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"Play Up School!"

MYSTERY MANSION



A SPLENDID STORY TELLING OF A HOLIDAY EXPERIENCE OF
THE GIRLS OF CLIFF HOUSE SCHOOL

BY HILDA RICHARDS



CHAPTER I.

STRANDED!

SNOW everywhere—a desolate, open landscape covered with the festooning white mantle that stretched far as the eye could see! Not even a solitary wheel track broke the unswollen expanse of the road.

And it was so still—still with that strange, freezing grip of winter. Just a faint puff of chill breeze blew tiny, glittering cascades from the spreading trees, and then the silence and stillness again—more intense it seemed than ever!

Then there came a sound—such a welcome sound—that spoke of life and movement in this waste of white!

Over the brow of the low hill appeared a motor-coach. The hum of its engine increased, and it came gaily ploughing along the snowy road.

Above the sound of the motor could be heard the murmur of human voices, and merry girlish laughter echoed from the cosy interior of the luxurious motor-coach. Twenty seats there were and each had an occupant; and now, as they came upon this dazzling scene, shining with the unnaturally bright reflected light, fresh exclamations burst from them.

"Wonderful!"

"Simply beautiful, isn't it, girls?"

"How jolly!"

"It's jolly cold—if that's what you mean!" grumbled a somewhat reedy and quite unmusical voice.

"Why, Bessie's making jokes!" came a delighted cry, and there was fresh laughter.

"I'm not—I don't joke when I'm nearly frozen to death!" mumbled the fat and spectacled girl who had spoken, as she huddled deeper into her warm coat. "B-r-r-r! I wish we hadn't missed that train!"

"I think this is a glorious ride we're having!" said Marjorie Hazeldene, as she looked round with wide, delighted eyes. "I'm glad now that we were kept longer than we expected at the Musical Festival. And after all, in a few more miles, Bessie, we shall be—"

"Frozen to death!" shivered Bessie Bunter, nearly disappearing from view under her coat.

"I hope not!" said Marjorie, laughing. "It's chilly, of course, but we're all well wrapped up. And it's a jolly nice ride for us to have, all together, before we go back to Cliff House again for a few more weeks. Our only disappointment is that Miss Chantry has had that motor-cycle accident and can't come back with us."

"Yes," spoke up Peggy Preston. "You really shouldn't grumble, Bessie, when the whole Form have been allowed to come and have two days' holiday."

"Taking an honour back with us, too!" laughed Vivienne Leigh, nestling close to Peggy in the back of the coach. "Not that I did much towards it—"

"You did, Vivienne! We should have been lost without your solo!" the girls chorused.

"Well, I was pleased to do what I could," answered Vivienne, blushing prettily. "But to

win a second prize—right in the heart of Yorkshire, where everyone is so musical! The other girls at Cliff House can't say that we've wasted our time!"

"And what a ripping outing it has been!" declared Dolly Jobling, her cheeks pink, and her eyes bright in the refreshing air.

"Rather!" they all declared, and then fell again into their happy and more intimate conversations.

They were all good chums, these Fourth Formers from Cliff House—with two possible exceptions. Marcia Loftus and Nancy Bell were sitting alone, and keeping rather silent—not that they were "frozen out," but because it was their nature.

They had been selected to be in the choir competing at the Musical Festival, and they had joined—perhaps just for the outing. Certainly their small and untrained voices would not have been greatly missed. But somehow Marcia Loftus and Nancy Bell never could enter into the real spirit of anything.

They always seemed to be trouble-makers by disposition; it appeared to please them to grumble at the popular girls of the Form.

How they had grumbled when they found that the train had gone, and this suddenly arranged motor drive was their only alternative if they wished to catch their connections and get back to Cliff House when expected. And because everyone else was so happy, and no one really cared to say what they thought of them, they were still "showing off," and still looking very sulky.

"Marcia!" whispered a quiet voice suddenly.

Frowning at once, Marcia looked at Cissy Clare—the frailest and most delicate-looking of all the party.

"What do you want?" was her blunt and impolite question.

"If—if you wouldn't mind—I—I'd like the window closed, please," said Cissy in a hesitating voice.

"Well, I want it open—it's stuffy enough in this horrid thing as it is!" said Marcia.

Peggy Preston, aroused by the sharp and unreasonable words, looked at Cissy. An expression of alarm leapt instantly into her eyes.

"Why, Cissy—poor Cissy's all of a tremble!" she exclaimed anxiously. "Cissy! Why didn't you tell us before?"

"I—I'm just a little bit cold," murmured Cissy.

"No, no—Marcia, please close the window at once!" said Peggy peremptorily. "Cissy, you look positively ill! Are you sure that you are only chilly? Why didn't you speak before, dear?"

"I—I shall feel all right in a moment," said

Cissy, as Marcia lifted the window into position with an ill-tempered bang. "I—I'm sure I'll be all right soon."

But Peggy looked worried. Was it merely chilliness? She did not like the strange brightness of Cissy's eyes—the burning spot of colour in each of her pale cheeks. Suddenly she became very silent. Supposing—

But she could not even bear such a thought as that! It was just her imagination—she was alarming herself, of course! She looked out through the windows at the country, and heard the pleasant chatter in front. Someone said that they were just about to descend a short hill. The vehicle began to gather speed. And then—

"Oh, look out!"

It was a frightened shriek that came from Bessie Bunter.

"Bessie!"

"You duffer!"

But at that very moment the coach jolted. For a second it seemed to pause, swaying. Then, with a sudden, sickening motion it slithered across the road, flinging the girls all in a huddled crowd on one side.

Bump! it went, causing the hearts of all the girls to leap into their throats; and then it stayed still at last, but at such an angle that they could only guess that it must be right in the ditch at the side of the road.

The driver was out immediately. And now, as startled cries began to rise on the air, a girlish figure, pretty in her fur coat and cap, came running to his side.

"What has happened? Is there anything that we must do at once, driver?" was her question, quick, and yet by no means panicky.

Beside the obviously alarmed driver she looked almost cool, and the man gazed at this olive-cheeked girl with the steady blue eyes and curly hair, and seemed hardly to speak for the moment.

"We've nearly had a—a nasty spill, miss," he managed to say at length.

"But we can't slip farther?"

"We—we might, miss."

"Then everyone must get out at once!" the girl cried, as she raced to the other side of the vehicle, and started to fling open the doors. "Girls—it's all right, but come out, and quickly as you can, and don't make a commotion!"

"Shall we fall over a pip-pip-precipice?" gasped Bessie Bunter's scared voice.

"No, Bessie—it's all right! Here, take my hand! Mabs, just give her a gentle push, please."

Bessie Bunter, helped before and behind, lumbered out of the coach, and nearly sprawled in the road. But she was caught and pulled to one side, as the others came quickly after her. One

after another they leapt into the snowy road, each giving the other a hand, except perhaps Marcia and Nancy, who had scrambled for safety heedless of anyone else.

"All out!" came a gasp from Clara Trevlyn. "All out, and—oh, look!"

The motor coach had lurched again. It fell against the hedge at the side of the road, and there was a horrible grinding sound. The scared girls saw the very windows and coachwork against which they had been flung smashing and crumpling as the vehicle came to rest again nearly on its side.

"My word!" breathed Peggy Preston. "What an escape!"

"And Babs—Babs saved us!" cried Marjorie Hazeldene, turning to grip the hand of the girl who had showed such promptitude and presence of mind. "Good old Babs!"

"Hurrah!" went up the cheer, that sent the colour flooding to those pretty olive cheeks.

"It was nothing, girls—" began Barbara Redfern breathlessly.

"But it was, dear!" cried her great chum, Mabel Lynn, as she hugged her in her turn. "You saw the danger before we had got over our scare. And now—"

The trembling driver came forward and touched his hat to Babs. Already he could see the quiet, blue-eyed girl a natural leader—as, indeed, the Fourth Form had found her long ago.

"I'm afraid it's finished the ride, miss," he exclaimed. "But for your promptitude—"

"Thank goodness we were all able to get out in time!" Babs cut in fervently. "But do you know where we are? What can we do now?"

"It's another ten miles to Shefton, miss," answered the driver mournfully.

"Ten miles!"

"Yes. But there's a village not three miles farther along the road, miss—Moorsley Fen, it's called. The trains stop there, and you'd get one this evening, if not sooner. Less than three miles, now I come to think."

Barbara Redfern was already determined.

"We shall have to walk on to Moorsley Fen, girls," she said.

"Walk!" gasped Bessie Bunter. "What, through all this snow?"

"Of course. But I don't think a walk will hurt us. Some of you were complaining about the cold just now," said Babs, as she was always

called, smiling at them. "What do you say, girls?"

"If we hadn't had a careless driver—" began Marcia furiously.

"No, Marcia, it's not fair to say that," put in Babs. "We were told the state of the roads before we started. I can testify that our driver did his very best, and it isn't his fault that we're in this plight."

"Hear, hear!"

"Well spoken, Babs!" cried those who had been sitting in front.

Already it was evident that Babs had command of the situation. She had not been saying a lot in the coach—that was not really her way. Here, where they were really "up against it," she showed that ready tact and action necessary in a leader.

"Augusta, do you mind helping Clara to get out the baggage from the back?" she asked.

"Fortunately, our bags are very light, and it won't hurt us to carry them." She turned to the driver. "What will you do, now that this has happened?"

"I'm afraid I shall have to wait, miss," said the man. "One of our cars is coming this way, I know—it might be soon, or not for an hour or two. I shall have to stay here and keep guard, and get them to send me help. But don't worry about me, miss. I can't say how sorry I am that I've landed you all in such a fix."

"I'll report it!" vowed Marcia Loftus, striding indignantly up and down the road.

"I don't think so, Marcia," said Babs quietly. "Just take your bag like everyone else is doing, and try to smile. It's no use crying over spilt milk; and we'll soon get to the station if we only try."

"Oh, you would say that!" muttered Marcia, snatching up her bag sulkily. "If we'd only caught the train as I said, this would never have happened. I hate these horrid charabancs!"

"There'll be some snow flying about in a minute, Marcia!" warned that active and energetic young lady, Clara Trevlyn. "I'm just longing to throw a snowball at someone, just to ease my feelings! How fortunate—!"

Marcia Loftus glared and became silent. Nancy, her crouny, was also wise in due season. And with those two grumblers silenced it was easy to pacify Bessie Bunter, who was not half such a bad sort as she sometimes seemed.

"This is my address, driver—in case you want any evidence about how this happened!" Babs exclaimed, as she handed a little card to the



Cissy Clare

man. "And now we shall have to be getting along. Do we follow the road to Moorsley Fen, or turn off anywhere?"

"Straight on, miss—it's almost a straight line!" said the man. "And thank you very much, miss, for your kindness. If I see anyone I'll ask them to hurry on and give you all a lift to the station—I only wish it was in my power to do so."

All their bags were out by now. Clara, wearing a rather sheepish smile, was carrying two, and everyone knew that the shabby old leather bag bearing the initials E. G. B. belonged to plump Bessie. But as that fat young lady had her hands and forearms deeply buried in her muff, Clara was evidently trying to save another argument.

And so they started off from the scene of the disaster, not all of them quite over their scare, but still cheerful and determined. And Babs and Mabs led them on along the road ahead, unsullied by any foot.

Bleak and barren indeed did the lonely countryside look, with never a friendly house or the curling smoke that showed a cosy and sheltered hearth. But they went on with stout hearts and laughter already—the Fourth Formers from Cliff House school simply were not going to be dismayed yet!

CHAPTER II SEEKING HELP

"Cissy—oh, poor Cissy! Babs, do stop for a moment!"

The cry from Peggy Preston pulled everyone up instantly. And Barbara Redfern and Mabel Lynn, facing suddenly about, saw what they had never suspected before—that there was something very wrong with Cissy Clare.

Even as they went running back along the road they saw the frail Fourth Former stagger as she walked, and but for Peggy's timely arm she must have fallen in the snow.

In the excitement following the disaster to their vehicle no one had observed the strange pallor and feverish look in Cissy's face. Those who had spoken to her had concluded that the disaster must have shaken her. But it was not that that accounted for the dizziness against which she had been fighting.

"Cissy—oh, Cissy, you are ill!" Babs cried as she ran to Peggy's side and helped to support the half-fainting girl. "Why didn't you tell us before, Cissy?"

In a frightened crowd the others gathered round while Cissy Clare fought to recover herself. Such a disaster as this—one of their number

taken ill whilst they were here in the frozen wilds! Could anything worse have happened? Where could they expect to get help?

"I—I'm just giddy, Babs," Cissy muttered hoarsely.

"No, no, dear—it's something more than giddiness," said Babs gently. "And you are shivering, too!"

"My coat—put my coat around her, Babs!" exclaimed Clara Trevlyn, as she started to pull off the article in question. "I've got a thick tweed costume, and carrying two bags has made me beautifully warm!"

"It's awfully good of you, Clara—"

"And—and m—m—my muff!" said Bessie Bunter, suddenly rolling forward to offer the article in question. "Keep her hands warm, you know—jolly good muff, too!"

"Thanks very much, Bessie!" said Babs in a tone that made the fat girl blush.

"Th-th-that's all right—I don't mind getting my fingers frozen at all!" said Bessie heroically. "I—I'm rather a hardy sort of girl—it's not robbing me at all. B-r-r-r!"

The shiver that Bessie gave as soon as her fat hands were exposed to the keen air would have made them laugh at any other time. But all eyes were on Cissy now.

"Can you walk if we help you, Cissy?" Babs was asking anxiously.

"If one of you will just let me lean on your arm—"

"Peggy and I will help you—one on each side, Cissy," said Babs. "And as soon as we come to a house we will stop for you to have a rest and see how you feel."

"I'll take your bag, Babs!" volunteered Phyllis Howell at once.

"And I'll take Peggy's," said Philippa Derwent, usually called Flap.

"It—it couldn't have been the open window in the horrid charabanc, I'm sure," said Marcia Loftus in a shaking voice.

"Open window? What do you mean?" Babs exclaimed.

"I—I didn't know—I mean, I closed it—"

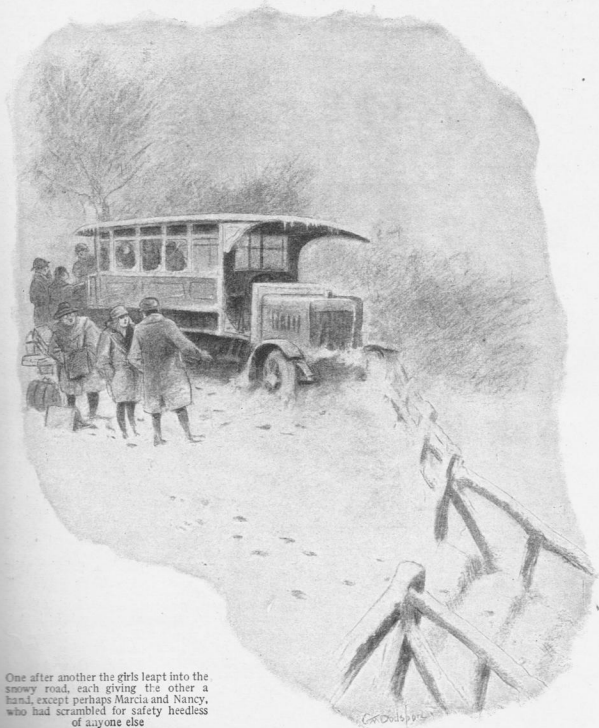
Peggy Preston explained Marcia's meaning. Marcia herself suddenly seemed too scared to be able to do anything except make frightened excuses. But that was Marcia's way—she was never courageous.

"We must see how Cissy goes on," was all that Babs would say, and they started on again, Marcia curiously silent.

Cissy was able to walk with the assistance of Peggy and Babs, and not knowing what was wrong with her they considered that the exercise would at least keep her warm.



Mabel Lynn



One after another the girls leapt into the snowy road, each giving the other a hand, except perhaps Marcia and Nancy, who had scrambled for safety heedless of anyone else

Behind them came Bessie Bunter, no longer with her muff. Bessie was trying to keep her more or less imaginary sufferings to herself, but it was difficult. She walked along and blew noisily on her hands, and banged them together, and rubbed them. Clara likened her, in a whisper, to a grampus—but Clara was always outspoken!

"There's a house just behind those trees!" exclaimed Mabel Lynn suddenly.

Instantly every eye turned on the snow-covered, gabled roofs that were just becoming visible over a fringing belt of trees.

"Yes, it is a house; and there's someone there!" breathed Babs. "There's just one tiny wisp of smoke rising, girls. How strange that whoever lives there has only one fire burning on such a cold day as this."

"Perhaps there are chimneys somewhere else—some that we can't see," murmured Clara.

But they could not see any more chimneys as they walked on.

The house itself was now clearly visible. It was a big, two-storied structure with attic rooms above, standing back from the road behind a large front garden. Snow covered but did not conceal the frozen ivy that seemed to grow over all the walls. All the windows were shut, and many were not even curtained. And just that single little wisp of smoke from the great house while the countryside was frozen solid.

Some of the juniors stopped uncertainly.

"It does look funny!" said Gwendoline Cook in an awed voice. Gwen was a girl who held all sorts of strange beliefs.

"Don't be silly, Gwen," said Barbara.

"But it looks so deserted and empty, and there doesn't seem to be another house in sight—not for more than another mile, I'm sure."

"I'm awfully hungry!" announced Bessie Bunter in a hollow voice.

"Bessie!"

"And cold! I need a—a little snack just to restore my circulation."

Barbara Redfern seemed to be at a loss to know what to do.

"Oh, why didn't we ask that man to come with us?" groaned countrified Annabel Hichens, wringing her hands. "Here we are, just a parcel of helpless schoolgirls—"

"Speak for yourself, Annabel!" put in Clara sharply.

"It's the truth, Clara!" said Annabel gloomily. "We are only girls, and we may wander about here until we are frozen to death. If there was

only a man here—or even a boy—so that we could ask him the best thing to do! I've always said that girls should trust to their menfolk—"

"Come on!" interrupted Babs, stung to action by Annabel's dreadfully old-fashioned and helpless words. "We're going to see who lives here."

"Oh, why didn't that man come with us—why didn't we beg him?" groaned Annabel.

"You might like to run back and ask him whether we should knock at the front door or not!" suggested Clara sarcastically.

Annabel almost seemed to be considering that proposition when she found that the others were going on and leaving her. And so she followed reluctantly up the snow-covered drive to the deserted-looking house.

Clang-a-clang! echoed hollowly when Babs had pulled the bell.

And there they waited—truly in suspense now. How colder and more shivery poor Cissy seemed, and how bright and feverish were her gentle eyes!

Everyone knew that they must find warmth and shelter for her somehow.

"I'll ring again," said Babs, when two or three minutes had elapsed. "Perhaps the occupant is sleeping."

She pulled at the bell, and again the echoing peal seemed to come as from a great distance.

Then they heard a step.

There was someone in the queer house, after all! Rusty bolts rattled in the sockets. There was the creaking of a latch. Then, at long last, the door opened.

And fears that the girls might have felt were instantly and wonderfully dispelled.

Facing them was a grey-haired, elderly lady with soft brown eyes and one of the kindest-looking faces they had ever seen.

"My dears!" was all she exclaimed as she saw the crowd of girls standing outside.

"If you please," spoke up Babs, "we're awfully sorry to trouble you, but we are walking to Moorsley Fen—"

"Walking to Moorsley Fen—on a day like this?" cried the lady, holding up her hands in horror.

"Yes; we were travelling by motor and—and it has broken down," Babs explained. "We should have gone on, but our friend here, Cissy Clare, does not feel—"

"The poor dear! Oh, how ill she looks!" was the compassionate interruption. "Please bring her in at once, so that she may sit by my fire for a little while. What a dreadful world we live in, to be sure, where it is always snowing!"



Freda Foote

"Well, not always!" smiled Babs. "Until a week ago it was quite fine and warm——"

"Of course, of course; yes, I did not think of that!" the lady assented, causing some of the girls to stare not a little. "But come in, all of you, and sit round my cosy fire. It must be dreadfully cold out there!"

Her tone was so kindly and inviting that the girls came in at once and stood in a hall, almost empty of furniture, but covered with such rich and wonderful carving that it fairly took their breath away.

Closing the door, the lady came to where Babs and Peggy were still supporting the shaking figure of Cissy—Cissy, who already seemed to have lost all interest in everything.

"The poor dear—how she trembles!" murmured that kindly and sympathetic voice. "In here, my dears—there is a nice fire in here!"

She opened a door leading off the far end of the lofty and spacious hall, and Babs, Peggy and the sick girl were the first to enter.

Hardly could they keep from crying out in amazement at the sight that met their eyes!

It was not the sort of room that they had expected to find in such a grand house. Chairs and tables alike were littered with all sorts of things—at least a dozen pieces of knitting were lying about. And the fire! It was not the roaring, cosy thing they had expected, but hardly more than a few smoking embers in the grate!

"Come in, my dears; come in!" the lady cried. "How glad I am to have this visit from you! Do come in and make yourselves cosy!"

The girls from Cliff House School crowded into the room, and they, in their turn, could hardly repress their amazement.

What sort of house was this, they were wondering.

CHAPTER III.

MYSTERY UPON MYSTERY!

IT was a low moan from unfortunate little Cissy Clare that pulled them all together at once.

"Oh, the poor dear!" cried the lady of the house; and she was one of the first to run forward.

Barbara Redfern looked at Cissy in sudden fright. She had suddenly gone limp, as though she had fainted. Her eyes flickered, and those burning, feverish spots in her cheeks were brighter and more pronounced.

"A sofa, quick, girls!" Babs breathed. "Cissy must lay down at once! And the fire——"

"Dear me, it is nearly out!" exclaimed the lady of the house, like one noticing that for the first time. "How careless of the maids! And poor Cissy——"

Why did she speak the name so softly and so lovingly, it seemed? Even at that dramatic moment a strange feeling went through Babs—a feeling she simply could not understand. Why did her face light into a half-smile, and then become so sad and serious again?

"The fire—yes, the fire!" the lady exclaimed again, as though she had temporarily forgotten it. "Will one of you pile coal on it, please? Pile it as high as you like. You will find coal in the scuttle."

Clara was the first to rush to the scuttle—to find it as empty of coal as it could be.

"There—there's none here!" she said haltingly.

Bessie Bunter shivered and rubbed her blue hands, and blinked pathetically through her thick glasses.

"The maids—they have brought no coal?" the lady muttered. "They are—but there, we can soon get some. Will you find some more, my dear?"

"Certainly," promised Clara; and with that she had taken up the scuttle and was off.

Already they had laid Cissy on a big settee, drawn to what little fire there was by willing hands. Now, looking round, Augusta saw two blankets—a discovery in the drawing-room of this house that was to cause her to wonder later.

"Wrap her in these, Babs," she whispered gently.

"Ah, splendid idea!" the lady exclaimed. "Poor Cissy!"

Again her voice seemed to dwell on the name, now with an infinite pathos in its tone; and that sad smile haunted her face, just flickered about the corners of her tender mouth, and then went again.

From somewhere in the house came a lusty banging; then there were steps in the passage. Armed with two or three bundles of wood and a bucket of coal, Clara Trevlyn returned to them.

"Sticks—splendid!" exclaimed the hostess. "Make up a good fire—a roaring fire, my dear! If only I had known, what a fire I would have had by now!"

Cheerfully and willingly Clara knelt in the fender. She did not seem to mind the ashes strewn about, but Clara was never particular about that sort of thing.



Marjorie Hazeldene

The sticks cracked merrily in the grate whilst the girls clustered round Cissy Clare and tucked her in the blankets. Her eyes were closed now, and she was taking short and laboured breaths.

"Poor Cissy!" muttered Peggy Preston, her eyes filling with tears.

"We may be able to do something for her yet," whispered Babs hopefully. "Making her walk as we had to do may have brought on this faint, and she must be wanting nourishment, as we all are."

A hollow groan came from Bessie Bunter. She could not help it.

"Nourishment?" repeated their hostess. "Dear me! Yes, of course, I have food in the house. I have been baking this morning. I will bring some at once."

She turned and went from the room, and Clara raised a heated and rather grimy face from the fire, now beginning to blaze merrily.

"I say, Babs," she whispered, "this is a queer house!"

The girls stared at Clara.

"I found the coal all right; there's a tremendous store, and wood as well," Clara explained. "But I don't see any sign of servants, and the place looks absolutely deserted. I listened, but I couldn't hear a sound in the whole house."

"Goodness gracious!"

The girls looked at each other in bewilderment. What were they to think now? None of them liked to put their feelings into words.

The only sound that broke the sudden stillness was a fresh and more hollow groan than ever which came from Bessie Bunter.

"I—I hope that grub comes soon!" was Bessie's contribution to the conversation. "Poor Cissy must be—be awfully faint, and I'm nearly as bad myself!"

Babs bent over the sufferer and examined her condition anxiously. Her knowledge of first-aid told her that she was feverish, but nothing more.

"I think she's easier," murmured Peggy Preston. "The warm blankets and this fire, which is burning up so nicely now——"

Babs nodded.

"If only we knew what it was, Peggy!" she whispered. "I wonder if we could get a doctor?"

"Shall I go out and see if I can find one in the village, Babs?" asked Mabel Lynn.

"I think we'd better wait until our—our hostess returns," said Babs.

They started to wait. Many minutes had passed already, but they heard no returning step. They tried to talk to each other in low tones on ordinary matters, but it was not

successful. Each girl knew that she was waiting—and wondering.

How strangely disordered the room was! How bleak and cheerless the whole house seemed on such a day! Certainly the room was warming up now as Clara's fire blazed on the hearth, and they could take off their furs and wraps. But why were they waiting like this?

"Hark!" muttered Mabel Lynn suddenly; and she gripped her chum's arm.

There was an instant pause in all the conversations, and in the intense silence that suddenly fell soft notes of music came to their ears—the haunting, elusive chords of a sweetly played harp.

"Mum-mum-music!" chattered Bessie Bunter, her eyes opening wider than ever. "Oh, I say!"

No one else spoke, and Bessie fell silent again. It seemed almost wrong to speak. The melody swelled, then fell almost to silence and swelled again. To the girls it was as though someone was suddenly speaking to them softly and sadly—perhaps regretfully. Few of them had ever known anything so tenderly appealing as the music of that unseen harp.

"Cissy!" breathed Babs in a sudden and startled whisper.

Every eye turned on the couch by the fire. Cissy's eyes were open, and it almost looked as though she was trying to sit up. There was a slight smile on her pale face, as though she had heard the tune in her sleep, and it had brought her back to consciousness.

"My dear——" began Babs very gently.

But at that very moment the music ceased with almost painful abruptness. Cissy's smile faded. She lay back again and her eyes closed once more. She seemed to drop off to sleep almost at once.

In the tense, strained silence of the room the girls heard fresh and vague chords. Two or three would follow each other, and then the melody would stop. Single chords, like those played by a vague and wandering hand, hummed softly to their ears—then two or three more in sequence, and always the same ones. It was as though the unseen player was trying to start something that eluded her after its first bar. Marjorie Hazeldene, always emotional where music was concerned, turned away eyes that were filled with tears.

The music stopped suddenly, and there was a gentle scraping sound. Soft steps pattered down the stairs. The door of the room opened, and the lady of the house came in.

If the girls had been surprised before, they were startled now. They saw instantly that she seemed to have forgotten their very existence. Tears were glimmering in the soft, brown

eyes that looked at them in such momentary astonishment, and the kindly face was sad and lined with care. There was no sign of the food that she had gone to get—more than half an hour ago.

"My dears— Ah, of course, I remember!" the lady exclaimed, her face quickly smiling. "You—you are all warmer now? And Cissy?"

How very gentle indeed was her voice as she uttered the name that always came so readily to her lips. And now she went hurrying across the room to gaze down at the little patient, and Babs saw once more the elusive smile flicker on her face—just for a moment.

Babs was the first to break the strange silence that had fallen on her chums.

"Could we have a little milk or something to give Cissy, madam?" she asked quietly.

"Why, yes, of course!" the lady exclaimed.

"Yes, she must have nourishment, of course. If you will just wait while I fetch it——"

"Might I help you?" said Barbara quietly.

"How kind of you! Certainly, my dear!" was the ready response.

Their strange hostess led the way to the door again, Babs following her. Mabel Lynn went as well. In the hall there was a temporary pause, but Babs had already noted where the kitchen was likely to be, and she took the lead now.

Her guess was right, but it was a strange and disordered apartment that she found. Saucepans stood about the table containing cooked, partly cooked, and even raw food. Everywhere that she looked she saw neglect and untidiness.

"My kitchen—nothing cleared up by those maids again!" the lady exclaimed in a vexed tone. "How annoying it is. I really shall have to make a change! But make yourselves at home, my dears, and take just what you want. Perhaps you are all hungry?"

"It is very good of you, madam," said Babs quietly, and she went to the cupboard.

The place amazed her. There was some mystery—perhaps the biggest mystery that had ever come her way. It was too early yet even to hazard a guess. But the situation called for action—called for leadership. Babs felt the responsibility that was growing with every minute.

Her eyes went quickly round the kitchen cupboard. It was well stocked. Then she went to the pantry, and Mabel Lynn, at her side, heard the little gasp that left her lips. Never before had they seen quite such a bare and empty-looking pantry.

"Nothing at all!" whispered Mabel Lynn.

"I saw some dried eggs and some condensed milk in the cupboard," Babs replied in the same voice. "Get a saucepan, dear, and we'll get Cissy something hot and nourishing at once. And then——"

"Perhaps there is something here that you would like," said a tentative voice behind them.

They saw their hostess standing at the open door of a little cabinet on the other wall. Going quickly to her side Babs saw, to her delight, that it was full of well-known and tried medicines.

"Mabs, here is just the stuff that the Matron



Everywhere that the girls looked they saw neglect and untidiness. "My kitchen—nothing cleared up by those maids again!" the lady exclaimed in a vexed tone. "How annoying it is!"

always gives in a feverish case!" exclaimed Babs delightedly. "Will you ask Peggy to give Cissy a dose? It certainly won't hurt her, and it may do quite a lot of good."

"For Cissy! How splendid that you thought of that!" cried the lady admiringly.

Mabs ran off eagerly, and Babs set about the preparation of a drink of egg and milk from the limited ingredients at her command. She was still busy when her chum came back to replace the bottle in the cabinet.

"Cissy—is Cissy better?" was the anxious exclamation that greeted her at once.

"Her breathing is easier," said Mabs at once. "Perhaps she will rally when she has had something hot. But I—I really think that a doctor ought to see her."

"A doctor— Ah, yes!" the lady exclaimed. "On the telephone—of course. Yes, I can ring up the doctor. I should have thought of that!"

Babs was heating the milk on a gas-stove. She prepared the egg according to directions, and added it. Soon there was a steaming cupful of the most nourishing drink that Babs could devise just then.

They passed back through the hall and both girls looked at the telephone, but the lady did not seem to notice it herself. She hurried to the room where Cissy was lying, and Babs and Mabs were glad to follow her. It had been bitterly cold in the kitchen.

"Some drink for Cissy—something nice and warming!" the hostess exclaimed as she hastened to the sick girl's side.

Peggy was supporting the unhappy girl. She seemed half-conscious now—just enough to know that she was required to drink from the cup that Babs carried. Her eyes looked more normal, but very tired. As soon as she had had her drink she lay back again.

"The doctor—if you don't mind, madam?" Babs asked in a worried voice. "We would like him to see Cissy as soon as possible, because we must be getting on—"

"Getting on? Oh, my dear girls, you cannot possibly think of going to-night!" the lady exclaimed. "You must stay here with me for to-night at least—such dreadful days, and it is always snowing now! You must wait until the snow has gone!"

"But—if you please—"

"No, really! I cannot permit it!" exclaimed the lady. "I will see if the maids have prepared enough bedrooms. Will you just wait here until I have seen, please?"

She went from the room, leaving the girls puzzled and staring. Some of them were beginning to talk among themselves, Marcia Loftus's ill-natured voice being quite as noticeable as any.

She was criticising and condemning. Surely they could have found a different house from this? What was the matter with the place?

The others looked at Marcia, not knowing what to say. And while they waited, wondering, something was happening that was to give them cause for still greater wonder!

Their hostess had gone to the top of the stairs. Here she turned to the gallery that ran round on each side above the hall and gave access to the rooms on the first floor.

A shiver shook her suddenly as she paused and looked round. Her brown eyes remained staring at the opposite wall, blank in expression and so hopeless as well. She put a hand to her forehead as though it ached with some intolerable burden.

"What is the matter with me—what is it?" she muttered. "I know I came here for something. But what? What was it?"

A shiver ran through her again as she stood there, such a forlorn, pathetic figure, trying to urge a mind that would no longer serve its turn.

"Bed—something about bed?" she said suddenly. "Yes, of course—that is it. I am so cold and—and it is snowing outside. Yes, bed."

She went along to one of the rooms, opened the door, and passed within. There came the grating of a key and then—silence!

CHAPTER IV.

WHAT SHOULD THEY DO?

"I'M not going to wait here any longer!" grumbled Marcia Loftus. "I don't believe that woman intends to come back at all. Perhaps she doesn't even own the house!"

Barbara Redfern's brow wore a worried frown. Marcia Loftus did not put things nicely, but that was a way that Marcia had. And there was certainly some justification for her grumbling now.

They had waited nearly another half-hour. The afternoon was dragging on, and Cissy still lay on the couch, little better than before in spite of their attentions. Outside, the snow still lay, cold and drear, everywhere. They were in a strange house with a still stranger occupant, and Babs knew that it was time to take some definite action of their own.

"Let's go and see if we can find our hostess somewhere—I'm sure now that she forgets things!" Babs said, after a pause.

"Forgets!" said Nancy Bell bitterly. "Why, Agnes White here isn't in it with her for forgetting things. She went up to see the maids about the bedrooms—if there are any maids in the house! Jolly fishy, I call it!"

"I'm starving!" said Bessie Bunter dismally.

"My figure, you know—I can't neglect it much longer. I'm sure I shall faint if I don't have a snack soon! Oh, dear!"

"Let's have a look round!" said Babs desperately.

She led the way, and they went out of the warm room into the chill that pervaded the whole place. Bessie Bunter roamed towards the kitchen as though drawn irresistibly by some magnetic force. The others looked wonderingly around the lofty hall, lighted at the top by its snow-covered skylights. They saw the broad white stairs to the hall-landing and the narrower flights that led on each side to the oaken galleries set with doors. But there was no sign of anyone.

"Let's go up!" said Clara Trevlyn.

Most of them acted on that advice and went up. They reached the galleries above and found that they joined just above the front door. On each side were further stairs leading to the attic rooms in the roof.

"B-r-r-r-r! How cold!" shivered Babs, as she looked this way and that. "Not a fire anywhere but in that room below! It's like an ice-house up here!"

"And poor Cissy's still below and no one's visible at all!" muttered Marjorie Hazeldene.

Babs came to a sudden resolve.

"You others had better look round," she said. "I don't like this at all, and it's up to us to do something, I'm sure. I'll go down and telephone for the doctor—that's the first thing. I'm sure the lady won't mind us doing that—she said she'd do it herself."

She went running down the stairs again, resolved at last on action. There was a small telephone directory, and she soon found the doctor's number, underscored in blue pencil.

"Dr. Smith," read Mabs at her side. "Yes, he must be the family doctor, Babs. No. 47—ring up at once."

Babs lifted the receiver and waited. After a long silence a voice spoke into her ear:

"Who is that?"

"Number 47, please!" said Babs.

"But your number isn't working now—we were told to disconnect your instrument a fortnight ago!" answered the drawling voice.

Barbara looked more puzzled than ever.

"Disconnect a fortnight ago?" she repeated.

"Yes. And as no subscription has been paid, I can't put through a call, although—"



A tall and graceful figure came quietly into the room. The doctor looked up.

"Good gracious! It's—it's— Miss Meadows!" he cried.

"But you must—you must!" Babs cried with sudden urgency. "I don't know anything about the subscription—I'm a stranger here. But we want No. 47, Doctor Smith. There's someone ill here!"

"Someone ill? Why, surely the house is empty—"

"No, it isn't empty! Oh, please put me through and don't argue!" cried Babs, more surprised and alarmed than ever.

"Against all the rules!" muttered the voice, but a clicking followed.

"Doctor Smith's house!" said a voice, after a pause.

"Can the doctor come to see someone at once, please?" Babs exclaimed.

"I don't know. Who is that speaking?"

"I—I—"

Babs turned desperately to her chum.

"My word—I hadn't thought of that!" she gasped. "We don't even know where we are, do we? If—"

"The house is called Moorside—I remember that, now!" said Mabs quickly.

"Speaking from Moorside," said Babs into the mouthpiece.

"Moorside!" repeated the voice incredulously.

"But the house is shut up!"

"Shut up?" repeated Babs like one in a dream. "No, it isn't! There's a lady here, and—and a lot of us have called to see her. One of our number is ill, and we'd like the doctor to call—as soon as possible."

Followed a long silence. Then a deep, masculine voice spoke.

"You say you are at Moorside, and want me?"

"Please, doctor," said Babs.

"This is not a practical joke?"

"Goodness gracious, no! We had an accident on the road—a party of us—and one of our number seemed feverish so we came here. We'd like you to come and see her as soon as possible."

"But how did you get into the house?"

"The lady let us in," said Babs blankly.

There was a long silence.

"I will come at once!" said the doctor's voice and then he rang off.

Babs turned from the instrument trembling.

"I say, there is a mystery here," she murmured. "Everyone seems to think that the house is empty. Isn't it just queer?"

She gave a shaky laugh.

"Well, thank goodness the doctor's coming, anyway! He'll be able to set our minds at rest about Cissy, and explain what it all means."

Clara Trevlyn came along the passage with a queer expression on her face.

"I've found the lady," she said.

"Found her? Where?" ejaculated Barbara.

"There's a locked door upstairs," said Clara breathlessly. "We heard the creaking of a bed, and then someone coughing. She must be in there, and—she must have gone to bed!"

Bessie Bunter rolled dismally out of the kitchen while Babs and Mabs were still looking too amazed for words.

"Horrid old kitchen I call it—we shan't get a snack here," grumbled Bessie. "I'm sure this house isn't properly run. There doesn't seem to be anything at all except a couple of stale old loaves. We shall jolly well starve if we stay here!"

Marcia Loftus and Nancy Bell came hurrying from above. They, apparently, brought news—that made them smile with bitter smiles.

"Maids!" scoffed Marcia, as soon as she set eyes on Babs. "We've just found the maids' bedrooms, Barbara, and I'll guarantee that they haven't been occupied for at least a fortnight!

There's no sign of anyone having been upstairs for ever so long—the dust on the floors is quite thick."

Barbara Redfern looked graver than ever.

"It's queer," she said. "There's some mystery, and the sooner we find it out the better. But why has our hostess gone to bed, girls? That's what I'd like to know! What strange things she has been saying and doing ever since we've been here."

"She's not right in her head," opined Marcia Loftus.

"Oh, I see—see—say!" chattered Bessie Bunter, her eyes rolling.

"Marcia, don't be so horrid!" said Babs quickly. "I'll admit that the lady seems to have very little memory, but I'm perfectly sure she's quite sane. Still, she can't go to bed like this. The only thing to do, girls, is to knock her up again."

"Knock her up?" repeated Clara.

"We must," said Babs, moving towards the stairs. "The doctor's coming, and she must be here to see him!"

She tapped gently on the door that Clara indicated at the end of the gallery, and waited. Then she knocked again.

"Is that you, Emily?" asked a sleepy but familiar voice.

"No, madam," Babs answered. "We—we are—" a happy inspiration came to her. "We are the girls with Cissy."

"Cissy!"

How gentle sounded her voice, even from behind the thick door.

"Is Cissy better now?"

"She is going on quite well now," said Babs reassuringly.

"How splendid! I must get up and come down to see her at once!"

The girls gathered again in the hall with perplexed and wondering faces. Peggy came out to them to say that Cissy had opened her eyes, and said a few words.

Then a fresh sound came to their ears—the hoot of a motor horn. They heard wheels scrunching in the snow outside. Babs opened the door just as a car drew up outside and a brisk-looking, middle-aged man came running up the steps.

"Are you the young lady who telephoned me?" he inquired, raising his hat.

"Yes, sir—if you are Doctor Smith," said Babs.

"At your service."

He came into the hall and looked in greater wonder at the girls gathered there, many of them still wearing their coats.

"I am afraid that I was quite at a loss to



Viwiene Leigh

understand you. You say that someone requires my aid?"

"In here, please, sir."

The doctor approachedaisy Clark. She looked up at him but did not seem to recognize him as a stranger.

"When was she taken ill? What have you done for her since then?" asked the doctor of Babs.

He listened to her answers, and nodded his head several times.

Finally:

"You have acted most promptly, miss," he said. "Your friend here is feverish, but is no danger if well looked after. She is suffering from a chill, but nothing more, and care and attention will put her right in a day or two. I believe her condition is due to some sort of excitement. Is she a contented sort of girl, or has she anything that might worry her?"

"I think she's been very worried, doctor," spoke up Gwen Cook.

"Dear me!" said the doctor. "In what way?"

"It has been a very sad fortnight foraisy," Gwen explained. "You may remember that some days ago a tiny cruising steamer foundered in that gale with all hands?"

"Perfectly, my dear. It was very sad indeed," said the doctor.

"aisy's aunt—an aunt who lived somewhere in Yorkshire—was on board that steamer as a passenger, doctor," said Gwen. "They were passionately attached to each other, and it has upsetaisy terribly. She is a very quiet girl, and I believe that I am the only one who knows of this. But I am sure it has been on her mind ever since."

This was news to all the girls. The doctor nodded very gravely.

"It quite accounts for her condition, and I am glad you told me," he said. "Worry has encouraged this chill and aggravated her condition. A good sleep now will do wonders, but no one must mention this matter to her until she is quite well again; you must do all you can to keep her from brooding on it. Amuse her as much as possible. You understand?"

Babs was in the act of starting to reply when the door opened. A tall and graceful figure came quietly into the room. The doctor looked up, startled, and leapt to his feet with surprise.

"Good gracious! It's—it's— Miss Meadows!" was his astounded utterance.

CHAPTER V. LEFT IN CHARGE.

MISS MEADOWS smiled kindly but a little vaguely.

"How are you?" she said, taking the proffered hand. "I forgot your name, but—"

"Dr. Smith, Miss Meadows," said the doctor, with a sudden and swift change in his manner. "But I had no idea you were still here. I was certain that you had gone—"

"Gone? Where should I go?" asked Miss Meadows with mild surprise. "I live here where it always seems to be snowing! Even though it is first thing in the morning, and I have only just got up—"

The doctor took the lady's arm very quietly as the bewildered girls stared at that surprising speech. He seemed to understand something at last.

"You should not have got up, Miss Meadows," he said gently. "Don't you know that you are needing a little rest? Sit down and talk to me for a little while. You are looking very thin."

"It is this cold weather," sighed Miss Meadows, sinking down. "And my mails don't seem to do anything for me now, they are getting so lazy. Perhaps I haven't been looking after myself properly."

The doctor encouraged her to go on talking, and the girls listened, more amazed than ever. It was rational talk all of it, but all very vague. The conviction that had been growing in every mind strengthened to certainty. They began to understand why they had waited so many times, and why the house appeared as it did.

"Rest—that is undoubtedly what you want, and I must prescribe you a little physic, too," the doctor exclaimed at last. "You must go back to your bed, that is the very best place for you, and I will see that you are looked after. Will two of you young ladies help Miss Meadows?"

Like girls in a dream Babs and Mats accompanied Miss Meadows back to her room. When she was in bed again, the doctor took her temperature and felt her pulse.

"We're going to look after you for a day or two, Miss Meadows, and I shall come and see you again," was his parting remark as he shook the thin hand again. "You will have to have a fire up here, but we can soon see about that for you. You must stay here for a little while and rest."

Feeling utterly bewildered, Babs and Mats followed him down the stairs to the spacious hall.



Peggy Preston

They hardly knew what to do next, and when the doctor addressed them all it seemed that he was in a similar predicament.

"Well, this is a queer position," was his remark as he looked at Babs. "Perhaps you young ladies will tell me all about yourselves, so that we can see how we stand."

Babs told him all, adding that but for Clary's sudden illness they would never have stopped at this queer house set in the heart of the snow-covered moors.

"And you'd all have been in the train now at Moorsley Fen?" the doctor exclaimed. "Well, I really don't know what to say about it. Your friend Clary isn't fit to be moved from here. She really wants a warm room, a proper bed, and diet. And, as for Miss Meadows—"

He broke off, looking more perplexed than ever.

"What is the matter with Miss Meadows, sir?" asked Babs anxiously.

"I can only be perfectly frank in this matter," answered the doctor. "Everyone in the village believed that Miss Meadows had gone from here."

"Gone?" gasped Babs.

"Yes; she said good-bye, but did not say exactly where she was going. The house was to stand empty for some time. To find anyone here was what startled me so much. To find Miss Meadows was an even greater surprise. I will tell you now her trouble, my dear girls. She has lost her memory!"

"Lost her memory?" breathed the girls in amazement.

The doctor nodded, and went on quickly:

"Yes. She is perfectly sane—perfectly rational. But you probably noticed, as I did, that her memory of the past is not only a blank, but she seems to forget things from one minute to another. Something must have happened here when she was alone. Perhaps she has had a blow, certainly something at which we cannot guess at present. Goodness knows how the poor soul has lived on here alone!"

Amazement and dismay were writ large on every face.

"She looks very thin," said Babs, hardly knowing what she said.

"She is very thin indeed to what she used to be," assented the doctor. "She has a bad cold, too. She must have forgotten that she had dismissed her maids, and decided to shut the house up. From day to day—quite a fortnight—she must have had just enough food to keep herself alive and occupy her mind; but evidently nothing of the past has yet come back to her."

The girls looked more bewildered than ever.

"Do you know if she has any relations, sir?" asked Babs, feeling that she must say something.

"I know she has relations—I've seen them," answered the doctor. "Where they live is another matter. I haven't any notion. I will inquire in the village, and put an advertisement in the newspapers. But—but—"

He broke off.

"You're wondering what we are to do until then, sir?" muttered Babs helplessly.

"Candidly, I am. You see, some of you will have to stay, if only to look after your friend. Am I right in assuming that you are on your way back to school?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm afraid I should not permit you to go in that case," said the doctor, pursing his lips. "You see, until I know exactly what is the matter with your friend, you should remain somewhere in quarantine!"

"My hat!" said Clara.

"We couldn't think of leaving Miss Meadows, either," said Babs, with sudden decision. "I'm sure she's awfully nice, and it was ripping the way she invited us in, and was so concerned over Clary." Her eyes suddenly shone. "My word! We must all stay here, and try to put things right a bit. Miss Primrose would agree at once if she were here."

There were excited exclamations from the others at once.

"Splendid!" cried the doctor. "What both of my patients want is a little attention and plenty of young and jolly company. It will rally your friend Clary. It might even bring back Miss Meadows's memory!"

"Then I'm for staying!" cried Babs.

"And I!"

"Same here, Babs!"

"If we can have some grub——" began Bessie Baxter tentatively.

"Hands up those in favour of wiring to Miss Primrose that we are staying till she sends us instructions!" exclaimed Babs, facing round on the eager girls.

A forest of hands shot up into the air.

"Those not in favour, I ought to ask!" asked Babs, laughing.

Annabel Hichens blinked at the doctor, but his manly presence, and the fact that the suggestion came from him, reassured her. Marcia Loftus and Nancy Bell exchanged a look, and grinned knowingly.

"Everyone!" said Babs delightedly. "Doctor, we are all willing to stay here until we see how things are going."

"Well done, my girls!" cried the kindly medico. "Miss Meadows is kindness itself when she is all right, and it will be doing her a splendid

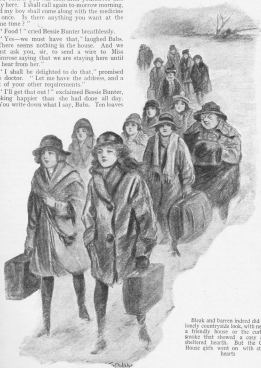
good turn if you will look after yourselves and stay here. I shall call again to-morrow morning, and my boy shall come along with the medicine at once. Is there anything you want at the same time?"

"Food!" cried Bessie Barter breathlessly.

"Yes—we must have that," laughed Babs. "There seems nothing in the house. And we must ask you, sir, to send a wire to Miss Fritrose saying that we are staying here until we hear from her."

"I shall be delighted to do that," promised the doctor. "Let me have the address, and a list of your other requirements."

"I'll get that out!" exclaimed Bessie Barter, looking happier than she had done all day. "You write down what I say, Babs. Ten leaves



Blank and barren indeed did the lonely countryside look, with never a friendly house or the curling smoke that showed a cozy and sheltered hearth. But the Cott House girls went on with stout hearts.

of bread, twenty-five tins of cream, two dozen—"

"Twenty-five tins of cream!" said Babs.

"Yes—one each, and—a and a few to spare, you know," said the fat girl. "And then—"

She was interrupted by a merry peal of laughter.

"Necessities first, I think," smiled Babs.

"Here's a paper. Speak up, girls, for what we want!"

Bessie led them in speaking up, but even without her leadership they would not have been backward. Bessie wasn't the only one by now.

"And here is the message to our headmistress, sir," said Babs, who had been scribbling busily.

"We're rather a big party, but—"

"The more here, the merrier it will be, I'm sure," exclaimed the doctor, as he put the papers into his pocket. "You can telephone to me if you want anything more, and I'll be along to-morrow morning. I will add a message to your school myself."

They saw him to the car, and thanked him for his kindness. Then he was gone, and Babs closed the door and looked round.

"Well, this is an adventure if you like!" she exclaimed. "What a good thing that we came here, girls, isn't it?"

"I should just think so!" said Marjorie Hazeldene. "Fancy that poor Miss Meadows living here like she was, and no one knowing anything about it! It's a wonder she hasn't been ill before!"

"It is," said Peggy. "But we'll soon put things right now, Babs, you'll have to be the lady of the house, and tell us what to do. I'm just dying to get on with something!"

Babs looked round, half laughing, and half serious.

"All right," she said. "It's a case of everyone turn-to and lend a hand. Bessie, we'll appoint you chief cook, and you'd better have a look round and just see what there is—we want some more egg and milk for Cisey for a start. Peggy had better remain head nurse—I'm sure she's cut out for that."

"Rather!"

"Clara's jolly good at fire," went on Babs, smiling. "We want a fire in the hall here, a fire in Miss Meadows' room, and fires in the other places we are going to use. Clara, you'd better choose a fire-lighting squad!"

But there was no need to choose. Doty Jobling, Phyllis Howell, Philippa Derwent, Katie Smith, and Gwen Cook came to her side at once.

"Form fours!" said Clara in a martial voice, but her squad didn't do anything like that.

"The rest of us—oh, we'll soon find something that wants to be done," said Babs. "The great thing is to get this house warm and cosy, and then

Cisey can be put in a proper room, and we shall know that the invalids are all right."

It was wonderful how quickly they got to work—especially Bessie Bunter, who had been complaining before that she was faint from lack of food.

Bessie went to the kitchen like a bird to its nest—long before the word "Go!" Cooking was not only a hobby, but a serious and necessary art to the fat girl of the party, and there was no one in the Fourth Form who could rival her in skill.

Peggy went to see that Cisey was all right, and then went downstairs for a little chat with Miss Meadows. She found her quite calm and quiet in her bed, and certainly showing no signs of being a troublesome patient.

The others all got equally busy. Certainly Marcia and Nancy seemed to be walking about a lot and doing little, but there were too many busy hands for their selfishness to be noticed. Fires began to spring up all over the place, and the cheery crackle of sticks from above and below added an air of comfort that had not been known before.

First to find the linen cupboard was Annabel Hiches, by far the most domesticated in the whole party. Annabel did not want anyone to sleep between damp sheets. She staggered to the drawing-room with tremendous piles of bed linen, and was quickly banking up the fire and spreading sheets all about the room. Round the fire in the hall, mattresses from the five bedrooms—chosen by the girls—were quickly and scientifically placed. And then—the tooting of a motor-car, and Bessie Bunter came rushing from the kitchen to get the groceries and bread.

The activity, under Barbara's direction, grew with the minutes. Inside an hour Cisey Clare was carried upstairs to the room prepared for her, and tucked between the warmest blankets that Annabel could find. And then—

Gong-o-o-o-gong-o-gong!

There stood Bessie Bunter in the hall, hot but happy, wrapped in an enormous white apron, beating the gong.

"Dinner's ready, girls!" she called. "I say, don't wait too long now—there's eggs and bacon, and tomato soup, and fried potatoes, and pan-cakes and—and all sorts of fine things! I say, do hurry up!"

They did hurry.

Marjorie had laid the great table for nineteen places, and had a tray ready for Miss Meadows. And there was a genuine cheer as Bessie Bunter, looking happier than ever, rolled out of the kitchen, carrying the first pile of hot plates and steaming dishes.

"Well done, Bessie!"

"Braven!"

Bessie Hunter served out the good things with a liberal hand, and no one even appeared to notice the helpings that she took for herself. After all, they felt that the cook deserved a little extra—especially as they knew the cook so well.

It was getting late when they had finished, for time had passed quickly since the doctor's departure. Babs, looking at her wrist watch, proposed going to bed.

"We're all tired, I know," she explained. "We've only to make the beds and arrange ourselves into rooms. We'll see that the two patients are sleeping well first, of course. What do you say, girls?"

"Bed for me!" said Clara decidedly. "It's better work making fires than I thought, and we'll have it all to do again to-morrow morning."

"Will you cook breakfast, Bessie?" asked Babs.

"Will a duck swim?" said Clara, and there was a laugh in which even Bessie had to join. They knew that Bessie would do the cooking—even if she needed some persuading to rise.

The dinner plates were put to soak and left for the night. After raking out the downstairs fires the girls went up. They all looked in at their patients, but both were sleeping, and certainly the change inaisy was remarkable.

"A better colour than ever she has had before!" said Peggy Preston jubilantly. "How ripping that it is only a chill! I shall sleep happily after all!"

They banked up the two fires to keep the rooms warm, and then went to their new bedrooms. Vastly different now was Moorside as they turned in between the warm sheets at last to sleep.

To sleep? Well, not for a little while, at all events.

CHAPTER VI

NOT BESSIE'S LUCKY DAY

CLANK, CLANK!

SCYD-A-UPS!

Gwen Cook sat bolt upright in her bed and listened. It was light. The morning had come. But whatever was that queer sound in the passage?

Clank, clank!

Barbara Redfern and Mabel Lynn were also roused. They looked up sleepily at the alert figure of Gwen, in the second bed in their room, and then smiled at the peacefully snoring figure of Bessie Hunter, who had been sleeping with Gwen.

"You heard it, Babs?" asked Gwen's small and breathless voice.

"Heard what, Gwen?" said Babs, still sleepily. Clank, clankity-clank! Scree-aps! came from the passage.

"There! That's it!" said Gwendoline Cook in a thrilling whisper. "I might have guessed it last night. The place is—haunted!"

Clankity-clank!

Babs and Mabs exchanged a glance and looked more wideawake. It was like Gwen Cook to say such things, of course—Gwen had a strong belief in the supernatural. But certainly it was strange.

"W-why-what's the matter?" mumbled Bessie Hunter, opening her eyes at last and staring at Gwen. "Isn't time to get up yet. Might let a girl—"

"There's a ghost in this place, Bessie!"

"What?"

Bessie Hunter sat up with a cry that was not at all sleepy, and clutched under the pillow for her spectacles.

Clank-clank! came again.

"There it is!" whispered Gwen. "Hear that?"

Bessie Hunter shook so badly that the bed seemed nearly to vibrate.

"Gwen, don't be so silly!" said Barbara Redfern, as she prepared to slip from between the sheets. "Talking about ghosts—why, you never seem interested in anything else! It's someone trying to give us a scare!"

Clank-clang! CLASH!

"Ow!" gasped Bessie Hunter. "Dud-dud-did you hear th-th-that one? I say, Babs, hi-hi-lock the door! Mabs hi-looks awfully a-scared!"

Bessie showed great modesty in attributing that feeling to Mabs. Her own bed was really vibrating now!

"I'll soon see what it is!" said Babs, as she pulled on her dressing-gown and put her feet in her slippers. "I expect—"

"Don't open the dud-dud-door!" chattered Bessie.

"But—"

"Nun-no! I—I—I haven't g-g-got my glasses on yet. I can't give it a pip-pip-proper glance!" stammered Bessie, showing no eagerness to don her celebrated glasses. "If you—oh, look out!"

Babs had opened the door at last.

Bessie Hunter, prepared to witness anything, got ready to dive deeply beneath the bed-clothes. But it was a peal of laughter that came from Babs.

"Ha, ha, ha! Oh, my goodness!" chuckled



Dolly Jobbing

Babs. "What a sweet own nothing. Guess who it is, Mabs?"

"Marcia Lottin?" asked Mabel innocently.

"No, it's Annabel Hichens. Fancy getting up as early as this to scrub!"

"Annabel sup-sun-scrubbing?" asked Bessie disbelievingly. "Oh! There you are, Gwen! He, he, he! There's your ghost for you! I jolly well knew it wasn't a ghost all the time, too."

The figure of Annabel Hichens appeared in the doorway, and those who had not seen her could hardly repress their smiles; Bessie didn't attempt to do so. Annabel, with her hair dragged back in a severe plait and her sleeves rolled up, held a bucket of water in one hand and a flannel in the other, and appeared to be as delighted as they had ever seen her.

"Come you here and see all the dirt I've got up!" invited Annabel, in her countrified way.

"It did want doing badly, to be sure! I've hardly been able to sleep all night for thinking how neglected the place is!"

"Really?" said Mabel Lynn, and tried hard to keep from smiling.

Annabel gave the house-damnel a loving sponge and sent a stream of dirty water into the pail.

"There, just you look at that!" she said triumphantly. "I thought I'd get on with this place before you were getting up. It must be high on eight o'clock now."

"It's half-past," said Babs.

"And I haven't finished!" gasped Annabel. "I can't stop talking now. I want to polish the stairs before anyone is about!"

Clankity-clank! came from the pail as Annabel sped away again.

Babs closed the door and went into a peal of laughter.

"I've never seen Annabel look so happy before. I'm sure she's going to enjoy herself here!" she told Mabs between her chuckles.

"But we mustn't let her good example be in vain, must we? Come on, Bessie, jump up and get the breakfast ready!"

"Till Annabel to get the kitchen fire going!" said Bessie sleepily.

"Not Nobby! Why, that's your job!" laughed Babs. "Catch hold of her feet, Mabs, and we'll soon have her out!"

Bessie Bunton wriggled convulsively and clung to the sheets. Bessie always did that, especially when it was cold, as it certainly was this morning. But there were ways and means known to Babs and Mabs, and they employed them. Within five minutes Bessie, indignant and protesting, was partly dressed and saying

all sorts of unkind things about the water at the wash-stand.

It was not the sort of morning for a protracted dressing. Babs nearly made a record, but going out into the gallery outside the rooms she found that she was not the only one stirring. Peggy Preston was just coming out ofaisy Clara's room.

"How is she, Peggy?" was Barbara's eager question.

Bright-eyed and smiling, Peggy beckoned for Babs to follow her.

"Hafo, Babs!" said a small voice, and Babs sawaisy half-risen in the bed, a faint smile on her pale face.

"Better,aisy?" cried Babs delightfully.

"Much," saidaisy. "But I—I feel awfully weak, and I don't understand why I am here. I must have been awfully ill."

"As long as you're better,aisy?" Babs exclaimed. "You must make up your mind to rest to-day and get quite well. And then——"

Clara came bustling in with a cheery smile on her face and a bucket of coal in one hand.

"Not the first one about, Babs!" chuckled Clara. "I've got the downstairs fire going, and this will be all right in a brace of shakes!"

Smiling, Babs crossed to the bed and held her sick friend's hand.

"You've quite happy now,aisy?"

"Not—not happy," saidaisy, in an odd tone. "I can't understand it quite. This room seems familiar, somehow, and—and it makes me feel so sad. I don't know what it is, I can't quite think. But——"

"You mustn't think that sort of thing,aisy!" said Babs gently. "The doctor says that you've got to cheer up, and we're going to see that you do. Bessie will soon have some breakfast cooked for you if you feel strong enough."

Out in the passage Peggy held Barbara's arm.

"aisy said something the same to me, Babs," said Peggy in a puzzled voice. "It does seem strange that she should have such a feeling."

"It must be her illness, Peggy," said Babs. "You know the doctor said that we must cheer her up, and we've got to do it somehow. How is Miss Meadows?"

"She's awake and looks better than she did yesterday," Peggy replied. "You must see her, too, Babs."

Miss Meadows was delighted to have another visitor, and almost her first question was aboutaisy, the name that she could not forget. Babs commented on it when they left her room at last.

"Her memory is so bad, Peggy, and yet she can always think of Cissy and speak so kindly about her!" was how Barbara put it. "Isn't it a strange thing!"

"Yes. I can't understand it at all," said Peggy. "One of those strange tricks of the mind—perhaps because she is so gentle and sympathetic."

"That must be it," said Babs. "And—oh, what's that?"

She gripped the balustrade as there came a loud, sithering sound, a crash, and then a yell of surprise and indignation.

"Oh, my backbone! Oh, oh!"

"Bessie Bunter!" gasped Peggy.

They looked quickly down the stairs, and there, seated on the mat at the bottom, was the girl they had guessed.

Bessie had been guilty, apparently of a very odd trick of hers, and had fallen down the stairs.

"You should look where you're going!" said the prim voice of Annabel Hichens.

"How did I know the soap was there, you silly noodle?" demanded the fat girl, who was not really hurt. It was a habit of Bessie's to yell for nothing. "Of course, I might have guessed—"

"Better go down and look into this," murmured Babs, smiling.

They ran downstairs to find a very hot and fierce argument in progress between Bessie and Annabel. But Bessie was only shaken; she was certainly not suffering from such fearful injuries as she seemed to think.

"You're all right, Bessie," said Babs, trying to soothe the indignant fat girl. "After all—"

"I've a jolly good mind not to cook Annabel any breakfast, anyway!" grumbled

Bessie. "Fancy leaving the soap like that! I think—"

"Come on, Bessie—kitchen!" urged Babs. "We're all getting very hungry!"

Bessie Bunter favoured Annabel with an indignant and concentrated blink, and walked haughtily in the direction of the kitchen. She trodden on the stove, cold and full of ashes, and looked more peevish than ever.

"Sha'n't be able to get breakfast for an hour or two," announced Bessie. "I'm sure—"

"Oh, come, come!" urged Babs. "We'll get the stove cleaned for you, and there'll soon be a nice fire."

Clara Trevelyn, followed by Phyllis Howell, Philippe Derwent, and Dolly Jobling, came noisily into the kitchen.

"You might have got me a fire, Clara!" said Bessie, with returning indignation. "You know that I'm delicate, and standing about in the cold doesn't do me any good!"

"Then come with us," said Clara breezily. "We're going to have a little snowballing to warm us up. Coming?"

"Sus-sus-snowballing?" said Bessie blankly. "What, on a morning like this? You'll jolly well get frozen, and serve you right, too!"

The four chuckled and went on through the kitchen into the snowy garden beyond. Bessie Bunter watched them go and shivered dimly.

"Come on, Bessie! Fire's beginning to go now!" cried Babs, as she put a match to the paper. "You stoke it up while we clear these ashes away. They'll all be wanting brekker soon!"

Bessie Bunter glared at the fire. It was smoking and showing no intention of "drawing."



There stood Bessie Bunter in the hall, wrapped in an enormous white apron and beating the gong.

properly. Already considerably ruffled, Bessie was in no mood to be mollified.

"You don't know how to get a fire!" she said, in rather a tart voice. The cold weather was to blame for a lot of things that morning! "I'll soon make it go. The darrpers want adjusting. I wonder what this one does?"

Bessie leant over the stove and seized a knob in the top.

"Bessie!" gasped Peggy.

"Don't touch it!" cried Babs.

But Bessie, intent on exploring her stove, had already touched it; and the next thing she knew was that a perfect shower of soot came leaping down right on her upturned face.

"Oh, Babs! I—I—atishoooh!"

A terrific sneeze shook Bessie Bunter.

Babs and Peggy found themselves gazing in a stupefied way at a face that was as black as ink and quite unrecognisable, except that it was fat!

"Bessie!"

"Oh—oh, dear! She—anotherd in—atishoooh! —is—soot! Oh, dear! Oh, oh!"

Bessie Bunter blundered headlong across the kitchen. Babs hurried to her assistance, but was just too late.

Even as the fat girl was passing the open door, something came whizzing inside. It was a disaster, out in the open, for Dolly Jobling to have missed her aim. It was a still greater disaster for Bessie that she got right in the way of the trusty snowball.

Smack!

"Oh!" gasped Bessie Bunter; and she sat down with a clammy lump of snow effectively completing the disguise that the soot had started so well.

"Bessie!"

"My dear——"

"Knocked down! Pushed over! Kicked about!" gasped Bessie Bunter, scraping at her face with grimy hands. "Tin't jolly well fair! Oh, dear; it's cold—it's horrid snow! Help! I shall never get over this, I know! Oh, dear! Ooozer!"

Babs and Peggy helped Bessie Bunter to her feet and escorted her to the tap. They washed her face, while she spluttered and protested. But Bessie was not grateful. She imagined that Babs and Peggy were quite responsible for all that had happened to her, and refused to listen to anything else. And when she was clean at last, she called out of the kitchen with her nose in the air, saying that she'd starve rather than cook for such ungrateful girls!

But there were plenty of volunteers for Bessie's job by then, and they acquitted themselves quite well. Within half an hour the

steaming dishes were in the dining-room, and Bessie's interest in life returned once more. She criticised everything, of course, but ate with a hearty goodwill, and by the time the meal was over the smile was back on Bessie's face and she was volunteering to cook for lunch.

CHAPTER VII

WORKERS AND SNOOSES!

GENERAL Dr. Smith was an early caller that morning.

He found Moorside quite a hive of industry, and already so changed in appearance that he opened his eyes with astonishment. It was no longer the trusty, cheerless house that the girls had found on their arrival. Many busy hands had made light work of the neglect that had taken place recently.

"A message from your Headmistress, girls!" was his first cheery announcement, as he passed a telegram to Babs. "I am sure she is one of the very best. Miss Princess does not want you to neglect your studies, but as long as Miss Barbara and I consider it necessary, you can all stay here if you send her a daily report."

What a cheer these was at that!

"And my patients—are they going on well?" was his question, when he had congratulated the girls on all they had accomplished.

"Quite well, I think, sir," said Babs, as she and Peggy prepared to lead the way.

Clara Trevlyn, looking very flushed and excited, whispered to Dolly when the doctor had disappeared upstairs:

"Think it's safe to slide down the balusters again?"

Dolly Jobling looked quite shocked.

"Really, Clara—when the doctor's in the house——" she began.

"But Annabel's bustling round with the dustpan again!" put in Clara eagerly. "She gave me such an awful look when I came down last time that I'd really like to have another try. It's polishing the rail, too!"

"I think we'd better wait," said Dolly.

"Perhaps so," assented Clara reluctantly, and sighed.

Out of the corner of her eye she could see Annabel. Annabel always treated them, when they were at Cliff House, to the humble song of the happy home. It was evident now that Annabel's cry that woman's place was in the home was not an idle one. She was moving about with an almost fierce joy at all the neglect that cried out for her ready attentions.

It amused Clara immensely to watch the patient Annabel, now that her own more laborious share of the work had been accomplished

(not without noise) to her own satisfaction. But, of course, the line must be drawn somewhere.

So Clara waited for the departure of Doctor Smith before she pressed on with the good work of polishing the roll of the balusters.

He came at last, but he was not looking quite as sunny as Clara had hoped. An eager crowd collected to hear his report.

"Miss Meadows shows quite a splendid improvement—warmth has kept her cold away," the doctor told them. "You must make her stay in bed at least until to-morrow, and feed her well. I am not quite so satisfied with your friend Casey."

"But she is ever so much brighter, sir," said Peggy.

"Agreed. She has rallied wonderfully under excellent nursing," nodded the doctor. "I am grateful for that. It is this strange sickness and lack of interest that worries me. You must see if you can cheer her up somehow. She will never get strong if she worries so much. I expect that between you you can find some way of amusing her."

"I might give her one of my comical recitations," observed Bessie Bunter gravely.

"I don't think she could stand that," smiled Babs.

"Oh, really—"

"Just something to keep her mind from brooding," said the doctor. "You understand what is wanted, of course. Is there anything that I can do for you this morning in the village?"

"Well, we thought of going into the village ourselves, sir," said Babs. "We have some letters to post and various things that must be got."

"Get ready, and I'll run you in in the car," offered the doctor.

"Thanks awfully, sir," said Babs.

"How many for the shopping expedition, girls? Where is Marjorie Hazeldere?"

"Mending those curtains that were torn by the wind," smiled Clara.

"Vivienne Leigh?"

"Washing up—with Katie Smith and Lucy Morgan," said someone.

"How about you, Clara?"

"I've got some wood to chop!"

"Bessie?"

"I can't possibly think of leaving my kitchen," said Bessie, with an air of ponderous importance.

"Annabel?"

"What? Think of gadding about when these

floors haven't been swept for weeks?" asked Annabel in horrified accents.

The doctor broke into a hearty laugh.

"I think you'd better cast lots for it," he said. "That will be quickest when you have such a hive of energy here!"

But volunteers were soon found without that expedient, as it happened. Mabel Lynn and Gwendoline Cook had little to do, and Phyllis Howell and Philippa Derwent declared that



Intent on exploring her stove, Babs had already touched it; and the next thing she knew was that a perfect shower of soot descended on to her upturned face.

they must have a breath of fresh air. In a very little while they were all wrapped up and seated in the doctor's car, while from the front door Babs called last directions about purchases, and Bessie Bunter had similar remarks to make from the back door.

"We'll bring plenty of something!" promised Phyllis Howell, laughing.

The car sped away and Babs closed the door. The steady clank of Annabel's brush against the

dustpan went on without interruption, but the others were waiting.

"We've certainly got to think of some way of backing up our patients," said Barbara, with a wry smile. "Poor Ciszy! What a pity that she has such a weight on her mind at such a time!"

"And Miss Meadows. Will her memory really come back, I wonder?" speculated Peggy softly.

"I wish the doctor had heard something about her relations," said Babs. "But no one in the village seems to know anything about her. Isn't it just a queer position?"

"We'll have to get our brains to work and think of something," said Clara, knitting her brows.

"Jolly mean of you!" came the echo of an indignant voice from the back of the house.

The girls looked at each other, smiling.

"There you are—I've just told you the most comical part of my comical recitation and you never smiled at all!" said Bessie Butler's aggrieved voice. "I won't recite again while you're washing up!"

"Thank goodness for that!" came Katie Smith's chuckle.

"I'm afraid that we shall have to count Bessie out of the entertainment line," chuckled Clara. "The worst of her is that she isn't a bit funny when she tries to be; it's only when she's serious that she's such a scream!"

"It's quite true," said Dolly Jolting. "Clara, can't you do something to back Ciszy up? Go up and have a yarn with her. I'm sure she's fond of you!"

"I'll try," said Clara.

"That's the way!" said Babs more brightly. "We'll make it a point after this of not giving either of them a chance to brood. Very soon—Hallo, what's that?"

A spluttering noise came from the drawing-room.

Babs ran into the room with most of the others at her heels, and pulled up in astonishment. From that colloquial and outspoken young lady, Clara, came the emphatic utterance:

"Well, I'm jiggered!"

There was a kettle on the fire, and the water was boiling over. But neither of the two girls, who were banging in the room with books in their hands, was taking any notice of it.

"Marcia Loftus and Nancy Bell!" murmured the astonished girls.

"Kettle's boiling, my ladies!" announced Clara, in a sarcastic voice.

Marcia Loftus looked up, and frowned.

"We'll look after that," she said.

"Yes, but it's boiling all over the hearth that I've cleaned up!" said Clara.

"Oh, bother the hearth!" said Marcia. "Can't you leave us alone and get on with your amusements?"

"My word!" said Clara, nearly speechless.

Babs looked round the room, a spot of colour in each cheek.

"Marcia and Nancy—it's really too bad of you, when everyone's trying to do something!" she exclaimed. "You were the last down to breakfast, and here you are, sitting reading and getting ready to make tea for yourselves, I suppose?"

"Can't you leave us alone?" grumbled Marcia in her ill-tempered way. "We're not keen on rushing about and getting a lot of honour—that sort of thing isn't in our line! We're not worrying anyone here."

"Keeping out of your way nicely, I think," said Nancy Bell with a lazy yawn.

Clara took drastic action. She picked up a cushion and simply hauled it at the recumbent Nancy!

"Oh!" came a startled cry.

"Now get up and do something!" said Clara in a bottled voice.

Nancy Bell patted her hair and glared at Clara.

"If you think——"

"Yes, we do!" said Clara. "Come on, girls! We're not going to act as maids for these two idlers! If they haven't got the decency to do something themselves we'll help them. What shall we do with them?"

"Attach them to Annabel Hickers!" said Dolly Jolting delightedly.

There was a peal of laughter at that suggestion.

"Just the very thing, Dolly!" exclaimed Barbara. "We'll tell Annabel that they're to do just whatever she tells them, and if they don't we'll take them out and roll them in the snow!"

"Rather!"

Marcia leapt to her feet and faced the others with glimmering, greenish eyes.

"You're not going to bully us!" she cried.

"Not bully—just keep you out of mischief!" smiled Clara. "Come on, the dregs! Come and report yourselves to Annabel Hickers!"

"I'm not going to meddle about on my hands and knees to please any of you!" said Marcia furiously.

"Just where you're mistaken, dear!" said Clara sweetly. "Come along!—Off to Annabel!"

Marcia hacked away, but not quickly enough. Clara held her wrist. She pulled her forward,



Philippa
Dressent

and there was no lack of willing hands to assist her.

Marcia struggled quite unavailingly after that. That exhibition of absolute lassitude had really been too much for the girls. The two, who were content to enjoy themselves while everyone else was working, were led unceremoniously from the drawing-room.

"I won't do anything, anyway!" panted Marcia.

"Then quick march for the snow!" chuckled Clara. "Come along, girls!"

Marcia was led speedily in the direction of the back door, and Nancy Bell was brought in her wake.

Through the kitchen windows the snow glistened white and unmelting.

"Beautiful drift over there where we can roll them!" smiled Clara. "Bessie, just open the door so that we can—"

"Leave me alone—I won't be put in the snow!" quivered Marcia.

"Are you going to work?" countered Clara.

"Y-y-yes," came the trembling answer.

"And you, Nancy?"

"If—I'm bulled into it!" said Nancy spitefully.

"Put it that way, if you like!" said Clara gleefully. "Annabel, where are you? Two new converts, Annabel!"

Annabel appeared in the doorway with a mop in her hand.

"Marcia and Nancy want to work with you this morning, Annabel!" announced Clara. "They're going to do just whatever you want them to get on with next! If they look like going to sleep at all, just tell us."

Annabel blinked in amazement.

"Marcia and Nancy want to work?" she ejaculated.

"Not exactly 'want,' perhaps," conceded Clara. "But it's either that or the snow, you see! Just tell us if they want any correction!"

The light of understanding dawned in Annabel's eyes.

Proud, countenanced and stouter as she might be, Annabel loved fair play in her own way. She knew that Marcia and Nancy were "slackers" by nature, and they were never friends of hers. Her eyes lit with triumph.

"Very good," she said. "Marcia and Nancy, fill you those pails with hot water and follow me!"

Dolly jolting nearly exploded.

"Good for you, Annabel!" cheered Clara.

"I—I won't!" chattered Marcia impotently.

"You sha'n't order me—"

But she changed her mind almost at the same moment. It may have been the expression on Clara's face that influenced Marcia. She turned without a word and filled her pail, and Nancy Bell followed her example. Shaking with laughter the girls watched them follow the homely Annabel to some fresh scene of action that she had discovered in the old house.

"The best revenge we've ever had on them—it's priceless!" sobbed Katie Smith. "Annabel will make them work, too! She wouldn't have missed a chance like this for worlds, I'm sure!"

And there was more laughter in Midside that morning than there had been for weeks! Everyone went to have a peep at "Annabel's Squad," and noted the efficient way in which she managed her subordinates. Clara told Cissy Clare about it, and really made her laugh. And before Mabel Lyon and the others had been back from the village a couple of minutes they were led to the spot where the two slackers were working under considerable protest!

Marcia and Nancy did not take everything meekly. They made two determined efforts to desert their able leader, but were frustrated each time, and with Clara obviously eager to exact the "snow penalty," they chose the lesser evil. But their tempers were not good when lunch time came at length, and they sat down to Bessie Bunter's meal with faces that were expressive if nothing else.

The meal was a jolly one, the remarks of Marcia and Nancy not being in any way missed. The girls had all worked well during the morning, and they felt that now that comfort had been restored they could afford to rest. It was possible that Annabel's stern sense of duty would not let her pause whilst in a maid's house, but they were not worrying about that.

"We've really got to do something to amuse our patients this afternoon, girls," Babs said. "Any suggestions?"

"My comical recitations——" began Bessie Bunter gravely.

"Not quite suitable—not to-day, at any rate, Bessie," said Babs, keeping a straight face with an effort. "Look here, girls, the Fourth Form chair is here in full strength. We might sing something in the hall. It would sound rather nice in the bedrooms. I suggest that for a start, anyway."

It seemed quite a popular suggestion with everyone, and they fell to discussion. It was a discussion, however, in which Bessie did not join. The fat girl of the party was thinking seriously. She had a confidence in her own musical abilities which was considerable, and although no one else



Phyllis Howell

shared that confidence, it did not daunt Bessie Bunter.

With a strange and abstracted gleam in her eye she left the table unobserved when the meal was over, and went upstairs. The scraping sound that came almost immediately afterwards was, unhappily, also unobserved.

Babs was musing the Fourth Form choir in the hall at the time.

"Something nice and lively for a start, I think," she said. "Now, what can we do? A chorus from the 'Mitsade' would be rather nice. We might— Oh!"

Barbara stared up the stairs. Everyone else was staring. They had heard a most unusual and most unexpected noise in this old house.

"Whatever was that?" breathed superstitious Gwen at once.

Twang! Twangy-twang! TWANG!

"Der-heen yee-ander green-heen ver-halley—"

A voice that was rather rosy and distinctly unmusical was chanting a very exaggerated version of "The Ash Grove," interrupted rather than accompanied by the still more unmusical twanging of a harp.

"Bessie Bunter!" breathed Babs in amazement.

"Where stree-come-hets mee-he hander—"

Bessie Bunter's solo got no farther. A crowd of girls swept up the stairs and removed her, protesting volubly, from the harp that she had dragged to the gallery over the front door.

"My—my solo, you know—jolly good idea of mine—you oughtn't to be jealous!" expostulated Bessie. "I really think—"

But Bessie had no time to say what she really thought. The others wanted to say the same thing, and they had the advantage of numbers. They said it in no uncertain manner.

"My dears!" called a gentle voice.

"My word! Miss Meadows!" exclaimed Babs. "Oh, Bessie, Miss Meadows has heard you and—"

"Would you mind bringing the harp to me here, please?" called that voice.

"We must!" said Babs, and they lifted the magnificent harp between them and bore it to Miss Meadows's room.

"Those few chords—how they have made me wish to play!" sighed the memoryless lady as she sat up in bed. "If you have no objection, my dears, it would be so pleasant for me."

"Delighted, Miss Meadows, I'm sure," said Barbara readily.

The thin hands strayed over the strings, and the melody they had heard before—the wonderful, throbbing chords that had come so faintly to their ears while they waited for Miss Meadows

to bring the promised food—filled the room. It seemed to hold them as by some charm. Even aggrieved Bessie Bunter was caught under a spell.

How long they stood, fascinated, they could not tell. Peggy was the one who first heard a faint little gasp from the passage. She turned, looked through the half-open door, and saw—Cissy Clare!

"Cissy! Whatever are you doing here, out of your bed?" Peggy cried, as she ran to the trembling girl's side. "You can hardly walk, dear. And you know—"

Cissy nodded, clutching vaguely at the bed-trade.

"That music—I know it so well!" she muttered. "So many times I have heard that tune and—and it reminds me—"

She could not go on. Peggy saw the glistening tears rolling down her face. Very gently and sympathetically she helped Cissy back to her room.

"I'm dreaming—I know I am!" Cissy muttered when, once back in her bed, she started up again at a swelling chord. "I know this is not real—that I don't really see the things that I seem to, and—"

Peggy Fruton stood tense and erect, almost as though turned to stone.

The music of the harp ceased abruptly.

Thump, thump, thump! echoed loudly and reverberatingly through the old house. Thump, thump!

And then a voice—a voice that cried from outside the front door:

"Open the door whoever you are—open it at once! I demand admittance! Open the door!"

CHAPTER VIII

STRANGE CALLERS

WITH palpitating heart and a strange pallor, Barbara Radfern went running down the stairs.

Some of the girls were behind her, but a good many had stayed with Miss Meadows and with Cissy Clare. Their doors were closed now. But surely that rough banging and the angry voice of the man outside must still carry to them!

Who could it be? What did it mean? Why this sudden interruption that had so terrified Miss Meadows and scared them all?

Thump, thump!

"I know there's someone in the house—I've seen the smoke!" shouted the voice as Babs ran along the hall. "Open the door and come out, whoever you are!"

Barbara Radfern did the catch and opened the door just sufficiently to look out. Her heart

kept. Three men, muffled in shabby overcoats, were standing on the steps!

"Oh!" gasped Babs, and that was all.

The leader—the short, concoidal-looking little man who had evidently been plying the knocker, was almost as surprised as Babs was.

"What do you want, coming here and making such a noise?" Barbara exclaimed, recovering her presence of mind. "Who are you?"

The man stared, his eyes wide with astonishment.

"I'd like to know who you are!" he retorted.

"My name is Barbara Roffern," said Babs.

"Appen to 'ave bought this 'ouse?" was the sarcastic question.

"I don't know what you mean," said Babs curily.

"You soon will—and you'll 'ave to tell me what you're doing 'ere, too!" said the blustering and unpleasant caller. "Do you know who I am? I'm a bailiff!"

"Oh!" gasped Babs. "But—but——"

"I've come 'ere to take possession of an empty 'ouse, and I finds it occupied!" went on the swaggering little fellow. "But I've got all the papers in my pocket, and I'll trouble you to open

that door and let me come in and take possession!"

"You must be out of your senses!" gasped Babs.

"Eh? What's that?"

"This house is called Moonside—you must have come to the wrong place! I'm sure you've made a mistake," said Babs desperately.

A fat knacker wagged at Babs.

"Made a mistake? Me?" cried the little man. "You'll be telling me next that the lady who owned this 'ouse ain't deceased, eh?"

"Sssh!" said Babs, her face turning as white as chalk. "Oh, how can you come and say such a dreadful thing——"

"Eh?" interrupted the man.

"You—you come and say such a thing as that, here!" Babs went on. "If you don't go away immediately I shall telephone for the police! How dare you come and say such a thing!"

The bailiff stood glaring.

"Fetch the police—for me?" he stammered.

"Yes! To come here and say such a wicked thing when the owner of the house is upstairs!"



"Kettle's boiling, my ladies!" announced Clara, in a sarcastic voice. Marcia Lottan looked up, and frowned. "We'll look after that," she said. "Yes, but it's boiling all over the hearth that I've cleaned up!" said Clara

"You won't tell me a story like that!" sneered the man.

"What do you mean?"

"Why, I ain't took in like that! The lady we got owned this 'ouse died some time ago, and—"

"Go away!" panted Babs, terrified lest those words should carry upstairs.

A large and heavy boot was wedged against the door.

"I'm coming in——"

"Help!" panted Babs to her charms. "He's trying to get in!"

Clara, Phyllis, and Flap Derwent rallied to her aid at once. They pushed on the door, and pushed hard. There was a startled yelp from outside. The door closed sharply and latched, and Babs flung the top and bottom bolts into position.

"You've cast me out, 'ave you?" bellowed the bullfinch's voice.

No one replied.

"I shall come again—I'll bring police the next time! You sha'n't treat me like this, and you'll know all about it when I do come. The game's up, and you better understand that—living in someone else's 'ouse and making free like this!"

The girls exchanged looks of sheer bewilderment.

They were so utterly at a loss to account for this extraordinary visit that none of them spoke.

They did not see the two figures that crept from the back of the hall and went towards the kitchen.

"Someone trying to get in!" breathed Marcia Loftus to her friend Nancy Bell. "My word! It would make Babs look small if we let them in at the back after all, wouldn't it? There must be something in what they say, coming in daylight like this!"

"I'm fed-up with stopping here, anyway," agreed Nancy, and they hurried on, too-carried away by their own spitefulness to reflect on the plan that had darted into their heads.

The others, standing in the hall, watched through a stained glass window as the three men went away.

"Look! They're turning!" said Clara, with sudden intensity. "See! That blustering little man is pointing to something! Now they've all turned! Girls, they're going to try and get through the back door!"

"They must never get in here!" breathed Babs. "We must stop them somehow—oh, we must! If Miss Meadows should hear what that man was saying——"

She darted off without finishing her sentence. They found the back door open. Out in the

snowy garden Marcia Loftus and Nancy Bell were standing together, grinning.

"Marcia and Nancy!" said Babs in a hollow voice.

The two girls looked up and their cheeks went scarlet with sudden confusion.

"Why, they must have beckoned those men to come round this way—that's what it means!" said Clara in a horrified voice.

"What—what if we have?" asked Marcia, trembling.

"Marcia!"

"After all, we're all strangers here, and you ought, at least, to see that man's papers——"

She broke off. There was no time to frisk. The three men appeared between the spot where the girls stood and the back door.

Babs was the one to come to the instant decision necessary.

"They musn't get in, girls!" she gasped. "Quickly! Snowballs! We'll beat them off like that!"

Katie Smith uttered a yell that would have shamed one of the fiction characters in whose wild exploits she was known to delight.

"At them!"

The men stopped, staring. And in that instant the Cliff House party acted. Twelve girls were clutching handfuls of snow. Twelve snowballs whizzed through the air. It was an attack that made the men jump back in surprise and dismay.

"Back to the house!" cried Babs.

The girls made a rush immediately. The leader of the men uttered a rallying cry at the same moment. But he was just too late.

Helter-skelter the girls poured back into the house, and the last one slammed and bolted the door just as a powerful hand grasped at the door-knob.

"Open this door!"

The girls were not likely to obey that summons, however, and the man seemed to understand that. While Babs and her charms waited in the kitchen, they heard his mutter to his companions. Then, through a side-window, they saw the men departing again.

"Perhaps they've gone this time, but we must watch for them," said Babs, breathing hard. "But who are they in reality? Why did they come?"

Clara looked with withering scorn at the two shivering girls who had been caught in the garden.

"Thanks to two traitors they nearly got in!" she said bitterly.

"We—we didn't mean anything," quavered Marcia. "We—we thought it would be a joke.

We didn't think. And they haven't got in, anyway."

Barbara Redfern gazed at the two disappointed Fourth Formers, and could only shrug her shoulders.

"Like Marcia, and Nancy, of course," she said bitterly. "What a hindrance they've proved all the time. And they'd have let those men in

"Not really. Oh, can't you take a joke?" cried Nancy Bell, thoroughly understanding at last how serious things might have proved. "We only did it to score off you because you made us work this morning. I—I don't know about Marcia, but I—I won't do such a thing again."
"Nor will I!" promised Marcia.

Babs and the others left them without speaking. In the hall they found Peggy Preston, and two or three of those who had remained upstairs.

"Whatever was it?" asked Peggy's scared voice.

Babs told her as briefly as possible.

"Thank goodness that talk couldn't be heard upstairs, anyway," breathed Peggy, looking more anxious than ever. "I believe I've made Miss Meadows think that it was just a tradesman, but she seems very strange, and she won't play the harp any more."

From an upstairs window they watched the three men trudging back in the direction of the village, Moorsley Fen. They were more puzzled than ever to account for the strange statements made so positively by the blustering man who had demanded admission.

"I can't understand it, I really can't," Babs said, after they had discussed all sorts of possibilities. "I'm going to ring up Doctor Smith and speak to him."

But Doctor Smith was as mystified as they were. He said that he would keep a look-out for the men, and speak to them if he saw them; but he could not account for their presence.

It did not take matters much further, and it was very worrying for the girls who had taken charge of the house under such strange circumstances.

Quite a dampen fell on their spirits for the rest of the afternoon, try as they would to regain their old cheerfulness. The only girl who seemed really happy was Annabel, and Annabel had been far too busy with her flannels and pad even to heed the dramatic visit of the balliff and his men.

A snow-fight planned for that afternoon was not held. Marjorie Hazekens, busy with her needle as was her wont, seemed strangely slow and uncertain. To complete all the disasters, the

cake that Bessie Barter made for tea was flut and burnt—an almost unheard-of thing for Bessie's cooking.

"Poor Miss Meadows!" sighed Peggy as she pecked at her portion of cake and finally pushed it to one side. "She seemed so gloomy when I took her up tea. And—"

"Sssh! Did you hear anything then?" exclaimed Babs, sitting up rigidly at the table.

"Hear what?" said several startled voices.

"A soft click like the closing of a latch," Babs said.

"I heard nothing."

"Nor did I!" said several voices.

"An upstairs door, perhaps?" suggested Babs.

But they could not rest after that. For five minutes, perhaps, they kept on the pretence of chatter and then Peggy rose.

"I'm going to see how Miss Meadows is getting on," she said as she left the room.

Almost instantly it seemed that Peggy returned, and at the first glimpse of her set white face everyone saw that something was wrong.

"Peggy, what has happened? What is the matter?" cried Babs as she leapt to her feet.

Like a bombshell came Peggy's breathless answer:

"Miss Meadows isn't in her room. She must have gone out while we were having tea and gone out."

CHAPTER IX

LIGHT AT LAST

In the stunned silence that fell on them all, Barbara Redfern said:

"Quickly, girls! We mustn't lose any time. Spread all over the house and let us find out if Miss Meadows has really gone."

They scattered instantly, and Peggy ran at Barbara's side as they explored the lower part of the building.

"It's my fault, I ought to have guessed, Babs," poor Peggy was saying. "Miss Meadows said something about not paying a tradesman, and not liking men shouting outside the house. I didn't think she would remember any more about the incident. Apparently she has. It must mean that she has got it on her mind, and gone out with the vague idea of paying some bill in the village."

Babs squeezed her arm.

"You couldn't know, dear," she murmured. "Anyway, Miss Meadows can't have much start of us, thanks to your promptitude. She's not down here, that is certain. And it doesn't seem



Clara Preston

It was hardly necessary for Babs to complete her utterance as she joined the girls who were streaming down the stairs to the hall. Their expressions told plainly enough that, although they had searched the house, there was no trace of its mistress.

"Two girls must stay here and look afteraisy." Babs muttered as she pulled on her hat and coat. "You all want to go, I know, but there's no time to argue. Gwen Cook and Lucy Morgan, will you stay, please?"

"If you wish it, look you," said the Welsh girl reluctantly, and Gwen nodded.

"Thanks very much. Now the rest of us can get away and search. Come on, girls. We must break into four parties, and go in different directions. After that we can spread out in single, star-shape. We're bound to come on Miss Meadows like that if we run!"

Pulling on their coats as they went, the startled girls poured out of the house and along the snow-covered carriage drive. None of them questioned the instant leadership that Barbara had assumed. They knew that they could rely on Babs to do the right thing.

"Six of us towards the village, that's only fair," said Babs, as they paused, panting, in the road. "Mabs, Peggy, Marjorie, Clara, Vivienne and myself. Phyllis, Flap, and Dolly had better choose the parties to go in other directions. Coming, girls?"

She was off at once and the five girls followed her with implicit obedience.

There had been no recent fall of snow. The lane was now marked with the tracks of several vehicles and several sets of footprints. But almost at once Mabel Lynn's sharp eyes detected the track of a walker whose shapely, pointed feet had left a shaky and erratic trail along the road.

"Miss Meadows?" she exclaimed as she pointed.

"Yes, I think it must be!" echoed Babs, quick to understand the tracks. "We shall do well to follow them, anyway!"

They ran along the road, all of them keeping sharp eyes on the footprints they had detected. Here and there they were lost, but with six to look it was an easy matter to find them again. A startled cry came from everyone when the tracks were seen suddenly to turn into a field, leaving an unmistakable trail as far as the tall, snow-covered hedge in the distance.

"A footpath—perhaps a short cut to the village!" breathed Babs. "We are not sure that these are Miss Meadows' tracks, but three of us must follow them. The three others had better go along the road. Mabs and Peggy, will you come with me?"

The party broke up without question. It was wise to scatter even though there seemed little doubt. Babs and her two chums went running across the field, while the others pressed on along the road.

But was there any doubt? How shaky and uneven were the prints; how they went from side to side, as though their owner had gone along hardly aware, herself, of what she was doing!

They could not run fast enough through the thick, clinging snow to reach the hedge that must surely be hiding from their sight the figure they sought!

"Ah!"

It was like the echo of a faint gasp that seemed suddenly to come to their straining ears. And then the sound as though someone fell.

"Goodness! Did you hear that?" breathed Mabel Lynn, going whiter than ever.

Babs set her teeth and did not speak. She had heard.

There was a gap in the hedge. They could see it now, and as one they tore on towards it. A low cry of horror rose to Barbara's lips as they passed on—and saw at last!

The footprints led across the spotless snow for twenty yards, and then ceased abruptly. In the surface of the snow was a yawning hole—nothing more was visible. But they all knew at once what had happened. Miss Meadows was somewhere beneath that!

There was no time for them even to hazard a guess at what had happened.

"Oh!" was the choking cry that came from Peggy Preston's throat, and that was all.

Babs kept forward.

"Babs—"

But no warning was needed. Babs knew that there must be some concealed hole or crevice that the snow had covered. She was ignorant of the nature of the ground, and must go with care. But she ran quickly until near the spot, then dropped to her knees and crawled.

Snow fell away from under her hands and she felt and saw a sharp edge of rock. Below was blackness.

Faint, infinitely pathetic, came a sigh of pain.

"Babs, can you see anything?" murmured Mabel Lynn, and the scared girls came crawling to their leader's side.

"Yes," said Babs quickly. "There is a sort of fissure here spanned by some planks. Miss Meadows must have missed them, and—ah! I—I can see her!"

Her eyes had become accustomed to the gloom. In the faint grey light reflected through the thick masses of the snowdrift she could see

broken rock, and a sort of ledge, and on that ledge was the figure of the woman they sought.

"Babs! Oh, be careful, dear!" implored Mabel Lynn. "Hold my girdle in case you slip, yourself!"

Babs took the grip gratefully. Already she had made up her mind and was acting. She could see a way of getting to Miss Meadows' side.

The snow fell away and the hole widened and lightened as Babs descended. They could all see Miss Meadows now, stretched on a rock and very still. But as Babs clambered to her side she moved a little and sighed again.

On the icy surface of the rock Barbara's foot slipped, and she would have fallen if she had not

Babs was trembling with her anxiety. But she noted something instantly. Miss Meadows seemed to move as one in no great pain. There was a faint streak of red on her forehead, but that was all.

"You have had a fall, Miss Meadows," said Babs softly. "Keep quite still, please. We will have you out in a moment." Swiftly she looked to the waiting girls six feet above her. "Tie all your girdles together and make a rope, girls. Belts, scarves—anything will do!"

They understood at once. A rope, made regardless of the damage they might do to their



Mabel Lynn's sharp eyes detected the track of a walker whose shapely pointed feet had left a shaky and erratic trail along the road. "Miss Meadows!" she exclaimed as she pointed

grasped with both hands at the girdle. But in another moment she had righted herself and taken fresh hold with her feet. She stood at last on the ledge. Right under her the fissure fell away to depths she could not see.

"Miss Meadows!"

The unhappy lady stirred at that very moment, so suddenly that Babs was almost taken off her guard. She grasped just in time; the convulsive movement that Miss Meadows made had nearly caused her to fall from her precarious position of semi-safety.

"Where—where am I?" asked a faint, dazed voice.

things, curled quickly down. Standing on the slippery ledge, making wonderful efforts to keep her balance, Babs tied the improvised rope under the lady's shoulders.

"Coming!" cried the voice of Clara Trevlyn, and Babs' heart bounded as she knew that Marjorie, Clara, and Vivienne had witnessed the scene from the road and were coming to help.

Again Miss Meadows was muttering, but the rope was tied now. Babs glanced up anxiously.

She heard voices above, and then a figure appeared. To test the rope and to lend assistance to her chum, Mabel Lynn was descending.

She stood suddenly on the ledge beside Babs, and they exchanged a silent handgrip.

"Thanks, Babs," was all Babs could say. Then she looked up again. "We are ready now. Pull, please!"

The improvised rope tightened. Babs and Mabs exerted themselves to the full limit of their strength. Inch by inch Miss Meadows was drawn up.

It was terribly hard work in the limited space for those standing on the slippery ledge. But luck seemed to aid them. They held Miss Meadows until those above could grasp her shoulders. They sighed with relief as she was lifted to safety at last. And then their own turn to be rescued came.

Breathless but safe, everyone was in the snowy field at last. Miss Meadows was very pale, and the crimson streak was more pronounced. Her eyes were closed, and she was silent now.

"Quickly, girls!" Babs muttered, as they would have pressed forward to congratulate her. "We must get Miss Meadows back to bed as quickly as possible! The doctor must come at once. I don't think she's seriously hurt, but——"

It was that "but" that made them act so quickly. They lifted Miss Meadows, and started off at their quickest pace for Moorside. And as they ran, their calls echoed far and wide on the still air to tell the others that, in a measure, the chase had been successful.

Girls were rallying from all directions when they reached Moorside again. In breathless sentences the girls explained what had happened before they hurried the unhappy lady inside and carried her to her room.

What silent activity followed in the old house! While Freda was telephoning for the doctor, Annabel Dickens came with spotless, warm blankets and two hot-water bottles. She would have made mustard plasters if she had not been dissuaded.

Even Bessie Banter excelled herself in bringing a hot drink containing sal volatile from the medicine cupboard.

And Miss Meadows? Very quiet and still at first, there was now a slight change in her as Babs bathed the wound on her forehead and tended the black bruise that was beginning to appear. As the girls watched in such a breathless and scared body, they saw that something was happening.

First the colour came to her pale cheeks. Her eyes, not so vague and vacant now, were flickering open. She looked at the girls—wonderingly. Words left her lips.

"Where am I? What has happened? Why are so many of you standing there? I—I don't understand."

"You have had an accident, Miss Meadows," said Babs, gently.

"Yes? My head aches—I know that," came the reply in a stronger voice. "But surely I am not in my own home? I—I can't make out what has happened——"

A soft voice was heard muttering in the passage. A shuffling step came towards the room.

"It's Cissy—she's out of bed again!" muttered Faggy. "Oh, Babs——"

"Cissy!"

Miss Meadows sat upright in bed, her eyes wide open, her lips curved in a smile.

"Cissy? You don't mean Cissy, my little one——"

The words died in her throat. The door had opened. There, in the opening, stood Cissy Clare, wearing slippers and with a dressing-gown over her pyjamas.

She stood perfectly still for perhaps two breathless seconds. Then a wild cry left her lips—a cry so loud, so excited, that it caused every heart to leap.

"Auntie Mabel!"

"Cissy—Cissy, my dear!" cried Miss Meadows.

She would have risen from the bed, but Cissy was across the room in a flash. They clasped in each others' arms and kissed and hugged, while the tears streamed down their faces.

"Auntie Mabel! Oh, auntie—gentle!" choked Cissy's voice. "I didn't know—I never guessed before. We all thought—oh, auntie! It's wonderful—too good to be true! Tell me I am not dreaming!"

"My darling, I think I must have been dreaming!" whispered Miss Meadows.

They clung to each other still in that wonderful embrace.

"Auntie Mabel! Oh, I can't believe it, even now!" sobbed Cissy. "To think, as we all did, that—oh, I can't say the words! I can't!"

"I don't understand," murmured Miss Meadows, as she returned the other's passionate embrace. "Something has happened—I know that. But what is it? It seems that I have been sleeping for weeks. Why am I in my own home? Why have I not gone for that sea-trip? Surely——"

There was a firm step on the stairs. Dr. Smith appeared at the door. To him Babs ran, trembling with tears in her eyes, and gripped his sleeve.

"Doctor—oh, you've come at last!" she said huskily. "Something wonderful has happened; you'll see it for yourself! Oh, doctor, I believe that Miss Meadows has found her memory again."

From the bed a voice, clear and confident, exclaimed:

"Why, it's Doctor Smith! Doctor, I'm

absolutely bewildered! Can you tell me what-
ever has happened?"

The doctor turned for a moment to hide the
emotion that suddenly gripped him. But it was
not necessary. There was not a dry eye in the
room.

CHAPTER X.

"AND SO THEY LIVED—"

WHAT a wonderful, festive meal it was that a
merry party partook in Moorside just
twenty-four hours later! A meal such as
Bessie Hunter had never cooked before in all her
life—a meal to which everyone was going to do
full justice.

The mystery was a mystery no longer. Miss
Meadows, although still weak, was nevertheless
in possession of all her faculties and on the road
to health again. It was the shock of the accident
and the blow to her head that had restored her,
said Dr. Smith.

She had been allowed to attend this jolly meal
to celebrate the happy termination of every-
thing, and there she sat, with Cissy by her side,
propped in an easy chair beside the roaring fire.
And Cissy, so wonderfully recovered that she was
almost herself again, had no eyes for anyone but
her Auntie Mabel—no voice for any but the ears
that she had believed would never hear her
again.

It was all explained, and simply at that.
Auntie Mabel, as they all called her now, could
remember closing her house before taking the sea-
trip. Quite alone, she had been in the very act
of descending to the telephone to order a car
to fetch her, when she must have fallen and
sustained the blow that robbed her of her memory.

She had recovered, probably after lying un-
conscious for some time, to remember nothing.
She did not even know that there were no maids
in the house. For more than a fortnight she
must have been living the bewildered existence in
which the girls had found her—starting cookery
that was never finished, playing upon her harp,
doing fancywork that was dropped anywhere
and never thought of again.

Now she had managed to get enough to eat
from the garden and the pantry still arranged
all, but it was evident that she must have gone
very short indeed during that time. And so she
had lived on with no one to suspect that Moorside
was not an empty house—a house with that
poor, memoryless tenant tottering on through
the days that came and went.

By a mistake, but an understandable one
owing to the hurried departure of the ill-fated
steamer that had foundered, Cissy Clare's parents
had been informed that Auntie Mabel must have
perished with the luckless crew of the ill-fated

steamer. They had had no cause to think other-
wise; there had been no clue to tell them the
truth. It was by their reluctant action that the
bailiffs had come to take possession of what they
thought was an empty house; they were not
likely to come again.

For Mr. and Mrs. Clare were here now, and
other relations. Dr. Smith was present, as well.
And the Cliff House party were in full strength,
and in the very best of spirits. Only Annabel
Hickens wore a gloomy expression, and that,
perhaps, because she had heard that a new staff
of maids was to appear on the morrow!

"A health! I must propose a health!" cried
jolly Mr. Clare. "It is to Barbara, I am sure, that
we must all feel eternally grateful. But for her
courage and resource Auntie Mabel might not
have been here now. To Barbara Redfern!"

"Hurrah!" came a cheer, and with clinking
glasses the toast was drunk while Bobs alone sat,
blushing and silent.

"Speech, Bobs!" they pressed her, and the
cry became so insistent that at last she had to
rise.

"Thank you—everybody!" Barbara said,
still blushing. "I don't really deserve it—I'm
sure I've done nothing more than any other girl
would have done. I think that the whole adven-
ture for all of us has been just wonderful—I can't
put it any other way. This is a day that I am sure
some of us will ever forget. We didn't like it when
that motor-coach broke down, but I think that
we must all vote it now the finest piece of luck
we've ever had. Here's to Auntie Mabel—may
she live long and happily and soon be quite
restored to health!"

They drank the toast with acclamation. And
then there were more speeches and more replies,
and soon the fun was waxing fast and furious.
The night passed all too quickly for everyone.
But was that to be wondered at?

By the next morning the adventure was over.
School called, and Bobs knew that the time had
come for them to return to Cliff House now that
Moorside was re-staffed and Mr. and Mrs. Clare
were staying until Miss Meadows and Cissy were
quite well again.

"Good-bye—good-bye, all!" Auntie Mabel
cried, as the motor-cars were ready at last to take
them all to the station. "You must come again
just as soon as you can. And thank you for all
you've done! Thank you—with all my heart!"

"Good-bye—good-bye!" they called, and a
flood of other messages that just jumbled into one
parting cheer. And then they were off, with at
least one—Bessie Hunter—making great use of
her handkerchief. Bessie herself said that a fly
must have got into her eye, but it is doubtful.