the shore, and turned up the slope of the Happy Valley, terminating right at the foot of the great platform on which the house was to be built.



The girls laughed merrily, as they turned into platelayers, putting down length after length of the Decauville Railway, in a style that would have made a gang of professional platelayers envious.

For a woman to be caught in a war canoe means death.

"That," explained Miss Strong, "is partly superstition, or religious belief, and partly so that the women shall not run away. They are just chattels and slaves, and if they had access to the canoes of the tribes they would often run away if they had the use of the canoes, because they can't get away through the thick forests."

"What shocking people!" exclaimed Miss Whiffen, lifting her hands in horror.

"But it did not prevent these two girls from playing in an empty war-canoe which was lying moored in their lagoon," said Miss Strong, relating the story she had got from the smiling Melita. "They thought that they were unseen, for the canoe was moored in the shelter of a creek that ran into the lagoon. But a boy saw them, and threatened to tell, and they got frightened, for they knew that they were likely to be clubbed to death. So they took the canoe, and paddled her along the lagoon, thinking to take refuge with a neighbouring tribe to shield them from the anger of their own people. They knew that if they could get to the chief of this tribe, and throw themselves at his feet, holding him round the ankle,

hours, and little Chrissie would certainly have died!"

Miss Whiffen was full of sympathy for the black girls now.

She was not happy till she had fed Melita with a whole cup of Bengel's food, and this Melita took eagerly.

"Him good kai-kai!" she said.

"You will understand, Miss Whiffen, that 'kai-kai' means something to eat all over the Pacific," said Miss Strong. "So, when Melita or Chrissie asks for kai-kai you will know that they want to eat!"

And Miss Strong left Miss Whiffen sitting staring at Melita, as though she were afraid that she—herself—would be the first thing that Melita would want to eat when she took to solid food again.

Steam was got on the donkey-boiler again, and the work of unloading the ship started once more.

Stack after stack of rails were unloaded from the hold and rafted ashore.

Then the construction of the Diamond Island Railway was commenced. This was a business simple enough.

There was a large shelf of coral rock running at the back of the sands, which stretched for miles along the shore.

Miss Strong pointed out to the girls

Pat gave a shrill yell of triumph as the last section of rails and sleepers were bolted into position.

"Arrah, now!" she cried. "Did you ever see such a morning's work in your life?"

Then she flopped down on the ground, and wiped her forehead with a dreadfully ragged red handkerchief, which she particularly cherished because it annoyed mademoiselle.

To mademoiselle this red handkerchief was as a red rag to a bull.

It was a dreadful handkerchief, in her opinion.

It had been the property of one of the sailors who had been taken off the Utopia, and was as big as a small tablecloth, and was made of red cotton with white spots, and had a square in the centre of it that was filled up with the flags of all nations.

It was also full of holes, and was covered with black oil stains, for which Pat cherished it all the more.

Mademoiselle la Touche, who had been platelaying with the rest of the girls, shuddered at the sight of the handkerchief.

She drew a dainty little square of cambric and Valenciennes lace from her own pocket, and elegantly fanned her nose, as she looked on with horror whilst Pat swabbed her heated forehead heartily.

"Patrecia! Patrecia!" she protested. "What for do you wipe your face with zat dreadful dishcloth?"

Pat's eyes twinkled. "Faith, mademoiselle," she urged, "'tis a bee-autiful hanky! Look at the lace trimmings all round it, an' the flags av all nations in the middle!"

And Pat proudly displayed the tattered rag to mademoiselle's horrified gaze.

"But it is so inelegant—so unladylike!" urged mademoiselle. "It is zo 'andkerchief of ze travailleur—zo workman—not of zee young laadee!"

Pat gave a gesture of desperation as she pointed at the long line of rails that curved down the Happy Valley towards the shore.

"Faith, mademoiselle!" she said. "How can ye be ladylike an' lay a mile av rails between breakfast an' lunch-time? An' those dear little mouchoirs av yours—what good are they to a poor rough Irish gurril loike me?"

That conquered mademoiselle.

"Patrecia," she said, "if you will give me zat 'orrid dishrag, I vill in return present you vix 'arf a dozen of zose 'andkerchief zat you so admire!"

Pat rolled her eyes.

She had got what she had been yearning for for weeks.

Those handkerchiefs of mademoiselle's were wonderful little squares of the finest cambric, edged with priceless Maltese lace.

For these she had been ostentatiously mopping her forehead with that dreadful red rag for the past three days.

"Mademoiselle," she said, "sorry as I am to part with it, I cannot resist your generous offer! Take my poor old red handkerchief as a memento of the day that we laid th' first section av the Diamond Island Railway, and I will collect the handkerchiefs ye so generously give me when we get on board the ship."

The bell was ringing violently on the ship now—an impatient signal from the cooks on board that dinner was spoiling.

"Hurree up, girls!" exclaimed mademoiselle, gathering her working party together. "Ze rosbif of ole England 'e will be done to ashes if we do not accelerate ourselves!"

"It was too bad of you, Pat, to wheedle those handkerchiefs out of poor old Touchy by rubbing your face with that filthy rag!" said Joe reproachfully.

But Pat only laughed.

"I wanted those handkerchiefs, Josephine, my dear," she answered.

"An' I knew that I'd only get 'em by irritatin' Touchy with my red hanky till she had to give me somethin' in its stead. But wait till after dinner, Joe. I'm goin' out huntin' for something that will make Touchy the proudest an' happiest girl on Diamond Island. There's somethin' that Touchy's set her heart on all her life—somethin' that's the very top av her ambition. An' she little dreams that she's cabin' an' workin' an' sleepin' within a stone's throw av it!"

"What is it?" asked Joe curiously.

"Never you mind! Little girls should ask no questions, an' they won't get any stories told them!" replied Pat mysteriously. "This afternoon is Saturday afternoon, Joe, isn't it?"

"Of course!" replied Joe. "Last night

was Friday night. And that is why we found the two Sisters Friday adrift in the canoe!"

"Good!" replied Pat. "Thin this afternoon is a half holiday."

"Miss Strong says so," answered Joe. "She thinks that we have all been working too hard, and that after last night we ought to lie down and rest. But I was going on with the boat-building with Dumpling Davies. We have spread an awning to keep the sun off us whilst we are at work, and if we stick at it we can get the last planks on and have the boat ready for varnishing."

"Get on wid ye, Miss Industrious!" said Pat coaxingly. "What's th' need to work on th' old boat when we've got that beautiful light war-canoe covered wid elegant mother-av-pearl to go boatin' in? Look here, Joe, ye'll have your little nap after dinner, an' thin, at four o'clock, whin th' heat av the day is over, I want ye to take me for a little paddle round the ship, so as I can make Touchy a present"

"What are you driving at, Pat?" demanded Joe.

"That's me secret!" replied Pat. "Wait, an' it will be revealed to you. If you won't come out an' paddle me round, I'll get some av th' other girls—Glady's an' Edith, for example. Then you'll wish that you had come, for I've got wan av the finest adventures up me sleeve that iver happoned on Diamond Island!"

Joe could resist no longer.

She was eager to finish her boat, but Pat's air of mystery and vague hints overcame her.

"All right!" she said. "I'll come, and Hilda and Dumpling! Do you want any more to paddle the canoe?"

"She's built and licensed for fifty savages," answered Pat; "but I reckon four girls is enough to handle her easy. She's as light as a feather."

And her magnificent new instalment of 'is splendid new serial' in next Thursday's issue of 'The School Friend.' Order your copy in advance to avoid disappointment.

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