

# MORCOVE'S RECKLESS TWO!

BY MARJORIE  
STANTON



AN EARLY ADVENTURE OF  
BETTY BARTON & Co

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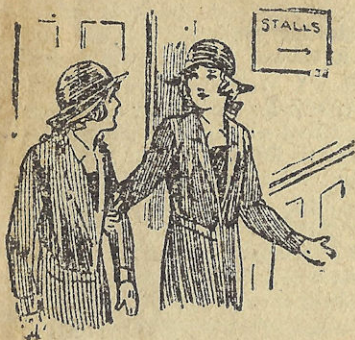
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# MORCOVE'S RECKLESS TWO!

An Enthralling, Long Complete Tale of the Early Adventures of BETTY BARTON & Co., the Popular Fourth-Formers of Morcove School. Introducing AUDREY BLAIN, CORA GRANDWAYS' Friend.

By MARJORIE STANTON.

Author of "THE MORCOVE TUCK-SHOP KEEPERS," "FROM DESERT TO MORCOVE,"  
"THE CIRCUS GIRL OF MORCOVE," etc., etc.

## CHAPTER 1.

### Audrey Arrives.

"HAVE you seen her, Betty?"  
"Seen whom?"  
"She is simply beautiful!"  
"That is no answer to my question," laughed Betty Barton. "Have I seen whom?"

"The new girl!" Polly Linton explained exuberantly. "Hair like the colour of ripe corn; eyes—oh, they are wonderful eyes! And she's fifteen, Betty, and has the air of a queen!"

"Yes, wather!" broke in Paula Creel's amiable voice, as she drifted into Study No. 12. "Howevah, I twust there is still a chance for me, bai Jove!"

"Have you seen her, then?" cried Polly. "I have heard she is wipping to look at!" said Paula, sitting down in the best chair the Form captain's study could show. "I have not seen her myself, pwecisely. Howevah——"

"Oh, Paula is going to be jealous, Betty dear!" crowed Polly teasingly. "Up to now our Paula has always been the swell girl of the Form; but this new girl's appearance means a rival. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Not wival I mean to quawwel with," declared Paula. "I twust we are going to be friends—fwiends all wound, bai Jove!"

"Well said, Paula!" cried Betty Barton. "I say, though—has the new girl come up

to her study yet? I see they have given her the one that has been empty for ever so long. That was her luggage dumped down in the passage outside No. 15?"

"Yes," nodded Polly, swinging on to the edge of the table—her favourite position when gossiping. "Heaps of luggage she has, too!"

"Yes, wather! Howevah—— Hallo, Madge dear!" Paula broke off, as the captain's study suddenly received another of its usual afternoon visitors.

"Madge, have you seen her?" Polly promptly demanded. "She's wonderful!"

"So I am told," said Madge Minden, the quiet one.

"The loveliest head of hair, Madge! Eyes—oh, they sort of fascinate you! What are you looking at yourself for in that pocket-mirror, Paula? Ha, ha, ha!"

"I was merely seeing if my hair was quite to wights," Paula answered.

But Polly laughed again, winking at Betty and Madge.

"Sure you weren't feeling just a wee bit jealous, Paula? I tell you, this new girl, Audrey Blain——"

"Audrey Blain?" repeated Betty. "It's pretty—Audrey."

"Yes, wather! I quite wealise, geals, the new member of the Form is wonderful in every respect. But——"

"Girls, have you seen her?" panted Tess



Trelawney, suddenly whirling into the study. "She is amazing! The moment I set eyes on her I felt a longing to paint her portrait right away!"

"There, you hear!" Polly laughed. "Tess is an artist; she knows beauty when she sees it! This new girl——"

There was another interruption. Trixie Hope sailed into the room, exclaiming:

"Oh, la-la! La belle demoiselle!"

"That's what I say!" chuckled Polly. "Tres chic, and all the rest of it! Betty, you really must get a look at her before we sit down to tea!"

"I must," said Betty. "This new girl of ours seems to be turning all your heads!"

Partly in fun, and partly with a sincere desire to make the new girl's acquaintance at once, with a view of becoming friendly right away, she went softly to the door and opened it a foot or so.

Putting her head through the opening, she looked along the passage to where some of the new girl's luggage had been set down by the school porter. The door of that study was closed, and Betty could not tell whether or not the new arrival was in the room.

As she had arrived but an hour ago, whilst the girls were still in class for afternoon lessons, it was quite possible she had not yet finished the formal interviews with Miss Somerfield, the headmistress, and the school matron.

Betty turned round.

"I don't think she is there. Where did you see her?"

A chorus of answers made it clear to the Form captain that her chums had only had the merest glimpse of Audrey Blain, when that girl was quitting the headmistress' study in company with the matron.

"Then she has not come up yet," decided Betty.

She sent one more glance along the passage—and at that very moment the door of No. 15 opened, and Audrey Blain came forth.

Betty felt it only right to step outside her study and go forward.

"Good-afternoon!" Betty said genially. "You are Audrey Blain, of course? I'm so glad to——"

"How are you?" the new girl struck in airily. "Give me a hand with this luggage, will you?"

Betty did not think this an unreasonable request, although she did think it might have been made less coolly.

"You want it shifted into the study——"

"Some of it. I will show you which. The rest you can help me to take upstairs presently. That fool of a porter dodged off before his job was finished," the new girl said disgustedly. "I tipped him too soon!"

Then she pointed out a very swagger leather bag for Betty to handle. It had the initials, "A. B.," stamped in gold upon the side, and it was only one of several equally grand bits of luggage.

Betty soon whisked the bag into the study, and returned for another. Then she returned for a third, by which time her chums were watching operations from the doorway of Study No. 12.

"Not that one—it goes upstairs," said Audrey Blain. "But you might tackle this."

"This" was a mahogany box that appeared to hold a complete croquet set. Betty was willing to "tackle" it, but the weight of the thing was simply beyond her strength.

Audrey herself, meantime, sauntered into the study with a tennis racket, screwed up in its wooden frame.

"What's the trouble, Betty?" asked Dolly Delane, coming along the passage at that moment. "Oh, let me help you!"

Just like Dolly to be so obliging! Before Betty could voice a word of thanks, she was being given practical help. Even then the box took some shifting, but at last the breathless couple had the thing inside the study.

"Thanks!" Audrey Blain said tersely then. "That's all!"

This was followed by a cool nod of dismissal. Betty was flushing—and not entirely as the result of her recent exertions. She was the last girl in the world to stand upon dignity; still——

"I wish one of you would hang around for a bit!" Audrey said next moment. "I'm bound to feel all at sea."

"I am sorry," Betty answered. "I must get back to my study, because we are having a bit of a celebration there in a few minutes."

"Oh, a party? That sounds better!" Audrey Blain commented. "Glad to know you get a bit of fun out of life!"



"It—it will be a jolly tea-party, without doubt," said Betty. "A girl in our Form did a very brave thing last week. She saved another girl from being burnt to death in a fire, and so we all thought we would have a sort of high-tea in honour of the heroine."

"Oh dear!" Audrey remarked with sudden dryness. "I didn't know it was anything like that!"

"The girl we are so proud of just at present is Judith Grandways——"

Betty paused, for she thought that her utterance of that name had startled Audrey.

"There are two sisters—Cora and Judith Grandways. Do you know them?"

"I? What makes you think that?" Audrey demanded, turning those lovely violet eyes of hers upon the Form captain. "So this Judith Grandways——"

"She is the one who saved a girl's life last week. It was a most heroic deed; but," Betty went on earnestly, "what made the whole thing so particularly pleasing to all of us was this. Judith, like her sister Cora, used to be an utterly wayward girl. The pair of them were even under sentence of expulsion at the time the fire happened. But Judith's brave deed wiped out all that."

"How very interesting!" Audrey commented again, in that half-cynical tone which had already nettled Betty and Dolly.

"You need to have been at the school as long as some of us," Betty said, "to feel as we do about it. When you see a girl like Judith Grandways suddenly reforming completely, it makes you glad—jolly glad!"

"And her sister—has she reformed?" was the dry inquiry.

"Cora Grandways has at least been a bit different from what she was. In her case, the change is going to be a gradual one, we suppose. Will you come along to Study 12 presently?" Betty added, conquering her dislike of the new girl's cynical air. "Then you will meet so many of the girls."

Audrey Blain lifted her narrow shoulders in a shrug of extreme diffidence.

"Well, perhaps," she answered. "Thanks! You can stay around for a bit?" she added, looking at Dolly.

Now Dolly the Doormat, as she was called, could never decline to make herself useful.

"Oh, yes," was her inevitable answer, "I'll stay, certainly!"

"You won't keep her too long, will you?" Betty pleaded, withdrawing to the door. "I know Dolly is as keen as any of the girls about our little festivity in Study 12. But she won't study her own pleasure unless you make her."

"Oh, Betty, that's all right!" laughed Dolly.

But Betty went back to her own study, feeling that it was going to be anything but all right.

Audrey Blain seemed to be just the type of girl to abuse another's obliging disposition.

"Well?" Polly rushed at Betty in Study 12. "Isn't she stunning?"

"She is very beautiful, yes," acknowledged Betty.

"Her hair—her eyes!"

"Yes."

"Well, then—what's the matter, Betty?"

"I would like to ask," Madge put in quietly, "that new girl didn't exactly order you to cart that luggage about, Betty?"

"No," laughed Betty, "not exactly!"

"I thought she might have lent a hand with the heavy box, anyhow!" said Tess. "And where is Dolly now? Making herself useful to the new girl?"

"Dolly won't be long, I hope," Betty said, banishing any disappointment that her looks had betrayed. "By the way, we must lay for one more, because I asked the new girl. That was quite right, I suppose?"

"Yes, wather!" drawled Paula, whilst the others murmured to the same effect. "And now, geals, I pwesume it is time to pwepare for the spwead?"

"Ra-ther!" cried Polly the madeap, and next moment she was bustling about as briskly as any, getting the study table laid for tea.

Superfluous articles of furniture were shifted into the passage for the time being. An extra table was joined on to the one permanently there. Extra crockery was forthcoming from other dens, and chairs were dragged in and fitted around in the deffest manner.

As for the feast itself, since it had involved lavish contributions on the part of all the girls, it made a wonderful effect when set out upon the snowy cloth.

Piles of pastries and cakes; all the



"Oh, don't you bother, Judy!" the Form captain pleaded. "I expect Cora wanted to come here, only that new girl got hold of her."

"Yes, but——"

"She is rather a grand young lady; I have had some experience of her already," Betty said, forcing a laugh. "Cora will come along presently, bringing the new girl with her, most likely."

But Cora did not come to the tea-table to which she had been so specially invited. Nor did the girls see anything of Audrey Blain, although they knew that Betty had done the friendly thing by inviting her.

Except for the two vacant chairs, the whole festive occasion was an unqualified success. Round about six o'clock, when the girls were clearing away the tea-things, they could detect an anxiety on Judith's part to be off. But they were all quite certain that that anxiety clashed with a wistful longing to stay.

"These glorious long evenings!" Betty exclaimed, glancing out of the window. "We can get a bit of tennis in a few minutes—and you'll come along down with us, Judy?"

"I would love to!" Judith answered, her eyes ashine with the joy it meant to her to find herself on such good terms with all the girls. "I've made up my mind to go in for sports now. But——"

Betty divined the cause of that uneasy "but."

"We'll see you down there presently," she said. "I know you want to rout out your sister."

"Get her to come, too!" cried Polly, as Judith was going away. "I don't know about the new girl. She may please herself!"

"Yes, wather!" said Paula, dropping into the old favourite armchair. "She might want us to carry her wacket, bai Jove!"

Judith was already out of the room, and passing to the study which she shared with her sister. She found the room empty; but a moment afterwards Cora came in, looking very elated.

"Hallo! So it's over?" Cora exclaimed glibly.

"Yes," said Judith.

"Enjoy yourself?"

"I would have been happier, Cora, if—

if you had come along. Up to the last, I was hoping you would put in an appearance."

"More fool you!" said Cora, shrugging. "I told you at five o'clock I had no desire to sit down to tea with those girls!"

"Oh, Cora!" the younger sister exclaimed. "I know you said it, and I was silly enough to let it make me cry. But you didn't mean it, surely?"

"I did mean it!"

"Then," said Judith in a pained whisper, "aren't you going to try, like me, to make up for all the past? I have been thinking that you want to make good just as much as I do. The girls, too—they think you are sorry!"

"Oh, yes, I know all about that!" smiled Cora. "I suppose I have been rather on my good behaviour lately! As you sort of put in a plea for me when you were being let off the expulsion, I sort of owed it to you to look like a good girl for a bit, even if I didn't feel like one!"

"Cora, don't talk like this! Oh, I can't bear it!" Judith burst out hoarsely. "I know—I know you have not felt the same change that came over me last week. But you really are going to be a different girl in the future, aren't you, dear? You do mean to be friends with those girls—those girls who have been so generous in giving us both another chance?"

"Talking of chances, one has come my way to-day," was Cora's careless answer. "Have you met the new girl, Audrey Blain? She is just our sort!"

"Do you mean just the sort we used to wish we could chum up with?" Judith returned. "The sort to kick against discipline; the sort to set every rule of the school at defiance?"

"That's Audrey Blain all over!" nodded Cora.

"Then I don't think I want to chum up with her," Judith answered sadly. "I'm done with that life, Cora."

"I've not!" said the elder sister. "My word, I feel like saying that I am only just beginning it! To be with Audrey Blain for a few minutes is to have a lesson in the art of kicking over the traces. She's going to be a handful, Judy! Talk about you and me—I guess we have been mere babies compared with Audrey Blain! Ha, ha, ha!"



Judith, looking terribly distressed, was silent, and now her sister picked up a hat and clapped it on.

"One moment, Cora!" Judith exclaimed then. "Won't you come along with me, Cora? I'm going down to get some tennis with Betty and the rest."

"Are you really?" mocked Cora, walking to the door. "Well, I happen to be going to get a bit of fun with Audrey Blain! So-long!"

And the door banged behind her.

### CHAPTER 3.

#### Never Too Fast for Cora.

THE moment her sister had flung out of the room like that, Judith Grandways sank into a seat, sighing heavily.

She swept a hand across her forehead—the action of a girl who feels dismayed, distraught.

This day should have been the happiest she had ever known. Oh, how sadly it was going to end, after all!

That was her poignant thought as she sat there, pondering her sister's ominous flippancies.

By what seemed to Judith, in her reformed state of mind, a sheer calamity, this new girl had come to the school—a girl who bade fair to set the pace at reckless conduct.

In the very hour when she, Judith, had hoped to see her sister cementing desirable friendships with Betty and the rest, Cora had actually been making this new girl's acquaintance.

Already the dangerous alliance had been formed. Oh, it was awful to know that in Audrey Blain there was a girl who appealed to all Cora's old instincts.

What, then, was going to happen now?

What a struggle it was going to be to save this sister, who really had no inclination to reform!

A sister who had suddenly formed this fatal friendship with Audrey Blain—Audrey Blain, from all accounts a beautiful, moneyed girl, fascinating and reckless!

Where were Cora and Audrey now? What were they going to do? What was that "bit of fun" Cora had hinted at just as she slammed out of the room?

With these questions throbbing in her uneasy mind, Judith suddenly sprang up, quitted the study, and went along to the door of No. 15.

She knocked, but got no answer. Opening the door, she found the den deserted.

Her sister and the new girl had already gone out.

Judith went back to Study 7. Standing at the open window, she could see down into the playing-fields. Over by the tennis courts, Betty & Co. were forming a jolly party, and she knew she was welcome to join them.

Suddenly she caught a brief glimpse of her sister and the new girl outside the school bounds.

There might have been nothing alarming in that. At this season of the year the girls were allowed a generous amount of liberty. But Judith noticed with dismay that the two girls were walking at a smart pace along the road to Morcove Road railway-station.

Judith found herself looking at her wrist-watch. The time was twenty-past six—and at a quarter-to seven there was a train into Barncombe town.

Were the two girls daring to slip into Barncombe by train, catching the eight-twenty back? Was that the "bit of fun"?

"Madness!" Judith exclaimed to herself hoarsely. "That is a thing absolutely against the rule of the school! If they really are going to do such a thing, then—oh, it may end in Cora being expelled after all!"

She took a few quick turns about the room, and then suddenly her mind was made up.

She would go after her sister at once, even run all the way to the wayside railway-station, in the hope of being in time to plead with her.

All the efforts she must make to save her sister must not be known to Betty & Co.

For the present, at any rate, they had the happy belief that Cora was at least on the way to reforming. If possible, they must not be allowed to feel the utter contempt and scorn for Cora which this backsliding of hers would merit.

Judith slipped out of the house by a back way. That was partly to avoid being seen by Betty and the others, and partly because



it was her shortest route to the Barncombe Road.

Once clear of the grounds, she ran on and on, luckily meeting neither a mistress nor any of her schoolfellows. That same luck, however, did not enable her to overtake the couple she was after.

Then, suddenly, as the anxious girl was making a last breathless spurt towards the booking-office door, she fetched up with a sharp gasp of surprise.

Two girls were wheeling a motor-bike and side-car out of the small goods-yard, and those girls were Audrey Blain and Cora!

In a flash Judith understood, and a certain sense of shame came over her.

She had wronged both girls by jumping to the conclusion they were going to flout the rule of the school by paying a flying evening visit to the town.

Their "bit of fun" was innocent enough, after all. Audrey had asked Cora to go with her to the station, to get delivery of a motor-bike and side-car which belonged to the new girl, and which she had not been able to bring along to the school earlier in the day.

Judith held still for a moment, then turned to go back. But now Cora sang out a gay "Coo-ee!" and waved.

"Judy—here!"

It would have been churlish to ignore the cry. Judith turned again, and walked towards the couple. They were at a standstill, and Audrey was "filling" up with petrol.

"Ha, ha, ha!" Cora greeted her flushed-faced sister. "Been running all the way from the school to keep an eye upon your naughty sister? Duffer, Judy! But perhaps you can have a rest all the way back. Audrey, this is Judy, you know!"

"Charmed!" Audrey lifted her beautiful head to smile at Judith. "Oh, yes, I can take you on board, Judy. I've often driven three-up! It's rather fun!"

"What a beautiful machine!" Judith remarked, feeling she must say something of a friendly nature. But all the time her heart was sinking with dread.

Now that Audrey Blain stood before her, Judith felt all her fears confirmed.

This new girl's fascinating looks and manners; the suggestion of money which her dress proclaimed—all were disquieting elements.

She was, in very truth, just that type of

shallow girl whom Cora had always wanted to see at Morcove School. It had been said she was fifteen, but she looked older.

"You may get in, dear," Audrey said to Cora, speaking in a very caressing tone, that obviously stirred something in Cora's breast. "And your sister can cuddle down in front of you."

She added, stowing away the spirit-can:

"You'll be quite comfy, Judy. Your sister's knees will be a cushion for your head."

"Thank you!" Judith answered, whilst Cora got into the side-car. "What a sensation it will be at Morcove, for a Fourth-former to have a motor-cycle! Yet there is no reason why you should not have one, of course. Cora, how lovely to be able to race up and down the Devonshire roads, instead of having to pedal!"

Audrey was ready to start. She came round to help Judith make herself comfortable in the forepeak of the roomy side-car. Her white, soft hand closed about Judith's arm, and somehow the touch of that hand sent a thrill through Judith. She realised that any bold recklessness in this girl's nature was blended with a very subtle dignity and grace. She was no tomboy. And that was just where the danger lay!

"Judy!" Audrey laughed, sweeping a hand caressingly over Judith's bare head. "I like Judy! And I think you are very pretty, you know—just like your sister! Comfy?"

"Now we are off!" Audrey smiled a few moments later, as she got into the saddle.

The machine was a lady's model, perfectly comfortable for the driver.

"I suppose we shall do it in no time, back to the school?" Judith exclaimed.

"Only," spoke Cora, sitting behind her huddled sister, "we are going for a spin first!"

Judith turned her head round sharply, looking at Cora in sudden alarm.

"We—you—have we permission, Cora?"

"Have we permission, Audrey?" inquired Cora, with a laugh.

"What's that?" sang out Audrey, above the hum of the engine. "We have permission to fetch the outfit to the school, and that's good enough!"

"But—"

Judith could say no more. The motor-bike and side-car suddenly purred away, causing the wind to buffet her face and leave her almost breathless.



Almost before she had recovered from the shock of the violent start, they were out on the main road. They should have turned to the right to take the direct road to Morcove School; but Audrey had whirled to the left, and now she was driving along at a good twenty miles an hour.

Cora bent forward in her seat, and almost shrieked in her sister's ear:

"How do you like it, Judy? Better than tennis, eh? I call it glorious—ripping!"

"But, Cora——"

"Don't look so scared, duffer! Even if you have reformed lately, I suppose you can enjoy a spin like this!"

"Too fast, is she saying? Is that what scares her?" cried Audrey, darting a side-glance and a smile at them both.

"No; faster, Audrey—faster!" urged Cora recklessly.

And in another half-minute the outfit was going at thirty miles an hour!

#### CHAPTER 4.

##### Always the Way.

UNWITTINGLY involved in this mad "spree" of a stolen joy-ride, Judith was now almost frantic with alarm.

It was not that she had a coward dread of something happening to leave her and her companions thrown out upon the road, maimed, or even killed, amidst a pile of awful wreckage.

She could see that Audrey was a skilful driver, and under other conditions Judith could have felt a joyful thrill at being whirled along like this.

But there was the sickening thought that it was all wrong, that the whole thing was being done in absolute defiance of school discipline.

Audrey had been given permission to ride the machine to the school under its own power; and here she was, taking an ell after being given an inch!

But of what use to voice loud appeals to Audrey to turn back? Cora would only strike in with counter-cries, "No; keep on!" And in any case, Audrey would probably humour her own mad mood, although so much calling out to her, above the roar of the engines, might easily distract her for a moment, and then——

Then there would be certain disaster!

So, with the motor-bike and side-car speeding along at this hair-raising speed—up and down the lonely Devonshire roads, with their beautiful undulations—poor Judith could only sit mute and still, in the forepeak of the side-car, almost praying in her heart that this was the last time her sister would be led away like this.

Oh, if only it could be so, the distraught girl was thinking. If only she could bring such influence to bear upon her sister as would turn that girl's heart and mind to better things!

It was so worth while playing the game! Judith knew it now. She knew that the last few days had conferred upon her a happiness she had never known before, and she was longing to see Cora make good.

All at once Audrey began to slow up. At first, Judith could only believe that this was because the girl had turned out of the main road and was coursing along a winding lane with a very bad surface.

After another hundred yards or so, however, Audrey pulled up altogether. She swung off the machine, smiling upon the sisters as calmly as you please.

It was half-past seven—still broad daylight, for at this season of the year, "summer-time" made the evenings light right up to nine o'clock.

"You are not going to take a spell-o?" Cora asked, in her flippant way. "I was just getting warmed up to it!"

"Oh, you'll soon have had enough of tearing about with me!" was Audrey's light reply—a reply that fell ominously upon Judith's ears. "Let's have a sit-about and a talk! And I suppose you smoke?" she laughed, suddenly producing a silver cigarette-case.

Cora liked a stolen smoke. Judith herself, in the old days, had thought it "big" to whiff at a cigarette. Now, the idea of lighting up was as repugnant to her as any other bit of stupid affectation.

"Yes," Audrey said, looking around whilst the sisters clambered out of the side-car. "I always like Devonshire. I am a London sparrow myself—my people have their house in the West End of London."

"How ripping!" Cora said enviously. "Do you hear that, Judy?"

"Well, perhaps I'll run you there some fine day," laughed Audrey, disposing herself very gracefully on a bank beside the track.

The setting sun was shining through the



hedgerow, dappling her exquisite figure with patches of warm light. She lolled at ease, affecting total unconcern for her appearance. Yet Judith was sure that the beautiful girl was very vain of her looks, and as clever as an actress at assuming effective poses.

"We come from the North, you know," said Cora, seating herself close to Audrey. "From Lancashire."

"Oh, do you?"

"Mr. Grandways is in a big way up there."

"Oh, is he?"

Audrey made these comments with a due amount of friendly interest. What Judith could not understand was why the girl suddenly smiled—had to smile, it seemed, as if secretly amused.

Nor, Judith felt sure, was it a smile that the girl wished either of them to notice. For she kept her head down until she had banished the amused curve of her vivid red lips.

"Well, light up, somebody!" she said, tossing the cigarette-case to Cora. "Why don't you sit down, Judy dear?"

"I think we ought to be going back," Judith said. "It is against the rule of the school—"

"Oh, the rule of the school!" sneered Cora. "Stop that rubbish, Judy, for goodness' sake! Keep such twaddle as that for when you are with Betty Barton & Co."

"Perhaps Judy wishes she was with the other girls now?" smiled Audrey.

"I do!" was the frank reply. "I hate this sort of thing!"

"It's a new stunt with Judy," grinned Cora, "to be a reformed character!"

"Well," laughed Audrey, taking a slow whiff at her cigarette, "my own particular stunt is not to be like that—hardly!"

"Nor mine!" rejoined Cora. "And, of course, Judy won't last any time at it! If only because she is my sister, and we have always been such pals, she will chuck up being a model of good conduct presently—especially now you have happened along, Audrey!"

"I hope Judy and I are going to be friends, of course!" Audrey said, letting her lovely eyes bestow one of their most alluring looks upon the reformed girl. "I don't want heaps of friends—a herd of them. Just a few—select and 'settish.'"

"Ah," Cora exclaimed delightedly, "when

you talk like that, Audrey! For ages, Judy and I were trying to get together a set! But it never came off. We had great hopes of Paula Creel at one time. But Betty Barton got hold of her, and now Paula simply worships that girl!"

"I seem to hear a lot about Betty Barton," Audrey purred. "The captain of the Form, I believe?"

"Such a captain, too—bah!" shrugged Cora. "That's why the Form is such a dead-and-alive show! I've no use for Betty!"

"It doesn't sound as if I shall have much use for her either," Audrey commented, smiling. "But there must be some girls who—"

"You mean, if you started to get up a set?"

"Well, yes, call it a set."

Cora was looking eager, excited.

"There is Paula Creel. I don't know—perhaps something might be done with her. Madge Minden, too—she's a girl we might get hold of in time. A great musician, Madge is. If you understand good music, Audrey—"

"Oh, I adore music—really good music! I must have a talk with Madge Minden, some time. Any others?"

"Cora, dear," Judith interposed gently, "don't you think it is time we started for home? We must have come some miles during that fast drive of ours!"

"We came about fifteen miles," said Audrey coolly.

"Fifteen!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" the new girl laughed, looking back on the grass again. "How you amuse me, Judy dear! I can get you to the school in fifty minutes, easily!"

"Well, then—oh, do let us start back at once!" pleaded Judith. "Think what it means, if we have any hitch! You won't get blamed, perhaps, Audrey, because you are a new girl and can't be expected to know all the rules of the school."

"Oh, I expect the rules are about the same as those at the school I was at before I came here," Audrey said airily. "I know all about rules. They are things you break!"

Cora shrilled with laughter.

"Isn't she the limit, Judy?"

"A good many of us were the limit at my old school," confessed Audrey, throwing away her cigarette. "But I think I was



'the' limit. Fancy, I am in my sixteenth year, and still in the Fourth Form! That shows how I have studied my lessons!"

She plucked a blade of grass and chewed it, looking prettily dreamy for a minute or so. Then, with a sudden little shrug, she jumped up, shaking her frock to rights.

"Well, I suppose we had better potter home. Home!" she repeated bitterly. "They are having fine doings at my people's place in London. It is the height of the London season. And here am I, out of it!"

With a grimace, she sauntered back to the motor-cycle, and Cora and Judith soon resumed their positions in the side-car.

"It won't be much of a potter, after all," Audrey warned them, the devilment suddenly gleaming in her eyes. "So hang on!"

The engine roared to life, and even Cora took alarm at the hint of intended recklessness.

"Not too fast, Audrey, in case——"

"I'm going to get you to the school before call-over," Audrey sang out, as the outfit hummed away; "then no questions will be asked!"

That airy assurance dispelled the uneasy look in Cora's eyes. With her face to the rushing wind, the excited girl sang a snatch of some song, and Audrey, picking up the tune at once, began to sing it, too.

Then——

Bang went a tyre, and in another ten seconds the three girls were grouped upon the lonely track, staring at the back wheel.

"A proper burst!" chuckled Audrey. "And I haven't a spare——"

"You—your mean we can't repair the tyre?" gasped Cora, looking far more terror-stricken than Judy. "What are we to do then? Oh, whatever shall we do?"

"Goodness knows; I don't!" shrugged Audrey. "And I don't jolly well care!"

## CHAPTER 5.

### Is This "Reforming"?

IT had gone half-past nine by the school chimes.

Call-over was ended. Most of the girls were at this moment trooping up to the dormitories; but Betty, as sometimes any girl had occasion to do, had slipped away to her study for a moment.

In her hands was a copy of a leaflet which had been handed to all the Form captains a few minutes ago. It concerned a forthcoming "fête" at Lady Lundy's stately country seat, Barcombe Castle. Morcove scholars were to be allowed to go on certain conditions, but it was a duty devolving upon each Form captain to settle certain details.

Betty put the leaflet on her writing-pad, placed an inkpot on it as paper-weight, and then turned to quit the room.

"That you, Betty?" came in an eager whisper from someone with whom the Form captain half-collided in the doorway, for the place was all in darkness.

"Yes, Polly. I'm going up now."

"I say, they are not back yet!"

"No; so I understand."

The two girls returned together along the dim corridor.

"Judy, too!" muttered Polly, after a few moments' silence. "How sorry I am Judy is in this!"

"So am I, dear—very sorry!" sighed Betty. "But it can't be that she is sort of playing fast and loose—oh, no, I can never believe that. It isn't her fault if she has got into some scrape with Cora and that new girl."

"That new girl!" fumed Polly. "Oh, Betty dear, how sorry I am she has come to. Morcove! She looks like being another Cora, only more so!"

"Yes," said Betty, very gravely.

At heart, she felt that that was only putting the case very mildly.

Cora's mischief-making had been crude, openly malicious. She had offended the very girls whom she had tried to woo. But this Audrey Blain—there was going to be nothing like that about her, Betty felt. Instead of fawning, she was going to fascinate. Instead of courting friends, she was going to let them court her!

Up in the Fourth Form dormitory, the girls were all talking excitedly about the evening's sensation.

No mystery attached to the trio's absence. It was known that Audrey and Cora Grandways, with permission, had gone to the railway-station to get Audrey's motor-cycle outfit, handed over at the goods-office.

But what was puzzling the Fourth Form girls was this: How had Judith Grandways become a party to the joy-ride?



Her going after the couple, because she had a suspicion that they meant to do something in defiance of discipline, and she wanted to dissuade her sister, if not both of them—that Betty & Co. could have understood.

They feared that Cora's reformation was only a half-hearted one, and that she was likely to backslide at any time. But Judith—were they to start doubting the genuineness of her desire to be a credit to the school? It almost seemed like it.

"Bai Jove," sighed Paula, getting into bed, "it is most wegwettable, this, don't you know! Howevah, until it is pproved that Judith has simply slipped back into her old ways, I shall wefwain fwom further wemarks! Good-night, geals!"

"Hear, hear!" said Betty earnestly. "Say nowt! is our motto up North!"

The lead was well taken up. Talk was switched on to safer topics—notably, the coming fête at Lady Lundy's; but when the lights were out how many of the girls could get to sleep, knowing that three beds in the dormitory were still without their occupants? Not many!

For when the slow booming of the school bell had marked the passing of another hour, and the sudden unbolting of doors downstairs was followed by the murmur of voices in the hall, almost every girl up there in the Fourth Form dormitory sat up sharply, exclaiming:

"They're back!"

In a few minutes the three miscreants came softly into the dormitory, attended by Miss Redgrave. That young lady remained on hand until the trio had undressed; but Miss Redgrave's presence was hardly needed to put a check on all talk.

The very lateness of the hour did that, coupled with a feeling on the part of all the other girls which they felt could be best expressed by chilly silence.

Audrey they were disgusted with, and Cora, too. As for Judith—the morning must show whether she could exonerate herself or not!

Only, after the under-mistress had again withdrawn, and when the room was in darkness once more, Betty spoke softly to Judith, as that girl went stealing by, seeking her own bed.

"What has been happening, Judith?" the Form captain whispered.

"We are to see the headmistress in the

morning," Judith answered. "Good-night, Betty!"

And that was all.

Presently some smothered laughter was heard. It came from Cora and Audrey, who had started to talk in whispers, their beds being alongside each other. But several girls called a loud and disgusted:

"Stop that row! Go to sleep, can't you!"

And, with a final chuckle, the two girls subsided.

Betty, for one, remained wide awake long after that, feeling deeply troubled.

What a terrible disappointment it was going to be, if Judith had been led astray almost as easily as her sister!

And yet how like the truly reformed Judith had that girl whispered her "Good-night, Betty!" Something in the gentle tone had seemed to convey so much more than the actual words.

It was as if Judith had said, "Oh, Betty, don't think ill of me because of this! You have made me your friend, and I treasure that friendship dearly! Don't think I am going to drift back into the old bad ways!"

## CHAPTER 6.

"Try to be her friend!"

**C**LASSES had already assembled next morning when the three miscreants came away from their interview with the headmistress.

Very quietly they entered the Fourth Form class-room and went to their places. Not only was every eye in the room upon the trio, but there were girls who felt ready to demonstrate, then and there, against the culprits.

Disgraceful for a new girl to have made this sort of a start! And the sisters—this was how they were "making good"!

Such was the bitter thought running in the mind of many a scholar at the moment when the scapegrace three entered.

But those girls who expected to see Cora and Judith putting on the old air of defiance, and Audrey Blain affecting a smile of amusement at being in disgrace—they got a big surprise.

All three culprits looked as if they had taken the stern words of Miss Somerford very much to heart. Judith's head was



hanging in an utterly shamestricken way. Cora had never looked so thankful at having got off with a caution.

As for Audrey Blain, she looked so very demurely, so pathetically rueful, it was impossible to believe that she had wilfully flouted the rule of the school last evening.

Hers was the winsome air of a girl who is very, very sorry that a nasty mishap has got her and her friends into disgrace.

And at "break" it became known to Betty Barton, at any rate, that the whole business really had been due more to a mishap than to unruly conduct.

Betty was sent for by Miss Somerfield.

"In regard to last night's upset, Betty," the headmistress said, as soon as the Form captain had presented herself, "I find there were extenuating circumstances. The girls would have been back in ample time for call-over, only they had a mishap with a tyre. They lost count of time whilst trying to mend the tyre, so Cora and Audrey assure me; and after all they had to push the machine all the way home!"

Betty looked as relieved as she felt.

"Then, of course, Miss Somerfield, they were really not to blame?" she urged. "I know what it is to have tyre-trouble, even with a push-bike!"

The headmistress nodded.

"At the same time, Betty," she pursued gravely, "in so far as those girls embarked upon even a brief jaunt round the countryside—only a brief jaunt, they assure me—they were doing a wrong thing. They should have taken account of the time—seven o'clock—when they started. But I have made generous allowance for innocent impulsiveness, and have let them off with a caution."

"Miss Somerfield, the Form will be so glad it is all ending like this!" Betty exclaimed. "Especially as Judith was mixed up in the trouble. We—we want to keep her out of trouble. Not that I think she is in danger of going back to her own ways. I am positive she was dreadfully upset about getting into such a scrape last evening."

"You think Judith's reformation is really sincere?" Miss Somerfield asked softly, after a moment's silence. "I have thought so, too, Betty. But it appears that she was as much to blame as any of the three last evening!"

"No, Miss Somerfield! Oh, surely——"

"That is the only conclusion I can draw," sighed the headmistress. "It appears that Audrey Blain had no particular desire to go for a ride. The machine is hers, and she has long since got over the excitement of riding it. She pleaded that she only wanted to give the sisters a treat. And then Cora Grandways assured me that she only wanted to go an extra mile or two, on the way back to school from the station, but Judith was all for having a good long run."

"But did Judith admit that?" asked Betty.

"She did not deny it; and her looks seemed to confess that that was the truth of the matter. But I prefer to overlook the whole regrettable incident, Betty. Now tell me," the headmistress added, "how do you like your new member of the Form?"

"She—she seems a very brilliant sort of girl——"

"Not brilliant at her work, I am afraid," smiled Miss Somerfield. "You mean brilliant in company—is that it? I will say a word that you need not repeat, Betty. I have Audrey Blain's reports from her former school; I know the sort of girl she is. And I want you, the Form captain, to be tactful with her. I want you to try to be her friend!"

Betty felt that never had so much been suggested in so few words.

Before she could make any answer, she received an encouraging nod and a smile that meant dismissal, and next minute she was back in the class-room.

Polly Linton, sitting next to Betty, was all eager whispers. Only too gladly Betty explained the headmistress' lenient view of last night's affair, and so, of course, the "extenuating circumstances" were soon whispered all over the room.

The Fourth Form, however, could not forget Cora and Audrey's subdued laughter in the dormitory last night.

Some, too, disagreed with Betty and others in holding that Judith Grandways, at the worst, had only been carried away by a harmless impulse.

"I suppose we must give her the benefit of the doubt?" Betty heard Etta Hargrove saying to Grace Garfield, in the quad. "But it had better not occur again, or I've done with being a friend to so-called 'reformed' girls!"

By tea-time, indeed, Judith was actually



in no better favour with the Form as a whole than was her sister.

Audrey, though—Audrey had somehow made wonderful progress, in spite of yesterday's bad start.

Girls were suddenly admitting that they found her very charming. She had admired Tess Trelawney's water-colour sketches. She had discussed Beethoven with the musical Madge. And to Paula she had said, on the way out of classes:

"Excuse me, but I do like that jumper of yours. It is far prettier than anything of my own!"

Betty herself looked in at Study 15 for a chat, and came away, at the end of half an hour, feeling greatly heartened.

She had sounded Audrey about sports. Audrey would do her best—oh, certainly—to back up the Form. They had talked about the affair of the motor-bike, and Audrey had freely confessed that she felt terribly sad about it, although she really was not to blame. She did hope the girls would overlook her bad start; and perhaps Betty and some of her chums would come to tea one afternoon?

"Delighted!" Betty had accepted promptly. "The others will be only too glad, I am sure!"

Then, when the Form captain had departed, feeling so glad that this new girl was to be no stormy petrel after all, Audrey threw herself negligently into a chair, and laughed softly to herself.

"Ha, ha, ha! Oh, dear, what an easy game it is to play!"

She was still indulging her merriment when Cora Grandways came in.

"Yes, sit down, Cora dear!" Audrey said. "I say, I'm not doing badly, am I? The girls were looking at me as black as thunder this morning; but I can get the pick of them to come to tea to-morrow, if I like!"

"Paula Creel, do you mean?" whispered Cora. "And Tess Trelawney, and—"

"Madge Minden, yes. I like Madge particularly! Betty Barton was here just now—"

"You don't call her the pick of the Form?" struck in Cora. "What do you want with Betty Barton?"

"Nothing!" smiled Audrey, standing up. "Absolutely nix! But you don't suppose those chums of hers will take up with me

whilst I am flouting her? By and by, Cora dear—by and by, I shall drop Betty! I never did have any use for Form captains!"

"Sh!" Cora suddenly gestured, but she was too late.

The door had opened whilst Audrey was still speaking, and now Judith came in, looking very white.

"Yes," she said, shutting the door behind her, "I heard what you said, Audrey Blain! I couldn't help hearing. You have no use for Form captains—meaning, no use for Betty Barton!"

"Oh, but I have," Audrey answered coolly. "I am friends with her already. I have even got her coming to tea one afternoon!"

"It is a make-believe friendship on your side," Judith said, trembling visibly. "Oh, I know what your game is! You and my sister together—you are out to steal Betty's best chums away from her! You can't woo them without wooing her; but when you have got a good hold on the girls you want, then you will drop Betty, and defy her to get back the friends she has lost!"

"Shut up!" hissed Cora furiously. "You are in this, Judith—"

"No! No, I am not!" Judith answered, in great agitation. "No more plotting against the Form captain for me! Betty Barton took this hand of mine in friendship yesterday. I believe she would stand by me through thick and thin, and I will stand by her!"

Then, suddenly, with the spirit of her new-found nature shining in her eyes, she put out her hands beseechingly to her sister.

"Cora—oh, even if you are not really as sorry for the past as I thought you were going to be, do at least have no more of it! Take your stand with me on Betty Barton's side! As for this girl—remember last night, Cora! Her mood was far more reckless than yours! Remember our interview with Miss Somerfield this morning! We did not own up to having had to ride all that way back on a flat tyre. Audrey, here, was ready with a pack of fibs. Falsehoods are nothing to her—"

"You didn't seem to want to tell the truth!" struck in Audrey scornfully.

"How could I tell the truth when you had already persuaded my sister to bear



you out in all your falsehoods?" flashed back Judith. "What could I do but be silent, when to speak out meant telling Miss Somerfield that you were both fibbing? What girl could say words that mean branding her own sister as a liar?"

"Oh, well, we got off all right!" shrugged Cora.

"By means of a pack of fibs—yes!" rejoined her sister. "And so it will be in all the rest of the bothers this girl will lead you into! If you get off at all, it will only be by fibbing. And the first time you don't clear yourself, Cora, you will be—expelled!"

"I don't care——"

"Cora, you must care—you must! I implore you, dear, do better than this with the chance you have been given. Have done with this girl—have nothing to do with her!"

"That I certainly shall not do!" Cora answered harshly. "In Audrey I have found the sort of girl I have always wanted to chum with. With her, Judy, you and I can do what we were never able to do by ourselves! We can form our own set out of the pick of Betty Barton's friends!"

Judith fell back a step, a hand on her breast.

"You say 'you and I,' Cora. Do you thing," she gasped, "that I am going to share your hateful alliance with this girl?"

"You must!" said Cora grimly.

There was a moment's dramatic silence.

Then Judith turned to the door and fumbled with the lock, trying to let herself out of the room. Her eyes must have been blinded with tears.

"One moment, Judy dear," her sister called softly. "Don't go!"

"I am going—to Betty Barton——"

"You are not going to Betty Barton!" Cora almost hissed, striding across the room. "I know all about your turning over a new leaf, and that sort of thing. And I say it has got to stop!"

Judith stood transfixed.

"You don't mean it, Cora!" she faltered at last. "Even if you yourself don't want to make good after all, surely—surely you will let me?"

"I'll let you mix as much as you like with Betty and the rest," Cora said, whilst Audrey simply stood by, smiling. "But you are not to have any fine scruples about being friendly with Audrey here! Audrey

and I are going to need your help. Judy will be helpful, won't she, Audrey?"

"Oh, yes," said Audrey; "very. At any rate, Judy ought not to keep away from us. The other girls may smell a rat if she does."

"And supposing I refuse to be—helpful?" Judith said huskily.

"You can't, when your own sister is asking you!" Cora answered, wagging her head. "If you do refuse, Judy, do you know what I shall do? I shall simply take less care than ever not to get expelled!"

"Cora!" the younger girl gasped in horror.

"That's my threat," said Cora. "See if I don't remember it! But you are going to be sensible, Judy—of course you are! Sink or swim, you have got to be one of us, because you know too much!"

At that instant the door was rapped, and Betty Barton looked into the room.

"I might have mentioned it when I was here just now, Audrey," she said pleasantly. "You have heard about the fête over at Barncombe Castle? Will you join the Fourth Form party for it next Saturday?"

"It's good of you—yes, delighted!" Audrey exclaimed, with her most charming smile. "Is it an afternoon affair?"

"We start away from the school at two sharp, and return at seven," Betty said, jotting down Audrey's name on a slip of paper. "But you'll hear all about the arrangements later."

"Judy and I would like to come, too, please!" Cora said softly; and Betty nodded her genuine pleasure, adding those two names to the list.

Then she was gone, and Cora was suddenly giving a low chuckle.

"Return at seven—he, he, he! Evening is just the time when the fun begins always at those fêtes! And are we to miss it, Audrey?"

"Not much!" Audrey answered, with a wink. "Gracious, though, how the very idea of our giving the rest of the girls the slip scares your sister!"

"Judy and I have done just as daring things as that before now!" grinned Cora. "Cheer up, Judy dear!"

But Judith, pale and trembling, and with drooping head, went from the room at last, closing the door quickly behind her.



In her own study, a few seconds later, she stood staring dully before her—staring at the hard, the cruel prospect which her troubled mind envisioned.

What, then, had the future in store? What else but a break-up of all the happiest life of the Form, so gradual that the mischief would be done even before it was suspected!

She, Judith, aware of the whole scheme, could give warning to Betty Barton, could tell every girl in the Form to beware of Audrey Blain! But if she did that—if she dared to thwart the scheme that was afoot—then Cora would keep that threat. She had it in her unreformed nature to do so.

"My own sister!" Judith murmured sorrowfully, sitting there with hands clasped despairingly before her. "And am I to see her, if ever I do frustrate any of their plans, caring less than ever whether she is expelled or not?"

And in despair the poor girl asked herself: What ought she to do? What could she do?

At that moment, in Study 15, Cora Grandways was taking leave of Audrey Blain, for the time being.

"All I know is," Cora was saying, drifting to the door, "Judy has got to be in any scrape that I may get landed in. Because, if I am to be expelled at any time, I am not going to be sent home alone!"

"You, expelled!" laughed Audrey. "What rubbish!"

"I don't know so much. I'm having my last chance, remember!" Cora said gloomily. Then she brightened a little. "But there, Judy will always manage to save me, I guess, if the worst comes to the worst! Ta-ta!"

She slammed the door behind her, and her step receded along the corridor, whilst Audrey Blain sat very still, with a sudden strange smile coming to her lips.

It was the same puzzling smile that she had tried to hide yesterday evening, when Cora had been talking about Mr. and Mrs. Grandways up yonder in Ribbleton.

"Judy will save you, will she?" Audrey Blain murmured to herself. "Judy will save neither you nor her own precious self, if I can help it! I can do with Madge Minden for a friend; Paula, too, and Tess, and others with something attractive about

them! Those are the girls I want for my little set! As for you, Cora Grandways——"

She got up with a shrug of disdain.

"The sooner you really are expelled, along with your precious sister, the better I shall like it!"

## CHAPTER 7.

### A Gentle Reminder.

"HURRAH!"

"Hooray!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The excitement and fun was almost like that of a breaking-up day at Morcove School.

It was just two o'clock, on the following Saturday, and on the wide gravelled drive, in front of the main porch, quite a fleet of motor charabanes was drawn up.

Three of them at least were already packed with girls, and it was due to the drivers' "winding up" of these loaded vehicles that such deafening cheers and peals of laughter were filling the air.

In the first of the loaded motors, the Sixth Form girls could be counted, up to a round score.

The Fifth Form had needed a couple of the roomy vehicles for their accommodation.

Another motor was at present being loaded up with a sprinkling of Third Form youngsters.

As for the Fourth Form, they were in evidence, of course!

But there seemed to be some little hitch with the Fourth.

The charabanc allotted to them was quite empty at present.

The girls had mustered in the open air, and were eager to be off and away; but it was the rule of the school that, on occasions like this, scholars must await the signal from their Form captain. At present, the Fourth Form captain, Betty Barton, was not to be seen.

"Oh, hooray! Here comes Betty at last!" cried Polly Linton suddenly, with genuine delight. "Now we are all serene!"

"Yes, wather!" drawled Paula Creel, beaming.

The girls made a rush at Betty, whose pretty face showed that, whatever the hitch had been due to, everything was all right now.

"Well?" they clamoured. "What was



the bother, Betty? What did Miss Somerfield have to say to you?"

"Oh, just an extra word of warning for all of us," laughed Betty.

"Why us more than any of the other Forms?" protested Polly indignantly.

"Oh, well," Betty laughed soothingly, "you must admit, girls, if ever anything goes wrong, the Fourth are generally there!"

"The fact is," Betty continued, "Miss Somerfield had an uneasy feeling that some girls in this Form might forget the official nature of the outing, and start——"

"Being on their own?" suggested Polly. "Well, if they do——"

"They will catch it hot—that's a fact!" agreed Betty. "But you know what the headmistress is; she hates having to punish a girl for flouting discipline. She would much rather make every effort to have the possible fly-aways well looked after."

"Am I one of the possible fly-aways?" broke in a voice from the fringe of the group. "And are you to keep a special eye on me, Betty?"

All turned and looked at the speaker. The girl was Cora Grandways.

But Betty hastened to say another soothing word.

"I shall not mention any names. As for you, Cora Grandways, I, for one, give you credit for wanting to be on better terms with all the Form. I am sure it has been a treat, the way the Form has rubbed along just lately——"

"Yes, wather!" put in Paula. "Fwiends all wound, bai Jove!"

"And this outing over at Barncombe Castle—oh, I can't believe that you, Cora, or any other girl will be so silly as to break the few restrictions we are asked to observe."

"Hear, hear!" exclaimed the girls, who were most impatient to be off. "So that's that!"

"Yes, wather!"

"Right away then!" laughed Betty, with a wave of the hand at the waiting charabanc, and in a twinkling the vehicle was being stormed for places.

There was a pair of steps for the girls to ascend by, but they did not all await their turn at those steps.

Whilst some scrambled in at the back, and others ran like monkeys up the ladder, many a boisterous young lady climbed to

the wheels, and scrambled all anyhow over the motor's side. Never mind how, so long as she got a good seat!

Betty had not taken part in the rush. She had one other duty to discharge before taking her seat.

She ran across to where a girl was preparing to drive away on a very fine motor-cycle, to which a roomy side-car was attached.

The girl was so tall as to give her the appearance of being in one of the higher Forms. But Betty, the Fourth Form captain, spoke to her as a member of that Form.

"Audrey!"

"Hallo, dear!" Audrey Blain smiled, straightening up from her finished task of flooding the carburettor. "You are off now?"

"Yes, Audrey. And you are coming along on your outfit, with Cora and Judith Grandways? I say, it was decent of Miss Somerfield to let you have the machine out to-day, wasn't it?"

"Topping of her!" agreed Audrey. "I think the headmistress is a dear!"

"Well, then——"

Betty paused. She was a girl who hated saying anything that seemed like an airing of her position as captain. In this case, however, she knew that it was her bounden duty to make an appeal to this girl. She had been told to do so by the headmistress, only a few minutes ago.

"Well, then, Audrey," she said, after that moment's pause, "you will be careful, won't you? I don't mean about driving, for I know you are a marvel at handling the machine. I mean, from start to finish, Audrey, keep out of trouble, won't you?"

Audrey broke into a smile—a very winning smile that suggested perfect goodwill towards the captain, and anything but a desire to get into mischief.

"That's all right, dear—don't worry!" she said, very softly. "Although, of course, I know you must feel a bit uneasy about me, considering I got into a row over the motor-cycle on my first day here!"

"That's all forgiven and forgotten," Betty said. "Still, I simply had to say what I have, Audrey, and I—I'm so glad to see you don't resent it!"

"Resent it! Why should I? You are



captain. Betty," was the very winning answer; "you are my friend besides!"

"I hope so!" Betty said gladly. "Ta-ta, then! And I suppose we shall see you coming after us all the way! Ours is the last charabanc."

"All aboard for Barncombe!" Polly Linton was shouting, hands framing her lips. "Come on, Betty!"

"Let her rip, driver!" panted Betty, as she nimbly climbed to her seat between Polly, her bosom chum, and Paula. "I know you girls have been wishing me further with my dodging here and there, but——"

"No, no! We understand, Betty!" they assured her, whilst Paula murmured:

"Yes, wather!"

The driver gave a more or less playful blare of the motor-horn, and away went the great vehicle, amidst further cheering.

Down the long drive, out of the great gateway, and so on to the undulating road to Barncombe town; away they went, with the breeze from overseas fanning the girls' faces and ruffling their hair.

Lady Lundy, over at Barncombe Castle, had been favoured with a glorious day for her fête. And she deserved to be so fortunate.

This outdoor festival, to which most of the spacious grounds and many of the public rooms of the castle were to be given up, was one of those local events which Lady Lundy so frequently organised, entirely at her own expense, on behalf of good causes.

To-day's fête was in aid of the fund for enlarging the local seaside home for slum children.

If only because the cause was such a deserving one, all Barncombe town, and folk from miles around, would be there. Later in the afternoon, the headmistress of Morcove School, and many members of the staff, would be turning up. Meantime, here were most of the girl scholars being transported to the scene of revelry under conditions which, the headmistress knew, could not have been bettered.

Tr-r-r-rump, tr-r-r-rump, tr-r-r-rump! blared the Fourth Form's motor-horn, time after time, as the reliable vehicle hummed along the highway. And, suddenly:

Kr-r-r-r-rah, kr-r-r-r-rah, kr-r-r-r-rah! shrieked the mechanical horn attached to Audrey Blain's outfit, as she and her two

passengers came speeding after the charabanc.

"Hurrah! Here they come!"

"Yes, wather!"

The girls in the motor, turning round to look back, were waving their hands and laughing. The charabanc was raising a lot of dust, and that in itself was enough to make Audrey want to overtake and shoot ahead of the huge vehicle.

Betty and others were beginning to feel confident that Audrey was not altogether the irresponsible girl they had thought her to be when she first came to the school a few days ago. She had her high-spirited moments—what girl hadn't? But to-day there was only a minority of her school-fellows who suspected her of being a stormy petrel.

Opinion, however, certainly was divided at present as to what Audrey was.

To-day, though—to-day would convince the sceptics! So Betty was saying to herself at this moment.

If those three girls, following back there in the motor-cycle and side-car, really had it in their hearts to kick over the traces, then this outing would surely prove too good an opportunity for them to miss!

And whilst Betty was thinking all this; whilst she, the Fourth Form captain, was counting upon the outing passing off without anything happening to the discredit of Audrey and the sisters, what were those three girls saying amongst themselves?

If only Betty could have known!

## CHAPTER 8.

"No one will know!"

IT was Audrey who made the first remark, just as the motor-cycle and side-car reached the summit of a fairly steep hill, from which Barncombe town could be seen.

"Do you think three girls, who have promised to be very, very good, might pull up for refreshments in the town?" she asked.

Cora Grandways grinned.

"Really good girls would feel they ought to have the Form captain's written permission!" she cried back at Audrey, above the hum of the engine.

"Ask Judy what she thinks?" Audrey sang back, whilst she slowed the outfit just



a little, to allow the charabanc to draw still further ahead of them.

Cora was occupying the one seat of the side-car, whilst her sister sat in front of her, huddled into a very small amount of space.

"Do you hear, Judy?" Cora cried, giving a tug at her sister's hair. "What do you say to our stopping for half an hour at the Barncombe Creamery?"

Judith Grandways looked round with such an appealing expression that few could have failed to be touched by it. But Cora only grinned again, whilst Audrey's glance was half-teasing.

"Well, good little girl?" Cora twitted her sister.

"I think that we ought to do the decent thing, and go straight through the town," Judith answered, so gently that her sad voice was almost lost in the hum of the engine.

She added, with a kindling spirit:

"The motors are making a non-stop run, and we are expected to do the same!"

"But supposing we don't want to?" chuckled Cora.

Judith seemed to heave a hard sigh.

"If you want to do a wrong thing, I suppose I shall be powerless to stop you!" she said.

"That you certainly will!" Cora teased her. "Audrey is driving, you see, and Audrey and I happen to agree that it would be nice to stop for refreshments!"

Then Audrey Blain smiled that adorable smile of hers—one she so often used as a means of winning over girls who were feeling disappointed in her—a little shocked, maybe.

"Oh, Judy, dear, don't look so sad! Surely I am entitled to pull up for a bit! I'm driving, and it makes me thirsty. At least, we can always say that was the reason for breaking the journey!"

"No one will ever know!" declared Cora. "So why bother any more? We'll stop when we get to the town, Audrey!"

After that the motor-cycle and side-car sped along at a nice smooth pace, without ever overhauling the Fourth Form charabanc, which had slipped out of sight.

Audrey gave all her attention to the driving, whilst Cora sat back in the side-car, obviously admiring the new girl's skill at handling the engine.

As for Judith Grandways, her handsome

face had such a cold, set look, it was just as if she were being driven along in the teeth of a bitter wind, instead of having nothing but the softest West-country breeze to confront her.

She was miserable, utterly weighed down with the despairing thought that the whole outing was going to end in disaster!

That chuckling remark of her sister just now—"No one will ever know!"—it was repeating itself in Judith's brain over and over again.

"No one will ever know!" She found herself weaving the mocking words into all her thoughts of this unhappy plight that was hers.

Would anyone ever know just how grief-stricken she—Judith—had been, to see her own sister, Cora, agreeing to enter into any mischief that the new girl might plan?

No one—no one would ever know what an ordeal of secret suffering had been hers since this new girl came to Morecove!

Her sorrowful thoughts were ended abruptly by Audrey's playful blaring of the motor-horn, as the "outfit" now entered the narrow main street of quaint old Barncombe town.

"Half-way along, on the left!" Cora sang out, for Audrey was fresh to the town. "You'll see the gilt sign-board!"

At the Creamery tea-rooms, all three girls alighted, and it was Cora's suggestion that the outfit should be wheeled into the bake-house yard, which was approached by a covered way.

Leaving the motor-cycle and side-car nicely hidden away in that yard, so that nobody belonging to the school might catch sight of it whilst driving through the town, the trio then entered the shop by a side-door, and climbed the stairs to the first floor.

"Lemonades—iced, please!" Audrey said sweetly to the waitress. "And some cakes!"

"Ha, ha! How lovely!" Cora chuckled, flinging herself into a basket-chair and putting her feet on the edge of another.

Audrey smiled, looking across at Judith, whose expression was still one of great unhappiness.

"I like this show!" was Audrey's comment presently. "Ever been here for supper, you girls?"

"Supper!" exclaimed Cora. "No, not supper! Even Judy and I, in the old days,



were never so cool as to stay out to supper in Barncombe!"

"Well," said Audrey, looking as cool as the lemonade she was sipping, "we might get supper here to-night, on the way home! The place is open until nine, I see."

"Yes, but—oh, of course, I'm game!" Cora whispered gleefully. "Shall we really be able to manage that little plan of ours, though? I mean, about staying late to the fête?"

"My dear Cora," Audrey answered languidly, "I thought it was quite agreed!"

"I agreed to it, certainly—if it can be done!" was the reckless rejoinder. "I am only wondering whether the whole thing won't get nipped in the bud. Betty Barton is feeling as bossy as ever to-day!"

"I shall handle Betty all right," said Audrey. "The others, too. The thing is for you to stick to the plan absolutely. Judy, darling, you are not drinking your lemonade!"

"I don't want it!" was the heavy response from Judith. "It is no use, Audrey Blain, your trying to win me over. I hate being here; I hate the very idea of what you and Cora intend to do this evening!"

"Why not say you hate Audrey herself, and be done with it?" scowled Cora.

"Audrey cannot suppose that I am in love with her!" was the bitter reply. "No girl could be a true friend of Betty and all the rest of the girls, and at the same time have any liking for—this girl!"

"Well, that's frank!" Audrey said, quite lightly.

But Cora was looking blacker than ever.

"Why not say you hate me, too, Judy—me, your own sister?"

"That would be utterly untrue, dear," was the gentle answer.

She was getting up from her chair, perhaps only to look at herself in one of the mirrors as an excuse for detaching herself from her companions.

"You had better say nothing to Betty Barton—remember that!" Cora muttered. "I am sorry to have to speak so crossly to my own sister; but even my own sister will catch it hot from me if she spoils to-day's bit of fun!"

Judith turned round to answer, but Audrey now interrupted the sisters' talk by jumping up from her chair, with the bill for the refreshments in her daintily gloved hand.

"You two needn't hurry," she said, going to the room door. "I'm slipping down to pay at the desk, and then give an eye to the bike."

But even as she quitted the room, the queer smile at her red lips showed that she had not been frank with the sisters.

That smile—it was the smile of a girl who is playing a very deep game, and enjoying it!

"Let them finish their squabble between themselves!" she muttered to herself, as soon as she was in the open air. "I can't stand either of them much longer—and that's all the more reason for my losing no time about getting them expelled!"

Hardly a minute later she, who had said those heartless words to herself, was bestowing the old adorable smile upon Cora and Judith both as they came out to the side-car.

"Judy won't blab, Audrey dear," Cora said, just as they were starting off again. "She is my sister, and she sees that she and I have got to sink or swim together!"

"Audrey, listen to me!" Judith said, stepping close to that girl as she sat astride the cycle. "I give you one last warning before we get to the fête! If we do anything to bring disgrace upon ourselves, it is going to mean certain expulsion for Cora and me."

"Nonsense, dear!"

"I say it will!" Judith insisted vehemently. "Do you, then, want to see Cora and me expelled?"

Audrey's lovely face never even changed colour. She looked straight at her questioner, never flinching.

"Why should I want to get you two girls expelled?" she asked blandly. "How absurd you are! You are my friends!"

"Cora may be your friend—I am not!" Judith said, turning away. "I cannot be friendly with a girl who is playing her own double game!"

Audrey changed colour now. To hide her sudden confusion, she bent down to flood the carburettor.

That last remark of Judith's—what did it mean? Was it only a shot at a venture, or did she know?

But how could the girl have got to know, Audrey asked herself, with returning composure—how could Judith possibly have found out that she—Audrey—was indeed playing a double game?



"Oh, let's push on, Audrey dear!" Cora urged impatiently.

And twenty minutes later they were at the gates of Barncombe Castle.

## CHAPTER 9.

### All the Fun of the Fair.

**I**N a part of the spacious grounds that had been set out for the day as an old English fair, with roundabouts, swings, cokernut shies, Aunt Sallies, and other delights, Paula, the aristocrat of the Fourth Form, was standing bewildered.

"Hallo, Paula, darling!" And the hand of Polly the madeap fell weightily upon the swell girl's shoulder. "Come on, Paula!"

"Come wheah, Polly deah?"

"For a swing, Paula—you and I together!"

"How fwivolous you are!" sighed Paula. "Weally, Polly, you must know I stwongly object to those swings. They cweak so howwibly!"

"Come on!" Polly persisted, gaily taking her dressy chum by the arm. "I've got the tickets!"

"Yes, wather! Howevah, Polly, I—I would much wather not, don't you know!"

Polly's answer to that was to tear off two coupons from the little book she had purchased at the entrance gate, and present them to the woman in charge of the swings.

Each coupon represented twopence. Those girls who, like Polly, had bought a book of twenty-four coupons had the joy of knowing that they had contributed four shillings towards the seaside home for slum children.

For all the side-shows, such as these swings, houp-las, etc., had been hired by Lady Lundy at her own expense, and every penny spent by visitors to the fete was thus bound to go towards the very laudable fund.

"Thank you, young ladies!" smiled the ear-ringed gipsy in charge of the swings. "You can have five minutes."

"Oh, bundle in!" chuckled Polly. "Look, there are Dolly and Bluebell in that other swing—I didn't see them at first. Coo-ee, Dolly! Coo-ee, Bluebell!"

"Ah, dear!" sighed Paula, resigning herself to her fate. "You know, Polly deah, if I must have a swing, bai Jove, I would much wather have a swing with any other geal but you!"

"I know you would, dear!" teased Polly. "That's why I have made you come with me! Now then, off we go! Hooray!"

She was standing up in the boat, setting it a-swing by pulling at the rope. Paula, on the contrary, was sitting down, clutching the sides of the boat as if she were in a violent sea, with every prospect of being capsized.

"Lovely, isn't it, Paula?"

"Er—yes, wather! Howevah——"

"Now up we go, Paula dear!"

"Yes, pwecisely! Howevah——"

"And now we go down—ha, ha, ha!"

A sort of groan came from Paula. She was trying to keep hold of the boat's edge; at the same time, she wanted to keep her hair to rights!

Polly pulled—how she pulled at that rope! Round and up swung the big swing, then down and round up to the other side, with Paula turning visibly paler at every creak of the boats.

"Isn't it simply glorious!" chuckled the madeap. "We'll have another go after this!"

"Er—no, Polly deah! Weally, don't you know!" came Paula's polite protest. "It is xtremely fwriendly of you to tweek me! Howevah, I do not wish to be tweeked to a swing. I——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And Polly's was not the only peal of laughter that went up as she kept the boat in full swing.

Betty and some of the others had come upon the scene, and they, too, were already in fits of laughter over poor Paula's distress.

"Don't keep her too long, Polly!" Betty called out. "I want to treat her to the roundabouts!"

"Healp!" yelled Paula, when she heard this. "Weally, I—I will not be the subject of such widiculous fwivolity! Stop, Polly! Stop!"

"Up she goes—ha, ha, ha! And down she comes—he, he, he!"

Then Paula resorted to a desperate extremity.

She simply flopped along the bottom of the boat, shamming dead!



"Poor dear!" Betty said, when at last Polly stopped the swing, and they all helped Paula to get out. "What a shame!"

"Not at all—not at all!" was Paula's bland reply, now that the ordeal was over. "Weally, geals, it was wather fun, don't you know! Yes, quite exhilawating, bai Jove! Most wefweshing, weally!"

"Ha, ha, ha! You'll like the roundabouts better, Paula! Come on!"

"I—I wather wegwet, Betty deah, I must wefwain fwom woundabouting to-day!" said Paula, looking freshly alarmed. "I quite wealise, don't you know, it is all for a good cause, and all that—yes, wather! Howevah, if you will kindly excuse me——"

And next moment, amidst another burst of merriment from all her chums, the swell girl of the school was in full flight.

It was perhaps five minutes later when she met Madge Minden sauntering about the grounds, in quest of Betty and the rest.

"Pway be careful, Madge deah!" Paula Creel warned her earnestly. "The geals are doing the most dweadful things, weally! Swings, bai Jove——"

"Oh, that's where they are! I want to have a sw——"

"Madge, deah, I would wefwain, if I were you! The woundabouts, too, bai Jove! I—I wouldn't patwonise the woundabouts! They—they go wound and wound, you know——"

"What else would you expect them to do?" smiled Madge.

Her mirth was never of the extravagant kind.

"Yes, wather! Howevah, they—they go wound and wound wather wapidly, bai Jove!" Paula said.

And very earnestly she suggested that she and Madge should see about some tea instead.

"Right you are!" Madge agreed. "Anything to oblige."

On the way to the open-air tea-tables, however, Madge the musical had to pause to listen to the band.

She was standing there with Paula, looking thoroughly enraptured, when a winning voice said quietly:

"That's the same piece you were practising on the piano yesterday, Madge. How I do love it!"

Madge turned sharply. Audrey Blain was the speaker.

"Hallo!" was Madge's pleasant greeting. "You got here all right, then? Where are your side-car passengers?"

"Oh, I've lost them, somehow or other! I shall find them again in a minute."

"I was looking for Betty and the others," smiled Madge. "But Paula, here, begged me to get some tea."

"Yes, wather! Howevah——"

"Sensible notion!" exclaimed Audrey. "I'm dying for a cup! I wonder"—very prettily—"if you will let me order for three?"

"Why ever not?" Madge said, wondering to herself how she could ever have thought this girl to be a menace to the happy life of the Form. She was so friendly, so charming!

"Yes, wather!" simpered Paula. "It is stwange how ewwybody seems to want to tweek me! Howevah, I twast I shall have the chance of wepaying you, Audwey, pwesently, don't you know!"

Audrey walked on with them towards the tables.

"I do like your frock, Paula dear!" she exclaimed. "I'm afraid that you and I are a pair as regards liking to look smart!"

"Yes, wather! Howevah——"

"No harm in that, is there?" laughed Audrey. "It is nice to have something in common. And then there is Madge's playing. You know, Madge, when I first heard you playing in the music-room at school I just felt I wanted to—to hug you!"

Madge smiled her sober smile, not because she was being flattered, but because she took the extravagant remark as a token of Audrey's genuine love for good music.

And thus, next minute, Madge and Paula both were sitting down to tea with the new girl, feeling on better terms with her than ever.

Some people went away from a neighbouring table, and Audrey promptly turned the seats there to show that that table was reserved.

"Betty and the others may be along in a minute," she explained with her usual smile. "Then we can all be together."

Consummate actress that she was! False in her friendship for Cora; false in her show of goodwill towards the Form captain! But



there was nothing false about her regard for Madge and Paula.

These two girls she really liked. It was her secret ambition to have Madge and Paula, along with one or two other leading lights of the Fourth Form, as her devoted followers in the end. Part of her double game was this—to win the affection of almost every girl in the Form, and then "drop" those whom she felt she could dispense with!

Some, however, she knew would need more than mere "dropping." Betty, for example. Betty must be smashed!

The time had got to come—Audrey had quite made up her mind about this—when Betty would have to lose the captaincy, for the simple reason that the captaincy was a position Audrey herself meant to enjoy at last!

There would have to come a day when girls like Madge, Polly, Paula and others would be asked to choose between Betty and herself—and they would have to be so fond of her by that time that they would feel bound to choose her!

What need is there to account for such a subtle game as this that Audrey Blain was playing? Is it not enough to know that she was a brilliant, daring girl, conscious of being very beautiful and fascinating, and feeling it only right that she should queen it over others?

But that other game of hers—her deliberate intention to get Cora and Judith expelled. What was the motive there?

Ah, behind that purpose there was something far graver, far more secret than this girl's mere ambitions!

She had her reason for wanting to see the sisters sent home in utter disgrace at last. Little they know it, but she had actually come to the school to be the means of their downfall!

And this was the girl who presently was asking Madge and Paula so sweetly, was their tea just as they liked it?

Little they knew either what a girl she was to beware of!

"I do think it is jolly, our being allowed to come to the fête!" she purred. "It is just like a great big garden-party, isn't it? And such lots of nice people!"

"Lady Lundy's affairs are always a great success," said Madge. "We girls have been to many——"

"Yes, wather! And, bai Jove," Paula put in gaily, "heah is Lady Lundy's own daughtah, Madge deah! You wemember——"

"Oh, it is Lady Evelyn—yes!" Madge exclaimed, jumping up in delight as a very charming young lady came towards their tea-table with the obvious intention of renewing her very pleasant acquaintance with the scholars.

"How are you, girls?" said Lady Evelyn, shaking hands with Madge and Paula. "And you—a new scholar, I presume? So pleased to see you here!"

"Lady Evelyn, this is Audrey Blain," Madge explained. "Paula's rival as a fashion-plate!"

"Yes, wather! Howevah, we are gweat fwriends, all the same, what?" Paula put in, beaming at Audrey. "And—hooway! Heah comes Betty and the west!"

There were at least six girls with Betty Barton, and they all looked just as flushed and breathless as she after their fun at the swings and the roundabouts, the cokernut shies and the Aunt Sallies.

"Look, Lady Evelyn—I'm the only one who got a prize at the houp-la!" Polly the madeap boasted. "I call it a jolly fine squeaker!"

And popping the prize to her lips, she blew a great blast.

"Wheec-urrrr!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"How fwivolous you are, weally!" Paula admonished Polly. "You dwive me ewazy!"

Whilst Lady Evelyn was joining in the laughter, Betty suddenly caught sight of Cora and Judith Grandways. The sisters were standing a little way off, looking towards the group, and there was a very sullen expression on Cora's face. Judith looked worried.

Perhaps it was the sight of Cora's sulky expression which caused Lady Evelyn to efface herself. Had she known how one at least of the sisters had reformed just lately, she would certainly have wanted to be friendly; as it was, she hurriedly moved away before Betty or any of the others had time to explain.

Cora now came forward, trying to look agreeable. But Judith did not seem to want to join the tea-party.

"Judy, come along!" Betty hailed her. "Here is a seat for you!"



Even then Judith only shook her head and walked away.

"Well," Cora said with a forced laugh, sitting down next to Audrey, "no one can say that I don't want to be sociable. Isn't this reforming, Betty?"

Betty was ordering tea, and perhaps she did not hear.

At any rate, she made no answer.

## CHAPTER 10.

### The Artfulness of Audrey.

**A**N hour had passed. The castle grounds by now were simply teeming with people.

Miss Somerfield and many members of her staff had arrived, expressing delight at the way the schoolgirls were enjoying themselves.

Some of the best Barncombe society was here, and—as is always the way on such occasions—some far from desirable elements had also started to put in an appearance. At present all was order and pure enjoyment of "the fun of the fair," but it was Miss Somerfield's experience that these events always became a little bit rowdy later in the day. That was why she had fixed a rather early hour in the evening for the girls to return to the school.

The scholars, of course, were here, there and everywhere. Even inseparables like Betty Barton & Co. were continually losing one another for a little while, their varied experiences giving rise to much talk and laughter in the odd moments when one couple by chance encountered another.

Betty, of course, thought nothing of chums like Polly, Paula, Madge and Tess losing touch with her now and then. But she would have been very concerned if she had lost sight of Audrey, Cora and Judith for any length of time.

For Betty knew that it is an ominous sign when three girls suddenly slip away from all their companions on an occasion of this sort.

Audrey, as a matter of fact, was more often in touch with the Form captain than any other girl. And what a world of relief this meant to Betty! What complete peace of mind it gave her to feel convinced that the new girl was proving herself, before the

whole school to-day, to be a sensible, jolly girl!

So the festive day wore to evening, Betty felt that her enjoyment of the fête was absolutely unalloyed. Her greatest wish was being realised—an entirely united Form, with no element in it working for mischief!

So she said to herself, little knowing once again what was passing between Cora and Audrey in a remote corner of the castle grounds now that the hour was at hand for all the scholars to return to the school.

"You've been hanging about Betty & Co. a jolly lot!" Cora was grumbling half-savagely. "I have hardly had five minutes with you, Audrey!"

Audrey looked straight at the grumbler with that imperturbable air of hers.

"My dear Cora, what is your grievance?" she said coolly. "Aren't you quite aware that I really like Madge Minden, Tess Trelawney, Paula Creel, and one or two others? Isn't it settled that they are to be the beginning of my own set?"

"Yes, but you needn't be so nice to Betty!"

"I must be nice to Betty! I've told you again and again," Audrey said sharply. "Madge and the others will never take up with me if I am nasty to Betty. It isn't likely. That is the fatal mistake you and Judith made in the old days."

"Oh!"

"You tried to win over Paula and others whilst you were showing animosity towards Betty, who was their friend. Absurd! Allow me to carry out my idea in my own way, please!"

"All right," grumbled Cora. "What about our plan for this evening, anyhow?"

"Allow me to carry that out, too, in my own way," Audrey answered as calmly as ever.

"You really are game to stay late and have a bit of real fun when the others are gone?" questioned Cora. "You have almost made me think you had thrown up the idea!"

"You know what you are to do," Audrey said in her authoritative way. "You and Judith—where is Judith, by the by?"

"Oh, moping about the grounds somewhere!"

"Find her presently," Audrey pursued, "and, when the time comes for the girls to take their seats in the charabanc, you and Judith must keep out of sight."



She paused, taking a swift survey of the thronged grounds.

"I shall be pretending to get my motor-cycle ready for the return journey. You and your sister must hide away so that no one can find you if they search for you."

"Why?"

"Because it is quite likely there will be a last look round for you to take you home in the charabanc. When it is known that my cycle is jacked up," Audrey smiled, "someone is bound to say that we three girls must go home by charabanc. But they won't be able to find you, and then I shall be given permission to stay behind and get the cycle put in order, and come on quite late with you."

"Why can't Judy and I stay around with you?" Cora wanted to know discontentedly. "I don't see anything of you, Audrey!"

"If you do stay around you will simply be roped in for the return journey by charabanc—I can tell you that," Audrey said. "Now just do as I tell you, Cora, and then you'll get your extra hour or two after the others have gone home!"

Cora said, "Oh, all right!" in a rather softened way, and then, catching sight of her sister, ran off to repeat the details of the clever "scheme."

"So you quite understand, don't you, Judith?" Cora was asking a few minutes later. "No letting yourself be seen at seven o'clock. You had better be with me at ten to seven, and then I'll know where to hide along with you."

"I understand," Judith answered drearily. "But I think it is sheer madness, Cora. Oh, Cora," she added almost tearfully, "is it worth while, just for the sake of being here when the rowdiness starts—?"

"Yes, it is!" struck in her sister harshly. "You may not want to stay, but I mean to, and so must you, too!"

"You will be expelled, Cora—"

"Rubbish! Can't you trust Audrey to cover everything by her promise to get the machine to rights? She is up to a game or two, that girl!"

"Yes, a double game!" Judith exclaimed bitterly.

"A double game—what do you mean?" Cora asked. "You said it before, Judy—a double game!"

"That is what Audrey is playing—I am sure of it. She wants to make up her own set of cronies, then seize the captaincy by

striking a blow at Betty Barton. As for us, Cora, she means to get us expelled!"

"What rubbish you talk! She is our friend!"

"You think so, I know. Very well," Judith sighed, "wait and see, since you won't be warned in time."

She drifted away, so weighed down with the sense of despair that her steps were absolutely aimless ones. Indifferent to all the merriment going on around her, she gave quite a violent start when a hand suddenly fell upon her shoulder.

It was Betty Barton who had come up quietly behind the unhappy girl.

"Judy, what's the trouble? Why do you avoid all of us?" Betty asked in her down-right manner. "You wouldn't have tea with us. You haven't mixed at all to-day."

"I—I'm sorry, Betty—"

"I'm sorry, too, Judy. Puzzled as well. You ought to be looking so happy, because, do you know that there is not a girl in the Form now who doesn't believe you really have been perfectly sincere in your desire to make good?"

Judith's face should have brightened then, but it did not.

"I'll be frank with you," Betty pursued earnestly. "During the last few days a few girls have been doubting whether you were sincere as you professed to be. I felt sure you were, so did Polly, Madge and others. But opinion was divided. It is not divided now!"

Still no look of joy in Judith's eyes such as Betty had expected to see.

"Come along and have a last go on the roundabouts then," the Form captain urged, "before we all start mustering for the return home. Judy, cheer up, dear! Don't go home without first enjoying some of the fun!"

"I—oh, Betty, it's no use!" Judith exclaimed hoarsely. "There is no fun in—in roundabouts and things like that—for me!"

And again she drifted away, leaving Betty more puzzled than ever.

That was the last the Form captain saw of Judith in the castle grounds.

Betty had had no further glimpse of either of the sisters when the time came for the scholars to seek out their different conveniences.

With a punctuality that set Miss Somersfield and her staff smiling with pride and delight, all the scholars turned up in the



great courtyard where the charabancs were parked along with many fine cars.

There was, of course, a good deal of playful boisterousness over the resumption of seats, but in a few minutes all the vehicles except one had got away, each with its full load of passengers.

The one exception was the Fourth Form charabane.

It had the same number of passengers which it had brought to the fête, but there was sudden delay owing to Audrey Blain's running up with the news that her motorcycle had suddenly gone wrong, and she did not think she would be able to get it right under an hour or so.

"How vexing!" Miss Somerfield commented, but she made it clear that she did not hold Audrey to blame in any way. "I do not care about the idea of your staying here until eight o'clock, and then perhaps still being unable to get the thing to work."

"Well, of course," Audrey said demurely, "it is always a bit chancy when the engine goes wrong. Still, I do know a good deal about the thing. Besides, some chauffeur might be able to—"

"No!" Miss Somerfield decided. "I would prefer that you find room in the Fourth Form conveyance, Audrey."

"But what about my side-car passengers?" Audrey said ruefully.

"The Grandways girls? They must be squeezed in too, somehow!"

"Plenty of room—yes!" the scholars proclaimed heartily.

"Then find Cora and Judith at once, please," said the headmistress. "I do not understand why they are not here now."

Audrey scampered off with great goodwill, and then Miss Somerfield detailed half a dozen other girls to take part in the search to avoid delay.

Ten minutes later the seven seekers came trickling back, and all had drawn a blank.

Cora and Judith Grandways were not to be found!

"Annoying — most annoying!" Miss Somerfield exclaimed testily. "Always those girls!"

"But," put in Audrey demurely, "please

"There is no excuse for them," the headmistress declared angrily. "They should have mustered with the rest, even though they were to have gone back in the side-

car. It is just like those girls to get into some scrape or other!"

"Please, then," Audrey ventured again after a moment, "what had we better do? Shall I stay behind after all and get the cycle to rights? The sisters will surely come along—"

"No, you will go in the charabane with the rest of the Form!" was Miss Somerfield's decree. "As for Cora and Judith—"

She looked very stern as she turned to quit the spot.

"They will return with me," she said, "when I myself have found them!"

## CHAPTER 11.

### Not Audrey's Fault.

AUDREY BLAIN drove home in the Fourth Form charabane, sitting cooly between Madge and Paula, with Betty and Polly close at hand.

She frequently remarked how sorry she was that Cora and Judith looked like getting into hot water.

"I wouldn't have had it happen for worlds!" was one of her comments, as the charabane hummed smoothly along on its return journey to the school. "I know those two sisters are the last girls who can afford to get into a bother!"

"You are right about that," Madge said. "They themselves must know it, too, and yet—there it is!"

"Yes," chimed in Etta Hargrove, sitting close enough behind to hear what was being said. "They seem to be up to their old tricks again!"

"I don't know what to think of them," muttered Grace Garfield. "My doubts about their intention to make good took to flight to-day. But the doubts have come back!"

"So have mine—and mine!" muttered other girls.

And Betty, as she listened, could only say to herself: "What wonder?"

"Well," Audrey exclaimed by and by with the prettiest air of distress, "if I have been in any way to blame, I shall be awfully sorry. But I don't think I was to blame really!"

"I can't see how you could have been," Betty turned round to remark. "As Miss



Homerfield said, Cora and Judith must have known they ought to muster, even though they were intending to go back in the side-car."

"It is their disappearing altogether that is so bad," Madge said. "With seven of us hunting everywhere, asking other people to look out for the couple and tell them to hurry to the courtyard—"

"Yes, wather!" broke in Paula. "But I must say I veward the disappearance of those geals just at that time as vewy vemarkable!"

"They have not reformed!" Etta exclaimed, with conviction. "That is what it means! Even Judith is as bad as ever—and I shall tell her so when I see her!"

"Oh, don't be too hard on them," pleaded Audrey, smiling round upon Etta. "At any rate, let us suspend judgment for a little while!"

Which remark, falling upon the ears of Betty, seemed to her a fine thing for Audrey to have said.

During the last mile to the school, the evening breeze blew very freshly in the girls' faces, and Audrey was very anxious to see that Madge and Paula kept warm enough.

They had a rug about their knees. Audrey, in her caressing way, tucked it closer about Paula, bringing it as high as that girl's waist. Then she did the same with Madge.

"Comfy?" she asked Madge. "Oh, how cold your hands are! Come to my study when you get indoors—you, too, Paula dear," she whispered affectionately. "I shall have a little surprise for you."

The two girls returned smiling glances, feeling altogether charmed with the new girl. There was that in Madge and Paula both which so quickly responded to Audrey's winning pose of affability.

And so, when the dusty charabanc had set down its load of passengers at the school porch, it was only a few minutes before Audrey, alone in her study, heard Madge and Paula outside her door.

"Come in!" she called softly.

They entered, to find her unstoppering a large silver thermos flask.

She had set out dainty cups and saucers, and a biscuit-box, and now she poured hot coffee into the cups.

"Bai Jove," exclaimed Paula, "how vewfeshing!"

"Very acceptable, after that last half-hour in the car!" Madge agreed. "It was just getting a trifle chilly, wasn't it?"

"I would have liked to ask in all the Form, but one thermos flask would hardly go round, would it?" said Audrey with a laugh.

"It is extremely kind of you, Audrey!" declared Paula, sinking into a chair which was even more luxurious than any she could boast. "You have been a real bwick all day!"

"But I ought not to have had any bother with that motor-cycle," Audrey sighed. "Then Cora and Judith would not have been getting into trouble."

"Pway do not look so distwessed about those geals—"

"But I feel it is my fault—"

"No," said Madge. "Not a girl in the Form thinks that, Audrey. I say! What lovely things you brought with you to the school!"

"You like music—here is some of mine," Audrey purred, dumping a pile of piano-forte pieces on to the table. "Have you ever tried duets? I would love to get up this one with you!"

"Oh, wouldn't it be jolly!" Madge said, innocently swallowing this fresh bit of bait. "We will get an hour alone together in the music-room, to-morrow. I have heard this duet; it's wonderful!"

Audrey, standing beside the friend she wanted, twined an arm lovingly about her waist.

"I believe we are going to be great chums, you and I! Paula, too, of course—"

"Yes, wather! Howevah," said Paula, sipping the steaming coffee, "I wather fancy you will have every geal for your chum in the end. This is weally gwand coffee!"

"I took care to have some ready, knowing we might have a chilly ride home. It was really meant for Cora and Judith and myself," Audrey smiled; "but they won't get coffee now! They will be lucky if they don't get sent to bed, supperless. Poor old Cora and Judith!"

The door was tapped, then opened, and Tess Trelawney looked in.

"You don't mind? I fancied Madge and Paula were here," she said. "Oh, what jolly little water-colours, Audrey! Yours?"



"I dabble a little, yes," Audrey nodded modestly. "You paint a lot, don't you? I would love to come sketching with you one afternoon!"

And, of course, Tess swallowed that bit of bait, just as Madge had swallowed the other.

For fifteen minutes or so, the three girls—the very three Audrey was most keen on fascinating—remained in that study, coming more and more under the charm of her brilliant disposition. Then, just as she was saying that she wished they could have stayed another hour at least, a sudden murmur of excited voices was audible from the corridor.

Audrey opened the door swiftly and looked out.

Girls were coming forth from other studies, wondering what had brought friends of theirs rushing upstairs in such an excited state.

"Cora and Judith—have you heard?" Polly Linton cried, making a rush at Audrey and her companions.

"No. What about them? Bai Jove——"

"They are back! Miss Somerfield brought them back in her car!" panted Polly. "Here is Betty—she'll tell you!"

But before the excited girls could turn to the Form captain for information, they saw the headmistress herself coming along from the stairs, with Cora and Judith at her heels.

"Is Audrey Blain there?" inquired Miss Somerfield, in an ominous tone.

"Yes, Miss Somerfield—here I am!" Audrey herself answered demurely.

"Tell me the absolute truth, Audrey!" the headmistress said. "Is it any fault of yours that these two girls could not be found this evening?"

And Audrey said without the least change of colour:

"I don't see how it can be!"

## CHAPTER 12.

Scorned by Her Schoolfellows.

MISS SOMERFIELD nodded, as if that was the answer she had hoped and had expected to receive.

"At least half an hour after you had all left in the charabanc," she pursued sternly, "these two girls were brought to me by a policeman, who had found them skulking in a private part of the castle

garden. In any case, they had no right to invade that part of the grounds——"

"We didn't know it was private!" struck in Cora sullenly.

"Granted that you were unwittingly trespassing," Miss Somerfield returned sharply, "you had no right to be anywhere at seven o'clock but in the courtyard! Audrey was there!"

"Yes, but—but——"

"Well?"

"We were to have come home with Audrey in the side-car," Cora floundered. "We thought—I mean, we were quite sure she would come and find us when she was ready!"

"How could she possibly find you, when you were skulking in a private part of the castle grounds?" flashed the irate headmistress. "It was your place to seek Audrey at a time when you knew perfectly well that she would be getting the side-car ready!"

"Audrey said——" Cora began desperately, then stopped suddenly.

She was mad with Audrey, and yet she did not wish to denounce her as having been a party to any scheme. That would only be giving oneself away!

"It seems to me," said Miss Somerfield, "that you hoped that after all the charabancs had left the castle, you and your sister would be stranded because Audrey could not bring you home in the side-car! And, in seeking to spin out your time at the fête, you never cared whether you might get Audrey involved in trouble! But Audrey is not involved. I acquit her of all complicity in the disgraceful affair!"

"Hear, hear! Bravo, Audrey!"

"Yes, wather!"

The girls who had gathered around could not help demonstrating their delight over Miss Somerfield's pronouncement.

During the argument that had been going on, Audrey had been closely watched by Betty and Co., and all had been impressed by her innocent air.

"It is time for all you girls to get your supper," the headmistress finished gravely. "Pass away then, please. Cora and Judith, you will report to me in the morning, when I will decide what your punishment is to be!"

With those ominous words, she turned back to the stairs, leaving the two culprits surrounded by a thoroughly hostile crowd.

"Come away, Judy!" Cora blazed out,



pushing past some of the girls to get to Study 7. "Audrey, I want you!"

"All right; but don't speak like that, please," Audrey said sweetly.

Following the sisters to their study doorway, she made a gesture to the girls outside not to hang around. Then she entered the room and shut the door.

"You're a beauty!" cried Cora furiously.

"My dear Cora——"

"Nicely you have let me and Judy down this evening!" Cora stormed on.

Then, lowering her voice, in case girls might be loitering near the closed door:

"You told us to hide!"

"I told you to keep out of sight, because I hoped that, if you were not spotted at once, I would be given permission to tackle the motor-cycle. I didn't tell you to hide so that seven girls looking for you couldn't even find you!"

"I distinctly remember your saying, 'Hide away so that no one can find you!'" Cora insisted huffily.

"Yes, but do admit that you overdid it!" Audrey pleaded, with her soothing laugh. "There was always the chance of permission being refused me to stop and tackle the motor-cycle. It was refused, as it happened, and we ought to have been able to find you after the search we made!"

Cora flung herself into a seat, scowling.

"All I can say is, I don't like the way you manage things, Audrey! If this is how it is always going to be when things go wrong—Judy and I getting blamed, and you getting off scot-free——"

"My dear Cora," Audrey broke in. "I don't deserve these reproaches, and I don't want to quarrel. Things went wrong, I admit. I was ordered to return with the other girls, and—really, what else could I do?"

There was a deep silence then. Audrey had won! She had even convinced Cora that she—Audrey—was not a bit to blame!

"All right," mumbled Cora at last. "But it is a nice look-out for me and Judy! We shall be expelled, most likely!"

"Expelled—yes!" Judith said. It was the first word she had uttered since this talk started in Study 7. "And what did I warn you, Cora?"

"Oh, shut up, you!" snapped her sister sulkily.

Judith crossed to the door then. She was going out, when Audrey flashed round upon her.

"Judy dear, say you don't blame me! Really, I——"

"I do blame you!" Judith struck in icily, looking the new girl full in the eyes. "I believe it is all exactly as you wished it to be—all part of your double game!"

Then she passed from the room, going in an absent manner along the corridor to the stairs.

Reaching the ground floor, she saw quite a number of Fourth Form scholars standing about, too taken up with excited talk to have a thought for the light supper which was provided every evening.

Judith turned aside quickly at the bottom of the stairs, seeking to avoid the girls; but some of them rushed towards her.

"You!" one of them cried scornfully—it was Etta Hargrove. "You are the girl who talked of making good, aren't you?"

"The girl who was done with all the old tricks and ways!" added another bitterly. "Judith Grandways, the girl who made speeches about turning over a new leaf!"

Judith stood facing the scornful throng.

"Have you finished?" she asked faintly at last. "Is there anything else you want to say?"

"Only this," flashed back Etta. "I, for one, have given up believing in girls who talk so much of making good!"

"And I—and I!" cried others.

They turned on their heels then, and walked away, leaving Judith all alone, shaking from head to foot.

But Betty was suddenly at the poor girl's side, exclaiming softly:

"Judy—oh, Judy! Those girls—there are only a few of them who feel like that. And you will be able to prove how mistaken they are, won't you? In the morning, Judy—surely you will be able to explain?"

"Oh, leave me alone—let me go!" was the agonised cry from Judith's heart. "I'm sorry, Betty—so sorry! But I can't explain—no, I can't!"

And she rushed away blindly, weeping into her hands.

## CHAPTER 13.

### Audrey Gets On.

**B**EFORE morning service on that Sunday after the fête at Barncombe Castle, all the school heard the decision which Miss Somerfield had arrived at.



Cora and Judith were to be "gated" for a couple of weeks. In addition, they had been solemnly warned that the headmistress felt very grieved and disgusted at this second lapse of theirs, after their expressed intention of making good.

If they had another lapse, it would be their last! The school, in fact, understood that Miss Somerfield was "fed-up" with the sisters—and no wonder! She was not the only one!

"Did you ever know anything like the deceitfulness of that Judith?" Etta Hargrove remarked bitterly, coming up to Betty with a number of other Fourth Form scholars after dinner. "She is going about with a drooping head, as if she was so very sorry. Sorry!"

"So she is sorry, Etta," Betty asserted quietly, yet with a touch of spirit.

"What!" Etta Hargrove bristled up at once. "Surely, Betty, you are not so stupid as to imagine the girl is an injured innocent?"

"At the worst," Betty answered, "I believe that Judith, even if she were a willing party to yesterday's scrape, only gave in to please her sister."

"No, that won't wash," Etta said curtly. "If you are going to champion Judith Grandways, Betty, then—well, I'm sorry, that's all!"

"I shall be just as sorry as you, if we are to have another difference of opinion," Betty said. "But it is my firm conviction that Judith never really wanted to flout discipline yesterday."

Then Grace Garfield spoke.

"You know, Betty, you really are unreasonable! As Form captain——"

"Yes, as Form captain——" murmured several others, all looking at Betty very steadily.

"I can't help it," Betty said at last, with a hard breath. "Neither can you, I suppose. So let us take time—Oh, let us try not to allow a mere difference of opinion to cause any split between us!"

She waited a moment, hoping to receive some friendly assurance from Etta and the others. But nothing of the sort came. They all stood ominously glum, and at last Betty walked away, suffering all the pain a leader knows when he or she is losing the rank and file's support.

Entering Study 12 very quietly, she found Polly Linton there, writing home to

her people. Paula was lolling in an easy chair, ready to doze at any moment.

"What's the matter, Betty dear?" Polly asked, rubbing the blotter over her finished letter.

"Oh, some of the girls think I am disgracing my position as captain by defending Judith."

"Well, cheer up, I'm with you, Betty!" Polly said, banging her fist on the blotter. "So is Paula—aren't you, Paula? Wake up, duffer, and answer!"

"Yes, wather!" Paula said, quite alertly. "Bai Jove, do you think I'm going to forget that Judy saved my life? Mind you, she may have her twifling lapses; howeverah——"

"That is just what the girls need to see," Betty urged. "A girl may feel a longing to make good, and yet have her weak moments. Give her a chance, and the weak moments will become fewer and fewer."

At that moment the door opened and Audrey Blain looked in.

"If any of you girls would like to have a cup of tea with me later on in my den——" she began tentatively.

"Thank you, Audrey," Betty answered. "But—oh, I don't know; I feel I shall be rather poor company this afternoon."

"Betty has got the hump about the Grandways sisters," Polly explained. "I don't wonder. It is making a nasty division in the Form, and that's the sort of thing none of us likes. I shall stay here and keep Betty company."

"Yes, wather!" drawled Paula, and Betty shot both chums a grateful glance. "Howeverah, I am extremely gwateful for your kind invitation, Audrey."

"Some other time——"

"Yes, wather!"

Audrey nodded amiably and went out, and in the corridor she met Madge Minden.

"Hallo, Madge! Will you come to tea with me this afternoon? I can't get Betty; but you won't let that matter for once?"

"What's the matter with Betty?" Madge asked. "I was just going to look in at Study 12."

"Oh, Betty has got the hump, they say. She finds that a number of girls disagree with her view about the Grandways sisters. I don't know what to think myself. I haven't known them long enough."

"I know what to think," Madge said, very decidedly. "They are a pair of



deceivers, and of the two, Judith is far the worse."

"Gracious, don't go along and tell Betty that! It will upset her no end—coming from you!" Audrey smiled.

"I am sorry," Madge said; "but every girl is entitled to her own opinion."

"Well, if you do have a tiff with Betty," Audrey went on, "please don't let that prevent you from coming to tea with me. Madge, I—I do like you, you know. So you must come!"

She passed on to her own study, but she had not been alone there for a couple of minutes before Madge appeared, looking rather upset.

"Audrey——"

"Yes, dear?"

"I'll come to tea by and by. I would like to."

Then Audrey, left to herself once more, sat down and laughed to herself.

"Cora and Judith very nearly expelled, if not quite!" she mused aloud exultantly. "And half the Form already turning against Betty! I am getting on—fast!"

And she sat there, her golden head lolling against a silken cushion, smiling up at the ceiling, letting her mind run forward to the day when she would have won her double game.

Cora and Judith expelled in dire disgrace; Betty Barton with hardly a friend still to call her own; and the Form paying full allegiance to its new captain, its queen—clever Audrey Blain!

#### CHAPTER 14.

##### Bad News for Betty.

"GOOD gracious, Betty——"

It was a very breathless exclamation which madcap Polly Linton had voiced, as she came into Study 12, at Morcove School.

Polly had just run all the way upstairs. And, prior to doing that, she had been playing a strenuous game of tennis.

She shot her racket into the nearest corner of the den, then stepped to the table. Her chum, Betty Barton, the captain of the Fourth Form, was there, packing a small portmanteau.

"But why?" Polly asked in amazement.

"I've got to go home, Polly."

"Wh—a—a—a—at!"

"As soon as possible, dear."

"Wh—a—a—a—at!" was all Polly could say, a second time.

"But I shall not be leaving until the morning," Betty went on, with that calmness which was always such a set-off to her madcap chum's excitability. "You see, I've missed the through train to Lancashire. I only had the telegram half an hour ago."

"Betty, dear—oh, Betty!" Polly cried out at last. "What's the trouble, then? You—you are not going home—for good!"

Betty paused in her packing to answer very softly:

"No, Polly; my sister Doris is ill—nothing very serious, we all hope. But they want me to go home at once."

"That's natural," Polly said, nodding. "And you would want to go, even if they had not wired for you. Little Doris—I remember meeting her in the hols., that time. I know how she is all in all to you, Betty."

"I do feel it a bit," Betty confessed, with a sudden shining of the eyes; "but there, I am going to make up my mind that things must come right in the end with her! I expect you will laugh at my starting to pack already—just a few things. But I felt I must do something, Polly."

"I want to do something, Betty! As your old chum and study mate, there ought to be something I can do to help!"

Betty put on a cheerful smile. She was never the one to parade any anxiety or grief.

"Well, dear, if you can find me a bit of string——"

"Righto! I'll get you a whole ball of string," Polly declared, whirling to the door; and, of course, that door slammed as the madcap went out. It always did.

Betty folded away a few more things in the bag which stood open on a chair. Then she turned to the mantelpiece, and took up the telegram lying there:

"Please get leave to return home for the present. Doris ill, not serious, but your presence desirable. Love.—Dad and Mother."

The Form captain's thoughts were far away in that dear old home in Lancashire, where the sister she loved was lying ill,



when she heard quite a number of girls suddenly trooping along the corridor. Next moment the study door crashed open, and Polly whirled in again, bringing several other girls with her.

"Here's the string, Betty! And I've got you a strap, in case you wanted one. And here's Paula Creel, and Madge Minden, and all of them, and I've told them all!"

"Yes, bai Jove—yes, wather!" Paula Creel said, with hearty emphasis. "How-evah! Things are not weally sewious, are they, Betty, deah?"

"No, not serious," Betty said, passing over the telegram. "Girls, it's awfully good of you to let me see how sorry you feel for me, and for all of them at home. I won't forg t it!"

Sympathetic interest begat a medley of talk. Still, Betty mustn't bother a bit about how things went on in the Form, whilst she, the captain, was away.

"I don't mean to," Betty assured them cheerfully. "I shall not be forgetting you, of course, but you won't think it unkind if I don't write. I will if I can; but——"

"We quite understand, Betty," broke in Madge.

"Hurrah for the day when you come back, Betty! We'll have a celebration," cried Polly excitedly.

"Yes, wather!"

The ringing of a bell downstairs reminded the girls that it was time for tea, and some instantly and quietly effaced themselves, fearing that Betty and Polly would start asking them to stay and have tea with them, and knowing that it could hardly be convenient.

Betty had done all she could about packing. She slung the unstrapped bag into a corner, and then sat down to rummage through a drawer, looking at odd memoranda to see if there was anything she must attend to before going away. Polly scampered out of the room, perhaps feeling that her chum would prefer to be alone; but the loneliness only lasted a few seconds.

Then the door opened quietly, and another girl came in.

"Hallo, Judy!" Betty looked up to exclaim.

Judith Grandways closed the door be-

hind her, then came forward with a troubled expression on her handsome face.

"I have just heard, Betty. I am so sorry——"

"Thank you, Judy. Really, though, as the telegram says, it is nothing serious."

"No; and I only hope that we shall soon see you back again," Judith rejoined. "The Form will miss you, Betty. I shall miss you, I do believe, more than any other girl, although I am not your best chum, either!"

"You are not my oldest chum, Judy," Betty said, getting up from the table. "But ever since you turned over a new leaf there has been so much to make me fond of you. And——"

Betty paused.

"In your case, Judy, perhaps I know better than some of the other girls what a very hard fight you are having."

## CHAPTER 15.

### At the Last Moment.

SEVERAL of Betty's chums were at Morcove-road railway station, the following mid-day, to see her off.

The fussy little twelve-thirty "local" was to take the Form captain as far as Exeter, where she would join a corridor express via Bristol. By getting let out of class on the very stroke of twelve, the girls had managed to start away from school at the same time as Betty.

Polly, in fact, along with Paula Creel and Bluebell Courtney, actually drove with Betty to the station. There would have been room for Madge, too, at a pinch; but Madge missed the chance.

Now, at five-and-twenty past the hour, some of the girls came cycling up to the little wayside station; but neither Madge nor Tess was amongst these.

"Well, I shall be sorry if I don't see them," Betty exclaimed ruefully. "They must have misunderstood the arrangements, and——"

And there Betty broke off, turning very pale as a sudden thought struck her.

"Gracious, Polly dear, what do you think I've done? I've come away without saying good-bye to Judy Grandways!"



"But——"

"She and her sister—they are gated, you know. They can't come to the station. Bother! Cora won't mind a scrap, very likely; but Judy will think it unkind of me!"

"I'll make that all right, Betty," said Polly. "The moment I get back I'll explain how sorry you were. Hullo—look, here comes Audrey Blain, on her motor-cycle!"

"With Madge and Tess in the side-car, yes!" exclaimed some of the other girls. "My word, how that girl does get along!"

"She is a skilful driver," Betty murmured, trying to be perfectly just. The very moment was at hand for boarding the train—and she was still troubled with the feeling that she had taken an unfair dislike to the new girl.

Madge, Tess, and Audrey came running on to the platform just as the train was signalled.

"You didn't think we were going to miss you, Betty?" Madge said, coming straight up to the captain. "Good-bye, Betty, and my best wishes to all your people, including little Doris."

"Yes, wather, bai Jove! It is most distwessing, Betty deah, you going away twom us like this! Howevah—Pway, Polly, why do you push me like that?"

"Because there's no time for giddy speeches!" chuckled madcap Polly. "Can't you see the train coming round the curve? Ta-ta, Betty! Good luck——"

"Oui, oui! Au-revoir, chere amie!" struck in Tixie Hope, airing her French. "Voila, la trainee!"

"Good-bye, Polly—Bluebell—Tess; good-bye once again, Paula dear, and you, Madge!" Betty said, shaking hands all round. She came to Audrey Blain.

"Good-bye——"

"Oh, good-bye, Betty!" Audrey said, holding out her exquisite little hand. "I am so sorry you are going! We'll all be very good whilst you are away!"

Whether Betty detected in that remark a touch of irony, mockery, or insincerity of some sort or another, she never really knew. But, suddenly, she felt all her vague distrust of Audrey crystallising.

No, it was not jealousy of her! Betty was certain.

Now, at the very last moment, some-

thing was telling her what Judy Grandways would have liked to tell her; something was saying: "This is a girl to beware of!"

And the train was coming in; it was even now drawing up alongside the platform!

Naturally, the high-spirited girls had to start cheering and larking about. Betty would not have minded that; she would have enjoyed the fun, only she felt she must get a last moment alone with Polly.

"Polly!"

"Yes, Betty? Why, how queer you look!" Polly exclaimed, as Betty managed to draw her aside. "Don't let it upset you, dear! You'll soon be back!"

"It—it is not that, Polly. Listen a moment!"

Betty glanced around, then whispered:

"For the sake of the Form, Polly, watch Audrey Blain!"

"Do what? Why——"

"Whilst I'm away, Polly, watch Audrey Blain! And if she——"

"Take your seats, please!" cried the guard, blowing his whistle. "Phee-cep, peep! Right away!"

"Betty," came in a merry chorus, "you'll miss the train!"

The Form captain made a dive for the nearest compartment, and appeared at the open window directly the carriage-door had been slammed shut.

"Good-bye, all! Good-bye! Polly, don't forget!"

"I won't, Betty! Ta-ta! Good luck!"

The train was moving out. On the platform stood all the girls, with no idea of stirring an inch until Betty was out of sight.

Again and again they sent a cheer after her, whilst raised hands fluttered handkerchiefs to the last. There was one girl, however, who was just a moment before the rest in turning to leave the platform.

Audrey Blain—she turned about suddenly, putting her back to the other girls; and so she was able to indulge the smile that had come to her lips. No one, seeing that smile, could have mistaken its meaning. It said plainly:

"Now for a free hand whilst Betty is away!"

But no one did see the sinister expression on Audrey's face just then. When the



train was out of sight, and they were all dispersing, Polly had good reason for taking a long, critical look at the new girl; and Audrey was then wearing quite a different smile, causing Polly to ask herself:

"What on earth could Betty have meant by whispering that warning? 'Watch Audrey Blain! Why should I watch her? There is nothing wrong with Audrey!'"

Less than a minute later they were all going back by the means they had adopted to get to the station.

Incurably frivolous was Polly the madcap; all the same, she was the last girl to let a love of fun make her neglect any trust imposed in her.

As an instance of this, although the bell was going for dinner by the time she got to the school, she could not put off having a word with Judith Grandways.

Polly found Judith in Study 7—alone. The elder sister had already gone down to take her place in hall.

"I say, Judy," was the madcap's breathless beginning, after running all the way upstairs, "Betty told me to tell you she is so very, very sorry!"

"Oh!"

"She forgot to say good-bye! In the rush of going off, you know——"

"Yes?"

"She quite forgot that you and Cora are gated and so couldn't be at the station, even if you wanted to. But you won't think ill of Betty, now I've explained, will you, Judy? If you knew how upset she was when she remembered——"

"Think ill of Betty—oh, no, never!" Judith exclaimed with great earnestness. "It is all right, Polly; thank you all the same for speaking about it. I know it was only an accident, Betty, missing me."

And Polly left her then, looking glad over the message that had come from Betty—a message confirming Judith's belief that she still held the captain's faith and friendship.

The moment Judith was alone, however, what a bitter look suddenly replaced the glad one!

She was thinking of Audrey Blain again; thinking how it was all that girl's fault that she, Judith, had been unable to go with others to the station to see the captain off.

All Audrey's doing, that she, Judith, and her sister were gated!

A hard sigh came from Judith as she turned at last to quit the room.

She was thinking, if only she could have warned Betty—all of them—to beware of this girl! If only one could intervene, now that Betty was gone, to prevent the new girl from making such headway with Madge, Paula, Tess, and others!

But, no; it was out of the question. For ever in the ears of unhappy Judith Grandways there rang an echo of that threat which her own sister had uttered:

"Hold your tongue about everything, Judy, or I shall take less trouble than ever not to get expelled! And, if ever I do get expelled, I shall not go home alone!"

## CHAPTER 16.

### Off and Away with Audrey.

JUST before two o'clock on the following Saturday afternoon, Cora Grandways came into Audrey's study.

Audrey had made a special toilette for the afternoon, and looked lovelier than ever, stretched along the couch, with a book in her hand. Cora's handsome face was sullen.

"Cora!"

"Well?"

"Would you like to come into Barncombe with me this afternoon?"

"You know I'm gated!" burst out Cora sulkily. "You don't think a bit about me, Audrey, when making your plans for the halfer!"

"My dear Cora!"

The new girl began to smile; but Cora rushed on truculently:

"I was the first girl you made friends with when you came to the school. You talked as if we were going to be as thick as thieves!"

"We are good friends still, I hope!" shrugged Audrey. "I'm asking you to come into Barncombe with me. What do you say? Yes; or are you afraid as you're gated?"

Cora hesitated, but Audrey was smiling at her in such a winning way that her doubts fled.

For a moment Judith's warnings had led



h, and Cora to suspect a trick on Audrey's behalf, but she dismissed that thought now.

as she "You really want me to come?"

have "Don't be stupid, Cora!"

re of "You are not done with me then, Audrey?"

now "Oh, no!" Audrey assured her pleasantly, but under her breath she added:

with "Done with her! Not quite! I shall not be done with either you or your sister, my dear Cora, until you are both expelled!"

tion, Nevertheless, Cora was quite safe with Audrey that afternoon. Audrey meant to keep Cora out of danger, for to have done otherwise would have caused disgust by the other Fourth-Formers.

ing, Audrey sprang up from the sofa, looking ver get full of life. Her dainty appearance was hardly that of a girl who was going to drive a motor-cycle; but down at the "garage" Audrey kept a special sort of overall, which she always slipped on over anything she was wearing, when taking out the "combination."

g Cora helped her to back the machine out of the shed. It was all in order for starting, for Audrey had filled up with petrol and looked to the oil before dinner, so as to have no messy jobs to tackle just before starting. Saying "Get in, dear," to Cora, she slipped on her overall, pulled on her motoring gauntlets, and then got astride the saddle.

e They hummed away at a nice easy pace down the drive, out through the school gateway, and then along the road to Barncombe.

Nor did Audrey indulge in any hair-raising "stunts" this afternoon.

It was a pleasant pottering along, all the way to the town, and she was intent upon being nice to Cora. Audrey was in a venturesome mood this afternoon. She contemplated doing something daring, that was why she had asked Cora to accompany her. She meant to break school rules, and she knew better than to ask Madge or Tess to do that.

Just as they were crawling into the quaint old town, Audrey found Cora looking at her in a very thoughtful way.

"Penny for your thoughts, Cora dear!"

"Oh, I was just thinking what a marvellous girl you are!" Cora said with a

sudden laugh. "It's so queer to think that the same girl who can play so beautifully, and paint a little, and be such a—such an ornament to society, knows how to drive a motor-cycle, and keep it in order!"

"You can dance?"

"Oh, yes. But dancing—I don't count that!"

Audrey suddenly turned the machine into a side-street.

"There is a garage along this street," Audrey explained. "I thought we would leave the outfit there, instead of in the Creamery yard. You don't want the other girls to know you're in Barncombe."

This was perfectly correct, and so Cora thought it quite a good idea for them to leave the motor-cycle and side-car at the garage.

Audrey led the way from the garage, and suddenly she stopped dead, turning to look straight at a brilliant poster that flamed upon the wall.

"Oh, Cora—look! The travelling opera company is at the Theatre Royal!"

"Yes, but we can't go!" Cora said.

Audrey looked at her, and without a word led the way on again.

Then they came to the Theatre Royal itself. Crowds were lined up for the matinee.

"Pity you're in such a funky mood," said Audrey again. "Still, I suppose I can understand it. Yet, as you're gated, you've no business in Barncombe at all, so what difference going in the theatre would make——"

Cora gave a gasp and clutched at Audrey's arm.

"I don't funk it," she answered. "I'll come in."

Then Audrey shot a glance around, and whispered to Cora to slip out of sight up a court, and wait for her there.

Cora obeyed, and in a minute her friend—if one can call her such—rejoined her looking very elated.

"I've got a box, Cora dear——"

"A box?"

"Yes. It cost me the price of four stalls; but that doesn't matter. We shall be out of sight of the audience, if we sit well back. I say, I'm so glad you haven't funk'd it."

"Of course I haven't funk'd it! Let us go in at once!"

And they did so.



## CHAPTER 17.

## What Will They Think of Her Now?

**A**LL alone in Study No. 7 at the school, Judith Grandways came away from the open window with a suppressed sigh.

For the last five minutes she had been standing there, watching any number of scholars setting off in jolly parties upon their various jaunts.

Some to the town, others for a ramble along the cliffs, others again for an idle afternoon down on the shore—they were all gone now. But she—the freedom of the spacious grounds was all she could have to-day!

How hard it was, she could not help thinking bitterly. Ever since she made up her mind to be a better girl and deserve the friendship of Betty and the rest, not once had she wanted to do anything in defiance of discipline. Yet here she was, this sunny afternoon, "gated" by the head-mistress! gated, too, for reasons that the school, as a whole, thought perfectly fair.

There was a double sting in it all. Not only was she suffering the loss of liberty, simply because her wayward sister had involved her in last week's misdeed; she had forfeited many friendships that had started when she declared her intention to reform.

Betty, Polly, Paula—they and a few others, she knew, still had faith in her desire to make good. But there were girls who had felt bound to question the sincerity of her intentions.

Suddenly the thought came to her. Where was Cora? Then Judith remembered she had last seen her, hat and coat on, slipping out into the school grounds with Audrey.

Suddenly a fear came to Judith.

Had Audrey tempted her sister to break bounds?

Judith left her study and commenced to search the school, but in vain. Nowhere was there any sign of Cora.

Judith saw a party of girls—Madge, Polly, Paula, and half a dozen others—going out of the school gates with Miss Redgrave, but she thought nothing of it until she overheard another couple of girls talking.

"Polly & Co. are just off to the opera," said the first girl.

"What?" exclaimed the second, with per-

haps reasonable surprise, for such treat were few and far between.

"The matinée at the Theatre Royal—they're off to it, under the charge of Miss Redgrave," answered the second girl.

The girls then moved off, but Judith stood mute and still. Their little conversation had brought a new fear to her mind. Was it not possible that Cora and Audrey might have gone to that show?

And now these other girls, under the charge of a mistress, were bound for the same theatre.

Judith hurried back to her study and donned her hat and coat. Her mind was made up about one thing.

She had got to slip away to the town and warn Cora and Audrey that other girls were going to the opera!

Could it be done?

Only by breaking bounds—setting at defiance the gating order! And even then, all must depend upon her getting to Barnecombe before Miss Redgrave and her party arrived on their cycles.

Not for a moment would Judith allow herself to hesitate.

Whether Audrey got caught or not she did not care a rap; but Audrey must not succeed in getting her sister into trouble again!

The whole situation was enough to drive one crazy. And utterly distraught, Judith looked indeed, during her stealthy slipping out of bounds.

The thing was easily done; yet that did not make it a less agonising deed.

Another breach of discipline by the girl who had reformed! Once again she had been forced for others' sake into doing it; but supposing she was caught—could she plead any excuse? Could she urge that she only broke bounds to warn her sister to keep out of mischief? Impossible!

Just as the two-twenty out of Morcoveroad was getting its "Right away!" from the guard, a breathless girl dashed through the barrier, spilling money all over the platform, and only troubling to keep hold of the ticket which she had snatched at the pigeon-hole.

Into a first-class compartment she sprang, and flopped down, exhausted. The porter ran up with the money she had dropped, but she gasped out:

"Keep it—I don't care!"



The train again puffed away, and Judith had no time to ask herself, had it been "up to her" to do this thing for Cora's sake?

Rightly or wrongly, the harassed girl returned a mental "Yes!" to that question.

Having caught the train, too, she had every chance of succeeding. It would get to Barnecombe long before the girls who were cycling with Miss Redgrave arrived there by road. They would have to stall their machines, and possibly they would spend a few minutes at the Creamery, getting a glass of lemonade after the ride along the dusty highway.

Almost before the train had drawn into the town station, Judith was springing out. Slipping the ticket to the collector, she ran on through the booking-hall, across the yard, and then dodged amongst some back streets to the theatre.

The audience had all gone in; but Judith had expected this. She knew that these pieces generally began at two-forty-five, and it was now five-to-three. As she breathlessly stepped into the foyer, she could hear the orchestra blending with the fine chorus on the stage.

"Give me a stall, please," she panted, rapping down two half-crowns. "Yes, one!"

Next minute she had passed into the auditorium.

The "house" lights were down, but the stage was brilliantly lit. A girl attendant came quietly to her to show her to a seat; but Judith whispered:

"No; I am looking for someone. Let me stand here, and see if I can pick out my friend."

She was not in anybody's way, and so the attendant raised no objection. Feeling red-hot now that she was inside the theatre, Judith stood close back to the wall, looking upon line after line of the reserved seats.

Nobody in the auditorium had a glance for her. Every eye except hers was on the stage. Eagerly she scanned the rows of animated faces, all betokening delight in the music and singing; but she could not see Cora and Audrey.

They were not in the stalls, nor were they in the pit. But the upper circle—she could only see part of the audience in those

seats; and she had a sudden belief that the upper circle was just the part of the house Cora and Audrey had thought it safest to select.

By holding a whispered talk with the attendant, she got permission to go into the upper circle.

Standing right at the back, she again looked at every seat-holder in turn.

Not there!

A sudden sense of joyful relief filled Judith's heart. Thank goodness they were not here, after all!

She would just go away now, and get back to school without being caught—if she could!

Despite all the attraction of the brilliant stage, with its singing and acting, she at once quitted the auditorium, going out by a door with the illuminated sign, "Exit."

The winding passage-way ended in some baize-covered swing doors. She had rather lost her sense of direction, but she counted on emerging upon the side street. What was her dismay, therefore, when she pulled open one of the swing doors and found herself looking into the front foyer, where she had bought her ticket for the stalls?

It was the main entrance to the theatre—and here in a group close to the very door which she had opened, were Polly, Paula, Tess, and half a dozen other girls!

They all saw her. Miss Redgrave would have seen her, too, but that young lady was getting the tickets at the pigeon-hole. For one awful moment, however, Judith stood face to face with her schoolfellows.

Then, letting the door swing shut, she flashed about, and rushed for another way out.

But, although she escaped from the theatre, and went all through the town to the railway-station without being stopped, the despairing thought was hers: she had been seen—seen by her schoolfellows actually inside the theatre!

And some of those girls were the very ones who had been like Betty—reluctant to discredit her desire to make good!

What would they think of her now?

By a bit of luck that seemed a sheer mockery in such circumstances, she caught a train at once to Morcove Road. All went well with her throughout the secret journey back to school. But—



She had been seen out of bounds; she, the "gated" girl, who had been warned that one more breach of discipline would mean certain expulsion!

For a moment after reaching her study Judith stood gasping for breath behind the closed door; then her overwrought nature gave way, and she sank down by the table, bursting into tears.

In the meantime, Cora and Audrey, in the seclusion of their private box at the Theatre Royal, were enjoying the performance immensely.

The touring company was first-rate, and Cora, at any rate, would have liked to let the artistes see her clapping her applause at the end of each act, only she dared not run the risk of showing herself.

Audrey took things much more coolly. Although she was enjoying the performance, she did not want to applaud. She was not the sort of girl who would.

Just before the curtain was rising on the last act, Cora glanced at her wrist-watch.

"Quarter to five," she whispered to Audrey, for the whole audience was hushing itself now. "When must we go, Audrey?"

"When? At the finish, of course!" Audrey answered lightly.

Cora made no comment.

The curtains rustled apart, and instinctively Cora, banishing all her uneasy thoughts, bent forward to watch the stage. Then she remembered the need for caution, and gave a frightened look over the ledge of the box. It was the first time she had been so indiscreet.

"Audrey!"

It was a flustered whisper from Cora, as she pushed her chair still farther back.

"Oh, Audrey, there are a lot of our girls down there—with Miss Redgrave!"

"Gracious!" exclaimed Audrey, keeping a steady nerve. "Have they seen you?"

"I—no, thank goodness! They can't have, or they would be looking up!" Cora said in great agitation. "I only caught sight of them as the curtain was going up. But——"

"It is all right then; don't get jumpy!"

"We had better go!" Cora said, rising quietly from her chair. "We must, Audrey! Come on! This is the last act, and it may be cut short. It sometimes is, in the provinces, Audrey."

"Oh, very well, darling!" Audrey assented, with an air of giving in over nothing in particular.

She took an audacious peep round the curtain of the box.

"Yes, I can see them——"

"Don't look, Audrey! Come away!" urged Cora.

Swiftly and quietly the girls made their exit from the theatre. No one else was leaving, and so they came out into a perfectly quiet High Street.

Ten minutes later they were running for home in the motor-cycle and side-car, knowing that their misdeed would never be known to anybody now.

Tea was still on the school tables when they got indoors, and so they partook of it down there.

## CHAPTER 18.

### Nothing Wrong with Audrey.

**R**OUND about seven o'clock, Polly Linton came bursting into Study No. 12, singing a snatch of the gipsies' chorus.

"Here, don't you get leaving me all alone for the rest of the evening!" she called back along the passage to Paula and the rest. "I've got no Betty, you know! Stay with me, some of you!"

"Yes, wather!" assented the agreeable Paula, as she came drifting into the room. "Talking of Betty, it's nice to have had that telegwam, geals!"

"Oui!" said Trixie. "But what about prep?"

"Mine's going to wait until the morning," said Polly. "Sit down, some of you. I say! That tenor——"

"That orchestra——"

"And the gipsy queen——"

And the madcap began to sing the gipsies' chorus again, at the same time dragging Paula out of a chair to waltz her round the study.

"Yes, wather! Howevah, pway don't be quite so fwivolous, Polly, deah!" panted Paula. "Weally, I—Oh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The waltzing couple had crashed against Audrey, who was just coming into the room.



Andrey over the  
 "You have been to the opera?" purred Audrey. "How jolly! I say, though, will you all come along to my little supper party at eight o'clock?"

"What!"

"I prefer to give supper parties instead of teas," Audrey said demurely. "No objection, is there?"

"Gracious, no! But——"

"I was going to say," Audrey pursued, "I should be very sorry to do anything that was against regulations."

In the midst of all her excitement over the opera, madeap Polly had a sudden serious moment. She was looking at Audrey, thinking how perfectly sincerely she had made that remark about not defying regulations.

And this was the girl whom Betty had said should be watched.

What on earth could have possessed Betty when she voiced that warning?

She, Polly, was always watching Audrey, if only because the new girl was so fascinating, compelling attention. But as for finding anything suspicious about her conduct—no, really, it was just the other way about!

"Then I shall expect you all—ta-ta!" Audrey said engagingly, and drifted away, taking two or three other girls with her.

There remained with Polly in Study 12 only Tess, Paula, Trixie, Dolly, Bluebell, and Madge.

"It is perfectly sickening," Polly sighed. "Judith Grandways, although she is gated, along with her sister, she—she was at the theatre this afternoon!"

"We all saw her——"

"Yes, wather! And, bai Jove, it is extremely disappointing," said Paula. "I have been most weluctant to believe that Judy was backsliding. After this, howevah——"

"I don't know what Betty would say about it," muttered Polly. "We are going to hold our tongues, of course. If it got to Miss Somerfield's ears——"

"Then Judith Grandways would be sent packing," struck in Tess. "I can't think why she did a thing like that!"

"Sheer glorying in mischief," muttered Dolly sadly.

"It's enough to make anybody feel that they've done with her," murmured Bluebell

Courtney sadly, "though I can't altogether forget that at one time appearances were all against me. I—I can't help feeling sorry for Judith."

"It's very natural that you should feel like that, Bluebell," interposed Polly, "but Judith's case is very different."

"Weal, I am not surpvised," drawled Paula. "Howevah, I can't be done with Judy, even now. No, geals, I cannot forget that Judy once saved my life, bai Jove. Tweak her gently, geals!"

Paula was getting up from her chair as she spoke. She did not trouble to remark why she felt suddenly impelled to withdraw from the pleasant society of her chums. Paula had her faults and foibles; but one thing was to her credit, anyhow: she often tried to do a bit of good by stealth.

She quitted the room, and doubtless her chums only thought she was going off to put on a pretty frock, in honour of the supper party at eight o'clock. For once, however, Paula Creel was not thinking about her toilette table.

She went along to the Grandways' study and put her head just inside the doorway. Both sisters were there, and so Paula called Judith outside to speak for a few moments.

"I twust you don't mind, Judy?" the swell girl said in her apologetic manner, when they had walked to the stairs end of the corridor. It was perfectly quiet there. "I—er—without wishing to use any stwong expwessions, don't you know——"

"You want to say what you think of me for being where you saw me, this afternoon?" Judith took her up.

"Yes, wather! I mean—no, bai Jove; not that at all, Judy! I merely wished to wemark, don't you know; I twust you weally want to wetaim the wegard of geals like Betty, Polly, and others?"

"How can I retain a thing I have lost?" was Judith's bitter exclamation. "Oh, it's no use!"

"Be a bwick, Judy," Paula said then, laying a hand upon the other's shoulder.

"Weally, don't you know, it is going to be a gweat gwief to me if you don't twy to play the game. Yes, wather!"

Judith was nearly crying now.

"That's wight," Paula said, starting to beam. "A geal who can cwly about a wong thing she has done—theah's still hope for



her, bai Jove! So just you go on twying, Judy!"

"Paula——"

"Twying and ewying, bai Jove! Theah's nothing like it!" said Paula. "And wemember," she added, with a final encouraging pat of the hand, "if at first you don't succeed, just twy, twy again!"

She drifted away, having done her honest best, in her own simple, fatuous fashion, to bring the supposed backslider up to the mark again. Judith, sweeping a hand across her wet lashes, turned back towards the studies, and just then several of the girls came away from No. 12.

Tess, Trixie, Dolly, and Bluebell—all four came to a dead stop, confronting Judith. She had expected them to pass her by icily, and so they might have done, only they were remembering Paula's words: "Tweat her gently, geals!"

They knew that Paula, in addition to her good nature and tolerant disposition, had a special reason for wishing Judith to be treated gently.

So, despite the misgivings that many of them felt after this latest lapse, for Paula's sake they wanted to gloss over it as much as possible.

"Why did you do it, Judy?" Tess asked her, more in sorrow than in anger. "You know what I mean—this afternoon! Why did you?"

Judith opened her mouth as though about to speak, but no words came forth in answer to the question Tess had asked.

"Do be very careful, Judith," admonished Trixie gently. "You must know that if Miss Somerfield got to hear of this there could only be one ending to it all. What-ever possessed you?"

"I can't tell you," was all poor Judith said at last.

"What an answer!" Tess could not help exclaiming, with a shrug. "She cannot tell us—huh!"

And all four girls passed on together, whilst the supposed backslider stood looking after them, tight-lipped and pale.

She could not blame them, after all; appearances were all against her.

Was it any use trying, so her thoughts ran on, when she seemed to get deeper and deeper into disgrace, no matter how careful she was?

"Audrey Blain! Yes," she said to her-

self, through clenched teeth. "Yes, it is she who is at the bottom of everything! Oh, if only I could defeat her scheme! If only I could prove to the girls that she is fooling them!"

But could she? It seemed very doubtful indeed.

## CHAPTER 19.

### Audrey Sends a Telegram.

"WHAT shall we do about it?" asked Tess Trelawney.

"Me, do?" said Polly Linton, the madcap of the Fourth Form at Morcove School. "Gracious, I'm not the captain, to decide such a thing as this! But I think the whole lot of us ought to feel like accepting the challenge."

"Yes, wather!" chimed in Paula Creel, with her rich drawl.

Some half-dozen girls were gathered in Study No. 12, the "den" most favoured with callers, for the simple reason that it was the one occupied by Betty Barton, the Form captain, and her bosom chum, Polly.

But Betty Barton was not here to-day.

Betty Barton had not returned yet, and no one was deputising for the absent captain. Hence the reason for these girls having to confer about a certain matter which really demanded a Form captain's handling.

Dolly Delane took up the postcard, which, although it was addressed to Betty Barton, had been handed to Polly Linton, by the Form-mistress, half an hour ago.

"It is signed, 'Miriam Haste, Fourth Form captain, Barncombe House School,'" Dolly commented. "She must be a new captain——"

"Yes, nodded Polly. "But that isn't the point. Question is, shall we go over there to play them at cricket, on Saturday afternoon, or not? I'd like to."

"Same here," said Tess.

"Count me in!" cried Dolly, with enthusiasm. "What about you, Paula?"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove! Gwacious, geals, we are not afwaid we'll get a whacking, I twust?"

"Right!" exclaimed Polly gaily. "That settles it, for where you girls lead others will follow. We shall easily get up a strong team. Hallo, Madge!"

"Read that!" cried Polly, flicking across



the postcard. "Are you game for a cricket match on Saturday, Madge? Against Barncombe House."

"Oh, yes!"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove!"

Paula Creel manifested signs of heaving out of the chair in which she was lolling, as if to make a very earnest speech.

But she was forestalled by another glad cry of welcome, as Polly Linton saw Audrey Blain appear at the open door.

"Audrey, will you show us what you can do at cricket on Saturday? We have hardly seen you handle a bat since you came to the school at the beginning of the season."

"Saturday," repeated Audrey. "Saturday? I'd love to back up the Form. But—"

She turned to Madge Minden.

"It rather puts an end to that great idea of ours, doesn't it, Madge, dear," she murmured. "We thought that a picnic in the hayfields before the hay is carted would be so—"

"Ripping!"

"Topping!"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove! Howevah—"

"There is this challenge from Barncombe House," Polly said, with a grimace. "Your idea sounds tempting, Audrey. I'd love a picnic in the hay, but it will be something new for the Fourth Form to put pleasure before sport."

"Unless," put in Audrey, "we can picnic in the hayfields on the way to Barncombe House and play the match in the evening."

At once Audrey's idea caught on, and was acclaimed ripping.

"Just the thing!" agreed Polly. "I'll get Barncombe House on the 'phone at once and see if they are agreeable."

And away she whirled, to return after a few minutes to say that Barncombe had agreed and the match was to take place on Saturday after tea.

Saturday dawned a gloriously fine day. It was the continuance of a sunny spell that had been ideal for the hay-making. And the girls had been readily granted permission to indulge all their wishes.

They were to have their picnic in one of the many hayfields on the way to Barncombe; then, when the afternoon had worn on, they were to continue on their bikes to Barncombe House School, there

to play the great cricket-match in the cooler air of early evening.

Play the match, and win it, for the glory of Morcove and the Form!

"Betty should be here!" That was Polly's one boisterous cry, over and over again, as she made her own preparations in Study 12 for both picnic and sport. "She simply should be here to-day!"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove!" answered Paula, although Polly had imagined, as she fluttered around, that she was speaking to herself. "Howevah—"

"Are you packed up, then, Paula?"

"Yes, wather! I have pwepared a small contwibution to the wepast, don't you know. I was going to wemark, howevah—"

"Paula, dear, I really haven't time to listen to remarks at present! Where's my satchel?" fumed Polly.

"Bai Jove—"

"My satchel! Where—"

"I wather fancy, don't you know, Polly, deah, there is a satchel behind that cheah!"

There was. It was Betty Barton's, but what was Betty's was Polly's, and vice versa, in Study 12.

Polly slammed the satchel on the table, and began to pack it—crum it—with her "contwibution" to the feast.

Just as she was slinging the bulging load about her shoulder, other girls came in, all ready for starting away on their bikes.

"Hallo, Madge! Hallo, Tess—Dolly—Trixie—Bluebell! I say, you have all got monster parcels!" Polly cried. "Do you think I have packed enough?"

"Gracious!" they laughed, taking a look at her satchel, as she swung it round for inspection.

"Anyhow," chuckled the madcap of the Form, "it will do for a snack! We can have more refreshments in Barncombe, when we ride on to the match. Coming?"

"Yes, wather!"

"Well, then, come on!"

And away rushed Polly, not setting herself up to be the leader of the party, but certainly leading by at least half a dozen paces.

"And pway, Madge, deah," drawled Paula, as they all trooped downstairs, "wheah is Audwey?"

"Audrey—we may see her at the sheds, getting her motor-bike and siddecar out."



"Oh, bai Jove! Is she ddiving you as passenger?"

"No," said Madge; "I think she is running Cora Grandways. She talked about giving Cora a treat, as it is Cora's first day of liberty after the gating."

Paula nodded, as if that ended the matter, but the mention of Cora had turned her thoughts to Judith, and when she saw that girl in the playground going across to a bench beneath an elm with a book, she called to her:

"Judy, deah! Now, do come with us! There's still time!"

Judith, however, only looked round to give a shake of the head; then she walked on, opening her book to read as she stepped across the grass.

At this instant the girls heard the "Bang, bang, bang!" of Audrey's motor-cycle, as she started it up.

The sound set them running on to the cycle-sheds, and there, sure enough, Audrey was already astride the saddle, with Cora Grandways as a passenger in the car.

"Oh, you are off!" shouted Polly, Tess, Bluebell, and one or two others.

Audrey softened down the explosions of the engine.

"Yes," she smiled. "But you girls will get to the hayfield first, after all. I'm running into Barncombe for some things. Shall come back to the picnic spot at once, though."

"What things?" asked Dolly, laughing. "Don't you go buying up the Creamery, Audrey!"

"You mind your own business!" was Audrey's playful retort. "Look out, there! We are off!"

She put the clutch in, and away went the "outfit," purring beautifully down the gravel-path and round to the main gateway.

It is pretty certain that she and Cora were almost half way to the town by the time the girls, with the ordinary cycles, were pedalling through that same gateway.

Swiftly the motor-cycle sped along the beautiful highway, taking the undulations at an even pace, just as quickly up the hills as down them.

Usually the breeze was laden with the fresh scent of the sea, but to-day Audrey and Cora smelt the sweet, new-made hay lying about in the hot sunshine, just ready for picking up.

"That's the field, Cora!" Audrey sang out, as they flashed past a white field-gate.

"Yes!" shouted back Cora Grandways.

"They can't possibly mistake it?"

"Oh, no! Every girl at Morcove knows that meadow. It is called Whiteacres."

Audrey nodded, as if pleased to be so reassured. She said no more—not because she was in anything but the sweetest of moods with Cora, but because one had to give one's whole attention to the driving.

By half-past two they were in the heart of Barncombe town, with the motor-cycle and sidecar drawn up the kerb outside the Creamery Tea-rooms.

"Now, I want to get some things for the picnic here," said Audrey. "And I also want to go to the grocer's and one or two other shops."

She led the way into the Creamery, which was the very best teasshop in the town. Even at this early hour of the afternoon it was fairly crowded, for Barncombe was teeming with early holiday-makers. Audrey found a table for two, however, and she invited Cora to sit down and have an ice with her.

"Now, dear," Audrey smiled, when they were spooning at the delicious confections, "am I being all right to you to-day?"

"Oh, Audrey, you are ripping!" Cora said, with terrific fervour. "If only you'll be like this to me sometimes, I'll do anything for you!"

"Well, there's nothing I want you to do just at present, thanks!" laughed Audrey. "We had a lovely spin just now, eh?"

"Glorious!"

They chatted on until the ices were finished; then Audrey jumped up, telling Cora to remain there.

"You don't want to come round with me to the grocer's and those other shops, Cora."

"Oh, but——"

"I might lose you, and then we should be all the afternoon looking for each other," Audrey urged. "There's a picture-paper—have a look at that."

And she was off, causing many people to give her a quick, admiring glance as she went speeding along the High Street. Audrey was a girl who would attract attention anywhere.

She went to all the shops she had men-



tioned to Cora. But what was this building Audrey was suddenly stepping into after her breathless shopping? The central post-office!

Audrey had said nothing to anybody about wanting to visit the post-office.

Going swiftly to the side ledge where telegrams could be written out, she snatched up a form, and wrote this message in block letters:

"DO NOT COME TO-DAY. REGRET CANNOT PLAY THE EVENING MATCH.—M. H."

Taking her stand among a whole crowd of people waiting to send off telegrams, Audrey at last slipped the message under the wire, with the exact money to pay for it.

The telegram was seized by a girl clerk, who was far too busy to notice who had handed it in. Audrey quickly slipped out of the throng, and made for the street.

Ten minutes later she was whizzing Cora Grandways out of the town and along the same road that they had come in by, making for the field with the white gate.

## CHAPTER 20.

### Hurrah for the Hayfields!

"YES," said Polly Linton. "Betty certainly ought to be here!"

She and her companion cyclists had reached the picnic spot.

Five minutes since, they had stalled their machines along the shady side of a hedge, just inside the field, and now they were spreading themselves in the very sunniest corner, where the hayrick would be built next week.

A couple of loads of the sweet-scented, rustling hay had been drawn in off the field to that corner and dumped there.

"Gorgeous!" exclaimed Tess Trelawney, sitting down flop.

"Yes, wather! A twifle pwickly, bai Jove!" said Paula, as she put her hand on a dry nettle. "Howevah, I quite agwee, geals, this is a treat!"

"Oui, oui!" chimed in Trixie. "There won't be such another chance for us this summer—jamais, jamais!"

"Jammy, jammy!" sang out Polly. "Oh,

my hat! Won't the wasps be round presently! My satchel is simply oozing jam!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Take it away!" groaned Paula, as she looked at the bursting satchel, which the madcap held up for inspection. "If you will act about when you are out cycling, bai Jove, how can you expect to come through without twouble?"

For Polly, during the cycle ride, had come a cropper, with sad results to her satchel.

"Never mind," said Bluebell. "I'm sure there is plenty of tuck to go round. If you had seen the amount of eatables that Paula packed——"

"Pway wefrain fwom any wemarks about my contwibution to the wepast," said Paula, settling down as if she intended to go to sleep. "I have only done what I wegard as the pwoper thing, bai Jove!"

Then she closed her eyes and breathed soothingly. Next moment, however, she sat up, and finally moved to another place.

"What's wrong?" asked Polly.

"Quite all wight," Paula answered. "Only I wather fancy they were all nettles theah. Howevah, this is better, bai Jove!"

And again she sank back, closing her eyes and breathing deeply.

"Well," Polly broke out, ending a sudden pause in all the chatter, "what about tea?"

"Tea—now?" the girls laughed, with pardonable surprise.

"What about getting tea ready, anyhow?" Polly insisted. "It's such fun!"

"Oh, pway let us have a bwief spell of wost!" Paula implored, without opening her eyes. "I'm feeling so extwemely comfortable, bai Jove, I—— Yah! Bah!" she suddenly spluttered.

"Gracious, Paula!"

"Burr! Splutter—healp!"

"Whatever is the matter, dear?"

"Quite all wight," Paula said, shutting her eyes again. "Only I wather thought I was swallowing a fly, bai Jove!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, shall we," suggested Polly, when the laughter had died away, "see about tea? And then, when Audrey and Cora arrive, we can——"

"Heah, bai Jove!" spluttered Paula.

"Oh, dear, Paula, what is it now?"

"Quite all wight, and pway excuse me!"



said Paula, sitting up in a rather flustered state. "Only, do you geals find the wasps wather twoublesome?"

No. None of the girls had heard any wasps buzzing close.

"Extwemely wemarkable!" Paula said blandly. "They wather appear to fancy me, bai Jove! Howevah!"

And she started to shake up the hay behind her, just as if she were shaking up cushions.

"Well," Polly began again, "supposing we do as I say, and then——"

"Ow, healp!" yelped Paula, suddenly jumping up, as if stung. "Heah, bai Jove, geals!"

"You again, Paula!"

"Have I been weclining on a wasps' nest, or what?" gasped poor Paula. "I put my hand into the hay, and—— Gwacious, look at my hand now! All covered with——"

"Jam!" shouted Polly, and she exploded with laughter. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"He, he, he! Jam——"

"Geals, pway—what—who ——"

"I forgot!" chuckled Polly. "Ha, ha, ha! I set the broken jampot there! He, he, he!"

"Did you, bai Jove!" grimaced Paula. "How extwemely careless you are! No wonder the wasps—— Heah, look at them, you know! They are sawwounding me! Healp!"

And Paula rushed away as if she really had upset a whole colony of wasps just now.

Shrieking with laughter, for a few moments the other girls were helpless to tackle the unpleasant situation. The jam in the hay actually was attracting a large number of wasps, and it seemed as if the picnickers would have to seek some other spot.

At last, however, Bluebell Courtney rose to the occasion.

Boldly she stepped to the danger zone, gathered up the jampot and the jammy hay in a great bundle, without soiling her hands, and carted it at least fifty yards.

The wasps buzzed after her, eager for their feed, and she left them at it, returning with a triumphant grin upon her pretty face.

Then the girls heard the blare of a motor-horn, and next minute Cora and Audrey were in the hayfield.

The motor-cycle and side-car were "parked" in the shade of the hedge, close to the bicycles, and the two girls came up, laden with Audrey's purchases in the town.

"Audrey, whatever have you been doing?" cried Polly, her eyes a-dance. "I guessed that was your little game!"

"Oh, well, I wanted the picnic to be a success!" shrugged Audrey, sinking to her knees on the hay.

She half closed her eyes to look up at the sun, then gazed all round the sweet-scented field.

"Anybody sorry about coming?" she jested.

"Not likely!" cried Polly. "But I do wish Betty was here! Well——"

"Yes?"

"What about——"

"Tea!"

The remark was made in sections, as it were, by the girls. And that meant, of course, perfect agreement on the point. It was time for tea!

So for the next few minutes there was a great unstrapping of satchels and undoing of parcels, and a general laying out of eatables and drinkables.

On a spotless tablecloth, spread upon the hay, the girls put out their various contributions to the feast. Teacups clattered into saucers, tumblers were dumped about, thermos-flasks, full of piping-hot tea, stood imposingly among the more ordinary-looking lemonade-bottles.

"I think somebody ought to take charge of the tea," said Tess. "How about you, Polly?"

"No, thanks! I think Audrey——"

"Oh, no, thanks!" smiled Audrey, very demurely. "Betty isn't here, or I suppose she would be supervising. Aren't you her deputy, Polly?"

"No!" said Polly emphatically. "It is quite a mistake to think I'm deputy-captain."

"Then it amounts to this," said Audrey. "In the absence of Betty, we are all equals here."

"And very nice, too!" rejoined Cora. "I mean——"

She didn't know what to say to excuse that remark, which had had just a flavour of the old sneering dislike of acknowledging a captain. She subsided with a laugh.



"Paula—wake up, Paula!" sang out Polly gaily.

"Eh, what? Oh, bai Jove, is tea weady?" exclaimed Paula, after she had opened her eyes in a bewildered fashion. "How wefweshing! I am extremely soywy I did not hearp, bai Jove!"

"Bluebell and I have had a nice job, unpacking your contribution!" laughed Tess.

"I must apologise——"

"Oh, don't do that—nothing to be sorry about!" grinned Tess. "It is a very nice contribution. You and Audrey between you have beat the band!"

"All I know is," chattered Polly, passing the plates round, "we shan't feel up to much cricket after a feed like this."

"Who cares? I don't!" said Cora.

Then she bit her lip again, and coloured.

That was another slip. The girls had given her a quick glance. Not a word of reproach—only a glance; but it was a glance which told Cora that this was not the way to win their regard.

The cricket match was a definite engagement to play; it was a chance for Morcove to achieve a great victory. What right-spirited girl, then, could treat the fixture as being more of a bore than anything else?

The sudden, awkward silence was relieved by Polly's opening a bottle of lemonade, by the simple process of pressing a finger against the glass ball in the neck.

The lemonade was warm—what people call "uppish." As the ball fell in, a fountain of froth spouted up, playing full in Paula's face.

"Gwacious, Polly!" yelled Paula, falling back just as if she had been bowled over by a fire-hydrant. "Healp!"

"Oh, sorry!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Sorry, Paula!" laughed Polly, still manipulating the fizzing lemonade. "My word! Oh!"

"Stop it, you silly!" yelled Paula, as she got another squirting. "Turn the wretched thing the other way, bai Jove!"

"Oh, please, no!" cried Audrey, as Polly swerved the fountain in her direction.

The girls' laughter was simply delirious.

Even when they thought they had laughed the joke out, they went off with a bang

once more, as they ran past Paula trying to get her lemonade back to rights.

"It's a wonder!" groaned Paula. "All in all, but doesn't Polly, dear, how very delicious you are!"

Yet even Paula knew that a picnic would be nothing without a few diversions of the sort that had already happened. In the greatness of her good nature, the swell girl of the Form soon forgave the tantalising Polly, and, altogether, the tea went off amidst no end of fun and laughter.

Just as the girls were clearing up, stowing away the folded cloth, the china and glass, and the cutlery, there was a sudden cry of amazement from Bluebell.

"Hallo—look!"

She was pointing to the field entrance, where a quite familiar figure, wheeling a bicycle, was to be seen. "Coo-ee! Coo-ee!"

Miss Redgrave waved a hand; then, leaving her bicycle propped against the open gate—a sign that she only meant to stop a minute or so—she came across to the girls.

"Oh, I say!" burst out Polly excitedly. "If we had only known! We've eaten all the cakes and drunk all the tea and finished all the lemonade, and——"

"But I could not have stopped for refreshment, thanks!" smiled Miss Redgrave. "I am due in Barncombe at half-past four. Girls, I've brought you a telegram."

"What?"

"If I had not been coming this way myself, I would have sent a maid to look for you with it," the assistant mistress remarked, unfolding the message. "It is from Miriam Haste, over at Barncombe House School. She says——"

"Do not come to-day!" several of the girls read aloud blankly. "Regret cannot play the evening match." Oh, I say!

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove, how extremely——"

"What a sell!" exploded Polly. "Just when we were ready to give them such a licking!"

"Malheur—bad luck!" muttered Trixie.

And Paula said again:

"Yes, wather!"

And then the disappointed and astonished girls could do nothing but stand and look at one another for a few moments.

Polly Linton's face looked as black as thunder.



"Really," she fumed, "this is a sickener! You know, Miss Redgrave, we were so keen on the match. I was looking forward to writing to Betty to-morrow, saying what a licking we had given Barncombe House!"

"It is a great disappointment, I know," sympathised the mistress. "But it is no one's fault, of course. It was good of Miriam Haste to wire at the last moment, to save you the needless trouble of going over. You will stay here a bit longer now, I presume, to enjoy the fun of the hay-field?"

"Yes—yes, that's the idea!" cried most of the girls, although Polly, Tess, and Paula still looked unable to get over the disappointment.

After chatting with them all for a few minutes, Miss Redgrave departed on her cycle, and then the girls sat about in the hay, some of them getting as much enjoyment as ever out of these sunny hours.

But Polly in particular had suffered a blow to her high spirits.

Before another hour was out she was suggesting a return to the school, so that some of them might, at least, get a bit of tennis.

"I'll come—yes," offered Bluebell. "It's rather a lazy business, this."

Polly found several of them just as willing as Bluebell to get back to school. Tess said she didn't mind what they did, either way, and even Paula was ready to abandon her nest of hay.

"What about you, Madge, dear?" Audrey asked. "You look very nice and comfy."

"I am," said Madge.

"So am I," murmured Audrey languidly. "Madge—"

"Yes, Audrey?"

"Stay with me," said Audrey. "I'll run you home in the sidecar."

"But there is Cora. What about her?"

Audrey's answer to that was to call to Cora.

"I say, Cora! You go home on Madge's bike. I gave you a spin coming—now let me give Madge a turn going back!"

"Oh, all right," Cora said, with not too much good grace.

Then Audrey consulted Paula, Tess, and Trixie with those winning eyes of hers. The girl's glance asked coaxingly:

"Won't you stay?"

"Weal," sighed Paula, "yes I would wather like to, don't you know. Howevah

"I think we had better go with Polly," said Tess.

Yet she, too, seemed very loath to make that decision, now that Audrey was smiling into her eyes.

They rode away—all the girls who had cycles—Cora Grandways taking Madge's, and then Madge and Audrey were left sitting close together in the hot sunshine, with the soft hay for a couch.

"In a few minutes," Audrey exclaimed, at last softly, "we'll go along to the motor-bike, and I'll take you a lovely run all round the country, Madge. You'd like to come?"

"Yes, Audrey; I—I'd love it."

"You wanted to stay with me, didn't you?"

"Yes," Madge said, with that strange, fascinated look in her dark eyes.

"Madge," continued Audrey, in a whisper, "we are going to be great pals, aren't we?"

"I— Yes, I feel—"

"Always, Madge? I mean, if ever it should be a case of your choosing between me and some other girl, you'd choose me, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," Madge answered frankly. "I think I would have to."

Audrey suddenly put an arm about Madge's neck and kissed her.

"You are a dear—just my sort!" she said. "And I do love you for it!"

Madge and Audrey sat there for quite a long time, Audrey doing most of the talking. Then, when the sun's rays were weakening, and a cooler breeze was blowing across the hayfield, they got up and went to the motor-cycle and side-car.

"Which way, dear?" Audrey purred, when she had taken her seat astride the saddle.

And Madge answered:

"I don't mind, Audrey."

## CHAPTER 21.

### Audrey Blain's Triumph.

MONDAY morning brought a letter for Polly Linton—and not from Betty, either.

It was just after morning school when the madcap had the missive handed to her.

The postmark was "Barncombe," and



Polly guessed at once that the letter had come from Miriam Haste, the first of the Barncombe girls, explaining why she had not been at the Saturday had had to be away.

From Miriam the letter had come, but its contents were anything but what Polly had anticipated.

As she read the note, her mouth fell open with a soundless "Oh!"

Next minute she was dashing out of Study 12, in search of Paula and the rest.

Paula and Bluebell were in the study which was theirs. Polly burst in upon them like a bombshell.

"That telegram last Saturday—the one Miss Redgrave brought to the hayfield—here's a nice thing!" gasped out Polly.

"Miriam Haste never sent it!"

"What? Oh, bai Jove!"

"Here is a letter from her—read it!" panted Polly. "She is very hurt that we girls did not keep our appointment. She says we have played about with them, that we couldn't really have wanted to take them on at cricket, and— Oh!" Polly stamped a foot. "It's too bad, when we did so want to play that match, and win it!"

Paula laid the letter down. Then she flopped.

"Bai Jove!" she breathed. "Extraordinary!"

"A hoax!" was Bluebell's comment. "A cruel hoax on us! Somebody went to the post-office, and sent off that telegram, so as to—"

"Yes, and who, was it? That's what I want to know!" Polly stormed. "I— Oh, if ever I find out! Only let me get hold of the person!"

"Yes, wather! Howevah," said Paula feebly, "it is some stwanger in the town."

"No; I can't believe that," demurred Polly. "Why should a stranger want to hoax us? What stranger would know anything about a fixture between ourselves and the Barncombe girls? I tell you, that telegram was sent off by someone in this school!"

"My deah Polly—"

"Yes!" insisted Polly, fairly boiling over.

She turned to give a glance to a few girls who had come to the doorway, having heard the sudden to-do. They had been there long enough to gather what the trouble was about.

"I know it!" declared Polly, banging a hand upon the table. "There was a girl

who didn't want the match to be played this afternoon. She didn't want the picnic to be put short. Audrey Blain!"

"Are you talking about me?" broke in the red, calm Audrey, suddenly stepping into the room.

"Yes, I am!" Polly cried. "Oh, and I'm ready to say it to your face, too! My eyes are opened at last. Now I know why Betty warned me to—"

"To do what?" chorused several of the girls, in amazement.

"Never mind," Polly rushed on. "Leave Betty out of it for the present. I say that Audrey Blain here sent that telegram which was delivered to us during the picnic! She sent it off—"

"Are you mad?" Audrey struck in, looking icily indignant.

"Deny it!" challenged Polly. "Deny it, if you can!"

"I do deny it!"

"Then you are a— I won't say what!" Polly almost shouted, whilst the other girls simply gasped for breath. "You did send the telegram. You were in Barncombe early in the afternoon."

"Oh, yes!" Audrey assented coolly. "Shopping for the picnic. Cera was with me. Apparently, however, you don't imagine for a moment that Cera Grandways could have sent the telegram!"

Audrey said this with a laugh. But the moment she had spoken many girls looked as if they suddenly realised that it was far more likely Cera Grandways was the culprit.

At this moment Cera herself pushed in the front.

"You had better not suggest that I sent that message, Polly!" she cried angrily.

"I don't suggest it," was the prompt reply. "You may have known about it, but—"

"I did not!"

"In any case, I am convinced the whole idea of hoaxing us—getting that match wiped out—originated with Audrey."

"Oh, Polly!" Tess put in soothingly. "Steady, dear!"

"I—I can't help it; I feel mad about it!" Polly gulped. "I did so want that match to be won by us! Now we are the scorn of the Barncombe girls, and we can only clear ourselves, as a team, by admitting that one of our own scholars played such a nasty, shabby trick!"

Audrey was looking as calm as ever.



"I appeal to everybody here," she said quietly. "What more can I do than deny it? Did I ever seem to want you not to play the match? If anybody ever talked about its being a good job that the match was off, it was not I."

As she said this, her listeners were instantly reminded of the fact that Cora had been the one who seemed to regard the match as a bore.

"Cora," Tess turned to her to ask gravely, "did you send off that telegram?"

"No—no—no!" was the vehement reply. "Oh, I declare I didn't! I was in the Creamery all the time whilst Audrey was shopping."

"Oh," said Madge Minden, in her quiet way, "Audrey was not with you all the time?"

"That simply proves that Audrey had the chance to go to the post-office, unbeknown to Cora!" cried Polly.

"It also proves, Polly, that Cora had the chance to go to the post-office, unbeknown to Audrey," returned Madge.

"I didn't send that telegram!" Cora repeated, flushing with anger.

"Then what are you girls going to assume?" Audrey asked blandly. "I'm not going to stay here arguing those girls who still want to be my friends will find me in my study." Audrey, drawing herself very erect, marched out of the room.

"One moment, Audrey," Madge pleaded; but the girl answered austere:

"Not here, Madge, dear. If you are still my friend, then perhaps you will come to my study. Any girl who is my friend, I hope she will know how to answer Polly Linton's disgraceful insults."

Audrey stepped along, and in a moment Madge was going after her.

"Madge," cried Polly, in awful dismay, "you—you are not giving me up for that girl?"

"I must," Madge answered, "if you can't be nice to Audrey."

And she passed from the room, watched by all—watched by some of the girls with a look of full approval.

Polly turned then to those who, above all others, were her own and Betty's friends.

"Paula—Tess—Trixie!" she exclaimed distressfully. "Think a moment, and then say if I am not right. Say, then, if Betty was not right in being afraid that Audrey meant

mischief! Audrey and Cora were in the town at the time that wire was sent off to us. Doesn't everything point to one of them having sent the telegram? Who else could have? Who else would want to send it?"

"We have both denied it!" Cora cried out angrily. "I don't know anything about Audrey—what she did, or didn't do, when I was in the Creamery. All I know is—"

"She did send off the telegram!" Polly declared again. "In this case, Cora Grandways, I accept your word. It is plain to me that Audrey only took you with her so that you would be her scapegoat if the thing was ever charged against her."

"Oh, come, Polly!" said Tess. "This is drawing it a bit too strong!"

"It is the truth, I am sure!" Polly flashed.

"I think you are mistaken—I really do," said Tess, making an ominous movement towards the door. "I like Audrey. You liked her, Polly. Only suddenly you have turned against her."

"Yes, because—"

"Your reason isn't good enough," Tess broke in. "I will go along and talk it over with Audrey. If—if I don't come back you'll know—"

"I shall know," said Polly sadly, "that you, too, have gone over to her. Very well."

Again the dramatic hush, as Tess passed to the door—another of them, another of Betty's best supporters in the past, slipping away!

"You know, Polly, deah," Paula sighed, as Polly looked at her, "this is most distressing. I am inclined to agree with Tess and Madge. Yes, wather! Aren't you doing Audrey a most frightful injustice?"

"No. I hold that the thing is proved. And the worst part about it all is that Audrey tried to get Cora to serve as a scapegoat. Cora used to do these things, so Audrey thought we would jump to the conclusion that Cora sent the telegram."

"Weal, theah," Paula said, drifting towards the door, "I'll go and heah what Audwey has to say, don't you know. I'm sowwy, Polly! Howevah, I wather think for once you are wong. Yes, wather!"

"So do I," said Trixie, stepping after Paula.

And the next moment she and Paula had gone.

There were girls still in the room whose



loyalty to herself and Betty was not enough thing to Polly. She had never liked to put the question to herself. What had happened already was almost too much for her to bear.

"Just—go away, please!" she begged them, with a wild gesture. "I don't want any more talk at present. Go!"

So they left her, and as they went, leaving Polly all alone, she sat heavily at the table.

Her eyelids quivered as the tears glistened along her lashes.

She felt grief-stricken, appalled.

## CHAPTER 22.

### "Good old Polly!"

**B**UT Polly was not the type of girl to spend much time crying.

Suddenly she dashed her hand upon the table-edge.

"I'll beat Audrey Blain yet—yes, I will!"

Even as she made the fierce resolve, however, she had thoughts that filled her with despair.

Beat Audrey Blain! There came into Polly's agitated mind a sort of vision of Audrey—Audrey, the beautiful and fascinating; Audrey, the wealthy, clever girl, able to play almost as beautifully as Madge, able to paint a little, like Tess, able to dress like Paula, able to talk French with Trixie almost like a native.

Beat Audrey! How could any girl hope to beat her, least of all a girl who was simply the madcap of the Form?

Polly knew that she was popular—that the girls, almost without exception, liked her, but had she any real hold over them when it came to a serious question of this sort?

Whatever Polly's faults, egotism—self-confidence in her power of leadership—was not one of them, and she doubted very much whether it would be possible for her to exert sufficient influence over the Form to counteract the advantage already gained by Audrey Blain.

And then she thought once again of her absent study-mate, Betty Barton, and the thought lent her fresh courage.

If she could only hold the fort for a little while longer Betty would have returned, and then all would be well. Polly was quite sure of that, at any rate.

"I'll watch her," she said to herself, "and I'll be in a way confused by the time I see her hands—unofficially, of course—but the trust was upon the less that Polly must not fail her. Somehow in time she had got to check Audrey's onward march."

"Yes, I will—I will!" Polly cried again to herself, with another blow of her clenched hand upon the table. "Before Betty comes back—"

She checked her vehement words and dashed suddenly out of the room.

In a few minutes she was in conversation with Miriam Haste, and explaining the matter of the forged telegram.

"When can we play you instead?" were her last words.

"I suppose you couldn't manage to raise a tennis team to play us to-night?" was Miriam Haste's reply. "We should have had a match, but I've just had a wire from our opponents to say that they are down with the 'flu!'"

"It's rather short notice," answered Polly, and then a sudden idea came to her. "But we let you down on Saturday, and it's up to us to help you now. Your opponents scratching has given us a chance. We'll come over to-night!"

"I'd be most grateful if you would," replied Miriam Haste. "My girls are feeling fed-up, I can assure you—two disappointments in a few days!"

"We'll be over to-night without fail!" was Polly's emphatic answer, and she fixed time, and other particulars, and then rang off.

Quick, impulsive Polly had not stopped to think properly of the difficulties she might incur in getting a team together at such short notice. The Fourth were always so keen on sport, she expected no trouble at all.

Polly's first visit was to Miss Redgrave, and she easily fixed up the permits for the tennis team to go over to Barncombe, then she hurried to warn her team.

Unconsciously she wended her way to the sports ground. On a fine evening that was the usual place in which to find Fourth Formers of Morcove School.

Reaching the tennis-courts, she found a number of Fourth Form scholars there. But the very ones she had hoped to see turning



up for a game—the girls who were the Form's best players, and therefore the ones to take part in the coming tournament—they were not here.

Polly's care-free air vanished. Giving a grimace of annoyance, round she turned, and pelted back to the house.

Was she going to find all the absentees from the tennis-courts with Audrey Blain?

She did. Being bidden to "Come in!" by the very sweet voice of Audrey, Polly entered the study, to find it quite crowded.

Audrey herself was lying on a settee. Madge, Paula, Tess, Trixie, Dolly—they were all here. There was yet another girl, besides. This was Cora Grandways.

"Hallo, Polly!" Audrey said, as if she bore the deputy-captain all the goodwill in the world. "We were just hoping you would join us. I've planned to give a supper to-night in honour of my pater's birthday."

"To-night?" echoed Polly.

"Yes, to-night," answered Audrey. "Cora, here, and I have fixed up our grievances, and I hoped, if you did not bear me any ill-will, you would prove it by staying, too. I accept Cora's word that she did not send the telegram, and I think you might take mine. There's no proof that either of us sent the telegram. It might be anyone in the school—or someone out of it, for that matter!"

"But I've just fixed for all of us—or, at least, a tennis team—to go over to Barncombe to-night!" was Polly's blunt reply, addressed more to the company as a whole than to Audrey in particular.

"Oh!" was Madge's comment, and the others had voiced displeasure.

"It is a nuisance, I admit," sighed Polly. "I know that it is very short notice, but, after all, we let Miriam Haste down on Saturday, and when she told me on the telephone just now that she had just been disappointed over a tennis match to-night I offered to fill the breach."

"That is all very well," Tess murmured. "But we can't chop and change about like this at a moment's notice."

"It is too bad——"

"Yes, wather! Weally, Polly, deah, although I am keen as mustard, bai Jove, on that tournament, I wather feel, don't you know——"

"Don't think we're blaming you, Polly," Madge said, as Paula paused. "But it

hardly seems to me that Miriam Haste is justified in expecting us to go over to Barncombe House at such short notice."

"I know it's riling," Polly said, at last, gently. "But if you girls will forgo the supper, I—I'll be really grateful. After all, Miriam knew nothing of the supper."

No one spoke for a few seconds, then Trixie Hope broke in with:

"But think of the expense to which Audrey has been put! Everything has been ordered, hasn't it, Audrey?"

"Oh, yes!" It was Audrey's first contribution to the talk. "The things are now on the way from Barncombe."

Then there was another pause, Polly frowning unhappily the while.

She knew that Audrey's comparative silence did not mean any indifference on her part as to whether the supper was held or not.

The girl was simply lying low, leaving a jolly good row to work up between the tennis party and Polly.

"You can have a supper any other evening," said Polly. "Don't let's have a scene. I appeal to all you girls. Just make up your minds that the tennis tournament must come first. It's for the honour of the Form, you know, and the Fourth have never before let anything stand before sport."

Then Madge said half resignedly:

"Well, I shall do just what the rest decide to do."

"Yes, wather! If Tess and Twixie——"

"I think it rather a shame," said Tess glumly.

"So do I," said Trixie, "when Audrey has got in all these things, at her own expense, to be hostess to the lot of us."

"I'll do whatever the majority wish," Dolly Delane remarked.

Polly turned to Etta Hargrove and Eva Merrick. She had great hopes of their being much keener on the tennis tournament than on staying for the supper.

But it was soon evident that these two were much of the same opinion as the rest.

"I say you must go for the honour of the Form," cried Polly, now thoroughly excited. "Can I go back to the telephone and tell Miriam Haste that I can't raise a team to play her? Whatever would Betty say when she returned? The Fourth have never put a supper before a challenge before!"



And she looked Audrey full in the eyes. "These are the girls I want for my team," continued Polly. "I want you for the honour of the Fourth don't refuse to play for me. I must ask you to come away now, for we must start at once."

She read out a list she had hastily prepared.

There was Madge, Paula, Tess, Trisla, and the rest of the best of the Fourth Form's tennis players.

For a moment it seemed as if the girls were going to refuse to play, then Madge turned to Audrey.

"I'm sorry I won't be able to stay to supper to-night, Audrey," she said. "It's a rule of the Fourth that when a Form matter comes up all private desires and wishes take second place. Polly has promised that the Fourth will go to Barncombe, and whether she had the right to make that promise is another matter; we must back her up for the honour of the Form."

And she passed from the room. One by one the other players made their apologies to Audrey and followed her.

Polly was the last to go.

"Don't apologise for what you've done," said Audrey before Polly could speak. "If it's for the honour of the Form, that's enough for me."

But though she smiled sweetly, Polly knew she was writhing under the skin.

Polly was decidedly unpopular when the charabanc arrived to take the tennis team to Barncombe House. Though they had agreed to go, all the girls still thought Polly had been very high-handed in her action, and though they talked among themselves, they scarcely spoke to the deputy-captain.

One girl watched them go from a study window. Audrey was attempting to act as hostess to a dozen or so girls that she did not want—those she wanted were off with Polly.

Audrey felt uneasy. Polly was not popular now, it was true, but later, when the girls had had time to think the matter over, what would be their feelings then?

Audrey was glad when her supper-party was over, and about eight-thirty she strolled towards the school gates, as she thought the tennis players might be back at any minute now.

Sure enough, ten minutes later the dusty

motor came in through the school gates, packed with the tennis players.

The driver—perhaps encouraged to do it by his passengers—gave a hurtling blast on the motor-horn, and then a cheer went up.

Moreove had won the tournament! That was a certainty.

In a flash girls were swarming across from all parts of the grounds, to line the route and cheer madly as the charabanc rumbled past.

"Hurrah! Hooray! Bravo, the Fourth!" was the hearty cry, whilst hands and handkerchiefs were waved at the smiling victors in the motor. "Well done, Morecove!"

Then the cheering girls chased the vehicle to the setting-down place in front of the porch, where a goodly crowd was already assembled.

As Polly and the rest clambered down from the seats, rather dusty and ruffled about the hair, the cheers were renewed. Morecove had won, yes!

Miss Somerfield herself welcomed the victors, and there was Miss Masingham, the Form-mistress, with Miss Hedgrave. Naturally enough, the girls were anxious to get indoors without being made a fuss of, but Polly, as their leader, simply had to stay and give details of the tournament.

But as soon as the crowd dispersed, Madge passed word round for a special general meeting of the Fourth Form at once in the Fourth Form Common-room. Polly was asked to attend as well.

"Girls," said Madge, as soon as all the Form were present, "I've called this meeting so as to make a public apology to Polly Linton. Some may have thought her wrong this afternoon, for one foolish moment I did. But the Fourth always has been, and always will be, I hope, ready to accept any challenge at any moment. Polly dear, I've been so miserable ever since, though you may not have thought it. You were right, and I was wrong—"

"Yes, wather! And I tell you, geals," simpered Paula, "it made me play a tremendous game at the tournament—feeling I hadn't been a proper bwick at all, don't you know!"

"Hear, hear-r-r!" said Tess. "I believe we only beat Barncombe House because we all felt so ashamed."



Then everybody began to talk or shout at once, and what everybody talked, or shouted, was all in Polly's favour. Good old Polly! What would the Form be without a girl like her?

And all this time Audrey Blain was alone in her study.

Audrey Blain's handsome face was sullen indeed as she pondered the outlook for herself.

Beaten! Beaten after all—and by Polly Linton!

It seemed to Audrey that she would simply have to haul down her colours now, and become a mere follower of the captain, instead of the leader of her own circle. Hateful, humiliating position to be faced. But, there—

After all, whatever one had to be on the surface, at heart one could still be always the same subtle Audrey. So long as one was not found out, not shown up to Madge and all the rest, what did it matter?

And as these cynical thoughts came into Audrey's cunning mind the old wicked smile flickered at her lips again.

"I think I really will be Betty's 'friend' when she comes back," was her ominous decision. "Dear Betty, dear Polly—bah!"

## CHAPTER 23.

### Not Quite "Cricket."

"YOU will be out middle stump this time, Madge!"

"Think so, Polly?"

"Certain!" cried back Polly Linton, the madcap of the Fourth Form at Morcove School.

She stood back from the single stump to take a run for the deadly ball which she was going to send down the pitch.

"One of my brother Jack's middle-stumpers!" she announced. "Watch, girls!"

Madge Minden was not to be dismayed. In the last three minutes she had only been "out" once. As a set-off to that humiliation, she had been punishing the bowling very creditably, as she stood at the practice-wicket in the school playing-field.

The ball came down—one of those that you hardly know whether to treat as fast or slow. Madge was not flustered.

Smack!

"Oh, good!" cried some of the other girls.

But it was an easy catch, and almost in the same breath those same girls sang out:

"Now, Paula, look out—oh, catch it!"

Paula Creel was in a dream, putting a stray wisp of hair to rights. She exclaimed in a drawing tone:

"Bai Jove, it's quite all wight, geals! You are out, Madge—yes, wather!"

Madge, however, was not out, for Paula didn't catch the ball.

It slipped through Paula's hands, and a derisive chorus was heard:

"Butter-fingers! Boo!"

"Yes, wather!" Paula agreed, quite amiably. "Howevah, twy again, Madge deah!"

Just at that moment, Audrey Blain, who had been playing cricket, but had returned to the school, was hailed by a pleasant:

"Audrey—just a moment!"

Audrey, turning away from the stairs, saw that the headmistress had called her, and held a telegram, and the girl had that sharp thrill which everybody experiences at sight of a "flimsy."

"Where are all your chums, Audrey?" asked the headmistress. "I am sure they will be glad to have the news that has just come by telegram. Your Form captain, Betty Barton—"

"She is really returning to the school on Monday?" Audrey burst out excitedly, "I have heard it said—"

"Betty is actually returning to-day!" Miss Somerfield hastened to announce delightedly. "She arrives by the four-twenty this afternoon."

"The four-twenty!" echoed Audrey.

She glanced at her wrist-watch. Twenty to four now!

"There's a school carriage going to the station in a few minutes," Miss Somerfield pursued. "Perhaps Polly Linton and one or two others would like to go in it to meet Betty there? They have my permission."

The headmistress turned back towards her own sanctum, doubtless feeling quite sure that Audrey would rush away to tell Polly and the rest.

Audrey Blain, however, did not run back to the field with the glorious tidings. She stood a moment at the foot of the



stairs, looking very thoughtful, then she made a rush up the stairs, and it is not about some urgent bit of business.

Going past her own study, to the Fourth Form quarters, she darted in the door of No. 7, and burst in upon Cora Grandwater.

"Cora!"

"Hallo! I don't often see you looking so excited!" exclaimed Cora. The frowning look that had been upon her handsome face suddenly vanished. "You haven't often come rushing in search of me like this, these last few days, Audrey!"

"Your sister not here?" commented Audrey.

"No, she's gone for a walk—moping about alone, as usual," grimaced Cora. "You know what Judy is these days!"

"Well, never mind Judy," Audrey rushed on. "Cora, would you like to do me a service—make me ever so grateful?"

"What? Oh, you know, Audrey!" Cora exclaimed, in the fawning tone of a would-be toady. "I'm always longing to be your pal!"

"Well, listen!" Audrey had shut the door. She stepped close to the other girl to speak in a lowered tone. "Betty Barton is arriving to-day——"

"To-day!"

"Yes—by the four-twenty. I believe I'm the only girl who has had the news. Miss Somerfield imagines, I fancy, that I'll rush to tell the others; but I'm not going to. Cora, I'm going to have the first half-hour with Betty—alone!"

"But supposing——"

"Oh, if you are going to argue!" burst out Audrey. "I have no time to waste, Cora. Either do what I say, or else fail me, and take the consequences. I can always manage without you!"

"I don't want you to manage without me," mumbled Cora. "Goodness knows, I'm only too pleased to do anything to oblige. But——"

"All right, then; get tea ready whilst I'm away."

"Yes. Only, Audrey——"

But Audrey was gone.

A few seconds she spent in her own beautifully furnished study. She ran a comb through her lovely, golden hair, picked up some gloves, and then went off, slipping out of the house by a back way.

Ten minutes later, she ran to meet the

own carriage that was up the way to pick up Betty Barton and her luggage.

It had come down the school drive with its own behind the coachman, and as Audrey saw that Betty and the rest had still to long the news.

"Halt a moment!" Audrey cried to the driver, and he pulled up the horse. "I'm to go to the station to meet my school-fellow."

"Ay, to be sure, miss!" nodded the coachman affably. "Miss Somerfield said as there might be two or three of you would care to have the drive."

"Well, I'm the only one, so get on!" Audrey said, as she subsided gracefully on to the cushioned seat.

It is safe to say that no other Fourth Form girl—not even Paula Creel, the aristocrat of the Form—could have made a prettier picture than Audrey Blain made, lolling in the open carriage as it bowled along the highway.

But, for all the sweet expression of her pretty face, as she was now driven along to the station, Audrey felt anything but happy in her mind.

She had a very distinct feeling that she would have to sing smaller than ever, now that Betty Barton herself was going to resume the leadership again.

Betty and Polly together! It was hopeless to try and pull them down. Other girls could not be lured away from them. Their study—No. 12 in the corridor—was famous for its friendly gatherings. At the present moment, Audrey knew that there was not a girl in the Form who, if put to the test, would choose her for a friend, to the exclusion of Betty and Polly. And so——

Here she was, on her way to the railway-station, feeling it a very desirable policy to make friends with Betty right away.

Just as the carriage was pulling off the main road into the station approach, a fine car came humming along, going in the direction of the school.

Audrey noticed that it held a handsome man of twenty-five or more, who was driving, and a lad who could not long have finished with school. She liked the look of both of them, and when they doffed their caps, she eagerly answered the greeting.

"You know who them two were, miss?" the coachman smiled, as he pulled up out-



side the booking-office. "Mr. Jack Somerfield, the headmistress' brother——"

"Oh!" Audrey exclaimed, in complete surprise. "I wondered why they raised their hats. And the lad?"

"Master Jack Linton, I fancy, miss."

"Jack Linton? Do you mean Polly Linton's brother?"

"Ay, miss!"

Audrey walked away, exclaiming, "Fancy!"

She passed through to the deserted platform, thinking more of the two in the car, for the moment, than of Betty's imminent arrival.

She had heard no talk at the school of the headmistress expecting her bachelor brother to turn up. Nor had the girls gossiped about the expected arrival of Polly's brother.

"So that was Jack Linton!" Audrey pondered. She had often heard the girls talking about him, and had wished she could meet him, he seemed to be such a good sort from all accounts.

The creaking of a signal wire suddenly brought her mind back to her immediate task—that of meeting Betty and being awfully nice to her at once.

Audrey was a girl who hungered for popularity. The thought of her being cold-shouldered—as seemed likely since her failure to steal away Betty's friends—was a dismaying one. And so, when at last the train came in, she was wearing her most winning smile as she rushed to meet the one passenger who alighted.

"There you are, Betty! How glad I am! Oh, it is nice to have you back!"

And, just as if she had never been anything but passionately devoted to the Form captain, she almost took Betty's breath away by impulsively kissing her!

## CHAPTER 24.

### "Out in the cold!"

BETTY BARTON was looking a trifle disappointed as she gazed around the almost deserted station.

"Polly has not come to meet me, then?"

"No, dear——"

"Nor Madge, or Paula, or—or any of the others?"

"No, Betty, I'm the only one."

Betty's lips went down a little more at the corners.

Then Audrey looked very sad. She made a great show of checking a sharp sigh, and was silent until the luggage had been put up with the driver and she and Betty were sitting side by side in the carriage.

"Betty," she broke out then, just like a girl who had to make a clean breast of something about which she was very sorry, "I don't suppose you have come back to Morcove ready to be friends with me?"

"I am ready to be friends with any girl who plays the game!" said Betty.

Audrey secretly squirmed. It was no use; this girl had her "sized up" properly! The only thing was to swallow all one's pride, all one's ambition, and try to play toady!

"Betty, I—I'm going to be frank with you," Audrey gulped feebly. "I have been a bit of a trouble whilst you have been away. I upset Polly a bit, I know, and you will find she is not exactly in love with me. But, Betty——"

"Well?"

"Can't I make a fresh start altogether, from to-day—this very hour when you are taking up school life again? Believe how sorry I really am; how I hate the idea of being at sixes and sevens with you and Polly!"

Audrey was making herself quite emotional, thinking that that would impress Betty. But the Form captain was not going to be stampeded by conduct which, after all, might be only clever acting.

"It's up to you, Audrey," was Betty's frank comment. "We have one simple way at Morcove of dealing with a girl who wants to be friendly all round and keen on the Form. We say, 'Let her prove it!' There's nothing like it, Audrey. Deeds, not words!"

"Yes, of course!" Audrey was bound to agree meekly. "Very well, then; keep an eye on me, Betty, during the next few days——"

"I shall certainly do that!"

"You will find me standing by you—standing by the whole Form!" Audrey declared vehemently. "Here is my hand on it!"



Betty took the hand that was offered to her, then withdrew her own.

She felt very sorry that Audrey's humility seemed open to doubt. It was horrid to have to question another girl's sincerity when she was talking like this. But Betty had "had some" before from other girls who, after causing great trouble and pain to others, had professed a desire to make good.

And Audrey, during the rest of the journey to the school, knew only too well that she had by no means won over this shrewd, capable Form captain.

She had hoped to spring from the carriage at the journey's end and go into the house almost arms-round-neck with Betty. But there was nothing like that at all when they reached the school porch.

"Ta-ta for the present!" Betty exclaimed, the moment they had both jumped out. "I suppose I ought to report to Miss Somerfield, but—oh, I must fly upstairs and see Polly!"

And away she sped, leaving Audrey in a very chastened mood.

It was just the hour when girls who were not going to have tea downstairs would be bustling about in their studies. Sure enough, Betty Barton reached the closed door of the dear old den—No. 12—to hear a great clatter of crockery taking place.

She flung the door open, and dashed in, and then at least one girl dropped a cup and saucer to the floor—smash!

It was Polly.

"What!" yelled Polly the madeap, staring as if Betty were a ghost. "Why—oh—"

"Polly, how are you?" cried Betty, giving her bosom chum a jolly good hug.

"And you, Paula? Quite all right?"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove! Howevah—"

"Betty, what on earth—" gasped Polly. "We thought—we understood that you—Monday, you know—at the earliest!"

"Well, here I am!" cried Betty gaily.

"Hallo, Madge dear! Trixie—Tess—"

"Betty!" The two or three girls who were drifting into the room cried out in amazement. "It's Betty!"

"Yes, wather! And what a welief, bai Jove! Heah, geals, we must have gweat wejoicings, what?"

"We'll have the jolliest tea-party that ever was!" declared Polly, kicking the broken china into the empty grate.

"Quick, some of you! Help me with the

cloth! And when you go to fetch along extra chairs, tell the other girls—"

"Yes, wather! Hooway! Betty deah, this is a twaat! Er—pway sit down, don't you know! You must be tired after your journey."

"Not a bit of it!" declared Betty. "I say! Weren't you all glad to know that my sister Doris is getting well again in proper style now?"

"Yes, wather!"

By twos and threes, other girls came in to greet Betty on her return, until the study was almost packed out with a crowd that was going to stay to tea.

Suddenly, just as Dolly Delane was coming back from the hot-water pantry with two brimming metal jugs, Audrey Blain appeared at the doorway.

She was smiling sweetly, as usual, and amidst so much excitement she looked bewitchingly calm.

"Oh, I am out of it!" she exclaimed, letting herself look very disappointed at sight of the sumptuous tea-table.

"No!" Betty said quickly. "Any member of the Form is welcome. Come in, and—"

"But what I meant was," Audrey said, "I'm out of it so far as having a tea-party in my own study is concerned! Cora Grandways has helped me to get ready. I was hoping to have quite a nice big gathering, in honour of your return, Betty!"

"Thank you!" said Betty. "Sorry if you have gone to a lot of fuss, all for nothing! But, surely you haven't been back long enough to make everything ready, with only Cora to help you?"

"Cora was busy all the time I was on my way to and from the station," Audrey said, taken off her guard. "I told her you were turning up by the four-twenty, and asked her to get ready."

"Oh, you told Cora that?" commented Polly. "You had time to tell Cora, but no time to let us know!"

Audrey flushed.

"I—yes, I'm sorry!" she stammered. "You girls must think it was awfully bad of me not to tell you. But, you see, I meant you to have a surprise."

The answer was plausible enough, yet it did not seem to go down. There was certainly a very ominous silence in the study.



"Oh, well," Betty broke out at last, "come in, anyway, Audrey!"

"No, I—I really think I had better not," Audrey felt she must say, although she longed to join the party. "There is such a number of you as it is!"

"Don't be silly!" cried Madge Minden. "We want you to stop, Audrey!"

That was flattering to Audrey. But it was not quite flattering enough—no! If Madge Minden had said, "Unless you stop, we shan't!" then there would have been something to exult over! But what Madge really had said proved that Betty came first in her affections.

"I shall see something of you later," Audrey said, withdrawing with a last sweet smile for the assembled company.

And she went along the corridor to her own study, where Cora was setting a nice collection of chairs round the tea-table.

"Oh, you needn't bother any more!" Audrey exclaimed, sauntering into the room. "It's a wash-out!"

"What!"

"You've had all your trouble for nothing!" Audrey explained; and she laughed queerly. "Practically the whole Form is having tea in No. 12!"

"And we are not wanted there!" scowled Cora.

"I was asked. I don't know about you," Audrey said. "You had better go along and squeeze in, Cora. Anyway, I don't want you now."

"But——"

"Cora, if you hang about now, I shall flare out!" Audrey said wearily. "I'm not in a sweet mood. I warn you!"

"You are taking it to heart because you are unable to win those girls away from Betty and Polly!" Cora said. "You shouldn't let it annoy you, Audrey. Your chance will come. Meantime, haven't you got me for a friend?"

"Delightful consolation, I'm sure!" was Audrey's tart rejoinder. "So you think you make up for the loss of Madge Minden's company, and Paula's, and those other girls? Oh, run away and play!"

Which said, Audrey simply flung herself along the settee.

She evidently had no intention of sitting down to tea, and in a moment Cora, scowling blacker than ever, flung out of the room, slamming the door disgustedly.

It could hardly have been a minute later

when Audrey, reclining dejectedly upon the couch, heard strange voices in the corridor. She sat up, listening with eager curiosity.

They were male voices, mingling with one girlish voice that she knew quite well. The familiar voice was that of Miss Redgrave, the assistant Form-mistress; but those masculine tones—whose could they be?

In a flash the answer came. Jack Somerfield and Polly Linton's brother, the younger Jack—they were being conducted to Study 12 by Miss Redgrave!

Even as Audrey listened, she heard a tremendous burst of talk and some cheering as the visitors joined the happy tea-party. She could tell the wild delight that this sudden and unexpected appearance of the two Jacks had inspired.

Along there in the Form captain's study, the cry was for more teacups, more chairs! And she, Audrey—bother! She was out in the cold!

Moodily she got up from the couch and drifted to the window. She was still frowning to herself when sounds came to her ears of young people scampering along the corridor. Then the door was tapped, and Madge's voice called:

"Any chairs to spare in there, Audrey?"

"Oh, come in!" Audrey called back.

"Yes, take all you want!"

Madge Minden threw the door wide open, and then Audrey noticed that Polly's brother Jack had come with Madge on the quest for chairs.

"How do you do?" Jack Linton cried breezily, with quite a nice bow to Audrey, whom he had never met before. "I'm just helping Madge, you see. Not fair to let a girl fag chairs about when I'm available!"

"Audrey dear, this is Polly Linton's brother, Jack Linton," Madge said, in a very happy tone. "We are great chums, and I do wish you had been sitting down to tea with us!"

"Don't bother about me, Madge dear," Audrey answered, putting on a very pretty air of being lonely. "Are you going to stay at the school as a guest?" she asked Jack Linton.

"Just for a few days, yes," he answered, with a chair under each arm.

"Then I suppose I shall be seeing you again?" Audrey responded, with one of her nicest smiles.



Jack made a suitable answer, then backed out of the room, chairs and all, followed by Madge, who was carrying another.

From what Audrey heard in the next few moments, it rather seemed as if Madge and Jack were having a sort of friendly duel with the chairs in the passage.

"So that's Polly's brother!" Audrey murmured, sinking down on the settee now that she was alone again. "What a nice fellow! Bother! What a donkey I was to hold aloof from the tea-party!"

She jumped up again, all restless as she was, and made a cup of tea for herself. But she was aware all the time of all the boisterous talk in Study 12.

## CHAPTER 25.

### Is it Her Chance?

THE following morning—the last Saturday before breaking-up day—found Audrey still wracking her brain as to how she could re-establish herself in the minds of the Fourth Form girls. She was determined that she would achieve that purpose, either by fair means or the reverse.

But she was absolutely without an idea; that was the maddening part about it!

Half the night she had lain awake, trying to think out some scheme. All in vain! When she awoke this morning to hear the happy girls, she had had to affect an unselfish interest in their pleasure. But all the time she felt desperate, mad with envy and despair.

After morning school, it only galled her all the more to come into contact with the girls.

Audrey couldn't bear to hang around, listening to their excited chatter about Betty.

Every word seemed like a prod to her jealous nature.

Dinner was an exasperating ordeal. As soon as she could do so, she slipped away to her study, put on her things for out-of-doors, and wandered away.

It was early for other girls to be coming from the schoolhouse, to spend the beautiful afternoon on the sports field, or roaming the countryside or the seashore. On her way down the drive, she only saw one other person, and that was Jack Linton.

He was well ahead of her, whistling

cheerily as he swung along, carrying what was more than an ordinary walking-stick. It looked to Audrey like a proper mountaineering staff, and suddenly she made a shrewd guess at his plans for the afternoon.

Moreove abounded in rugged places that were excellent practice for amateur climbers. Polly's brother was renowned for his love of adventure, and evidently he was going to do a bit of difficult climbing this afternoon.

Never once did he look round. Even if he had, he would not, of course, have invited her or any other girl to accompany him. She lost sight of him as he quitted the school grounds well in advance of her, and she did not dare think of putting herself in his way.

Just as she herself was passing out through the gateway, she looked back towards the schoolhouse. Girls were trooping forth now, and it annoyed her to see that a good number seemed to be bent upon taking an afternoon ramble.

"Hang them!" she fumed, stepping along quickly. "The whole place will be swarming with them! And I—I'd give anything to be quite alone, so fed-up do I feel!"

It was this miserable longing for isolation that made her saunter off in a direction she had never taken before. Avoiding the path down to the seashore, and the main road and its by-lanes, she bestrode the springy turf of the moorland, soon finding all the solitude she wanted.

Gorse bushes grew in great clumps everywhere, and as she went on, the ground became more romantically rugged, for she was drawing towards one of the great Devonshire tors.

She began to skirt by giant masses of rock that looked as if they had been sent rolling down from the tor in past ages. Not a sound came to her ears save the thin, sweet note of linnets in the gorse.

Suddenly, however, she heard a sound in advance of her that made her pause abruptly.

She could hear Jack Linton whistling in that cheery way of his.

Quite by chance, her quest for solitude had brought her to the very spot where he had sought his practice climb!

Whilst she was still hesitating whether to go back or forward, she suddenly had a glimpse of him.



He was clambering over a great mass of fallen rocks to the foot of a forbidding cliff.

That sloping cliff did not look as baffling to a climber as a sheer wall of rock would be. It inclined away as it rose from the ground; but its face was worn so smooth with the weather that a steeper but more rugged cliff might have been far easier to tackle, after all.

So, at any rate, Audrey judged, and sheer admiration of the lad's daring held her there, unbeknown to him. She felt she simply must watch him.

Keeping out of sight in case he should look round, she now saw him take a coil of rope from about his waist. It puzzled her to know what use he was going to put it to; but she soon understood.

The first twenty feet or so from the ground offered no means of climbing, and she noticed that he was peering along the smooth face of the cliff, trying to find a suitable place for making an upward "cast" with the rope. It had a grappling hook at one end. If he could get the hook to bite into some crevice up there, or grip round a ledge, he could then haul himself up.

He seemed to find the right spot at last, for he stood back a little and measured the distance with his eye, then flung the hooked end of the rope towards a likely-looking ledge.

Again and again the small but strong prongs failed to grip the rock, and Audrey thought to herself:

"He'll never do it!"

But he did!

To her sudden wonderment, the grapple found a hold at last, and next instant Jack was trying the line with all his weight.

It held; and now he started his daring climb, going hand over hand up the taut rope.

"Phew!" Audrey heard him panting, when at last he had got past the smooth slope that he never could have tackled without the rope. He was on a narrow ledge now, and could take breath.

Audrey crouched down to avoid being seen. This was an elevated part of the countryside, and he might spend a minute enjoying the big sweep of scenery that was to be viewed even from where she was lurking, at the very base of the cliff.

When she took another peep, she got a shock.

Jack Linton had vanished!

Her heart gave a big leap, for her sudden fear was that he had simply fallen headlong to the ground and was lying there, injured.

Then she breathed freely again, for certain sounds told her that his disappearance only meant that he had scrambled out of her sight for the moment.

As he clambered his way up the sloping mass of rock, he had also been working round it, because, no doubt he had to find a hold where he could.

It gave her a thrill of relief to know that he had not gone tumbling down; but all at once she found herself feeling half sorry that he was getting on all right.

Had he met with some accident, she might have rushed to his aid, and then—

Then he would have owed her a debt of gratitude, which he would have wanted to repay!

He would have said, "How can I repay you?" And she would have known what to answer—yes! She would have made him tell Betty & Co. about her heroism!

From such thoughts as these it was a quick step to the sudden idea: Could she yet be of service to Jack Linton during this daring climb of his, so as to put him under an obligation to her?

He was surely going to descend, later on, by means of the rope. But supposing the rope was not there!

Her face lit up. Now that he and she were out of sight of each other, nothing would be easier than to deprive him of the rope!

Cautiously she scrambled amongst the boulders to the foot of the cliff, and then took hold of the dangling rope.

Time after time she jerked and tugged at it, and at last the grappling hook above lost its hold.

Down came the rope, and she had to skip aside to avoid being hit by the hook.

It fell with a loud clatter that Jack must have heard, for next instant she heard him calling:

"Hallo, there! Anybody about? Hallo!"

But it was not that uneasy cry of his that left Audrey with a fast-beating heart. What filled her with sudden wild alarm was a much more distant hail.

"Coo-co-ee! Coo-oo-ee!" came faintly to her from afar.



She looked round as she stood with the fallen rope at her feet, and then, at least a mile away on the open moorland, she saw a group of schoolgirls.

Betty and her chums! They were over there, and it almost seemed to Audrey that they were looking this way!

Her face went very white. She felt she had been caught in the very act—seen by all those girls deliberately pulling away that rope to involve Jack Linton in need of help!

## CHAPTER 26. "Such a heroine."

**B**UT in a moment Audrey's fear was passing.

Gazing towards the distant group, she realised that it must have been physically impossible for the girls to see what she was up to. Nor had that faint "Coo-oo-ee!" been meant for her, she felt certain.

The girls—mere specks in the distance, one might term them—were now running about, as if playing a game on the open moorland.

She pulled herself together, resolving to carry on with her cunning scheme as if that scare had not happened.

Jack was calling out again, "Anybody about?" And now she ran along under the cliff, answering him.

"Yes, I'm here! Who is it? Is anything wrong?"

Next minute she was standing away from the sloping cliff, looking up at him as he clung precariously to the rock, quite forty feet from the ground.

"Oh, it's Jack Linton! Gracious, Jack!"

"Hallo!" he called down breezily. "You are Audrey Blain, I think? I say, are the others here?"

"No; I came for a stroll round. I heard somebody calling out!"

"Well, you see," he broke in, "just now I thought I heard my rope fall to the ground! If it has done that, I'm in a fix, I tell you! I can't get any higher—and I won't be able to get down!"

Audrey looked suitably alarmed.

"Gracious! Well, don't get nerry!"

"Oh, I'm not the least bit inclined to do that!" he chuckled. "Still, I'll be

order in my mind when I know about that rope!"

"Don't move, whilst I run and see about it," she cried; and then sped away amongst the boulders on her make-believe investigation.

Three minutes later she came back, carrying the coiled-up rope.

"Whatever will you do?" she cried up to him. "Look!"

"Oh, my hat! So the rope did unhook itself! I thought I heard it flop down!" he grimaced. "Well, now I'm up against it! Can't very well take a slide, can I?"

"For goodness' sake keep where you are!" she implored him. "I'll save you!"

Audrey took care to say "save" instead of "help," which would certainly have been the more modest word.

"But, how——" he began, only she cut him short.

"Wait!" she implored him again. "I must go round and get to the top of the tor, then lower the rope to you. It may be a nasty climb for me, here and there, but I'll risk it."

"Oh, but——"

"I must! I couldn't think of putting my own safety before yours!"

"Thanks! What a brick you are!" he called down. "I say, I won't forget this! Do you really think you can go round to the top, though? Do you know the proper way?"

"I have never been here before, but I am sure I shall manage," she sang back. "You chose the steep side of the tor."

"Of course I did!" he laughed. "I was out for a bit of training!"

How jolly he was to talk to, Audrey thought. But she could not hang about like this, keeping him in such a fix. Repeating her entreaty that he would not stir an inch, she hurried away, taking the rope with her.

This particular Devonshire tor was like a gigantic cone in shape. As Audrey had said to Jack, she did not know the place, but she felt perfectly sure that there must be a means of climbing it on one of the less precipitous sides. Very likely there was actually a zig-zag path, up and down which hundreds of holiday-makers had scrambled before now.

Sure enough, the beginning of such a



path she soon discovered, after working right round to the other side of the tor. Breathlessly she began the ascent, and she even got to the summit without a hitch. But, arrived there, she found that her real task was only just commencing!

No use lowering the rope to Jack from where she stood. It would never reach him. And, to get to a point from which the rope would serve its purpose, she herself must clamber down at least twenty feet or so.

"Hallo!" she shouted. "Jack!"

"Hallo!" he shouted back, from below. "Are you all serene?"

"I'm at the top, Jack. I shall have to climb down a little way before I lower the rope. It's a bit steep!"

"Then don't do it!" he cried earnestly. "Audrey, you mustn't! I can stick here until you get help."

"You must be awfully cramped and tired!" she cried down to him. "I'm going to risk it!"

He could not see her, nor could she see him; but his repeated cries to her not to take any chances enabled her to imagine the picture of anxiety that he presented.

He was half-clinging to, half-leaning against, the wall of granite, with not merely his own safety to think of, but also the risk she was running.

Risk there was, no mistake about that!

Audrey was absolutely heart-in-mouth as she scrambled down the weather-worn rocks. Every inch of the way she was wishing devoutly that she had not landed him in such a desperate plight. Yet all the time she was telling herself that if—if she did end up by figuring as his rescuer, she could pose as a heroine.

Panting for breath, and all of a shake, she at last got to a ledge of rock that was directly above Jack Linton. Kneeling there, she paid out the rope, retaining the hooked end so that she could fasten the grapple in some crevice.

"I've got my end!" he sang out suddenly. "Say when, Audrey!"

She noticed that he did not implore her to be very careful to fasten the grapple so that it would not slip, and she thought that very nice of him. He was trusting to her good sense, although he knew that if the hook did slip, he would go hurtling headlong to the rocks below!

She wedged the grapple firmly amongst the rocks, so that two of the prongs bit hard; and then, placing her hands hard down upon the hook, brought all her weight to bear upon it.

"Now, Jack!"

"Right-ho!"

And next moment the rope creaked as he started to haul himself up.

To Audrey it seemed an age before she saw his head and shoulders rise into view. The fact was, all the time he was clambering so pluckily up the rope, she was in frantic fear of his meeting with some terrible accident, in which case she would be to blame.

When at last he hauled himself on to the same ledge on which she was crouching, he found her almost hysterical with the suspense she had been suffering.

"Oh, come, don't go to pieces now!" he rallied her, for she was hiding her face in her hands and groaning. "You've been so plucky, Audrey! I shall have to tell the others, you know."

"Oh, if anything had happened!" she shuddered. "You might have lost your hold—fallen from sheer exhaustion!"

"Well, I didn't, so that's all right!" he consoled her, panting for breath. "Question now is, will you be able to climb back to the summit? My word, Audrey, it was plucky of you to scramble down to this ledge!"

He said this as he stood scanning the rocks down which she had ventured. Audrey did not answer, and he spent a couple of minutes coiling the rope, the while she pulled herself together.

"You know, the more I think about it, the braver it seems!" he broke out again. "I told you to run for other help; but I doubt if I could have held on."

"Silly fellow!" quavered Audrey, meaning to impress him with her modesty about the rescue. "I have only done what any other girl would do!"

"That may be so," he assented. "But what you have done is a thing to be proud of. I shall tell all the girls about it."

How Audrey's heart beat with pleasure at that.

"Only wait until we get back to the school!" he rushed on, full of gratitude as he was. "I'll tell them all about it! Audrey, do you feel like coming along now?"



If so, I'll give you a hand, and then we can toddle back together."

"Thank you, Jack—yes, I think you will have to help me," she said very prettily, "for climbing up these rocks is not as easy as climbing down them, is it?"

"It couldn't have been as easy to climb down either!" he said, thus showing again how sensible he was of the pluck she had shown.

Without further talk, they set about returning via the summit. He went first, and then, lowering a section of the rope to her, made the scramble up much easier for her by almost hauling her to the top.

And all the time Audrey was exulting over the success of her clever scheme.

It had worked beautifully!

Here was a lad who was going back to the school to tell everybody that he as good as owed his life to her. He was going to leave no stone unturned in his effort to broadcast the story of her bravery.

"Like to rest a bit, Audrey?" he asked her gaily. "Or shall we push on for home? Myself, I'm simply dying to get to the school and tell them! Still, if you feel——"

"Oh, no; let us make our way down!" she agreed readily.

His eagerness to fulfil her wish—how great it was!

And there, suddenly, she started, halting on the craggy path to listen.

From somewhere close at hand below there was sounding a sudden babel of girls' voices.

"Hark! Why, that's my sister Polly and some of her chums!" Jack cried out next moment. "Oh, I say, come on! I'm longing to tell them what you have done for me!"

In his eagerness he caught Audrey by the hand and would have run her the rest of the way down the sloping path, but even as they rounded another bend they almost ran into the arms of Betty, Polly, and Madge.

The rest of the party seemed to have got left a little behind in a race to the top. They were flocking up the steep path, jerking out excited remarks in between their gasps for breath.

As for Betty and her two companions, all they could do was to give a gasping "Oh!" of wild relief, as they found Jack and Audrey suddenly confronting them.

"Hallo, girls!" Jack greeted them. "What's the game, that you are all rushing about like this? Seeing who can get to the top of the tor first?"

"Game!" panted Polly. "Oh, Jack, if you know the fright we've had! A long way off we saw you in great danger, and we came tearing to this spot, fearing all the time that we'd be too late!"

Audrey felt she wanted to clap her hands with delight.

It was evident that her skilful rescue of Jack from his desperate plight had been partly witnessed by the girls. What could be better?

"Oh, I say, is that so?" Jack exclaimed sympathetically. "You mean to say you saw me in that nasty fix on the cliff? No wonder it gave you a turn! Here I am, though, safe and sound—thanks to Audrey Blain!"

The breathless girls were grouped about him and Audrey, and they saw him lay a hand upon that girl's shoulder.

"She rescued me!" he declared. "The whole thing was not only clever—it was heroic!"

"No, Jack!"

Audrey felt she must demur; but, of course, he persisted.

"Audrey wants to make light of what she did; but, I tell you, girls, she took big risks to reach me with that rope and help me back to safety! I—I owe her my life, perhaps! I tell you, she is a downright heroine——"

"She is nothing of the sort!" cut in Betty quietly. "She is simply one big sham!"

"Hear, hear! Yes, wather!" cried the girls, Paula being one of them.

Audrey felt herself suddenly going to pieces.

She knew that she ought to look haughtily indignant, like an injured innocent; but, instead, she grew confused, flushing to the roots of her hair.

"We don't often have a difference of opinion," Jack said, looking from one to another of the girls. "We've always got along together first rate. But, after the way Audrey has saved me, I—I can't quite see eye to eye with you, you know!"

"You were in a nasty fix when Audrey saved you, as you call it?" Betty said. "But who got you into that fix, Jack?"



"Why, you see, it was all my own fault. The rope I was relying upon to get down by—it fell away, and——"

"It was not your own fault!" cried Polly. "Audrey pulled the rope away! Some of us saw her do it!"

"What!" gasped Jack.

"Yes, yes—yes, wather! We saw her!"

"Oh, how can you say such a thing? How dare you!" panted Audrey. "You were quite a mile off! I saw you, and you were mere specks in the distance! Jack, don't believe them! It is absolutely impossible that they could have seen!"

"We saw you," said Betty, with crashing quietness, "by the aid of—this!"

—And, as she spoke, she held out a pair of field-glasses that had been hanging by a strap about her shoulder!

## CHAPTER 27.

### Rewards Well Reaped.

THERE was sudden dead silence at that romantic spot where the excited group had gathered.

Jack, in a sort of dazed manner, took hold of the glasses, then let them fall back into Betty's grasp again. He looked hard and steadily at Audrey, whose eyes wavered.

"Um!" he muttered at last. "So it is rather different from what I supposed!"

"Yes, wather!" murmured Paula, almost mechanically.

"Instead of owing it to you that I got out of that awkward fix, Audrey, I really owe it to you that I got into it!"

"She simply and deliberately got you into danger, so as to have the chance of figuring as a sort of heroine!" Polly cried disgustedly.

But Audrey was suddenly marching off. What else, indeed, could she do? What girl in her place could have blustered denials, when the thing was proved? Seeing is believing, always; and the girls had seen her—through the field-glasses!

Beaten—yes, beaten once again! That was the awful, the humiliating position she knew herself to be in.

Not for the first time since she had come to Morcove School had this lesson been taught her: It pays to play the game,

whilst deceit and cunning always incur their just penalty in the end!

Deceit and cunning had been her resources all along, and what a penalty, indeed, was she to suffer now!

From this hour onward—all through the remainder of her days at Morcove—she would be known for what she was. Who would be her friends? Not Madge Minden; not Paula Creel, Tess Trelawney, Trixie Hope, nor any of those girls whom she had hoped to gather around her as an exclusive "set."

Friends? She could think of only one girl who would still be a so-called friend, in spite of the awful exposure. Cora Grandways—that toady—bah!

Audrey went back to the school, alone; and in the solitude of her lavish study, during the next hour or two, she could do nothing but brood over the complete frustration of all her hopes and schemes.

"No chance of being taken away from Morcove next term!" she muttered despairingly. "I'll have to come back, I know, and then——"

The door flashed open; Cora came in with that rude violence which always irritated Audrey even at the best of times.

"My word, Audrey!" Cora began. "I've been hearing some nice things about you—he, he, he! Never mind, though! You——"

"Hold your tongue!" Audrey cried, stamping a foot.

"All right, dear; all right!" Cora pleaded soothingly. "Audrey, what a mistake you made, snapping my head off! It isn't as if you were well off for other friends—or likely to be, now!"

"If I haven't another friend in the world, I don't want you!" Audrey said passionately. "I hate you!"

"What's that?" Cora asked, looking very white in the face. "Are you crazy, Audrey?"

"I am fed up!" was the furious answer. "I don't mind what I tell you now. I'd like to see you get expelled—you and your sister both; and I'd like to be the cause of your expulsion! And if you want to know why, I'll tell you! Your mother, Cora Grandways, got my mother expelled when they were at school together! Now do you understand?"

Cora had backed towards the door, retreating at every fierce word as though it was a smack across the cheek.



"Understand?" she echoed at last, wetting her lips. "I understand my sister Judith's attitude now—yes! You make me see that Judy was right when she said that you never meant to be a real pal to me; that you were trying all the time to get me into disgrace!"

"I was—I was; I admit it!" Audrey cried recklessly. "Tell Judith so! Tell all the Form! I don't care! I'm fed up! This hateful school—if I have to come back to it next term—as I suppose I must—I'll make trouble for some of you! I'll just do as I please, and bother the Form, so there!"

Cora found herself suddenly pushed aside by the opening door. Betty stood there, with quite a crowd behind her.

"Cora need not trouble to tell the Form," Betty said quietly. "Thanks to the way you have been shouting, Audrey, at least a dozen of us have heard. We couldn't help hearing!"

"I don't care in the least!" Audrey retorted insolently. "You are welcome to think of me as a girl who has sailed under false colours, for I don't want to fly them any more. I'm just going to be myself—please myself—and bother the lot of you!"

"Well," said Betty, smiling a little, "such refreshing candour is better, I think, than so much deceit."

"Yes, wather! Howevah—"

"However," Betty went on, taking the words out of Paula's mouth, "I don't think

we had better stop to bandy words with you, Audrey Blain. In view of what you have owned up about, it is pretty evident there is a girl who has been most cruelly misjudged by the Form. I mean——"

"Judith Grandways—yes!" Polly almost shouted.

"Yes, wather!"

"We have reproached her, shunned her, as being a girl who was no more reformed than her sister," Betty said. "And all the time——"

"Oh, come on!" burst out madcap Polly, fuming to get away. "I expect Judy Grandways is in her study; let's run to her!"

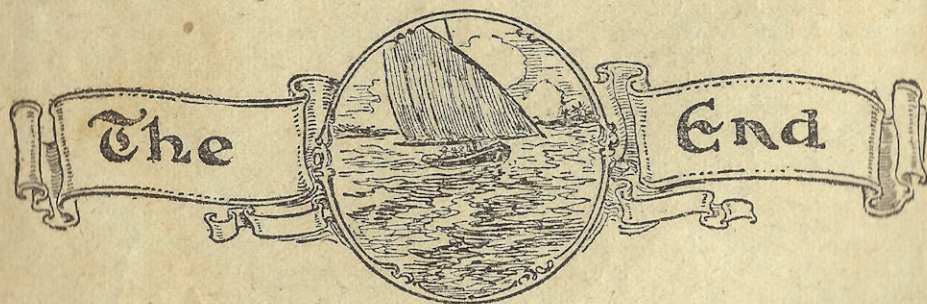
"Yes, wather!"

There followed a whirlwind rush of many girls along the corridor; and, next moment, all the loneliness and unmerited cold-shouldering that Judy Grandways had known had come to an end.

For they found her in Study 7, and they did not leave her there!

Judy Grandways, whose reformation weeks ago had been as sincere as any girl's could be, was having the reward she deserved for trials and troubles so nobly borne.

At last—at last she was thronged about by the girls she had longed to have as friends; and ah, how differently could she look forward to next term, as she laid her head upon the pillow that night, from what Audrey, or even Cora, could!



Three more splendid numbers of "The Schoolgirls' Own" Library will be on sale on Friday, June 3rd.

See page iii of cover for further particulars.



# BEFORE YOU GO CYCLING.

It was a lovely day in May. You know, just one of those days when the sun shines very determinedly as if it intended to remain out all day, and yet was not too hot because of the nice spring breeze that was blowing.

Norma, seated all alone, was just thinking how wrong it seemed to be indoors, when a rat-a-tat sent her scuttling to the street door.

"Hallo, Mabel!" she greeted her chum, as she opened the door. "Do come in!"

"No fear," exclaimed Mabel. "I've just come to drag you out. Come along! Get your bike out and we'll ride to Little Tipton. Just an ideal day for a spin."

It took Norma half an hour, though, before she was ready. She hadn't looked at her machine since last summer. It wanted dusting; the tyres needed pumping up, the lamp which brother Bob had borrowed had to be found. At last she was ready, though.

It was a glorious trip to Little Tipton. Just a nice five miles jaunt, and easy going. Very easy, indeed, for the going was mostly down hill.

Coming back was the trouble, though. Apart from it being a bit of a climb, Norma managed to be having continual trouble. One wretched tyre, for instance, persisted in going flat every half-mile. Then the back wheel started squeaking abominably when a little strain was put upon it. The bell, too, failed to operate properly when it was most needed.

No, it didn't bring disaster, but it might easily have done.

What with one thing and another, it was getting dark before they had completed the return journey.

"Better light up!" said Mabel. They got off. Mabel's lamp behaved beautifully, but it took nine matches to get Norma's lamp going. And, after all that it went out three times before they got home eventually. Rather a disappointing end to a pleasant trip.

"I'm fed-up with this machine," Norma complained. "I wish I could have a new bike like yours. We had our first ones together, so I think it about time I had a new one."

Mabel laughed.

"It isn't a new bike, stupid," she said. "It's as old as yours, but I will admit it has had a good spring-clean. Did it all myself, too!" she added proudly.

"You didn't?" Norma gasped incredulously.

"Fact!" was the reply. "And if you like I'll give you a hand with yours. It's all wrong, you know, to start out on the first ride of the season without a proper overhaul."

Mabel was as good as her promise. She was round next school holiday to help her chum.

"First," she said, suiting the action to the words. "We remove tyres, and examine them in a bowl of water for punctures."

Two small punctures were quickly found and mended. At the same time new rubber tubing was put on the valves. Tyres replaced, rags were produced and the whole machine was carefully freed from every particle of dust.

The bright parts were cleansed with a scouring powder such as is used for cleaning saucepans and other domestic purposes.

"Later," Mabel explained, "we'll give it a good shine with plate powder, and then polish with furniture cream to avoid further attacks from rust!"

"It's looking better already," Mabel remarked, quite pleased. "But I'm sure you'll never do anything with the frame; it's so badly chipped in several places."

"Don't be so sure," rejoined Norma. "I've brought a remedy for that, too." And she produced several sheets of emery paper. "We'll clean the rust from the chipped places first with the coarse emery, and then work it perfectly smooth with the fine sort. You can give a hand, Norma, but be careful not to scratch the enamel round about. Fine down the edges of the chipped-off parts."

When all the faulty spots of enamel were thoroughly rubbed down, the two chums cleaned them with turpentine, and then gave them a final polish with a clean silk rag.

"Now for a little enamelling," said Mabel. "This is the kind of enamel used for painting motor-cars; you can get it anywhere. Using a good brush, we put a thin coat over each patch. It'll have to remain a couple of days to dry; then we'll give it another coat, and, after that, a final coat of fine varnish. If the job is done very carefully, and the whole frame given a good clean-up afterwards, the touched-up parts will never notice."

True enough, they didn't. Norma was delighted with the changed appearance of her bike when Mabel had finished renovating.

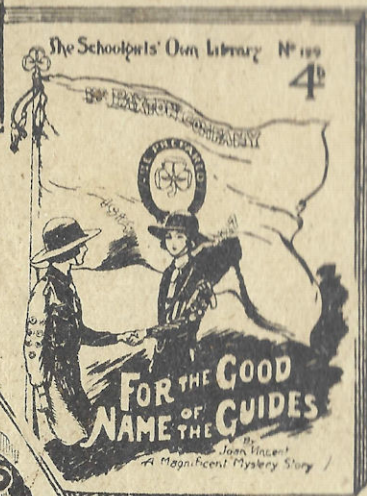
"Now we must look over the etceteras," declared Mabel. "The machine needs a thorough oiling; no wonder it creaked the other day. Just a spot for the bell, too. That's all it needs. As for the lamp, we'll give it a thorough clean-up, put new oil and wick in it, and it will not let you down again for a bit."

And that finished the spring-clean. Now Mabel enjoys many a jaunt with Norma without the discomforts attending her trip to Little Tipton.



**NEXT MONTH'S  
NUMBERS**

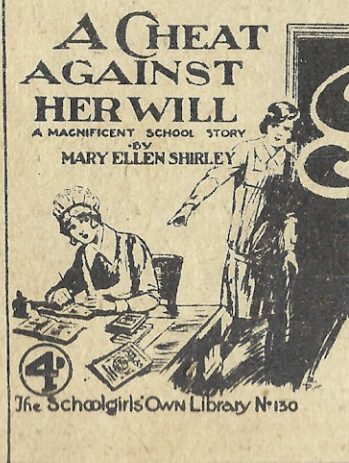
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