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*C. E. Russell*

**An Easy First!**



# "No Longer A Madcap!"

A Story of the Girls of  
Morcove School

By Marjorie Stanton

## CHAPTER I.

### THE CAUSE OF THE TROUBLE

"**S**HUSH!" Betty Barton, captain of the Fourth Form at Morcove School, frowned heavily, and side-glanced quickly at the girl who sat at the desk beside her.

Miss Massingham, the Fourth Form mistress, was writing on the blackboard, and from time to time she glanced round sharply to see that the girls were not getting into mischief.

Betty was a conscientious girl, and a hard-worker; but the same could not be said of the girl beside her, who was wagging her own hand out endeavouring to encounter Betty's. For Polly Linton was the madcap of the Form.

It was obvious to most of the girls near by that Polly was trying to pass something to Betty, and several eyes watched anxiously to see what was to happen.

Polly Linton was grinning as she wagged the note about, but a girl who sat behind Polly was frowning seriously. That girl was just now putting her hair to rights. It was rarely indeed that Paula Creel, the most elegant and aristocratic girl in the Form, was not putting her hair to rights. Yet it was always the tidiest in the Form.

Paula was anxious now on account of her friends. She had noticed Miss Massingham half turn her head as Polly, reaching sideways, just saved herself from slipping by grabbing her desk lid and banging it slightly.

"Bai Jove!" lisped Paula, in a dramatic hiss. "Bewlah! Betty darling—Polly——"

Miss Massingham wheeled round suddenly, and Betty became as one frozen. But Paula Creel was apparently intent upon her chum's safety.

Polly Linton, as a last resource, groped for Betty's hand—and dropped that precious note. "She's dwopped it, y'know!" Paula hissed.

And Polly Linton, frowning, reached her hand back to slap Paula's leg and warn that well-meaning girl that Miss Massingham was an interested spectator of the scene.

It was a fact that the others had smilingly realised—and now Paula realised it, for she gave a faint "Oh, gwacious!" indicative of dismay, and her hand stole nervously to her hair.

"Paula Creel!" exclaimed Miss Massingham in a voice of thunder.

"Bai Jove! Yes, M-Miss Massingham."

"What is the meaning of this whispered conference? I do not write on the board for my own amusement, but for your instruction."

"Yes, wather, Miss Massingham. How-evah——"

Miss Massingham strode forward, for Paula's eyes had been fixed upon the note that had dropped to the floor, and the elegant girl had been vainly nudging Polly to pick it up, a fact that Miss Massingham had not failed to notice.

"Ah!" the mistress exclaimed grimly as she stepped forward, and, stooping, picked up the crumpled note. "This, I presume, was the subject of your discussion?"

"Mum-my discussion? Bai Jove, Miss Massingham, I sincerely hope you do not considah I would hold a discussion. It would be wude——"

Miss Massingham ignored the protest, and stared from Betty to Polly.

Polly was tapping her desk, and frowning with engrossed attitude at the writing on the board; and Betty—she was just a trifle flushed and guilty.

Miss Massingham unfolded the note, and her eyebrows raised. She glanced sternly at Polly Linton.

"I see," she remarked grimly. "This is most mysterious." "Julius Cæsar in the music-room." Would you mind telling me what the Roman Emperor in the music-room has to do with the mean annual rainfall of Great Britain?"

"N-nothing," was Polly's hesitating reply.

"Then, pray, what does this extremely mysterious, but doubtless very interesting, message mean?"

"It's—it's only a play we're going to rehearse, Miss Massingham," Polly explained. "We're—we're going to rehearse it in the music-room."

Miss Massingham raised her brows and crumpled the note in her hand.

"You do not enter the Form-room, Polly Linton," she exclaimed tartly, "in order to make arrangements for plays to be acted after school hours. At the present moment you are required to study the rainfall of Great Britain." She whisked back to her desk, and Polly, thinking that the affair was ended, gave a deep sigh of relief.

But it had not ended, as Polly was to know.

"When lessons are over," the mistress remarked, "you will draw me from memory a map of Great Britain, giving the mean annual rainfall."

She took Polly's text-book, and that girl gave a groan of dismay as what was almost her last hope of knowing the rainfall vanished.

"Poor old Polly!" Paula Creel remarked.

"Paula Creel, you will bring me your text-book, and after lessons you shall remain with Polly."

Betty Barton jumped up.

"Please, please, Miss Massingham," she exclaimed, "I was to blame as well. Polly was trying to pass the note to me."

And then Betty was awarded the same punishment as her two friends.

Madge Minden, Tess Trelawney, and Trixie Hope cast the three unfortunates looks of compassion. They had heard that message Miss Massingham had read aloud, and realised what it meant.

"Julius Cæsar in the music-room."

There were thoughtful expressions then and shining eyes. Madge Minden contrived to give Betty a very serious nod—a nod which might mean anything, but a nod which Betty took to mean that Madge was quite in agreement with what was arranged.

Suddenly the door of the Form-room opened. Polly sat bolt upright, welcoming the interruption. And, indeed, at that moment the Form seemed more animated than it had been during any other period.

At the sight of the page-boy the interest redoubled. For it meant that there was something important—a visitor, or perhaps, the more optimistic thought, that Miss Massingham's presence might be required elsewhere.

But whatever they thought, they were wrong, for after the page-boy had spoken to the Form-mistress, Miss Massingham, with a quite serious frown, looked to her Form.

"Polly!" she exclaimed suddenly; and Polly Linton almost jumped out of her seat.

What was wrong now, she wondered, what escapade of hers had come to light?

She was judging by the serious look on Miss Massingham's face, but the reason for the seriousness Polly quite misinterpreted.

"Just one moment, Polly."

In response to the summons Polly left her place, not without a feeling of some anxiety, and stood before the Form-mistress.

"The page-boy has brought word from the headmistress that your aunt, Mrs. Somers, of Hayten Dell, is ill," Miss Massingham exclaimed. "You have the headmistress's permission to pack your things and go there at once."

Polly Linton opened her eyes wide, surprised and perturbed at the news; for she was fond of her Aunt Sybil, who lived in a little village not far from the school.

"Can I go now, Miss Massingham, please?" she asked.

"As it is a case of serious illness, it is as well that you should."

The page-boy had gone, and Polly, with murmured thanks, made as though to turn to the door. But the Form-mistress laid a restraining hand upon her sleeve.

"One moment," she said. "This does not excuse your detention, Polly, and you must do the punishment when you return." She frowned slightly as she continued: "If only you would pay a little more attention to form work you could easily come very much higher in the lists than you do at present; if only you paid as



"Good-bye, Polly!"

much attention to school work as you do to games—”

She sighed and left the sentence unfinished, and the madcap of the Form nodded a little vaguely, consoling herself with the thought that the lecture could not be long-lived. For Polly did not take school life very seriously.

It pleased her far more to be the best in her form at hockey than to be the best at any subject in Form work.

“That is all, Polly,” Miss Massingham said. “But I may as well tell you that your father has written asking for a report on your conduct—”

“My father has!” Polly exclaimed, aghast.

Many times she had had lectures from her father; but she had taken them rather lightly, because she always felt in her heart that he was lecturing more from a sense of parental duty than from a desire to see her become a swot. In fact, she had had ample proof in the pride he took in her achievements at games.

But since her father had written to Miss Massingham, was it not probable that he was getting agitated on her behalf?

“It only requires you to concentrate on your work,” Miss Massingham resumed. “You are high-spirited, Polly. I shall watch you closely during the next few days before I send in a report. Help me send your father a good report by altering your ways.”

“I—I’ll try,” Polly agreed; and into her mind came visions of work left undone—preparations scampered through in a few minutes because she had been wasting time.

Then Miss Massingham made a sign that the discussion was over, and Polly, in none too cheerful mood, hurried up to the dormitory to pack her bag.

She was just kneeling on the suit-case to clip

the catches when her chums ran into the room, lessons having ended a few moments ago.

“Poor old Polly,” Tess Trelawney laughed, placing her hand on her friend’s shoulder, “always getting into hot water—”

“And always deserving to,” Polly admitted glumly.

And then they accompanied her downstairs, waiting while she went into the Form-room, where Betty Barton and Paula Creel were engaged in map drawing.

Polly kissed them good-bye, told them of the postponed rehearsal, and then took her departure. Not many minutes later she was seated in a train bound for Hayten Dell, and in her mind were tangled thoughts—the forthcoming play that they were to act in aid of charity, the lecture from Miss Massingham, and her aunt, lying seriously ill.

And, as she thought of her aunt, the memory of the last occasion upon which she had seen her came floating back to her mind. It was not a pleasant memory—not on account of her aunt, but because of Vera Somers, her cousin. For Vera was a spiteful girl, and had made unpleasantness.

Polly found herself wishing that Vera might not be there—that, at any rate, she would be a different Vera from the one she had seen on her last visit to her aunt.

And, finally, she consoled herself with the thought that since Vera had now left school she must be different.

And there Polly was right. Vera she would find different—but not an improved Vera! But of that Polly did not suspect. She determined that she would find Vera anxious on her mother’s account, and changed for the better.

But what a surprise awaited Polly!



It was obvious to most of the girls that Polly was trying to pass a note to Betty, and they watched anxiously for what was to happen

## CHAPTER II.

### AN ENEMY TO FEAR

"YOU!" Polly Linton had just entered the hall of Hayten Manor, her aunt's house, when that word greeted her.

She turned and smiled in friendly manner as she saw her cousin upon the staircase. Vera was clothed in a rest-gown, and took Polly's outstretched hand languidly.

"How's aunt?" Polly asked eagerly.

"Eh? Mother—oh, about the same," said Vera easily. "Doesn't vary much, you know; delirious most of the time. But what's brought you here?"

"I came to see aunt," Polly returned coldly, angered by the other's callous words.

"Oh, good! Glad to leave the school for a bit, I suppose, eh?"

"Yes—in a way. Where is aunt's room?"

"Oh, you can't go there yet. The nurse won't let you in. One of the maids will tell you when. How are things at the kindergarten you go to?"

Polly flushed.

"Oh, not so bad," she replied.

"Getting into plenty of scrapes—lectures from the mistresses, and all that?"

"Well, yes," Polly admitted. "I did get a lecture just before I came away."

"Dear old scapegoat, always in trouble," Vera laughed unpleasantly. "Wonder when you'll be expelled? I told your pater I didn't give you more than another term at the most—"

"You—you told pater that?" Polly asked quickly.

"Yes; no harm, I suppose? You've told me plenty of yarns about the things you get up to at school. He didn't seem very amused, though."

Polly choked down angry words, but she glared at her cousin. It was like Vera, she reflected, to do a thing such as that. Now she knew why her father had written.

For several seconds Polly stared at her, then, being informed that she could see her aunt, she hurried to the sick-room.

How quiet, how solemn it was in there!

Tenderly she kissed her aunt's white face, smoothing her cool hand across the hot forehead.

"Poor aunt!" she murmured.

And who would have recognised her now as the madcap of the Fourth—Polly the irrepressible, irresponsible, as she sat beside the bedside of the frail, sick woman, stroking the thin hand that was extended to her?

One glance only was needed to realise how ill Mrs. Somers was; and the solemn quietness of the sick-room accentuated matters.

"I am so glad that you have come, Polly dear. I—I feel lonely here, with only nurse as companion," the woman whispered. "Vera is—very kind, but—but, of course, she has her friends and her social engagements—"

Polly started and, frowning, looked closely into the sad grey eyes of her aunt.

"Social engagements?" she murmured mechanically.

She would have added something, but for once her impulsive tongue was checked, and she tactfully said nothing of what was in her mind.

Social engagements! Was Vera so heartless? Did she speak of social engagements when her mother was so ill?

Just for a moment, while the thoughts were passing through her mind, Polly had glanced away from the sick woman, and when she returned her glance she found that her aunt lay as one in a trance.

A soft footstep sounded beside her, and she glanced up to find the kindly nurse smoothing the counterpane.

"You must go now, the nurse murmured kindly. "Mrs. Somers has been delirious most of the time, and she must not be worried."

She sighed, and Polly, rising, glanced at her wonderingly.

"It would be so much easier," the nurse explained, "if only her daughter— But there, that's the way of things, I suppose. Those who receive the most affection are the least grateful. To think that this kind, unselfish woman should call for her daughter almost every minute—"

She shook her head sadly and disapprovingly.

"You mean that auntie calls for Vera—and she doesn't come?" Polly cried in absolute amazement.

And then her voice died away, as Mrs. Somers restlessly moved from side to side. Polly, unused to illness, stared, somewhat frightened, with tears of compassion near to her eyes.

"It's a shame," she said indignantly; and she paused again as she heard her aunt unceasingly whispering her cousin's name.

"Vera dear, stay with me, please; don't leave me alone, Vera."

Turning and tossing from side to side the woman repeated that sentence again and again.

"It is always the same," the nurse was saying. "She says little else, and sometimes days have passed when her daughter has seen her only for a



Betty Barton—the captain of the Fourth

moment or so. Even now I think she is dressing for a dance."

Polly was staggered. How any girl could act so cruelly to anyone amazed her, but that Vera should treat her mother so unkindly seemed almost incredible.

Kind-hearted and forgiving, Mrs. Somers indulged her daughter in every way, so that Vera's every wish was granted.

For several moments Polly Linton, with hands clenched and eyes burning, stood staring at the sick woman, then almost abruptly she turned on her heels, and the door closed softly behind her as she hurried from the room.

To reach Vera Somers' room took her but a moment, and she tapped imperatively on the door. The key turned in the lock, and Polly entered even before the door was fully opened.

Vera Somers, amazed at Polly's manner, stared at her, so Polly did not tell her the reason for the visit. For Polly's attention was attracted by the condition of the room. Vera Somers was obviously dressing for one of her "social engagements."

"You're—you're going out!" Polly exclaimed.

Vera walked back to her dressing-table before replying.

"You're very smart," she said. "How did you guess it?" And she turned to display her beautiful, but rather over-elaborate dress. That it was expensive no second glance was needed to tell, probably it had been designed with that object. "Like my frock?"

Polly Linton, however, scarcely glanced at it.

"This is not a time to talk of dresses," she

exclaimed impatiently. "Your mother is ill—dangerously ill; can't you realise what it may mean?"

She spoke more quietly now, and in her voice was a note of pleading.

As she heard the words, Vera Somers threw back her head and her eyes narrowed.

"What do you mean?" she ejaculated.

"You know what I mean," Polly retorted. "You know that you ought not to go out to dances and theatres while your mother pleads for your presence in her delirium."

Vera Somers shrugged her well-shaped shoulders.

"My dear kid," she returned more calmly and patronisingly, "don't give me your mistress's lectures second-hand. I suppose I can please myself what I do?"

Polly drew a deep breath.

"You—you mean, then," she exclaimed angrily, "that you are going out this evening; you can't—you mustn't!"

Her cousin spun round upon her fiercely.

"Mustn't!" she exclaimed. "Are you going to give me orders, Polly? Mustn't, indeed! You don't seem to realise that one must keep one's social engagements. I should never hear the end of it if I didn't go. All the girls in my set would laugh at me."

"Laugh at you for not staying by your mother when she's dangerously ill?" Polly echoed in sheer amazement. "They must be fine friends indeed!"

"They're friends I can't afford to lose!" Vera snapped. "It isn't every girl who gets a chance of going to the Van Hyltons, I can tell you. It will make me socially if I'm seen there. Anyway, I'm going."



"Give me that key!" fumed Vera. "Give it to me, or I'll take it from you."

And she turned back as if the affair were completely finished; but Polly did not move.

She stood there like a statue, a fierce, angry statue, and the set of her jaw told of determination.

"That is final?" she asked. "I tell you again, Vera, your mother is ill—dangerously ill, and she wants you by her—even now she is calling for you and yet," Polly added huskily, "you're going to a dance as if nothing were at all wrong."

"I am going, that's sufficient. You needn't go on pleading, making out that I am some sort of criminal; everybody's doing that," Vera said bitterly.

"Which just shows how wise they are." Polly stepped back to the door and a sharp click from that direction made Vera turn to her.

"What are you doing with that key?" she exclaimed.

"I have locked the door!" Polly's voice sounded grim.

"Locked it!" fumed her cousin. "How dare you; give me the key."

Polly Linton folded her arms and faced the angry girl who stepped up to her. Vera's eyes were narrowed and her breath came quickly; her dignity had been flung to the wind.

"Give me that key at once," she stormed, stamping her foot. "Give it to me, or I'll take it from you."

"Don't be absurd, you're not half as strong as I am," Polly retorted coolly. "You are going to stay here until you change your mind and decide not to go to the dance!"

For several moments the girl stormed and raged helplessly. Then her storming changed to pleading.

"Please, please, Polly," she whimpered. "Think what it will mean to me if I don't go—I must go! Their car will be here in a minute, and what can I say to them? It's a chance of a lifetime. I can't miss it."

"If your mother treated you half as unkindly as you treat her," Polly answered, "you'd have no allowance, no money to buy these dresses, and I'd like to know just how long these people will be your friends if you haven't a penny in the world."

But Vera Somers was not listening to her; she had arisen from the chair in which she had flung herself, and now crossed to the window.

"It's the car," she gasped, turning a white face to her cousin. "It's the Van Hylton's car; they have called for me. Polly, please—I'll do anything for you, honestly I will. I—I—"

But Polly Linton remained as impassive as the sphinx. The door bell rang and the sound of voices came from the drive.

White-faced with anger and humiliation, Vera Somers listened to light footsteps that sounded in the passage outside. In another moment there came a gentle tap on the door, and the servant announced that the Van Hylton's car was waiting their guest. Vera stepped forward, but Polly Linton caught her in a grip of steel, placing a firm hand over her cousin's mouth.

A few moments later the servant's footsteps died away in the distance as she went to tell the waiting chauffeur that Miss Somers's mother had been taken seriously ill, and on that account Miss Somers begged to be excused the dance.

It was all over then, and Vera, white and limp as a rag, fell back into the chair, staring with burning, resentful eyes at the girl who had defeated her.

And not until she had extracted a promise from her did Polly release the thoughtless girl. That promise Vera had to keep—she could not have done otherwise—and Polly Linton smiled with a smile of happiness as she watched the girl enter the sick-room. She had won; but she had made an enemy.

Spiteful to the last, Vera was making the most of things, assuming all credit for not having gone to the dance, even describing how she had not listened when Polly had entreated her to go and to take her, too.

But of that Polly knew nothing.

When, a little time later, she heard that danger was over, and that Mrs. Somers was now in a peaceful sleep, she felt that to gain so much was worth even incurring the enmity of Vera.

That the enmity was very real she learned the next day when she left.

"You saved your mother, Vera," she said warmly as she met the selfish girl coming from the sick-room.

Vera Somers eyed her up and down coolly before replying.

"You think you are very clever, Polly Linton, with your meddling," she said. "But your innings is over—and now it's mine. It won't be very long before you'll be wishing that you had minded your own business!"

And with those words, so nearly a threat, Vera brushed past Polly and marched down the corridor.

Worried, and puzzled, Polly stared after her; then, smiling, she shrugged her shoulders. After all, what had she to fear from Vera? That was the question she asked herself, and it gave her nothing but increased contempt for the girl.

Indeed, so happy was she that her aunt had recovered that she almost forgave Vera and her threats. And when Morcove was reached, Vera was entirely forgotten. Her aunt was on the



Paula Creel—the swell girl of the Fourth

road to recovery, and in a few days she and Vera would be staying with the Lintons, where she would have friends around her.

Once again Polly was in her old atmosphere, forgetting the lecture from Miss Massingham, and her former, momentary desire to change her ways. Perhaps once she did have a vague uneasiness, but dismissed it from her mind almost immediately, telling herself that it was merely the result of Vera's spiteful words.

Merely? Ah, there indeed Polly erred, misjudging the extent of her cousin's spite. Vera did not forget, and to her revenge was sweet—how sweet Polly Linton had yet to learn.

### CHAPTER III. POLLY, THE PERFECT!

"ORDER!"  
"Yes, bai Jove, ordah, deah geals.  
Pway ordah!"

"Order you, too," said Polly Linton, catching Paula by the shoulders and plumping her down in a chair.

The music-room was crowded with Fourth Form girls, and the door very judiciously had been locked. Girls were sitting round on chairs they had brought; and those who had not brought chairs had the choice of the window-sill or piano, unless they chose to stand.

"Order for the chair," came Polly Linton's booming voice, and the babble of tongues died down for just a second.

There were cheers as Betty Barton mounted a stool; for Betty was a popular captain, and the girls were all ready to hear her.

"Ordah! Pway be silent, deah geals, Polly—"

"Now," Betty exclaimed, when silence had been gained. "This meeting has been called, girls, to decide what we are to do for the Fund Day in Barncombe Town. The Fifth are up to something, you know—"

There were groans for the Fifth, and Betty smiled.

"Never mind. We've got to do something better," she resumed. "Polly suggests playing 'Julius Cæsar'—"

"Because she wants to play Marc Antony," interposed Ursula Wade, the sneak of the Fourth. But no one minded what Ursula said.

"Not a play—a concert," said Madge Minden in her serious way. "We can distribute talent so much better. Play one scene from Shakespeare, if you like—"

"Hear, hear."

"A concert—"

"Good idea—"

And there was a hubbub for some moments, and poor Betty, though she waved her arms ever so, could not gain silence. It was Polly who restored order. Polly thumped the piano till Madge's heart ached, and the piano hummed in protest.

"Now, girls, please don't make so much noise," Betty pleaded, with an anxious glance at the door. "We shall have a mistress arrive on the scene, and that won't do. I take it that you want a concert—shush! No shouting. Hands up for a concert!"

Up flew a veritable forest of hands, and Madge Minden elevated two. She felt that she had to do her best.

"Right, then a concert it is, and we'll act some scenes from Shakespeare. As a matter of fact, I think it's a very good idea. We've got heaps of talent—"

"Bai Jove, yaas wathah, Betty darling. I don't mind singing a song y' know."

"Have no concert if Paula's going to sing," said Polly hurriedly; and there was a laugh.

"Weally, Polly—"

And Paula vainly protested. But her voice was scarcely heard. Judging by the noise there wasn't a single girl in the Form who could not do something.

"We can't have you all on the stage," said Betty at last, as, with a rather worried laugh, she put down the pencil which she had used to write down their names.

"Madge, Paula, Trixie—I suppose the people can stand a French recitation?" she asked, rubbing her nose thoughtfully.

"Oui, oui," Trixie hastened to assert, in her alleged French. "Ils l'ameront—they will love it—"

"Have you seen my grandmother's pen—" teased Polly. "No, but I have the garden-roller of my niece's uncle."

Poor Betty sighed hopelessly, and sat down on her chair. There was so much noise that she was afraid lest at any moment a rap should come at the door—a rap that heralded the approach of a mistress.

"We must be quieter," she said anxiously. "For one thing, the Fifth are bound to get to hear of this, and we want to get in ahead of them. Just think," she added eagerly. "If we can score over this play, and beat them at hockey, they'll never be able to hold up their heads again."

"Hear, hear!"

And that speech received the loyal ovation



Polly Linton—the madcap of the Fourth



that it deserved. When the shouting had died down, Betty had her own way. Gradually she made them take seats round the room, and sorted out the performers for the great concert.

"Excellent," she murmured with a sigh of relief when she had finished. "Here's a list fit to beat anything: Madge Minden, pianoforte solo. Paula Creel—er—song. Trixie Hope, French translations, I mean, recitations. Polly Linton, comic song—"

"And me," prompted Dolly Delane, for once putting herself forward.

"Oh, yes, duet Dolly and Tess Trelawney. Then something from me, and last, a scene from 'Julius Cæsar,' with Polly as Marc Antony, and Paula as Julius Cæsar in the Forum scene."

"Good old Paula—"

Paula Creel smiled.

"I wather flatter myself I do that wather well," she admitted, with a shake of the head. "The Cweels have always been good actwesses. I shall soon learn my part y' know."

"You will, silly goose," Polly agreed. "Julius Cæsar's dead in that act. If you can't act as a dead body—"

Polly left the completion unfinished, and the look on Paula's face caused more peals of merriment.

"Order, order!" called Betty again, when confusion broke forth anew. "We must take this up seriously, girls. We shall have to rehearse some of the things—"

Paula Creel was on her feet in an instant, and hurrying to the door.

"Where are you going?" Polly demanded.

"Get my music, Polly dear. I'm going to pwactise, y'know—a Herrin' calling—"

"A—a what?" gasped Polly. "My—my hat, you leave the herrings alone—"

"She means 'Caller Herrin'," Betty laughingly explained. "You go and practise, Paula dear, there's a good girl—"

And when she had gone others went, too. Madge Minden took possession of the piano, and, with a dreamy look on her face, commenced to play her solos.

Round the music-stool a crowd gathered, sorting out songs and duets.

And when, some minutes later, Paula Creel, a thoughtful expression on her face, entered the room, she found that most of the girls had vanished to get their songs.

"I say, Betty dear," she murmured. "I've just been glancin' at my copy of 'Cæsar,' y'know."

"Learnt your part?" smiled Madge Minden dreamily.

Paula nodded.

"I'm goin' to play Marc Antony. I'm wather a good actwess—"

"But—but, Paula dear—your—your—er—"

accent," Betty protested cautiously, not wishing to hurt the elegant girl's feelings.

But Paula Creel, fired possibly by the thought of being a prominent actress, had already started.

"Fwiends and Womans, deah geals. Lend me youah eahs—no—that's wrong—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Fwiends, Wemains of countwymen—I mean, womans and countwymen, lend me youah eahs."

"I'd rather not!" cried Polly.

"I come to buwy Cæsar, not to pwaise him. Howeveh—er—er—yes, wather. I haven't come to pwaise him, y'know—er—oh, I see—The evil that men do lives after them, y'know; the noble Brutus has said Cæsar was ambitious. It's vewy w'ong—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Betty dear, I wish you'd give a geal a chance. I feel I should be a success as an actwess, weally I do—"

"You would," Tess Trelawney agreed, choking with laughter. "Poor old Bwutus—still, you'll make a good Cæsar, Paula. You've got just the hair—and—er—the figure—"

"Bai Jove, weally?"

"Y—Yes," nodded Betty, trying not to laugh.

"You'll really make an awfully nice Cæsar, Paula dear. Besides, laurels will suit your coiffure."

"Vewy well, then. But I don't mind twying to play Marc Antony. Twy, twy again, y'know. Howeveh I'll sing my song."

"Yes, in a minute, dear," Betty remarked tactfully. "Gracious—wh—what's this?"

And the girls about the piano turned suddenly at the new entrant. A girl in a dark cloak had come into the room, and as the dark cloak fell to the floor they saw that it was the madcap of the Fourth.

Polly Linton struck a dramatic attitude.

"Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears—"

"Yes, wather, Polly dear."

"I come to bury Cæsar—"

"Not to pwaise him, dear geal—"

Polly Linton glared at the well-meaning Paula, and in most un-Antonian manner stepped forward, and took away the tattered copy of Shakespeare.

"Now will you be quiet?" she asked. "You're Cæsar—you don't speak. You're dead. You lie down on the floor."

Polly Linton, once her enthusiasm had been roused, ruled things in her own way, and Betty saw that it was useless to protest. Polly meant to rehearse, and, after all it did not matter greatly, because rehearsal was needed. So Betty took the copy of Shakespeare and attempted to guide her friends.

"Hands up for a concert!"  
And up went a veritable  
feast of hands



Paula Creel, after smoothing out Polly's cloak as a carpet, placed herself gingerly on the floor, and feigned death.

Then Polly got into her stride, and soon she was rehearsing for all she was worth.

But a moment later the door opened, and a grinning face peered in. It was a Fifth Form girl. The Fifth Form girls were seniors; but they were not above stooping to "tease" and rag the Fourth-Formers.

"What on earth's this?" the girl asked, staring at Polly in her Roman costume. "I say, girls, do come and look at these children—"

Marc Antony's narration ceased suddenly as three smiling faces were framed in the doorway. Keen though she was, Polly was sensitive to ridicule, and she knew that off the stage a Roman in full war kit was rather absurd.

"Go away," she said.

"All right, Mr. Cæsar. Sorry to interrupt. Go on. Friends, Romans and kids—"

Polly made as though to hurl a cushion at them, and the girls vanished.

"Next one will get this cushion," said Polly. "I'm not going to stand that—" And she resumed her speech.

Footsteps sounded in the corridor again, and Polly groped for the cushion. Her hand grasped it tightly as she went on with her speech.

The other girls looked away from the door in order not to warn the entrant, and Polly made a swinging movement with the cushion.

Whiz!

"Oh!"

"Got them!" Polly Linton wheeled round in triumph, and then her hands dropped to her sides and the joy vanished from her face.

For there in the doorway, her hair ruffled, stood Miss Massingham. And the look on the Form mistress' face was not pleasant to behold.

"Oh, I—I'm sorry," stuttered poor Polly.

The mistress advanced to the centre of the room, breathing deeply through her nose.

"No doubt," she said tartly. "So this is the cause of the disgraceful noise that I have heard. It is you again, Polly—goodness gracious, who is this on the floor?"

She stared down at Paula Creel, who was lying quite still on the cloak and cushions.

"It—it's Paula. She's playing Julius Cæsar's death," Polly explained.

"Paula, get up at once. I am surprised to see you acting so foolishly."

But Paula Creel did not move. Steady breathing came from her, and Polly Linton gave a sudden chuckle that was instantly frozen.

"She—she's asleep," she choked.

But Paula was awake an instant later, and rubbing her eyes. When she saw the Form mistress she was on her feet, looking extremely foolish.

"So this, Polly," said the Form mistress severely, "is how you commence to reform, by throwing cushions at mistresses—"

"I—I didn't mean it for you—I—mean—I thought—"

"Possibly you did not. I will believe that. But, anyway, it is not lady-like to throw cushions. Also, you would be better employed doing preparation. Take off that absurd attire at once and return to your study."

And Polly Linton, her hands hanging by her side, stared after the retreating mistress. For now Polly remembered; clearly she recollected the interview with Miss Massingham.

She had been going to reform, and this is how she had begun. Perhaps she would have laughed. But she remembered what the mistress had said.

"Help me send your father a good report."

What report would her father receive now? There was good reason for the madcap of the Form to be silent. Good reason for her to hang her head sorrowfully.

For Mr. Linton, though just, was stern; many times before she had received lectures from him, and now—

Ah! How Polly wished then that she was not such a madcap. But it was too late for wishes!

Had Polly been by the pillar-box half an hour later she would have seen Miss Massingham slip an envelope into it, and the address would have been one that was very familiar to Polly.

As for the contents—perhaps it was just as well that Polly could not see inside that letter!

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE FOODLESS FEAST.

"SHE'S got it!"

That cry rose from the touchline, and there was a yell of enthusiasm from the crowd that gathered round the ropes.

It was not in the ordinary course of events that a large crowd gathered to watch a junior game, but this half-holiday was an exception.

A goalless game was in progress—a ding-dong battle between the Fourth Form at Morcove and the girls of a neighbouring school.

No wonder the crowd round the ropes cheered, visitors and school-supporters too, for Polly

Linton, with a sudden burst of speed, had outwitted the left back of the opposing team, and now she was making a bee-line for the circle.

No wonder there were anxious, long looks on the faces of the opposing side. Only a few minutes' play, and yet in those few minutes all that the girls had battled for might be lost.

And Polly of all girls!

There was a determination in the very way Polly ran. The ball seemed glued to her stick, and the stick might have been a magic wand. The other back, straining every nerve and sinew, was in the circle even as Polly got there.

Now there was excitement indeed. One false move on Polly's part and the ball might be cleared, to remain in mid-field, hacked this way and that, until the game ended.

Already the half-back had fallen back, and Polly's friends in the forward line were standing in strained eagerness waiting for something to happen.

It seemed hours, and yet the whole thing occupied but two minutes.

The ropes were groaning at the crowds that pressed forward against them, and even staid mistresses—even Miss Massingham—watched in breathless anxiety.

"Ah!"

The goalkeeper was rushing out, even as Polly stuck the ball away from the lunging stick of the powerful girl who played back.

A groan of disappointment rose, and also a sigh of gladness, according to the sympathy of the supporters.

And the groans and sighs changed ownership as, with a lightning movement, Polly tipped the ball over the goalkeeper's stick, and the goalkeeper, too late, lunged at it with her padded leg.

Slowly, oh, so slowly that it seemed that even yet one courageous lunge might prevent it crossing the fatal white line!

Defenders and attackers alike stood as though petrified, as though expecting the ball suddenly to turn and fly with invisible wings away from the goal-mouth.

But the laws of momentum were not to be defied, and next moment a yell that was likely to deafen its hearers rose from the crowd that surged round the ropes.

"Goal!"

"Well-played, Polly!"

"Bravo, the Fourth!"

And then Polly could not be seen for wildly excited, cheering girls.

She was chaired, carried shoulder high, and they could see her stick waving wildly above the heads of all.

And then, when the enthusiasm had died down and Polly was placed on her feet, there were cheers for the opposing side—the side



"Fwiends, Womans, and countwymen!" lisped Paula Creel. "Lend me your eahs!"  
"Thanks! But I'd rather not!" cried Polly

that had fought so well, but with less fortune than their opponents.

"What a game!" Polly exclaimed breathlessly.

And she pushed her arm through Paula Creel's just as that girl was about to praise her for the wonderful game she had played.

"It was the side," Polly said. "The side scored the goal. I didn't do any more than the others."

But she had. As usual, Polly had been the live spirit. Her play had given them heart, even when the tough struggle was at their end of the field.

But it was the game that counted, and not the victory. Now, laughing and chatting merrily, they accompanied their opponents to the gate, where a motor-coach waited to take them back to their own school.

And not until the last cheers were echoed in the distance, and the brilliant tail light of the motor-coach disappeared, did they turn from the gate.

"And now," Betty laughed, "change and tea."

To change was but the work of a moment, and, laughing merrily, they made their way down to the Fourth Form passage. And there was Study No. 12 brightened by the firelight, with Dolly Delane bending before the fire.

"Good, Dolly; you're a brick!" Betty laughed, patting the girl on the shoulder.

"I—I couldn't find anything in the cupboard," said Dolly. "I've brought some things I had, but there isn't much."

Then there were glum faces, indeed. For the match had made them hungry, and they had hearty appetites.

"Oh, crumbs; nothing to eat!" groaned Polly. "This is a bright idea! Who's got some money? Here, Paula; you're a plutocrat—"

But Paula Creel shook her head dismally.

"Bwoke!" she explained, with a gesture. "Clean bwoke!"

"Sixpence!" was Betty's wry but pointed remark.

And Madge Minden brought out two pennies.

"Done—teless! And no one expecting anything?" Polly asked.

"No, nothing!" Madge said; and the others shook their heads.

"But, I say," remarked Dolly Delane, "there's a letter for you in the rack, Polly. Perhaps there's a remittance."

"Letter for me?" Polly asked excitedly; and her eyes danced. "Is it from dad? You know his handwriting?"

"Yes, it was—"

But Polly hardly waited to hear the confirmation. She was skipping down the passage light-heartedly. They were saved! She had written to her father for a remittance, and now it had come.

It was indeed an occasion for cheers!

And what joy when she reached the letter-rack and saw the square envelope addressed in her father's clear, well-known handwriting!

She snatched it from the rack, and her fingers trembled as they slit open the flap.

In another second she had drawn out the contents, but there was no remittance. She frowned and opened the single sheet.

She unfolded it, and did not move. Like a rock she stood as she read the contents, and the colour died from her face. The sparkle went from her shining eyes, and she lowered the sheet at last.

Her lip quivered as she looked down the dark corridor, but she made no attempt to move from the spot. The letter was clutched in her hand, and now she screwed it up fiercely. Just for a moment her eyes seemed to burn with a light of battle, and she braced herself.

The report from Miss Massingham had gone forth, and now—now the blow had fallen with a vengeance!

## CHAPTER V.

### "THE PLAY'S THE THING!"

"POLLY'S been a long time."

Betty Barton made that remark as she glanced through the window on to the dusky quadrangle.

"She certainly has," Madge Minden agreed; "and it's a good sign, too! I shouldn't be surprised if she's gone to the tuck-shop, and she'll come in with her arms loaded!"

"Bai Jove, yes, wather! I'm jolly hungry, so I hope she does!" simpered Paula.

Just then the door burst open, and with such a crash, too, that they thought it must be their chum. But it was Ella Ellgood, one of the Fourth, but not of their particular set.

"Girls, what do you think?" she exclaimed.

"The Fifth are giving a concert, too."

"The Fifth are!"

"Yes, and a good one, too," Ella amended.

"Strikes me we shall have to alter our plans, Betty. No good having two concerts. The first will score all along the line!"

"Then we've got to be first," said Madge Minden promptly. "I don't see why we should let the Fifth get ahead of us."

But Betty was not so decided.



Ursula Wade—  
the sneak of the  
Fourth

"It is rather startling," she agreed. "They probably heard our plans, and, of course, if there are two concerts, the first will score. But," she amended, with a look at Madge, "I'm afraid we can't be first. The Fifth have got all the influence."

"We're not going to throw it up?" asked Madge, keenly disappointed.

"Throw up the concert idea—yes," Betty assured her. "But there's no reason on earth why we shouldn't have a play. We've got everything prepared for it, and it will be just as popular."

Then there was debating and discussion. Madge wanted a concert, because of her playing. But the others didn't mind very much which it was, and Madge, not being a selfish girl, very soon gave in.

"Then a play it's going to be?" Betty asked. "I should have liked a concert immensely, but you see how it is, Madge. Perhaps you would play an overture for us?"

And Madge Minden was quickly appeased.

"Polly will be pleased," Tess Trelawney remarked. "She's got the fat part, and she's the best one for it, too."

They were all agreed on that. Marc Antony's part was not by any means an easy one, but Polly knew it by heart, chiefly, as she had often told them, because she had been made to learn it as a small child when she had been disobedient to her governess.

At any rate, she knew the part well, and she acted it well, too. She had a clear-sounding voice, that carried all over a building, so that the words should be heard everywhere.

"We shall do it yet!" exclaimed Betty in triumph. "After all, Shakespeare is popular. The mistresses will like it, and everyone will come. Shakespearian shows always draw well. You remember the time when the Ben Greet companies came?"

"Yes, rather. Of course, we sha'n't eclipse them—still, we can do our best," smiled Madge Minden. "And Polly has no stage-fright. It's good to have a lead who is not at all afraid."

"Of course it is. Polly is the girl we rely upon. In fact"—Betty looked seriously at her chums—"it seems that we're relying upon Polly for everything. My word, what chance should we stand against the Fifth without Polly?"

And there was a shaking of heads then. There was no jealousy amongst these chums. They knew only too well their worth, and the worth of their companions. Some things they could do

better than Polly. At French—indeed, at most lessons—Polly was the worst of them all.

But in other things she excelled, and only too willing were they to give praise where praise was due.

"By the way," said Tess Trelawney, suddenly thoughtful, "where is Polly?"

"Mais oui," Trixie Hope agreed in her strange French. "Où est elle? Where is she?"

And there was no Polly to tease her then about the French exercises.

But only a few moments later they heard footsteps in the corridor, and Madge flung open the door.

"Wonder what she's brought?" Tess asked, with shining eyes, as the footsteps sounded nearer.

And they gathered eagerly in the doorway, expecting to see Polly arrive with her arms laden, and her merry eyes laughing.

But what a difference! It was Polly sure enough—but such a Polly! A Polly who walked without the usual sprightliness—a Polly whose face was no longer flushed, whose eyes no longer glinted mischievously.

For a second or two there was silence—a hushed silence that might almost have been felt. Then came from Polly a laugh, a laugh so jerky that it sounded unnatural.

"No luck!" she said in dry tones. "No remittance that post. So we'd better play Mother Hubbard."

"No luck—oh!"

"Well, never—never mind," Betty said with rather an effort. "It doesn't matter. Don't look so down, Polly dear."

"Yes, wather, pway do cheer up, Polly dear!"

"Aren't I cheerful?" Polly asked in hollow tones, her lips trying to smile, but her eyes dull. "It—it's so jolly here, one—one ought to be glad—to be happy that one can be here at all—"

The last words were spoken as if to herself, and the girls stared. Then Betty, always the leader, took her chum by the arm.

"Polly," she said anxiously, "what is the matter, dear? That letter—no bad news? Your father is all right—they're all right at home—"

"Oh, yes. I—nothing like that," Polly assured them; and as she looked from one face to another she tried to brace herself up.

Betty, seeing that nothing was to be gained by pressing the girl with questions, sought to raise the weight from her mind by arousing some fresh interest.

"We've had news," she said. "The Fifth are



Madge Minden—  
the Fourth Form  
musician

getting up a concert in aid of the fund; that means they'll get in first. You know what they are——"

"My word!" Polly exclaimed, really interested now, and forgetting that heavy weight that had so depressed her. "What on earth are we going to do? Get ahead of them? Rag their music?"

Betty shook her head.

"Better not," she advised. "No—we've decided that after all we'll give 'Julius Cæsar.' It's a long time since a play was given at school, you know."

"'Julius Cæsar'? My word, that's great!"

"Yes, we thought that you'd be pleased. Of course, we're relying on you—you know Marc Antony's part so well. It's bound to be a success——"

"Relying on me?" Polly echoed the words sharply, and she seemed to take a step away from them, her face paling.

"Yes, of course; yours is the biggest part, dear," Betty explained, somewhat amazed. "You know it so well, don't you?"

"Know it, yes—but——" Polly Linton gulped, and there was a strained silence in the study while five pairs of eyes were fixed upon her.

"But what, dear?"

Polly Linton's hand clenched and unclenched; she tried hard not to meet their concentrated gaze, and when at last her voice came, it was husky and low.

"But—I—I can't take part——"

Then, before they could stop her, she had turned and fled from the study, leaving her friends staring at the open door, not moving until the echo of her departing footsteps had died away.

"Can't play—Polly can't play——" Betty echoed incredulously. "But she must—I don't understand. There must be something wrong somewhere. Why can't she play?"

"Ah! Why?" Madge Minden agreed. "There is something wrong—someone has been upsetting her. Polly is not a crying sort, but there were tears in her eyes just now, Betty dear, for I saw them!"

## CHAPTER VI.

### NO LONGER THE MADCAP

ETHEL COURTWAY, captain and most popular prefect of Morcove School, raised her eyebrows in surprise when she switched out the light in the Fourth Form dormitory.

Although not a noisy form, it was seldom indeed that the girls were altogether quiet when Ethel Courtway arrived on the scene to turn out the lights.

To-night was an exception, for there was

scarcely a sound, and most of the girls were lying as still as logs. But Ethel said nothing, judging that the exertions of the half-holiday had probably made them tired.

But no sooner had the door clicked to, and Ethel's footsteps died away, than the dormitory, that had been so quiet, was filled with a buzz of talk.

Some girls, laughing, were scrambling out of bed, despite the warning gestures from Betty.

"Not yet," the captain of the Form warned them. "Ethel isn't far away, and if we make too much noise she'll come hurrying back."

"Besides," Madge Minden pointed out, "the Fifth won't be asleep."

Reluctantly the over-anxious girls slipped back into their beds, and contented themselves as well as they could until their leader should deem it prudent to commence hostilities.

It was not the first time that the Morcove girls had raided the senior form, but familiarity with that kind of amusement did not breed contempt of it.

"My word," chuckled Tess Trelawney, "won't the Fifth have the shock of their lives, eh? Just think of them all, fast asleep, and then——"

The manner in which Tess Trelawney gripped her pillow showed only too clearly what was going to happen to the Fifth.

"I believe," said Madge Minden thoughtfully, "that all the best generals attack at dawn, between the dusk and the daylight."

But that suggestion was not received enthusiastically, Betty Barton rested back on her pillow, and looked out of the corner of her eyes at the bed where Polly Linton was lying.

She had not heard Polly's voice, and Polly, as a rule, was the leading spirit in this sort of enterprise.

"Got your pillow ready, Polly?" Betty asked, as her chum turned over in bed.

And Polly Linton nodded rather uncertainly.

"Just think of them," Tess Trelawney resumed. "All snugly asleep, and then biff! biff!"

"Yes, wather, only don't wumple their dresses, deah geals. The Fifth waided us once, and cweased howbively a dwess of mine that was lying on a chair. A wag's a wag, but——" she added with a serious shake of her head. "But cwumpling a geal's dwess is very sewious."

"Yes, don't start wagging dresses, girls," cautioned Tess seriously. "Creating a draught might give someone a cold."

"Mais, oui. Il fait froid as it is—it's cold already——"

Polly Linton smiled, but made no response. It seemed as though Polly were making an effort not to join in the conversation.

But she was grinning broadly now, and Betty's

heart leapt. This was more like the Polly of old, she reflected.

"My word, Polly," she laughed. "We'll teach them, eh? We're not going to let the Fifth score, are we?"

"I should think not," Polly agreed. "They've got too much cheek. Why, only to-day one of them referred to us as children. Children—us!"

"Like their cheek," agreed Tess Trelawney. "But they'll have a surprise to-night all right!"

Then for some time there was laughter and talking. They were only waiting long enough for the Fifth Form girls to get safely into bed before they commenced the raid.

At last Betty decided that it was time, and she looked at Polly.

"Ready?" she asked, in a whisper. "Now you can show them, Polly!"

But Polly Linton remained in bed, a worried expression on her face.

Betty had slipped on a dressing-gown, and had put her feet into cosy slippers.

She looked in some surprise at her chum, wondering why Polly, usually in the first line in a prank of this sort, should remain in bed.

"Aren't you coming, dear?" she asked.

"I—I—if you don't mind, Betty, I—I'd rather not, please," Polly returned in some confusion, her face red.

At her words other girls turned, amazed and wondering. Polly Linton—not joining in a dormitory raid—what could possibly be the matter?

"But why, dear?" Betty asked gently. "Don't you feel well?"

For a moment it seemed that Polly was tempted to nod her head, and so get out of the matter easily. But it would have been an untruth, and Polly Linton was not the sort of girl to choose the easier path if it were the wrong one.

"It isn't that," she said worriedly; "but—I'd rather not!"

And beneath the bedclothes her hands were tightly clenched.

Ursula Wade, who was standing nearby, laughed in her unpleasant way.



Polly tipped the ball over the goalkeeper's stick, and the next minute the field resounded with, "Goal! Well played, Polly!"



"Afraid?" she asked. "Afraid you might get caught?"

"Ursula!" Betty flared at the girl. "How can you? It's you who would be likely to be afraid, not Polly?"

"Oh, is it?" Ursula's lips curled. "Then let Polly Linton tell us why she isn't coming!"

It was an awkward moment then when Betty glanced in anxious inquiry at her chum.

That Polly Linton, the madcap of the Form should be afraid!

What could be the matter with Polly Linton? Polly the madcap, first in the field and last to leave it!

And only Betty Barton, with her inner insight and greater knowledge of Polly, was able to realise what it meant for that girl to lie in bed while the others were dressing and gathering their pillows.

Now Polly was sitting up, and her eyes were shining.

"That's the style," said Madge Minden. "Pack up your troubles till the morning."

With surprising suddenness Polly was out of bed. She had slipped on a dressing-gown and slippers in no time, and now had gathered up a pillow.

"I—I'll come," she said, with a certain amount of reluctance in her tone.

Betty, greatly relieved, nodded her head, and decided that Polly would change her mind also about the play. For if Polly did not act the part of Marc Antony it would mean that Betty or one of the others would have to learn the words; and there was not very much time at their disposal.

They had relied upon Polly. And really she was the last girl in the world to "let them down." That is how Betty looked at it, and she was quite sure, therefore, that Polly would be in the play when at last it should be staged.

Now Polly was moving more slowly, and it appeared almost as though her sudden high spirits had been dampened.

"If—if we got caught, I wonder what 'd happen?" she asked.

"If we get caught—yes, my word! There 'd be trouble," smiled Betty. "Miss Massingham would be annoyed, and perhaps it'd mean a detention. But it wouldn't be the first time the Fourth has been detained. And, after all, we've pulled off pillow fights before, Polly."

But Polly did not reply. She was sitting on her bed, a troubled look in her eyes.

"If—if you don't mind much, I—I'd rather not come."

Polly's voice came tremblingly, hesitatingly.

The brief silence that followed her words was broken by the jeering voice of Ursula Wade.

"Rather not—hark! The brave Polly

afraid of a pillow fight—afraid you may get hurt?" she jeered.

Ursula Wade was always ready to make trouble—always prepared to make some jeering remark at Betty's or Polly's expense.

But Polly was not a girl to take a remark like that lying down.

A gleam of battle was in her eyes as she rose from the bed, gripping her pillow.

"Afraid?" she asked. "Is that what you think, Ursula—that I'm afraid of a pillow fight—?"

Ursula nodded, but less certainly now as Polly advanced, swinging the pillow, and she raised her arm in defence as the pillow swung on to her.

Biff!  
It landed heavily, and Ursula, yelping, backed away.

"Polly," Betty exclaimed. "Polly—dear—"

But Polly was too enraged to hear her friend; and Ursula, she was backing away, vainly endeavouring to guard herself from that attack.

She swung her pillow about, and swung her hands, but Polly's pillow attack beat them down, and presently Ursula, gasping, collapsed on the floor.

There Polly, breathing hard, let her remain.

"Now perhaps you'll say that I'm afraid?" she asked.

Ursula's small eyes gleamed with malice, but she made no reply. Which was undoubtedly very wise, and extremely discreet.

Polly, without a word, turned on her heel, and went back to her bed.

In another moment she was tucked in. Betty looked at her anxiously, but said not a word, and in a few more minutes Polly Linton was left alone in that long dormitory. Nor did she stir till they had gone.

Then she sat up in bed and blinked about her. For a while she did not move, then from her dry lips came words spoken in anguish.

"They think I'm afraid—if—if only they knew. But I can't tell them—I mustn't. And now—they don't understand. They don't!"

And while in the Fifth Form dormitory there was turmoil and fun dear to the heart of Polly Linton, that girl sat alone in her bed, tears in her eyes.

She could not join them—why?  
But that was a question she could not answer—not even when Betty, her dearest and loyalest friend, asked it.

For Polly Linton was bound to silence!

## CHAPTER VII.

"I WONDER—"

POLLY LINTON'S strange change of behaviour was the topic of conversation for some days. That Polly was an altered girl was quite



"Hark at the brave Polly!" jeered Ursula Wade. "Afraid of a pillow-fight—afraid you might get hurt, I suppose!"

evident. But what was agitating the Fourth was to know why.

"I'm bothered if I can understand it. What can be the matter with her?" asked Madge Minden. "You know, Betty, we've been relying on her—and she hasn't been at hockey practice or rehearsals."

"I know," Betty agreed in a worried tone, and the captain's brow was wrinkled. "But what can I do? You know how obstinate Polly can be! And besides, she isn't the sort to let the Form down without a reason—"

"No, no, Polly isn't that sort," Madge agreed seriously. "But it really is a mystery."

Others, however, took a more severe view, and were wrath with Polly.

Only one girl in the Form seemed at all pleased. That girl was Ursula Wade. It seemed to Ursula that the loyal friends of Study No. 12 were at last falling out. But even Ursula, cunning and prying though she was, did not know why.

And it was not because she did not wish to

find out. Ursula had a score to pay. She had not forgotten the ignominious scene in the dormitory, when she had felt the force of Polly's arm behind the well-aimed pillow.

But Ursula had to wait her time.

And Polly was allowed to go her own way until the time for the match with the Fifth drew near, and Polly was still not at practices.

"I can't understand it," Betty said, as she banged the ball about with a few of the others. "Polly's the last girl to desert the practices. And if she doesn't practise—well, she won't be fit for the match—"

"And we shall lose," Madge Minden finished. "That's evident. Betty, don't you think we ought to go and see her? Why is she moping inside the school all this time, instead of playing games?"

"Don't know. She—she had a French book when I saw her."

"French!" echoed Tess Trelawney. "You don't mean that she was swotting French, Polly?"

And there were others who echoed Tess's amazement. For Polly was not given to swotting—and at French she was, to put it quite plainly, a perfect "dud." The French mistress had told her so many times. Polly had once tried to improve her knowledge of the language, and Trixie, who had explained that the friendly spirit of the Entente should be fostered, had tried to help her.

But it had not been much of a success, and Polly's French went "de mal en pis," as the French mistress described it, from bad to worse.

And now—now happy-go-lucky Polly, the madcap of the Form, was staying indoors with a French book as company when she might be playing hockey.

"It can't be," murmured Tess Trelawney with a shake of the head. "She hasn't been detained. And, candidly, it isn't at all like Polly to stay in without a reason."

"Suppose we go and see her, girls," suggested Betty.

And there was a nodding of heads. A few minutes later, hockey-sticks in hand, they were entering the school-house and making their way to the Fourth Form passage.

"Hallo, door's locked," Madge Minden exclaimed when she tried the handle of Study No. 12.

But a rap or two, and they heard the key click in the lock. Polly Linton, slightly flushed, greeted them. The sparkle had gone from her eyes and a troubled frown had taken its place.

"Hallo," she murmured. "Want me?"

"Yes, dear. Aren't you coming down to practice?" Betty asked. "You've been deserting hockey. There's the Fifth Form match soon—"

"Fifth Form match?" Polly started. "I—I'd forgotten that."

"Forgotten it?"

Five voices echoed the words in amazement, and five pairs of eyes regarded Polly as though she were some strange specimen for a museum. Forgotten an important fixture—the important fixture, a match which was the talk of the Form! The match upon which their whole energies had been centred!

And Polly, the best hockey-player in the Form, had forgotten it! No wonder they stared at her.

"Gwacious!"

"I—I'm awfully sorry!" Polly stammered. "But I'm busy!"

Even as she spoke they could see over her shoulder the litter of books on the table. Papers and books of all descriptions were there, and the sheets of paper had been written upon recently. Polly Linton was swotting.

"Polly—you—you've been working!"

The madcap of the Fourth gave a laugh that was slightly hollow in its sound.

"Yes—it—it sounds strange. Everyone speaks in amazement that I should do any work. But—but—I must."

"You must? But why? I mean we all must to a certain extent," Betty qualified. "But there's no need to swot all the time and neglect sports. The mistresses don't expect that?"

"The mistresses? No. But—oh, I can't explain."

And Polly listlessly turned on her heel. It seemed that there was a lump in her throat—that speaking was difficult: and awkwardly her friends paused in the doorway, wondering what to do.

Polly was back in her chair now, seating herself heavily. But her attitude was not natural, and though a book was held in her hand the girls could see that she was not reading it.

Puzzled, and perturbed, they could only stand and stare, not knowing what to make of this sudden change. What was there for them to say? What was there for them to do?

"Swotting French?" asked Trixie Hope quickly.

Polly turned her head and nodded.

"Yes. I'm a dud at French. I—I'm a dud at everything," she added half bitterly.

"Oh, Polly, you're not—you—you're not a dud at hockey."

"No; but what else, bar games? What am I good at in class?"

"Oh—oh, heaps of things, frinstance——"

And there Betty stopped, racking her brains to think of some subject at which Polly was good. But what subject was there? That indeed was a problem.

Just for a second or so the others stood in the doorway watching, then they vanished quietly, closing the door gently.

Left alone, Polly Linton sank heavily into a chair, and then groped amongst the papers at the back of the table drawer.

She frowned as she did so, then pulled out all the contents, examining each paper in turn.

The look on her face told clearly that what she had expected to find was not there, and a look of consternation filled her eyes.

"I—I can't have lost it, surely," she muttered to herself. "But—but—but where can it be?"

She searched for several minutes—searched everywhere, then gave it up in despair.

Comforting herself with the thought that it must be somewhere in the study, she settled down once more in her chair, to glance gloomily into the dusky close.

But she would not have sat there so quietly had she known that a few studies away another girl was reading the letter for which she had just hunted in vain.

"Polly," ejaculated the Fourth Formers, "you've been working!"



"So that is why you have altered, Polly Linton," she said. "No more madcap, no more joining in with the form, for fear you are packed off home."

She glanced down at the letter again, noting the paragraph that warned Polly that she was to say nothing of the matter to anyone, not even to her dearest friend.

"Your father is right, Polly," Ursula nodded to herself. "I haven't forgotten that dormitory scene. You had better take your farewell, for soon it will be good-bye, Morcove, for you."

## CHAPTER VIII.

### POLLY IS MISSED

And as she read that letter Ursula Wade's eyes gleamed.

"So that's it," she murmured. "I see!"

And she read aloud to herself from the letter.

"It seems that you are merely wasting your time and my money. Your Form-mistress' report was bad; but I will give you another chance. You may remain at Morcove if during the next weeks I receive from your Form-mistress no derogatory report. And I have instructed her to write to me regularly of your progress. Yet another chance I am offering you of retrieving yourself. In any case, you must pursue your studies hard; but if you succeed in winning the Fisher Scholarship, or show any possibility of doing so, then, of course, the matter will be out of my hands. This will necessitate giving up games and other spare-time occupations. You have called the tune, and now, if you wish to remain at school, you must pay the piper."

"If not—if you fail to comply with these conditions—then, Polly, much though I regret it, you will have to say good-bye to all that is familiar and dear to you at Morcove."

"You will find life in an office a change after school, and you must please yourself whether you work at school or in an office. It is for you to decide."

Ursula Wade's eyes had in them a peculiar gleam.

"**B**UT, Polly——"

Betty Barton spoke pleadingly as she looked in bewilderment at the white, strained face of Polly Linton.

"I—I can't, Betty dear. Please don't ask me why."

"Why can't you play, Polly?" Betty insisted, placing one arm about her friend's shoulder. "Why have you taken suddenly to mugging away at dry old school-books instead of joining the form readily? You used to be so keen, Polly dear. Surely you care whether we beat the Fifth or not?"

"Care? Yes, of course I do, Betty. But—well, I'm such a slacker."

In those words there was as much self-condemnation as self-compassion, and Betty Barton, concealing her bewilderment, gripped Polly's arm.

"Well, don't take it to heart so dear," she said. "If it's Miss Massingham you're worrying about, you're just high-spirited—that's all; she ought to know you by this time. Come along, change into your hockey things."

"I am sorry, Betty dear, but—but I can't come."

It was the final decision, spoken as such, and as such Betty took it.

"Very well, Polly," the captain of the Fourth rejoined, a little coldly. "I'm sorry."

And, still puzzled greatly, she went back to the

hockey field to tell the others her friend's decision.

To say that they were disappointed would be to express their feelings mildly. Even the substitute, glad though she was to have the chance to play for Morcove, was sorry that Polly could not take her place.

And the Fifth, too, though they wanted to win the match, would rather win it with Polly as an opponent.

It was a glum team that took the field for the Fourth Form. But they were determined to do their best. Some of them were angry with Polly, feeling that she ought to have played, and they in particular were determined to show her—in an independent spirit—that they could get on quite well without her.

Possibly the Fifth Form girls expected it to be "a walk-over"; but if that were so, they were doomed to sad disappointment.

The Fourth played grimly, and their half-backs hung on to the opposing forwards like leeches.

They fed their forwards well; but the forwards, without spirited Polly in the centre, seemed lost. Betty was at centre-half, from which position she could act as a pivot for the whole team.

She worked like a Trojan, stemming attacks and starting them by feeding the forwards. Madge Minden, at centre-forward, was playing her best in spirited fashion. But Madge was not so tricky with her stick as was Polly, nor was there the same vim in her smite.

At half-time Betty called her team together.

"The score's two nil against us," she said. "But a game's not lost until it's won, you know, girls. Get the ball on their side of the half-way line and they can't score—not if you keep it there."

It was good advice; for without getting the ball into the goal-circle, scoring was quite impossible, and the closer to their own goal the girls fell back, the nearer to the goal circle were the opponents.

"Clear for all you're worth," Betty advised anxiously to the two backs. "Never mind so much about passing; if you can get at the ball, smite it for all you're worth to get it right up-field. The forwards should be somewhere around, and they'll get to it first all right—"

"But it's no good banging the ball about anywhere," Tess grumbled. "The Fifth are all over the place."

Betty shook her head.

"Every time the ball leaves your sticks there's the chance of an opponent intercepting it, and you mustn't pass near the goal circle. Get it right away good and hard—"

The whistle went then, and encouraged by their leader the Fourth Form team took the field again.

This time there was grim determination on

every face. Polly was missing from the front-line, but there were eleven girls still, and they ought to be able to do something.

The Fifth were smiling rather; almost as though they regarded the match as too easy; and Betty noted that fact with an inward chuckle.

If the Fifth-Formers grew careless there was hope yet.

Madge bullied off with the opposing centre-forward fiercely, and the ball was on the Fifth Form's side of the line. Away went the forward up field, passing quickly and accurately.

They were past the half-backs before Trixie Hope, who was playing inside-right, made a mistake.

The tall Fifth Form back was bearing down on them, a sturdy girl who never missed a shot, who was safe if she got within hitting distance of the ball.

Trixie almost mechanically slipped the ball to her centre as the back bore down on her. She had forgotten that Polly was not there.

Madge Minden went to take the pass, got the ball on her stick, and ran. But she had not a sudden burst of speed, and her stick arm was swept aside as the back with outstretched arms banged down on the ball.

Then—biff!

And the ball whizzed upfield towards the Fourth's goal. But Betty with her hand stopped it, and banged it up-field.

But again the Fifth Form forwards got it, and the Fourth retreated. Once again the war was in their half.

What a ding-dong battle it was then; a battle for victory; a battle to recover two lost goals and convert them into a third.

But all the time the Fifth kept the ball down-field.

Beyond the half-way line the Fifth Form backs stood, sending the ball back every time that it came their way.

And there was no Polly to rally the forwards, no Polly to charge her way through with a powerful hand and a stick that never wavered.

They knew it—the whole team—that many a time Polly with her unquenchable energy and burst of speed would have streaked up-field on her own if necessary.

Another goal for the Fifth!

Three nil, and the jubilant Fifth Formers returned to the centre line.

Now Betty, her face grim, was waiting for them. How she managed it they knew not, but she kept the ball in the other half. Never once did she miss, but hit with all the vim that was in her.

And it gave the forwards heart. Soon they had the ball, and the backs of the Fifth Form team, surprised, turned languidly—too languidly.

Madge was streaking on, the thudding feet of the panting back close behind her. She stopped suddenly, and the back, unwarned, went careering on, only to find when she did stop that a wing forward had the ball.

She ran to intercept a shot that was coming, and found that instead of a shot the ball had been passed to Trixie, who slipped it to Madge.

Only the goalkeeper to beat—but others running down behind.

Now the goalkeeper, her face tense, was waiting. She rushed, and the ball was slipped to Trixie past the outstretched stick of the back.

And then a deafening cheer shook the ground. "Goal!"

But before the shouting had died away the shrill note of the referee's whistle told that the game was finished—finished, and lost.

It was long before the cheering died away and the handshaking was finished, and then the Fourth Form team, happy in the knowledge that they had played their best, yet slightly disappointed, returned to the schoolhouse.

"We pulled together wonderfully," said Ella Ellgood. "Madge played centre like a brick—"

"But not like Polly," said Madge quickly. "My word, girls, if we'd had Polly—"

"Yes, if—then truly we should have won," nodded Tess Trelawney. "But apparently she cares more for books than for the honour of the Form."

"Apparently," Betty nodded; but there was a peculiar intonation in her voice; for she knew that when the news of the defeat reached her, Polly Linton would be even more cut-up than the rest. For Polly Linton had set her heart on that match—that match that she could have won, but which through her absence was lost.

## CHAPTER IX.

### URSULA GETS BUSY

As the sound of voices came to her ears, Ursula Wade halted and almost instinctively drew into an alcove, pulling a curtain to shield herself.

It was eavesdropping, and distinctly mean; but then Ursula Wade had never been able to lay claim to being honourable.

And now, she was quite anxious to hear the conversation between the two mistresses, only a yard or so away from her.

Their voices gave her their identity, Miss Somerfield, the head mistress, was one; and Miss Massingham, mistress of the Fourth Form, the other.

"I don't know whether it has happened, or whether the prefect who reported it was misled," Miss Somerfield was saying, "but if she is right, and one of the chairs in the Common-Room has been broken, the matter must be investigated at once."

Eagerly Ursula Wade waited for the next words.

"The report is probably correct," nodded Miss Massingham, "and I will investigate and find the culprit."

Ursula Wade knew who the culprit was, for only the previous day she had annoyed Polly Linton with malice aforethought, in the hope that damage would be done. Damage had been done, and the bill would, in due course, be sent to Mr. Linton.

In view of the letter she had read, Ursula could make an accurate guess as to the consequences. But the satisfaction of knowing that her plans had succeeded, that the words she had whispered into the ready ears of a prefect had reached the right place, was completely shattered by the form-mistress' next words.

"I cannot go at once, Miss Somerfield," she said, "I shall be finished with the history papers just before eight. I will go down to the Common-Room at eight o'clock precisely, Miss Somerfield."

And then they parted.

But Ursula Wade remained where she was, drawing a deep breath.

"Good!" she exclaimed, her eyes narrowing as she smiled cunningly. "Miss Massingham will be in the Common-Room at eight."

And then she laughed, as she added the next words.

"And now, Polly Linton, I'm going to play trumps."

Ursula found the Common-Room in a buzz of talk.

There was no need to ask what was their topic of conversation. Voices were raised angrily, and in an arm-chair sat the girl at whom the anger seemed to be hurled. It was Polly Linton.

She had been reading, but at the entrance of the defeated hockey team she had been forced to raise her eyes and meet the accusing glances of her friends.

"Of course we should have won," Tess Trelawney was saying. "Madge Minden played jolly well, but we missed you, Polly."

"I know you did," said Polly rather wearily. "And I'd love to have played; but I couldn't, and there's an end of it."

"That isn't the end of it," Madge Minden returned quietly. "It's all very well to think that the matter can drop there; you've lost us



Ethel Courtway  
—the popular  
head girl of  
Morcove.

that match. But what about the play? Betty's learning the part the best she can, but it isn't giving her much chance—"

Polly Linton nodded. She was fully aware of that, and she felt it perhaps more keenly than the others did; but she could not help it. It would not do to risk anything now—and it would be risking things if she disobeyed her father's rules.

He would be certain to hear of the play, and he would know that she had taken a big part, the rehearsal of which must have encroached upon her spare time. He would know, then, that she had disobeyed him.

"I'm bothered if I can understand what's the matter with you," Ella Ellgood said impatiently.

Ursula Wade heard all this with evident satisfaction, and now she advanced to the centre of the room. She could see that Polly, unable to explain the reason for her altered conduct, was becoming annoyed at constant questioning.

To be loyal to one's form and yet appear disloyal without even having a chance to prove one's loyalty, was enough indeed to make Polly annoyed.

"You want to know the reason," Ursula Wade asked, "why Polly Linton did not play in the match this afternoon, and why she's backed out of playing Marc Antony?"

The girls wheeled on her, and Polly Linton simply stared.

It was obvious by the look in Polly's eyes that she wondered momentarily if Ursula Wade had found that missing letter.

But if she expected Ursula to tell the whole story, and her true reason, she was mistaken—and relieved.

Ursula Wade gave a glance at her watch, and the corners of her lips twitched slightly.

"Doesn't it occur to any of you," she asked, "that Polly might have a reason for wanting the Fifth to score?"

"A reason? What do you mean?"

At that startling suggestion the girls were on their feet, and Polly, too, was staring in as much amazement as anger at her cunning Form-fellow.

Ursula Wade shrugged her shoulders, and pointed accusingly at Polly Linton.

"I mean," she said, "that Polly Linton is being well paid to see that her Form loses."

For a moment or two after that dramatic statement a pin might have been heard to drop. Polly Linton's cheeks flushed, and with blazing eyes she faced her accuser.

"You—you dare!" she choked, "to suggest that I—"

Ursula laughed.

"I have suggested it," she said coldly. "You have been well paid to let the Fifth win that

hockey match, and now you're going to make the play a failure."

Trembling with rage, Polly Linton snatched a cushion from the chair, and Ursula Wade, with much cunning, moved so that she stood in front of the huge clock.

"You dare say that," Polly exclaimed through her teeth. "It's not true, and you know it."

Ursula Wade raised her hand to smooth her hair, and in so doing glanced at the watch on her wrist. It wanted but a minute to eight o'clock.

"I do say it," she said. "You have betrayed your Form—"

The incensed Polly raised her arms, and the next moment the cushion was flying through the air. Like lightning Ursula moved aside, and the cushion crashed against the face of the clock. Next moment there was a mighty noise, as the clock fell—smash!—on to the floor.

"Oh, gwacious, Polly, deah geal!"

"Polly!"

Agitated, alarmed girls stared at the smashed clock, and there was a hushed silence.

But one girl was staring in quite another direction. That girl was Ursula Wade. Ursula's eyes were fixed upon the Common-Room door, which was slowly opening.

And now, as Miss Massingham entered, the girl drew back. Betty Barton, in a last effort to save her chum, stooped to gather up the wrecked clock.

Too late!

As figures in a tableau, the girls stood motionless; while Miss Massingham, horror in her eyes, regarded the smashed clock, looking from it to the rather challenging, flushed, angry face of Polly Linton.

"Polly!" she exclaimed, amazed. "You—you have done this—"

"I—I—it was an accident!"

"That cushion—you used that as a missile. You recently used me as a target," the mistress remarked acidly. "Apparently my warning was not enough. Follow me to my room."

But she paused, remembering her reason for entering the room. And then—only one question was needed, and Polly Linton, resigned to the hopelessness of her position, admitted to the damage.

Thunderous indeed was the mistress' brow then, and when the Common-Room door closed there was a buzz of talk. And the girl who was the centre of discussion began to wish that she had not been so very clever.

"You planned it," Betty Barton was exclaiming angrily. "This is your doing, Ursula Wade—you stood in front of that clock because you intended that Polly should break it."

"Yes; and what is more, she knew Miss

Massingham was coming," Madge Minden put in, more fiercely than she had ever spoken before.

"I—it's not true," Ursula expostulated, completely flustered.

"I saw you," Madge said in her more usual dignified way. "You cannot deny that you were hiding when Miss Massingham and Miss Somerfield were talking, because I saw you—I wondered why you were listening; now I can guess."

And then, almost without a word being spoken to suggest it, Ursula Wade found herself shunned—found that she had been "sent to Coventry"—sentenced to silence!

That she realised the enormity of that punishment, the slight shiver she gave showed. But for Ursula there was no way out; and she learnt that the way of the transgressor is indeed hard.

Nor was Ursula the only one to learn that hard fact. Polly Linton, as she accompanied the stern-faced Form-mistress, was far from happy. At first she had been resigned to her fate, for that was Polly's happy-go-lucky way.

But now the full importance of it all dawned upon her.

She had failed—failed ignominiously.

What would her father say to her—what could he think of her? How could she induce him to believe that she had tried, tried hard, to alter her ways?

He would not believe it, and she realised that she could hardly expect him to.

No, no, this was the end, without doubt. All her endeavours had been of no avail. She might have played for her Form, and helped them win their match—she could not have had a more ignominious end, anyway.

And before the mistress in the study she stood motionless, not speaking, scarcely moving.

"I am very sorry that this has happened, Polly," the mistress sighed. "But you must

realise that I have endeavoured to guide you. What report can I send your father now? The bill for the clock's repairs will be sent to him—also that for the repair of the chair. You understand?"

"Y-yes, Miss Massingham."

The words were heavily spoken, with head bowed; and the mistress, a sympathetic chord in her being touched, gave the girl a kindly glance.

"At least you have the grace to be sorry," she observed. "You may go, Polly; doubtless your father will punish you sufficiently."

And Polly, with those last words still ringing in her ears, went from the room listlessly, to she knew not where.

To go back to the Common-Room to face her chums for perhaps the last time? Oh, it was impossible! Where could she go? What could she do?

As she stood in the cool corridor, facts surged into her head.

She had failed! She must leave the school. That would be her father's verdict—for had he not said as much in his letter?

Her feet guided her to the large door that led into the school grounds, and she wandered towards it. But, as she did so, her eyes observed small, familiar things—things that had become part of her life.

It seemed that every little nook and corner, every chair, picture, and window, had some history that was forged with her own.

These old school steps—how often she had run up them and down! How often her tired feet had dragged up them after a stern game of hockey, or descended them stealthily at some hour when she should have been in the school!

Good-bye—good-bye to all that was near and dear to her! Oh, why, why had she not been different? Why hadn't she set her mind to work



Ursula ducked, and the next minute the cushion sent the clock crashing to the ground



in working hours, as others did? If only she were like Betty. If only—and so the vain regrets tormented her; the past, relentlessly unalterable. How clearly, in indelible ink, her small misdemeanours seemed written in those pages. Too late now to turn over a new leaf and start afresh.

Not until lights bobbed up in the dark outline did she realise that it was bedtime. Bed-time, and her last night in the school, of that she now felt sure.

Choking down the lump in her throat, she walked swiftly to the school-house, mingling with the crowd of girls mounting the stairs.

And to her chums' questions she gave but scant replies. To speak at all was difficult. But to tell them the truth—to tell that it was "Good-bye!"—she just couldn't.

## CHAPTER X.

### ONCE MORE HER OWN MERRY SELF!

How anxiously Polly glanced through the tall dormitory windows as she dressed the following morning, dreading for the first time in her life the sight of her father, arriving as a moral policeman to capture a wrong-doer.

It was just as she was fixing the ribbon to her hair that she saw him; and she remained transfixed, only her trembling hands and quivering lip showing that she was not a carved stone figure.

He had arrived—and now the blow had fallen! Her heart thumped in her throat, and she knew that her pale cheeks had crimsoned. She dared not look at the other girls, but hurried from the dormitory, knowing full well that Betty was following her—yet consciously closing the door in her friend's face.

The blow must fall in private—no one should witness her humiliation. Suppose she cried—what would they say then—what would they think?

Down the stairs she blundered, only to pause on the bottom one as her father entered the school-house.

Stern eyes—reproachful and unforgiving—they were not the eyes she met!

For about her father's lips a smile played, and his eyes twinkled.

"Polly!" he cried. "What splendid fortune—"

Dazed, she blinked at him—perhaps he did not understand—perhaps he had not been told all. She must tell him!

He took her hands, and kissed her cold lips. As he did so the twinkle in his eyes gave place to the reflected worry in her own.

"Why, Polly, little harum-scarum—what's the matter? You look ill—haven't you slept well?"

"I—I—yes—but—daddy!" Her voice was hoarse, and she buried her head on his chest, whilst his hand stroked her hair.

And all at once she felt safe—he would understand—he must! How stupid she had been to regard him as some fierce figure—fierce, her father! Hysterically she began to laugh; but he silenced her.

"Come, come, Polly, what is the matter—something is wrong? Tell me—"

"Your—your letter," she gulped. "Daddy I have tried—I did try to be different. I—I gave up games, and the play, and I've worked ever so hard. Really, I have. Then—then everything went wrong. I didn't mean to break that clock or the chair—it was an accident—"

"Letter—clock—chair—Why, darling, what on earth do you mean? You talk in riddles. Come, now, what is it?"

And, really worried, Mr. Linton led his daughter into the cold fresh air.

"From the beginning, now," he said gently. "This letter—what letter—"

"The letter you wrote me the other day," she cried, puzzled at his manner. "Daddy, you must remember. You—you threatened to take me away and put me in the office if—I didn't improve. Miss—Miss Massingham sent you a report—"

For several seconds he stared at her as though she were talking in some strange, inexplicable language.

"But, Great Scott!" he burst out. "I haven't written you a letter, child! I had a report from Miss Massingham, yes, and I wrote to her—but not to you—"

"Not to me," the bewildered girl cried. "But—but it was typed on your little typewriter, and you signed it—I know your signature, daddy."

He stared at her, round-eyed, and for several seconds did not speak.

"But, gracious, Polly, I've never written you such a letter. I had no such idea in my mind. My poor child—and have you been imagining—" In sheer stupefied amazement he paused, unable to fathom that mystery—as to why his daughter should receive such a letter. "I wrote to Miss Massingham," he continued—"er—quite a different sort of letter. Excusing you for your high spirits, which you—er—possibly inherited from me. But, as for writing you such a letter, 'pon my word, the idea's absurd. Where is the letter?"

"I don't know, it's lost," Polly cried, her cheeks aglow and her eyes sparkling. She did not trouble to solve the mystery. All that concerned her was the knowledge that her father had not written the letter. She was not

going to be taken away from Morcove. She wanted to shout, and laugh, and sing!

But, as though to make assurance doubly sure she turned to him a little anxiously.

"Then you're not going to take me away from Morcove, daddy?"

"Take you away! Great Scott, no—I've just come down to fetch something your aunt left at the Manor House, so dropped in here to see you—"

His next words were smothered—speech was made quite impossible—for, with a relieved, happy daughter clinging to his neck, and kissing, kissing interminably, speech was not easy. It was also not necessary.

Mr. Linton left Morcove that afternoon. He departed with ringing cheers sounding in his ears, and the memory of a very festive tea in Study No. 12 with Polly and all her friends.

As he turned in the lane to wave to the group of girls he smiled, and continued with rejuvenated, springy step. The smile, however, soon vanished, and a steely look replaced it—the grim look, tight-lipped mouth, and set jaw, symptoms that Polly had feared to see.

Those fearsome symptoms were not for Polly, however. Mr. Linton had recalled a certain circumstance that cleared away much that had puzzled him.

Distinctly he remembered writing that letter to Miss Massingham—a letter which, he discovered, had never arrived. In its place had arrived the letter that had caused so much trouble. Who could have changed those letters—who could have wished to change them—but the girl who had taken his letter to post?

Vera Somers—how eager she had been to post that letter—she who always tilted her nose at even the suggestion of meniality in a task. That she should have been eager had struck him as peculiar at the time—but he had merely concluded that it was a sign of a change for the better in Vera.

That it had not been so, he now realised. Also he realised why Vera had been so keen to practise on the type-writer; why she had collected his autograph!

To Polly he had allowed it to remain a mystery, lest the humiliation of the exposure should serve to increase Vera's hatred.

But to Polly, life seemed all sunshine again, and the black cloud had lifted for ever.

Once again she was the happy, care-free Polly whom they had always loved—laughing, joking, teasing.

"And now I'm never going to leave Morcove," she laughed. "When a new girl comes in

nineteen sixty, she'll want to know who the distinguished old lady with the aristocratic stoop is."

And Polly placed a hand on her back, stooped, and hobbled across the study, to the merriment of her companions.

"I shall go down to posterity as the only old-aged pensioner prefect of Morcove—"

"Yes, wather! However, pewwaps not the only one, Polly. I fancy I shall remain heah for many yabs, y'know. Pewwaps in nineteen sixty I shall still be playin' the leadin' parts in dwamatic entertainments—yes, wather! Talking about plays, though, I shall be Marc Antony after all. To be or not to be, y'know—yes, wather! That's the question. However, that it is—"

Betty took her by the arm.

"Oh, you goose, Paula! That speech is Hamlet's, not Horatio's; and, anyway, Horatio is in the play 'Hamlet,' not 'Julius Cæsar.'"

"Good gwacious! Are you quite suah?"

"Quite," said Betty seriously. "Never mind, you shall learn Julius Cæsar's part in the Forum scene, dear. You sit down quietly and learn it."

"Yes, wather. I will wehearse my part now."

"Good!" said Polly, with a chuckle. "We can have a little quiet. Julius Cæsar is dead in that act. So practise being dead—and remember dead men don't talk."

That quiet overcame Paula, and she was actually quiet—"rehearsing."

But when the final rehearsal did come, Paula was up to the mark, and fairly "put her back into it," as Polly said.

What a day it was, too—that play-day! The hall in the village had to be decorated; a thousand and one things had to be attended to.

It was going to be a triumph for the Fourth and a triumph for Polly Linton.

And when the night arrived, and Polly triumphantly played her part, the hand-claps she received were ample compensation for the troubles and trials she had endured.

There was her father in the front row, with her mother beside him, and his applause was the sweetest of music to her ears.

No wonder, then, that Polly's face was flushed, and that at the end of the play she forgot her Roman traditions and executed a war-dance that seemed a combination of a Highland fling and a sailor's hornpipe.

But Polly didn't give a rap for traditions, she was happy. All the clouds had rolled by, and she meant to revel in the sunshine.

"The same old Polly!" laughed Betty Barton happily.

And then the curtain fell, closing the play—and our story.

THE END