

THE MORCOWE TUCK-SHOP KEEPERS

AN EARLY
ADVENTURE OF
BETTY BARTON & Co
BY
MARJORIE
STANTON



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MRS TUBBS SAYS-

"My Dears,—I'm all that flustered and put about that I don't know what to do. It's this Thursday business again. Oh, aren't I glad that Thursday only comes once in the week. Yes, I get this every Thursday the same—a crowd of schoolgirls, all as excited as though they're going to a tea-party, swarming into my shop and shouting: 'SCHOOL FRIEND! SCHOOL FRIEND!' Here, this way with mine, Mrs. Tubbs," and sich-like till I don't know whether I stands on me head or me heels. They fair turn my shop inside out, they do!

"Thursday is SCHOOL FRIEND day, you know—the day the paper's published. All the girls go mad about it, though you can't blame the dears for that, I'm sure, 'cos it's the best

paper for schoolgirls you can get, in my opinion. The girls about here—why, I finds 'em actually waiting on my doorstep before I open the shop in the mornings; and when I do—oh, dear! I've sold out this week's issue a'ready, and I haven't had my breakfast yet!

"As usual, we've had to repeat our order, and I expect the whole performance will have to be gone over again when word gets round among those as haven't got their copies yet. Oh, yes, it's a trial, is Thursday; but, bless you, I don't *really* mind, for it fair does my old heart good to see the way them girls enjoy that paper. If you don't read it, you ought to. Give me an order now, and I'll get it for you every Thursday."

EVERY WEEK "THE SCHOOL FRIEND" CONTAINS:—

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THE MORCOVE TUCK-SHOP KEEPERS!



A Magnificent Story of the Early
Adventures of BETTY BARTON
& Co., of Morcove School.

By MARJORIE STANTON

Author of "FROM DESERT TO MORCOVE," "THE CIRCUS GIRL OF MORCOVE," "A
DISGRACE TO MORCOVE," etc., etc.

CHAPTER 1.

Turned Out of the Meeting.

TWO o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon—always a halfer at Morcove School.

It was an hour for getting away to tennis, cricket, or any of the other sports and pastimes in full swing during summer term, and most of the Fourth Form girls who were now making their way downstairs carried tennis-rackets or some other bit of sporting "gear."

Yet they did not go direct to the open air.

Instead, they turned aside on the ground floor of the great school, slipping, one after another, into a small hall usually set apart for lectures or scholars' meetings.

It was going to be no staid lecture for the Form this afternoon—that was evident!

Even when the hall door was shut one heard the buzz of many tongues. When the door opened sharply, to let somebody in or out, the din became a sudden uproar!

Nobody, however, belonging to another Form was attracted to the spot. The whole school knew that this was merely the commotion inseparable from any Fourth Form general meeting.

"Girls!"

That was Betty Barton, the Form captain vociferating the one word above all the babel of tongues.

Now that almost the entire Form was here the laughter and chatter had reached

its climax. Now, too, Betty supposed, they might fairly make a start.

"Girls!"

"Hurrah! Up, the Fourth!"

It was unthinkable that any general meeting should begin without the whole Form first giving a cheer for its noble self.

"Yes, wather!" simpered Paula Creel, the amiable swell girl of the Form. "I quite agree. One feels, don't you know, that an occasion of this sort——"

"Paula, you seem to be fond of hearing your own voice!" laughed madcap Polly Linton, ever the one to tease the swell girl. "Suppose you take the chair?"

"What! Me take the cheah?" cried Paula.

"Yes, wah—ther!" The whole Form mimicked her familiar drawl. "Ha, ha, ha! Go ahead, Paula!"

"If you will kindly show me the cheah," said Paula, looking very flattered, "I shall be most gwatified to officiate."

"Who's got the bell?" screamed Polly. "Etta, give it a ring!"

So Etta Hargrove swung the small hand bell until its jangle-jangle fairly drowned all other sounds.

"Good!" commented Betty Barton, when at last the uproar had been more or less quelled. "Now, Paula, since you want to take the chair——"

"Yes, wather! Howevah, wheah is the cheah?" said Paula, looking round.

There was no chair, as it turned out. To

officiate properly, Paula must stand on a table.

"Theank you!" Paula murmured, setting herself to rights after being hoisted up.

"Weal, geals——"

"Hurrah!"

"Yes, wather! Pwecisely!" beamed the swell girl. "Howevah, if you will kindly wefwain from cheahing at this pwesent moment, I will pwesume to make a few twifling intwoductory wemarks."

"That die!" murmured Polly loudly.

"Why doesn't someone fetch one."

"Unaccustomed as I am to public speaking——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I say, geals, unaccustomed as I am to public——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" the girls yelled again, amused by Paula's use of this stock phrase.

"Weally, bai Jove! Naow, geals, order! I wather fancy, don't you know, you are all aweah," said Paula, "of the weason for this meeting. Yes, wather! The weason for this meeting, geals, is that there is a weason for holding it."

"You don't say so?" chuckled Polly.

"Therefore," continued the swell girl, "as I was wemarking, unaccustomed——"

But the audience simply would not stand another repetition of that time-worn phrase. A howl went up.

Somebody pushed somebody else, who pushed against the table.

Then another howl went up—one of a different kind. It was Paula's, as she lost her balance and had to take a flying leap from the "platform."

"Hurrah! Bravo, Paula—capital!" applauded the audience, just as if Paula really had made a wonderful speech.

"Did I do all wight?" Paula simpered.

"Splendidly!" Polly and a few others assured her. "The way you fell off that table—— Ha, ha, ha! Yes; up, Betty! Now the captain! Hurrah!"

It was no sense of self-importance that had induced Betty Barton to mount the table to claim the audience's attention.

All the time Paula was talking such nonsense the girls had known that the real business of the meeting would begin when Betty was standing there.

So the moment Paula fell off the table quite a number of girls had pushed the captain towards it, urging her to "get on with the business!"

"Well," cried Betty, after taking a deep

breath, "if this meeting isn't over in less than ten minutes, I shall be sorry. Such a jolly afternoon—we all want to be out of doors, therefore I mean to cut the talk as short as possible."

"No, no!" dissented the girls.

They knew that the meeting had been caused for a very laudable purpose, and they were quite willing to give Betty a lengthy hearing.

"I took upon myself to call this meeting. A bit of cheek, perhaps——"

"No, no!"

"Thanks! Well, here we are, anyhow, and I do feel proud to see such a big gathering!" Betty went on. "That alone tells me you are going to back me up over my scheme, for I know you have all got an inkling as to what it is about."

"Hear, hear! Yes, wather! Bravo, Betty!"

"You all know," went on the captain, "that the school tuckshop, down by the gateway, is closed to-day on account of poor Mrs. Marlow, who runs it, being laid up."

A murmur answered the speaker. All flippancy had died away, giving place to deep sympathy the moment Betty referred to old Mrs. Marlow, the good dame who for years had combined the duties of gatekeeper with the business of a small tuckshop.

Close to the gatekeeper's tidy lodge, yet almost out of sight of people going to and fro on the main drive, there was a small outbuilding, and here Mrs. Marlow had been in the habit for years of retailing cakes, lemonade, etc., at certain official times of the day.

"It is good to know that her illness is nothing serious," Betty went on with feeling. "But it has meant her going into the school san., to be nursed up a bit, and meanwhile—there's the tuckshop shut up! And here are we and all the rest of the school with nowhere nearer than Barncombe to buy refreshments when we want them. I——"

"What rot it all is!" interrupted a loud, hostile voice suddenly, and all turned to see Cora Grandways standing just inside the doorway, with her sister Judith.

"Order, order!" a number of girls cried sharply.

Betty resumed before the hostile couple could create the uproar they no doubt wanted to cause.

"My idea is, girls," said Betty simply, "we will run the tuckshop ourselves."

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove——"

"Ripping notion!"

"Piffle!" came Cora and Judith's sneering comment at the end of all the applause.

"You girls——"

"Order, order!"

"Anybody is perfectly free to raise any objections when I have finished," said Betty. "I shan't be a moment now. I just want to say that before calling this meeting I had an interview with Miss Somerfield and she——"

"Bravo!"

"And she gave the idea her whole-hearted support."

"Hurrah! Well done, Betty! Cheers for the headmistress! Hooray! Hip, hip, hooray!"

"We have full permission to run the tuckshop on a sort of co-operative plan——"

"Hark to the Lancashire kid!" sneered Cora, speaking loudly to her sister.

"I'm Lancashire, yes!" said Betty. "I come from the same town where your home is, the town where your father made his money."

"We are not Lancashire!" snapped Judith.

"All Lancashire knows that—and is thankful!" said Betty, whereupon a great roar of laughter went up at the sisters' expense.

"Yes," Betty continued, laughing herself, "we have permission to run the tuckshop if we want to, and all I want to know is—are you in favour? If so—— But before we have hands up, we had better hear objections. Now, Cora!"

"Oh, I've no fine speeches to make!" shrugged the elder sister. "I only know it is all piffle, this idea of running the tuckshop. If old Mother Marlow is ill, let some other person run the show."

"Somebody else from outside will naturally want to stick to the profits, or most of them," was Betty's prompt reply. "We are not out for profits. Any we make we shall just put aside for Mrs. Marlow's benefit when——"

"Hear, hear!"

"I can see you making profits!" scoffed Cora Grandways, with another shrug. "A fine notion you have of running a show like that! Who do you think is going to buy the stale pastry you'll be landed with?"

"This thing is an experiment, girls,"

Betty answered again. "We are going to give it a trial——"

"Hear, hear!"

"Those in favour!" sang out a round dozen of them, shooting up their hands.

Up went the hands of all the rest in a flash—all save Cora and Judith.

"Carried!" declared Betty promptly.

"Next thing, then. It shouldn't take a minute. We must have a committee, who will be responsible for everything."

"Our noble captain!" proposed Cora sarcastically.

Polly and a few others looked as if they would like to put Cora and Judith out of the room—head first!

"Oh, it's all right!" sneered Cora, smiling maliciously. "We are going."

"You had better!"

"Yes, wather!"

"We haven't the least desire to see who is put on the committee," Cora said, moving very slowly towards the door. "It will be the usual gang, no doubt!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Madge Minden hotly. "Has anybody anything to gain by being elected to the committee? Does it mean anything but a good deal of bother—trouble that will be shouldered willingly——"

Madge's fierce outburst seemed for the moment to have reduced the carping Grandways to silence.

But after a telling pause the elder sister spoke.

"Well," she said, with that pasty smile of hers, "I suppose the committee will have the handling of the money? And——"

She got no further.

Such a spiteful insinuation—that some of the girls might seek to divert the tuckshop money to their own use—so enraged the meeting that in a moment Cora and Judith were being mobbed!

"Out you go!" some of the disgusted scholars almost shrieked.

"We take it from whence it comes!" cried Betty, from the table. "All the same, girls we——"

"Out they go!" insisted the audience in general.

And next moment out went Cora and Judith. Through the doorway they were far from gently propelled, to be sent floundering headlong into the passage.

Then slam went the door, and the meeting, after putting its hair to rights, proceeded to the election of a committee.

CHAPTER 2.

Betty & Co's "Boom!"

A T half-past four that afternoon the "Fourth Form Co-operative Association," as it was jokingly dubbed, started business.

If a good send off was any augury for success, then Betty & Co.'s well-meaning venture was assured of "boom" times!

Dozens—scores—of Morcove scholars caused such a run on the stock-in-trade. Within half an hour of the tuckshop's first opening customers were having to be rationed.

But that is not to say the committee were content to sell out what chanced to be on the premises and then close for the day. Oh, no!

"I'll let you have one jam sandwich—no more," Polly Linton could be heard saying to one customer. "But come again later on. We've got a whole extra lot of stuff on the way."

For the committee had already got through on the 'phone to the Barncombe Creamery, and the manageress there was sending out a lad with a tricycle-van with fresh supplies to meet the urgent demand.

At length the Creamery boy arrived with his monster load of fresh supplies and all demands could be met.

Money simply cascaded into the till as Polly Linton, Trixie Hope, and Tess Tre-lawney — the three "counter-hands" officially appointed for duty on this auspicious opening day—settled with one customer after another.

Good Mrs. Marlow had always kept the tiny tuckshop spick and span, and perhaps she could not have felt looking a little dismayed had she seen the litter of greasy paper and empty pastry boxes which was now strewn the floor.

But what else could she have felt but almost tearful gratitude to the girls of the Fourth Form over this scheme for keeping the flag flying whilst she was laid by?

The committee had resolved to pay the old dame a visit from time to time to cheer her up with the good news of their success, and so they did, as we shall see in due course.

Meanwhile, evening drew on, and the shadows of the old elms lengthened across the playing-field, all golden with the yellowing sunlight, and still trade was as brisk as ever!

The scheme was such a disinterested one it excited none of the good-natured ridicule with which the Fifth Form usually treated all Betty & Co.'s doings.

The Fifth Form patronised the tuckshop as freely as the Sixth Form—and that is saying a good deal! For in all the Sixth there was not one girl who did not turn up to spend a shilling or so.

Again supplies began to get exhausted, whilst Polly plunged a hand into the till and poured the money through her fingers, exulting over the enormous takings.

"Pounds and pounds!" she announced to all who were within hearing. "If we go on like this—"

"We shan't!" laughed Betty. "We must expect the novelty of the thing to wear off, of course. But I am positive we shall always have a good day's takings."

"Yes, wather!" agreed Paula, sauntering up to the counter at this moment.

Having got a trifle dishevelled during a recent scrimmage at that same counter, she had been up to the house to put herself to rights.

Paula stood aside whilst one or two urgent customers were being served. Then she opened her purse.

"If you have any cweam cwackers," said Paula, "pway——"

"Sold out!" Polly cried from behind the counter.

"Surpwisin'" said Paula. "Pway, Polly, what hev you in the form of light wewfeshment?"

"Dough-nuts, Paula."

The swell girl reflected.

"Dough-nuts do not wecommend themselves to me as pwecisely the wight form of wewfeshment for the dormitowies—what? Howevah——"

And she took ten in a bag.

The first real lull at the counter gave Polly a chance of noticing Cora and Judith.

The sisters had been sauntering about in front of the shop at frequent intervals, always showing a sneering contempt for the venture.

"Do you want anything?" Polly asked icily.

"Want anything—from your shop?"

"Then," said Polly, "would you mind standing out of the way of those who do?"

A dozen girls pealed with laughter. They were not all Fourth Form scholars either.

The Grandways sisters' hostility to anything undertaken by Betty & Co. simply

because it was undertaken by them, was well known in the school.

And in the present case there was a general feeling of disgust against the sisters, at their making even a praise-worthy venture of this sort an excuse for showing their malice.

Cora and Judith walked off, chin in air. But, although it consoled them a little to be able to do that, how they raged inwardly at being unable to say something cutting before they retreated!

It was the old, old story. The measure of Betty & Co.'s success was the measure of Cora & Co.'s chagrin.

"But they won't have quite so much cause for crowing to-morrow, Judy!" the elder sister burst out, ten minutes later, when they were alone together in their study. "I've had an idea!"

"Oh! You mean——"

"Sh! To smash up the whole business—yes!" Cora said, sinking her voice. "If only I can get permission to cycle into Barncombe at midday to-morrow, you will soon see that precious Co-operative Association in anything but a flourishing condition!"

"My word!" Judith exclaimed gleefully. "You don't mean to say you hope to smash it up?"

How strongly the Grandways' spirit was showing now—if one can call it "spirit"!

These two girls were exulting in exactly the same way over the prospect of "busting up" the Fourth Form venture as their father had often exulted over the "busting up" of some struggling rival in business.

"This is my idea," Cora went on, hitching her chair closer to Judith's, "Betty & Co. are doing a roaring trade, simply because they have a monopoly."

"Yes——"

"The school is all alone out here at Morcove, miles from the nearest shops. The school tuckshop—their tuckshop, as it has become—is the only place where a girl can get anything. But supposing a rival came along, Judy?"

Judy brought her hands together with a little clap. She understood. She had nothing but eager nods of approval and delight, as her sister unfolded the scheme.

"So, to-morrow, Cora, you will go over to Barncombe?" Judith exclaimed, when she had listened to the details. "Shall I come, too? Better not, perhaps?"

"No, it might look suspicious," Cora said, with an air of great cunning. "I shall have to take care that my visit to Barncombe never gets connected with—with what will happen afterwards."

A girl so cunning as Cora, however, was quite equal to finding a plausible reason for asking permission, next day, to run into Barncombe.

After morning school, very demurely she stood in front of Miss Redgrave, the Form's assistant-mistress, asking to be allowed to go into the town to get some wool, urgently required to finish a jumper.

Cora even had with her the half-finished jumper to show to Miss Redgrave, and the girl's wistful longing to get that wool was almost pathetic!

"Well, you may go, Cora," the assistant-mistress said. "You know the only objection to a midday run into the town is that a girl is forced to miss dinner at the school. But you——"

"I will take care to have a proper meal, Miss Redgrave," was the demure answer. "And, of course, I shall be back in time for afternoon classes."

So Miss Redgrave gave her final nod of assent, and ten minutes later Cora was pedalling along the road to Barncombe, alone.

How she raced along those Devonshire roads! Not because she was very pressed for time, but because she was so eager to get on with the cunning scheme!

By a quarter to one she had bought the wool at the wool shop, and then she put her cycle in store at the Creamery and had a hasty snack of food.

At one o'clock she was out in the High Street again, hurrying along it with a buoyant step.

Then, having turned aside into a narrow by-street, she slackened a little, as if to get back her breath now that she was close to her goal.

She came, in a few minutes, to a very mean little shop that was double-windowed. One window displayed bread and cakes, the latter looking very stale and unappetising.

The other "department" was a sort of medley of greengrocery and sweetstuffs. Behind a jumble of cauliflowers and oranges stood an array of boiled sugar sweets in jars.

Cora took a good look into the shop as she went past it. Then she turned back,

and, screwing her courage to the sticking point, entered.

A man came forward, and he was in keeping with the style of the shop.

His waistcoat was floury, but his boots and gaiters were earthy, suggesting that he combined bakery with the cultivation of vegetables.

"Good-morning, miss!" he said.

"Good-morning! Aren't you Mr. Josling," said Cora, "the man who has a stall in the market on market days?"

"Yes, miss—why?" he asked, in pardonable surprise.

Cora had to make another call upon her nerve. Her scheme was an audacious one.

At the end of fifteen minutes' adroit talk with the man she had made him an unwitting ally in her nefarious scheme against the Morcove tuck-shopkeepers."

It was quite possible that Cora might have laid all her cards upon the table, so to speak, and Mr. Josling would still have been just as eager to take a hand in the game.

For the present, however, Cora thought it best to leave him in ignorance as to the malice which had prompted her to put him in the way of "a good thing."

Classes were just assembling by the time Cora got back to the school, and she feared she would have no chance to get a word with her sister until late in the afternoon.

Judith, however, was feeling equally anxious for a word in private.

The moment the class settled down she asked permission to run upstairs to her den, to get a handkerchief.

So suddenly the designing couple came together in Study No. 7, and for the one minute they could dare linger there they talked with complete security.

"Yes, it's all right!" Cora burst out joyfully. "He'll be along this afternoon. He can get the stall here by means of his old mare, and—you should just have seen his face!" the speaker added, with a laugh. "He quite thinks he is going to make his fortune!"

"Splendid!" was Judith's comment. "And now, Cora, I've something to tell you. Whilst you have been away I've done a daring thing. I had no idea of doing it—one could never have hoped for the chance. But that chance came, and I seized it!"

Then she bent closer to her sister and whispered.

Cora's expression became a mixture of delight and uneasiness.

"You actually dared to do that, Judy? Over the 'phone?"

"Yes. Don't look so uneasy! No one can possibly find out who it was spoke over the 'phone. And just think how it will play up Betty & Co."

Cora gave her queer laugh, as she turned to go downstairs and into class.

"After what you have told me, Judy," she said, "Mr. Josling will stand a better chance than ever of making his fortune!"

CHAPTER 3.

The Firm Opposite.

THE "counter-hands" appointed for that afternoon and evening were Betty Barton and Madge Minden, with Paula Creel as a reserve, should business be as great as yesterday.

The rule had been made that only the girls officially "on duty" were to be behind the counter.

Yesterday—the great opening day—there had been a great deal of hanging about the "Co-op." out of mere curiosity, but all the girls had agreed that it would be much better, from now onwards, to visit the shop merely for the sake of making purchases.

That the Fourth Form's venture was going to be a great boon to the school as a whole, during poor Mrs. Marlow's illness, all agreed.

And it was felt that the best way to show appreciation would be by treating the "Co-op." as a business concern, not as a passing sensation.

So, on their way down to the tuckshop, to open for the day, our three chums had no procession of mirthful girls trailing after them.

In one hand Betty held a small wash-leather bag, containing a certain arpent of change. In the other she had the key of the shop door.

"Is that a quarter to five striking?" she exclaimed, just as they reached the little outhouse and she was unlocking the door. "We shall have to look slippy!"

"Yes, wather!" agreed Paula.

She was wearing a special overall for the occasion—an event that she would never forget.

That she had served behind the counter of the Morcove tuckshop, was a thing Paula Creel, the aristocrat of the Form, meant to brag about at home, in proof of her "democwatic spiwit"!

"Howevah," the swell girl added, putting a curl into place behind one ear, "we can't vewy well start business until the things awivve fwom the Cweamewy."

"I wonder the boy isn't here by now," Madge commented. "Didn't you say half-past four to the Creamery people, when giving your order for the day's supplies, Betty?"

The Form captain nodded.

"I said half-past four, sharp, because we would be opening at a quarter to five. But we have a few cakes left from yesterday."

"Bai Jove, heah they come!" Paula exclaimed, turning back to the shop door. "Quite a cwowd wanting twifles for tea, don't you know!"

Betty and Madge were already bustling about, in expectation of a sudden rush of customers.

"Bother that boy from the Creamery! I wish he would hurry up!" the Form captain could not help exclaiming. "It will be horrid, having to turn away customers! But—"

"Hark!" Madge suddenly interrupted, listening in a bewildered way. "Whatever is all that shouting out in the road? Whoever is out there, making such a to-do?"

She and Betty stepped to the shop doorway, and listened.

"Bai Jove!" Paula said softly. "How wemarkable! Geals——"

"Hark!"

Then they all listened again.

At the same time, they noticed that the girls who had been swarming across the grass to the tuckshop suddenly diverted their steps, and made for the school gateway.

"They are going to see what all the noise is about," said Betty. "We can't all go. But you, Paula——"

"Wight-ho!"

Less than a minute later, Paula Creel came flitting back, looking horrified.

"Bai, Jove, geals! My gwacious, heah's a nice thing, don't you know! We've got a wival!"

"A what?"

"A wival! Theah's a fellow out theah, with a bawwow, selling——"

"Half a sec.!" Betty and Madge exclaimed together.

And, leaving Paula in charge, with not a single customer to attend to, they now rushed round to the gateway, where a great throng of scholars had gathered.

Then they saw—and understood!

There was a rival to the "Co-op."—yes!

Somehow, an enterprising individual in Barncombe had got wind of the state of things at the school.

Hearing about the roaring trade which the school "Co-op." had done yesterday, he had awakened to the fact that Morcove must be a fine chance for anybody in the refreshment line of business.

And here he was, with a travelling shop, in the form of a covered stall on wheels!

His stock-in-trade was already displayed for sale. The horse had been taken out of the shafts, and was contentedly cropping the herbage.

Exactly opposite the school gateway stood this rival "shop."

But it was not on the highway. Shrewd Mr. Josling had pulled aside on to the grass, which was common land.

"Hi, hi, hi!" bawled Mr. Josling, putting a hand to his mouth. "Fine cakes—fine apples—fine fresh to-ma-toes!"

For a moment, the astounded crowd of girls merely stared.

"Here you are, young ladies! Fine ripe pine-apples! Fine fresh cakes—every one of 'em fresh to-day!"

The foremost girls in the crowd stepped past the gateway. Others followed.

Slowly they all drew nearer to the well-laden stall.

"Now, young ladies, wot's wrong with any o' that stuff?" challenged Mr. Josling, with a leer that was meant to be ingratiating. "Wot's wrong with it, I say?"

There was nothing wrong with it. Betty and Madge, like all the rest of the girls, could see that at once.

The tinned pineapples were a reliable brand. The apples were the pick of a barrel.

In the pastry "department" most of the eatables had come from the Barncombe Creamery. The name was on the boxes and baskets.

"You, young lady!" Mr. Josling bawled, fastening upon Ethel Courtway.

Her age and height showed her to be one of the oldest seniors. She was, in fact, the head girl of the school.

"I arst you, young lady," cried Mr. Josling dramatically, "is there any hobjection to my standing here to earn an honest penny by honest trade?"

"Oh, no; I suppose not!" said Ethel, in her genial way. "But this is going to come rather hard on our own 'co-operative' concern!"

"Never mind," spoke up Betty, the sense of fair play strong within her. "Surely there is enough trade for him and us! At any rate——"

"One can't help admiring his enterprise," murmured Madge. "I wonder nobody has thought of this before."

Mr. Josling's keen ear may have heard that remark, for he suddenly launched into another little speech.

"I should ha' been this way hages ago," he declared. "Only, young ladies, being a poor man wot lives by the sweat of his brow, it's took me time to get 'old of a 'orse."

"Poor thing!" murmured several of the girls—meaning the horse, not Mr. Josling. "It looks as if it could do with a nibble at that grass."

"Yes, wather!" said a familiar voice at Betty's elbow, and that girl faced about sharply.

"Hallo, Paula—you here! But what about the shop? Have you left no one in charge?"

"My deah Betty," said Paula, putting another curl to rights, "there is weally nothing to take charge of, don't you know!"

"But——"

"I sold out in thwee minutes—yes, wather! A most stwenuous time I had for thwee minutes!"

"Hi, hi, hi! Now for summat for tea, ladies! All fresh to-day!" invited Mr. Josling, and in a moment he had his first customers.

Betty turned upon Madge.

"That's all very well, Madge, his getting customers. Let him, and good luck to him! But we musn't shut down our show. Poor Mrs. Marlow! Her business will be gone, if we don't look out!"

"That boy from the Creamery!" fumed Madge. "Why on earth doesn't he come!"

"I do hope he hasn't had an accident on the way here!" Betty exclaimed. "I'll run up to the school, and find out, over the 'phone, when he started."

"Yes, do!"

She was off in a flash, whilst Madge

went back to the deserted "Co-op.," to remain in charge.

No one followed her there. Mr. Josling's enterprise was claiming all the attention. And what a roaring trade he was doing, too!

Five minutes later Betty Barton came flying across the grass from the school-house.

"Madge!" she gasped out, as she charged up to the "Co-op." doorway, "the cakes and things are not coming!"

"Not——"

"The Creamery people—I spoke to them on the 'phone—and they say they had a 'phone order from the school, at midday, not to send the stuff."

"Not to send it? Oh, but——"

"The manageress was quite clear about it. She took the message herself. Someone rang through from the school, and asked her not to send the things."

"Then we are done!" Madge exclaimed tragically.

"Yes," Betty answered ruefully. "For to-day—we are done!"

CHAPTER 4.

Live and Let Live!

THE two girls had hardly drawn breath, after these excited remarks, when they were aware of a fair number of scholars coming towards the "Co-op."

The majority were Fourth Form girls. It might have been expected that the Form would stand by its own venture, but how pleasing it was to Betty and Madge when they saw members of others Forms also approaching.

Pleasing—and yet humiliating!

They were coming to the tuckshop—meaning to "support home industries"—and the tuckshop had nothing to sell!

"Well, Betty—well, Madge," said Ethel Courtway, one of the first to reach the shop, "I think I shall stick to the old firm."

"Hear, hear!" cried all the other girls.

"'Live and let live' is a good motto," Ethel went on. "But it applies to Mrs. Marlow just as much as it does to that weird merchant on the green. It will go hard with Mrs. Marlow if you don't keep the flag flying until she is about again."

"We will—we must!" Betty declared grimly.

"Only—just at present——"

"Oh! Haven't the things come from the Creamery?"

That disappointed exclamation was voiced by a dozen girls at least, as they now gazed around and saw that the shop was "sold out."

"That's bad!" said Ethel sympathetically. "At the very time when you are face to face with sudden competition the Creamery people have let you down!"

"No. They—we—— The fact is," Betty floundered, "there is some awful misunderstanding!"

"More than a misunderstanding!" added Madge bitterly. "I think a very mean trick has been played by somebody. The Creamery people are not sending the supplies. They had orders not to!"

Ethel's brows went up.

"But, surely," she exclaimed. "I thought you had made arrangements for a daily supply!"

"So we had!" cried Betty. "But at mid-day the Creamery people received a 'phone message from the school, countermanding the order."

"Who sent that message?"

"We don't know!" Betty and Madge answered together. "And the Creamery manageress can't tell us. She said the voice over the 'phone was just like mine!"

"Oh!" Ethel commented, and that was all for the moment. Then: "Was it, do you think, some practical joker, imitating your voice? If so, that practical joker had better look out!"

"That is the worst of the telephone," Madge muttered angrily. "It can be so easily put to a bad use. Nothing is easier—or safer—than to send a trick message over the 'phone.'"

One of the girls standing around said excitedly:

"I say! I suppose—I suppose the message was sent from an ordinary call-box, in the town, and not from the school?"

"By whom?" Ethel asked. "What person in the town would want to play such a mean trick?"

"Well," winked the girl who had just spoken, "supposing Mr. Josling put somebody up to doing it—to help his own little venture? He may have a daughter——"

"What a thing to suggest!" Ethel broke out. "And yet——"

And yet, now that the suggestion had been made, she, like others standing there, could not help pondering it.

There certainly was something very suspicious in the fact that the supplies for the "Co-op." had been stopped on the very day that Mr. Josling came along to start business at the school gates.

"Hi, hi, hi!" they heard him shouting still, every moment the custom slackened. "Step along, young ladies! Vally for money!"

Then suddenly Betty and Madge beheld Miss Somerfield coming down the carriage-drive, on foot, with several of the staff at her side.

The headmistress was not, for the moment, taking any notice of the school "Co-op."

Her interest was concentrated upon the scandalous—that was the word for it—the scandalous scene going on outside the gateway.

Through that gateway she hastened, causing the crowd around the stall to scatter.

Many of the girls were laden with purchases which they had been tempted, to make on account of the "Co-op." being sold out.

There were girls who looked half ashamed, whilst others boldly vaunted their purchases, feeling quite sure that there was nothing wrong in patronising Mr. Josling.

That worthy by this time had grown hoarse with exhaustion.

Yet he still kept up a running accompaniment of "Hi, hi, hi!" whilst he disposed of his customers at lightning speed.

"Hi, hi, hi, young ladies! Vally for money!"

"Pray, sir——"

"Fine ripe pineapple! Fine ree-ipe to-mato!"

"Pray, sir," Miss Somerfield repeated, advancing, with becoming dignity, across the roadway, "what is the meaning of this?"

"Hi, hi, hi! Who'll have the last tin o' fine ree-ipe pineapple Vally for money, my gals!"

"One moment, I beg!" cried Miss Somerfield, lifting her voice. "What does this mean?"

"Oh, I beg yer parding, ma'am!" Mr. Josling exclaimed, doffing his mangy cap. "You'll be the 'eadmistress, perhaps?"

"I am. And, as the headmistress, you

will not be surprised at my asking for some explanation."

"Bless yer 'art, ma'am! That's orl right!" Mr. Josling responded cheerily, if hoarsely. "The fack is, I've had a terrible time lately, I have, trade being so bad. So I'm just trying a new line, ma'am, which I hope as 'ow you'll patronise it, me being a hard-working man—"

"I do not question your honesty," Miss Somerfield cut him short blandly. "Nor do I question your right to set up a stall on this piece of ground."

"You can't, ma'am, even if you was to want to," Mr. Josling rejoined affably. "This here is common land, and anybody who likes can pitch here."

"I know. But I have always been able to get gipsies and others to move on further, simply by asking them," said Miss Somerfield. "Even the gipsies understand that anything going on all day just outside the school gates is not desirable."

"I'm sorry, ma'am!" said Josling, in a tone of genuine regret. "But I can't move on."

"Not even a few hundred yards?"

"No, ma'am; I can't! For this here stall is my livelihood, you understand. And how much trade am I going ter get, if I ain't nice and handy for the young lady scholars?"

Miss Somerfield was perplexed.

She regarded this sudden appearance of the huckster at the school gates as hardly becoming. At the same time, she wanted to be fair.

"Live and let live," the same motto that Ethel Courtway had quoted, had come into her mind.

"You are aware, of course," the headmistress resumed, "I have only to say the word, and your stall will be put out of bounds."

"You won't be so 'ard and crool as that, ma'am—not you!" Mr. Josling cajoled her. "I put it to you, ma'am. Wot's to become o' me and my family, if I ain't allowed to turn an honest penny? Wot's the objection to me? I gives vally for money."

He waved a hand at what was left of his stock-in-trade.

"There's the vally!" he asserted. "There's 'olesome food, if you like!"

"Yes; but—"

Miss Somerfield heaved another sigh of perplexity.

"I am trying to see things from your

point of view, she said at last. "Now try to see things from the school's. We have our own little shop——"

"Yes, mum; so I understand. And all I can say is, there's nothink better'n competition. It's going to keep your shop up to the mark, me being here. Your shop's got ter sell wunnerful stuff to beat mine. Your shop can't get sticking up the prices, neither, not whilst I am here!" he finished triumphantly.

Once again Miss Somerfield was reduced to silence.

The man's arguments were perfectly fair. To put his stall out of bounds would not be fair.

The only thing to do, it seemed to her, was to let him go on, in keen competition with the school tuck-shop, leaving the scholars to bestow their patronage just as they pleased.

After all, Miss Somerfield reflected, the girls of Morcove School could be trusted to make their own choice, without any advice from her.

They would give the lion's share of their custom to the "Co-op," out of loyalty to the school and regard for old Mrs. Marlow.

And so, in a very little while, this Mr. Josling would find it hardly a paying game to come out to Morcove every day.

"Well, I shall say no more," Miss Somerfield announced at last, "except that all bawling and yawling must cease. If that continues, Mr. Josling, then I can reasonably complain to the police."

"As to that, ma'am," said Josling, with a sort of bow, "you shan't hear not another bawl, nor yet a yawl from me, as long as I live!"

"You are hardly likely to be here as long as that, I imagine!" the headmistress could not help rejoicing, with her pleasant smile. "Good-day!"

And she turned back through the school gateway, leaving Josling free to resume the disposal of his stock.

"Hi, hi, hi!" he said, in a stage whisper, causing the crowd of girls to explode with laughter.

His way of fulfilling the promise not to "bawl and yawl" was certainly comical!

"Fine ree-ipe to-ma-toes!" he said, in that same husky whisper. "Now, young ladies, to save me taking home anythink! Fourpence a pun, these 'ero tomatoes! 'Oo'll have the last cream buns? 'Oo's for the larst tin o' fine ree-ipe pinchapple?"

Inside of the next ten minutes he had sold out!

With a great weight of loose cash jingling in his various pockets, he was putting the horse between the shafts, whilst he announced, in that discreet whisper of his:

"I'll be 'ere same time to-morrow arternoon, young ladies. Thenking you one an' all for your kind patronage!" And he swept them a bow. "Vally for money, mind you. Go to your own shop, if you want to, o' course. But if it's vally for money you want—why, I'm the one to give it yer!"

CHAPTER 5.

Another Disaster.

AFTER prep., that evening, Study No. 12 was the scene of a very grave committee meeting of the tuckshopkeepers.

These youthful shopkeepers of ours, imbued with that fine idea about standing by old Mrs. Marlow during her illness, had soon come up against the stern realities of commercial life!

Competition!

It might be the desirable thing that Mr. Josling, honest man, called it. But competition meant worry—no mistake about that!

On the agenda for the committee meeting was that matter of the false 'phone message to the Creamery Tea-rooms.

There was a mystery that needed to be cleared up. Cautious inquiries in the school-house had elicited the fact that no unauthorised person had been seen or heard using the telephone.

So, if the false message really had been the work of some "japer," she was a scholar who stood a very good chance of never being found out.

But what about that theory as to Mr. Josling being the instigator of the false message?

More and more Betty & Co. were feeling that here was a possible solution to the mystery.

Yet it seemed a shame to suspect him of such nefarious work when he seemed to be above doing any underhand action.

At any rate, it was the decision of the committee that they must keep an open mind upon that point for the present. And so they soon drifted to the next item on the agenda

"To consider ways and means of meeting the competition from outside sources," Betty read out, from the head of the table.

"Well, what about it?"

"Bai Jove—yes, wather!" Paula exclaimed, looking profoundly distressed. "You know, geals, we must do something, don't you know! Otherwise, you know, we'll soon be bankwupt!"

"And we thought we would get such a nice bit of profit together, after paying expenses, to hand to Mrs. Marlow!" sighed Betty.

"The really ugly point is this!" grimaced Madge. "Our effort to keep the tuckshop going seems to have brought along a rival who will be a permanent one!"

"It's dweadful!" said Paula. "The unweasonable fellah talks of having a bawwow outside the gates as long as he lives, bai Jove!"

"Oh, bust him and his barrow!" fumed Polly.

"Well, he is there," Betty laughed ruefully, "and it is no use our resenting his collaring our customers. We don't want any bad blood——"

"Hear, hear."

The committee was emphatic about this.

"What we had better do," suggested the Form captain, "is to compete with him in a fair and square manner."

"Hear, hear!"

"Yes, wather! Faih and squah," said Paula. "Live and let live! And if at first you don't succeed, don't you know, just twy, twy again! Howevah——"

And Paula turned towards the "chair," with an apologetic look for having interrupted.

"Well?" Betty questioned her chums at the table. "Don't wait for me to do all the talking!"

"There are only two things I can suggest," said Madge, as no one else spoke. "I think we ought to keep the little shop in first-rate order. Everything spick and span——"

"Hear, hear!"

"Then the stuff will look far more attractive than Josling's," rejoined Trixie. "Yes, Madge is right."

"And the other thing that occurs to me is this," Madge resumed. "We ought to go slow with our order to the Creamery people. Josling's barrow outside the gates is bound to affect our takings, and we don't want to be landed with stale cakes."

"Gwacious, no!" gasped Paula. "How-
evah——"

"We will cut down the order at once," Betty said, heartily approving Madge's remarks. "I'll send a note by this evening's post, asking the Creamery people to deliver only half the quantity we had ordered to be sent every day until further notice."

"That's the idea!" Polly agreed heartily. "Go slow for the present!"

So there, at any rate, was one wise decision arising out of the confab.

Betty, on behalf of the committee, wrote a brief note to the Creamery Tea-shop, Barncombe, asking them would they kindly send only half the quantity of cakes and pastries which they—the committee—had ordered to be sent daily.

The letter went off by the last post, and the girls knew that it would be delivered in Barncombe first thing in the morning.

Nor was that other precaution, advocated by Madge, and so unanimously approved by the committee, neglected.

After morning school, next day, a volunteer party of girls hurried away to the tuck-shop, and got busy with the task of making everything as sweet and clean as it had ever been, even in Mrs. Marlow's most active days.

Soap and water, and plenty of it! That was the rule the girls were acting up to.

With arms bare to the elbows, and coarse aprons tied about their waists, Betty, Polly, and Paula, Madge and Tess, Trixie and Dolly, they all scrubbed and scoured and broomed away with hearty good will.

It was a hot day.

To come across the sunny field into the cool shade of the trees that overhung the shop, and to step into that shop after it had been "done out," was as refreshing as is a draught of iced lemonade to the thirsty spirit!

By five to one the noble work was finished. Like the cottage in the famous poem, everything was "wondrous neat and clean."

When the Creamery supply of catables had arrived, around about half-past four, customers would surely feel they could eat cream buns straight off the snow-white counter!

Counter-hands for the day were Trixie Hope, Dolly Delane, and Etta Hargrove. The moment they were let out of afternoon class, these three girls scampered away to "take over."

And, although Betty and the rest did not want to interfere, they could not help strolling down to the "Co-op." presently, to see all was going well.

Mr. Josling had arrived with his horse-drawn stall.

Once again the bony steed was thankfully taking his nibble at the grass on the other side of the roadway, exactly opposite the gateway, and once again Mr. Josling, coat off and sleeves rolled up, was setting out his stock-in-trade.

From a distance, Betty & Co. were able to see that their rival had also taken the precaution not to bring too much perishable stock, on the assumption that trade would be divided between his stall and the school tuckshop.

Then the "Co-ops" supplies from the Barncombe Creamery arrived.

To-day they had come in a two-wheeled delivery van, instead of by cycle.

It was the same boy, however, and mighty important he looked as he drew in through the school gateway and round to the tuck-shop.

"Good-afternoon!" the girls greeted him. "What's the idea of sending the stuff by the van?"

"Much too big an order for the tricycle," was the pompous answer. "I could never have managed the hills."

"But you managed them that other time!" Betty exclaimed, mildly surprised.

"Yes," the boy said, undoing the back of the cart, "but that was only half the load this is."

"Only—half——"

The girls felt a sudden sinking of the heart. They found themselves glancing at one another, then into the cart.

The boy lifted out the first basket—a monster one.

"Four dozen cream buns, miss."

"What?"

Out came another basket.

"Twelve jam sandwiches, eight pounds of Swiss roll——"

"Eight pounds?"

It was a gasp of dismay from the whole committee.

A third basket was dumped upon the grass.

"One dozen chicken pasties; four dozen jam puffs——"

"Stop!" cried Betty wildly. "We—There's some mistake! We never ordered all these things!"

"You ordered," declared the pompous lad, lifting out a fourth basket, "twice as much stuff as you had the first day."

"Twice as much?" the committee almost yelled.

"Twice as much," repeated the lad. "That was the order our manageress received over the 'phone, at mid-day. Just double the amount of everything."

The committee looked like fainting, en bloc!

CHAPTER 6.

Something for Nothing.

HAVING unloaded all the perishable goods upon the grass, the lad took out his delivery book, with its invoice between the leaves.

"Will you check 'em over, miss?" he said, knowing that Betty was the Form captain. "Then sign, please."

Betty did nothing of the sort.

She simply stared.

At last, drawing a hard breath, she voiced the committee's feeling in the matter.

"You must take two-thirds of that stuff back."

"No, miss——"

"You must!"

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove——"

"Sorry, miss!" said the lad, still confining his remarks to Betty. "I have strict instructions never to take back perishable articles which have been ordered."

"But——"

"It wouldn't do, you see. We'd be ruined. Our shop might be full up with unsaleable, stale pastry."

"But——"

"Weally, don't you know——"

"We did not order twice as much of everything as we had the first day!" Betty said desperately. "We ordered half as much—just half as much!"

The boy—he was one who would get on in life—thrust the delivery sheet and invoice under Betty's nose, along with a pencil.

"Sorry, miss!"

"We are sorry. We are at our wits' end to know what to do!" cried Betty. "We decided last night that we could not possibly hope to sell more than half the amount we got rid of on the first day. So we wrote to your people. The letter went off by the last post."

"Yes, miss; but there was a telephone message——"

"There could have been no telephone message!" the committee protested, in chorus.

"There was a telephone message at mid-day," insisted the lad. "I was in the shop when it was taken. And a fine fluster it put the manageress into! Acting on your letter, she had warned the kitchen not to make as many pastries as usual. She had to tell the cooks to hustle round and get an extra lot done at short notice, so as not to disappoint you. And there they are!" he finished, pointing at the baskets. "And here's the sheet, miss. If you will kindly sign——"

Betty took the paper then. She gazed in a helpless way at her friends, most of whom nodded despairingly.

"It is most aggravating!" sighed Paula. "Howevah——"

"You had better sign. It is not the Creamery's fault," said Madge.

So Betty signed. She herself was realising that the Creamery had, at short notice, put themselves about to supply the increased order.

Then the boy went off with his empty van, and the committee of the Fourth Form Co-operative Society stood gaping at the wholesale quantity of perishable food which was left on their hands.

Meanwhile, Mr. Josling had already started business for the day.

He was not doing a roaring trade.

Many scholars were loitering about, preferring to wait until the "Co-op." could supply them, and only a few impatient girls were patronising the rival establishment.

"Pray goodness some of the girls have had remittances to-day!" Betty breathed, as the "counter-hands" took over the huge stock and started selling.

"Yes, wather!" simpered Paula. "I am a twifle short myself, for once. I wather made a splash, don't you know, that opening day."

"Yes," said Madge ruefully. "So did I. So did most of the girls, it is to be feared. We shall hardly be the only ones who are stony."

And so it proved.

Even without a rival to split the trade, the "Co-op." would have had a bit of a slump to-day.

When the pastries and cakes were set out in the spick-and-span shop, they looked most tempting.

Girls gathered around, and eyed them

longingly. But purchases were on the small scale. They had to be, for funds were low.

"The half quantities that we ordered," Betty reflected, standing there to watch business, "would have been more than ample."

"We have been done again—diddled!" Polly said grimly. "And by means of the telephone!" Betty, dear, it can't be Josling's doing. It isn't to be supposed that he would order twice the quantity—four times what we really wanted."

"Unless he wanted to smash us up by getting us landed with heavy losses," struck in Tess. "But I can't believe he is as cunning as all that. The telephone messages are sent from the school. There is somebody——"

"Yes, somebody!" echoed Betty, below her breath.

At that instant she could see Cora and Judith Grandways, loitering close to the shop, looking gleeful over the slackness of trade and the enormous quantity of the eatables that stood no chance of being bought.

Betty had her sudden suspicion. So had some of her chums. But not a word passed.

If—if Cora and Judith were at the bottom of this disastrous sending of fake messages, then the thing was to keep silent and just watch out.

Meantime, the urgent question for the committee to decide was—how to dispose of the surplus pastries.

"Suppose we give credit to any girls who happen to be short of money?" suggested Dolly Delane. "They will soon nip in and buy then!"

"I don't like the idea of giving credit," demurred Betty. "Doesn't it cause a sort of what-do-you-call-it?"

"Precedent—a bad precedent—yes," nodded Madge.

"Besides," said Tess, "we shall never like collecting money when the girls are in funds. After getting them to buy the stuff—just to oblige us, as it were—it wouldn't do."

"Much better give it away," Betty said resignedly. "As we cannot possibly sell the stuff, and most of it will be uneatable if kept—cream buns, and things like that will——"

"Yes, wather!" chimed in Paula brightly. "Geals, I beg to second Betty's proposal! Give it away——"

"Hear, hear!" murmured the rest.

"And I would like to remark," went on Paula, "as this distressing affair involves the firm in a distressing loss, I shall have much pleasure in making good that loss when I hear from home!"

"Bravo, Paula!" cried Polly, slapping her on the back. "You are a brick!"

"I twy to be, geals! Howevah——"

"You shan't bear all the loss. We'll share it together," Betty declared, evoking prompt murmurs of approval. "Carried, then, is it? The perishable stuff is to be given away?"

"Yes—yes! Yes, wather!" was the chorus.

And so, towards sundown, when trade at the shop had come to an end, and there was not the least prospect of selling another cream bun or other pastry, a most incredible rumour spread like wildfire everywhere.

Cakes and pastries were being given away—yes, given away—at the school tuckshop!

CHAPTER 7.

Mr. Josling's Threat.

"HAVE you heard——"

"Yes; but is it true?"

"Can it be true? Let's run and see, anyhow."

Exclamations of that sort were being voiced in all parts of the school grounds and over at the schoolhouse itself.

Girls in their studies, girls who were just coming to the end of their game of tennis, netball, or cricket, girls who were sauntering idly about the garden—all were full of sudden excitement over the rumour.

Cream buns, cakes, jam-puffs—for the asking!

No wonder they thought it too good to be true!

Yet true it was, as they found as soon as they got to the tuckshop.

For there, standing on an upturned biscuit-box, with her friends of the committee around her, was Betty Barton, confirming the sensational rumour with her own tongue!

"We are giving away the stuff that is unsold—yes," Betty said calmly. "It won't keep—not to be good enough to sell to-morrow, anyhow. So——"

"Whatever made you get in such an

enormous stock?" cried one Fifth Form girl.

"You might have known——"

"We did know, thank you!" Betty struck in icily. "There has been a—a-misunderstanding with the Creamery people——"

"Oh, another misunderstanding!"

"Yes, another!" flashed Betty.

For it was Cora who had twitted her this time, and Betty was in no mood to be twitted by Cora!

"Call yourself a committee?" jeered Judith. "Ha, ha, ha! A fine debt of gratitude old Mother Marlow will owe you before you have finished!"

"That's a fact!" chuckled Cora. "All you busybodies have done, so far, is to get a rival for Mrs. Marlow to have to cope with when she's about again. And——"

"Flop!"

"Oh!" yelled Cora, as a doughnut suddenly smote her full on the side of her head. "Who threw that?"

"I did!" cried Polly Linton, causing a peal of laughter. "We are giving the stuff away. If you want any more, Cora, say so!"

But that was only Polly's "sauce." She had no intention of continuing to use delectable doughnuts as ammunition.

What she did was to toss one or two lightly at the crowd, causing a mirthful scramble for the "souvenirs."

"Yes, wather!" cried Paula invitingly, as she stood beside the baskets of remnants in the shop doorway. "Heah you are, then! Take the lot!"

"Roll up, girls!" Polly cried. "Free, gratis, and for nothing!"

"Yes, wather! Woll up! Fwee, gwatis and—— Ow, don't cwush, geals! Pway don't cwush!"

For, in a moment, such a scrimmage had set in round about the tuckshop as Morcove had never seen the like of before!

It was not that the girls were hungry, nor were they greedy. They just scrambled and tussled for the oddments for the fun of the thing.

All the same, those who came out of the fray in proud possession of a squashed cream bun or a flattened jam-puff, seemed to find great pleasure in masticating it on the spot.

As for Paula Creel, she came out of the fray, not with a squashed pastry to eat, but with a very squashed appearance.

"Healp!" she sighed dismally. "I'll never get myself stwaight again to-night!"

But now suddenly the dispersing crowd became aware of somebody who had been looking on, in a great state of anger, through the boundary railings.

Mr. Josling was there, glaring wrathfully.

"Hi, you!" he suddenly shouted at the committee. "So that's your game, is it?"

"What's the matter?" asked Betty, going across to him, followed by Polly, Madge, Paula and the rest.

"I see your little game! I see your artfulness!" roared Mr. Josling savagely. "Giving away the stuff, to get customers for to-morrow!"

"And that's wot you call fair play, is it?" Mr. Josling stormed on. "That's living and letting live, is it? You calls yourselves young ladies? It's downright underhanded, a thing like that!"

"Look here, Mr. Josling," spoke up Betty; "if we chose to give away perishable stuff——"

"All right; look as innocent as you like. I don't care!" the infuriated Josling roared. "You're not the only one as can give away stuff to get customers! What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, mind you!"

"Really——"

"Yes, weally, bai Jove——"

"Mebbe I'll have stuff to give away to-morrow!" Mr. Josling informed the whole crowd. "Saturday—to-morrow! I'll be here early, I will. And if I don't knock any of your bonus schemes into a cocked hat, my name ain't——"

"Mr. Josling!" cried the whole committee soothingly. "Mr. Josling!"

But, Mr. Josling had finished—for to-day, at any rate.

Almost throwing himself on board the weird vehicle, he cracked his whip defiantly, cried "Gee-up, there!" to the bony steed, and drove off to Barncombe.

CHAPTER 8.

Worse to Come.

IN the late twilight, Betty and her chums went softly up the stairs to that ward in the san. where Mrs. Marlow was being cared for.

The girls had promised they would re-

port to her, at the end of every day, how "business" was faring.

Not to have given her a look in this evening, just because things had gone all wrong, would have seemed to the girls cowardly.

"Well, my dears!" the good soul welcomed them, with a smile on her rather waxy face. "I'm sure you must had good business this evening!"

She, poor soul, still sadly crippled by her bad turn of rheumatism, was in a low basket-chair by the window, which nurse had closed a few minutes since.

"Ay, my dears," she chatted on; "sitting here at the window, I couldn't azaakly see the old place. But I've heard such a commotion at times from that direction! So I said to myself, 'Bless their kind hearts, them gals is doing a roaring trade!' And all for my sake, too!"

"We shall carry on!" Betty declared, secretly making an effort to keep the dejection out of her voice. "Of course, there are—er—little difficulties—"

"But," Betty pursued, putting on a cheerful countenance, "as soon as we have got over the—er—"

"The initial difficulties," prompted Madge, smiling feebly.

"As soon as we have got over the initial difficulties, Mrs. Marlow, we are sure the shop will—er—that is to say—it will be an even greater success than it has been—er—up to now!"

"Thank you, my dears! I'm sure, for your own dear sakes, I hope it will be!" Mrs. Marlow exclaimed fervently.

"Never mind, though!" Betty said resolutely, when they were all going across to the schoolhouse, after leaving the san. "No throwing up the sponge!"

"No jolly fear!" agreed Polly heartily. "Let old Josling come along to-morrow and do his very worst! We'll hold out somehow!"

"And finish up at the end," said Madge just as hopefully, "with colours flying!"

But would they?

There were two girls in the Form, at any rate, who had their own opinion about that!

Cora and Judith Grandways—they were lounging about in the Fourth Form passage when Betty and her chums went past.

The plotting sisters saw how stoically those responsible for the "Co-op." were facing the black future, but they only laughed in their sleeves.

"He, he, he!" sniggered Cora, as she and her sister withdrew into their own lair, and closed the door. "We shan't want to do any more secret telephoning, either. That little dodge has answered very well, so far. Now I've another scheme!"

"How lovely!" applauded Judith softly. "One more day of disaster for Betty & Co., and it will just about finish them!"

Cora had walked to the dark window.

"To-morrow," she mused aloud, "to-morrow I must get a word with Josling before he arrives upon the scene."

"Nothing easier," Judith remarked eagerly. "You can catch him half-way here on the road from Barcombe to Morcove. But what is the plan this time, dear?"

"You'll see!" said Cora darkly.

And, once again, she smiled in the sinister way which always meant trouble ahead for the victims of her malice!

CHAPTER 9.

Bluebell Learns the Latest.

IT was eleven by the clock in the Fourth Form class-room at Morcove School.

Ten minutes since the Form had come in from "break," and now pens were scratching busily once again.

With a good heart were the scholars attacking the lesson before them, for it was the last one of the day.

Saturday! Only another hour, and then books could be slammed shut until "prep." time, this evening!

One of the school maids, comely in her cap and apron, entered the class-room quietly, handing a note to Miss Redgrave, the Form's assistant-mistress.

Then the orderly silence of the room was broken by a quiet call:

"Betty Barton!"

The captain of the Fourth lifted her pretty head sharply, laying down her pen at the same time.

Miss Redgrave had read the note, which evidently had something to do with Betty. But what?

Always the Form captain, like any other scholar, felt a little sinking of the heart at being "called out" in connection with a matter originating from the headmistress' sanctum.

Betty's eyes exchanged a glance with those of Polly Linton, which answered with a "Cheer up, I'm with you, anyhow, Betty!"

Then the Form captain quitted her seat and stood before the assistant-mistress.

"Betty"—and the first word assured that girl that there was nothing serious the matter, after all—"Miss Somerfield has scribbled a line to me, asking me to excuse you at once."

"Oh!"

"You and your chum, Polly Linton, may both stop work and go along in the carriage to meet Bluebell Courtney."

Those girls who had paused in their work, feeling curious as to why Betty had been called out of class, saw her face lighting up with a great joy.

"Bluebell is coming back to-day!" Betty exclaimed elatedly.

"She arrives by the train reaching Morcove Road at eleven-forty," Miss Redgrave answered. "You know, the headmistress always likes any scholar to be met by one or two of her friends. So you and Polly can be off at once."

"Thank you!" came in a sort of gasp, from Betty. "Oh, thanks!"

And Polly, who was already out of her desk, having heard her name mentioned, echoed the joyful cry.

"What's that? Bluebell coming by the eleven-forty? Oh, how spiffing!"

"Yes, wather!"

"That will do, Paula Creel!" smiled Miss Redgrave, as she heard the swell girl of the Form make that drawling comment. "Just go on with your work, Paula. It is only another hour for everybody!"

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove! How wippin'!" Paula could not help saying again gleefully, and, taking a fresh dip of ink, she returned to the attack.

Meanwhile, away scampered Betty and Polly, as soon as they were outside the class-room.

This was a perfectly gorgeous day in the summer term, and never a thought had the two chums about putting on hats.

Making a race for it round to the stables, they found the school coachman just putting

in the horse, and so they were lolling in the hinder seat of the landau long before the chery groom was ready to start.

In any case, a drive out to the little wayside station and back, on a day like this, would have been a downright treat for the chums.

And how much extra joy did they experience over the fact that one of their favourites was to be met?

It was only towards the end of last term that Bluebell Courtney had come to the school.

Even in that short space of time, however, she had found her way into the hearts of all.

The name "Bluebell" may seem a curious one for a girl to bear.

But that was the name she—at that time a mere waif of the circus—had been known by when she was travelling the country as a member of Samways' Celebrated Circus.

"Hurrah!" cheered both chums, with genuine heartiness, as the fussy little train steamed into the quiet wayside station and set Bluebell down. "How are you, dear? How jolly to have you back!"

"How jolly it is to be back!" was Bluebell's joyful cry as she returned her chums' hugs and kisses. "Did you think I never would be seeing you again?"

"Well, dear——"

"I know. I was coming back from London before Easter, and I didn't. Then I was coming back on reopening day, and I didn't do that, either!" Bluebell laughed, hastening away from the quiet platform with her chums, whilst the porter followed with the luggage. "But here I am at last, anyhow, and— Oh, what a spiffing day it is, and how lovely it is to be in glorious Devon! And how is everybody—everybody?"

"The Form," said Betty, laughing, "is in great form!"

"As usual!" returned Bluebell, her sparkling eyes showing how she was just such another high-spirited girl as were Betty, Polly, and so many others in the famous Fourth.

She added, with breathless eagerness, as soon as they were driving off:

"What are you all doing this afternoon? Tennis? Or are you going down to the shore? Betty, Polly, I long to see the sea—dip my hands in it! London—ugh! I

don't like London! Not for long, at any rate," she added, as an afterthought.

"Well," chuckled Polly, "you don't have far to go from the school bounds to get all the sea you want. It would be jolly to spend the afternoon down on the shore, but——"

"Yes," said Betty rather gravely, as Polly looked at her, "we are rather tied, as it happens, Bluebell. The Form has a big thing on!"

"Oh, has it? What is it, then? I say, do tell! And can I help?" was Bluebell's string of eager questions. "I hope I'm not to be shut out by being too late!"

"Never fear, Bluebell; you'll be able to come in on our side right enough," the Form captain said, giving Bluebell's hand a friendly squeeze.

"Then tell me——"

"Bluebell," Betty went on impressively, "the Form has started a business, all on its own!"

"What?"

"The Fourth Form Co-operative Society—how's that?" cried Polly. "The name is on the door, too!"

"It sounds—it sounds wonderful!" cried Bluebell. "But——"

"This is the whole thing in a nutshell," Betty hastened to explain. "Old Mrs. Marlow, poor soul, has been laid aside by rheumatism, and so she couldn't run the little tuckshop near the lodge gates."

"The school's own tuckshop, just inside the grounds? I remember."

"Yes. Well, we had an idea," said Betty, "that we ought to keep the show going for her. Miss Somerfield gave the scheme her blessing, and we made a fine start."

"A spiffing start!" chimed in Polly. "The first day's takings—wonderful!"

"Then," sighed Betty, "some man over in Barncombe must have got wind of the money that was to be made by selling cakes and pastries and lemonade and things. He owns a horse and a covered stall on wheels, and he comes out every day."

"But is he allowed?" cried Bluebell.

"Not inside the grounds, of course," Betty answered. "But the open land between the school gateway and the cliffs is common land, and anybody can pitch there. So this afternoon you will see him turn up and start trade."

"What a shame—for you, I mean!" exclaimed Bluebell. "Of course, if he is a poor man, trying to turn an honest penny into——"

"Yes, dear; that's what we all say, and, of course, we don't want to smash him up," Polly said. "Only we can't help feeling sorry that he has come along, because it has led to—oh, no end of difficulties over our tuckshop!"

"He gets a lot of your trade, of course."

"Worse than that!" Betty sighed again. "Since he turned up we have hardly had a chance to compete with him fairly. The first day he was outside the school all the supplies for our tuckshop were held up by means of a faked message to the people who send them out from Barncombe, and so we had nothing to sell."

"How awful!" grimaced Bluebell.

"Hear the rest," Polly said ruefully. "The next day we purposely cut down the order for things, because we expected competition with this Mr. Josling, and another faked message was sent to the Creamery Tea-rooms, at Barncombe, telling them to send twice the amount of stuff, instead of half!"

"So that you had——"

"We had four times as much stuff as we really wanted, and it was mostly perishable," Betty said. "In the end, we had to give it away."

"Yes, and then," rushed on Polly bitterly, "Mr. Josling accused us of giving the stuff away so as to win the girls' favour! That was yesterday evening, and he went off vowing all sorts of threats of vengeance!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" Bluebell exploded merrily. "I can't help laughing. I'm sure you have had a lot of bother and worry. All the same——"

"Oh, yes, it's funny, in a way!" allowed Betty, smiling feebly. "We have had to laugh, too—haven't we, Polly?"

Polly's answer was to burst out laughing even then.

"It has been a scream, in one way," she agreed, sobering down at last. "Only to see Paula Creel serving behind the counter is enough to make a cat laugh! But don't tell Paula I said so, Bluebell!"

"Just as if——"

"Paula takes herself so seriously, you know!" Betty grinned. "Dear old Paula! She is so afraid of being thought a snob,

and simply glories in the chance of being 'democwatie,' as she calls it, by serving behind the counter!"

"I want to serve behind that counter!" Bluebell declared rapturously. "I want to throw myself into this business of the Fourth Form 'Co-op.' heart and soul!"

And, to hear her joining in all the talk about the tuckshop within half an hour of her arrival at the school, anybody would have imagined that Bluebell Courtney had been one of the very originators of the novel enterprise.

She was, indeed, so taken up with the all-absorbing topic of the day that not until just on two o'clock did she suddenly remember a certain duty that she should have discharged directly she reached the school.

Tearing herself away from a friendly gathering in the Form captain's study, she went to No. 7, knocked softly, then entered.

Two girls were alone together in this den—Cora and Judith Grandways.

"Hallo!" Cora, the elder sister, said very sullenly, as Bluebell entered. "What do you want?"

"You weren't asked to look in, you know!" Judith added resentfully.

Bluebell looked as if she would like to say, "I didn't very much want to come!" Which was the truth, to be sure. But she was wise enough to treat the sisters' hostility with indifference.

"I have a message for you," she said quietly, "from your Uncle Cyril."

For it so happened that Cyril Courtney, the gentleman who had adopted the one-time circus waif, was related to the Grandways family, although he had anything but the Grandways' spirit of vulgar snobbery.

"Well, what?" snapped Cora.

"Your Uncle Cyril asked me to remember him to you," Bluebell said. "And I was to tell you that he hopes to come down to the school during the summer term, although he may be called abroad."

"Well?"

"And—and——"

"Get on with it!"

"He hopes, if he is able to get down to the school, he will find you doing well. That is all."

"Thank you for nothing!" sneered Cora. "If Uncle Cyril does come down at any

time, he will have to take us as he finds us!"

"We are not going to put ourselves in the hands of the precious Form captain for improvement, if that is Uncle Cyril's idea!" chimed in Judith.

"If Uncle Cyril is so keen for our welfare," Cora went on sarcastically, "he might have sent us a five-pound note each."

"I expect you got one out of him," Judith challenged Bluebell. "Yes, of course! You see her changing colour, Cora? Oh, it was a fine day for you, Bluebell, when you got yourself adopted!"

"It was!" agreed Bluebell earnestly. "Life has been a different——"

"Oh, we don't want to hear you gassing about that! Clear out! You are Betty & Co's friend—not ours!"

Thus Cora. And she gave a kick to the door as soon as Bluebell was pulling it shut softly behind her.

"Another of them," Cora muttered sulkily, when she was alone again with her sister. "Another girl to back up the wonderful captain!"

Then she gave a shrill laugh—a plainer token than ever that she was mad with jealousy of Betty Barton's position as captain of the Form.

"It's two o'clock," Judith exclaimed softly, and instantly the elder sister looked rather excited, as if reminded of an important appointment which she might come nigh to missing.

"Two o'clock? Then I must be off, Judy!" she exclaimed in a guarded tone, whilst she took up her hat and snapped the elastic under her chin. "That man Josling is on the way from Barncombe by now, for a certainty."

She opened her purse, looked into it, then asked quickly:

"Got any money to spare, Judy?"

"A ten-shilling note——"

"That will do," Cora said, snatching at the paper money. "I may want it. But you had better come, too," she added, pausing by the door. "Then, if any of the girls see us, they will only think we are going off for a spin round the country."

"Oh, I'll come!" Judith said, smiling mischievously. "I shall enjoy taking a hand in the private confab. with——"

"Sh!" gestured Cora.

She opened the study door, and, followed

by her equally cunning sister, passed on towards the stairs.

Ten minutes later both girls were cycling along the undulating road from Morcove to Barncombe.

CHAPTER 10.

A Bad Look-out for Betty & Co.

MR. JOSLING, sitting, whip in hand, behind the aged horse that was drawing the travelling stall from Barncombe out to Morcove, had the grim expression this afternoon of a man who means business.

There was one other indication of Mr. Josling's intention to crush all "opposition."

The travelling stall was loaded to the limit!

Creak, creak! went the rusty springs, as the horse laboured along. And crack, crack! went Mr. Josling's whip in the air whenever the aged steed showed signs of giving out at a point where the road went uphill.

But Mr. Josling, whatever his faults, was merciful to his beast.

If he cracked his whip, he also threw himself off the cart into the road, so as to lighten the load.

And, shambling on beside the horse, he even mumbled a sort of apology to the animal, by way of gentle encouragement.

"Ay, ole feller," said Mr. Josling, casting a glance at the overladen vehicle, "I know it's a bit of a pull. But you'll have a easy time of it going home t'night. For," he added, with returning grimness, "nary a bit o' stock-in-trade will I take back to Barncombe! Them girls——"

He fumbled in his deep pockets for pipe and pouch, then resumed his mutterings, shambling along the while beside his panting steed.

"It's only wot I promised 'em I'd do!" he said savagely. "Nice and clever they thought theirselves, giving away cream buns and sasige-rolls, to curry favour with their customers! But two can play at that game, as I warned 'em. If they can throw a sprat to catch a whale, so can I. And so I will!"

He had filled the pipe, and was halting to strike a match when——

Tr-r-ring, tr-r-ring, tr-r-ring! sounded a

couple of cycle-bells in front of him, and he saw two Morcove girls slowing up to dismount.

"Huh!" muttered Mr. Josling, thinking for the moment that the two girls must be members of the "Co-op." committee, wanting to parley with him.

Then he recognised one, at least, of them, and off came his cap by way of polite greeting.

"Why, to be sure," he exclaimed, "'tis the same young lady as come to my shop in the first hinstance, and told me how I could do a roaring trade at Morcove!"

"Was I wrong, Mr. Josling?" smiled Cora Grandways, whilst her sister Anne beamed upon the man ingratiatingly.

"Up to a pint, missy, you was right," said Mr. Josling, checking the horse, so that he himself might stand and talk with the dismounted cyclists. "You come to my shop in Barncombe, you did, and you giv' me a friendly hint that money could be made with a stall outside the school gates, and I'm free to say I did very well the first time. The second, though——"

"You found trade a bit slow, I know," Cora struck in. "But that was because a good many girls were out of funds. Still, you did better than the school's own shop. They had to give away a lot of the eatables——"

"Ay, I know they giv' it away—I see 'em!" scowled Mr. Josling. "For advertisement, o' course. Throwing a sprat to ketch a whale."

"No; there you are wrong!" grinned Cora. "They didn't want to give it away, and they had not planned to do so."

"Sure?" questioned Mr. Josling doubtfully.

"We are quite sure—aren't we, Judy?" said Cora. "This is my sister, Mr. Josling, and she is in the know, of course. The fact is, she and I were the cause of those girls having to give away so much stuff. We were the cause of the Creamery people sending out four times as much stuff as was wanted—perishable stuff, too!"

"Oh, was you?" gaped Mr. Josling. "You? My word, there's summat very queer about all this, that there is! I thought it queer enough that you should come to the shop and put me up to running an opposition show to the school shop. But this——"

Cora shrugged.

"We are going to let you into a secret, Mr. Josling," she said, sinking her voice. "We are having a game with the girls who are running that tuckshop."

"A game, do you call it? Well, that's one word for it!" sniggered Josling. "And the game is that you are out to bust up the tuckshop—hey?"

"We shan't be sorry to see the venture come to grief," was Cora's answer, delivered with a knowing look. "And that is why we have run out to meet you this afternoon, for a bit of a talk, Mr. Josling—"

"Yes—wot?" he said, growing suddenly husky with excitement. "You know me, missy. An honest man, earning his living by the sweat o' his brow. Anythink I can do for you—any wishes o' yours as I can fall in with—only say, you know!"

"You can do this for us," Cora answered quickly, whilst she glanced around, in fear of someone belonging to the school coming along the road. "Turn back with the load you have—"

"Do wot?" gasped Josling.

"Turn back. Don't go yet awhile to your pitch outside the school gates."

"Not go? Miss a 'ole afternoon's trade?"

"You may have to miss the trade. You shan't be out of pocket, anyhow," Cora said, and she pulled out her purse. "My sister and I, we are prepared to give you a sovereign, on condition that you turn back."

"A—a sovereign?"

"A pound-note, anyhow."

"If I turn back? Yet I dunno, missy," Josling hastened to say, feeling he ought to stand out for better terms. "I stand to lose more'n a pound profit. Think o' the expense—wot it costs me to keep that there 'orse o' mine! I'll turn back, missy, but not for a mere sovereign. I'll do anything to oblige, I will. But not for less than thirty shillings!"

He added regretfully that he was a poor man, earning his living by the sweat of his brow—not a philanthropist.

"But listen to me!" Cora exclaimed, in a hurry to get the thing settled. "You can come to the pitch outside the school gates later on to-day—say six o'clock."

"Yes, and then the scholars will have spent all their money!" he cried.

"No, they won't have," retorted Cora, "because the school tuckshop has only a small stock for this afternoon. The committee are expecting a big slump on account of competition from you, and so they will not be ready for any rush that sets in when you fail to turn up."

"And that," chuckled Judith, "is where the joke will come in! Ha, ha, ha!"

Josling fell back a step, his mouth forming a round "Oh!" of speechless amazement.

Then slowly a look of sheer admiration came into his eyes.

He was like a man who knows he is standing in the presence of a superior cunning to his own.

"Yes," he breathed at last, "you girls, if you ain't the limit! You really want me to come along later on—hey? I twig your little scheme. Oh, ay, I follow you, young ladies!"

And he screwed up one eye.

"Right!" he exclaimed next moment, slapping a knee. "I'll be there at jest the right time, my gals! Which means, just the time when t'other young ladies have given me up for the day and have got in supplies with a rush. Ha, ha, ha!"

"It will pay you, we are sure!" grinned Cora, swinging her bicycle round, preparatory to mounting. "If only you turn up at just the right time, as you say you will, then the school 'Co-op.' will have to put the shutters up once and for all."

Josling took his aged horse by its drooping head and began to back the travelling stall, so as to be able to turn round.

"I shan't go back to Barncombe—no," he said unctiously. "I'll just turn back a little way, and pull aside into a nice quiet spot for a bit. Good-afternoon, missies! And thank you, I'm sure! You'll see me later, don't forget!"

"I hope we shall!" Cora said with her false, mirthless laugh. "Come on, Judy darling!"

Judith's delight showed itself in the way she sprang into her saddle.

"It's splendid!" she panted. "At last, Cora, I do believe we are going to settle scores with Betty & Co."

"I am sure of it," said Cora, "at last!"

And they rode back to the school, glorying in what the next few hours had in store for the victims of their malice.

CHAPTER 11.

Top Speed to Barncombe.

"GAME and set!" cried Tess Trelawney.
 "And time for a glass of lemonade," rejoined her partner, Madge Minden.

"Yes, wather!" agreed Paula Creel, from the other side of the tennis-net. "I could do with a wefwesher myself!"

"Oui, oui!" assented Trixie Hope. "Tout suite—at once!"

So they all four picked up the scattered balls, Madge slipping them into a net bag for the present.

Just a trifle breathless and warmed up after a bit of fast play, but looking very charming and "summery" in their white frocks, the girls quitted the court they had been using, crossing the grass towards the school tuckshop.

"I don't hear our friend Josling yet," remarked Madge. "But I suppose he is there. Too much to hope that he is going to give the 'Co-op.' a rest from competition to-day."

"He'll be there right enough," said Tess, grimacing. "Don't forget, girls, Miss Somerfield warned him that he must stop his bawling and yawling. That's why we can't hear him."

"Weal," drawled Paula, "I, for one, am going to westwict my patwonage to the school tuckshop."

"Hear, hear!" murmured her companions.

"I wegard Mr. Josling with the greatest good will," said Paula, putting a curl to rights. "Live and let live—yes, wather! All the same, old Mrs. Marlow must not come out of the san., when she is wecovered fwom her wheumatism, to find her business wuined!"

"That's just it," said Tess. "If the Fourth Form were running the shop for its own benefit, it would be so different. We must think of Mrs.——"

"Hallo! My word, Josling really is not there!" Madge suddenly broke out excitedly.

She had side-stepped, so as to get a view through the school gateway, and could see the pitch which Josling had occupied on his former visits.

"Here's luck!" Madge added joyfully.

"The opposition has not turned up this afternoon."

"Bonheur! Joy!" cried Trixie.

"Yes, wather! Hoo-way!"

And next instant all four girls were racing on to the school tuckshop, where they knew they would find Betty, Polly, and Bluebell on duty at the counter.

The shady plot of grass outside the picturesque building was teeming with girls.

Open-air exercise on such a brilliant, warm day had generated an early desire for refreshments, mostly of a liquid nature.

Lemonade there was in plenty—delicious, home-made lemonade, brewed only an hour ago by a couple of the Fourth Form girls, and already reduced to the right temperature by ice supplied by the butcher.

There was ginger-beer, too, and there were other "minerals."

But one had only to glance round the interior of the cool tuckshop to notice that its stock of eatables was very limited to-day.

This, however, was the result of no mismanagement on the part of the committee.

Those who understood the situation—and what scholar in the school did not?—knew perfectly well why such a limited assortment of cakes, and those of the plainest kind, was all the "Co-op." had for sale.

The "opposition" had threatened to come along this afternoon and almost give things away, in an effort to "cut out" the tuckshop!

So, as a wise precaution against such tactics, the committee had decided not to stock up for this afternoon.

The risk was too great.

"Your lemonades," Betty said, pushing the four glasses across the counter to the thirsty tennis players.

"Thanks, dear!" said Madge. "So he hasn't turned up?"

"No, girls. Just because we have nothing much to sell, the fellow has not come along with his threatened mountain of stuff!" Betty answered, with a rather rueful smile. "Still——"

"Nobody seems to be hungry just at present, so we would not be selling many cream buns and things, even if we had them," Polly cried, rinsing out tumblers.

Even as Polly made that philosophical remark, however, a customer came to the

counter for something more substantial than lemonade.

"You have some cream buns?" she asked.

"Sorry——"

"What, no cream buns! Saturday, too!" exclaimed the disappointed customer. She was a Fifth Form girl. "Well, have you any eclairs?"

"You know why it is," Betty said soothingly. "We thought we would not order any fancy cakes from the Creamery, in case we couldn't sell them. No one wants cream buns and eclairs unless they are perfectly fresh. If we couldn't sell them to-day we couldn't keep them until Monday evening."

"But what a nuisance!" grumbled the Fifth Form girl. "What have you in the cake line?"

Betty pointed to a few buns and a plum-cake that Etta Hargrove had "knocked up" in the school kitchen, with cook's permission.

"Um!" grimaced the Fifth Form girl.

"No; I don't want them, thanks!"

"They are——"

"I can see what they are!"

And she walked away, giving place to another girl who was suddenly feeling in the mood for a fancy pastry to go down with the lemonade.

"You've no cream buns—nothing in that line?"

"No. Sorry! But we——"

"Oh, I understand! But I thought, perhaps, as the opposition hasn't turned up, you might have telephoned for some things to be sent out express from the Creamery."

This other disappointed customer walked away, and then Betty, after a word to Polly and Bluebell, came round from behind the counter and took Madge and the rest of the committee aside.

"I say," Betty said briskly, "that is just what we had better do, hadn't we? Josling is not coming, it is evident. So——"

"Telephone to the Creamery, at Barncombe, and ask them to send out stuff?" Madge exclaimed.

"Express," nodded Betty.

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove," Paula said, "I could do with a cweam bun myself!"

"And when tea-time comes round—with Josling not here—we can do a roaring trade," chimed in Tess.

"Yesterday the girls were a bit stony,

just because we had such a lot to sell," said Betty. "To-day a lot of them are in funds again, just because we have nothing to speak of on the counters. But we'll soon alter all that. I'm up to the school-house to 'phone!"

"Do!" urged Madge, whilst the others nodded their hearty approval. "And, Betty!"

The Form captain paused to flash round. "Well?"

"If they can't send a boy with the stuff at once, we'll run over on our bikes."

"Will you?"

"Yes, wather!"

"Thanks—thanks!" cried Betty, and away she sped, knowing that she could get through on the telephone.

Whilst she was gone, Madge and her fellow-members of the committee stood watching the tuckshop.

There was a steady flow of customers to and from the doorway.

Many still only wanted lemonade, or other liquid refreshment, and they came away looking highly satisfied.

But there was an increasing number who wished that cream buns, eclairs, and even a sausage-roll or so, could be obtained.

"Patience!" Madge remarked, with a laugh, to one disappointed customer. "The committee are taking steps to get in a nice stock before an hour is out. Betty is 'phoning now."

"Here is Betty," remarked Tess, as she saw the Form captain racing back from the school-house. "But, gracious! How upset she looks!"

They ran to meet her, and in a moment Betty was gasping out the disastrous news.

"They won't take any order over the 'phone!"

"What?" cried her chums.

"You can't blame them!" panted Betty.

"I got through to the manageress, and she said she really couldn't take any order over the 'phone. It is because of the faked messages sent yesterday and the day before. She thinks there may be more business of that sort, and so she has made the rule—no 'phone orders, or countermanding of orders, will be regarded!"

"Bai Jove!" Paula breathed. "And that's a nice thing! Howevah——"

"Bother!" exclaimed Tess, stamping a foot. "It's one thing after another! There are swarms of girls to-day who have money for cakes and cream buns, girls who will be

wanting them badly in an hour's time, and we— Oh, bother it!"

"Well," Madge broke out stoically, "there is only one thing to be done. I must get away on my bike to Barncombe, and buy as much stuff as I can carry."

"Ah, that's the idea—yes!" cried Tess, brightening up.

"Oui, oui!"

"Yes, wather! Bai Joove—"

"I'll come with you, Madge!" Tess rushed on.

"And I!" said Trixie. "Vite, vite—quick, quick!"

"Yes, wather! Geals, I am not gweat on fast widin!" said Paula. "Howevah, I wegard it as my duty to go to Barncombe."

"The more there are, the more stuff we can bring back," Madge said. "Come on, then! No need for hats! Betty—"

"I'll tell Polly and Bluebell—yes!" Betty answered, on the point of running into the tuckshop. "And we will tell all the girls as they come into the shop. Ta, ta! Good luck! Be quick!"

"We'll go like lightning!" cried Tess.

And Paula said:

"Yes, wather!"

CHAPTER 12.

Pastries—and Punctures.

WHIR, whir, whir!

Tr-r-ring, tr-r-ring, tr-r-ring!

And again—whir, whir, whir!

Four girl cyclists, breathless and heated after their urgent run along the undulating Devonshire highway, were just at the commencement of the High Street in Barncombe town.

With their hair floating in the breeze, the girls tr-r-ring-tr-r-ringed a "Get out of the way, please!" as they pedalled swiftly up the narrow street, causing many a dreamy pedestrian to make a sudden skip for the pavement.

"Half-past three!" gasped Tess. "Pouf!"

"Yes, wuw-wuw-wather!" panted Paula, heroically holding out.

Paula pulled the trigger of her cycle-bell, then darted a hand to her forehead, to put her hair to rights.

"Anyhow, we are there!" Madge said triumphantly, as the gilded signboard of the Barncombe Creamery hove in sight. "If only we can get back just as quickly as we came—"

"Yes, wuw-wuw-wather, geals!" panted Paula. "I twust we shall—I twust so, don't you know!"

"You are not quite dead beat, are you, dear?" asked Trixie, her own face flaming red with the exertion of the race.

"I am downright pwestwate!" declared Paula. "Howevah—"

And she was managing to smile courageously as she almost fell off her bike at the kerb outside the Creamery.

Next moment all four girls were entering the shop, which was just filling up for the afternoon.

The manageress came forward at once, smiling a pleasant greeting to these girls, whom she knew so well.

"Our chum, Betty Barton, 'phoned through to you a little while ago," Madge led off, "about sending some—"

"Oh, yes! It really was a genuine message, then?" the manageress exclaimed. "I am so sorry I had to be cautious, but, for your own sakes, as well as ours, I thought it best to make that new rule. In future, all orders, or instructions, by 'phone must be ignored."

"Yes—yes, we quite understand," panted Madge. "So we have run out on our bikes to take back with us as much stuff as we can manage."

"There is no opposition to-day," added Tess, "and lots of the girls are in funds."

The manageress smiled, with great good will.

She knew exactly what the Fourth Form girls were doing at Morcove—and why they were doing it—and she thought very highly of their enterprise.

"Miss!" she called to one of the waitresses, and next minute that young lady was making up a dozen large cardboard boxes of fancy cakes and pastries for the girls to take back on their cycles.

"That's better—thanks!" Madge exclaimed gratefully, when the last strings were being tied. "Here you are, Tess—Trixie! Can you manage all four, Trixie?"

"Oui, oui!"

"Where's Paula? Paula!"

Paula was in front of a big mirror, arranging her hair.

"Bai Jove, are we weady? Oh, thanks!" she exclaimed as Madge, without a word, thrust three large boxes into her hands. "A mere twifle as we regards weight. Bai Jove! Yes, wather!"

"I can pay——" Madge began, turning to the manageress.

But that lady smiled, waving a hand.

"Oh, don't trouble—don't stop now! I think I know you well enough," she said. "I do hope you sell out!"

She held the shop door open for the girl, who went blundering out, laden with the light but cumbersome parcels.

Barncombe was one of those quiet, sleepy towns where a very small occurrence creates a very great sensation.

By the time Madge and her companions had finished tying the numerous parcels to various parts of the cycles a crowd had gathered.

It was just possible that the bystanders imagined these four girls were going home to eat everything themselves.

This thought suddenly occurring to Madge, brought a blush to her cheek.

Nor did she and her chums feel quite free from embarrassment when, at last, they skimmed away.

The various folding boxes, tied to the handlebars, and other available parts of each cycle, bore the tell-tale words:

"BARNCOMBE CREAMERY."

But at last they were clear of the town, with its staring throngs, and now, with heads bent low to the breeze, they pedalled on as fast as possible.

If no hitch occurred during this return journey, they knew they should be back in time for the cakes and pastries to be retailed for tea.

It was a thought to keep the four girls up to the mark.

Only let them get to the school "Co-op." without delay, and by closing time this evening the whole stock would have been turned into hard cash.

So far there had been nothing but upsets and hindrances in the working of the tuck-shop on behalf of poor Mrs. Marlow, but now—now there was a chance to make a bit of profit!

Along a nice, level bit of roadway they skimmed, after forging breathlessly uphill, and then down they went, taking a gentle descent at sixteen miles an hour.

It was, as Paula shrieked aloud, whilst she came purring on behind the others, "Glowious—wipping!"

But, alas, disaster was at hand!

Exactly half-way back to the school

Madge's front tyre suddenly gave a loud ping!

In the very next moment "Ping!" went Tess's front tyre. And then:

Ping! again.

That was Trixie's back tyre.

"Bother it!" exclaimed Tess, as the three hopped off. "Look out, Paula! There must be a lot of——"

Ping!

"Bai Jove! Is that my tyre, too?" gasped Paula.

It was!

She sprang from her machine.

All four girls looked at the punctured pneumatics then at one another, and then all over the dry roadway.

"Hallo, look!" Madge suddenly exclaimed. "Tintacks!"

"Dozens of them!" cried Tess.

"Scores——"

"Bai Jove! Millions, you know!" chimed in Paula. "And some bwocken glass, too!"

Once again the girls exchanged glances. "It has been done purposely," Madge declared at last, and the others' silence betokened their agreement with this opinion.

"Someone at the school," Madge went on fiercely, "the same mischief-maker who sent that 'phone message yesterday and the day before——"

"Yes," breathed Tess grimly. "This is proof positive. The 'Co-op.' is being made a dead-set at by some girl or other. Our bikes have been punctured, so as to delay our getting back to the school with the stuff."

"We'll get there all the same!" Madge declared promptly, walking on. "Better not waste time mending the punctures. Paula, can you manage?"

"I will dwag on till I dwop!" said Paula. "Pway pwocceed, geals!"

So they pushed on again, wheeling their cycles, and after another half-mile Tess glanced at her wrist-watch.

"We may yet be in by five o'clock."

"And perhaps a lot of the girls will hold back their tea, knowing we are on the way," Madge told her chum hopefully. "The great thing is, Josling is not there, doing all the trade before we get a chance!"

"Oui, oui! That's the great comfort," agreed Trixie. "To-day we have no opposition to fear. We—— Hallo!" She

broke off, peering ahead with a startled expression. "Look!"

The other girls were already looking.

A hundred yards ahead of them a man with a horse-drawn stall was pulling out from a side lane on to the road to Morecove.

"Gweat goodness!" gasped Paula.

"Theah he is, bai Jove!"

"Yes," Madge a'most groaned. "It's Mr. Josling!"

CHAPTER 13.

A Race Between the Rivals.

MR. JOSLING'S turn-out was going along at an easy walking pace.

Such leisureliness might have struck the girls as being very curious—suspicious even—but for the fact that they knew the horse to be a very decrepit animal.

Perhaps the poor beast simply could not go faster than this to-day, and therein lay the girls' only hope!

They could yet get to the school in advance of Mr. Josling!

If they were hampered with punctured bikes, he was also hampered by having a worn-out horse between the shafts.

"Come on!" Madge whispered, setting forward at a much quicker pace. "And not a word to him, mind, when we are overtaking him."

That shrewd bit of advice from Madge was received with nods of approval by her chums.

Now she had mentioned it, they could see the desirability of slipping on in front of Mr. Josling without getting involved in any passage of arms.

Swiftly, and without talking among themselves, the girls overhauled the lumbering vehicle. Josling was walking beside it, pipe in mouth.

He heard the girls coming on behind him, and when he looked round to take note of them he gave them a very genial smile.

"Afternoon, young ladies!"

For Josling was all for ingratiating himself with Morecove scholars, so long as they were not the scholars who were running that tuckshop.

He imagined evidently that these four were a party who had no places on the committee.

Then he saw the cardboard boxes, with the tell-tale words: "Barnecombe Creamery." And suddenly his genial expression vanished.

"Ullo!" he exclaimed, scowling. "Wot's them packidges?"

None of the four answered. They were trundling their cycles past him, one behind another.

"So you've bin buying up the Creamery, hev you?" Josling cried, in a louder voice. "Oh, orl right! If that's your game——"

Without looking round, the girls could tell that he was hurriedly clambering on board his lumbering vehicle.

"Vite—vite!" Trixie whispered. "Quick—quick!"

But it was impossible to go faster without breaking into a run.

Crack! sounded Josling's whip, urging the horse to "Gee-up!"

Nor was the aged steed quite so devoid of energy as the girl had fondly hoped.

They did not know that Josling had been "standing by" in a sheltered quarry for the last two hours, with the horse out of the shafts and getting a refreshing bite of grass.

What the girls did know was that that horse was suddenly coming on faster!

"Run!" Madge exclaimed desperately.

"We must!"

"Yes, wather!"

And they did.

What a comical sight it would have been to anybody on hand, to see the four girls, with their punctured bikes, scuffling along the highway, whilst after them clopped the horse and van!

But it cannot be said that the girls enjoyed the humour of the situation.

To them it was quite a grave crisis.

Yonder, at Morecove School, were dozens of girls waiting to spend money on cakes and pastries.

If Josling got there first, he would supply all wants in a few minutes, and once again the school "Co-op." would be landed with a stock of eatables for which there was no demand!

On the other hand, if they—Madge and her companions—raced Josling, the cakes and pastries would be disposed of at lightning speed, the "Co-op." coffers would be full, there would be a profit to show at last!

Yes, it was a crisis. The "Co-op." could not go on suffering these bad days.

It had simply got to be first with the cakes and pastries to-day, or else it must put the shutters up!

"Faster, if you can!" panted Madge, leading by a yard or two. "Paula——"

"I—I vewy much wegwet," gasped Paula, "I am extwemely short of bweath! Yes, wather! Howevah, geals——"

"Come on, do!"

"Pwe-pwe-pwecisely!" palpitated the swell girl. "The thought of letting you down is too distwessing! Bai Jove, though, haow far behind is he now?"

Josling was no more than ten yards behind, if that!

Every time he cracked his whip it seemed to the girls as if he was cracking it about their ears, not the horse's!

Faster, always a little faster, the desperate four seemed to be running, at the same time trundling their wretched cycles, and always a little faster that horse was clop-clopping after them.

Then suddenly a slithering sound was followed by a shouted "Coom up!"

Heart in mouth, the girls looked round.

The horse had stumbled.

Only by a sharp drag at the reins had Josling held the poor beast up.

Now the whole outfit was at a standstill, and Josling was jumping down to run and look at one of the brute's forefeet.

"It's a loose shoe, perhaps—a cast one. Oh, joy!" gasped out Madge. "What a bit of luck for us!"

When they looked back again they saw Josling trying to tackle a half caste shoe by means of a claspknife.

And, for all they knew, he was still at the job when they themselves were turning in at the gateway of the school.

At any rate, they had won the race.

What a cheer went up, too, as the four exhausted cyclists came trundling their machines round to the tuckshop!

It was just as if the race had been an official one.

But, of course, Moreove School knew nothing about Mr. Josling's attempt to get there first.

The cheers were inspired by the sight of all those cardboard boxes from the Barncombe Creamery.

"Hurrah! They are back—they have bought any amount of stuff!" went up the delighted cry. "Bravo, the Fourth!"

Betty, Polly, Bluebell—they rushed at the boxes, and had them inside the shop in a twinkling.

A crowd of eager customers surged to the counter, and then the din was something to be remembered.

"Six cream buns for me, Betty!"

"Four for me, and two eclairs! Quick, Betty!"

"Three for me, and——"

"Polly! Quick, please! We are waiting for tea! Three jam turnovers and two doughnuts and some Swiss roll!"

"One at a time—one at a time!" Polly shouted back at the turbulent crowd, laughing.

For a minute or so it seemed as if the enormous stock of catables would be whipped up on the spot. Suddenly, however, there was a lull in the clamour.

After serving the dozen or so girls who had been waiting about, Betty and her two chums behind the counter found the shop emptying.

"Most of the girls had gone in to tea before you arrived," the Form captain said to Madge, to account for the sudden slackening off. "They'll be out here in a few minutes, though. And then——"

"What a roaring trade we shall do!" burst out Polly gaily. "My giddy word, you girls must have bought up the Creamery!"

"Yes, wather!" said Paula, coming in from the outer air, where she had been sitting on the grass, perfectly dead beat. "I only twust we have not bought too much!"

"You couldn't have!" declared Betty. "With Josling not here——"

"But," struck in Madge, seizing the first chance to explain how matters really stood. "Josling is on the way now!"

"What?" gasped all three counter-hands.

"He's here!" cried Tess Trelawney, suddenly dashing into the shop. "Come and look!"

And, when the whole alarmed party dashed round to the school gateway, there was Mr. Josling, sure enough, taking his horse out of the shafts on the plot of ground that he had made his pitch just across the roadway.

CHAPTER 14.

"Smashed Up," Indeed!

"JUDY, dear!"

"Yes, Cora?"

Judith Grandways sprang up from her chair in Study No. 7, and darted to the window, where her sister was standing.

"He's here!" Cora exclaimed, gazing excitedly towards the school gateway. "Thank goodness, he has got here only a few minutes after those girls!"

"And they have not had a chance to sell half the stuff yet!"

"Not a quarter!" Cora answered exultantly. "Are you coming down?"

"At once!" Judith assented eagerly, and next moment they were going along the passage to the stairs.

The schoolhouse was fairly quiet, although the sisters knew that at any minute now there might be a general rising from tea.

Then, it was certain, a tide of girls with money to spend would set in towards the rival tuckshops.

"How Madge and the others must have rushed along, after getting the bikes punctured!" muttered Cora, when she and her sister were going down the drive. "I did think it would be a much greater hindrance."

"It is surprising that Josling didn't get here first, anyhow, since we hunted him out and gave him the tip to come along at once from the quarry. But that horse of his is such a crock!" concluded Judith scornfully.

"Never mind; he is here!" exulted Judith. "And now to get him to undersell Betty & Co. We'll persuade him to give the stuff away, if needs be, rather than let them make a clearance of their stock!"

"He won't need much persuading, I fancy!" chuckled Judith. "He is out to smash the opposition."

Cora cast a glance behind her, up the drive, and then quickened her pace.

She had seen that other girls were already flocking forth from the school-house.

As she and her sister drew close to the gateway they were able to see across to the tuckshop.

It was almost bereft of customers, but Betty and her chums were there, making all preparations for brisk trade.

Followed by her sister, Cora passed out through the gateway and across the road.

Josling, too, was nipping about, getting his stall in trim for trade.

"Give me a couple of tins of pineapple and some cakes—anything you like!" Cora said quickly, in a lowered voice. "And, whilst you are serving me, listen! My sister and I have plenty of pocket-money and we—"

"Two tins of pineapple, right!" Josling said aloud, at the same time taking care to listen.

"Undersell those girls!" Cora urged him, in a fierce whisper. "Give the stuff away, if needs be! We will cover all your loss."

"Right, miss!" Josling cried again, as if he was giving heed to a mere order for cakes.

"This evening will finish the school shop, if only you make a plunge!" Cora assured him. "So don't be afraid!"

Her purchases were already made up. She took them, paid for them, then turned away.

No one watching the whole proceeding could have suspected what had really passed between her and the owner of the stall.

By now a score or so of girls had drawn close to the gateway.

"Good-evening, young ladies!" Josling called across to them, with his ingratiating leer. "Now, young ladies, come and see the fine load o' stuff I've got for you! I'm late, misses; but better late than never. Hi, hi, hi! Fourpence a tin—fourpence!"

Morcove had been paying ninepence for a small tin of pineapple.

"Penny each cream buns, young ladies!"

Cream buns at a penny!

The crowd set towards the stall.

No one seemed to have a thought for the school tuckshop.

"Hi, hi, hi!" Josling went on, in that hoarse whisper of his. "Great reduction, young ladies! Small profits and quick returns is the motto to-day! Two a penny, them buns! Pick where you like! Two a penny! Hi, hi, hi!"

Morcove took another minute or so to recover from its amazement.

Then it fell to the tempting offer.

How could Mr. Josling afford to "cut" things as fine as this?

No one knew, and no one very much cared.

That was his look-out!
Cream buns at a penny apiece!

It was a "snip."

"Yus, young ladies, an' all fresh to-day," Josling assured his customers, as their silver and copper rattled into his till. "Hi, hi, hi! Small profits and quick returns!"

The committee of the Fourth Form Co-operative Society had made a hurried inspection of the opposition.

Now the girls returned to their neglected shop.

They were not panic-stricken, but they were worried.

Once again they had on hand a huge quantity of stuff that was practically unsaleable if kept over to another day.

And to-morrow was Sunday!

Unsold stuff would have to be kept over until Monday afternoon—nearly forty-eight hours.

"Hi, hi, hi!" they could hear Josling reiterating hoarsely. "Small profits and quick returns!"

"We must take up the challenge," said Betty decisively. "Better to sell the stuff at a big reduction than have it left on our hands."

"Yes, wather!" agreed Paula.

"Especially after yesterday's losses!" grimaced Tess. "This is the second time we have been landed like this. No business can stand it."

"We shall be ruined!" Paula exclaimed. "Without wishing to use a stwong expwession, this is downwight twagie!"

"Start away—half price for everything!" Betty said grimly. "That will bring the girls along!"

And so it did.

The moment Betty & Co. made it known that they, too, were making big "cuts" there was a rush of girls to the shop.

But hardly had Betty, Polly, and Bluebell started to sell at the reduced prices than all the girls went rushing back to Josling's stall, he having made a still further reduction!

"Ha'penny each, cream buns!" was Josling's cry.

"Tell the girls, three a penny!" Betty suggested desperately. "Call them back!"

"Geals—geals!" Paula yelled frantically. "Three a penny, bai Jove, cwam buns! All fwesh to-day, don't you know!"

The girls turned back.

They were going to snap up cream buns at three a penny with the greatest enthusiasm, only—

"'Ere y'are, cream buns, young ladies—free, gratis, and for nothing!" Josling was heard to cry. "Giving 'em away, I am!"

He was giving them away!

The crowd rushed back to him.

"Geals, geals!" appealed Paula, chasing after them. "Pway, wemember! We are not selling for pwofit!"

"Ham I?" retorted Josling, "when I'm a-giving the stuff away? 'Remember,' says you! I remember who started this game. You begun it, you did! Weren't you a-giving away for hadvertisement yesterday? Then why shouldn't I to-day?"

And he held the crowd around him.

A few girls there were who absolutely refused to take advantage of Josling's "generosity."

Nor would they let Betty & Co. adhere to the lowered prices.

They stood by the school tuckshop, and what they bought they insisted on paying for at the proper prices.

But when these girls had withdrawn, with all they needed in the way of cakes and pastries, the stock still on hand in the tuckshop was alarmingly big.

Human nature being what it is, how could one expect the majority of girls to buy eatables that could be had almost for the taking!

It was a state of things that has often been witnessed, on a far greater scale, in the world of commerce, and Morcove, like the public at large, when two trading concerns are fighting each other, got the most benefit it could for itself.

Long before sunset Josling had cleared out his stock-in-trade.

With a cheerfulness that he could well afford to assume, since his loss was all guaranteed by Cora and Judith, he practically gave away the whole lot, and it was certain there would be some fine feasting in the dormitories to-night, after "lights out!"

As for the "Co-op," it was simply faced with ruin!

For the second day in succession, it had suffered disastrously as the result of competition.

Matters were slightly relieved by the appearance of Ethel Courtway and some of her fellow seniors at sundown.

They had been away from the school since two o'clock.

When they discovered the plight the committee was in, they bought up far more eatables than they really wanted at normal prices.

Even so, the "Co-op." was closing its doors that night with a lot of stuff left on hand that would not be saleable by Monday afternoon—stuff that the girls could hardly have got rid of by giving it away, so generous had Josling's distribution been.

Josling did not drive off with his stall that evening.

The horse had lost a shoe and was slightly lame, and so the stall had to be left behind.

Drawn well off the roadway, on to the bit of common land, where the shop had a perfect right to be left, Josling made it all secure against possible rain.

Then, leading his shambling horse, he trudged off in the twilight, whilst at the gateway stood the committee of the "Co-op.," staring, it must be admitted, very wrathfully after him!

All next day the travelling stall was standing on the green opposite the school gateway.

It was still there, when darkness again shut down upon the lonely world of Morcove.

Mr. Josling would come out from Barncombe on the morrow, no doubt, ready to carry the "trade war" yet another step.

Meanwhile, by leaving the stall behind him, he had left the "Co-op." committee a very unwelcome reminder of his opposition.

That Sunday night Betty & Co. went up to their beds, feeling very sick at heart.

When asked by other girls if the "Co-op." was to open on the morrow, they had answered as cheerfully as possible:

"We hope so."

But would they be able to open?

Were they in a position to "carry on"?

This was a question that had had to be debated very gravely in committee.

And the answer arrived at was anything but a comforting one.

No!

With Josling as a competitor still to be reckoned with, the outlook for the "Co-op." was black indeed.

Heavy losses had been incurred, and only by having a private "whip round" could the

girls meet the bill owing to the Creamery.

That liability Betty & Co. meant to discharge, if it took their last penny of pocket money.

But how could they get in further supplies—how could they dare take the risk—whilst the presence of Josling's stall meant such uncertainty about sales?

"Bother Josling and his stall!" Tess fumed, on the way upstairs, with Betty and the rest, last thing that Sunday night. "I wish we could wake up in the morning and find his precious stall blown out to sea!"

But no gale of wind obligingly sprang up to fulfil Tess's wish, even if she meant it.

The night was calm and fine, and the girls went to sleep knowing that Josling's stall, down there on the green, was not in any danger of being damaged even by rain.

And yet—

What was it, when morning had come again, that fetched all the inmates of the Fourth Form dormitory to the windows looking out towards the gateway?

It was nothing less than a wild shout from Etta Hargrove, who had chanced to be the first girl to slip from her bed that morning.

And Etta's wild shout was this:

"Oh, look! Quick, girls—look! Josling's stall has been smashed up in the night!"

CHAPTER 15.

Great Fun for the Grandways.

THE first ringing of the bell for breakfast that morning was ignored by almost the whole of Morcove School.

Scholars and mistresses alike were formed into a crowd around Josling's stall.

Nothing was lacking from the amazing scene to suggest that the stall had been deliberately and thoroughly smashed up, as if to make sure that Josling's "opposition" to the school tuckshop should be stopped for good and all.

But at whose hands had the stall suffered like this?

Betty & Co., even whilst they were asking one another that baffling question, were conscious of being looked at by the girls in general very suspiciously.

And only too well the committee of the Fourth Form "Co-op." knew what those suspicious glances meant!

Their schoolfellows were being forced to

suspect that they—the committee—had committed this mean deed.

For that was the word for it.

"Go into school, please!" Miss Somerfield said suddenly, after a whole minute spent in dismayed contemplation of the wreckage. "All of you, go into your breakfast. Betty Barton—"

"On behalf of the committee, Miss Somerfield," Betty broke out then huskily, "I wish to say, please, we had nothing whatever to do with this."

"Go into your breakfast," Miss Somerfield repeated quietly. "I will see you and the rest of the committee at nine o'clock."

The headmistress had spoken in an impartial tone, but the very utterance of such words at that moment led to one conclusion in the minds of all the scholars.

They felt sure that Miss Somerfield herself, reluctant as she was to do so, shared their suspicion about Betty & Co.

A poor brekker did the chums of the Fourth Form make that morning, and never had spick-and-span Paula Creel gone about looking so neglectful of her personal appearance.

And in that depressed frame of mind she followed her equally gloomy chums to the sanctum.

"Now, you girls," Miss Somerfield began, briskly, but quietly, directly they were in a line before her. "What have you to tell me about that wrecked stall of Mr. Josling's?"

"We have not touched it," Betty said flatly.

"It is a most serious business," Miss Somerfield remarked gravely. "Quite naturally, Mr. Josling will lay the blame for the deed against you; because you are the girls who were running the school shop."

"We had nothing to do with the smashing up of his stall," Betty repeated. "We quite understand that everything points to our having done it; but—"

"It is a pity, a very great pity!" Miss Somerfield exclaimed unhappily. "Now I am sorry I ever let you try your hand at running that shop."

"But, Miss Somerfield," Betty could not help interrupting hotly, "you don't believe that we wrecked the stall when we have denied it?"

"In this case, unfortunately," the headmistress said, "it is not what I believe, but what others are bound to believe. I,

personally, despite all the evidence against you, am going to accept your denial."

"Thank you, Miss Somerfield! Oh—"

"But whether the school, as a whole, will acquit you of blame, I cannot say," Miss Somerfield went on regretfully. "Mr. Josling will not, that is certain. I may appease him by promising to pay for all damage done, but this thing will rankle."

"If I may be allowed to make one remark," said Paula blandly. "I shall be a twifle hard up for a few days, on account of other expenses I have promised to meet. Howevah, as soon as possible, I shall have extweme pleasure in beaving a share of the damages. Yes, wather!"

"And I! And I!" added the others, just as readily.

"No," declined Miss Somerfield firmly. "Since you say you did not wreck the stall, why should you pay for the damage done? The expense must fall upon the public purse of the school. I shall meet Mr. Josling's claim when he makes it. Meanwhile—"

She made a little pause.

"The whole school will be gated—"

"Gated?" gasped Betty & Co., in dismay.

"Yes!"

The headmistress was speaking with great deliberation.

"It is perfectly certain that the deed was done by somebody in the school. Until the culprit either comes forward and confesses, rather than see the whole school suffer, or is found out over the whole disgraceful business, every scholar must stay in bounds!"

And such was the gist of the formal notice which appeared on the school notice-board, at midday, bearing Miss Somerfield's signature.

The whole school gated.

Even the most level-headed girls, although they saw that this was a perfectly fair step for their headmistress to have taken, felt a little chagrined.

Others simply raged, disseminating the most fiery talk about the "injustice" of the thing.

These were girls who argued that the smashing up of the stall could only be attributed to those scholars who had been running the "Co-op."

What other scholars could have had any possible reason for doing the deed?

It was, in fact, to the interest of the

girls in general that the "opposition" should continue!

So, amongst an ever-increasing majority, the feeling grew—not so much against Miss Somerfield as against Betty Barton and her chums.

Against them, for having done the deed in hot blood, and now being too cowardly to take the consequences!

"Do you see?" cried one fiery Fifth Form girl, pointing wildly to the notice-board, as Betty & Co. were going past. "This is your doing!"

"It is not!"

"It is—it is!" a dozen girls stormed furiously. "The whole lot of us gated, and all because you haven't the decency to own up!"

"We did not smash Josling's stall——"

"Didn't smash it!" cried the angry mob disgustedly. "If you didn't, then who did?"

"That," said Betty Barton, "is what we mean to find out!"

And at that moment Cora and Judith Grandways were mixing with the excited throng.

As Betty Barton made that significant remark, hinting at her own and her chums' resolve to discover who had wrecked the stall, the cunning sisters exchanged glances.

Then they walked off.

"Think they will find out, do they?" Cora sneered, under her breath. "It is a likely thing!"

And Judith showed an equal sense of being quite safe from discovery by chuckling softly:

"Ha, ha, ha!"

CHAPTER 16.

What Does Josling Want?

"PAULA!"

The murmured word went unanswered.

Paula Creel was lolling back in a study armchair, with a handkerchief over her pretty face.

"Are you really asleep, Paula?" asked Bluebell Courtney, in a tone that showed she did not wish to wake Paula if that young lady was, perhaps, taking forty winks.

A sigh came from under the handkerchief.

Then a dainty hand lifted the piece of cambric away.

"Bai Jove!" drawled Paula, stifling a yawn. "I have had a most welfweshing west! What's the time, Bluebell, deah?"

"Quarter to six, and I've already done my prep."

"You have, bai Jove? Howevah," said Paula, still too lazy to stir from the couch. "I do not feel I can bwing myself to gwapple with pwep. just yet. I——"

Paula checked; suddenly sitting erect.

"Bai Jove, theah's wather a commotion going on in some study along the cowwidor! Bluebell——"

"That is what made me speak to you when you were playing at sleeping beauty," said Bluebell Courtney. "There seems to be a row on."

"Yes, wather! A most distwessing wow."

"And," said Bluebell, "I fancy it is in Study No. 12."

"Bai Jove! You mean that Betty Barton and Polly Linton are in twouble?" Paula exclaimed, bouncing to her feet. "Come along, then. One moment, though, while I put my hair to wights!"

It was inevitable that Paula Creel should have to give a glance at herself in the study mirror.

She was not vain, but she had an in-born care for a spick-and-span appearance.

A single moment, however, really was all she occupied in putting herself to rights.

Then, with a degree of alarm which showed how any trouble pertaining to Betty and Polly was her trouble, too, she stepped into the passage.

Bluebell followed, looking equally concerned.

A dozen quick steps took them to the end of the passage, where an indignant party of girls crowded at the open doorway of the Fourth Form captain's study.

"Bai Jove, what's this?" inquired Paula. "Geals——"

"Boo—boo!" the indignant girls derided the swell girl, causing her to turn quite pale.

"Weally, don't you know——"

"You are another of them!" a voice in the crowd called out. "Shame on you, Paula! Shame on the lot of you!"

"I—I—— Howevah!" was all Paula could splutter, whilst she and Bluebell

gently pushed their way through the hostile throng and joined the party inside the study.

"Pway, Betty, deah—pway, all of you," Paula exclaimed—"what is the twouble about?"

"Boo—oooo!" cried the crowd again.

Some of the jeers were half-playful ones, others were extremely bitter.

Betty Barton looked stern.

So did Polly Linton, Madge Minden, Tess Trelawney, and Trixie Hope, these being the girls who were involved in the hostile demonstration.

"You need not have troubled to come along," Betty said softly to Paula and Bluebell. "Thanks, though—"

"My deah Betty! I twust I shall nevah fail to take my stand beside you in any wov. But—but pway, what is the twouble?"

"Gated!" sang out an angry voice from the heart of the crowd, which was made up chiefly of Fifth Form girls. "The whole school still gated—"

"Yes, wather! Yes, bai Jove, of course!" said Paula amiably. "We are all aweah of that!"

"The whole school is aware that it's you girls' fault!" retorted another member of the hostile throng.

"Weally, don't you know, you are out in your weekoning theah," said Paula.

"We have told them they are wrong, Paula, dear," sighed Betty. "You know—the whole school knows—we denied, as early as yesterday morning, having had any part in the disgraceful affair for which the school has been gated. But—"

"If you didn't do it, who did?" challenged several of the girls at the doorway. "And what we want to say is, that you had much better own up?"

"We tell you again, we have nothing to own up to!" Betty cried hotly.

She and her chums were very indignant that their word should be doubted like this.

"So clear out, sharp!" Polly Linton chimed in. "You lot of jabbering duffers—theah cill!"

A certain Fifth Form girl seemed to feel that she and her chums were not cutting a very dignified figure.

She made a gestured appeal for better order, and then spoke with refreshing calmness.

At the same time, there was a bitterness

in her tone which showed that she was quite as indignant as her friends.

"It is Tuesday evening, and all the whole school has been gated since yesterday morning," she said. "Is it fair that the whole school should suffer?"

"If you will put that question to Miss Somerfield, the headmistress," answered Betty, "she will say that it was the right thing for her to do in the circumstances. At any school, when a disgraceful thing is done by some scholar who can't be found out, the whole school is liable to be gated."

"We are quite aware of that," retorted the Fifth Form girl. She was Edith Elwin, the Fifth Form captain. "The school is gated because the headmistress hopes that the culprit will be so ashamed at the loss of liberty the whole school is suffering that she will be induced to own up. What we say is, aren't the culprits in this case feeling that it is high time they did own up?"

"We are not the culprits, so we can't say," said Betty.

"I'm sorry," said Edith Elwin coldly; "but I, like lots of other girls, find it hard to accept your denial!"

"Miss Somerfield has accepted it," said Madge Minden quietly.

"And Ethel Countway, the head girl—she, too," said Tess Trelawney.

"Look at the facts," Edith went on indignantly; "then ask yourselves—you, Betty Barton, and these chums of yours, who were the committee running that tuck-shop down in the grounds—ask yourselves if we are unreasonable in doubting your denial! All of you, as a committee, started to run that shop whilst Mrs. Marlow was laid up in the sanatorium. That man Josling came along with his stall, starting a sort of opposition outside the school gates."

"Yes."

"Well, we know what happened. During the night before last, Josling's stall was smashed up—completely wrecked—so that he could not carry on the opposition any more."

"We had nothing to do with the smashing up of his stall!" reiterated Betty indignantly.

"Wait a bit, please!" Edith Elwin pleaded icily. "The point is, if you didn't do it, who did? Why should any other girls smash up the stall? It was to their benefit to see the opposition going on. It meant cheaper goods, a better variety. Why

should any girls but those who were running the school tuckshop want to stop Josling's trade?"

"I have seen that point of yours all along," Betty answered promptly. "My chums and I realise that everything points to our having done the deed. But——"

"We did not touch the stall, so you can jolly well pack off!" burst out Polly Linton.

"Boo—ooo! Boo—ooo!" The jeering started again. "Bluster!"

"It is nothing of the sort!" said Betty, white with righteous indignation. "We are terribly sorry that the stall was smashed up. It makes us miserable to see the whole school gated, all as the outcome of our attempt to carry on the school shop whilst poor Mrs. Marlow was laid up. And we can tell you this——"

"What we want you to do," shouted a few of the scornful girls, "is to tell the head-mistress that you did it in anger, and now you are sorry! Own up now! Shame, shame, to make the whole school suffer like this!"

"Once more, we are simply going to tell you this!" Betty cried. "We did not smash up the stall, and we are not going to rest until we have found out who did!"

"Hear, hear!" cried the Fourth Form captain's chums, Paula chiming in with her emphatic:

"Yes, wather!"

Again a scornful howl went up.

This unhappy business of the smashed-up stall had been the means of reviving the old, old rivalry between the Fifth Form and the Fourth.

Sometimes the rivalry took a friendly turn, sometimes it became very bitter.

It was bitter enough at present!

"Shame, shame!" the crowd at the door repeated, starting to disperse. "We can't go out of bounds. We are like a lot of prisoners!"

"And all because certain girls are too cowardly to——"

Slam!

That was the door of Study 12, as Betty Barton rushed at it and violently closed it.

"It's cruel of them," she exclaimed fiercely, "when we have all declared, on our word of honour, that we never touched the stall!"

"Repeated denials only seem like cowardly bluster," Madge Minden added sadly. "What a horrid set-out it is!"

"Yes, wather!" sighed Paula, sitting down in the best chair. "It leaves me pwoastwate!"

"All my fault!" Betty exclaimed.

"Your fault, Betty?"

"I feel half sorry I ever suggested the idea of carrying on that tuckshop."

"Nonsense!" all her chums cried. "It was a splendid notion. We should have made a huge success of it, too, if Josling hadn't come along with his opposition stall. We would have laid by profits to hand to Mrs. Marlow, and——"

"As it is," Betty broke in upon them all sadly, "we have losses to make good out of our own pocket-money. Not that any of you mind that, I know. But the smashing up of the stall, our being under suspicion like this, so many girls thinking that we simply must have been the culprits——"

"My word," muttered Polly grimly, "only wait until the culprits are brought to book! A few girls in the school will have to come along with apologies then!"

"I have a suspicion——" Tess began.

But Madge broke in, rather ruefully:

"We all have a suspicion, Tess; but unfortunately, we have no proof."

"At present, no," rejoined Betty. "But—— What's interesting you so, Trixie?"

Trixie Hope, standing at the window, exclaimed, without looking round:

"Vite, vite—quick, quick! This is rather strange."

With a rush, the others joined her at the window.

Looking out, and following the direction of Trixie's pointing hand, they saw a shabby man skulking about on the open land beyond the school bounds.

"Why," exclaimed Betty, "it is——"

"Josling!" muttered the others, rather excitedly. "Josling again!"

"It is queer, his being there like that," murmured Betty, knitting her pretty brows. "Is he coming up to see Miss Somerfield again about the smashed stall?"

"He was here yesterday afternoon about that," answered Madge, "and we understood that Miss Somerfield settled his claim. We know she was going to do that."

"Besides, he is not making for the school gates," said Polly. "He is merely loitering about. Why, I wonder?"

It was a question none of the others could answer.

There they stood, crowding at the window.

sitting study 12, gazing out upon that all too familiar figure of the man who had been in opposition, wondering suspiciously what was his motive for loitering close to the school?

What was his game now?

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CHAPTER 17.

A Scare for the Sisters!

AT that moment, in one of the other Fourth Form studies, a girl was holding aside a curtain, to peer out of the window, whilst she spoke, in an uneasy whisper, to her sister, sitting moodily in a chair by the table.

"Cora! He is here!" was Judith Grandways' exclamation. "Come and look! He is hanging about outside the grounds. Whatever shall we do?"

The elder sister, Cora, jumped up from her chair and took a quick step to the window.

"Bother the fellow!" she muttered savagely. "I suppose he is going to be a fine nuisance now! Just because——"

"Well, we had our money's worth," Judith struck in, trying to draw comfort from this thought. "We got such a blow in at Betty Barton & Co. that they are not likely to get over."

"Yes, but——"

Cora Grandways looked increasingly uneasy as she stared at that distant figure slouching about beyond the school bounds.

"How I wish we could get out to speak to him on the quiet!" she said at last. "Surely we can make him see that he has no claim upon us, if that is his game! He didn't do so badly out of the scheme we put him up to."

"No," agreed Judith. "And, of course, he hasn't the least idea that we——"

"Sh!" Cora cautioned her sister, glancing round at the closed door.

Judith went on, in a yet more guarded tone:

"He can't have the least suspicion that we smashed up the stall. It was midnight when we slipped out of the house and did the trick. Suspicion has never fallen upon us in the school, so how could Josling himself suspect us? He was at home, in Barncombe, at the time."

"It is not that," frowned Cora. "The business of the smashed-up stall is settled

with, so far as he is concerned. Miss Somerfield has paid his claim, and there the matter rests. But before ever the stall was smashed up we——"

"Look! He is gazing up at all these windows, as if trying to attract attention!" exclaimed Judith. "I say, it won't do, Cora!"

That girl turned away, and took a furious turn about the room.

Judith still watched, and presently she made another uneasy remark:

"He is still there!"

"Bother him!" Cora said, flinging herself into a chair at the table. "He may wait, but we can't possibly get out to speak with him. Doesn't he know the whole school is gated?"

"I hope to goodness he doesn't start writing to us!" was Judith's rejoinder. "A letter coming to us in a handwriting like his—it might cause surprise. It might even have to be opened in front of the head-mistress."

"Wait a bit! This is getting on my nerves."

Cora sighed. And suddenly she drew a sheet of paper towards her, and took up a pen.

Sullenly she chewed the pen-top for a minute or so, then began to write.

When she had finished, she twitched the note across to her sister, for her to read.

"We cannot get out to speak with you this evening," Cora had written. "But, if you have anything to say, be at the old quarry to-morrow afternoon, and we will try to slip over for a moment."

"Yes, that's all right," Judith nodded, passing back the note for her sister to slip it into its envelope. "Though how we are going to get to the quarry to-morrow beats me!"

"Oh——"

"And however are we going to get this note into his hands this evening?"

Cora did not answer at once.

She was in that wrought-up state which makes some people want to shriek out.

She wetted the flap of the envelope, and banged it down—thump, thump!

"All I know is," she burst out furiously at last, "if that man thinks he can terrify us with threats of showing us up, he must be an absolute scamp! He has made quite enough money out of our dealings with him, Judy."

"I should think so," grimaced Judith. "All we promised to do was to cover any loss he might make by underselling Betty & Co.'s shop. Well, we have made good that loss—more than covered it. He had the money from us last Saturday evening."

Cora got up from her chair, and took another uneasy turn.

"Supposing his idea is to threaten to tell Miss Somerfield that we as good as bribed him to undersell the tuckshop?" she questioned. "Whatever shall we do then, Judy?"

"But we didn't bribe him. At least——"

"He can make out that we did. Oh, it's sickening!" Cora sighed heavily. "I'm sorry we ever tried that plan for smashing up the Form captain's venture. If the whole thing ever comes out, we'll be expelled!"

The guilty pair lapsed into a gloomy silence.

In a little while something that was passing through Judith's mind caused her to wander to a corner cupboard and pull the door open.

She was staring into the cupboard, looking more unhappy than ever, when her sister sprang up irritably.

"Oh, keep that cupboard shut!" Cora fumed. "I don't want to be reminded of what is in there. I want to forget, if possible."

Judith closed the door, and came away from the cupboard.

"What I want," she mumbled, "is to see those things got rid of. Whilst they are there——"

"Stop talking about it!" pleaded her sister frantically. "Haven't we enough bother on hand, with that fellow mouching about down there? You make me cross, Judy!"

"Oh, all right!"

And then the talk languished once more.

It was quite the usual thing for Cora and Judith Grandways to squabble when any little joint scheme of theirs had gone wrong.

And at present—well, they were worried.

When the tuckshop closed for the evening last Saturday its committee had found themselves faced with a serious loss, and since then, owing to the grave business of Josling's smashed-up stall, the school "Co-op." had not been allowed to reopen its doors.

All this, from the point of view of Cora and Judith, was excellent.

But, unhappily for them, in making a ally of Josling they now realised that the had played into the hands of a very trick rascal.

Round about twilight that evening the two sisters took yet another cautious peep from their study window.

Josling was still loitering about.

And for what other reason could it be, they asked themselves, but that he still hoped to get a word with them?

The note which Cora had written had been in her pocket all this time.

Now she took it out, looked at it, then put it away again.

"Come along!" she whispered desperately. "It's dusk now. We must—— Oh, we must see if we can get this note into his hands!"

She crossed to the door, but stood away from it again.

Fear was in her eyes then—the culprit's guilty fear of being watched, suspected, spied upon!

"I warn you," Judith whispered, "it's frightfully risky! If any of the girls have seen Josling——"

"But what are we to do?" Cora almost groaned. "Oh, come on! It's no use. Nothing could be worse than for Josling to be hanging about so obstinately until he does get a chance to speak."

With guilty uneasiness, she opened the door softly, and listened.

The corridor was deserted, and it reassured her to hear several girls in Study 12 talking in ordinary tones about ordinary school topics.

They would not be doing that, Cora reasoned, if their suspicions had been aroused—if they had seen Josling, and had wondered what he was waiting about for?

She looked round upon Judith, nodding.

"Yes—now!"

And next moment the pair of them were going swiftly, silently, towards the stairs.

On the ground floor they made for a back way out of the great schoolhouse, and sauntered, with apparently aimless steps, through part of the spacious garden.

Nothing could have looked more innocent than such conduct as this.

How often did the scholars take a last

Cor turned in the open air at this time of the year, before going in to "call-over"?

g a But three minutes later Cora and the Judith's movements were such as must have excited suspicion at once, had they been noticed.

th They had reached a shrubbery which had extended as far as one part of the boundary hedge.

be, Now Judith, at a sign from her sister, stood still, so as to give warning of anybody's approach, whilst Cora went along the shrubbery path, one hand in her dress-pocket, grasping the folded note.

n Dusk was fast deepening into night, and Cora's fear was not so much that her action would be seen by somebody belonging to the school as that she would not be able to attract Josling's attention.

The upper part of the high boundary hedge was all dense foliage, but low down it was a mere tangle of leafless branches.

Cora stooped a little, peering through the network of stems and twigs.

She could see Josling loitering up and down, smoking a pipe now.

He had reached the limit of patience over the vigil which he had kept up for so long.

With darkness fast descending upon the quiet world of Morcove, he must be thinking, Cora knew, that it was time to go home.

But he was very likely resolving fiercely that he would come again to-morrow!

And, if he did come again, what would the school in general think of his suspicious conduct?

No; he must be given the note, somehow!

Cora shot a glance along the path to where her sister was on watch.

Judith was to have coughed if any warning was needed.

She did not cough, and next moment Cora rustled the hedge as loudly as she dared, hoping to attract Josling's attention.

He heard the significant noise, but it was, perhaps, natural for him to feel a little hesitation.

Cora rustled the hedge again—louder, this time.

Then Josling, in a very airy manner, began to drift towards that spot.

Not a sound from Judith—no soft warning cough, to put Cora on her guard.

It was surely safe for the next step!

Whipping out the note, she folded it tightly, and tossed it clean over the hedge.

Then she flew back to her sister.

Heart in mouth, the nervous couple peered through another part of the hedge, and thus they were able to see Josling go by twenty paces off, reading the note.

"Thank goodness!" panted Cora. "Come away, Judy! It will be call-over in a minute."

The bell was, in fact, summoning the whole school for final muster just as the sisters got within doors.

They loitered in the spacious hall at the foot of the main stairway, watching other scholars come trooping upon the scene—some from out-of-doors, where they had been playing games up to the last moment, others from the studies upstairs.

In a minute, Cora and Judith were breathing quite freely.

The first batch of Betty Barton's boon companions were coming down—Paula Creel, Madge Minden, Tess Trelawney, Trixie Hope, and Dolly Delane.

It really was all right, then!

None of these girls had been out in the grounds, and so—

Here was Polly Linton, too, just coming down from the studies.

Now Cora and Judith had only to see Betty Barton come down, last of all, and their minds would be quite at ease.

As soon as they knew that Betty and all of them had been up in the studies they could feel quite sure their own movements in the shrubbery had not been detected.

In the twilight it must have been impossible for anybody to see what was going on, except from a point close at hand.

And Cora had been watching, so—

"Hallo, Betty, deah!" was the drawling remark from Paula Creel that suddenly gave the guilty sisters a turn. "Theah you are, then!"

Betty was there, right enough, mingling with the rest of the scholars.

"But she had not come down from the studies!

"Gwacious, though," went on the amiable Paula, with a laugh, "you can't go into woll-call like that, Betty! Your hair wants putting to wights!"

"Does it?" laughed Betty.

"Howevah did you get it to look like that, Betty deah?"

"Oh, I think I know," was Betty's only answer.

Cora and Judith exchanged glances.

Then they followed on into the great hall, for the roll-call, with fast-beating hearts.

For they were wondering—where was Betty at the moment when that note was thrown over the hedge to Josling?

CHAPTER 13.

After Lights Out!

IT must have been more than an hour after lights out that night when a strange thing happened to Paula Creel.

Like the rest of the girls in the Fourth Form dormitory, she had gone to sleep very soon after Miss Redgrave had looked in to say good-night.

Now she was suddenly awakened, and found a girl in a dressing-gown standing was at the bedside.

"Get up, Paula!" this girl said, in the most authoritative manner.

Paula did not get up.

She stared instead.

By the light of the moon, she observed that this was a Fifth Form scholar who was at the bedside.

"You are wanted in our dormitory," said the girl, as coolly as before.

"Bai Jove!" Paula said faintly. "I—Weally, you know, I don't know that I wish to wise fwom my bed! Howevah, what's the twouble?"

"You must come!"

It was a non-committal answer.

Any other girl in Paula's place might have felt suspicious, especially at a time when the Fifth Form were feeling so sore with the Fourth.

Paula, however, was easily dominated.

Although any request that she should bestir herself always clashed with her indolent nature, she never failed to give in to a little pressure.

Not to do so would have seemed to her to be churlish.

"Must come, bai Jove!"

She sighed softly, not wishing to awaken anybody else in the dormitory.

"This stwikes me as wather unweasonable, don't you know. Yes, wather! Howevah, it won't wait until the morning—what?"

"No; you are to come at once."

Then Paula got up.

Sighing repeatedly at having been awakened from her beauty sleep, and yet feeling a little curious—a little flattered too, perhaps at being the recipient of the mysterious invitation—she put on a dressing-gown, and stole after her companion out of the room.

"Sh!" gestured the Fifth Form girl making not a sound in her felt slippers. "Keep quite quiet!"

"Yes, wather! By all means! Howevah," whispered Paula, stepping along the dark landing, "I weally feel that this is wather extwaordinary."

"We came to the conclusion that we must get you to come along."

This impressive remark increased Paula's sense of being flattered.

She felt important.

Bai Jove, she suddenly thought to herself, it was rather fine to be the object of such deep concern!

Then, as she blandly followed her companion into the Fifth Form dormitory—biff! came a bolster upon her head, almost flooring her.

"Bai Jove! I—"

Biff! Biff! Wallop!

The bombardment from the pillows and bolsters was too much for her.

"Weally, you geals," she panted, as soon as they all desisted, "I must pwotest, don't you know!"

"Keep quiet!" they hissed.

"Yes, wather! Howevah, I—I—Weally! What have I done, don't you know?"

Edith Elwin, the Fifth Form captain, came back from the door, after shutting it softly.

"It is a question of what you and your friends have not done," she explained sweetly. "You have not yet owned up to the smashing of Josling's stall."

"I vevy much wegwet, Edith Elwin," Paula said, with dignity, "that you should have dwagged me out of bed at this time of night—"

"You weren't dragged at all," said the girl who had fetched her. "You came most obligingly."

"Yes, I did—yes, wather! Howevah I did—"

"I expect that now you wish you hadn't!" chuckled Edith. "It must be pretty plain to you that you are in for a hot time."

"Me? Pway, why?"

"Because you and your chums have not owned up. We also have our little committees, sometimes. We went into committee over this business of the whole school being gated, and we voted that we must take it out of you girls somehow!"

"I am only one geal," Paula reminded them, looking as spirited as she could with the exultant crowd ringing her about. "I twust you wealise that I am—bai Jove—alone?"

"Oh, yes. We pitched on you for this invitation, because we felt sure you would come along so nice and quietly."

"Bai Jove!" Paula exclaimed. "Haow—haow extwaordinawy!"

"Not at all—mere commonsense," said Edith Elwin. "We didn't want to begin with a girl like Polly Linton or Betty Barton. Of course, if you don't confess to-night, then we must give one of the others a turn."

"In fact," said one of the girls, "give them all a turn, until we do get a confession!"

"I—I twust you are not going to tweat me woughly," Paula said. "I must pwo-test, if you do."

"We are going to give you the chance to make a clean breast of it, about Josling's stall. Own up, Paula! You and the rest of your tuckshop committee smashed that stall!"

"I can only wepeat," said Paula, "you are wong! I wegard it as a downwight disgwace that you should dwag a geal out of her bed, bai Jove, to—to— Heah, don't dwag me about like this!"

For, at a sign from Edith Elwin, two or three of the Fifth Form girls had seized hold of Paula, and were pulling her this way and that.

"Spin her!" said Edith.

She—Edith Elwin—was not a bad sort.

Like the rest of the Fifth Form, her "feud" against the Fourth Form was more often good-natured than not.

Just as present, however, she felt she would like to see this member of the Fourth Form tuckshop committee brought to her knees in no playful manner.

Nor were Edith's followers altogether in fun.

They knew that Paula was no tomboy, and that made the delight of ragging her all the greater.

So, before poor Paula could offer the

least resistance, she was seized by two of the girls, who started to turn her round and round as fast as possible.

After a dozen spins or so, Paula was stood still, and then Edith Elwin asked her:

"Had enough?"

"Ye-ye-yes. wuw-wuw-wather!" panted Paula.

"Then perhaps you will own up?"

"Bai Jove! No, I won't!" Paula said stoutly. "Because, don't you know, I have nothing to own up to."

"Spin her!" Edith said again.

And once again Paula was spun.

"He, he, he!" went up the subdued tit-tering. "Hallo! Hark!"

A board outside the door had creaked.

Next moment, whilst all the swell girl's tormentors were standing half panic-stricken, the door quietly opened, and two figures appeared, arrayed in dressing-gowns.

Betty and Polly!

"Hallo, here are two more of them! Oh, good!" Edith exclaimed. "Quick, girls! Don't let them—"

"Escape" was what Edith meant to say. But already there was proof that Betty and Polly had no intention of trying to escape now that they saw their chum Paula "in the hands of the Philistines."

The floor was strewn with pillows which had been used to belabour Paula with.

Betty snatched up one.

Polly grabbed another.

Biff, whizz, biff—biff!

"We'll teach you to"—biff, bang!—"try your tricks on any of us!" Betty declared spiritedly, whilst she and Polly laid about them with the pillows.

Thump—whallop!

Two, at least, of the Philistines had been floored.

Others came on, having armed themselves with pillows.

Betty and Polly looked like being heavily outnumbered—disarmed—in a few moments.

But now a Fifth-Form girl, who had gone to the door to see that all was safe, suddenly fell back in wild alarm.

"Look out!" she whispered.

"Shut that door—keep them out!" Edith Elwin hissed, guessing the meaning of the warning words.

But she was too late.

Into the Fifth Form dormitory rushed at least a dozen Fourth Form girls.

Just as Betty and Polly, waking up to

find that Paula was not in her bed, had got up to investigate, so all these girls, rousing up to find Betty, Polly, and Paula were all out of their room, had come after them.

And here they were—a nice handful for the Fifth Form to have to take on!

Edith Elwin & Co. had meant to have a rare game with the solitary victim, but now—

What most dismayed the Philistines was to find that their own pillows were being laid hold of by the invaders, who had come unarmed into the stronghold.

For every pillow snatched hold of by the Fourth Form rescue party a Fifth Form girl was left defenceless!

Biff, whizz, blip—biff!

"Oh—oo—you—"

"Let them have it!" Betty panted.

And they did.

Swiftly the discomfited Philistines were driven to the top end of the room, until their backs were to the wall.

Even then, however, they could put up no defence.

Some of them, indeed, soon wished that the wall was not behind them, for it only served as something to be knocked against—bump, biff, thump—every time a pillow came swinging round against them!

Paula was already herself again, taking a fine part in the counter-attack.

The Philistines were in utter disorder, and what sort of a pummelling they would have had there is no telling, if a Fourth Form scout, on duty at the door, had not given the sudden alarm.

"Hist! Look out!"

In a flash Betty & Co. were streaking down the room to the doorway.

Making not a sound themselves, they were able to hear a pair of slippered feet padding towards the room.

There was somebody, either a mistress or a senior girl, coming to learn the meaning of the midnight scuffle.

Along the landing flitted the Fourth Form girls, carrying with them all the Fifth Form pillows.

Reaching their own dormitory unchallenged, they dived for their beds, and next moment each crib had its occupant, apparently fast asleep.

From the Fifth Form dormitory came a vague murmur of voices.

Ethel Courtway, the head girl, was

there, wanting to know what all the row was about.

Doubtless, Edith Elwin was making some vague reply.

She certainly could not have made any reference to a recent combat with the Fourth Form, for Ethel Courtway never even came along to Betty & Co.'s dormitory!

Half an hour later, someone did come stealing to the open door of the Fourth Form dormitory, but it was only Edith Elwin, alone.

"You girls!" she whispered very cautiously. "I say!"

"What? Come for some more, have you?" chuckled Betty.

"I say, you've got our pillows."

"Spoils of war!" said Betty, whilst a dozen of her chums laughed softly. "Good-night, Edith Elwin!"

"But—"

"Oh, go to bed!"

This curt injunction, followed by a lot of exaggerated snoring, convinced Edith Elwin that neither she nor her followers could get back those pillows to-night.

She padded back to her own dormitory, feeling that another time she and her friends must manage things rather better.

CHAPTER 19.

Now or Never!

IN the morning, Cora and Judith Grandways soon knew all about the affair in the night.

They had slept through it all, for, of course, none of Betty's chums had troubled to awaken the sisters when the sudden need for a rescue raid upon the Fifth Form dormitory had been realised.

Betty & Co. had known that, far from lending a hand in the battle, the sisters would be more likely to wish good luck to the Fifth Form.

But Cora and Judith heard all about the triumphant rescue of Paula from the hands of the Philistines, and that triumph of Betty & Co.'s did not help the sisters to start the day in a good mood.

Once again the Form captain and her chums were showing the wonderful way they had of keeping their end up during a time of trouble, and they themselves—

Cora and Judith—were feeling that the hour of reckoning was close at hand now.

The more they thought about the position as regards the man Josling the more dismayed they felt.

It had served their purpose very well.

But, oh, why, why had they not foreseen that such a secret arrangement would enable him to turn round upon them afterwards?

Only now—now, when it was too late to be sorry—Cora and Judith were realising, all too well, that they might never be done with the man.

The encounter they had got to have with him to-day—and goodness only knew how they were going to manage it—would not be the end of the whole wretched business.

Adding to the guilty pair's uneasiness, too, there was the fear that Betty Barton and her friends were putting two and two together.

Neither Cora nor Judith could forget that last evening, although they had taken every precaution to make sure of not being seen when they slipped the note over to Josling, Betty Barton might have been an unseen witness to the action.

Had she hidden herself in the shrubbery, suspecting that they were going to communicate with Josling, because he was hanging about outside the grounds?

They could not be certain. Perhaps they were needlessly alarmed, but they did know this.

Betty had not been with her friends, up in the studies, at the time the deed was done!

How often, then, during that Wednesday morning, did the guilty sisters steal a glance at both Betty and her chums, to try to discover in those girls' looks some indication of suspicion.

Betty & Co., however, seemed quite unconcerned.

"Yet that may only be a blind," was Cora's natural reflection, which she confessed to her sister after morning school. "The more suspicious they are, Judy, the more they will try not to betray suspicion."

"Don't let's go this afternoon—I mean, even if we can go!" Judith suggested despairingly. "We had better not, Cora."

"We must."

"Let Josling say anything he has to say by letter."

"How you talk!" snapped Cora. "The

sort of letter that man writes would be certain to attract attention in the school post. No, we must go. And—and— Oh, I must show a bold front somehow."

As had been the case yesterday evening, the sisters lapsed into a sudden heavy silence, and once again Judith was moved to go to the corner cupboard.

"Shut that door Judith! Why do you keep on looking—"

"Well, the things are still there, and they ought not to be!" exclaimed Judith, staring into the cupboard. "The two mags, we put on that night we slipped down to wreck the stall—"

"Be quiet about them, do!"

"I say, we ought to get rid of them!" Judith persisted sullenly. "They would tell a tale if they were found. I'm sure it would be wise to get rid of them at once. They'll never be missed. They were only old ones."

She flashed round upon her sister.

"I know! Let us take them with us to the quarry!" she whispered excitedly. "If we have to slip out of bounds for the one thing, we may as well do this at the same time!"

"Bury them there, eh? Very well. Yes," she whispered. "And yet— Oh, think of the risk!"

"Risk! The risk is in having them here!" Judith retorted impatiently. "Once they are hidden in that old quarry they will never be found. Whoever goes to the quarry?"

"I'm thinking of the risk of smuggling them out of the school!" Cora added, sinking down again. "We are going to find it hard enough, goodness knows, to smuggle ourselves out! Hang that gating order!"

And so they talked on—or, rather, snapped at each other—in their overwrought state.

Dinner-time came, and during the meal they were all ears, in the hope of picking up remarks from Betty and the rest as to how those girls meant to spend the afternoon's "halfer."

Once again, however, the guilty sisters were left tortured by doubts.

Betty & Co. were simply saying among themselves that they "might" play tennis, or "might" make up a game of cricket.

Two o'clock the usual time for scholars to embark upon any plans for the afternoon, found Cora and Judith skulking in

their study, afraid to make a venture of any sort.

Judith went out presently to spy, and came back with the reassuring report that Betty and all her friends were accounted for.

They were playing some game or another down on the sports field—to-day particularly crowded, owing to the whole school being gated.

But even then the couple's nerve failed them. Of the two, Cora was by far the worse.

Perhaps, being the elder girl, she realised that she would have to shoulder the greater blame, if ever she and her sister were brought to book.

At last, Judith went to that cupboard again, and this time she took out a bundle of waterproof clothing. She held it at arm's length—and with good reason, too.

The bundle reeked of paraffin, as if a lamp had been upset over it.

Finding several sheets of old brown paper, she wrapped up the ruined waterproofs, tying the parcel about with string.

Cora was standing by all this time, a gloomy witness to such preparations. Presently she went to the window.

"It is not a bit of use," she turned about to say despairingly. "I don't see how we can make the venture. Broad daylight——"

"You said we must go!"

"Yes, but how can we go? Oh, I'm fed up!"

Then Judith went to the window.

"Look here, Cora! If we are going to go, let's go!" she said desperately. "Those girls are all accounted for. You can see them from here, playing a scratch game of cricket. Come on! Buck up!"

And she took up the parcel with quite a resolute air.

Cora, too, was beginning to feel as desperate as she was miserable. After another timid glance down to the playing-field, she braced herself together, then crossed to the door.

"It's that parcel!" she paused to exclaim wretchedly.

"Getting rid of these things is more important than seeing Josling!" declared Judith. "If we are found with these ruined mags about the place, we shall be accused of smashing the stall. You know we upset a couple of lamps, and the oil was all over

the ground next morning, along with the lamps. You go first," she urged, "and I'll follow, if the coast is clear!"

Then Cora opened the door, and nervously went along to the stairs.

The schoolhouse seemed to be deserted. She turned and made a sign—"Yes, come on!"—and then Judith slipped forth from the room, with the paraffin parcel smuggled under one arm.

By sheer good luck, they got out of the house unobserved. Keeping clear of the crowded sports field, they worked round to a remote corner of the grounds.

Then they saw Ethel Courtway and a couple of her fellow-seniors sauntering about, as if perambulating the bounds on purpose to watch for would-be infringers of the gating order.

It was quite possible the unpleasant duty had been laid upon the seniors by Miss Somerfield.

Cora and Judith remained unseen, however, thanks to the shelter they found among some bushes, and presently the seniors had drifted out of sight.

Yes, the coast was clear—and not six paces from where the sisters were crouching there was a gap in the boundary hedge, only stopped by a few strands of wire.

"Come on! I suppose we must!" Cora whispered frantically. "It's now or never!"

Keeping her head low, she made a lightning rush for the gap and scrambled through.

Judith followed, flinging the parcel through the gap, and then squeezing after it.

On the outer side of the hedge, with open country before them, fear made Cora look back.

"Oh, my goodness!" she gasped. "We have been seen! Look! There is Betty Barton——"

"It's too late now! Come on!" panted Judith. "I mustn't be caught with the parcel!"

"But—— Oh, how I hate the lot of them!" hissed Cora furiously. "They must have been keeping a look-out everywhere whilst they were playing! She's going back."

"Come on, I tell you!" panted Judith. "Betty won't go and tell Ethel Courtway."

"She'll come after us herself!" wailed Cora. "She will break bounds, too!"

"Let her!" was the fierce rejoinder. "She will never overtake us!"

And together the flustered pair sped away, zigzagging among the massive gorse-bushes, whose golden bloom was scenting the sunny air.

CHAPTER 20.

"After them!"

THE Fourth Form game of cricket had come to a sudden end.

Stumps were still standing, and bats were lying about, just as if another game might be started by-and-by.

For the moment, however, Betty Barton and her friends were taking counsel together on the outskirts of the field.

"Yes," Betty was repeating excitedly, "it is just as we expected. They have broken bounds—gone off to have a word with that Josling fellow."

"At Barncombe?" questioned Madge.

"Where else can we suppose?" returned Betty. "He has a shop in the back streets. Oh, if only we could go after that couple!"

"Yes, wather!" agreed Paula. "How-
evah—"

"It wouldn't do to tell Ethel Courtway?" suggested Tess Trelawney. "No, of course! I feel the same. It would seem like splitting. Only—"

"Don't you think we have enough evidence to justify our going to Ethel Courtway?" broke in Polly. "You, Betty, saw Cora throw a note over to Josling last evening. Now they have slipped away, and, of course, they have gone to Barncombe—to his shop."

"They are such a crafty pair!" frowned Betty. "If we confided in Ethel Courtway, she might make up a party to go to Barncombe. Some of the mistresses might even go. And you know what it is. The more there are mixing up in the business, the more likely the culprits are to save themselves."

"True enough," nodded Madge. "This is a case where two or three of us—just a few—might succeed better than a crowd. But—"

"Bai Jove, bweaking bounds is a twying business," exclaimed Paula, "even for a good cause!"

"If Cora and Judith slipped away, why shouldn't we?" asserted Polly. "Let Betty,

Madge, and I chance it. You others get back to the cricket."

"I— One moment! I've got an idea!" Betty suddenly exclaimed, absolutely trembling with excitement. "Oh, it's great! Yes, Madge and Polly must come with me, and you others—"

"Tell us what the idea is!" they clamoured. "Betty, do!"

But Betty did not.

Away she scampered, going straight towards the front porch of the school, with Madge and Polly running after her. To any ordinary onlookers, it must have seemed as if those three girls were merely going to run up to their studies.

Inside the house, however, Betty avoided the stairs, and went straight to a back door.

Emerging into the open air again, she signed to her bewildered chums to follow cautiously.

She turned to the left, amazing Madge and Polly by the action.

For such a course could only bring all three of them to the paved yard outside the school kitchens.

Then suddenly Betty halted, when another four paces would have taken her round the angle of the wall into the yard.

Where she now stood she was close to a motor-lorry.

Every Wednesday this particular lorry came to the school, with a great load of the huge supplies which the establishment was always using up.

The load had been delivered. In a few minutes the driver would come away from the kitchen, where he was being regaled with a cup of tea, and then he would drive on—to Barncombe!

Betty laid a finger to her lips, then pointed to the back of the empty lorry.

In a flash her companions understood.

"Yes!" they signalled with their dancing eyes. "Right—ho!"

Next moment the captain of the Fourth Form had taken a leap at the back of the lorry, and was scrambling on board.

Madge and Polly followed suit. Headlong they tumbled over the chained-up tailboard, on to the lorry's floor.

There was a mound of empty sacks there. Snuggling down, they drew the clean sacking about their huddled figures, then waited, heart in mouth.

Somebody came strolling back from the school kitchen, whistling. It was the lorry

driver. He lit a cigarette, started up the engine, and—

Whirr-uh-urrr! Away went the lorry, gliding out of the tradesmen's gateway, on to the Barncombe road.

Betty, Polly, and Madge were out of bounds already, and had ever schoolgirls slipped beyond bonds by means of such a ruse as this?

There they crouched, in the body of the swaying lorry, their presence undreamed of by its driver.

He was completely shut off from them, and, even if there had been no tarpaulin division between his seat and the interior of the wagon, he would have been too taken up with the driving to give a glance behind him.

Faster the motor vehicle pounded along, and how it bumped and swayed, having no load to speak of on board!

The girls were shaken and flung about most violently, and yet they felt they must keep on venturing a peep over the top of the tailboard.

Extraordinary—thrilling! Only a few minutes ago they had been within bounds, desperate to know how they could get away without being stopped.

And already the school lay a quarter of a mile behind them, and at this rate Barncombe would be reached well under the hour!

"We shall have ages to wait for those two girls to come along," Betty jerked out guardedly, whilst the lorry rumbled on its way. "Even if they catch a train from Morcove Road to Barncombe, they—What?"

"Down—oh, down!" urged Polly excitedly, at the same time suiting the action to the word. "My word, they might have seen us!"

"Cora and Judith?"

"Yes."

The three girls let a few moments go by before venturing another peep over the top of the tailboard.

When they did look back along the road, through the cloud of dust raised by the lorry, they saw Cora and Judith.

And what a turn it gave Betty and her two chums to discover that the sisters had left the road—were turning into a side lane.

"That lane can't possibly take them to Barncombe," Betty muttered. "Here, I say, girls, supposing they are not wanting to get to Barncombe?"

"Gracious!" gasped Polly. "We are bound to go, anyhow. This thing won't stop till it gets to the town."

No wonder they looked at one another in comical dismay! To be still on board the lorry, when Cora and Judith were going in another direction altogether, was very disconcerting.

"The lorry won't stop," said Betty suddenly, "but it will slow down."

"Why, of course!" exclaimed Polly, clapping her hands softly. "We shall be going uphill again in a minute. That steep hill—"

"That will be our chance—yes," chimed in Madge.

Then they drew closer to the chained-up tailboard, so as to be ready to swing out over the top of it and drop their feet towards the ground as soon as the lorry should be going slow enough.

At five or six miles an hour, they could be sure of landing safely.

Always with that cloud of white dust rolling after them, the motor lumbered to the bottom of an incline, and then, on a changed gear, began to crawl up the hill which lay before it.

"Yes, now is our chance!" Betty exclaimed joyfully. "A mere walking pace. But mind you both— Oh, gracious!"

And down she ducked her head again, whispering imploringly:

"Don't look out! Keep down!"

"Why, what's the matter?" questioned her chums, in fresh dismay.

"Josling!" was Betty's thrilling answer. "The lorry has just overtaken him, walking towards where we last saw the sisters."

"Oh, I say!" Polly groaned. "This is awful! We'll miss everything. Betty—Madge—stop the lorry! It'll be at the top of the hill in a jiffy, and then—"

"No, wait!" pleaded Betty. "We'll manage!"

CHAPTER 21.

In the Quarry.

IT was ten minutes since Cora and Judith had turned out of the high road, at a moment when a lorry overtook them going towards Barncombe.

Now they were treading swiftly along a banked-in lane that led to the old quarry. The hot afternoon sun searched every yard of the lane, and the sisters felt just as

"cooked" as they might have felt in the tropics. As irritable, too!

The breathless rush since they had the luck to get through the boundary edge had been enough to make them feel red hot.

Now their flaming faces felt the sting of flies, whilst their eyes fairly blinked with the glare of the sun in this shadeless lane.

Nor was the quarry at all the sort of place to cool down in.

The rocky walls were giving back the roasting heat of the sun. Everything seemed a-quiver in that shut-in place, where not a refreshing breath of sea air could find its way.

Looking dead beat, both girls dragged to one of the large masses of stone with which the floor of the quarry was strewn, and sat down.

"And, after all," muttered Cora presently, "the fellow may not turn up. He may prefer to write some threatening letter."

"I know one thing," Judith answered, wearily rising from the stone. "I'm going to get rid of this bundle, anyhow. Keep an eye open, Cora."

A listless nod from the elder sister signified that she would not fail to watch, and now Judith picked her way among the unshapely boulders, seeking a spot where she could get rid of the incriminating bit of evidence concerning the destruction of Josling's stall.

Soon she found a suitable dumping ground for the bundle. She was at the foot of the encircling wall of rock, and here the ground was several feet deep with flakes of rock and powdered stone.

She knelt down, dug a hole with her bare hands in the loose rubble, and hastily dumped the parcel there.

Just as she was smoothing the fine chip-pings over the buried parcel she heard a discreet cough from Cora. It was a warning signal, and she sprang up and went, by a roundabout way, back to her sister.

Josling was at that instant mouching into the quarry.

"Hub," he said, condescending to doff his cap, "so you kept the appointment, young ladies! Well, I'm much obliged, I'm sure!"

"We cannot stay more than a minute or so!" Cora burst out, in great agitation. "We have run great risks in coming at all. Mr. Josling, why were you hanging about outside the school last evening?"

"Supposing I says, just to see if you had

any more horders for me?" he answered, leering. "You were so free with your horders all last week, weren't you? Quite made me feel I was your humble servant, you did!"

Cora and Judith each drew a deep breath. Their fears had not been groundless. The man was going to turn round on them.

"It was for your own benefit as much as anybody's!" Cora blustered.

"Oh, come off it!" Josling exclaimed, frowning. "You got me to come along with that there stall because you have a grudge against the gals as were running the school shop."

"That has nothing whatever to—"

"Begging your pardon, young ladies, it has a lot to do with it—ay, quite a lot," insisted Josling. "That's why you bribed me to undersell—"

"Bribed you?"

"Yes, bribed!" Josling repeated, so emphatically that both sisters cast uneasy glances around.

Shut in, as they were, on three sides, it seemed as if the merest whisper must be audible some distance away.

"Don't talk so loud!"

"No, o' course! You'd prefer I didn't talk at all, I dessay!" Josling jeered at them. "But I'm a-going to talk, young ladies; and I'm a-going to talk plain. I'm out o' pocket over the whole business o' bringing that stall to Morcove, and I expect you to keep your promise about making good my loss."

"Oh, how can you have the cheek to talk like that?" Cora flared up. "Last thing of all, on Saturday evening, we squared up everything!"

"Ay, so I thought then. But, thinking it over," he leered, stroking his scrubby chin, "I find I'm still a few pounds to the bad."

"A few pounds! And do you think that we—"

"Another thing"—he checked the distraught Cora—"the stall was smashed up on the Sunday evening."

"Miss Somerfield paid your claim over that," Judith burst out. "You don't expect us to give you money on that account, too?"

"I rayther expect you to let it go on the bill, yes," he said, "considering that you were the parties that smashed up the stall!"

"How dare you—"

"But I know I'm right," he went on,

with a triumphant leer. "O' course, 'tis thought up at the school that the committee did, what's running the school shop. But that's because folk don't know about your little carry-on. I know, though!"

"Mr. Josling——"

"I can figger it out. All part of your own little game to get that there committee into trouble—of course it was!"

"Oh, be quiet, do!" stormed Cora, putting her hands to her ears. "Judith, what shall we do with this fellow?"

"Leave him to do his worst!" Judith blustered desperately. "He has no proof. It's our word against his."

"No proof, you say?" Josling returned, smiling with low cunning. "We'll soon see about that! Wait here a moment—or you can come with me, and see me dig something up."

The sisters turned as white as death.

"Something," he pursued, "that the younger of you two has just buried over yonder. I see you do it, you know. I were watching. If that there parcel——"

And then he broke off, with something like a muttered oath.

For, all in a flash, both sisters had darted away to where the parcel was buried.

Wildly they fled towards that spot, hopping frantically that they, with the agility of youth, would be able to outstrip him when he gave pursuit.

Only let them get away with the tell-tale evidence of their guilt as regards the wrecking of the stall, and Josling might do his worst!

That was the sisters' feeling as they rushed to unearth the parcel and then make off with it.

Nor were their chances of eluding the man so feeble, after all.

The masses of rock scattered about the floor of the quarry were all in the girls' favour.

He was a clumsy man, and they could dodge this way and that nimbly.

He was blundering in pursuit before they were half-way to the spot, but Cora almost yelled aloud with relief as, looking backwards whilst she ran, she suddenly realised that the fellow had stumbled, hurting his ankle.

"Yes, quick! We shall get away easily now!" Cora panted at her sister. "Where's the spot, Judy? Where is it?"

For answer, Judith spurted on faster than

ever, flung herself on all fours, and began to rake away the loose rubble.

A couple of seconds, and the parcel was unearthed.

She sprang to her feet with it, ready to bolt off again, and get clear of the quarry altogether, with Cora at her side.

And then, all in an instant, both girls stood rooted to the ground, whilst their dilating eyes beheld Betty Barton, Polly Linton, and Madge Minden closing in upon them!

CHAPTER 22.

No Defence!

"STOP there!" shouted Betty. "The game is up, Cora Grandways! Judith, if you run, you'll only be followed!"

"Get out of our way!" hissed Cora, as if she were beside herself with rage. "What right have you to interfere?"

She added, with sudden cunning:

"You see that man who is making off? Run after him!"

"No," said Betty Barton, refusing even to look round and note how Josling was taking to his heels. "We girls prefer to keep our eye on you—and that parcel! Hand it over, Judith!"

"What? You are not going to——"

"Are we not?" Betty cried, and with the word she rushed in upon Judith, scuffled with her for a single moment, and then fell away from her, holding the parcel.

Then a thing happened that showed how both sisters realised their hopeless position.

Cora, for one, burst into tears!

"You are found out at last, the pair of you!" Betty said sternly. "We have heard every word of what has passed between you and Josling in this quarry——"

"And you are going to tell Miss Somerfield!" wailed Cora frantically. "Oh, Betty, don't! All of you—have a little pity on us! Think—think what it means!"

"Expulsion," said Madge Minden, "for a certainty."

"Then you won't be so cruel, so heartless?" implored the elder culprit. "Only give us another chance——"

"No!" Betty spoke as firmly as before. "You have had chance after chance, and you have still remained our enemies, hitting at us when you could and just how you could."

"Let you off, indeed!" Polly could not

help chiming in bitterly. "Keep silent about what we have discovered! It is likely we can do that when it is all through your scheming with that scamp of a Josling that the school 'Co-op.' was made to close its doors!"

"Through your scheming, yes," said Madge, "the shop lost money, when it should have made a profit to help support an ailing widow. Pity! How can you expect pity, when you had none for others?"

"Oh, don't whine to them any more!" Judith said sullenly to her terror-stricken sister. "Let them go back to school and tell! Let Miss Somerfield expel us! I don't care! We have had a good innings, anyhow."

Betty had been clawing away the brown-paper wrapping off the parcel.

Now a couple of old macintoshes, blotched with paraffin that still reeked strongly, were exposed to view.

"Was Josling right in what we heard him say?" she turned to say to her chums. "I think so. You remember that when the stall was smashed up there were lamps among the wreckage?"

"Paraffin lamps," nodded Madge. "We said at the time how thorough the persons were who committed the deed. A bit too thorough, it seems."

Cora, smearing the tears from her cheeks, started to follow her sister, who was walking away.

But suddenly she turned about, with another imploring gesture to the three girls.

"Think of our people!" she whimpered. "Our parents—our Uncle Cyril—the disgrace it will be!"

"I am sorry!" Betty said, quite firmly. "We girls have listened to that sort of talk too often in the past. We cannot think of your parents. We have now to think of the school."

"You—you—" Judith flashed about to hiss. "Oh, how we hate you, Betty Barton!"

"Yes!" Cora burst out, her tearful looks suddenly giving place to an expression proclaiming the old venomous hatred. "And look out for yourself if—if we are expelled over this!"

"There is no 'if' about it," was Betty's quiet answer. "You will be expelled."

* * * * *

And the evening of that same never-to-

be-forgotten day saw that prediction of Betty Barton's being fulfilled.

Cora and Judith Grandways were lying under sentence of expulsion, with no hope whatever of any reprieve being granted.

The formal notice of expulsion was upon the notice-board, and all Morecove School knew that the dread sentence was to take effect to-morrow.

Meantime, the miserable culprits had been isolated in the detention-room, and never again would their mischievous presence be known in the Fourth Form quarters.

Study No. 7 had lost its pair of sly, scheming occupants, and sincere was the hope among the girls of the Fourth Form that that study would see, in the days to come, tenants of quite a different character.

But what was this sudden rumour that went through the school next morning, leaving every scholar dumbfounded?

It was nothing less than the rumour that Cora and Judith could not be expelled!

That they richly deserved to undergo the sentence was beyond dispute.

Their conspiracy to frustrate the success of the Morecove tuck-shopkeepers followed by their wilful destruction of Josling's stall at dead of night—a deed done with the deliberate intention of getting the "Co-op." committee suspected of it—all had come out, and for such misdeeds alone, when the circumstances were reviewed, expulsion was indeed the only just reward.

In resolving to show no clemency, however, Miss Somerfield had been actuated by the fact that Cora and Judith had too long been a disturbing element in the life of the school.

Too often had some malicious misdeed, laudably hushed up by Betty & Co., because those girls had the natural dislike of "telling," reached the ears of Miss Somerfield.

Too often had she given Cora and Judith Grandways another chance, only to see that chance abused.

So, after this revelation of the Josling business, her mind was quite made up.

Under no circumstances whatever would the culprits be allowed to remain at Morecove School.

But here was this sudden startling rumour that, although Miss Somerfield was so determined about banishing the girls, banished they could not be.

For once, too, rumour was correct.

By midday—at the hour when Cora and

Judith should have been going away for ever from the school—the true situation was known to everybody in the school.

Miss Somerfield could not send the girls home, because their parents were abroad.

Nor could she get into touch with their uncle, Mr. Cyril Courtney, for the same reason.

Bluebell Courtney had hinted a few days ago, when she returned from London, after staying with her guardian, that he might be going away.

Miss Somerfield had now found that he was gone, and for the present there was no getting into touch with him.

So here was a strange state of things—surely unique in the annals of public schooldom.

Cora and Judith Grandways were under lock and key in the detention-room at Morcove School, and the question for mistresses and scholars alike to answer was this:

What was to be done with the girls who had been found out at last?

CHAPTER 23.

Their Day of Reckoning.

AT that hour of the sunny afternoon the one window of the detention-room at Morcove School was in deep shadow.

So in the vast difference between the spacious, sunlit playing-fields and the sunless gloom of this barely-furnished room on the eastern side of the great schoolhouse, there was something to invest the place with the air of a prison.

And like a prison, indeed, did that room with the barred windows seem to the two girls who were there.

At this moment both were sitting down in positions well away from the window.

There they sat, moodily silent, their once proud heads drooping dejectedly as their minds pondered this humiliating position.

Expulsion!

Even for a girl to be isolated like this in the detention-room was a thing almost unknown.

But in the present case the extreme punishment that had been pronounced upon these two sisters was richly deserved.

And they knew it.

Only too well they knew how often some shameful deed of theirs had been loyally picked up by their schoolfellows.

Only too well they knew that, time after time, despite the silence of other girls, sufficient had reached the ears of Miss Somerfield, the headmistress, to make her feel like decreeing banishment for them both.

They had been given chance after chance, and those chances they had flouted. To-day they could find no comfort—not a scrap—in the thought that they were being harshly dealt with. They had been a disgrace to the school for so long. They knew it, but they were not prepared to admit it.

No. Crestfallen and miserable as they might look when they were alone together, they still had the effrontery to put on shameless, defiant looks whenever they were visited in this room.

Such visits happened often enough. The fact that, pending arrangements for sending the culprits home, they were segregated in the detention-room, did not mean that they were being harshly treated.

Bare was the room, yet it held everything necessary for the girls' comfort and well-being.

The meals, brought into them thrice daily, were the same as those served to scholars in the great dining-room. Nor did many an hour elapse without one or another of the mistresses coming in to speak a word.

Those were times when Cora and Judith Grandways took care to look as unrepentant as they could. It was foolish of them, but would they have ever been in this unhappy plight if pride and folly had not dominated them all along?

Alone together, however, they had no need to disguise from each other the despair that was upon them.

At this moment a party of girls going past in the open air, close to the barred window, could be heard chatting vivaciously. Both culprits looked up—listened.

"Some of the Fourth," commented the younger sister, Judith.

Her sister, Cora, nodded gloomily.

"Yes. That is Betty Barton, the precious captain, with her chums."

"Going to play a game of tennis, I expect," Judith said a little wistfully.

"Tennis—bah!" shrugged Cora.

The voices out of doors died away, whilst in the detention-room the culprits lapsed into another dejected silence.

Then suddenly they each looked up sharply, hearing a footfall in the passage.

It was only four o'clock—just after school

had ended for the day—and not yet time for tea to be brought them.

Yet someone was going to enter. A key was being turned back in the lock.

Miss Redgrave entered accompanied by Miss Somerfield.

The Grandways remained seated.

"I think you might stand to your headmistress," Miss Redgrave could not help rebuking the sullen girls gently.

She did not want to be always "on at them." Far from it. But such deliberate rudeness as this was very offensive.

Cora and Judith shambled to their feet.

"You have no complaints to make?" Miss Somerfield asked them.

No answer.

"I could hardly believe that you would have any complaints," the headmistress pursued. "Yet I feel I must make the formal inquiry from time to time until you leave this place."

"When are we going?" Cora demanded insolently.

"I cannot say," was the regretful answer. "You know the position. After I had ordered your expulsion for offences that could not possibly be overlooked, I found that your parents were abroad. I communicated with your uncle, Mr. Cyril Courtney—"

"He's nothing to do with us," muttered Cora.

"I have met your uncle," Miss Somerfield said. "I met him in connection with the adoption of the new scholar whom the girls call Bluebell Courtney—"

"She is nothing to us, either!" exclaimed Cora, still riding the high horse.

Miss Somerfield sighed.

"It is probably your boast that nobody is anything to you," she said. "Very well. Life will teach you better, I hope. I was going to say—it is impossible to send you away, either to your home or to be taken care of by your uncle. So, for the present, I have no alternative but to keep you here. For," she added sadly, "it is quite impossible for me to waive the expulsion just because there happens to be nowhere to send you."

There was a pause. Cora had merely shrugged sulkily. Judith, the younger sister, was having the impudence to smile.

"At the same time," Miss Somerfield went on, "if this delay in sending you home is to continue much longer I shall have to take still greater care that you do not suffer

by the isolation. I am now going to make a concession—one that I trust you will appreciate."

As she paused the two sisters could not help looking at her eagerly.

"You may, if you like, go out and play a game of tennis for exercise and fresh air."

Cora shrugged indifferently. She and Judith never had been keen on sport.

"You don't want to play any games?"

"No."

"Well, you must have some exercise. Miss Redgrave—"

The assistant-mistress of the Fourth Form stepped forward.

"Conduct these girls to the open, please. But I do not wish them to feel that they are being exercised like prisoners with a wardress. My wish is that they go for a walk with some of their former school-fellows."

"You mean—"

"Yes, Betty Barton, the Fourth Form captain, must certainly be one of the party. And she will take with her any friends she—"

"It's not fair!" burst out Cora sulkily. "You are handing us over to the very girls who—"

"I am doing what I think to be a right and humane thing," Miss Somerfield broke in gently. "I am allowing you, for an hour or so, to be with girls of your own age."

"They are the very girls to jeer at us!"

"Cora, you know that to be quite untrue!" the headmistress said sternly. "It is true that Betty Barton and her friends have been the chief victims of your malice and your misdeeds, but it is quite untrue to suggest that they are the sort to exult over your position to-day. You can, if you prefer, be formally exercised under the eye of a mistress. If you are wise, you will take advantage of the concession I am making."

Then the two culprits looked at each other. In their hearts they knew that it was a great concession.

For both of them to be publicly exercised like prisoners, with a mistress acting as a sort of gaolress, would be far more humiliating than their going for a walk with girls of their own age.

"Oh, all right!" shrugged Cora.

She did not say "Thank you!" Possibly Miss Somerfield did not expect any such gracious word. Without saying more, the headmistress gave one of her meaning nods to Miss Redgrave and withdrew.

"Now, Cora—Judith," the under-mistress appealed to them in a tone free from any hint of reproach, "be good girls and come out of doors, and I am sure——"

"Good girls!" echoed Cora, with a grimace.

And Judith, as she followed her sister out of the gloomy room, forced a scornful laugh.

CHAPTER 24.

Gunning as Ever.

IN the main entrance-hall, at the moment when the graceless couple were passing through it, a few of the girls were gathered around the letter-rack.

The afternoon post had come in, and there was the usual eagerness on the part of many scholars to see if they were "in luck."

Miss Redgrave glanced at the crowd, then turned to Cora and Judith.

"Do you expect to hear from your people? They are abroad, but, of course, it is possible they might write to you."

She added quietly:

"You may go and see if there is any letter."

What better treatment could a pair of well-convicted culprits deserve than this?

Yet the sisters remained as sullen as ever, although they did not scruple to act on Miss Redgrave's suggestion.

Wearing their "don't-care-if-we-are-indisgrace!" air, they sauntered to the letter-rack, and, sure enough, in the division "G" there was a letter for "The Misses Cora and Judith Grandways." It bore a foreign post-mark.

Cora snatched it out, glanced at the writing, then made a face.

"Not from our people," she mumbled. "Only from Uncle Cyril."

"Bother him!" was Judith's scornful comment. "We know what any letter from him is likely to be—a long rigmarole telling us to be good and take Bluebell Courtney as a model!"

Such scant regard had the two sisters for their uncle, Cora never even trouble to open the letter then, nor did Judith urge her to. The elder sister pocketed it, whilst the pair of them followed Miss Redgrave out into the school-grounds.

"Wait here a moment," the mistress said, and she herself crossed the grass to the tennis-courts.

Some of the Fourth Form scholars were playing doubles. Others were standing around looking on and talking.

Cora turned to Judith.

"What do you think of this business of our being allowed to go for a walk with Betty & Co.?"

"Piffle!" scoffed Judith. "I say, I suppose you had better look at that sermon from Uncle Cyril."

Then Cora took out the letter again.

She was glad to do this, if only because she saw Betty Barton, Polly Linton, and two other girls coming away from the tennis.

She was glad to have some means of hiding her embarrassment.

So was Judith. As her sister opened out the letter she stood looking over that girl's shoulder at what was written.

Then, whether they wanted to or not, they looked delighted.

It was no "sermon" from Uncle Cyril at all. He had written just a brief, cordial note, and he had enclosed a five-pound note!

"Hide it, quick!" Judith whispered, whilst Betty & Co. were still coming towards them. "That money——"

"Yes!" Cora whispered tensely, and in a flash she was folding up the letter with the banknote hidden inside it.

For the moment their eyes fell upon the crisp note the same idea had come to both girls.

They had been quite out of pocket-money the last few days. But now——

Now, with five pounds in their possession, they had the means of doing a daring thing.

Escape from the school! A few hours' start, either late at night or early in the morning, before their flight was discovered; then they could get away to their home in the north!

Never mind that that home was all shut up. Only let them get to it, and they could "shake down" comfortably enough.

And then—then they could snap their fingers at Miss Somerfield, feeling that they had humiliated her before the whole school.

Betty and her friends came up, and their very looks showed that these girls had no desire to exult over the culprits.

The moment Miss Redgrave had explained the humane motive behind the head-mistress' action, the girls had risen to the occasion.

"We can't get a turn at the nets before tea," Betty said, just as if she was speaking

to girls in no disgrace whatever. "Will you walk down with us as far as the shore and back?"

"Um!" mumbled Cora. "Yes, I suppose so."

"We haven't much choice, have we?" Judith said bitterly.

"Oh, yes," answered Betty. "You can choose any other walk. So long as we are back round about five o'clock."

"The shore will do. Have you got the handcuffs?" Cora jested, with her sullen smile. "The prisoners might try to escape!"

"They are such a dreadful pair, you see!" was Judith's sarcastic rejoinder.

Betty ignored all this. She and her three chums just sauntered off, making for the school gates, with Cora and Judith walking a little apart from them.

It was the chums' worthy intention to entice the detention-room couple into conversation, for they understood that Miss Somerfield wanted the culprits to benefit mentally by this turn out of doors.

Cora and Judith, however, would not be drawn into any talk.

They were given every chance to share the conversation, Betty and the others making a point of addressing remarks to them in a quite cordial manner, but they just preferred to sulk.

They, who might well have been moved to tears by finding the very victims of their malice and wrong-doing so free from any desire to exult over their downfall, preferred to remain as hostile as ever.

"Did I see you reading a letter from your people just then?" Betty asked the couple presently, when they were down at the water's edge. "I hope they are well."

"Oh, do you!" retorted Cora, with a hoarse laugh. "Anyway, it was not a letter from our people, so see!"

"Oh, weally," said Paula Creel, trying, like the rest, to break down the culprits' useless bravado. "Fwom your uncle, pewhaps? Mr. Courtney, don't you know—what?"

"I don't see that it concerns any of you whom the letter was from!" snapped Judith.

"No, bai Jove, certainly not!" exclaimed Paula. "Howevah, I—ah—I merely wish to make a fwriendly remark, don't you know!"

"You have always been such a great friend of ours!" sneered Cora.

"I wegwet—" Paula began; but Madge Minden now put in a word.

"Cora—Judith," Madge pleaded gently, "there has been enough squabbling and bitterness in the past."

"Yes, wather!" murmured Paula. "Howevah—"

"All I know is," cried Polly Linton, in her boisterous way, "this is a jolly afternoon, and so don't let's waste it paying one another compliments—or the reverse!"

"It's a nice afternoon for you," said Judith. "Fine for you to be able to go indoors presently and boast that you have had the proud privilege of exercising the prisoners!"

"Judith," said Betty softly, "do we seem to want to make any boast of that kind? Honestly, we only want to forget that you are—in the detention-room. Look here—"

"Yes, wather!"

"For as long as you remain at Moreove School," Betty went on, her eyes shining with the generous spirit that was in the words, "you can be with us as often as Miss Somerfield will allow, and never will you hear us touching upon the past. There!"

"Thanks so much!" was Judith's jeering answer to this. "But I'm not crying out for pity yet, are you, Cora?"

"No!"

And then they walked apart and sat down, whilst the well-meaning four stood sighing to themselves sadly.

"Oh, well!" Polly exploded at last, like the madcap she was. And, the tide being down, she had to scamper out to the foam-laced margin of the sea, where her chums joined her presently. Whilst the four girls were out there watching the wavelets and the seabirds, Cora and Judith simply sat about on the dry rocks, closer inshore.

They had nothing to say to each other, but merely exchanged looks now and then, suggesting what poor comfort it gave them to make a boast of being unrepentant.

In a few minutes the four chums turned their backs to the sea and came slowly up the shore. Cora and Judith at once stood up, looking ready to go back to the school.

Not for worlds would they give Betty & Co. the chance of saying "Time is up!"

They strolled on in advance of the four

to the beginning of the path leading up through thecombe. Here, hauled high and dry on the silvery sands, there was a roomy pair-oar boat used when the scholars were bathing.

The school carpenter and odd man had been making a few repairs to the stout old craft. He had touched it up with paint here and there, and put in some new fittings. Cora and Judith, pausing to let the four overtake them, pretended to be interested in the boat.

Suddenly, whilst Betty and her chums were still twenty paces off, Judith Grandways nudged her sister violently.

"Look, Cora!" was the younger sister's excited whisper. "The carpenter's tool-bag, left there in the boat!"

Cora had already noticed the rush bag, with all the tools packed together in it, ready for the resumption of work to-morrow. But the sight of the bag had not excited her as it had her sister.

"What about it?" she asked carelessly, and Judith said quickly:

"Sh! Be quiet!"

Then the excited girl bent over into the boat. What was she going to do it was impossible for Betty and the others to see. Her hand shot straight out and snatched something from the toolbag—something so small that the girl easily slipped it up the sleeve of her blouse.

"Um!" she was saying aloud flippantly, a few moments later. "Well, I suppose we'll never take an oar in that boat again! Who cares, anyhow! I don't!"

Betty & Co. tactfully ignored this fresh show of stupid bravado. As cordially as before, they walked with the two culprits up the path to the headland, and so back to the school, still giving the sisters every chance to talk with them.

The bell had gone for tea, and the grounds were deserted. Even when the six girls got to the porch no one was there to witness the insolent manner in which Cora and Judith stalked away from the four who had companioned them.

"Perhaps they may like to repeat the walk with us to-morrow," Cora exclaimed tartly, when she and her sister were back in the detention-room.

"Yes," said Judith, "and perhaps they won't get the chance! Perhaps we shall not be here this time to-morrow!"

She suddenly held a hand in front of her, opened it, and said:

"Look, Cora—look!"

And there, on the palm of that hand, lay a small flat file!

CHAPTER 25.

At Dead of Night.

LATE that evening Paula the amiable drifted into Study No. 12, where already a few of Betty's and Polly's cronies were sitting about for a quiet talk.

"Bai Jove, geals!" Paula drawled. "Do some of you feel wather pwostwate just at pwesent?"

"It is close to-night," answered Madge Minden. "Thunder about."

"Yes, wather! Howevah——"

Paula found her eyes wandering to the best easy-chair, which at present held Dolly Delane.

"Have this chair, Paula!" Dolly the obliging cried, jumping up.

"Oh, bai Jove, how extwemely good of you!" Paula said. "I weally am a twifle tired. In fact, geals, I was thinking I would be weduced to the extwemity of we-clining on the floor!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" pealed the girls.

There was something about Paula's fatuous talk that always amused them.

"And pway," the swell girl resumed, fanning her pretty face with a perfumed handkerchief, "what are we all doing to-morrow, don't you know?"

Polly Linton, sitting on the edge of the study table, legs a-swing, answered promptly:

"I know one thing I am not going to do!" said she. "No more trotting out with Cora and Judith!"

"Oh, Polly, don't say that, dear," Betty remonstrated gently. "Of course, they really are a trying couple——"

"Yes, wather!" chimed in Paula. "A bwilliant couple, bai Jove! Howevah——"

"They are to suffer so severely, in the long run, for all their misdeeds," Betty went on, "I, for one, feel a bit sorry for them."

"Hear, hear!"

"But that doesn't mean you think the

punishment is too severe?" Tess Trelawney rejoined.

"No—"

"Certainly not!" said several of the girls at once.

"I just pity them," pursued Betty, "because the way they behaved to-day shows how utterly full of folly they are. But about to-morrow—"

"Yes, wather, geals! You will wecollect that to-morrow is a halfer—hooway!"

"Hurrah—yes!" Polly sang out, slapping the table. "Shall we all go to Barncombe, and have tea at the Creamery?"

"Good egg!" said Tess.

"Feeble," demurred Trixie Hope. "I vote we have tea at the school again, and fetch along a nice load of cakes and things—"

"Fwom the school tuckshop—yes, wather!" Paula struck in enthusiastically.

"You are right!" cried Polly eagerly. "Mrs. Marlow is reopening the tuckshop to-morrow, so we want to give her a good turn. But what, then, shall we do with ourselves in the afternoon?"

"Tennis?" suggested Madge.

"A ramble along the seashore?" was Bluebell Courtney's proposal. "But I don't mind."

"Nor I—nor I!" cried Dolly and one or two others.

"I wish we could hit upon an original game," said Betty.

"Yes, wather! Howevah, being a twifle pwestwate at pwsent," sighed Paula, still fanning herself, "I wegwet that my bwains wefuse to act. Weally, geals, I think the thunder that is about has made my mind go on stwike!"

"I know!" Polly almost shouted, suddenly smitten with an idea that lent itself to the teasing of the long-suffering Paula. "We'll have hare-and-hounds—"

"Wha-a-at!" screeched Paula. "This hot weather, bai Jove!"

"Feeble," said Trixie. "Very!"

"Yes, wather! You must wealise we would be more than feeble; we would be downwight weeks after a game of haih-and-hounds! However—"

"Paula shall be the hare—"

"How fwivolous you are!" Paula rebuked the grinning Polly. "Now, if some of you suggested a picnic—"

"A picnic! The very thing! Hurrah!"

It was one great, jubilant cry from the happy band of chums.

Polly swung off the table and made a rush at Paula, grasping her hands tightly.

"A picnic—hurrah!"

"Yes, wather! Howevah, if you will kindly—"

"You are a dear, Paula, to come out with an idea like that!"

"Yes, wather! But I do not wish my arms to come out as well, don't you know! Pway, Polly—pway wefwain fwom dwagging me out of my cheah, bai Jove!"

"Proposed, seconded, and carried unanimously," laughed Betty, "that we go for a picnic to-morrow afternoon."

"Weather permitting," added Madge impressively. "Hark!"

Through the study window, thrown wide open to the warm night breeze, came the low, distant muttering of thunder.

"We'll have the storm in the night," Polly declared, cocksure as ever. "So that's that! Start at two sharp to-morrow. Meantime—"

"There goes the bell for call-over," Betty remarked. "And so to bed, as Samuel Pepys used to write in his diary!"

"Yes, wather!" Paula, rejoined, rising very languidly. "And a wipping idea, too! Geals, I am going to sleep well to-night."

"So long as you don't snore, Paula—"

"How fwightfully fwivolous you are!" Paula rebuked Polly. "Not to say extremely wude! I have a gweat wegard for you, Polly deah, but I do wish you had a twifle more bwains!"

"Brains!" yelled Polly, whilst the others pealed with laughter. "You talk to me about b—"

"I wefuse to talk about my bwains," Paula said, walking to the door. "I weally must west them! I wather feel, don't you know, that something attempted, something done, has earned a night's repose!"

Meantime, the two girls in the detention-room were looking forward to anything but repose during the night.

Since the moment when Judith, the younger, possessed herself of that small file, the minds of both girls had been running on a daring escape.

It was a scheme as little to their credit as any of the misdeeds carried out in former days.

There was not the least justification for their trying to escape. They were not

injured innocents, suffering unmerited imprisonment under cruel conditions.

No, here was their old wayward, rebellious nature asserting itself again. Partly for the mere sake of doing something lawless, and partly with the idea of showing a last disregard for the headmistress who had been so tolerant of their bad conduct, they were going to do this rash deed.

As soon as the midnight chimes boomed out upon the night-bound world of Morcove, the two arose from their beds in the detention-room and slipped on their dressing-gowns.

They were not going to dress for going away until they had made all in readiness for the flight.

Cora stole to the locked door, and posted herself there as a listening sentinel. Judith went to the window, and in a few moments she was working away with the file upon one of the iron bars.

Rasp, rasp, rasp! went the file, making all too much noise to please the uneasy couple.

Yet they hoped that the work would continue without that tell-tale sound being heard by anyone else in the house.

Rasp, rasp, rasp! Soon Judith's right hand was cramped, and the muscles of that arm ached with the strain of holding the file. She had to take a rest at last, whilst Cora took a turn.

As the tool bit deeper and deeper into the thick bar, the rasping note turned to a squeak. The noise was still disconcertingly loud, but it could not be helped.

Right through the bar did the girls have to cut, this task taking them a full hour, what with the pauses they had to make now and then.

For at frequent intervals they desisted in their labour to listen.

But, though they had many a moment of alarm, the scare always passed off. Every other inmate of the house was fast asleep—that was evident.

And now—at last the bar was cut through, and they had to start upon another.

Only let them succeed as well with this other bar and freedom would be assured!

Rasp, rasp, rasp! began the horrid sound all over again. Harder than ever seemed the toil this time, because both girls were tired.

There are few things so irksome to the untrained hand as the steady working of a small, worn-out file that has no handle.

Squeak, squeak!—the changing sound told the girls that they were getting on. Yes, they were nearly through the second bar.

And still all was safe!

"Sh!" Cora gestured from the door; and in a flash she and her sister were back in their beds, with the clothes drawn about them.

False alarm! Cora, the elder sister, had been far more of a twitter than her sister ever since the work began.

In a few minutes they slipped from their beds again, and then Judith went at the iron bar with renewed vigour.

A sudden hard gasp of relief from the panting girl told her sister that the file had done its work at last.

With two bars thus cut through at one end, they had only to wrench them outwards—a very easy matter—and there would be ample space for the girls to squeeze through.

But first of all they had to see about dressing.

Swiftly they put on all their day things, laced their stoutest boots upon their feet, and donned their hats, after stripping off the school badge from these.

Then on the deep silence came a sinister sound that the girls had heard more than once at intervals, from the direction of the sea—the rumble of thunder.

"Oh, bother!" fumed Cora. "A nice thing it will be if a storm breaks and we get drenched!"

"I don't care!" Judith said desperately. "Storm or no storm, I'm out of this! Besides, we've got our macs."

This was true enough. They had each used a mac as the outer wrapping for that bundle of odds and ends—including a few saved-up scraps of food—which each girl was going to take with her.

"Shall we put them on?" whispered Cora.

"Why? It isn't raining yet. No, let's get away!" urged Judith.

So, without further delay, they stepped to the window—a casement one, standing open to the fresh air.

Together the girls took hold of one of the cut bars and wrenched it violently.

A few energetic efforts of this sort, and it was twisted out of the way.

Then they served the other bar in the same manner.

Five minutes later, Cora Grandways was standing in the deep darkness outside the window, her bundle tucked under one arm, whilst Judith was just scrambling through after her.

Scarcely a sound attended the younger sister's escape through the window.

She sprang down lightly, drew herself erect, then peered at Cora, grinning.

"That's that!" said Judith.

"Yes—and so, good-bye for ever to Morcove School!" was the fierce rejoinder from Cora, as she glared at the detention-room window. "We—"

Her next words were checked by another loud rumble of thunder. It seemed more overhead this time.

"Two o'clock in the morning!" Judith commented, looking at her wrist-watch. "There is a market-train to Exeter from Barncombe at seven."

Cora nodded.

"That's the idea," she muttered. "Even if our flight has been discovered by then, Miss Somerfield will not do anything drastic. We have told her we just mean to go home, whether our parents are there or not!"

Burr-rr-oom, burr-oom! rumbled the thunder in the inky heavens. Burr-rr-oom!

"Come on!" whispered Judith. "I felt a spot of rain!"

One last glance at the window through which they had made their daring escape, and then they flitted away, stealing through night-bound grounds of which every inch was familiar to them.

Ten minutes later, a vivid sheet of lightning streaked down the sky, and then an appalling clap of thunder cracked and rattled over sleeping Morcove, whilst large drops of rain fell with a hissing sound upon the dry earth.

CHAPTER 26.

What Happened to Paula.

"HALLO! I say—"

"Oh, is that you, Paula?"

"Yes. Was that thunder, Polly?"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove!" came Paula Creel's drawling interjection, from her bed in the Fourth-Form dormitory.

"Going to have a storm?" yawned Tess Trelawney, as she also woke up.

"Going to have it! We've got it!" said Polly. "Hark!"

"Ooo!"

"Oh!"

"Bai Jove, geals! That was wather a dweadful cwash—what?"

"Tse frightened!" Bluebell Courtney said, pretending to whimper.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, geals," Paula said, as the thunder died away once more. "I wegwet that my wepose has been disturbed like this. I was just dweaming, bai Jove. What time is it?"

"Half-past two," said Madge Minden.

"Bai Jove! I shall be tired out in the morning!"

"It is morning now," chuckled Polly.

"Yes, wather," drawled Paula, pulling the bedclothes about her ears. "Howevah, I do not pwopose to wise fwom my bed just yet! Good-n—"

"Good gracious!" exclaimed quite a dozen of the girls, all at once, as another blaze of lightning lit up the dormitory.

None of the girls was really afraid, but for all of them it had that fascination which a violent thunderstorm has for everybody.

Crowding at the windows, they watched the lightning zig-zagging down the sky, saw the play of it upon the sea, saw their whole romantic world of Morcove frequently lit up by the vivid glare, whilst the peals of thunder crashed and reverberated time after time.

But at last there was a lull, and then the girls drifted back to their beds, with nothing more exciting to keep them awake than the steady drumming of torrential rain.

With such a heavy downpour happening in the night, the girls felt quite sure that they would awaken to a brilliant morning.

There were some cross looks, therefore, at seven a.m., when the din of first bell made the scholars open their eyes upon windows down which the rain was still trickling!

"Oh, feeble!" groaned Trixie Hope. "Still raining!"

"Wednesday, too—burr!" grimaced Polly Linton. "I feel I could take it out of somebody over this!"

She looked about her, and it was almost inevitable that she should feel tempted to wreak vengeance upon the long-suffering Paula.

That young lady was still fast asleep. Polly got a big sponge, soaked it, and went to the swell girl's bedside.

"Wake up, Paula dear!" Polly said sweetly, at the same time squeezing the sponge. "It's raining!"

"Yes, wather!" exclaimed Paula, as the water trickled upon her face. "Bai Jove, I'm getting drenched!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What? Oh, how frivolous you are, Polly dear! Dwp it!"

"Certainly!" said Polly, promptly dropping the sponge.

Plop!

"Go away!" yelled Paula distractedly, whilst the girls pealed with laughter. "I will not be twifled with like this! I——"

And there she broke off abruptly, staring towards the dormitory door, whilst every other girl also looked in the same direction, with an expression of great surprise.

Someone was bursting into the room, after a breathless rush upstairs. It was Betty Barton.

One of the first Fourth Form scholars to start dressing that morning, she had slipped down to her study a minute since, for some reason or other.

"Have you heard?" she panted, as she now came dashing into the room. "Cora and Judith——"

"Why, what about them?" was the cry.

"They are gone!"

"Gone?"

"Flown in the night!"

"Oh, I say! Oh——"

"Bai Jove!"

"Yes," Betty went on, after taking breath. "I have just had the news from Ethel Courtway. The detention-room is empty! They fled away two of the bars and made off!"

"But where—— What——"

"They left a scribbled note behind for Miss Somerfield—a most cheeky note!" panted Betty. "It was to say they were going home."

The dead silence of all the astounded girls was broken at last by Polly. She was turning to look at the heavy rain out of doors.

"I don't envy them their journey, that's all!" she said grimly.

"They'll never get home," Madge said, with quiet conviction. "Even if they have not got drenched to the skin, and don't have to come back feeling very sick and sorry, they will be stopped at any railway-station when they try to get tickets."

But such calculations as these were upset. When the whole school assembled for

morning classes nothing had been seen or heard of Cora and Judith.

At "break" some talk went round to the effect that cautious inquiries, by Miss Somerfield, over the 'phone, had produced no results.

The railway-stations were now being watched, but everything seemed to point to the Grandways having got away very early in the morning.

There was always a big rush for the first train on the Exeter line on Wednesday

The station officials at Barnecombe had admitted that two schoolgirls might have got through unobserved during the rush, and, of course, no one was to blame if this really was the case.

By dinner-time the scholars knew that their headmistress was refusing to alarm herself over the couple's flight. They were not, in the strict sense of the word, missing. They were a pair of graceless runaways, who had left behind that cheeky note, coolly informing Miss Somerfield that they meant to make off to their home.

So when the scholars rose from dinner there was no talk of forming anxious search-parties in the neighbourhood. A hot sun had broken through the clouds at last, and Morcove School was making up its mind to revel in this fine Wednesday "halfer" that had come their way after all. As for Cora and Judith, the general feeling was that their impudent flight meant "good riddance to bad rubbish!"

Betty & Co. lost no time in preparing for their picnic.

The Form captain and her chums were some of the very first scholars to enter Mrs. Marlow's tuckshop, at two sharp. That good soul, now quite recovered from her rheumatic "turn," was having a grand re-opening day, showing counters piled high with appetising items.

The chums of the Fourth made suitable purchases of "picnic stuff"—cakes and pastries, assorted chocolates and bottles of lemonade, cream-buns and éclairs—and a few minutes later each girl was squeezing her share of the feast into a satchel to be slung at the hip.

"Hooray!" cried Betty, the moment she had got her satchel packed and nicely done up. "But I see I've left out a cream-bun by accident. Um! Got any room for an odd cream-bun, Polly?"

"What-ho!" said Polly, promptly taking up the bun and biting at it. "Thanks!"

"The cheek of you!" chuckled Betty. "I meant room in your satchel. Come on, girls! We are ready!"

Madge Minden, Tess-Trelawney, Dolly Delane, Trixie Hope, and one or two others had drifted in, all ready for marching away.

"Where's Paula, though?" questioned Polly, bolting the last mouthful of cream-bun.

"Paula has gone up to change."

"What?"

"She told me to tell you," said Bluebell Courtney. "She thinks it is going to be a roasting afternoon, so she has changed her mind again about what she will wear. She will have to catch us up."

"What with changing her mind every minute, and then having to change her frock every time she changes her mind—There, come on!" Betty laughed. "She's a funny girl, Paula!"

But their united love for the swell girl, and their anxiety to have her company, showed itself as soon as they got to the stairs.

There they all yelled up to her not to take all the afternoon dressing, and was she quite certain she knew where they were going to picnic, and should they order a car, or an aeroplane, or did she really think she could manage the walk?

"How fiviolous you are!" Paula ran out to the landing, in her petticoat, to call down to the chums. "I shall pwobably overtake you, geals, before you get to the school gates. Yes, wather!"

But they knew Paula better than that!

She was, in fact, changing her mind—and her frock—yet once again, at the moment when Betty and the rest romped out through the gateway.

The clock was just then striking half-past two.

By a quarter to three Paula was fully dressed, but giving a rather uneasy glance to the sky from one of the windows.

"Bai Jove!" she pondered aloud. "It wather looks as if those wetched clouds are coming up again. Yes, wather! Howevah

She took a look at herself in the full-length mirror.

"Oh, weal, if it does come on to wain," she decided, "I must just wun for sheltah! Yes, wather!"

So a few minutes later she was really off at last.

Then she remembered she had left behind

her contribution towards the picnic! Her satchel—where was it? Upstairs, of course!

This meant a breathless rush back to the house and upstairs, and another look at herself in the mirror.

Three o'clock chimed, and by now Betty and the rest were probably at the picnic spot, and Paula was only just hurrying out of the school gateway.

However, the swell girl of the Fourth Form had springy turf under her dainty feet, and so she could trip along faster than usual without getting too "pwestwate."

Her chums had decided to picnic at a favourite spot about two miles distant from the school.

Not a yard of roadway need be traversed, for the route lay along the breezy cliffs.

Paula hastened on, partly because she was eager to join her chums, and partly because she felt far from easy about the weather.

Quite suddenly, the clouds seemed to have come up again from all round the horizon, and now they were closing in blackly overhead.

At the end of the first mile she drew level with an old wooden look-out tower that was a familiar landmark on this part of the coast.

Many a time had the ramshackle building served as a temporary shelter for Morcove scholars during a storm, and what Paula suddenly wondered was whether she should not take shelter now, in anticipation of a sudden deluge.

Last night's storm had served them all a trick.

It had travelled round in a circle, as storms so often do, and it was going to burst upon Morcove once again. She was sure of it!

"And those geals—yes, wather! They'll have taken alarm by now, and will pwobably be wunning back, making for this tower," she reflected aloud. "It is pwactically the only sheltah for them, unless—bai Jove!—they slip down, through the combe, to one of the caves on the seashore."

A sudden splash of rain on her cheek decided her. She scampered to the closed wooden door of the old look-out tower, and tried to open it.

When the place had fallen into disuse, many years ago, the lower windows had all been boarded up. But for a long time now people had been free to go in and out by

the old tarred door, provided it was not stuck fast shut by the weather.

Paula found that last night's rain had made the door stick to-day. But she put her shoulder to it, and managed to squeeze her way through at last.

It had grown dark enough, quite suddenly, out of doors. Now that Paula was inside this ground-floor chamber of the tower, she was in groping gloom. A gust of wind suddenly sighed round the tower, and the door almost swung itself shut.

"Ugh—howwid!" Paula exclaimed aloud, groping about the place.

It had never been anything better than a storeroom. Now it was like a cellar, littered with the rubbish of years.

But she had been all over the tower at other times, and she knew that much better accommodation could be found up above.

She climbed the ladder-like stairs, and emerged, through a sort of ante-room, upon what had been a proper living-room, although the windows were like the mere slots in a Norman tower.

She stepped to one of these narrow apertures, to gaze out, quite expecting to see her chums racing towards the tower, to escape a drenching.

At that moment darkness came down in a great wave upon the outer world, and then something—

Simultaneously with a sudden vivid flare of light, Paula felt herself struck down, as if by a cruel blow.

There was a moment of utter chaos for her—another moment, whilst she struggled to rise and could not—and then the shock of the whole thing proved too much for her, and she swooned right away!

The tower had been struck by lightning!

CHAPTER 27.

A Cry for Help.

"**B**AI—bai Jove, you know!"

Paula had come to her senses at last.

But that is not to say she could understand what had happened.

Sitting shakily there, on the bare floor of that upper chamber of the old look-out, all she knew was that it had seemed like a dream to her just now.

Vaguely she imagined that that was how anybody must feel when suddenly attacked

by a cowardly assailant. She found that her hat had been knocked from her head, and she put up a hand to feel for bruises.

There was nothing of that sort whatever.

"Bai—bai Jove!" she gasped again, staggering to her feet. "Wemarkable! I—weally, I could declare I was hit a hard blow—a weally tewwific blow!"

She realised that she had been in too much of a hurry to stand up. From head to foot she was trembling violently, whilst her knees seemed ready to give way under her.

Out of doors the storm was raging furiously.

Day seemed to have turned to twilight—the heavy darkness of a thunderstorm, banished at frequent intervals by the vivid flare of lightning.

Taking a few faltering steps, she stood supporting herself against the circular wall of the room.

How long she had been insensible she had no idea, nor did she now heed the passing minutes.

She was absolutely bewildered.

Since it was evident that she had not been felled by a blow, she could only wonder if she had been taken ill.

"I—I—my gwacious, I must get out of this!" she exclaimed, her heart palpitating with fresh alarm. "I ought not to be alone, bai Jove! I'll clear out—yes, wather, even if I do get a dwenching in the storm!"

Then, as she crossed to the other side of the floor, intending to grope her way down the ladder-like steps, she got a fresh shock.

The pungent smell of burning rubbish assailed her nostrils.

It was just as if someone had lit a bonfire down below.

After sniffing curiously once or twice, Paula took her stand on the topmost stair and peered down.

Then she understood.

The old look-out tower was on fire!

She even realised, in an instant, exactly how the fire had started, whilst she also understood at last what had happened to her.

The place had been struck by lightning. It was a miracle she had not been killed; but the lightning, as it so often does, had acted freakishly.

It must have gone right down through the building, doing no more harm to her, its one occupant, than merely stunning her. But—

It had set the room below ablaze!

Paula fell away from that steep staircase with a shuddering gasp of horror. She looked about her wild-eyed, for she knew that she was trapped.

Impossible to get out of the building except by the door she had entered at.

That door was down there, and between herself and it there was a raging fire!

Vaguely Paula realised that several minutes must have elapsed whilst she was lying insensible. During that period the fire had made dreadful progress, the old store-room holding the very ingredients for a fierce conflagration.

Poor Paula! A girl to be laughed at often for her amiable foolishness; but who could have felt less scared than she at this awful moment of dire peril?

To be trapped in a burning building—a lonely building such as this—was it not a situation critical enough to unnerve the bravest girl?

"Help!" she cried out wildly, reeling to one of those narrow windows which offered not the least hope of escape. "Help—help!"

But even whilst she shrieked the word, the despairing thought was upon her: what chance of help was there?

In its own isolated position on the cliffs stood this tower that would soon be wrapped in flames. And the very storm that had caused the fire was, naturally, hindering any half-holiday rambles from strolling this way.

Betty and the rest had certainly sought other shelter, or they would have been here ere this.

"There is no one—no one!" was Paula's distraught cry, and once again she rushed to the head of the stairway, only to be driven back by the thickly rolling smoke and the lurid gleam of flames.

Hopeless!

The fire had gained a thorough hold of the old wooden building. Her frenzied mind pictured the fate that must be hers if she had made a mad dash down the stairs. She would never fight through to the outer door. The heat and the smoke would overtake her.

Besides, the outer door might have got jammed shut, and before she could open it, even if she ever managed to reach it—Oh, no, it was certain death to make the venture!

"Help, help!" she cried piercingly, after darting back to the window. "Help!"

But, for all she could tell, the agonised cries still stood no chance of being heard.

She was calling out into the rain and the gloom, calling in vain across a storm-deluged wilderness bereft of human beings.

"Get me out—get me out! Oh, save me—save me!"

With the smoke rolling up thicker than ever from below, she sank to her knees, feeling stifled, and now there was a pitiful faintness about her last despairing cries:

"Help! Help! Help!"

At that moment two girls were running towards the old look-out tower with heads dipped to the teeming rain.

It was obvious that they had been caught by the storm and were rushing for the nearest shelter, but such a plight as this did not account for their great agitation, for both girls were clad in sound water-proofs—ample protection against the rain.

By dashing along like this they were, indeed, getting far wetter than they would have done even by standing still in the open.

Had they heard those cries for help, then? Had they discovered that the old look-out tower was on fire?

No. These two girls were Cora and Judith Grandways, and they were simply bolting along like this because they had had the narrowest chance of being discovered in a certain hiding-place by Betty Barton and her chums.

The storm in the night had frustrated the runaways' plans.

So heavy had been that deluge, which started only a few minutes after they had escaped from the detention-room, they had been forced to seek the best shelter they could think of—one of the caves along the seashore.

Afterwards they had moved along to another cave, at a safer distance from the school, and there they would still have been if the sudden coming up of this second storm had not brought a number of Morcove girls hurrying down to the shore, in timely quest of shelter.

Those girls had come thronging into the very cavern that held Cora and Judith, and it was only because there chanced to be another way out of the cave that the runaways had managed to bolt off.

Preferring a run through the rain to the risk of being "captured," they had worked their way up one of the combs to the top of the cliffs.

From a distance they had seen the old look-out tower, and in an instant they had made up their minds. That was the place to shelter in for the present.

"My feet—they are soaked!" panted Cora, dashing along with her sister. "What we are going to do I don't know!"

"Oh, that won't hurt us!" gasped back Judith. "I'm not going to give in, anyhow! We have money on us, and—"

And there she suddenly checked, at the same time coming to a standstill.

Cora ran on a pace or two, then swung round angrily.

"Now what's the matter, Judith? Someone else to run away from? Where—who—"

"No, look—look!" Judith panted, pointing to the tower. "Fire! Oh, Cora, what ever has happened there? The place is on fire!"

"My goodness!" Cora exclaimed, recoiling in horror as she now saw, for the first time, a haze of smoke issuing from the tower. "Come away, Judy! Quick—come away!"

But Judith stood simply fascinated by the strange sight, and Cora seized her impatiently by the arm.

"Come away, I tell you! Don't you see, Judy, we may get blamed for that! We have been hiding in the neighbourhood; people will say we lit a fire and—"

"I wonder who did light a fire?" Judith exclaimed. "But perhaps the tower has been struck by lightning? I can't believe—"

"Hark, what's that?" she broke off sharply.

Clutching at each other in increased alarm, they listened excitedly.

"Help! Help! Help!"

"Oh, my goodness," Cora whispered hoarsely, "someone is in there!"

"Then we must do something—we must!" Judith cried. "It may be a Morcove girl. Hark! Yes, that's a girl's voice! Oh, Cora, come quickly."

Cora obeyed; but it was the younger sister who led all the way to the burning building.

Judith reached the smoke-wreathed door of the tower whilst Cora was still drawing

timidly nearer. She—Judith—laid her hands upon the timbers to push at them, but she stepped back with palms smarting with the heat.

"Just what I thought—too late!" was Cora's despairing cry. "Take care, Judy—keep away! There is a raging fire behind that door!"

"Come here—help me—you must!" insisted Judith. "It will take both of us to push it open wide enough!"

"But you are not going in, Judy?"

"I am!" was the desperate answer. "To run away and leave someone to a fate like that—oh, no, no, no! I'm not as bad as that!"

She pulled out a handkerchief and bound it about her mouth and nostrils.

Such a resolute action would surely have spurred any other companion of hers to action, but it did not spur her sister.

Cora cowered back, still looking at the burning building with eyes full of utter fright.

Then Judith made a gesture—for, with her muffled lips, she was no longer able to speak—a gesture that said: "Come—help me!"

At the same time she went close up to the door, which was only a few inches ajar. Finding then that Cora had never stirred, she looked round and appealed with her eyes.

Still Cora held away.

"It is no use, Judy! Oh, take care—think of yourself!" panted the coward.

But Judith was no longer that Judith who had been a partner to all the old deeds of cowardice, treachery, and malice.

Some better instincts, some heroic quality all too long dormant within her heart had responded to that piteous cry for help.

She was not going to think of herself—no! She was going to do the decent thing at last!

She was going to save the imperilled being who was inside this burning building, or perish in the attempt!

She lifted a foot, and drove it at the door, sending it crashing open a little way before it stuck again. And next moment she was gone!

For the coward standing outside, white as death with fear, there was nothing to see save that open doorway, belching thick smoke that was lurid with the raging fire within.

A miserable, craven figure in the pouring rain, there stood Cora, the coward—a coward in the past, and a coward even now!

She heard the hiss and cackle of the fire, the dull thud of something falling over, to become extra fuel for the flames, and all the time she knew that her dauntless sister was fighting through those very flames, to save a fellow creature, or die in the attempt.

And yet she never stirred a foot!

The moments went by, until at last even she could stand the suspense no longer. She ventured close to the fiery doorway, then backed away from it, emitting a shuddering cry of terror.

Shame at her own cowardice must have seized her, for she put up both hands to her drooping face. Who knows? A few seconds more, and perhaps she would have found courage to go after her sister, even as that sister had already gone after the hapless inmate of the tower!

But before Cora could pull herself together the chance for heroic action was gone.

Out through the fiery doorway stumbled Judith, staggering with the burden of the human load she bore. There was an instant whilst she, still clutching the insensible Paula, stared in a dazed way at Cora. Then she dropped the rescued girl to the ground, and fell swooning beside her.

"Paula!" was Cora's hoarse cry, as she recognised the rescued one. "One of Betty Barton's own friends, and my sister has saved her very life!"

She tremblingly drew both senseless girls clear of the burning building, noticing, as she did so, that neither was injured, only overcome by that fiery ordeal through which they had both passed.

And to her great relief, after a few minutes, Paula sighed feebly, and then opened her eyes.

"Bai—bai Jove! Oh, my gwacious!"

she said feebly. "This is bettah—yes, wather! Geals— But where are they? Betty and the west—where are they?"

With her half-collected senses, she realised that her chums were not with her, and that this was Cora Grandways who knelt beside her.

"You're not hurt, are you?" Cora said excitedly. "My sister—she got you out, yes! You would have been killed, you know!"

"Yes, wather!" Paula assented, sweeping a shaky hand across her smoke-begrimed face. "Howevah! I say, my fwriends are not here, then?"

"No. But the storm is ending now—the clouds are breaking already!" Cora rushed on. "What shall I do, Paula? Shall I run back to the school, and get help, or fetch those girls? I don't mind! Oh, I—I want to do something!"

"I wather expect you do," said Paula, fast pulling herself together. "Howevah, there doesn't seem much to do now, does theah? The tower must burn, you know—yes, wather! But if you could get hold of my fwriends——"

"I'll run and fetch them at once! Oh, I'll run all the way! I know where they are!" Cora cried, starting eagerly to her feet. "Only, see after my sister!"

"Yes, wather!" assented Paula, with absolute heartiness.

As Cora had said, the clouds were suddenly breaking. Although the heavy rain was still sheeting down only a mile or two away, a gleam of sunshine was banishing the gloom at this spot.

The golden ray, growing stronger every moment, came sweeping slowly along the wet grass, lighting at last upon Paula and her rescuer.

There it seemed to linger, as if, by its heavenly beams, it meant to symbolise the sudden change in Judith's own young life.

from storm and gloom to sunshine and joy.

Such a symbol did the beam of sunlight seem to Paula, anyhow, as she knelt there, on the glistening grass, beside her brave rescuer.

"Judith—Judith, deah!" the swell girl of the Fourth Form whispered, but there was no response.

"It was bwickish of you, you know—yes, wather!" Paula went on, speaking to the still unconscious girl. "And, bai Jove, if this doesn't wipe out all we have ever had against you, it it doesn't mean that you are going to make good from this time onwards, then I shall be very much surprised!"

And, saying very tenderly:

"You are a pwoper bwick, Judith!" Paula Creel kissed her then, dropping a gentle tear upon her rescuer's cheek.

CHAPTER 28.

Forgiveness Well Won!

TWENTY minutes after Betty Barton and her chums came dashing upon the scene, looking red hot with their breathless race from the spot where Cora Grandways had sought them out.

The burning tower was by now enveloped in flames, whilst the pall of black smoke which canopied the doomed building was, no doubt, causing scores of people at a distance to set off to see exactly what was the matter.

But little heed could Betty & Co. give to the fire.

Judith was still unconscious, and her deathly appearance was a matter of grave alarm to all the girls.

Paula Creel had already lifted the girl, unaided, and carried her to a safe distance from the burning tower, which another

hour would see reduced to a heap of smouldering ruins.

Now the whole party of girls had to devise a means of getting the sufferer to the school.

Tess and Dolly set off at once, to give warning of what had happened, and to get the school ambulance rushed to the spot.

But, in the meantime, Betty and her chums found a couple of sheep-hurdles, and these they made into a make-shift stretcher.

So, at a moment when many folk were rushing in hot haste to the scene of the fire, the scholars were already on their way to Morcove School, taking turns, in parties of four, at carrying the pathetic burden.

Hardly a word was spoken.

On arrival at the school, it was found that Judith had sustained no injury by her plucky deed; but, for her and Paula alike, absolute rest and quiet was decreed, in the school sanatorium, so that both girls might suffer no after effects of their terrible experience.

As for Cora, she was told to return to the detention-room, though it caused no surprise in the school when the news went about, that evening, that neither of the sisters was to be expelled after all.

If Miss Somerfield herself had been at all slow in seeing how one, at least, of the wayward sisters had suddenly come out in the light of a heroine, then dozens of Morcove scholars would have been ready to point this out to the headmistress.

That lady, however, it is needless to say, had been as quick as anybody to discern the wonderful turning point in Judith's youthful career which her heroic action marked.

Even before Judith had rallied sufficiently to be allowed to talk, Miss Somerfield, standing there at the bedside, had felt free forgiveness for all past misdeeds welling up in her heart.

Imagine, then, the joy it was to her to

say the words that meant absolute pardon for the past and a fresh chance in the future, when Judith's own lips falteringly told how she longed to follow the right path from this time onwards!

Never in her lengthy career as a head-mistress had Miss Somerfield listened to such earnest words. Judith was changed—reformed completely.

It was that sudden, wonderful regeneration of heart and soul which has altered the career of how many a hardened wrong-doer in the twinkling of an eye?

The once wayward girl, despair of all those who had sought so earnestly to influence her for good, had found her better nature at that critical moment when another's life was in the balance.

And now she was forgiven for all former wrongdoing, freely forgiven, as she deserved

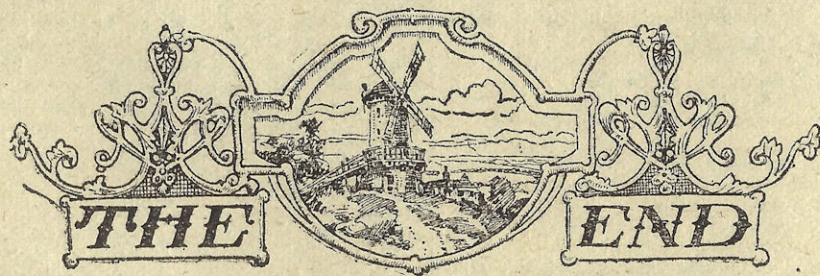
to be, not by Miss Somerfield only, but by every other inmate of the school.

What of Cora, though—Cora, who, it was known, had played but a coward's part during the crisis?

Such conduct as hers had been did not merit much consideration. Yet, if only because Judith herself was pleading that her sister, too, might be given another chance, Miss Somerfield was moved to leniency.

Cora also should stay on at the school, and perhaps—ah, how earnestly Miss Somerfield hoped it would be so!—perhaps the time would come when Cora, too, would be even as her sister was to-night—a changed and better girl!

And all the school wondered whether this would be so



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See page iii of cover for further particulars.

THE HANDY GIRL.

Her mother described Hilda as "a handy girl about the house." The description fitted her to a T. She was never so happy as when she was "pottering about," as she called it, with some domestic job or other that had gone wrong.

Which was just as well, perhaps, for Hilda's father, the only male in the house, had no gift for such matters. If he handled a hammer, the only nail he ever hit was his thumb-nail. Perhaps that is why Hilda became the "handy-man"; perhaps it was because she found it such an interesting hobby.

Her first job was to put a new washer on a leaky tap; at the time plumbers were scarce. Once she had found out the way to turn off the water and empty the cistern, the rest was easy. Unscrewing the nut at the bottom of the handle, she found a small piece of metal like a halfpenny with a small rod pushed through it.

A worn-out washer was held in position on the rod by means of a small nut. Unscrewing this, she purchased a new washer of the same size, adjusted it, replaced the nut, screwed on the tap again—and was surprised how easily she had performed a job that she had very hesitatingly embarked upon.

That little experience taught her that most household jobs are simple, if only you know how, and if you keep your eyes open the method is not difficult to discover.

Hilda's next job, strangely enough, also concerned taps. It was one of her weekly jobs to clean the brass taps of the house, and, noticing that modern taps are of stainless metal or white-enamelled, she thought it a great idea for saving labour. Then she discovered that a special enamel for painting over brass taps could be bought.

The necessary cash was readily granted, and, cleaning the taps scrupulously before starting work, Hilda did her job of painting in no time. The result delighted the whole household.

After that, Hilda had rather a craze for painting. The decorators were doing up her friend's house, and Hilda went over and watched points, and also asked a good many questions.

"It doesn't seem very difficult," she decided at last. "I think I could do a thing or two in that direction."

As she had never attempted anything like it before, Hilda thought she would try her new handiwork on something that didn't matter very much. The shelves in the scullery looked as if they could do with a bit of brightening up. The cooking had made them a big grubby.

First of all, she scrubbed the shelves with hot soda-water to remove all the dirt and grease. Then, following what she had learned from the painters over the way, she rubbed them over with a smooth piece of pumice-stone, to remove the unevenness of the old paint.

The painter, who was his own master, lent Hilda a brush, and sold her the small quantity of cream-coloured paint necessary for the job. "You apply this first, in two coats," he informed her, handing her a tin of paint called "flattening." "It forms a groundwork for the third coat, which is of glossy paint. And don't forget to paint in the same direction the whole time, not first down and then across. And don't use too much paint on your brush."

All of which Hilda bore in mind. She didn't find the job at all difficult, either, though she did it as carefully as if she was painting the front door.

She was vastly pleased with the job when finished, and her father made her a present of cash on the strength of it. She promptly bought a couple of good paint-brushes, for she had ideas about white-enamelling a mirror and an old chair and a washstand in her bedroom.

Don't think Hilda made a slave of herself by her domestic hobby. She enjoyed her sports and outings with her chums, but every now and again she would be seized with the idea of doing something fresh in the house—something either useful or ornamental.

One day it struck her that, as everybody complained of the terrific draught in the drawing-room, she would try to get rid of it. It made the room awfully uncomfortable at times.

It wasn't difficult to track the draught down. It came from all round the door. She visited the local ironmonger's, and he showed her some rubber piping that was just the thing for the top and sides of the door. She fixed it on with two dozen short tacks in fifteen minutes. The patent draught-excluder at the bottom, bought from the same place, was a more difficult job to fix, but Hilda managed it at last. And the drawing-room is perfectly cosy now.

With the experience she has gradually gained, there is hardly a job in the house Hilda would not attempt now. She doesn't regard it as hard work, though.

"It's great fun, when you know how!" she says. "Especially when everybody admires the work you have done!"

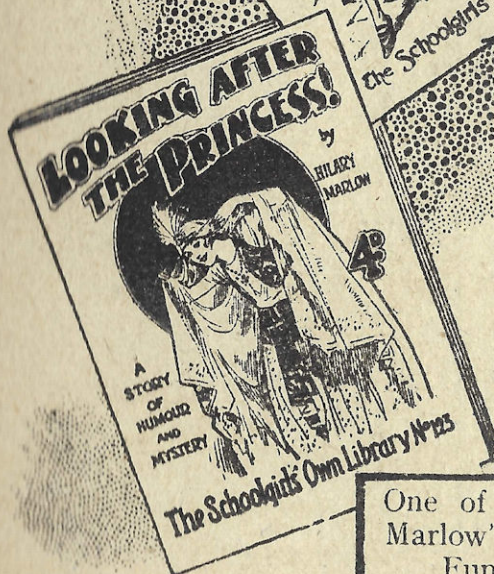
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