

The MYSTERY SERVANT of MORCOVE

BY
*Marjorie
Stanton*



A Grand Story of the Early Adventures of Betty Barton & Co

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Mystery surrounds a new servant at Morcove School. The suspicions of BETTY BARTON & Co. are aroused. But can they discover the truth—that the servant is an ex-scholar of Morcove—and can they discover the reason for her return in disguise?



The Mystery Servant of Morcove

A Fine Story of the Early Adventures
of BETTY BARTON & Co.

By
MARJORIE STANTON.

Author of "BEFRIENDED BY MORCOVE,"
"AT MORCOVE UNDER GUARD," etc., etc.

CHAPTER 1.

The Beginning of a Mystery?

"**H**OW jolly if we get the island
all to ourselves for the picnic!"
"Yes, wather!"

"It is so much nicer to find no one
else there!" added Polly Linton, gazing
over the sparkling sea to the rocky
islet for which Morcove School's own
pleasure-boat was making. "Gives you
the proper alone-on-a-desert feeling!"

"But I doubt if we shall be the only
ones this afternoon," came from Betty
Barton. "Such a glorious day must
have made some of the holidaymakers
feel like running across to Gull
Island."

"Anyhow, if we land to that little
bay on the eastern side, we ought to
be pretty private," remarked Helen
Craig. "May we do that, Miss Red-
grave?"

"Just as you please, girls!"
That cordial answer from the youth-

ful mistress of Morcove's Fourth Form
set madcap Polly off.

Polly had no part in the steering of
the broad-beamed craft, with its simple
lugsail. Miss Redgrave herself was
captain and crew alike. But Polly must
have her joke.

"Pipe the bo'sun! Port your hellum,
there! Heave-yo!" Polly sang out,
drawing on a stock of nautical expres-
sions derived from standard romances
of the sea. "Let go th' mains'l, and
give her her head!"

"Yes, wather!" beamed Paula Creel,
sitting with her pretty feet tucked be-
tween two picnic-baskets. "Anything
to make her huiwvy up, bai Jove!"

The boat certainly was not making
rapid progress, the summer's afternoon
being as calm a one as Morcove ever
knew along its picturesque shores.

Dusky Naomer, sitting next to Paula,
was reaching one hand over the side
to make a paddle of it, loving the feel

of the waters that looked so blue and cool.

"Gull Island!" resumed Polly, now dropping the role of captain and imitating a hired guide. "We are about to land, ladies, on an island that you who have read my 'History of Morcove,' four vols., crown octavo——"

"What is the geal wambling about?" chuckled Paula.

"In fortnightly parts," rattled on the irresponsible madcap, ever the life and soul of the party, "with coloured frontispiece, showing Paula Creel catching shrimps."

"Shwimps, bai Jove!"

"But hist!" Polly said dramatically, suddenly taking it into her head to talk like a pirate chief. "See yonder birds circling above the island! Can it be that the Spaniards have landed, with gold from the Spanish Main?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Far more likely that it is a boat-load of trippers!" grinned Tess Trelawney. "Oh, well, they have as much right to the place as we have! Only——"

"It does always seem as if Gull Island belongs to the school," nodded Dolly Delane. "It is opposite the school's front door, so to speak."

The light-hearted talk lapsed, and so quietly did the seaworthy little boat skim for the landing-place that had been decided upon, Polly at last murmured impressively:

"Nothing was to be heard but the wash of the waters! That and the wistful sighing of Paula Creel, as she thought of tea!"

"You'll certainly have to write a book some day, Polly!" was Miss Redgrave's laughing comment. "But I am sorry for Paula, if you do."

"If Polly dwaws any cawicature of me, I shall take pwoceedings!" threatened the beloved duffer. "Hoo-way, though! There's the bay, geals, and——"

"Not a soul in sight!" came in a chorus of joy from some of the others.

"Land! Land-ho!" cried Polly, point-

ing dramatically. "At last, at last the good ship What's-its-name——"

"Saucy Polly!" suggested Betty.

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove, it has been a pleasant c'rossing, geals, and now——"

"Passports ready!" sang out Polly. "Gangway, please!"

And, keeping up the fun, as soon as the landing began, she turned herself into a Customs' official.

"Show all luggage!" she commanded, standing sternly there as Paula and Naomer came ashore, carrying a picnic-basket between them. "Anything to declare?"

"Ooo, yes!" grinned Naomer. "Ze kettle and ze teapot, and——"

"Pass kettle—pass teapot! Now, miss," Polly addressed Madge, "have you any smuggled goods? No silk frocks or stockings?"

"Only what I have on!"

"Good job for you!" said Polly grimly. "The smuggling of silk goods has got to be put down. Hurrah, we are alone—alone!"

And away she scampered, to join Naomer in the urgent task of collecting driftwood for a fire.

Never did a picnic begin under jollier circumstances. The tinder-dry wood was soon ablaze on the silvery sands of the little bay, and a spread cloth was having the cups and saucers rattled out on to it.

From this and that basket came the eatables, a "spread" that bore witness to the taste and appetites of the vigorous schoolgirls.

Cucumber-sandwiches were brought out, potted meat and cake, cream-buns and Swiss-roll. These were only a few of the delicacies. Paula beamed as she saw tea being spooned into the teapot, against the time when the big kettle would be boiling over the camp-fire.

The greatest delight of all, however, was the girls' sense of having the islet all to themselves this afternoon.

They were the last ones ever to want to be selfish, but half the charm of the outing would have been gone had they

found Gull Island being over-run, as it chanced to be now and then during the summer.

It was Miss Redgrave who confirmed the joyous belief that no one else was here. Whilst Betty & Co. were getting the al-fresco meal ready, their chummy mistress had taken a ramble up to higher ground that offered a view of most of the island, and she came back to report that she had seen and heard no one.

So down they sat at last, all the merrier for being quite to themselves. Tea was handed round. First bites were taken at the various dainties.

"Skumptious!" declared Naomer, with the froth from a cream-bun all round her pretty lips. "He is a good one—yes!"

"Topping place for a picnic, so it is!" exclaimed Betty, gazing round. "It doesn't matter how often we come to Gull Island, and we have been here how many times——"

"Bai Jove, talk about Polly's witing a book!" beamed Paula. "She could make a thwilling stowy out of some of the adventures we geals have had here!"

"I always think of the time when Cora and Judith Grandways had their thrilling experience on Gull Island," murmured Madge. "And do you remember that other time, when we had a girl at the school who was always making mischief—Audrey Blain?"

"Audrey Blain, yes!"

"Bai Jove, don't wemind me of Audwey, pway!" pleaded Paula. "Geals—geals, this is a whipping cup of tea—yes, wather! A weal tweat!"

"Have some of this, Paula, with your bread-and-butter," Polly said, with a demureness that should have warned the duffer to be on her guard. "Highly recommended, dear!"

"Thanks, thanks!" beamed the elegant one, taking what looked like a flat jar of relish. "Bai Jove, I'm glad you wemembered to bwing this along, Polly deah! It is my favourite bwand of—— Ow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Healp!" shrieked Paula, falling backwards with the shock of removing the porcelain lid, only to let a live crab walk out. "Get away!"

"Ooo, queek—queek!" Naomer hailed the sight of the crustacean. "He is a good one, yes! So pretty!"

"Pwetty, bai Jove. Yah, take him away! Naomer, don't dwop him on my lap!"

Naomer didn't. With the greatest consideration for the crab, she got up to return him to the pool out of which he had been filched. And did she really mean to let him slip from her fingers, so that he lightly dropped upon Paula's bare head?

"Oh, sorry! I very sorry!"

"Sowwy, bai Jove!" groaned Paula, wildly clawing the crab out of her bobbed hair. "Ugh! That's the worst of it. I no sooner start wevelling in a bit of peace and quietness, than you geals begin! Dwop it! I mean, don't dwop it! Take the cweature away, do!"

Poor Paula, they led her a pretty awful life, as usual, during the next half-hour. No sooner was she giving a relenting smile, after being rendered very indignant by some jape or other, than she was victimised again!

Time after time she had recourse to her pocket mirror and comb to keep herself tidy, only to come in for some fresh bit of teasing that left her badly "wuffed"—in more senses than one!

By and by there was some paddling, so tempting the sunny shallows looked in that little sandy bay. Paula did not mind taking off her shoes and stockings to join in the fun, but she naturally wished to put them on again presently. Only, they had vanished!

Paula announced this aggravating discovery by a squeal of dismay.

"Look heah, you geals! My shoes and stockings——"

"Where?" asked Polly blandly.

"I don't know! They're not here!"

"Then what's the use of asking us to look?"

"You geals!" sighed the exasperated duffer. "I want you to look for my shoes and stockings!"

"Oh, thank you! We didn't come here to do that!" said Polly, tying a shoelace. "Well, what about a ramble round the island, girls?"

"Ooo, yes; queek—queek!"

With her half-dozen chums all getting up to wander away, Paula became almost speechless with indignation at the plight she was in. She gesticulated frantically.

"Look heah, you know! Geals, stop! Miss Wedgwave——"

"Oh, your things must be somewhere!" smiled Miss Redgrave, settling down to read a book.

"Yes, wather! But wheah? You geals, my shoes and stockings—wheah?"

"Always the way!" sighed Polly. "We no sooner start revelling in a bit of peace and quiteness than Paula gives trouble!"

This, and an all-round burst of laughter, almost caused Paula to tear her hair.

"All wight! But if those shoes and stockings aren't westored to me——"

"It will mean that the Customs' officer has seized them, and serve you right," chuckled Polly, "for wearing such expensive ones! Come on, girls!"

"Dweadful, dweadful!" groaned Paula, starting to step around gingerly, questing the missing articles. "Heartless cweatures, weally!"

From the higher ground, a minute later, Polly caused her fellow ramblers to pause whilst she called back:

"Coo-ee, Paula! Found them yet?"

"No!"

"Well, keep on looking, dear!"

Then, it is to be feared, Polly and the others forgot all about Paula and the joke they had played upon her, so caught up were they by the excitement of "exploring."

For, although they had come to know almost every inch of the island, whenever they landed for a few hours it seemed like landing for the first time.

The romantic grandeur of the place and its solitude combined to make each visit so thrilling.

"Miss Redgrave was right!" Betty broke out presently. "There simply can't be anyone here besides ourselves to-day, for ours is the only boat. We know that not a soul lives on the island, and so, if you see no boat——"

"Yet, look, Betty—look!" was the sudden startled cry from Polly which caused several of them to ask sharply:

"Where? What?"

For a moment Polly stood agaze, starting to frown perplexedly, as she muttered:

"Surely, girls, I glimpsed someone just then. Didn't any of you see? A woman, I fancied, slipping out of sight!"

"Over there, Polly?"

"Over there, yes!"

Again there was a pause, all the girls looking in that one direction where, indeed, anybody had plenty of chance of darting from view, if so minded. It was the very wildest part of the tiny island, with gorse and stunted trees growing amongst the rocks.

"But surely not!" Betty exclaimed at last. "I mean to say, who could it be, with no boat to go back in to the mainland presently?"

"There is certainly no one camping on the island, or we should have seen something of them before this," asserted Tess. "Besides, what need to dodge out of sight?"

Polly took a sudden stride.

"I'm going to look! Come on, girls!"

"Ooo, yes; queek—queek!"

And, in growing excitement, they all set off, feeling that here was some mystery which a careful search must clear up!

CHAPTER 2.

Pity Poor Paula!

"WELL, it's strange!"

"Most extraordinary," said Polly, "for I still feel certain that I did glimpse someone!"

Ten minutes had been spent by the girls in scouting around, with no better result than this—they had drawn blank!

"Of course, we all know very well," said Betty, "if anyone wants to play hide-and-seek, Gull Island is the place to do it! Whilst we have been searching around just here, the person might easily have slipped away to some other part of the island. But why—why should anybody be so anxious to avoid us?"

"Give it up!" Polly shrugged. "All I know is, there was someone—a woman—and she certainly was fitting away just as I glimpsed her."

"Would you know her again?" asked Madge.

"Goodness, no! I tell you, I had the merest glimpse of her before she vanished."

Like Polly, the others "gave it up," with a sense of great annoyance at being baffled. The chums of Study 12 loved a mystery, but every mystery should lead to a discovery, otherwise there was no thrill, but only perplexity.

They roamed on again, still on the look out, even though they no longer talked of the puzzling occurrence. Naomer fell to picking the wild flowers, Tess Trelawney paused at intervals to take in some pretty scene that appealed to her artistic eye, and the rest of them talked of various happenings in the past which had been associated with Gull Island.

In this fashion, they at length worked back to where they had landed this afternoon, and there they found Paula, still wandering to and fro in quest of her shoes and stockings.

Miss Redgrave had closed her book at the end of a chapter, and had gone for a little saunter, as Paula was about to explain, but she was given no chance.

"Hist! Whom have we here?" Polly exclaimed, affecting to see Paula for the first time in her life. "A girl!"

"Yes, wather, you wascals! And wheah—"

"A waif of the sea, washed up by the

waves, surely!" the madcap spoke on, making a pathetic rush at the duffer.

"Chee-ild, chee-ild, what ails thee?"

"I want my shoes and stockings!"

"She speaks!" Polly said, putting motherly hands about the barefooted one. "Oh, child, how it breaks my heart to see you thus! I—"

"Dwop it, you silly cuckoo! Look heah," protested Paula heatedly, "when I came out this afternoon I had shoes and stockings. Weal, now, I ask you, wheah are they now? Haow can I go home like this?"

"It would be most unbecoming!" agreed Polly sedately. "But have you searched?"

"Everywheah, bai Jove! I'm fuwious! I—"

"Have you searched the boat?"

"The boat, bai Jove? Why on earth should I search the boat?"

"Only because they might be there!" said Polly sweetly.

And there, in fact, were Paula's missing things, lying just where Polly herself had artfully dropped them on board during the paddling.

Paula's "fuwy" accordingly abated, and it was not long before she was giving her relenting chuckle at the way she had been japed.

"Ha ha, ha!" came her simpering laugh, when they had all re-embarked for the homeward run. "It has been a gwand tweat, anyhow, geals—yes, wather! A wégular spwee!"

"All spree and no spray, in fact," was Polly's jesting comment on the smooth sea—"not like some of the trips we have made before now."

This was true enough. Morcove School did not fail to make good sailors of its scholars. The facilities for learning how to handle both oar and sail were such as no other school in the kingdom turned to better advantage. It was considered as desirable for the girls to become proficient at boating as at swimming, and Betty & Co. had been out in many a stiff breeze off Morcove, gaining valuable experience.

If anything, the present run back to

the mainland was a bit too tame for some of them, but not for Paula! Always in dread of a breeze getting up and making the waves lumpy, Paula was one huge smile of satisfaction as the roomy little craft made lazily over the sea.

There was some teasing of the duffer, but no larking about. Even madcap Polly and frisky Naomer knew better than to get up to pranks on the water. So Paula, altogether, enjoyed a "wespote" that had raised her spirits to the highest pitch by the time the boat was being tied up to the school's own stone jetty.

"Take your time, girls!" Miss Redgrave counselled, smiling at the usual eagerness to be first ashore. She herself had skilfully brought the boat alongside, after dropping the sail, and had made fast at the bows, but there was the likelihood of some bumping. "Always wait a moment or two!"

"Wather, bai Jove!" agreed Paula, standing up. "All this huwwy, geals, is widiculous! It isn't as if we were wanting to get home to——"

Bump! went the gunwale quite gently against the low stone jetty, and the others were ready for the jolt it gave them. Nor, perhaps would Paula have been taken off her guard, only she happened to be finicking with her hair and her hat.

There was a sudden "Ow!" from Paula, and then——
Splash!

"Good gracious, Paula's fallen overboard! Paula, you silly duffer! Paula!"

"Healp!" was Paula's own spluttering answer to all the dismayed cries, as her head bobbed up. "Geals, geals!"—splutter—"healp."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

As quickly as that had sharp alarm changed to sheer amusement at this misfortune that had befallen the elegant one.

Even Miss Redgrave had to laugh, such a wild, floundering, comical figure did Paula present after toppling overboard into quite shallow water.

"Healp! Geals, geals!"

"Oh, go on with you!" chuckled Polly. "One would think——"

"I'm wet thwough!"

"Obviously!" smiled Betty.

She and Polly quickly reached over to draw the distressed duffer on board, whilst others kept the boat steady.

"If you will do these things, Paula dear——"

"A weck—a wuin!" lamented Paula breathlessly, when at last she was restored to her derisive chums. "Let me look at myself, geals! Wheah's my miwwow? Healp!"

"Paula, don't be absurd, stopping to look at yourself!" Miss Redgrave exclaimed, with a mixture of laughter and severity. "You must run home, and get into dry things. Two or three of you run on with her, girls."

And Naomer made a point of being one of those who in the next few moments hustled their dripping chum along the jetty, and then up the steep path to the school.

"We'll go in by the back way," suggested Betty.

"Yes, wather!" palpitated Paula. "I wouldn't be seen like this for anything, bai Jove!"

It was, however, expecting too much, and poor Paula had to put up with shrieks of laughter and derisive comments from various batches of girls.

"Weally, I don't see what there is to gwin about!" she said indignantly, and by now her chums had not the heart to say that that was because she could not see her own bedraggled appearance.

Their own mirth was being tempered by genuine pity for her in her plight.

"Hurry upstairs! And you'll have to change everything, of course," said Betty. "Whilst you're getting the wet things off, we'll find matron, and get a fresh outfit from the airing cupboard."

"Thanks, thanks!" Paula remained polite enough to say, as she scuttled upstairs.

CHAPTER 3.

The New "Tweenie."

ON the first landing, Paula encountered a very young and pretty "between-maid," in cap and apron, who stopped dead, and then looked like bursting into laughter at the spectacle which confronted her. But Paula did not pause to explain.

Breathlessly she continued on her way, and now the girl in cap and apron descended to where only Polly and Naomer remained, Betty having darted off to find matron.

If this had been one of the school servants who had been long enough at the school for the scholars to know her well, Polly and Naomer would have begun a laughing explanation; but, to their surprise, they realised that here was a maid who could only have entered upon her duties to-day, for they had not set eyes upon her before.

Taking care to rid her very pretty countenance of all signs of the mirth that the sight of Paula had caused, the new maid would have demurely gone by the two scholars; but Polly, in her good-natured way, felt bound to remark:

"Rather a scream, isn't it, the state that chum of ours has got herself into? She fell overboard!"

"Splosh, yes!" put in Naomer graphically. "He was a good one, that splosh! He, he, he!"

"How very uncomfortable for your chum!" the maid responded, with a decorous smile. "Can I do anything for her?"

"Oh, no, thanks! She'll soon get into dry things," was Polly's bland reply. "Wait a sec, though! Yes, perhaps you can do something—a cup of tea for Paula, when she is dressed again. She's such a one for tea!"

"I'll make a pot, and bring it up."

"Thanks, if you will! You—you have only just come into service here?"

"That's all, only to-day. It's my first place," quietly answered the new maid.

At the same time, she rather poised

herself, as if to say quite proudly: "How do you think I look?"

Polly and Naomer did not say so, but they thought she looked very smart and sweet indeed.

"Well, you'll like it here—be very happy, that's certain!" declared Polly.

"Your name—"

"Florence Blair—Florrie, I'm always called," was the shy answer with which the dainty-looking girl passed on.

They were to see her again very soon, for she appeared with a loaded tray just as Paula was coming away from the room where a lightning change into dry things had been effected.

"Now I'm fairly all wight—yes, wather!" Paula beamed, making for the studies. "A good west, and I twust I shall wecuperate wapidly!"

Then she saw the new maid and the tray.

"Wnat, tea, and for me, bai Jove?"

"Yes, miss."

"Oh, thanks, thanks! Extwemely kind of you! Most agweeable surpwise—yes, wather! If you will bwing it to my study, there is an armcheah—yes, wather!"

Once again the new maid seemed on the verge of laughter, and it was hardly a wonder, Betty and others were in fits of merriment as they saw Paula lead the way to her study, with an air of cheerful convalescence.

"You have pwobably heard I had the misfowtune to be pweecipitated into the bwny," she said, languidly sinking back into an easy-chair. "Thanks for the tea! If you will put it just theah—yes, wather! And do you think you will like being at Morcove?"

Polly had to retire and have her laugh out in the corridor when Paula addressed this question to the new maid. The drawing inquiry might have come from a duchess!

"Very much," said Florrie Blair meekly. "And is there anything else I can do, whilst I'm here?"

"If you would just pour out for me—thanks! One lump!" said Paula. "Ah, deah, what a tewwible expewience it was! A gweat mercy that I was not

brought home on a stretcher, bai Jove! We had been for a wun to Gull Island, don't you know!"

"That's the island one can see from the school windows?"

"Pwecisely!" Paula nodded at the maid who was pouring out for her. "A most womantic spot, isn't it, geals? And to-day we had it all to ourselves, which made it all the nicer."

"But did we have it to ourselves, Paula?" Betty interposed blithely. "Polly would tell you that she is sure there was some person, a woman, who would not let herself be found by us, and it puzzled us at the time."

Florrie Blair had just passed the cup of tea to Paula. She now looked at the last speaker in a wondering way.

"Do you mean to say, miss, that—that some woman on the island was hiding from you? Someone who lives there, I suppose, a country woman?"

"Oh, no, it couldn't have been anyone like that," Polly asserted confidently, "for the island hasn't a single inhabitant! The woman I glimpsed for a moment, she must have been—well, I don't quite know what to say! There was no sign of her having landed for a few hours whilst out boating!"

"Bai Jove, anyhow, geals, this is a wipping cup of tea! And, weally," Paula beamed, sipping at the cup, "I am greatly obliged, Florrie! You'll do all wight heah, I imagine."

"Thank you, miss, for saying so! I hope I shall," curtsied the new maid, drawing off to the door. "And I hope you will be none the worse for your accident, miss."

"Theah, Naomer, theah's a geal for you!" Paula commented, after Florrie had effaced herself. "I considah that was vewy properly spoken—yes, wather—an example to some of you geals who can only gwin whenever I come to gwief!"

She drank the rest of the tea, returned the cup and saucer to the tray, then shook up a cushion.

"And naow, Naomer, deah—all of you," the "patient" said pathetically—

"I will not be so wude as to ask you to wetire. But I twust I may be allowed to west quietly, so that I may pull wound in time. I—Ow, off me, Naomer, off me!"

"He, he, he! Ah, bah, you are not ill!"

"Ill? I should think not!" was all the madcap had to say, on being appealed to so pathetically. "As for pulling round—"

"I do that! Ooo, yes; queek—queek!" cried Naomer.

And, whilst Betty and Polly were going along to their own den, greatly amused, they could hear Paula's squeals for pity as Naomer "pulled her round" the study in the armchair!

Meanwhile, Morcove's new domestic had gone up, by a side staircase, to that little bed-room which had been allotted to her in the servants' quarters.

She closed her room door, then stood in a sort of muse, smiling faintly. If she had not looked so entirely free from all nervousness, and if Morcove had not been such a famous establishment for happy service, she might have seemed deserving of pity, so young was she.

But Florrie Blair evidently stood in no need of sympathy. She now did the last of her unpacking from the one tin trunk that had come with her to-day, looking quite amused.

Most of all was she inclined to smile when it was some part of her maid's outfit that she was putting away in hanging-cupboard or chest of drawers.

At last this little task was finished. Yet she hung about in her tiny bed-room, perhaps because she had been considerably told that she would not be wanted to do much downstairs this first day.

Drifting to the little dormer window, she was able to gaze down from this, the very highest part of the great schoolhouse, to where scholars were playing games in the big field.

"Just the same—still just the same!" was the strange murmur that came from her of a sudden. "The old school, the scholars who were here when I was

here, not changed a bit! And perhaps I would not have changed to them. They would have remembered me in a flash, only——"

She paused, to turn away from the window and take her stand in front of the dressing-table mirror. Her right hand went up to finger her nicely-bobbed hair.

"Dark brown, when it used to be the colour of corn," was her own murmured comment. "And a cap and apron now, when it used to be the school hat and frock. Mother and father were right. There could be no safer disguise."

Then suddenly the sight of herself in the glass made her look bitterly rueful, and more than rueful, roused to fury by some turn of fortune that had changed her young life.

"No, they'll not find out, and I can play my part easily enough!" she whispered through clenched teeth. "But it is pretty hard! It's a shame that the girl who was once Audrey Blain, the grandest scholar at Morcove, should be under this roof again as Florrie Blair, a servant!"

CHAPTER 4.

Cora Wants a Crony.

HANDSOME Cora Grandways came out of a shop in Barncombe High Street, got astride her motor-cycle's saddle, and drove off.

Rurr-rr, rurr-urr! went the brave little engine, as its dashing owner set off for the school at her usual high speed. The Saturday evening was still warm and sunny. It was light up to call-over at this grand season of the year, but Cora must needs fly along as if rain or darkness threatened.

She had no companion, and the empty side-car rather bumped along when the outfit's rider was on the main road. Any other girl with a sister at school with her would surely have been giving that sister a jaunt on such a glorious evening. Cora's attitude towards her sister Judith, however, was no loving one.

She had long since given up asking

Judith to go for a ride, although pompous "pa" Grandways had provided the combination so that the two sisters might get about together.

Nor, just at present, was there any other girl at Morcove for whom Cora had any use.

She had fallen out with Ursula Wade, and that quarrel between a couple who had been as thick as thieves had left handsome Cora in a state of "splendid isolation."

She affected not to care if no one would have anything to do with her, but this was mere bravado.

At heart, Cora sadly missed having a crony of her own these days. Even now, as she went tearing along the old familiar road, looking so very satisfied with the fun she got out of her own wayward life at Morcove, she was hungry for companionship. Only, the sort of "pal" Cora wanted must be one of her own kind. None of your Study 12 sort of girls for Cora, thank you!

As usual, after being in such a hurry to streak the few miles between Barncombe and Morcove she found no delight in seeing the school gateway close at hand.

Study windows were flashing in the bright evening sunshine, through the boundary hedge she could glimpse the crowded playing-field, and it all made Cora feel how she loathed—ay, and was loathed by—Morcove.

"Dashed if I go in, after all!" was her moody utterance, and so she drove on past the school gateway, following a main road that went for many a mile before it ran downhill into a little country town with which the school had few dealings.

Perhaps Cora would have kept on and on until she was in that town, with little else to do but turn round and come back, a sheer waste of petrol. But suddenly, when she was no more than a mile from the school, she found herself overtaking a girl who was rather wearily dawdling in the same direction.

As the flyaway motor-cyclist gave a warning blare of the horn, this other

girl first side-stepped to leave the road clear, then looked round.

Cora's first impulse was to rip by at top speed, just to show off, but a flashing look at the youthful pedestrian made the bane of the Fourth Form change her mind.

She liked the look of this girl, a complete stranger, and doubtless staying in the neighbourhood with her parents. Chance to become friendly, did it mean that? Good class, according to the way the girl dressed, and her style of walking! And so—

Cora pulled up sharply.

"Like a lift?" she asked sweetly. "I'm going your way, and I can run you along."

"Oh, thanks, but— Well, I have rather overwalked myself," the other girl confessed, with a half-ashamed smile. "I have been as far as the school. I felt I would like to look at it. One hears so much about Morcove School!"

"Get in!" invited Cora airily. "You are down here for the summer, perhaps? Your people—taken a house in the neighbourhood, have they?"

"The Old Grange, yes. Do you know it?" nodded the other girl, briskly getting into the side-car. "You go to Morcove School, I suppose?"

"I'm a boarder, worse luck!" Cora grinned, watching to see what effect such an answer would produce. "I hate school, don't you?"

"No, I can't say that I do," was the answer, spoken pensively. "I—I— My schooling came to an end rather unexpectedly early this year, and—"

"Not expelled, I hope!"

"Expelled? Good gracious, no!" the girl exclaimed, with a degree of horror that excited Cora's contempt.

Feeling that she was not likely to make friends with the girl, she felt she might just as well shock her.

"Um! They always say I shall be expelled in the end," Cora said, starting up the engine, "and perhaps I shall be. It doesn't worry me! Straight on?"

"For about a mile."

"Oh, yes, of course; you said the Old Grange! I know it."

Cora thumbed over one of the small plated controls, and—roar! away they flashed. Potholes didn't matter. Rather a lark, to shake this girl to pieces! Anyway, it was letting her see how one could drive!

Still showing off, Cora turned in at the carriage-way to the old house, and went up the drive at great speed, pulling up sharply just opposite the porch.

"There you are!" she remarked with her superior air. "I hope I didn't frighten you, but I always drive like that."

The girl said nothing, but quickly alighted, looking rather dispirited. The fact was she, too, would have been glad to find a friend in the neighbourhood, but the last few minutes with this particular Morcove girl had been enough for her.

Slightly on her dignity, she was going to say a simple "Good-bye, and thank you," but a sudden thought induced her to ask, instead:

"Won't you come in for a moment? I don't suppose my people are at home. In any case—"

"Well, I will, as I've really nothing else to do," Cora descended, getting down from the saddle. "Your people must be in a fine way, to be able to take a house like this!"

"Oh, there is nothing grand inside," disclaimed the new acquaintance, "and we live quite quietly! By the way," she added, leading Cora into the house, "Mr. and Mrs. Halden are not my parents really. They've adopted me, and I have taken their name. I am Norma Halden."

"I see!" Cora responded, whilst she now glanced about an old-fashioned hall with an appraising look that jarred upon Norma Halden.

More and more this girl was disliking the Morcove scholar, but, in her loneliness, she had jumped at the idea. Through this girl, perhaps, she could get to know others who would be really

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nice. From what she had heard of
Morcove School, this "swanker" could
not possibly be a fair sample of its host
of scholars.

"You are renting the place
furnished?" Cora conjectured, after she
had been waved to a seat in a dim,
panelled sitting-room. "My people,
Mr. and Mrs. Grandways, take a house
sometimes, but they favour London, the
West End!"

Norma could sense the boastfulness
that was making the flashy scholar
eager to reel off boring details of the
family's ostentatious life, so she ex-
claimed quickly:

"Your school, though, tell me all
about that!"

"Oh, the school!" grimaced Cora.
"Bother the school, I say! To like
Morcove, you've got to be as keen on
work as you are keen on games!"

"And you are not?"

"No, I'm not! Very dreadful, isn't
it?" laughed Cora. "But my notions of
what's worth while don't fit in with the
other girls'. They're a poor lot!" she
added, laying aside her gloves and lol-
ling back. "What do you do with your-
self all day?"

"Oh, I help in the house a bit! We
only keep one servant, who has been
with Mr. and Mrs. Halden for many
years. Then I garden."

"Really!" Cora almost sniffed as she
said it. "H'm, not the sort of life I
would like!"

"It isn't my ideal life," was the
frank admission. "I suppose I'm really
hankering to be back at school. One's
never dull at school. But—Will you
have some lemonade," Norma broke off
to suggest hospitality, "before you drive
back?"

There was some that she had made in
a glass jug upon a sideboard. Seeking a
tumbler, she filled it, the talk mean-
while lapsing. And now that the room
was silent, Cora became aware of some
eager whispering going on in the hall.

It sounded to her as if a lady and
gentleman had just met each other out

there, to fall into rather tense talk in
very subdued tones.

"I hope it's all right!" Norma said,
with a smile worthy of a better recipient,
"I made it this morning."

"You're what they call domesticated,
are you?" Cora did not mind saying,
with scarce-veiled disdain. "Well,
cheerio!"

She drank, at the same time aware of
the whisperers quitting the hall, to go
into one of the other downstairs rooms.

"And now I must fly," Cora said, set-
ting down the empty glass. "Thanks!
It was very nice. I don't know if I shall
see you again, so good-bye!"

Norma Halden echoed the farewell
softly, as she opened the door to let her
disappointing acquaintance pass out.
Hating to be uncerecermonious, she saw
her off from the porch, then came back
to the room where they had talked to-
gether for the minute or so.

"Awful girl!" was her sighing com-
ment. "Just the sort I simply can't
stand, with her awful swank! Pity she
was like that, because—"

A big lift and fall of the shoulders
told how she was rueing her loneliness,
and wistfully yearning for friends of
her own age.

"If only she had been some nice girl
from the school, one who—"

"Norma, what girl was that?"

The door had opened sharply, and the
question was being put by a lady of sin-
gular beauty and dignity. She certainly
was not more than forty years of age,
and, with her fair hair, the colour of
ripe corn, and extreme slinness, she
might have been much younger.

"Who was it, Norma? Tell me!"

"A Morcove scholar," answered the
adopted girl, turning round to meet a
look as irritable as the question had
been. "She gave me a lift home, so I
felt I must ask her in."

"You are not going to get friendly?"

"Not with that girl—no!" Norma
very emphatically assured the lady.
"But, of course, if I could find a nice
friend or two at the school—"

"Are you so lonely, then, so dull?" Mrs. Halden exclaimed, with slight annoyance. "Many girls would be glad to change places with you, Norma, especially girls who are no better off than you were when Mr. Halden and I adopted you."

"Oh, you have been very kind, and I would be horrid if I were ungrateful!" was Norma's earnest answer. "And please don't think I could ever tire of the quiet country life, only I would like to see another girl or two now and then."

The wistful admission was so reasonable, Mrs. Halden was left with nothing to say, except:

"Well, well, my dear! But don't get bringing a lot of girls here, to overrun the place. Mr. Halden and I have come here to—to be quiet."

That she would have liked to lay a sterner injunction upon the girl was evident from her nettled look, which Norma did not fail to observe. Mrs. Halden went away, and it was a sudden great relief to the girl to realise that, luckily, she had not been forbidden to make friends, only warned not to bring them here.

And now, left to herself again, Norma suddenly noticed that the Grandways girl had left her gloves behind.

In a flash, she had them in her hands, and was resolved to go across to the school with them some time to-morrow, Sunday. That must be a quiet, free day for the scholars, and she would be calling when they were at neither work nor play.

CHAPTER 5.

The Right Set This Time.

IT was just after three on the Sunday afternoon when Norma Halden passed in at the school gateway, for she had felt it best to wait until this hour.

With the weather as sunny as ever, all the school seemed to be out of doors. The grounds and playing fields looked

like some public park where chummy batches of girls were sauntering around, whilst others sat about on the grass, or under the elms, reading or talking.

Shyness seized Norma half-way up the drive. Feeling that she was an object of general attention, she felt she had better hand over the gloves to the first girl whom she could accost, saying whose they were, and then clear out.

One very jolly-looking junior was approaching, and Norma felt drawn towards her. She stood in no dread of a supercilious reception as she stepped up to this girl and said gently:

"Excuse me, but you have a girl whose name is Grandways at this school? She—"

"Oh, yes, in my Form!"

"Would you mind letting her have these gloves? She left them behind at my place yesterday," begged Norma.

"That's all right, certainly! Have you had to come far, all on account of these gloves?"

"Oh, no; only from the Old Grange, and, in any case, I would have been taking a walk! Besides, I was glad of an excuse for getting a look at the school," Norma owned, with a very frank smile.

"Then for goodness' sake don't hurry away! The Old Grange! We girls know it well, although we seldom go that way. You might stay, and let us give you a cup of tea! Come across the grass with me. My chums are over there. I'm Polly Linton, and— Well, I'd better have your name, to introduce you."

"Norma Halden. But, please— I mean, this is like—"

"Don't be silly!" was the delicious way in which chummy Polly, greatly taken with the girl, at once dispelled the last of Norma's pretty hesitancy. "Come on! You see that girl who has spread a rug for herself on the grass? She's a scream, our prize duffer, but the dearest girl in the world!"

"Next to yourself!" was what delighted Norma would have liked to say, get te

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mark, since it would only have seemed
falsome.
"Girls, I want to introduce Norma
Halden, staying at the Old Grange, and
quite in love with Morcove from the
outside!"
Thus Polly breezily did the introduc-
tion, a few moments later, adding:
"She brought along some gloves that
Cora left behind."
"But you're not a friend of Cora
Grandways?" Betty could not help ex-
claiming incredulously.
"No; the Grandways girl merely gave
me a lift in her sidecar last evening,
and—and—"
"You may say it!" grinned Polly.
"Cora didn't strike you as being quite
the nicest girl! Well, have a bit of a
rest here, Norma, and then we'll take
you indoors and show you round."
"Yes, wather!" beamed Paula, ap-
pearing to sit up on her spread rug with
great languour. "You must excuse my
not wising to shake hands, Norma
Halden, but I am somewhat incapaci-
tated to-day, as the result of a cata-
strophe yesterday."
"If there is a big word, Paula Creel
will use it!" chuckled Polly. "Paula
only means that she fell out of a boat
yesterday!"
"Ooo, yes—splish!" added Naomer
graphically. "He was a good one, that
splish! He, he, he!"
"You will realise, Norma," sighed
Paula sinking back upon the rug, "my
friends begrudge me any sympathy. It
is nothing to them that I am weakly
vey weak as the after effects of an
accident that was sewious enough to be
weported in the papers—yes, wather!
However, I am resigned to being
treated with undeserved widicule.
Wow! Naomer, off me!"
"He, he, he! What you want is
ze cup of tea!"
"Tea, bai Jove!" And Paula certainly
became very animated in an instant.
"Happy inspivation, geals! Norma has
had a long walk, so I pwopose that we
get tea at once—what?"

"Come on!" several of them promptly
agreed, jumping up. "In Study 12!"
"Yes, wather!"
"Whoa!" Polly bade eager Paula.
"Take your rug, Paula. You're not
such an invalid that we are going to lag
it along for you. Take it!"
"Healp!" was Paula's muffled yell, as
Polly tossed the rug at her, fairly
smothering her from head to knees.
"My hair, my fwock!"
"But queek, queek! Hurry for ze
tea!" Naomer now urged the be-rugged
"invalid," and the dusky one started to
propel Paula at a great rate across the
grass, with the rug still flapping over
her head.
Norma knew then that there never
was a more fun-loving pair than Polly
and Naomer, and never a more teased
girl than elegant Paula.
All the way to the school porch, there
was such a larking about with the
would-be "convalescent" as kept Norma
in smiles.
At this instant a certain "between-
maid" who was new to Morcove had
just come down from her little bed-
room, dressed for her afternoon off.
She did not come out by the front
entrance. Even so, she chanced to be
seen by the girls as she was walking
away from the side door, and the mere
back view of the dainty-stepping
"tweenie" made Norma exclaim:
"Why, who is that?"
"That girl going out for the after-
noon? Oh, she is a new maid! Ever
so young for the job," Betty smiled,
"but quite a success, they say!"
"Yes, wather! And, bai Jove, a weal
wipper!" declared Paula. "Florrie
Blair showed the gweatest considewa-
tion for my distressed condition
yesterday."
"One of your domestics?" Norma
murmured, still gazing after the reced-
ing figure that was so trim and dainty.
"It's curious, but—I don't know if it's
the way she walks, or what—she re-
minds me of someone I saw going away
from the Grange a few days ago!"

"Florrie only came into service at the school yesterday," said Helen Craig. "Had she perhaps been to the Grange to see about a place before she got this job?"

Norma shook her head.

"It could hardly be that. Mrs. Halden does not want a maid. Whilst we are at the Grange, we have to make do—Mrs. Halden has said so—with one elderly servant who has been with the Haldens for years."

"Queer that you should see something about Florrie to remind you of another girl," Madge mused, taking a last look at the maid before she passed from sight. "As you say, it may be the way she walks, but she reminds me of someone else. I can't think of whom!"

"The fact is," said Polly, as they all moved on again, "Florrie Blair is one of those girls who, even if they are in domestic service, are as good as any of us!"

"Yes, wather!" agreed Paula heartily. "I realised that from the vewy start, bai Jove! Flowwie was so vewy considewate yesterday!"

CHAPTER 6.

When Night Had Come.

A FEW nights later, Morcove School came in for a bad scare.

Cora Grandways had gone off after tea on her motor-cycle, and had not come back!

It was not until call-over that her being still out, "after hours," was known. In the hope that at any moment she might show up, having been delayed by nothing worse than a puncture, half an hour was allowed to drag by.

Then Miss Redgrave came away from the headmistress' study, to give a quiet order to one of the maids:

"Florrie Blair, will you go upstairs to Study 12 and ask the girls who are there to come to my room? You will find them waiting about in Study 12.

I know, for I suggested that they should not go up to bed with the rest of the Form, in case they are wanted."

"Yes, miss."

"You see, Florrie," continued Miss Redgrave, going up the first flight with the new "tweenie," "one of my girls is absent, although it is dark night now, so we shall have to take steps to find out what has happened."

"I'm sorry, miss!" was the "tweenie's" demure reply. "If I weren't so tired, I would offer to—"

"Oh, no, thank you, Florrie! You just let the Study 12 girls know that I want them. Then you must go to bed. I'm sure you have worked hard to-day."

"Thank you, miss! Then I'll say 'good-night'!"

"Good-night, Florrie!"

There were some six of the chums waiting about in great suspense, when a sudden tap at the door was followed by Florrie Blair's entrance.

"If you please, young ladies, I was to ask you to go to Miss Redgrave, as the missing girl has not come back yet."

"She hasn't!"

"Bai Jove, this is sewious, geals! Ah, weal," Paula said, getting up from her easy-chair, "I don't mind what I do to healp, even though it's Corwa!"

"I can see our being out half the night, scouring the roads," Polly said grimly, as they hurried from the room. "Going to bed, Florrie? Good-night, then!"

"Good-night, young ladies!" was said very decorously by the pretty "tweenie" who had so charmed all Morcove.

Stepping along to the secondary staircase, she ascended to her own little bed-room. After shutting herself in for the night, she hushed her movements, as if anxious not to disturb the occupants of neighbouring bed-rooms, who might be already in bed.

But no such considerate thought for others could account for the girl's great agitation, now that she was alone.

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Feverishly excited, she paced about the room with the lithe and silent step of a caged panther. Once she paused by the window and peered out, her excited eyes having the nightbound sea for their object.

"Mother that Cora Grandways for being out late and upsetting the school!" she suddenly seethed to herself. "It's keeping a lot of them up, and to-night is one of the nights that mother and dad hoped to make good use of. No moon!"

Then, with an exasperated sigh, she muttered again:

"Well, there is no help for it! I must give the signal that was arranged for in case of danger!"

With the word, she stole to a small cupboard, and filched out articles that any of Moreove's scholars would have recognised as pertaining to photography. There were one or two shallow chemical dishes; also, there was a small ruby lamp.

Florrie Blair, to give her the name that she was passing under, lit this lamp, then turned out her ordinary light.

With the glow of the lamp illuminating her tense looks, she stood near the window, moving the ruby light up and down.

Meanwhile, Betty & Co. were already empowered by Miss Redgrave to make one of the search-parties that were to set forth in quest of Cora.

Most of the seniors had been enlisted for the anxious hunt, and the juniors felt highly complimented at not having one of the Sixth Form girls put in charge of them. It showed how Miss Redgrave relied upon their promise to keep together.

Briskly they hurried out into the soft, warm darkness of the summer night. Two or three of them carried electric torches, but these were held in reserve. Although the night was moonless, the myriad stars gave light enough for Betty & Co. The girls knew their way about so well.

"I do hope Cora turns up soon!"

Betty exclaimed, just as they were leaving the school gateway behind them. "It is such a worry for Miss Somerfield and everybody."

"I should think her motor-biking will be stopped after this," remarked Tess, "let Mr. Grandways like it or lump it! This isn't the first time Cora has broken down on the way home."

"And she does go so far afield!"

"Yes, wather! Natuwalli, bai Jove, when the geal thinks nothing of doing twenty miles an hour!" chimed in Paula. "We'll walk till we dwop, geals, but I think it far more likely she is weally miles away fwom here!"

"Then why hasn't she 'phoned, or got someone to 'phone for her?" Helen rejoined. "If the girl would only show a little consideration for others, she would—"

"Bai Jove, look! Geals—geals, is that Corwa now?" broke in Paula, with pride in being the first to notice a far-off lantern-flash. "A light, geals! There, again!"

"Duffer!" was Polly's scornful cry. "Ha, ha, ha! How could that be Cora?"

"Signalling, bai Jove, with one of her motor-cycle lamps!"

"From more than a mile out at sea?" scoffed Polly. "Oh, Paula, Paula, show a bit of sense! Do you need to be told that the open sea is over there?"

"Bai Jove! Yes, wather!"

And Paula subsided, with diminished pride in her abilities as an amateur detective.

"That light, there it goes again!" Betty said, a few moments later. "Some fishing-boat, I suppose."

"I was just thinking—it's rather unusual," murmured Madge. "There are no flashes now."

But the cessation of the tiny flashes only left them eager to see if they came again, and so the girls were for the moment standing still, fascinated, when the deep silence caused them to hear a faint, dragging step, just a little way off.

"Hark!"

"That's Cora!" was Polly's prompt assertion. "Cora!" she shouted into the darkness. "That you, Cora?"

"Yes! What's the fuss about?" came a mumbling response from the errant schoolgirl. "I'm all right!"

"Bai Jove, the nerve!" Paula said under her breath disgustedly. "After cweating such a scare, dwagging us out to look for her, she's all wight!"

"And that's all she cares, you may be sure!" Helen muttered scornfully.

Cora now strolled up to them, and by the light of the stars they could see that she was tired and sullen—"fed up." The question "Where's your bike?" went unanswered, nor was she going to offer these girls any explanation as to what had happened.

"I suppose you had a breakdown?" Betty tried again.

"You can suppose what you like, all of you!" Cora snapped. "I'll account to Miss Redgrave, not to you!"

"How sweet!" Polly commented, smiling bitterly. "We might have been certain that you would not know how to thank anybody for the trouble they've been put to!"

In silence, after that, they all proceeded towards the school, except that Betty suddenly remarked:

"There's that light again, girls!"

Cora, sulkily walking apart from the chums, asked sharply:

"What light?"

"One that has come and gone in tiny flashes out at sea."

"Oh, that!" Cora said carelessly.

"Yes, I noticed it. I thought perhaps you meant——"

She broke off there, and Betty & Co. could feel certain that to ask her to finish the remark would only be to get snubbed.

Yet they greatly wondered at the words she had let out before putting a check upon her tongue.

Had she seen some other light, besides the one at sea, that she had spoken in such a fashion?

Could the chums have been with Cora during the next half-hour, they would not only have found the answer to that question, but might have found out how much else, besides!

CHAPTER 7.

Why Is It—Why?

WITHIN a few minutes of their return to the school, Betty and her chums were preparing for bed in the Fourth Form dormitory.

As for Cora, now that she had sullenly accounted to the headmistress for being out so late, she was under orders to get upstairs as soon as she had had a snack of supper.

It appeared that the motor-cycle had gone wrong when she was within five miles of the school, and she had had to abandon the derelict for the night, and complete the return trip on foot. A straightforward explanation, doubtless; but Miss Somerfield was getting tired of such escapades, and Cora was to hear more about this latest one in the morning!

Little the lawless girl troubled herself about that, however, when she had so much else to absorb her mind.

Nor did she spend more than a minute over her belated supper before going alone upstairs. Very softly Cora trod the stairs, becoming as silent as a thief in the night when she reached the sleeping quarters.

Keeping away from her Form's dormitory, she stole round to a flight of stairs that led up to some of the servants' bed-rooms. With as much speed as stealthiness, she came to one bit of a passage on to which two doors opened, opposite each other.

With one of these rooms Cora was not the least concerned. It was the other, with an outlook over the sea, that had surely been the one from which a red light, like a signal, had been glimpsed by her whilst she was wearily footing it back to the school!

Strange for one of Morcove's servants

to be showing a red light from her window at bed-time! So Cora had said to herself. Stranger still that there should have been another light, out at sea, winking back, as if in reply to a signal!

Without a sound, her very breath held in suspense, the girl who was always prone to spying, bent low, and put an eye to the keyhole.

But she gained nothing by doing so. The room was in darkness, and it's occupant in bed.

For a moment or so, Cora felt tempted to give a rap that would bring the inmate of the room to the door. At present she even did not know which maid it was occupying this room, and she was thirsting to find out.

But the difficulty of offering a plausible excuse for knocking up the girl made Cora go away at last—baffled, yet not beaten.

"I'm going to follow it up—I will!" she was saying to herself, as she silently passed to the floor below. "Something was going on to-night that means a mystery, it seems. Very well! To-morrow I'll find out who the girl is who has that room!"

For a girl—a servant, too—to be making signals with a red lamp from her window, it was highly suspicious. No one else, Cora felt certain, had observed the red light. Betty and her chums had noticed the other light, out at sea, but that was all, luckily.

Cora called it "lucky," because there was nothing she loved more than to be the only one to know of any underground work that might be going on at any time.

She was almost on the point of dropping off to sleep, an hour later, when a thought shot through her brain like a lightning flash.

The reason for those signals being made, she had guessed it! At least, one reason had flashed upon her that seemed to explain everything.

Her being out late and keeping the school up, all this must have been an

unlooked-for occurrence that had upset someone's plans, plans that could only be carried out when the school, at its customary hour, had retired for the night.

Burglary! Was that, then, what it meant, one of the servants in the school acting in connivance with outsiders?

Cora could not get to sleep for a long while after that. The sense of being the only one cognisant of this sinister business that seemed to be afoot kept her feverishly excited.

Next morning she played an artful game, so as to be free to follow up the mystery.

She pleaded that she did not feel up to much, after her tiring experience overnight. Miss Redgrave came up and saw the girl in the dormitory after breakfast, and, although it looked like a case of malingering, she said that Cora might lie there for an hour longer, if she liked to do so.

But Cora had a liking for something quite different!

No sooner had the bell rung all the other girls into class than she quitted her bed, performed a hurried toilette, and then made her way up to the staff quarters.

Just as she had guessed, not a soul was there. The maids always did their own rooms before nine o'clock, after which they were kept very busy in other parts of the great schoolhouse until midday.

Cora daringly took her chance, and let herself into her suspect's room. The burning question still was—who occupied the room?

Which of the servants was it? That was the first thing to find out!

The sight of a tin trunk, stowed away in one corner of the little bed-room, set Cora wondering. Was it the new between-maid, Florrie Blair? The trunk looked very like one that Cora had seen the carrier delivering at the school one day last week, but servants' trunks were so much alike.

With no scruples in the matter, crafty Cora started to pry around, and suddenly she picked up an insurance card

that was laid by on a shelf. "Florence Blair" was the name inscribed on the card, and so—

"That settles it!" exulted Cora. "It's the new 'tweenie.' Well! She's an impostor, only taken on the job because it suits the plans of people she is in with! And now, whilst I am here—"

Cora returned the card to the shelf, then stole back to the door and listened.

Still quite safe! One or two of the maids had come up to "do" the dormitories, but this topmost floor was as deserted as ever.

She crept across to the dressing-table, and opened this drawer and that to have a look at Florrie Blair's belongings.

By so doing, it seemed to Cora that she might get to know a good deal about the girl—where she came from, who her people were, and so on.

One thing struck the prying girl as she carried on her crafty search. Florrie Blair must be a vain little thing, with notions "above her station" of how a girl should pamper herself.

"It makes one wonder if she really is the daughter of common people," was the thought which Cora's snobbish mind conceived. "Some of these things—Hullo, what's this photo?"

Here, indeed, was a thrilling find for Cora to snatch from the bottom of a drawer, where only rummaging hands like hers would ever have come upon it! The photograph of a girl—a young girl, expensively dressed, and looking mighty proud of herself!

Cora quickly took the portrait to the window, and then she gave a great gasp of blank amazement.

"Surely—surely I know this face!" was her panted exclamation. "It is the very image of someone—a girl I used to know! But who is it, then—who? Oh, I must think! I must try to remember! No one at Morcove. And yet— Why, yes, I remember now! Audrey Blain!"

Her brain turned giddy whilst she still stared at the portrait.

"Audrey Blain! It is—it is! That's Audrey's vain smile—that's her poise. I

seem to remember her in this very dress, when I was in London with her, that time I stayed with her people. It is Audrey Blain—Audrey, who got herself expelled!"

Then it was for Cora's reeling brain to try and grapple with this consequent problem: Why was this photograph of Audrey Blain in the possession of Morcove's new "tweenie"?

In a flash, knowing Cora had the answer.

Audrey Blain and Florrie Blair were one and the same person!

Beyond all doubt, this photograph was only being treasured because it was just like Audrey's self-love to retain a portrait of herself that she could often admire in secret.

For some mysterious reason—ah, and what a deep mystery it all was now!—Audrey had obtained a situation at Morcove School as a domestic servant.

It was a part that she must hate having to play, only there were those who had insisted upon her rendering them that assistance. But why?

Why?

Even Cora's swift-working wits were at a loss now. With a baffled shake of the head, she at last returned the photograph to the drawer, left everything just as she had found it, and stole away.

On the floor below, she sauntered to the doorway of the Fourth Form dormitory, and looked into that great room.

Florrie Blair was there, busy with the bed-making. She demurely paused in her work, and ventured a shy:

"Good-morning, miss!"

"Morning!" Cora nodded back, then turned and walked away, smiling to herself.

Then and there she had been inclined to answer: "Good-morning, Audrey Blain!" But, no; it was just as well to wait a bit. That should be a treat to come!

"It is Audrey, though. When I looked at her just then, I could see! And I"—Cora gloried in realising, as she passed downstairs—"I am the only one in the school who knows!"

CHAPTER I.

Challenged—Point Blank.

"She was a jolly nice girl! And what about having her over to tea one day?"

"Yes, wather!"

That was Paula Creel's emphatic, if faint, murmur as she sat amongst the half-dozen chums who were crowded in Study 12 at Morcove School now that afternoon classes were over.

"If Betty, as captain, will dictate a letter, I'll take it down, as I do Paula's stories," said boisterous Polly Linton, hopping off the table-edge, to plump into a chair—"that is, if we are all agreed it would be nice to invite Norma Halden to tea with us!"

"Certainly!" assented Helen Craig.

"A nicer girl I never met!"

"Outside Morcove, ahem! You meant to add that, Helen?" grinned Polly.

"I'm sorry Norma Halden is outside Morcove," was Madge Minden's gentle remark. "She finds it dull and lonely, I'm afraid, over at the Old Grange."

"We will proceed, then!" said Polly, taking pen and paper. "Whoa, for blots!" And she gaily slung a blob from the edge of her pen-nib on to the floor. "Begin, Betty!"

"Shan't!" laughed Morcove's Fourth Form captain. "You know what to write, Polly, so go on with you!"

"Wemembering to express yourself politely, Polly, deah," cautioned Paula, consulting a pocket-mirror to see that she was just so. "If I were writing—"

"Which you are not, so dry up!" was Polly's mock-withering outburst. "You are not the only girl with a vocabulary, Paula!"

"Ooo, he is a good word, yes!" came from Naomer, squatting close to Paula. "Vocabulary, I shall use him! Only, what does he mean, please?"

"A vocabulary, Naomer, deah, means having the wight word weady—yes, wather! It is a gift which we Cweels—"

"I am going to say this in the letter!"

Polly almost shouted, causing Paula to subside as if sat upon. "'Desiring to pursue an acquaintanceship'—ahem—'which began'—er—'under such auspicious circumstances yesterday afternoon—'"

"Oh, get on and write your note," laughed Betty, "so that we can all get along out for a bit!"

"Ooo, yes; queek—queek!"

"Very well," assented the lover of nonsense, gravely starting to write. "It shall be just an ordinary note, finished in two ticks if Naomer will see that Paula does not interrupt."

"Wow!" howled Paula, as Naomer promptly acted on the suggestion by demanding to be nursed. "Off me—off me!"

"Eef you not keep quiet, I—I squash you!" threatened Naomer, wriggling down harder than ever upon the elegant one's lap. "There, is that better?"

Judging by Paula's collapsed look, it was not. It was lucky for her that only a minute elapsed before Polly jumped up, the letter finished.

"There we are: 'Dear Norma,—Do come to tea one afternoon.' That's good enough, isn't it?"

"Bwief, but to the p— Oow!"

"He, he, he! I told you what eet would be if you interrupt!" chuckled Naomer. "But now we can go out, so queek—queek, ewewyodies! Tennis, queek!"

A general uprising was taking place, and another moment would have seen Naomer heading the high-spirited exodus, when the study door opened, revealing one of Morcove's between-maids.

"Yes, Florrie?" smiled Betty.

"Nothing, miss, thank you! I—I was sent to find Cora Grandways. The headmistress wishes to see her," answered the girl in cap and apron who had taken up her duties but two days ago.

"You never need come to Study 12 in search of Cora Grandways!" Polly said, with a grim smile. "Even if we wished

for her companionship, she would never want ours!"

"No, of course—— I mean——"

Florrie Blair broke off in some confusion, as if conscious of making a mistake in showing that she knew all about that. Quickly resuming her habitual demureness, she said prettily:

"Well, I must go on looking for her, that's all. But I am afraid it means that she has gone out."

"Quite likely," said Betty, "on her motor-cycle, or has it been fetched home yet from where she had to abandon it last evening?"

"I think it is about her being out so late last evening that Miss Somerfield wishes to see the girl," Florrie Blair answered softly, and then departed.

Polly, next moment, called her back:

"Florrie! This note, would you pop it in the post-box downstairs, please?"

"Certainly, miss!"

Again the new maid at Morcove walked away, with the very daintiest step, and as she passed to the stairs, she gave a glance to the address on the envelope.

There was none to see, but at that instant Florrie Blair turned very pale, whilst she excitedly took a lip between her teeth.

Then she turned round, waiting for the Study 12 girls to come up with her.

"Miss, I see this note is for someone at the Old Grange. I hope it won't seem rude of me to ask. Shall I deliver it myself, instead of posting it? I am to be allowed out by and by for a walk."

"Why, of course!" Polly agreed heartily. "You'll enjoy the walk to the Grange and back, especially if you have never been that way before."

The scholars scampered on, never dreaming what a smile of mingled scorn and cunning had come to Florrie Blair's pretty face now that she was alone.

"If they knew!" she was saying to herself, with a sort of glorying in the crafty part she was playing. "If they knew that my afternoon's outing yesterday was spent at the Old Grange!"

She was pocketing the note that had been entrusted to her, when a Morcove junior, breathless after a run upstairs, came whirling round into the corridor. Her hurry was not due to blitheness of spirits, but seemed to be the outcome of an unruly, violent nature.

Florrie Blair, recognising this girl, spoke at once:

"Oh—er—miss, I have been looking for you! If you please, you are to go to the headmistress at once!"

"If I please! Well, I just don't please!" Cora Grandways said, with a defiant shrug.

She stood and looked at the maid, as if to see how she had taken this bit of insolence, and then, bursting out with laughter, she stalked on to her own study.

"Bother!" Cora began sullenly, with her sister, Judith, for a listener. "Got to go and see Miss S. about last night! Oh, well who cares? What are you doing with yourself, Misery?"

Patient Judith was obviously willing away a half-hour with a book.

"Bah, you're always stuffing your head into some story, instead of doing as I do!" jeered Cora, passionately stalking about the room. "I believe in doing things myself, not reading——"

"So do I, if they're the right things!"

"Oh, prig!"

"Nothing of the sort," Cora, the younger sister answered, in a tone that showed she had no desire to argue the matter. "I would be getting a game of tennis, perhaps, only—— Well, even if the girls would like me to join them, I'd feel too uncomfortable!"

"Because you have a sister you are ashamed of! Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Cora. "Poor old Misery! Well, I suppose I must get downstairs and see what old Mother Morcove wants!"

With a laugh at the scornful name which she had invented for the school's headmistress, the errant scholar flaunted away, and a minute later she was tapping outside Miss Somerfield's door.

"Come in! Ah, Cora, there you are at last!" the lady principal remarked, abandoning work at her crowded desk to attend to the junior. "It is about last night's affair, Cora— And stand better than that when I am addressing you, please!"

Thus called to order, Cora rather impudently overdid the strictly-to-attention attitude, with a sort of "Is-that-good-enough?" look.

"Cora, not for the first time, by any means, your having that motor-cycle to ride about on has kept you out after hours. Last night we were all put to great anxiety and trouble."

"Only because the engine let me down!"

"The simplicity of the explanation is all very well, Cora, but I cannot have a repetition of the upset. Much against my will, I gave in to Mr. and Mrs. Grandways on the matter. Now I must write and ask them to have the motor-cycle taken home, so that its being here at the school may not keep you pining for a ride. Meantime, you must not go out on it again, Cora. I forbid you!"

"But—"

"You ought to know by this time, Cora, I try to do my best to indulge all you girls over any little hobby or fad that seems harmless. Motor-cycling is quite all right—or, rather, it should be—but you were given an inch, and have taken an ell!"

With that and a good-tempered wave of dismissal, the headmistress turned back to her desk, whilst Cora, making a face to herself, marched from the room.

"Bother it!"

So she seethed as she sulkily returned upstairs, and perhaps it was lucky for Judith that she had gone away from the study by the time this disgruntled elder sister got there. Cora would certainly have vented her rage upon Judith.

As it was, the justly censured scholar raged about the room.

Life at Morcove without her motor-cycle was going to be a nuisance. The

thought came to her—if only Miss Somerfield, with so much else to think about, would forget to write to father, after all!

For, if such a thing as that could happen, then after a while, perhaps, one could start going out for a short spin or so on the quiet.

"If I could do that," Cora brooded desperately, "I could easily plead that I thought she had decided not to write to dad, after all! But I am afraid she means it, and so—"

What was it made Cora break off just there, with such a startled look, as if a thrilling idea had struck her?

It was nothing else than the belief that, even if Miss Somerfield did write to Mr. Grandways, the letter might never go!

"My word, I believe it can be managed!" was the tense exclamation with which she crossed to the door, whipped it open, and went hurrying downstairs.

By now tea was just upon ready in the dining-hall for those few girls who were likely to turn up for it this afternoon, instead of getting their own daintier little "spread" in the studies, as they were allowed to do.

Cora minced to the place at table which was hers, and was one of the first girls to be served. The haphazard attendance of only so few scholars did not keep the waiting maids very busy. Florrie Blair was one, and she was standing idly around when Cora, her tea hastily finished, came away.

"Oh—er—oh, Florrie Blair, come upstairs to my study as soon as you have a minute!" Cora said grandly. "I just want to ask you to do something for me."

"Very good, miss," was the answer that might have been expected from a "tweenie" who was giving such complete satisfaction in her new situation.

Nor was it more than ten minutes later before Florrie Blair came to the study where Cora was excitedly awaiting her.

"You can shut the door," Cora said, starting a smile that must have taken the other girl aback. "It is something quite private that I have to say to you, Audrey Blain!"

CHAPTER 9.

Their Secret Compact.

IT was as if the new maid at Morcove School had been dealt a slap across the face. She backed a step or two sharply, then stood staring at Cora in a horrified manner.

And Cora, maliciously enjoying this "facer" which she had dealt the other girl, only smiled all the more.

"Yes!" Cora resumed at last, taking a little creeping step towards the maid in cap and apron. "You had an idea that you would never be found out. No one was ever to know that Morcove's brand new 'tweenie' is simply Audrey Blain, the same Audrey who was expelled from this very school!"

Mute and still stood the girl who had entered Morcove School in the role of a demure little domestic servant. For all she had just as much brazen impudence as Cora herself, at this moment Audrey Blain, alias Florrie Blair, was all gone to pieces.

"You see, however, I have found you out!" Cora continued exultantly. "And to begin with, Audrey, you have got to tell me what it means—your reason!"

"I cannot tell you, Cora."

"Cannot tell me!" was Cora's furious retort. "If I want to know why you are here in disguise and under a false name, you'll jolly well have to tell me! Or would you rather I knocked the whole business on the head by telling Miss Somerfield and everybody else who you really are? Would you prefer that, Audrey? Better say at once—yes or no!"

"No!" came Audrey's breathless answer on the instant.

It showed how utterly staggered she felt by the sudden blow of her great secret being discovered that she drew

a chair towards her, and sank on to it, shaking all over.

Cora laughed softly.

"No, of course, you don't want to be shown up!" was her spiteful comment. "You have not come to Morcove School like this without being set on to play the part by your own people. I want to know why it is, then, and you have got to tell me—you shall tell me!"

There was a moment of intense silence in the study, with Audrey Blain sitting there, hands caught together in a distracted manner, whilst Cora stood over her menacingly. Then Audrey spoke huskily:

"Cora, it is no use, I simply cannot tell you! I would if I could, for, after all, we shared many a secret when I was at Morcove as a scholar. "But——"

"Oh, yes, we were good enough chums on and off, Audrey!" Cora remarked, with less savagery in her looks. "I always preferred you and your 'queen of the Form' notions to Betty & Co., with their piffing ideas about what girls should do, and you ought to know me well enough, Audrey. I can always keep a secret if it gives me an advantage over other girls. Come on, then," she wheedled, "you can tell me!"

"I can't—at least, not everything!" panted Audrey, starting up in a hard-driven way. "But I will set your mind at rest about one thing. I am not here to make any trouble in the school."

"Oh, that wouldn't worry me!" Cora laughed shortly. "I don't care a rap for Morcove, any more than you ever did!"

"My parents have met with misfortune, and are come down in the world," Audrey whispered miserably, "and I have had to turn to and help them."

"Huh!" muttered Cora, very little softened by the other's pathetic words. "Of course, I'm very sorry to hear this, Audrey! I guess you do feel the come-down, you who were always so proud and superior. But you don't make at all a bad 'tweenie'!"

And she gave her spiteful grin again.

Audrey winced sharply, then sank into the chair once more, still looking utterly agast at her true identity having been found out by this girl. Cora was known to her only too well as one who never failed to take advantage of the chance to enjoy a triumph.

"But, Audrey, why did you have to become a skivvy to earn your living, and why a skivvy at Morcove School? That's the mystery I want explained to me."

Audrey shook her head.

"I am not going to tell you—no! It would do me and my people just as much harm as would your showing me up!" she spoke on in great agitation, at the same time starting up again. "So, Cora, if you want to show me up, you must, and—and then——"

"That's all right!" stuck in Cora, with a sudden airy gesture. "I'll hold my tongue, Audrey. I'm not such a sneak as all that. Only, you'll have to do one little thing for me!"

"Yes, what?" came Audrey's eager whisper. "I don't mind what I do, Cora! You ought to know what I am when I am desperate!"

"Pretty much what I am when I'm in a corner, eh?" grinned Cora. "Well, what I want you to do, if possible, is to prevent me being deprived of my motor-cycle. Miss Somerfield is annoyed about it. She is going to send a line to my father, asking him to have the combination sent home. Only you could——"

"See that the letter does not go off?" Audrey exclaimed. "Well, I don't know, but if I can, Cora, I—I will!"

"You see," was Cora's subdued remark, "if only the matter could drop out of Miss Somerfield's mind after she has written the letter, it might mean a chance for me to take up the motor-biking again on the quiet. So you do your best, Audrey, that's all I ask!"

"And I will!" the other declared vehemently. "Cora, you are standing by me, and I'll stand by you! Thanks for—for promising not to give me away!"

"Oh, that's all right!" grinned Cora, and suddenly the pair of them touched hands, as if to seal the compact.

It was no real handshake, nor would it have had any binding value even if it had been a handshake. These two girls, what else were they but alike in being all for themselves, making common cause with each other, just because it suited their individual needs?

Cora's heartless grin, as soon as she was left alone, was sufficient to show how utterly she would disregard the other girl's interests in case of need.

"I suppose I couldn't expect her to tell me more than what I had guessed—that her people had come down in the world," she said to herself. "As for why she is at Morcove School, and why she was signalling with a red lamp from her bed-room window last night, that's the mystery which I shall have to find out!"

And she added craftily:

"Asking questions will never do it, and so the only thing is spying!"

CHAPTER 10.

Mrs. Halden is Annoyed.

JUST before seven o'clock that summer's evening, the new "tweenie" at Morcove School came to the old stone porch of the Grange, and gave a tug at the bell-chain.

The old-fashioned bell tinkled itself out, leaving a silence as profound as ever. Not for a minute or so did a foot-fall sound in the great old house. Then the girl caller heard someone coming forward. The hasp of the lock snicked; rather warily, the front door was opened.

The girl, who was Florrie Blair at Morcove School, spoke in the lowest of whispers:

"Hallo, Hannah! Is my mother in?"

A nod from the elderly, aproned woman was the only answer until she had let the girl step into the hall and the door had been closed.

"Yes, miss," the woman said then;

"your mother is about the place somewhere. If not in the house itself, then over at— You know where!"

"Quite! And Norma, where's she?"

"Gone out walking, miss."

"You are sure?"

"Positive, miss. I take good care to keep my eyes about me!" smiled elderly Hannah. "Hark, though! Here is your mother coming now!"

A door at the back of the house, leading in from the rear grounds, had opened and closed again softly. With all the freedom of one who was in her own home, Morcove's new "tweenie" strode on to a rear passage, where she encountered the handsome mistress of this lonely country house.

"Hallo, mater! Oh, don't look so jumpy!" Audrey laughed. "It is quite safe, or you may be sure I wouldn't be letting myself go. Norma's away, and I must forget I'm a simple skivvy when I can!"

"Dear Audrey," purred beautiful Mrs. Blain then, letting a smile come to her lips, "it must be pretty trying for you, dear, but you know it had to be. Why have you come, though, when you were here only yesterday afternoon?"

"That's all right, mater. I was sent here, as it happens, by one of the scholars. This note—for Norma!"

"A note, Audrey, for Norma? She told me that she made the acquaintance of some of the girls yesterday afternoon, but—"

"Mater, I wouldn't worry," was Audrey's bland interruption, whilst they passed into a dim sort of parlour that had, perhaps, been a housekeeper's room. "Even if Norma is getting chummy with the girls, what does it matter? The more she runs after them, the more she will be off the scene here!"

"There is a lot in that," Mrs. Blain nodded gravely, "so long as Norma does not bring crowds of the girls here. But I have said she must not have them here without my permission. As for

this note, I'll consider whether she had better have it."

Meantime, the speaker laid the missive upon the table.

"Where's dad?" Audrey asked, sitting down.

"He is attending to the business," was Mrs. Blain's answer, given with a dark look. "Well, Audrey, I expect you do think it is pretty awful for us to have come down to this. But there is money in it, and no mistake!"

"Which is the main thing just at present, isn't it, mater? Oh, I don't mind, so long as you and dad rake in the money! As for the part I am having to play, in a way it's a scream!"

"I know this, Audrey—it means ever so much to your father and me your being at the school. What would have happened last night if you had not been able to give the signal that means danger? By the way, why did you have to warn us to look out for ourselves?"

"A Fourth Form girl was out late because her motor-bike had broken down. They were sending out search-parties from the school. I didn't know but what the girls would be swarming all over the district, and so—"

"You did quite right, Audrey. Always give the warning signal if there is the slightest risk. And so far you have gone on without being suspected?"

"Well—er—"

"Audrey, you don't mean to say that someone at the school has— Oh, Audrey!"

"Mater, it's all right!" Audrey hastily assured her mother, who had been seized with great alarm. "It's only one girl. And she— I can handle her easily. Already I have got her to promise silence, and—"

"Hark!"

In the midst of all her great agitation over the news that one scholar, at least, had discovered Audrey's true identity, Mrs. Blain was now thrown into greater alarm than ever by very significant sounds from just outside the mansion.

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She darted to a window, then re-
turned, seeping with dismay.
It is Norma, bringing a lot of the
scholars to the house! And you are
here, Audrey!"

Delivering the letter, so that's all
right! was the daughter's quick-witted
replunder. "I must be having some
refreshment that you made me have
before walking back!"

So saying, Audrey ran from that room
round to the kitchen. Darting to the
pantry, she cut off a piece of cake,
clapped it on to a plate, and set it
upon the table.

Then she poured out a tumblerful of
lemonade, took this to the table, and
sat down.

Meantime, Mrs. Blain had gone strid-
ing to an outer door, as if she were
likely to display the fiercest anger with
that adopted girl who was merely a
dupe and a pawn in the game.

"Norma! Come here, Norma!"

The terse cry fetched the girl away
from her half-dozen chums, who stood
grouped upon one of the untidy lawns.

"Those girls, Norma—"

"They are the Morcove scholars
whom I got to know yester—"

"Didn't I say I would not have you
inviting them here to overrun the
place?"

"Yes, and I—I was not going to bring
them indoors!" Norma protested dis-
tressfully. "But I chanced to meet
them only a little distance from here,
and it seemed so rude not to show them
just round the grounds."

Mrs. Blain had all she could do not
to look more infuriated than ever. She
dare not say so, but Norma's taking the
girls round the grounds might prove
more calamitous than bringing them
into the house.

"Now that they are here, they must
come inside, Norma," was her tight-
lipped remark. "Call them in. By the
way, a maid from the school is here.
She came with a note—"

"Oh, yes, the girls told me they had
sent me a note, never expecting to meet
me. May I have them in, then?
Thanks!"

Mrs. Blain had managed to conceal
the worst of her anger, and now Norma
scampered back to the chums of
Study 12 in quite a joyous mood. She
imagined that her benefactress had
been only slightly vexed.

"You're to come indoors, girls!" she
announced blithely. "Mrs. Halden
wants to get to know you, I dare say!"

"Oh, thanks, thanks! Bai Jove!"

"We are rather a crowd," remarked
Betty, "still—"

And in they went, to meet with a very
bland reception from "Mrs. Halden."

"Now that you are here, you must
have some refreshment before you go!"
she said cordially, leading the way into
the dining-room. "We are rather short-
handed, but perhaps Norma herself
will—"

"Mrs. Halden, you must please not
trouble! We have not long had tea!"
exclaimed Betty, whilst the others
murmured to the same effect. "We—
we—"

Betty was not suddenly faltering to
silence because of any shyness. Like
her chums, she had been put quite at
ease by the lady's cordial manner.
Morcove's Fourth Form captain floun-
dered in her speech like that for the
simple reason that, looking at Mrs.
Halden, she felt vaguely reminded of
someone she had met—when, where?

No telling! Except, Betty instantly
decided, that it was no one connected
with Morcove School.

"Norma, dear," purred Mrs. Blain,
"run into the kitchen and fetch the
cake and lemonade for these girls.
They must—"

"If you are going to insist that we
have something, Mrs. Halden," laughed
Polly, "then do let us wait upon our-
selves, please!"

"Ooo, yes; queek—queek! I come
with you, Norma!"

With Naomer excitably darting after
the adopted girl, it was almost inevit-
able that the others should follow. A
few moments, and they were all with
Norma in the kitchen, where they

found Morcove's new "tweenie" shyly partaking of cake and lemonade.

"Hallo, Florrie!" smiled Polly. "So you delivered the note, which need not have been written, as it happens!"

"Yes, miss," said the model "tweenie," getting up. "And Mrs. Halden made me have something to eat before walking back. I am going now," she addressed Norma, stepping towards the back way out. "Good-evening!"

At that instant, Mrs. Halden appeared at the other doorway. Betty took her eyes off the departing "tweenie," to look round at Mrs. Halden, and in doing so it gave the schoolgirl another turn.

Queer! Not only did Mrs. Halden remind Betty of someone in the past. Somehow, between the lady and the new "tweenie" at Morcove there was a sort of— But, oh, what nonsense to call it a resemblance! Besides, what on earth connection could there be between a servant at the school and this lady who had adopted Norma? The very adoption proved that the Haldens were people of means. As for Florrie Blair—well, there it was! She was just a "tweenie"!

"Oh, thanks, thanks! This is extremely good of you!" beamed Paula, faintly starting to partake of the refreshment. "Wipping cake—wather!"

"Mrs. Halden, whilst we are here," pleaded Polly, "may we ask you to let Norma come out with us next half-holiday?"

Betty was still studying the lady's handsome features, without, of course, appearing to stare rudely, and now she thought that Polly's well-meant question produced a slight change of colour.

"I want my daughter—for she is as good as a daughter to me—to be happy," came the response, only after a pause. "Yes, I think she might spend a half-holiday with you."

"Hooway!" beamed Paula. "Thanks, Mrs. Halden, thanks!"

The lady suddenly smiled.

"Provided, of course, you don't get into mischief! Er—what were you proposing to do when the time comes?"

The chums laughed.

"I'm afraid, Mrs. Halden, we never make up our minds until the last moment. The weather has to be taken into account," said Betty. "But we certainly wouldn't get into scrapes!"

"Wather not, bai Jove! Mrs. Halden, we make ourselves responsible for Norma's safe return!" was the round phrase from Paula that ended the discussion.

CHAPTER 11.

Study 12 is Mystified.

FIVE minutes later the Morcovians said good-bye to Norma at the entrance gates to the mansion grounds, and then a half-hour's ramble brought the girls to their own school gates.

Betty had come along with the others feeling very thoughtful, puzzled. She was having ideas so wild that she hesitated about disclosing them, for fear of causing the others to scoff. "Prep" had to be done, and then "The Morcove Magazine" claimed the chums' attentions for a while. When Betty and Polly had settled down to this in Study 12, the latter girl thought her bosom chum very quiet indeed.

"What's up, Betty?"

"Oh, nothing! At least, nothing I can talk about, dear."

Polly let that evasive answer suffice—for the present. She hurried through her bit of work all the faster, however, so as to be able to return to the attack all the sooner.

"Betty," came firmly, twenty minutes later, "you are not getting your head into that work of yours one little bit!"

"Quite right, I'm not!" confessed Betty, tossing down her pen. "I am thinking all the time about— Oh, Polly, you will think me crazy, but—"

"Goodness, do come out with it, Betty! It's not like you to keep back anything from me—or to want to!"

Then Betty got up from the table.

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Mrs. Halden strike you as being

funny? Goodness, no! I thought
very nice, in a serious way."

"I meant queer—not funny, Polly.
Here, here, did you feel reminded of
anybody you had seen before?"

"No, no, Betty; can't say I did."

"Well, I had a feeling that I had seen
that lady somewhere. If she didn't
seem familiar to you, it proves that the
resemblance has nothing to do with
anybody who came to Morcove once."

"Oh, but I really didn't look at Mrs.
Halden, not to study her!" demurred
Polly.

"I did," said Betty. "And here's
another thing. Just as the new
'tweenie' was going away—you remem-
ber, in the kitchen—I felt there was
something, not a resemblance—"

"Between Florrie Blair and Mrs.
Halden? Betty, darling, you are silly!"

"I knew you'd scoff!" Betty smiled
nastily. "I can't help it, though.
Bother! It is so riling to feel you have
been reminded of someone by Mrs.
Halden, and reminded of someone else
by Florrie Blair, and yet— Wait a
bit, though! Polly, dear—"

"You're getting warm, I can see!"
laughed Polly. "Keep on, Betty, and
—"

"Every day we have a day at Mor-
cove when parents are invited!" rushed
on Betty excitedly. "It has just flashed
upon me, perhaps Mrs. Halden reminds
me of someone—a scholar's mother!
Half a sec! I'm going to see!"

She simply whirled out of the room,
almost knocking over Paula. The
elegant one, her prep finished, was just
coming into Study 12 for the usual
gather-round.

Betty was away five minutes, and
during that interlude Madge, Helen,
Tess, and Naomer all looked in at
Study 12, learning from Polly what a
sudden extraordinary fancy had seized
the usually level-headed captain.

Then Betty came rushing back, out
of breath, and carrying a large, framed
photograph.

"Here we are! Grabbed it from a
wall downstairs! One of the groups
taken on a parents' day!" she panted.
"And there is one lady in the group
who is like Mrs. Halden. So I was
right, Polly, you see!"

"Bai Jove!"

"But which one in the group is it?"
several of the girls clamoured.

"Ooo, yes; queek—queek! Show
me!"

Betty laid down the large photo-
graph, and stabbed a finger at one
figure in the large group.

"That one, girls!"

"That one! But— Why, that's
the mother of Audrey Blain surely?"
Polly instantly exclaimed.

"Yes, wather! A weally beautiful
lady, geals! To give cwedit where
cwedit is due, Mrs. Audwey Blain was
a wipper for looks, bai Jove!"

"Mrs. Blain—yes, so it is!" Betty
said. "I couldn't think of the name,
although I recognised the face. Mrs.
Halden is awfully like Audrey Blain's
mother, and so—"

"Whoa!" pleaded Polly. "Whoa!
This is too fast for me! I mean to
say, it just occurs to me— But how
can it be?"

"Bai Jove!" chuckled Paula.
"You've caught the complaint now,
have you, Polly?"

"I have got a notion that is madder
than Betty's by far!" said Polly
frankly. "It's nothing less than this.
Just as Mrs. Halden is like Audrey
Blain's mother, so is our new 'tweenie'
like Audrey Blain herself—there!"

A sudden great stillness was ended
by Paula's turning away, to flop back
into the easy-chair.

"Bai Jove!" gasped Paula. "I say,
you know!"

"But isn't it so?" urged Polly.
"Didn't Florrie Blair put us in mind
of someone, a girl—"

"By her walk, we said," put in
Madge soberly, "and that is the girl
she resembles in that respect—Audrey
Blain!"

"Yes, wather! Now you dwaw my

attention to the fact, I recollect, gals

"Ooo, queek—queek! What do eet all mean?" Naomer demanded, shrill with excitement. "You say Mrs. Halden is Mrs. Blain, and Florrie Blair is Audrey Blain!"

"No, darling, we don't say that they are—"

"But they may be!" Betty broke in upon Polly's utterance. "They may be, girls!"

"Betty, how can they be?" gasped Polly. "Mrs. Halden is Mrs. Halden, with an adopted daughter. Florrie Blair isn't the same as Audrey Blain, only in little things. As regards the colour of the hair, Florrie's is dark, very dark."

"Dyed!" put in Tess crisply. "Nothing easier!"

There was another heavy pause, the girls looking at one another in a wondering stupefied way.

Then Polly suddenly clapped her hands, and scuttled round the room, as if she had taken leave of her senses.

"What's the matter now?" the others asked by their looks.

"Something else that has just struck me, and—oh, this is simply staggering!" whispered Polly. "Last Saturday, at Gull Island, you remember, I told you I had seen someone, a woman, dodge away, as if to evade us!"

"And when we looked round, we could not find a trace of her," Betty rejoined, nodding. "Yes, well? Well, Polly? What has that to do with—the other?"

"Goodness knows! Nothing, perhaps!" answered Polly. "Only—only, girls, I can tell you this. That mystery woman on the island, from the glimpse I had of her, she might have been Mrs. Halden herself!"

Polly added breathlessly:

"And what do you make of that?"

None of her chums answered. Their looks and their blank silence were sufficient proof that never before in all their young lives had they been so mystified as now!

CHAPTER 12.

Florrie Blair's Denial.

"FLORRIE BLAIR, can you spare a minute to come to Study 12? There is something we want to ask you."

Morcoe's new "tweenie" was standing idle in the hall of the school-house when that question was called over the banisters, by a scholar who had halted half-way down the last flight.

Only slowly did the girl in cap and apron turn round to answer. The request had given her a sudden fright, and this time she did not mean to go to pieces as she had done when suddenly challenged by Cora Grandways.

"Yes, miss, I can come," was the perfectly demure response with which the new maid walked towards the stairs.

It was Polly who had come in quest of the suspect, and Polly, as she preceded the girl all the way up the stairs, had a feeling that the whole extraordinary suspicion was to be knocked on the head straight away. Florrie Blair seemed much too calm and innocent to be one who was playing a daring part.

Little did Polly dream, nor did her chums, that the suspect had already been challenged by Cora Grandways, and was therefore all the more on her guard.

"Here is Florrie," said Polly, going before the maid into Study 12, "so now you can ask her, Betty."

"It's like this, Florrie," Betty promptly began, with the other girls ranged round the room as silent on-lookers. "We want to ask you a certain question. If it seems rather strange, you must please make allowances for our having had good reason to put the question."

"Yes, miss," assented the "tweenie," very respectfully; "I don't mind what you ask me."

"The question is this," came from Betty steadily. "Are you really a servant? Is your name really Florrie Blair?"

The suspect neither changed coun-

change nor lost colour. She merely looked astonished:

"But of course that's my name! What else could it be? I don't understand you!"

There was a great pause. The chums had been answered, and now what were they to do?

What else could they do but simply accept the answer?

They certainly were not going to divulge their motive for having challenged the girl. Rather than do that, they were prepared to make the most abject apologies.

"Very well, Florrie!" Betty exclaimed at last. "Thank you for not taking offence!"

"Oh, I would never do that!" the "tweenie" declared meekly. "I'm not so silly."

"Still, it must have seemed such a strange thing to ask you," Betty admitted, with a forced laugh. "We can only say we are very glad you have been able to set the doubt at rest."

"Yes, wather!" came from Paula softly. "It is howwible having people around you who pwetend to be one thing, whilst they are weally——"

A flourishing gesture from Polly effectually silenced the hapless duffer, just as the "tweenie"—in reality, only too glad to get out of the room—drew off to the door.

"There's nothing else, then?" she paused to ask.

"No; thanks, Florrie!"

Then she was gone, and it was for the chums to look at one another rather foolishly.

"Um!" said Polly glumly, at long last. "So that's that!"

"She certainly never turned a hair," commented Helen. "Cool as a cucumber, she was."

"You don't think too cool?" hinted Tess.

"Well, if she was not giving a truthful answer," said Betty, "she must be——"

"An accomplished pwevawicator—yes, wather!"

There was a slight laugh at Paula's way of putting it. Then, with returning gravity, Madge Minden remarked:

"Audrey never was a truthful girl, if you remember."

From this, it was but a short step to the feeling that the "tweenie's" calm denial might have been untruthful. It might have been! For it so happened that the very girl she was suspected of being—Audrey Blain, and no other—was just the girl to have all the bravado in the world!

Betty & Co. went to bed that night quite worn out with the puzzlement they were undoing. On and off, they had been arguing the matter all the evening, and they could have made a list of questions as formidable as an examination-paper by putting down all the problems that persisted in demanding solution.

If Mrs. Halden was really Mrs. Blain, and Florrie Blair was really Audrey Blain, then why was such an amazing bit of deception being carried on?

And how about Norma Halden? Where did she come in? Betty & Co. were ready to vouch for that girl. She had no part in any queer business. She was too straightforward a girl to allow herself, in any circumstances, to be set on to play some doubtful role.

Did it mean, then, that she was a dupe? Had she only been adopted because it was necessary for the lady and gentleman to have some daughterly girl around them, whilst their actual daughter was necessarily parted from them?

Above all, what of Polly Linton's sudden conviction that Mrs. Halden, at the Old Grange, and the mystery woman seen on the island were one and the same person?

Perhaps it was because Polly herself was thinking about this last point more than any of the others that she came out with a startling suggestion next morning.

Polly electrified her chums by proposing that there should be another visit to Gull Island the following afternoon!

True, Norma Halden had been invited to spend the Wednesday "hafter" with them, but Polly was in haste to point out that that need not be a bar to their expedition. Norma could come with them!

"You don't propose to tell her what we——"

"Goodness, no!" was Polly's emphatic answer to Betty's uneasy exclamation. "Not a word must be said to Norma. Why, she would be awfully upset if we hinted at what we suspect!"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove! It would be wong to tamper with Norma's wespect for Mr. and Mrs. Halden, geals, when, after all——"

"It is all theory, suspicion, at present. That's true enough!" chimed in Helen. "We know nothing for certain, but have got it all to prove. There can be no harm, however, in letting Norma come with us."

"She will be disappointed if we put her off," said Betty, "and—— Oh, we must go across to the island to-morrow—we must! The Old Grange, Morcove School, Gull Island—they seem to be different parts of the same puzzle!"

"Just one suggestion," Madge suddenly murmured in her quiet way. "Wouldn't it be as well not to let Norma know we are going to the island until she calls for us to-morrow afternoon? Then her people won't know. It's advisable that they shouldn't, perhaps."

"Carried unan.!" declared Polly. "And we must jolly well see that Florrie Blair doesn't get to know, either!"

The result was that not until after dinner next day did the chums betray any intention of wanting to go across to the island.

By that time it was absolutely necessary to obtain permission for the putting by the sea, and to get Miss Redgrave to come with them, or else appoint a senior to be in charge of the party.

Whilst Betty was seeing to this, the others went off, so as to meet Norma before she should turn up at the school-

house. They had not gone far before she came running up, full of joy at having such a jolly batch of chums for the afternoon.

CHAPTER 13.

Another Signal—For Whom?

"**W**E'RE going down to the beach for a start," announced Polly, "but Betty is getting permission for us to sail out to the island!"

"And you see, we have ze peekneek!" was Naomer's gleeful cry, whilst she displayed the string bag that held a kettle and teapot. "Come on, queek!"

Betty turned up on the jetty a few minutes later, with Ethel Courtway as the senior in charge, which completed the party's joy. Morcove's head girl was the ideal senior for Betty & Co. to have with them. She was unofficial, and would leave them to do just as they pleased, once they were across the water.

Away they sailed ten minutes afterwards, making a faster passage than had been the case last Saturday, for the breeze was stiffer. A few other scholars, come down to the beach for a ramble, had seen the voyagers off with a hearty cheer, in spite of envy at their having reserved the boat for the afternoon. And so inevitably the news worked back to the school that Study 12 was off and away for another picnic on Gull Island.

Cora Grandways had word of it when she was sulkily mooning about the school grounds, sorely feeling the ban that had been placed upon her motor-cycling. The machine was still in the sheds, and she still hoped that the ban upon her riding it would become a dead letter in the end. It all depended, she was sure, upon Miss Somerfield's being induced to forget the whole affair, amidst the press of other matters.

Roused to jealous rage by the news that Betty & Co. were going to have such a "topping" time, Cora felt she must "round" on someone, and this

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her mood suddenly made her seek
for Audrey Blain.

She found the "tweenie" in a part
of the schoolhouse where it was
usual to converse on the quiet, and,
surprisedly, she began at once:

"Look here, Audrey, what about the
thing you promised to do for me—you
about my motor-biking being
signed?"

"That's all right! And you needn't
tell me by my real name, Cora, even
when we are alone," was the answer.
Miss Morcove wrote to your father,
and he won't have got the letter. It
has been delayed!"

Then Cora changed from black
seriousness to smiling delight.

"Oh, the letter didn't go off?" she
exclaimed joyfully. "That's better!
You are a sport, Aud—Florrie! If
father Morcove doesn't hear from my
father, I'm certain she'll forget the
matter. I don't mind waiting a bit,
although it's bad enough to be barred
the biking a day like this. A halfer,"
she grimaced, "and other girls—Betty
& Co. for instance—off for a sail to
Gull Island!"

Cora had started to walk away, but
she stood transfixed by the shock she
had evidently given Audrey. That girl
had given a violent start, and gone as
pale as death.

"Why, you don't seem to like the
idea of Betty & Co. visiting Gull
Island!" Cora instantly commented,
with a suspicious grin. "Yet what
difference can it possibly make to you,
Miss Broom-and-Duster?"

"Nothing!" Audrey said fiercely.
Perhaps the jeering name that had
been conferred was stinging her. Be-
cause that as it might, she turned her back
upon Cora.

At the risk of angering the very girl
who knew her secret, Morcove's new
"tweenie" strode away. That was
Audrey Blain when she was roused, a
far prouder and more defiant girl than
Cora herself!

The latter, left to herself, was kni-
tting her brows as she drifted away. By

the merest chance, the passing of an
ill-natured remark about Betty & Co.,
she had evidently given Audrey that
bad shock. What did it mean, then?

Why should Audrey Blain be so upset
on hearing that some of the scholars
had sailed out to Gull Island?

Then suddenly Cora recalled that
signalling with the red lamp the other
night.

"My word, I am getting on to things
now!" she exclaimed excitedly to her-
self. "The window from which Audrey
was signalling, it faces the sea. So
was she, perhaps, making signals to the
island that night?"

With such a thought as this in her
mind, Cora now felt that she would
give anything to be able to visit the
island at once. But that was out of
the question. Betty & Co. were using
the school boat, and none other was
available. Besides, boating by the
scholars could only be done in parties.

"First chance I get, though, I'll be
across to the island!" she resolved
fiercely. "For it is absolutely certain
Audrey is only at the school as a skivvy
because the school lends itself so
splendidly to signalling!"

Meantime, was there nothing she
could do to follow up the mystery?

"Yes, I know!" was the tense ex-
clamation with which she suddenly sped
away, quitting the schoolhouse by
means of a side door. "If Audrey has
the wind up about those girls going to
the island, she may be signalling
again!"

How it would be possible to do such
a thing with safety in broad daylight,
Cora could not think. Anything like
flag-wagging seemed utterly unthink-
able. All the same, she sneaked away
to a shrubbery in the school grounds,
and with the bushes screening, she
remained on watch.

The schoolhouse was some distance
away, and from where Cora had posted
herself the small top windows of some
of the servants' rooms were clearly
visible.

She waited, feeling less and less

hopeful of anything taking place, since it was broad daylight. What was her sudden excitement, then, to see the sunshine draw an almost blinding reflection of its rays from something at Audrey's window!

Flash, flash, flash! came the intermittent dazzle, and then Cora understood.

Audrey, by means of a bit of looking-glass, was signalling from that window. It was what they called heliographing, Cora knew, in the Navy and Army, telegraphing by means of the sun's rays.

"Then it's certain," exulted the watcher in the shrubbery, "Audrey is at the school for that purpose and no other—to give warning if any of us, at any time, are doing something that means danger to the secret business that Audrey has a part in!"

CHAPTER 14.

Found on the Island.

"**M**OST wewfeshing—yes, wather!" Thus Paula, with beaming emphasis, as she set down her oft-replenished cup for the last time on the picnic cloth.

"I am finished, too," Naomer said with rather a full-fed sigh. "Yet I not like to see that kreem-bun wasted. Eef we take him back, he will get squashed, perhaps!"

"Greedy!" said Polly sternly. "But go on, and then we shall have only the uneatables to pack up again presently. Who's for a scout round the island, girls?"

"I am!"

"And I!"

"And I!"

"Ooo, yes; queek—queek!" approved Naomer, jumping up with no less celerity because she was biting at that last cream-bun. "We not want to waste ze time!"

"Ethel——"

"I shall just sit here, and knock off a letter or so," smiled Ethel Courtway,

fetching out a writing-pad and pencil. "By coming with you girls this afternoon, I have been saved from offending two or three friends to whom letters are owing. Run along!"

"You were a brick to come, Ethel!" Betty lingered to say. "It has been the means of our giving Norma Halden such a nice treat!"

"I was delighted to come!" Ethel assured the Form captain. She glanced after Norma, who was already scampering off with Polly and the rest. "She's a nice girl, Betty, and ought to be at Morcove!"

"So we all say! Well, ta-ta for the present!"

And Betty sped away to catch up with the others.

"We're going up to the look-out point, as we always call it, to let Norma see all over the island," Polly remarked to Betty, who nodded hearty approval.

"Your first time at the island, Norma?"

"Yes, and it's just glorious, girls! Hope it won't be my last!"

Poor Norma Halden, little she dreamed what perilous circumstances would be hers when she next set foot on the island!

Roaming around in the sunshine this summer's afternoon, with these equally happy-hearted Morcovians for companions, how could she have any foreboding of all the danger that Gull Island was to mean to her ere long?

At the summit of the highest knoll Polly unslung some field-glasses that she had brought with her to-day.

"Have a look through these, Norma, and don't forget to take a look at Morcove School whilst you are about it!"

"Yes, wather!" beamed Paula. "The old school always looks so extraordinary gwand viewed fwom heah! Geals, there's that window flashing in the sun again, over yondah at the school!"

"Is it a window?" wondered Betty. "It seems such a pin-point of a flash, to be coming from a window-pane!"

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"Just like someone helling!"
said Helen. "Strange how the sun
trick with a window very

peering through the field-
glasses, remarked admiringly:

"A wonderful world one can see like
this! I might be as near as the school
away, looking at the schoolhouse!
As you know, I believe that dazzling
is caused by a girl standing at her
window with a mirror!"

"But Jove, the vain cweature!" said
Paula. "That weminds me, howevah!"
And out came her pocket-mirror and
such that she might give a touch to
her hair.

"Vain the girl must be, whoever she
is!" grinned Polly. "Vainer than you
even, Paula! For she was doing that
an hour ago, and has now started
again!"

Norma handed on the glasses to
Madge.

"That's what it is," Madge agreed,
bringing the binoculars to bear upon the
far-distant schoolhouse. "One of the
servants in her bed-room, doing her
hair at the window, I suppose!"

"But Jove, she ought to be we-
proved!" drawled Paula, industriously
touching her own hair to rights. "I've
no patience with geals who spend half
their time— Ow!"

"Well, zen, come on—down ze hill,
so!" cried Naomer, propelling Paula at
a terrific pace. "We must look for ze
crab, now ze tide is low!"

"Dweadful, dweadful!" groaned
Paula, unable to pull up whilst Naomer
was behaving like a shunting engine on
the steep incline. "I won't! I
protest! I— Ow! I hate cwabs!
All cwustaceans are wepellent!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Yet even Paula shared in the general
excitement presently, when Naomer,
hunting amongst the rocky pools, sud-
denly caught a baby lobster.

Such a rare catch had got to be taken
home, of course, and alive. Indeed,
Naomer's prompt decision was to keep
the baby lobster for a pet. So Paula

was requested to run back to "camp"
to fetch along the kettle.

"Kettle, bai Jove! But why the
kettle?"

"To put ze lobster in, of course,
duffer! He must have water to float in,
you see!"

"Dweadful, dweadful!" sighed Paula,
resignedly going off for the kettle. "And
it's my kettle, too! Ah, dear!"

Then Polly sang after the long-suf-
fering one:

"Paula, bring back the teapot as
well!"

"Teapot? Why?"

"In case I catch a— Oh, well, you
never know! A sea-serpent! Ha, ha,
ha!"

"Yes, wather! That'll be the next
howwow!" Paula sighed to herself.
"Some fewocious cweature that I shall
find cawling wound my study, when it
has escaped!"

All this time Betty & Co. had not
been forgetting the secret purpose of
their visit to the island. Polly, who
had been all facetiousness a moment
ago, now glanced about to make sure
that Norma was out of hearing.

Norma chanced to be picking her way
amongst the rocks, on the look-out for a
rare find in the way of some pretty sea-
shell, so Polly could safely whisper:

"Betty, it's jolly odd, that helle busi-
ness over at the schoolhouse, for hasn't
it occurred to you that—"

"It has!" nodded Betty cautiously.
"Audrey making signals with a mirror
in the sunshine!"

"Signals that can be picked up easily,
as we have proved, all this distance
away!"

"And farther than this," rejoined
Betty. "A signal of that sort could be
picked up by a vessel—say, six miles
out."

"Look at Norma!" murmured Polly.
"She simply hasn't a care in the world
to-day! Oh, Betty, darling, I do hope
and pray that, if there is any under-
hand work going on, as we suspect,
Norma will not suffer! But I don't like
the look of things."

"Neither do I, Polly. The girl has been adopted by people living under an assumed name, and with their own daughter in a situation at our school—that is, if what we suspect is really the case!"

"I wonder—oh, I wonder—is it?" was the tense whisper with which Polly ended the bit of guarded talk.

Next moment she was looking down into another of the numerous pools, and so she did not observe—nor did any of the other Morcovians notice—how Norma suddenly acted as if she had seen a treasure upon which to pounce.

A more thrilling find than even Naomer's baby lobster was that upon which Norma had come. The hand she had plunged into a very shallow pool, amongst the green boulders, fished up—a lady's amber necklace!

It was broken, and even as Norma filched up the rich find, she saw that some of the amber beads were lost, whilst others were ready to slip off the string. She hastily coiled the necklace in her two hands, to prevent such a loss, and was going to hail her chums, when a startling thought made her keep silent, whilst she took a closer look at the find.

Surely this was the very necklace that Mrs. Halden had so often worn, but had not worn in the last few days!

It was—the very same necklace! Norma had only to go over the beads carefully to come upon one that had a flaw familiar to her eyes.

So, then, Mrs. Halden had lost the necklace just lately, by unwittingly breaking the string during a visit to Gull Island!

Nothing surprising in that, Norma realised. More jewellery was lost during seaside jaunts than through any other means. But the puzzling thing was that Mrs. Halden had never remarked about her loss, nor had she said one word about having visited the island!

Norma was the last one to think ill of other people, but suddenly she felt herself being seized with a vague mistrust

of Mrs. Halden. There had been a lack of confidence, a strange kind of secrecy, about what had happened for the necklace to have turned up here.

It seemed an unpleasant, disquieting occurrence, best not mentioned to the Morcovians. Norma did not want to repay their kindness in having her out with them to day by giving them something to worry about. So she smuggled the broken necklace into a pocket, calmed herself down, then casually re-joined the scholars.

"I'm afraid we are not to have the island to ourselves much longer," Madge was saying, as she handled the binoculars. "The little boat that I am watching over there is heading for the island."

"Motor-boat—fast one, too!" commented Polly. "I am not sure that the one my people own could lick along like that. Who are the people in it, Madge? Can you see?"

"It is not easy to count them, they are sitting so low down in the boat; but I can quite clearly see the man who is steering. He seems to be a—Hullo! Do you see that?"

"Changed their minds about landing!" was Betty's comment on the way the boat had suddenly altered its course. "Girls, I wonder if that's because—"

Just in time, Betty remembered to be silent in the presence of Norma concerning the mystery. The few words had been so excitably spoken, however, Madge felt it best to create a distraction by saying to Norma:

"Would you like to have a look through the glasses, dear?"

"Thanks!" exclaimed Norma, again taking the binoculars. "It is a pretty sight that boat, with the spray rising like a fountain!"

She adjusted the glasses, and no sooner did the girls see her looking through the lenses at the boat than they all gazed landwards across the sparkling sea, to where Morcove School loomed large upon its giant headland.

The flash-flash of deflected sunlight was still going on. Or perhaps it had

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stead for a while, only to start again.
For a moment the chums watched;
and then they looked at one another.

They dare not speak, with Norma
standing close by, but by their very
looks the Morcovians arrived at an
agreement of opinion as definite as any
that an argument could have produced.

On and off, during the afternoon,
their suspect at the school must have
been heliographing with a mirror from
her bed-room window, making a signal
for someone to pick up, and at last the
signal had been received by those for
whom it was meant—the people in the
motor-boat!

Even if there had been any doubt in
the matter, it would soon have been
cleared up. For now, as Betty & Co.
set to watching the boat again, they
saw something there flash in the sun-
shine, something too bright to be the
mere sparkle of nickel-plating, and
when they gazed away to the distant
schoolhouse once more, the mirror at
the window was no longer being flashed.

Polly was doing her best to keep calm
as she addressed a remark to Norma:

"Can you see the people in the boat
any better now, Norma?"

That girl did not answer, and no
wonder!

The powerful glasses, which were still
held up to her eyes, seemed to bring the
boat and its occupants within a few
yards of her.

And she, who knew Mr. Halden's
features so well, was positive that the
man at the boat's steering-wheel was
Mr. Halden himself!

CHAPTER 15.

Beware, Norma!

A COUPLE of hours later Norma
said good-bye to her Morcove
chums, after a pleasant run
back with them from the island.

She was not to know how eagerly the
girls were going to fall into talk as soon
as she was gone, gravely discussing a

mystery about which they had felt it
best to say not a word to her.

Nor were Betty & Co. aware of the
tremendous thrills which Norma had
received whilst taking part in the half-
holiday jaunt.

This, then, was the unique situation
at present. Although they were on the
best of terms with Norma, Betty & Co.
were following up a mystery without
saying anything to her, whilst she her-
self was engaged on that self-same mys-
tery, from an entirely different angle, as
it were.

And this is to say nothing of Cora
Grandways—a third party to be en-
gaged upon the mystery, and likely
to be the first to solve it, since she had
already found out so much more than
the others!

Norma wandered home to the lonely
country mansion, pondering gravely,
uneasily.

To one of her trustful nature, it had
come as a very bad shock to find that
the lady and gentleman who had
adopted her seemed to be occupied in
ways about which they were silent, al-
though why there should be such
secrecy Norma could not see.

The obvious thing was to suppose that
any visits to the island on the part of
Mr. and Mrs. Halden were so many
pleasure trips. Why, then, were the
jaunts never mentioned? Why had she,
Norma, never been invited to take part
in one?

But now that she had been given
cause for mistrusting the "parents" who
had adopted her, she could think of a
lot else that was most disquieting.

Mr. Halden was often away for a day
or two at a time. Mrs. Halden fre-
quently absented herself from the
home, without saying a word as to
where she had been when she got back.

By the time she reached the Grange
her mind was made up. From now
onwards she must be on her guard. If
possible, she must feel her way cauti-
ously with these people who looked like
being anything but the benefactors she
had deemed them.

Even as she entered the house, it deepened her mistrust to notice how anxiously Hannah came forward, to confer a searching kind of scrutiny.

"Mrs. Halden is wanting you, Norma. She wonders where you have been."

"Out with my Morcove friends, as I thought she understood," Norma was answering, when Mrs. Halden herself suddenly appeared.

"Yes, Norma, but where did you go with the girls?"

With all the calmness that Norma could assume in her uneasy state, she answered carelessly:

"Oh, only to the island—Gull Island, they call it—a beautiful spot!"

"Gull Island? You mean to tell me that you have been across to the island?"

Norma was studying Mrs. Halden's handsome face, whilst appearing to be quite at ease. The lady had gone deathly pale.

"Yes, we sailed across in the school's boat. It was quite safe, or you may be sure we would not have been allowed to go. We had a senior with us."

"That may be so, Norma, but I didn't wish you to go to the island!" came in such a burst of anger as Norma had never yet provoked. "You are not to go again!"

"But—"

"More than that, I now forbid you to have anything to do with those scholars!" Mrs. Halden rushed on furiously. "You understand? Your friendship with them must end!"

"Oh, but why? They are such——"

"Never mind why! That is my business, not yours!"

Mrs. Halden, as she turned her back upon Norma and strode away, might have been leaving the girl in sudden tears, such an unreasonable, cruel command it had seemed to be, but Norma was concerned not so much with the harshness of the injunction as its suspicious nature.

Another minute, and she was alone in her own room upstairs, pacing about in great excitement.

She realised that it was the visit to the island that had excited Mrs. Halden's anger, not the going for a sail. So, then, the lady was not annoyed because of any risk there might have been. Besides, she had been told that a senior was in charge. The anger was all because the island had been visited and here was more proof, if more were needed, that Mrs. Halden and her husband had some secret association with the island—a guilty one, or why was there such secrecy?

Norma took out the broken necklace lost by Mrs. Halden when she herself had been a visitor to the island! And now to-day Mr. Halden had been in that boat which had certainly been steering for the island, only its course had been suddenly altered!

What did it all mean, and what should she herself do?

What else but extreme misery was it going to be for her, to stay on with a couple whom she could not trust? At this very moment, she felt so bewildered, frightened, the impulse was upon her to go away, though where she could go, friendless orphan that she was, the poor girl could not think.

"This lonely country house, it is no place for me, if I am in the hands of wrongdoers!" she could not help thinking, standing appalled at the deep husk that brooded over the place. "Oh, I can't stand it! And yet——"

There came suddenly a look to her face that did her great credit. Gone was the feeling of panic, and now she was herself again, deserving every bit of the admiration which the chums of Morcove had conceived for her.

"No, I will not go away!" she whispered to herself resolutely. "I'll not be such a coward!"

For good or ill, the decision had been taken, and now she opened a dressing-table drawer and hid away the broken necklace found at low tide on the island.

"I will stay on, and do my best to find out what it all means," she spoke

the visit to herself courageously. "And if ever I need some help, my Morcove chums will help me—I know they will!"

But what if she should only realise the need for friendly aid when it would be all too late to claim it?

Norah did not think of that, and it was an oversight which might yet cost her much deadly danger!

CHAPTER 16.

Baffled—And Not the Only One!

"It isn't fair! Those Study 12 girls get up an excursion amongst themselves, one which means taking out the school boat, without ever asking if any of us would like to go!"

"Oh Cora, you have always something to say against Betty & Co.!"

"Of course, Norah Nugent, you can't see the unfairness!" protested Cora grandways, with all the sudden sourness of her real nature.

She had sidled up to the other girl on the way out of class at midday, hoping to find a willing listener for her spiteful tale. Norah, however, was decidedly "off" with Cora at present, like the rest of the Fourth Form at Morcove.

Yet, simply because Cora had a secret and desperate reason for what she wanted to say, she felt bound to try again.

"Supposing, Norah, some of us fixed up a picnic on Gull Island, one that we

"A sail out to the island is always good fun, Cora, and so— Yes, I might mention it to my friends some time."

With which nodded remark, Norah slipped away, leaving Cora nicely snubbed. When Norah said "my friends," there had been an emphasis on the "my" which conveyed a lot!

Lip between teeth, Cora went, scowling, towards the stairs, and mounted to the Fourth Form quarters. A minute later she turned about to close her own study door with a savage slam.

"Bother!" she fumed to herself, at

the same time flinging down the one or two books that she had had to bring away from morning classes. "How on earth am I to get across to Gull Island, if any girls who are going won't have me in their party?"

It was a galling situation for Cora, and no mistake.

She was being paid out nicely by Fate itself, just at present, for having made herself so generally unpopular!

Morcove scholars never went across to Gull Island except in excursion parties, made up in advance by friendly arrangement, and Norah Nugent had put it plainly just now, if she and a few friends should get up a jaunt of that sort, they wouldn't want Cora.

"I must manage it somehow, though! I simply must, if I'm ever to find out what Audrey Blain is up to!" she pondered desperately. "It's the very next step, to find out what's going on on the island, that Audrey has been making those signals from her bed-room window in this schoolhouse!"

But how could the chance for getting a good look round on the island be achieved?

Even reckless Cora did not dare to entertain the idea of trying to go across in a boat alone, even if one could be had. So, until she could get herself included in an excursion party, she was held up—baffled!

She moodily dropped into an arm-chair, and, lying back with feet astraddle, champed her coral necklace, always a sign with Cora that she was raging inwardly.

The minutes crept by, and the end of all her heavy brooding was a despairing shake of the head.

"No, there's nothing I can do until I have spied over the island!" was her despairing murmur. "I can't think why it is that Audrey Blain is at Morcove School, under a false name, and acting as a common skivvy—Audrey, who used to be a scholar here! Then those signals I've seen her give, there must be some strange affair going on, but what?"

If only she could find out! To have made that one thrilling discovery—that a former schoolmate of hers was back at the school, in the pose of a domestic servant—and yet to be unable to discover the reason, it was maddening!

The study door opened, and Cora's sister, Judith, came in quietly. Not a word passed. Poor Judith had long since become too disheartened to feel that there was any good nowadays in trying to win her sister round. The gentlest remark only meant getting one's head snapped off.

Indeed, Judith thought herself at this moment that Cora should prefer to be silent, instead of starting on at her.

Only Cora's secret fretting about the great mystery kept her silent. As her sister set down some classbooks upon the table, she herself got up from the armchair and drifted out of the room. She wanted to be alone, to think!

Three seconds later the irritable girl was letting fly at Naomer Nakara, for running into her in the study corridor.

"Out of my way, can't you?" hissed Cora, trying to get a smack at Naomer's ducked head. "You Study 12 girls, you fancy you are everybody!"

"I not take up ze room you do!" sauced impish little Naomer, after skipping to a safe distance. "Why don't you go for a ride on ze motor-sikkle? He, he, he!"

This was like a red rag to a bull to Cora. The ban placed upon her motor-cycling by the headmistress had been something else to render Cora very touchy just lately. She made a dash at Naomer, meaning to catch her, and then box her ears.

With a shriek of defiant laughter, however, Morcove's royal scholar darted the last few steps to the door of Study 12, and burst headlong into that safe refuge.

Nor was Naomer less amused when her sudden dash into the sanctuary led to her crashing into Paula Creel and flooring that elegant young person like a ninepin.

"Healp!" yelped Paula, with the first breath that came after she had sat down so abruptly.

"He, he, he! I very sorry!"

"Sowwy, bai Jove! You come in here with the velocity of a thunderbolt, bai Jove!"

"I had to be queek, queek," grinned Naomer, "because Cora Grandways eat after me to box me on ze ear!"

"And, as usual," sighed Paula, getting up wearily, "I am the sufferer in the long wun!"

"He was a short run I took—only two three steps!"

"Naomer," said Paula sadly, "after being thwown to the floor with extreme violence—yes, wather—I am not prepared to gwapple with your wefusal to gwasp my meaning! When I said 'in the long wun,' that was a—yes wather—a colloquialism!"

"Ooo!" gasped Naomer. "He is a good word, yes! Coll-coll— Say him again, please!"

But there was no opportunity for Paula to do that. Again the door flashed open, letting in the two girls who rightly belonged to the study. Betty Barton was one, Polly Linton the other.

"Now, then—now, then," began facetious Polly, at the same time throwing down her school books, "what are you doing here, Paula?"

"I only looked wound, geals—yes wather! I found school wather twying this morning, didn't you?" And Paula sank into an easy-chair. "The summer weathah is too demowalising, bai Jove!"

"The fact is, you have no real desire for work!" said Polly, with mock severity. "Now, I— But, hooray, it's a halfer this afternoon! Cheers! And some lemonade, or I shall expire!"

"Ooo, yes; queek—queek!"

Although it was Betty and Polly's larder, Naomer had no hesitation in dashing to the corner cupboard and whisking out a glass jug and two cracked tumblers.

"Bai Jove, lemonade!" beamed Paula, lying back to fan herself with a pocket

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thundered Polly.

No one, Polly, dear—no one! Nor
I particularly desiwous—"

Oh, bai! There, Paula, there! This
be for you!" Polly said sweetly,
"Take it to her,
—quickly!"

Wow! Steady! Healp! You silly
walled Paula, hastily wiping
lemonade from her lap. "My
again—ah, dear!"

When you have finished larking
laughed Betty. "I mean to

Paula, stop your nonsense!" com-
Polly, fiercely banging the
"This levity, it must cease! Yes,

you mean to say—what?"
Well, this afternoon, a halfer, we
don't want to waste it!"

Which reminds me," Polly rejoined
happily, "I am for getting Norma
Helden, over at the Old Grange, to
mend the halfer with us!"

"Heah, heah!"
She does have such a lonely life, and
think she rather likes us," said Betty.

Could we let her know, then, that we'd
like her to look along this afternoon?"

I'll get a bike, and be there and back
before the gong goes for dinner," Polly
said, stepping to the door. "It's the
best way—no delay after dinner."

"Right-ho!" Betty agreed heartily.
And— Polly!"

That impetuous girl flashed round in
the doorway.

"Well?"
"If you can, you know!" Betty whis-
pered, with sudden great gravity.

Keep your eyes open at the Grange,
anyhow, and—and find out all you
can!"

Polly nodded.
"I had thought of that!" She winked.
Norma is as open as the day. She
can't get the ghost of a suspicion. But

when it comes to the lady and gentle-
man who have adopted her—well, we
know that it's all very mysterious!"
"Yes, wather!" drawled Paula, and,

as the door closed after Polly's exit, the
elegant one continued:

"Wemarkable pwoblem we have been
called upon to gwapple with, bai Jove!
Mr. and Mrs. Blain come to live at the
Old Gwange, a mile or two fwom heah,
under a false name. They adopt a
geal as their daughter, whilst their weal
daughter, Audwey, that used to be at
Morcove, as a scholar, gets a situation
as between-maid in the school. Geals—
geals it's—"

"Sh! Not so loud, Paula, when you
are talking about the great mystery,"
Betty struck in softly. "Have you
noticed that Morcove's new 'tweenie'
is always finding excuses for hanging
around the studies? It's my belief she
is not above spying, listening—"

"My gwacious, then I must be more
discweet!" Paula palpitated, with a dis-
mayed glance towards the door. "Not
for wouds would I—"

"Sh!"
That was Betty again, gesturing for
complete silence, whilst she softly stole
across to the door. Her hand went to
the knob, and in a flash she had the
door wide open.

"No one! Wrong that time!" she
derided herself. "I felt sure, however,
that I heard a creeping step, and I
thought it might be Aud—Florrie Blair,
ahem!"

Betty, however, had not been so
greatly mistaken, after all.

Morcove's new "tweenie" was no-
where near Study 12 just at present; all
the same, a certain eager ear had been
at the keyhole for a few moments just
now.

Cora Grandways! She, and no other,
was the girl whose creeping step had
not been quite quiet enough. She had
guessed, from the sudden silence in
Study 12 that someone was stealing to
the door, and in a flash she had nipped
out of sight round that corner which,
leading to her own study, she had so
often found useful.

Now she quietly entered her study.
But, seeing her sister still there, she

again turned away, and went drifting off through the schoolhouse, in the greatest state of agitation.

What was this that she had overheard Paula Creel saying in Study 12? If it meant anything at all the few remarks meant that she, Cora, was by no means the only girl at Morcove School who was aware of the new "tweenie's" true identity!

Nor was that all. Betty & Co., to Cora's immense amazement, appeared to have connected Florrie Blair with the present tenants of the Old Grange!

And now, suddenly, Cora saw how she stood to gain, after all, by what had seemed to be a most aggravating discovery. She hated the idea of Betty & Co. having found out even more than she had discovered. But, although the chums of Study 12 had gained this advantage, they should not hold it for long—oh, no!

Out in the open air, presently, Cora Grandways stood arrested by the consoling thought which suddenly flashed upon her.

"My word, yes!" she breathed to herself excitedly. "That's the very thing! If I can't get across to Gull Island, to do some spying there, I can at least keep a watch upon the Old Grange, and that's what I'll do this very afternoon! I'll spend the whole halfer finding out what I can at that lonely country house!"

CHAPTER 17.

More and More the Danger Grows.

POLLY LINTON hopped down from her cycle-saddle at the gloomy stone porch of the Old Grange, and quickly gave a ring at the bell.

For a full minute she was kept waiting, and it was more than time enough for Polly to realise better than ever what a deadly quiet life this must be for Norma Halden, out here in the depths of the country.

It was not as if the Haldens, having rented the Old Grange for a term, were keeping a number of indoor and out-

door servants, to give an air of cheerful activity to a place so lonely.

As Polly knew, the Haldens were only keeping one servant, the grey-haired gaunt Hannah, and it was this rather forbidding female who at last came to the door.

"Good-morning!" Polly began blithely. "Is Norma about?"

"I couldn't say."

"Perhaps you could kindly find out?" begged Polly, smiling. "I have just slipped along from the school to ask her if—"

"Who is that, Hannah?" came Mrs. Halden's interruption in a tone of great asperity, whilst she advanced with a quick and haughty step, from the back of the hall. "What, one of those Morcove girls again!"

"Oh, Mrs. Halden, do you mind?" Polly made a point of saying, very blandly, to this lady whose resentment was such a suspicious sign. "This is only a flying call, to ask if Norma may come out with us this afternoon. May she, please?"

"I don't know," came Mrs. Halden's response, in a chilly tone. "Norma has other things to do. She has certain studies that I do not wish her to neglect."

"It is such a lovely day," pleaded Polly, "and we have a halfer at the school! Do try and let Norma come out with us!"

"I must think about it," was the answer, which Polly considered highly suspicious. "You had better not expect Norma until you see her."

"Very well," Polly felt it best to say meekly, and she turned to walk back to where she had left her bicycle.

As she remounted, and all the while she was pedalling down the fairly long drive to the main gateway, she felt unpleasantly conscious of, as it were, being watched off the premises.

Altogether, even though she had been kept on the doorstep, and the talk had been so brief, this visit had provided extra proof that the tenants of the

things were involved in some very mysterious business.

"It's pretty clear," Polly was thinking as she rode out on to the main road, "our friendship for Norma does not fit in with the— Hallo, Norma, where you are!"

It was a sudden delighted exclamation from Polly, whilst she sharply pulled up and dismounted, seeing the very girl whom she and her chums used so much scrambling through a boundary hedge to catch her as she rode past.

"So glad to have got a word with you after all, dear!" was Polly's joyous beginning. "I have just called at your place to ask if you could come out with us this afternoon."

"Oh, Polly, it is good of you!" burst from Norma. "Did you see Mrs. Halden? Did she say I might come?"

"Why, dear, the fact is, Mrs. Halden seemed to be—seemed to be in doubt, but do try to persuade her!"

There was no immediate response from Norma and Polly was painfully aware of the girl suddenly looking very troubled and wistful.

"Norma, is there anything you want to tell me," Polly ventured to ask gently at last—"something you want to confide in me and my chums about?"

"No—at least—no, not at present, Polly, thank you!" came in a sighing manner from the girl who had been adopted by the Haldens.

"I am afraid, Norma, you are not altogether happy," Polly again felt her way with the other girl, after a pause. "If ever you have a reason for feeling—what shall I say?—worried, you must come to us girls at Morcove, to tell us all about it."

Norma's right hand was making little nervous pluckings at her frock as she slowly answered:

"Yes, Polly, I know that you and your chums—you would always stand by me in case of need. I have been thinking of you, in case I—I—in case I should need help."

Polly found it hard then not to blurt

out the fact that she and her chums knew more about Mr. and Mrs. Halden than was obviously known to Norma. But the Study 12 chums had wisely decided, for Norma's own sake, not to say anything that might alarm her, and Polly was not going to depart from this course now if she could help it.

So the Study 12 girl only put on a look of astonishment at what Norma had said.

"If you should need help, Norma. That's a strange thing to say!"

"Yes, well, I—I—" Norma drew a deep breath. "All I can say is that Mrs. Halden doesn't seem to want me to have you girls for my friends. I am awfully sorry, but, of course, I must do as she says."

"That's what I gathered from Mrs. Halden just now," was Polly's guarded answer, "and we Morcove girls will wonder what it means. Still, dear, do try for this afternoon—simply beg to be allowed—"

"Oh, I will, you may be sure!" Norma exclaimed emotionally, whilst Polly made ready to ride away. "If only I could see more of you and your chums. Tell them, won't you, how grateful I am for the invite?"

Polly, now that she was pedalling away, smiled back over her shoulder.

"We are not far off, anyhow, Norma! You know where to come at any time in case of need!"

And Norma said to herself, as she stood watching the other girl speed away:

"I do!"

It was a tremendous comfort to her at this time to know that not far off were friends who would surely be the last to fail her, if—if the need should arise.

Yet she must not be seen about with them whilst forbidden to do so by Mrs. Halden, but compliance with that lady's wishes need only depend upon things becoming more open and above board at the Grange.

If anything further happened to deepen Norma's belief that she had only

been adopted for sinister reasons, then, of course, she would have the right to deem Mrs. Halden a woman of whom to be afraid.

With a sharp sigh, the lonely and perplexed girl dawdled along to the gateway and went up the drive to the house. She was wondering if Polly Linton's unwelcome call had brought on a return of Mrs. Halden's stern mood. She had seen the lady in a very roused state a few days ago. That was after she, Norma, had been for an excursion to Gull Island with Betty & Co. But since then Mrs. Halden had gone out of her way to be very nice to her. Would there be another burst of anger now?

Poor Norma, she was soon to know!

Even as the girl entered the house, she came under the flashing eyes of Mrs. Halden.

"I believe you have been talking to that Morcove girl who was here just now, Norma!"

"Yes, I—I ran to catch her as she was riding away."

"Didn't I say that I would not have you mixing with those girls?" Mrs. Halden fairly blazed out. "How dare you disobey me like this!"

"I did not think that you would mind my just speaking to one of them for a mere minute," was Norma's perfectly truthful answer. "Surely there is no harm in that?"

"You understand, anyhow, there is to be no going out with them this afternoon! You are given a happy life here —" Mrs. Halden was continuing in a commanding manner, when the sudden whine of a car coming up the drive seemed to startle her.

"Run away now! That is Mr. Halden coming, and he and I have business to discuss."

No doubt they had! That was Norma's unhappy thought as she drifted away. But what was the business that it had to be kept so secret?

Mr. Halden did not pull up at the porch, but drove the car round to an

outlying garage in the spacious grounds. As soon as he had alighted from the motor, which was a very roomy one, he locked the garage doors upon it, and then came striding across to the house.

By the way in which he instantly sought one of the sitting-rooms, and cast himself into a low armchair, it seemed as if he was feeling dead weary after a very arduous spell at the steering wheel. He lay back in the armchair and passed a hand across his thin, jaded face.

"You got back all right, then?" was the tensely-whispered remark from Mrs. Halden, as she came into the room.

Quickly she closed the door behind her, to ensure complete privacy.

"Yes," he nodded listlessly, "all went well once again, and so that's another lot got off your hands!"

"And the money?"

Too tired to feel like much talking, Mr. Halden merely tapped a breast pocket as he lounged in the armchair.

"How much?" his wife asked eagerly.

"Oh, ninety-odd this time!"

"Ninety? Why, that's better than ever!" exultingly exclaimed Mrs. Halden. "What a really splendid thing it is proving! At this rate, we shall soon be set up well enough to have a taste of the old life again. Only, I am beginning to feel that we must be more careful than ever with Norma."

Mr. Halden lost all his lassitude in a moment, and jumped up in a startled way.

"Why, what about Norma? What's she been doing?"

"She has found out nothing so far, thank goodness," murmured Mrs. Halden, "but it is this wanting to be always with the Morcove girls that troubles me! If she and they get their heads together too much, who knows what they may not start puzzling between them the moment the least suspicion is aroused?"

Mr. Halden received this in silence.

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ing his mouth in a firm line as he
thoughtfully paced to the window.

At last he turned round, and if there
was a fierce look in his handsome eyes,
that look was no fiercer than the one
on Mrs. Halden's face.

"Well," he said, with slow impressiveness, "as we were placed, we simply
had to adopt that girl and have her
here as our daughter. Nor do I see
any reason why such a kid as that
should ever tumble to what is going
on, or give us any trouble. But if she
does—"

"Yes," muttered Mrs. Halden fiercely,
"if she does, we shall know what to do,
shall we not?"

And he answered:

"We shall!"

CHAPTER 18.

Cora Sees It All.

THE afternoon had kept beautifully
bright, and the great schoolhouse
was almost completely deserted
by its host of girl scholars.

The games-field accounted for a good
many. Every tennis-court was in use.
Cycle-sheds were bereft of their
machines, except that Cora Grandways'
swagger motor-cycle and sidecar still
remained under the ban that Miss
Homerfield had put upon its use some
days ago.

Cora, however, was not rueing the re-
straint that had been put upon her
motor-cycling just at present. There
was something far more thrilling to be
had this afternoon than even the most
fly-away spin round the countryside,
and that was—sheer detective work
over at the Old Grange!

As she came mincing out by the
school gateway, she walked nose in the
air, on account of some of the Study
12 girls standing about just there.
Waiting for Norma Halden, no doubt,
Cora very correctly guessed. For she
knew that Polly had cycled to the Old
Grange and back before dinner,
obviously to invite Norma over for the
afternoon.

But Cora knew nothing as to how that
invitation had been "squashed" by
Mrs. Halden, and how fateful the conse-
quences were to be of this bit of
ignorance.

For, taking it for granted that
Norma would now be coming along to
the school, Cora craftily avoided the
direct road to the lonely mansion, so
as not to encounter the girl.

Along winding lanes and over one
bit of pasture and another did Cora
warily make for the Haldens' place,
without meeting anyone. But what
was her sudden excitement when, get-
ting up from a grassy bank, after a
five minutes' rest, she realised that she
was being followed—and by a girl!

Cora merely glimpsed the girlish
figure that was coming on after her,
and then she dodged down out of sight.
Crouching amongst some bushes, she
peered excitedly, and it was her im-
mediate belief that she had not been
followed, after all.

From the wary way in which the
other girl was advancing, it was evident
that she, too, had chosen this cross-
country route to the lonely house for
purposes of secrecy, and the girl was
Audrey Blain!

Cora's heart beat faster than ever.

Her own intention to spy around at
the Old Grange this afternoon had
actually coincided with Audrey's inten-
tion to use her "afternoon off" for a
walk out in this direction!

Stealthily, Cora snaked to a safer
hiding-place amongst the lane-side
bushes, so as to let Audrey go on past
her unsuspectingly.

"Yes, let her get in advance of me,
that's the idea now," was the crafty
one's cunning thought. "Then, by
simply following her up, I may do
wonders!"

Another minute and the hidden
scholar, by peering very cautiously,
could see Audrey stepping past. The
once queenly scholar of the Fourth
Form was looking very moody, as well
as uneasy—brooding, perhaps, on the
hard fate that had made it necessary

for her to be taken on at Morcove as a domestic servant.

Hardly a breath did Cora draw whilst the other girl was going by so close at hand. The instant it was safe for her to do so, however, what an exultant chuckle she gave!

There had been time for her to imagine the very greatest luck that her creeping after Audrey might mean. Supposing that girl was due to meet someone—her mother, say—at a rendezvous near the mansion, there might then be a chance to overhear the conversation.

Cora was a great believer in eaves-dropping. She left it to girls like Betty & Co. to manage detective work without recourse to such underhand methods.

No such wonderful luck was to be Cora's however, as she realised a few minutes later. The girl whom she was cautiously shadowing entered the mansion grounds by way of a shrubbery gate, and bolted it shut behind her.

Savagely Cora glared at that door which was shutting her out when at last she got to it. Stamping a foot, she let out a furious "Bother it!" through gritted teeth.

So far she had done no more than establish the fact that Audrey Blain really was in secret association with the tenants of the Grange, and even Betty & Co. appeared to know as much as that.

"Well, I'm not going back at this stage—I just won't!" the baffled school-girl said to herself. "Whilst Audrey herself is at the house, it is the very time for me to— Oh, I don't know! How can I get into the house? But I must do something!"

Then she looked around. She was quite alone, that was certain, in this thicket that had grown up on waste ground outside the grounds of the mansion. Nor had she any doubt that neglect had made almost a jungle of a great part of the grounds themselves; so, if only she could get over the wall— Or, perhaps, by prowling on, she

would find a hedge through which she could scramble.

Liking this latter plan much the better, she followed the wall along on its outside as far as it bounded the grounds. Then came a rank growth of privet bushes, and to get through this bit of a hedge was an easy matter. There was not a single thorn to scratch her—only soft green foliage to be pushed aside.

And now, having got inside the private grounds, she took a few moments to consider matters.

The mansion was some distance away, but she was overjoyed to see how safely she should be able to get quite close to it. Apart from shrubberies and clumps of ornamental trees, there were rose gardens that had run riot, and clumps of bushes where a man might have stood erect and yet been concealed.

On she went at last, with the very greatest stealth, zig-zagging towards the house.

In spite of her feverish eagerness to find out if there was not a chance to slip indoors, she would not allow herself to take one hasty step.

Suddenly she bobbed down. She was just in time, if she was not to be seen by someone—a gentleman—coming away from the back of the house, to go towards a large detached building that had once been the coach-house and stables, and which now was obviously used as a garage.

Afraid to stir another inch, lest that man—Audrey's own father, beyond doubt—should look round and see her, she crouched low and watched.

To her intense relief, she saw him open one of the garage doors and pass inside; but it tried her patience when, instead of getting out his car and driving away, he remained inside the garage.

"Bother him!" fumed Cora. "Is he going to be there all the afternoon, tinkering at his car? I can just see it standing there, and I suppose he—"

CHAPTER 19.

Shock Upon Shock.

AT that moment, unbeknown to Cora Grandways, a very curious thing was happening.

Even as she, from her place of concealment in the grounds of the old country house, was excitedly watching Mr. Halden at his mysterious task, so was another girl!

And that girl was Norma.

Forbidden to go out for the afternoon with her Morcove chums, poor Norma had settled down an hour ago to try to get her head into a book.

Before she had done ten minutes' reading, however, Mrs. Halden had looked in upon her, as good as to order her to have a full hour's practice at the piano.

Norma was by nature an obedient girl, and she had promptly gone to the old-fashioned, tinkly piano, first playing over a piece or two from memory, and then trying her hand at a sonata which she took from the music pile.

All the time her mind had been in the same disquieted state over the unpleasant turn that life had taken. She was pondering all sorts of possible reasons why Mrs. Halden wished her to be so lonely, when suddenly a strange thought gave her quite a turn.

Why had she been ordered to the piano? Was it so that Mrs. Halden would know just where she, Norma, was for as long as the piano could be heard?

Once this idea had seized Norma, she could not shake it off.

It was something that fitted in so well with Mrs. Halden's nervous conduct of late. She disliked letting Norma go off on her own to mix with the schoolgirls, and yet perhaps the girl's presence about the house had become a nuisance, too!

In a few minutes, it dawned upon Norma that it might be as well for her to see what was going on whilst she was supposed to be at the piano. Nor had she any doubt that, after being rendered so uneasy and suspicious, she had a right to do this. She finished one

But what was this that was happening now? To Cora's sudden surprise, the man had emerged from the shed and gone to the doors of the adjoining stables.

She saw him unlock the place and pass inside, and once again she felt afraid to stir, lest he should suddenly reappear. Why on earth, though, was he meddling about in the stables? Surely, even if he had some repairs to do to his car, that job would not take him to the stables next door? Or had he converted the stables into a workshop?

She had just considered that possibility when he came out of the stables, carrying a big package. This he took round to the garage—to load upon board the car, she supposed.

"Good! Then he will soon be driving away, I take it!" she reasoned joyfully.

But Audrey Blain's father returned to the stable for another big parcel. To Cora's blank amazement, he went to and fro, to and fro, carrying bulky packages away from the stables, to load them into the car!

What did it mean?

Surely all this had something to do with the great mystery!

Parcel after parcel being loaded into the car! Not luggage of various kinds, portmanteaux and so on, but parcels!

Furiously the spying schoolgirl racked her brains over the problem for a full minute, and then suddenly the solution flashed upon her.

The renting of this lonely country mansion not far from the coast, Audrey in a situation at a school whose windows looked out to sea, the signals from Audrey's own bed-room window, all—all was explained to Cora.

The answer to the great riddle had come with a suddenness that left her gasp, dizzy.

"Smuggling!" she panted to herself. "The Blains are simply making their fortune out of smuggled goods!"

piece of music, let a minute or so go by, then played another—a very short item. Then she made a longer pause than ever.

Her idea was to let Mrs. Halden imagine that she was spending quite a little time looking through old piles of music for something else to play.

But Norma had done with the piles of music now!

Cautiously she crept across to the room door, and was going to open it softly, but the conviction suddenly seized her that someone—was it old Hannah?—was posted outside the room.

In the greatest agitation, Norma returned to the piano and forced herself to play some other fragment, although she was now so shaky that her fingers blundered badly over the keys.

After a minute, she again left the piano, this time to go across to the french windows opening on to the garden.

With a sort of vague dread, she was watching the ordinary door of the room even as she softly slipped back the catches of the french windows. It would not have surprised her to see that other door open, and either old Hannah or Mrs. Halden herself rush in, so strong was the belief by now that she was not wanted to quit the room just at present.

Nothing happened, however, and in a flash she was in the open air, and darting to cover, for it seemed highly advisable to do that.

Hardly had there been time for her to steady her breathing when she saw a back door open and Mr. Halden emerge. He went across to the outlying garage, glancing about himself all the time in a very cautious manner.

Yet his going to the garage, perhaps to get out the car, seemed to Norma such an innocent thing for him to be doing, and she felt far less eager to watch him than to keep a close watch upon the house.

It was only when a few minutes had passed, and he was still at the garage, that she peered again in that direction.

Then, to her amazement, she saw

just what another girl was seeing—Mr. Halden carrying parcels round from the old stables to the garage, as if to load them into his car!

From that moment, Norma was all eagerness to know what on earth could be in those parcels. When she crept from one place of concealment to another, it was only to work a little nearer to the outbuildings.

Then suddenly an alarming thing happened.

She was aware of Mrs. Halden rushing forth from the house, looking this way and that in an excitable way that needed no explanation.

The piano's silence had been noticed, and now the lady knew that Norma was no longer in the room.

Behind Mrs. Halden came Hannah, and she, too, was anxiously gazing about for a sight of the missing girl. Mrs. Halden made frantic signs for her to search around, and then ran straight for the garage.

Mr. Halden, coming out of the stables with a couple of light packages, was suddenly confronted by his wife in the wildest state of dismay. Norma saw the lady gesturing, and could imagine the panicky whisper which gave Mr. Halden the news:

"We don't know where Norma is! She has given us the slip!"

In her hiding-place in one of the shrubberies, Norma now crouched down, her heart pounding violently.

It looked as if the next few moments would find all three of them hunting the grounds in quest of her. And why all this great dismay on the part of Mr. and Mrs. Halden and old Hannah, unless they really were involved in some secret scheme of a guilty nature?

The last vestige of faith in her so-called benefactors was shed by Norma now. She had been their innocent dupe. They were engaged in some bit of sheer roguery which, on no account, would they have her discover!

Through the dense foliage that screened the girl, she saw Mr. Halden leave his parcels in the garage, then

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start to hunt around with his wife!
At the same time, Hannah was already
making an independent search.

Whether to lie low, on the chance of
not being discovered, or get up and
make a run for it, Norma could not
decide. Better for her if she had made
up at once, never to have ought to do
with the Haldens again! Perhaps it
seemed cowardly, however, to take to
flight. At all events, she hesitated, and
thereby she sealed her fate!

It was Hannah who looked like be-
ing the one to blunder upon her. The
lady and gentleman were a safe dis-
tance away, and Norma thought to her-
self tensely:

"If only Hannah would turn aside,
it might give me a chance, but——"

The sentence never completed itself
in Norma's excited mind. For now, to
her utter amazement, she saw another
girl suddenly start up from where she
had been hiding in the grounds, and
go racing off in full view of Mr. and
Mrs. Halden!

Indeed, that couple had been on the
point of reaching this other's girl's hid-
ing-place when she must have lost her
nerve and taken to flight.

A Morcove girl!

In a flash, Norma recognised the out-
door costume of the Morcove scholars.

As clear as daylight could render her,
there was a Morcove scholar in full
flight from Mr. and Mrs. Halden!

But who was the girl? Not one of
the Study 12 chums, surely? And yet

"No, it is none of the girls I have
been friendly with," Norma was be-
wilderedly concluding, when a sudden,
stern cry from close at hand told her
that she herself had been discovered.

"Norma! And hiding, too! All right,
my girl, you've just about done for
yourself now!"

She wildly faced about, and there was
old Hannah, looking ready to pounce
upon her and hold her fast.

"Stand away! Keep off!" panted
Norma, an 'at bay' look in her eyes.
"I have done nothing——"

"You have found out, and that's
enough!" Hannah said, and ran in upon
the girl with clutching hands.

Too late Norma tried to do what had
seemed such a cowardly thing up to
now. She would have run for it at
last, but the bony hands seized her.
She wrestled with her captor, but could
do no good for herself.

Overborne by superior strength, in a
moment she was being hustled towards
the house. Furiously Hannah rushed
her on before her, whilst poor Norma
now realised confusedly that Mr. and
Mrs. Halden were abandoning the pur-
suit of the other girl.

With dizzied head, Norma suddenly
found herself being hustled into the
house by way of a back door. There
in the passage, Hannah held her fast,
at a standstill, whilst Mrs. Halden and
her husband came running up.

"Mrs. Halden," was the captive girl's
protesting cry, "I must be let alone!
Tell this woman——"

"So you were in the grounds, spying
with that other girl, a girl from Mor-
cove School," was Mrs. Halden's hissed
exclamation, "one of your friends!"

"No, the girl was not——"

"Bah, that's enough of your fibs!"
Norma was silenced furiously. "Who
else could it have been but one of the
girls you have been inviting to overrun
this place? And I told you that I
would not allow——"

"She was not a friend of mine—she
was not!" Norma cried out in wild dis-
tress. "A Morcove girl, yes, but not
one of those——"

"Then who was she? We must know,
for she also saw too much!" struck in
Mr. Halden excitedly. "But you are
lying to us, Norma. My wife is right.
It must have been one of your friends!"

Again Norma was going to protest
vehemently that it was not so, but sud-
denly her brain reeled again under a
fresh shock.

A girl had come upon the scene from
somewhere in the house, and she was
exclaiming at Mr. and Mrs. Halden:

"It is all right! I know who the Morcove scholar was! I saw her from the window. Dad, mater, don't be alarmed. She's one I can handle easily."

Whether the reassuring words drew any response from Mr. and Mrs. Halden Norma did not know. At first sight of this newcomer upon the scene, she had stared astoundedly. Now she gave a great cry of acute bewilderment:

"You— Why, I know you! I have seen you yourself at Morcove School! Oh, you are the girl who is the new servant there, and yet these people are your parents—your parents!"

The next sound in the house was a warning word from Mr. Halden:

"Look out, Hannah! She's going to fall!"

"I've got her!" Hannah exclaimed grimly.

And she held Norma as that poor girl fainted dead away.

CHAPTER 20.

A Present for Gora.

POLLY LINTON raked up the last tennis-ball with her racket, and batted it for Naomer to catch, now that the game was over.

"Glorious afternoon it has been," remarked Polly, "but I can't say I have enjoyed it very much!"

"You mean," guessed Betty, walking off the court with her bosom chum, to where some of the others were sitting about on the grass, "you have been thinking?"

"All the time!" nodded Polly.

"Yes, wather!" came dreamily from Paula Creel, where she reclined picturesquely upon the ground. "I have been thinking——"

"You? I like that!" Polly promptly jumped down the elegant one's throat. "What have you been thinking, pray?"

"Bal Jove, that it is time for tea—yes, wather! And don't threaten me with that wacket, Polly deah! Now—now, Naomer, what have I done?"

"Done nothing, as per usual! But, poor thing, you must want your tea badly, so hurry up!" Polly said, starting to rout Paula with the racket. "Get along!"

"Ooo, yes; queek—queek! Run, duffer, run!"

"Haow can a geal wun when you don't allow her to get up? Ow!"

"Gallop, zen, on ze four legs—so! Goo-hun!" teased Naomer, treating Paula as a quadruped that must be chivvied along with a pelting of tennis-balls. "Hi, hi, ze donkey race! He, he, he!"

"Dwop it, you silly cuckoos!" wailed Paula, at last managing to rise erect.

"Now look at me—my hair, my fwock! I shan't be pwsentable at tea-table!"

Nor was her subsequent toilette finished before Polly and the rest had rattled out the tea things in Study 12, and the water was even in the pot.

"The whole afternoon spoiled for me, because Norma didn't turn up!" Polly said, with genuine seriousness, as they all sat down to the free-and-easy spread. "Not her fault, of course!"

"Wather not!" Paula agreed, ready to take a lively part in the talk now that she had enjoyed her first sip of tea. "Mrs. Halden must have been obduwate, and the geal did not like to webel—what?"

"Then the question is, what's to be done?" Betty exclaimed gravely.

There was a pause, eloquent of the damper which the great mystery was putting upon the usually high spirits of the Study 12 coterie.

Not only did the girls lapse into heavy silence, they all showed very little appetite for the dainties on the table.

"If we were only certain, instead of merely suspicious," came from Madge at last, "the obvious thing would be to go to Miss Redgrave."

"Yes, wather! Howevah——"

"It's out of the question that we can go to Miss Redgrave, or anyone else, at present," regretted Helen. "We have always made it a golden rule not to repeat things unless we were dead certain and saw a real need for giving

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information, and, as Madge has just said, at present we are only suspicious."

Betty murmured musingly:
I suppose some people can resemble others so closely that they may be mistaken for one another. Mrs. Halden might be really Mrs. Halden, with a very remarkable resemblance to Mrs. Blain as we remember her, but then

"There is this girl, Florrie Blair, the school's new 'tweenie," Tess took up the last speaker softly. "Are we to fall back on the belief that Florrie Blair merely resembles Audrey Blain?"

"Bai Jove, it's wather a lot to swallow!" declared Paula, passing her cup for a refill. "I mean to say, geals, two wemarkable cases of close wesemblance in the same distwict, awising at the same time—what?"

"It's ridiculous!" was Polly's comment. "But— No, the time has not come yet for us to go to Miss Redgrave. We need to find out. We jolly well must find out more about it all!"

"But how?" asked Betty ruefully. "The next step, girls?"

"I know! Oh, I've got it!"
And up jumped Polly, to do a sudden skittish waltz round the study. She stopped at last, and whispered excitedly:

"We must confide in Norma! The time has come for us to do that, anyhow!"

"Bai Jove!"
"Polly's right!" Betty agreed, looking glad at the suggestion her chum had made. "We have not wanted to upset Norma against the Haldens, but we must risk doing so now."

"We'll get hold of her as soon as possible," Polly rushed on eagerly, "and ask her if anything has happened to make her wonder if the Haldens are quite straightforward people."

"In othah wovds, Polly, deah, whether the geal has weason to doubt their bona fides—yes, wather! And if she has—"

"As I believe she has by this time!"

struck in Polly. "Oh, come on! Get tea finished, and then we'll be off!"

"To find Norma? That's all very well," said Madge, "but what about Mr. and Mrs. Halden? Mrs. Halden sent you to the right-about this morning, Polly!"

"Need that prevent me from calling again?" laughed the impetuous one. "It isn't a case now of waiting until we are welcomed. We have jolly well got to go there, wanted or not!"

"And don't think that I, for one, am afwaid!" Paula said, getting up with the rest of them. "Mrs. Halden has no tewwows for me!"

Tea was cleared away even more quickly than it had been laid. On went the girls' outdoor things, and off they went.

"I vote we avoid the main road," Betty proposed, as they were briskly marching down to the school gateway. "For, don't forget, it is Florrie Blair's afternoon out, and—"

"Sh! Look, here is the girl!" was Polly's tense remark.

Sure enough, at this moment, when the chums were walking towards the gateway, Morcove's demure "tweenie" came sauntering in.

She was carrying a small brown-paper parcel under one arm, and that seemed to be the finishing touch to her innocent appearance. Even as Betty & Co. gave her a kind of suspicious scrutiny, they all felt half-ashamed of doing so. She never flinched under their united glances, but gave her shy and polite smile as she calmly walked past them—a juvenile domestic who, let out for the afternoon, had seized the chance to fetch home some little parcel.

"Only," said Betty, after they had gone out at the school gateway, "Florrie Blair has not fetched that parcel from the town. One can't be certain, but she seems to have come from the opposite direction."

"Wonder what was in the parcel?" pondered Madge.

"Can't you guess?" said Polly promptly. "If she is really Audrey

Blain, and it is Mr. and Mrs. Blain who are at the Old Grange, then she has simply brought along something from home—some personal belongings, no doubt."

But Polly was right this time only up to a point. As regards the contents of the parcel, she was utterly wrong in her conjecture. Nor with a hundred guesses would she or her equally astute chums have hit upon the truth.

Meantime, the school's perfect little "tweenie" walked on up the drive and entered the great schoolhouse, by no means sorry that she had encountered that batch of scholars.

Only too well the girl who was playing such a daring part realised that, if Cora's panicky flight from the mansion grounds this afternoon had led to any development at the school, those girls would not have gone past her, Florrie Blair, as calmly as that.

"Cora, anyhow, has not said a word yet," was the thought that took the young impostor up to her own bedroom in a state of great relief. "So I was right, after all, when I told dad and the mater not to worry. And now——"

In the act of setting down the parcel, she gave a violent start. Confronting her, on the dressing-table, was a note that had been placed there during her absence. It was superscribed in pencil, merely "F. B."

Snatching it up, she ripped it open, and read just these few words:

"When you get this, come and see me. I shall be waiting."

It was unsigned—not even initialed. Even so, "F. B." knew whose hand had written the message. For a moment she looked rather terrified, then the sight of the parcel seemed to restore her faltering nerve, and she even smiled.

"Oh, it'll be all right! I know Cora!"

Almost leisurely, she took off her out-

door things and resumed cap and apron. Then, taking up the parcel, she quitted her room and descended to the Fourth Form quarters.

A few scholars who had stopped to talk in the corridor saw her trip past them, demure as ever. Then she turned the corner, and was at the Grandways sisters' study.

Only Cora was there. The girl in cap and apron entered, to find the fly-away scholar fidgeting about the room, her nerves all on edge.

"At last! What a time you've been!" Cora touchily greeted the newcomer, as soon as the door was closed. "What's in that parcel?"

"I brought it along with me, in case—— Well, you'll see," was Audrey Blain's perfectly calm response, and she set the parcel down.

Cora went and looked at it closely, giving a sort of triumphant grin of recognition.

"If it were bigger, Audrey, it might be one of the parcels that I saw your father loading into his car this afternoon!"

No staggered, frightened look came into Audrey's face, and it was Cora instead who was taken aback. She had expected the remark to leave Audrey "clean bowled."

"Yes, well?" Audrey said blandly. "Go on! Say the rest, Cora!"

"Huh, you take it quietly, I must say," exclaimed Cora. "But you always were a cool hand. Aren't you afraid that I am going to give you and your people away as a lot of swindlers? Smugglers," she spoke on tensely, "doing a roaring trade in stuff that ought to pay duty? I have put two and two together, you see!"

"As I guessed you had, Cora. I——"

"Your coming to this school in the guise of a domestic servant, whilst your people are renting that country house; your making signals from your bed-room window out to sea! I know all about it, Audrey, and what it means—smuggling!"

Cora was enjoying one of the

cap and parcel, she added to the

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proudest moments of her life. She was the detective triumphant.

"Gull Island, that's where the stuff is secretly dumped when it comes from abroad. Then your father secretly gets it to the Old Grange, a house just right for the purpose. Oh, I have tumbled to it all, Audrey! And supposing I chose to give information?"

"You and I were friends once, Cora."

"Were we really?" Cora laughed dryly. "I am not so sure about that. Anyhow, even if we were, why should I shield you now, just because your people are down in the world, and want to get rich again by cheating the Customs?"

Audrey, marvellously as calm as ever, pointed to the parcel.

"That's yours, Cora, so open it and see!"

"Mine?"

"Yes; I thought you would like it. Look and see!"

Cora pounced upon the parcel, and began to tear away the wrappings. Like her rich parents, she was always greedy for anything that came her way.

Next second she was letting the paper wrappings drop to the floor, whilst she gazed entranced at the contents of the parcel.

Over her extended right arm hung a frock, girl's size, of the costliest silk; over the other arm hung one or two dress-lengths of the richest silk material. She looked from one to the other with sparkling eyes.

"For me—for me, Audrey? You mean it?"

"For you," Audrey answered, nodding calmly, "because you are in the secret now!"

CHAPTER 21.

It May Be True!

THE chums of Study 12 had come all the way from Morcove School to the gates of the Old Grange without meeting a soul.

"Just look at the big old house from

here!" murmured Polly, as they made a hesitant pause, gazing up the gloomy drive. "It must be a dull and lonely life for Norma!"

"Cwuel, to have wefused to let her be fwiendly with us!" was Paula's feeling remark. "Howevah, we are going to have a wovd with her now!"

"We are!" said Betty firmly. "We'll do the fair thing, and give Mrs. Halden one chance of seeing the girl with her permission. If we are refused—well!"

"Come on, then!" clamoured Polly, and on they went, boldly advancing up the gloomy avenue to the front porch.

Betty, as she reached a hand to the old-fashioned bell-pull, looked to see if any of her chums were betraying nervous excitement. It was all right, however. Madge and Tess were quite composed. Helen and Polly were making remarks to each other about a rare shrub growing close by, and even Naomer was all calm smiles.

As for Paula, she was paying attention to her general appearance.

Betty pulled at the bell, and a faint tinkle-tinkle ended the almost uncanny silence.

"By the way," Polly suddenly whispered. "At this last moment we are not going to be put off by old Hannah. If she——"

"Sh!"

Someone was already opening the door. Next second, Mrs. Halden herself stood revealed to all the chums.

"Good-evening, Mrs. Halden!" Betty began serenely. "We girls have walked out this way to ask if we may see Norma for a few minutes—just for a few min——"

"No; I am very sorry," Mrs. Halden answered steadily, "but it is perfectly useless your calling for Norma any more. She has gone away."

"Gone away?"

"Rather suddenly—yes," was the silky rejoinder to the chums' chorus of surprise. "My husband took her to the station in the car a while back, and saw her into the train."

"Fancy!" Polly let it out. "Norma said nothing to me about any journey she was going to make this morning!"

"Oh, it arose suddenly, as I say!" explained Mrs. Halden, still refraining from inviting the girls into the house. "There was a telegram to say that she must go to someone who is lying ill, so we had to get her off at once."

"Pity!" remarked Madge. "So you can't say when she will be back?"

Mrs. Halden shook her handsome head.

"I'm afraid not."

"Could we have her address?" ventured Betty.

"Bai Jove, that's a bwilliant——"

"No, I can't very well give you Norma's address," Mrs. Halden struck in, making ready to close the door. "I have not wanted to speak so plainly, but, as a matter of fact, Mr. Halden and I do not wish Norma to continue her acquaintance with you girls."

"Mrs. Halden, may we ask why?" Polly asked promptly.

"If you must know, the reason is a perfectly simple one," was the unhesitating answer. "Being with you girls has an unsettling effect upon Norma. We have found it to be so. She was happy here until you made her hanker after being at a school, which, really, Mr. Halden and I cannot afford. Good-evening!"

And the door closed gently, but none the less emphatically, in the chums' faces.

"Bai Jove!" breathed Paula. "The—the wudeness!"

"H'm, yes!" sniffed Polly. "Well, that's that!"

They dawdled away, none the less affronted because they were mere schoolgirls.

"But, look here——"

"Don't stand to argue now, Polly," whispered Betty quickly. "It's fishy, certainly, but she may be watching us from a window. Don't look, in case!"

This was shrewd advice, and they followed it. Only when they were on

the main road, out of sight from any of the house windows, did they give way to their feeling of exasperation.

"Nice thing it is now!" Betty grimaced. "I mean to say, when we are told that Norma has gone away, called to someone's bedside, what are we to do?"

"We can believe it or not," Polly said. "Personally, I shall be inclined to——"

"Pwesome an open mind—yes, wather!"

"It might be true," fretted Madge. "That's the bother! It is such a perfectly plausible story. Of course, if we knew for certain that the Haldens are not the Mr. and Mrs. Halden at all, but are really the couple we suppose them to be——"

"And we are not certain," lamented Helen, "nor do I see just at present how we are going to test the theory—prove it."

"That weminds me, geals," beamed Paula. "I wead a book once, a wipping womance! When ewevy other means had failed to pwove the identity of a certain vogue, they got his fingerpwint—yes, wather! Fingerpwints——"

"Oh, Paula, what is the use of talking like that?" Polly almost groaned. "Even if we could get the 'tweenie's' fingerprint, we've no fingerprint of Audrey's to compare it with!"

"Er!—no! Bai Jove, I nevah thought of that! It's twue!"

"You never think of anything that helps!"

"Weal, don't be cwoss, Polly!"

"I'm not cross!" protested the girl who would like to do everything in a moment always. "But I do hate being hung up, baffled, flummuxed!"

"And that's what we are now!" Betty rejoined, with a rueful laugh.

"Fairly bunkered, as dad would say!" They straggled on, and the silence was a gloomy one.

"Mrs. Halden talked as if we would never see Norma again!" Betty deplored at last.

"And perhaps," sighed Polly, "we never will!"

Then she added stoutly:

"But, no; we will get to the bottom of it all, even yet!"

"Oh, we must!" exclaimed Helen.

"And it seems to me that, somehow or other, the next thing is to find out if Florrie Blair really is—Florrie Blair!"

Betty gave one of those nods that meant so much.

"We'll manage," she said.

In their present baffled state, the girls felt that it served a good purpose for them to exchange such desperately confident remarks. How much greater comfort would it have been, then, to Norma herself, if only she could have known that her chums of Morcove were talking in this strain!

Poor Norma, who had always felt that in case of need she would have those staunch chums to fly to for aid, only she had left it all too late!

CHAPTER 22.

Under Lock and Key!

WHERE, then, was Norma all this while?

Safe enough, from the point of view of that couple whose innocent dupe she had been!

After dark that evening, Mrs. Halden took up a tray of food that had been set by on her own dining-table, and proceeded upstairs with it.

To the topmost landing of the great old house the handsome lady made her way, to find Hannah waiting, sentinel-like, outside a certain attic door.

"Turn back the key and let me go in, Hannah, and you remain outside."

With an air of rather enjoying her new role of gaolesress, the grim-featured servant obeyed the calm injunction, and suddenly her mistress was in the attic, alone with Norma.

The place was groping dark, and Mrs. Halden exclaimed curtly, as she set down the tray:

"Why have you not lit the candle that was given you?"

There was no response, and as the lady herself struck a match and set it to the candle on the table, the feeble light revealed Norma standing over by one of the sloping walls, in a state of passionate indignation too fierce for words.

"Sulky, are you?" The lady could afford to laugh carelessly, now that she had glanced around the room and satisfied herself that Norma could not escape. "There, get your supper, my girl! Have you everything else you want for the night?"

Again Norma remained angrily silent, and so Mrs. Halden herself looked around the room, as if to make sure that the captive did not lack anything.

"I think you have been made very comfortable, Norma," was the comment that came at last. "Hannah has given you everything you need, and if you have sense enough to resign yourself—"

"Resign myself!" burst from Norma passionately. "Why should I be expected to do that, Mrs. Halden? I am not a bit resigned, and I demand my freedom!"

"Rubbish! That tone to me——"

"Well, you have no right whatever to treat me like this!" Norma cried out, stamping a foot. "It's against the law, and if ever I get away——"

"If!" was the mocking interruption. "Rash talk will not help to free you, Norma. The door is one you can never get past until I give the word, and as for the window, it is too high for you to escape that way!"

"I have friends!"

"The Morcove girls? Yes, of course. But I wouldn't rely on them, Norma."

The woman suddenly stopped being amused at the girl's helpless fury, and gave her a blazing look.

"You little idiot, Norma!" came with intense ferocity. "Do you think my husband and I are going to have our

business ruined at this early stage just because of you? Not likely! If you are locked up in this room now, it is only what we decided weeks ago to do with you, if ever you got to know too much!"

"And I do know that you and Mr. Halden—yes, and that girl who is a servant at the school—you are doing wrong all the time!" panted Norma wildly. "Oh, I have been cruelly taken in, wickedly deceived! Why—why did you ever adopt me if you feared I might get to know too much? Will you tell me that?"

"No, I will not, but there was a reason! Pity there was!" the woman said moodily. "My husband and I would have been only too glad not to have to saddle ourselves with a girl like you, but it had to be, and now this is the unfortunate consequence. It can't be helped!"

"That does not make it any easier for me!" flashed Norma, looking as passionate as ever in the candlelight. "And I tell you I will not put up with this—this imprisonment! I shall call for help, unless——"

"You may call. No one will hear you. Your voice will be worn to a whisper long before there is a chance of anyone hearing you."

The speaker added, with a faint smile:

"No tradesmen ever call, as you know, Norma. We do our own shopping. So there it is, and I advise you—just eat your supper, go to bed, and——"

"No—no, I will not take it all as meekly as that! Mrs. Halden, wait!"

On her way back to the door, where Hannah was like one on guard, the lady who was still Mrs. Halden to Norma turned round.

"Well?"

"Let me go!" the poor girl entreated, wildly wringing her hands. "I have done you no harm, ever!"

"You know too much, my girl, and so——"

"Mrs. Halden, stop! Oh, haven't you any heart at all? Don't keep me here!"

"Good-night, Norma!" was the unmoved answer. "Hannah, see to the door, won't you?"

It closed sharply even as the words were said, and a key grated round in the lock with a sharp snick!

In sudden frantic desperation, Norma rushed across the candle-lit attic, and hammered the door's panels with her hands.

"Help! Let me out! Help! Somebody come and let me out!"

Her ringing cries died away. She seemed to hear only a mocking laugh answer them, and the next moment she turned away to throw herself face downwards upon the pallet bed, sobbing aloud in despair:

"The Morcove girls, if they could only know! But I have left it too late—too late! How can they ever help me now?"

CHAPTER 23.

Stranded in the Dark.

POLLY LINTON patted her yawning lips.

"Heigh-ho! Somebody wake me when we get to Morcove!" she said languidly. "I do feel so tired!"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove! And if I could have just a little more woom, geals, I would like to close my eyes!"

"If you doze now, girls, you won't be able to get to sleep when you are in bed."

That was Miss Redgrave, Morcove's chummy Fourth Form-mistress, joining in the lazy chatter that filled the quite dark interior of the school's private bus.

The dozen or so girls were out late for once.

They had been over to Stormwood School for certain celebrations, and it was not until ten o'clock that they had reluctantly run to get on their outdoor things.

At this moment the private motor-bus was only just purring out, by the

wood gateway, on to the lonely country highway.

A run of several miles was before them all, along very lumpy roads, and Polly was not the only girl who felt that she was going to be jolted to sleep.

"We have had such a glorious afternoon and evening," commented Madge Menden, "no wonder we are dead beat now!"

"It's the warm weather!" suggested Helen.

"And the dancing!" added Dolly Delane.

"To say nothing of the lovely supper they gave us!"

"After a weally wipping spwead at tea-time—yes, wather!"

And Paula, trying to elbow a little more room for herself, as she sat squeezed between Polly and Naomer, gave a pleasant sigh and closed her eyes. Then she gave a yelp:

"Wow! Naomer!"

"Well, eef you deeg your elbow in my ribs, I dig my elbow in your ribs—see?" grinned Morcove's roguish one.

"It is most untwue to say that I was digging you in the wibs!" protested Paula. "I was merely indicating a slight desire to have the amount of space to which I am entitled—yes, wather! At the pwesent moment——"

"Will you let me get to sleep?" cried Polly, causing many an amused grin in the darkness. "What a trial you are, Paula!"

"Twial, bai Jove! I am just as dewious as you, Polly, deah, to west my weawy bwain, but——"

"Your what, Paula?"

"My weawy bwain. I don't know who it is tweading on my feet, but——"

At this moment someone in the darkness gave a prodigious snore. It was Naomer.

"Someone has plenty of room, evidently!" commented Polly.

"Yes, wather!"

"You change places with me, Paula, darling," Polly proposed sweetly.

"That'll work much better."

So it did, from Polly's teasing point

of view. No sooner did Paula stand up in the dark and swaying bus than Polly spread herself luxuriously. Paula tried to find the fresh place for herself, and it was not there.

"Polly, deah——"

"Sh! Quiet!" enjoined Polly. "Do be reasonable, Paula! Don't wake poor Naomer!"

Another long-drawn-out snore came from her Serene Highness, and even Miss Redgrave laughed.

"Dweadful, dweadful!" lamented Paula. "Now I wealise I am to be defwauded out of my wight wation of woom. Look heah, geals, where is a geal to sit?"

As it chanced, a big pothole in the road decided that question for the elegant one. The bus gave a very violent bound, and Paula found a seat—on the floor.

"Healp! How many more feet——"

"Dear, dear! Is it Paula making all the commotion?" Polly said, with mock peevishness. "We musn't bring her next time. Sleeping nicely, Naomer, darling?"

"Ooo, yes!" dreamily answered the snorer. "And I dream—I dream I see Paula Creel lying on ze floor!"

"So I am, you wascal, and I pwotest! Heah, healp, let me up! I'm a weck, a wuin!"

"Do keep still, Paula. I am feeling so comfortable now," announced Polly. "But let's spread the rug a bit better, shall we?"

This resulted in poor, teased Paula being absolutely extinguished under a capacious motor-rug which the girls spread over their knees.

The bus bounded and bumped along. Polly and Naomer, who had been so very sleepy, now kept up the liveliest talk, and all the time muffled complainings arose from the floor.

Polly, still taking no notice of Paula, changed the subject.

"I thought the speeches were awfully good—so short! And those lobster patties—delicious!"

"What I enjoyed most of all was see-

ing Zonia again," came Betty's contribution to the talk. "How fond they are of Zonia at Stormwood now! I would like to——"

Bump! went the 'bus at this instant, and half a dozen of them jerked out dismayedly:

"Goodness, what was that?"

Polly lifted her bit of the rug to speak down to Paula:

"Did you feel that, Paula, darling?"

A sound, half groan and half sigh, was the only response. Teasing Polly did not take alarm, however, on Paula's account. It was Polly's firm conviction that Paula, as a matter of fact, had made herself quite comfortable.

Moreover, there was something else about which to feel alarmed, and that was the very erratic and heavy progress of the bus, following on the extra violent bumping of a moment or so ago.

"Why, we are stopping!" exclaimed Miss Redgrave. "It will be a nice thing if we have broken down, all this distance from Morcove!"

"Goodness! We'll have miles to walk, if we have!"

That a plight no less awkward than this had befallen them was soon made evident.

The bus stopped, and the glum-looking driver got down to come round to the rear door and speak with Miss Redgrave.

"Very sorry, miss, but my back axle has gone!"

"And does that mean that we must get out and walk?"

It did.

Less than half-way home, Miss Redgrave and the girls were stranded on the lonely, nightbound road!

CHAPTER 24.

The Man in the Car.

"PAULA! Jump up, Paula, darling!"

"But——"

"We've broken down! We've got to get out and walk!"

"Dweadful, dweadful!" came Paula's lament, as she wriggled up from the floor. "Just as I was feeling weally comfowtable—yes, wather! Walk, did you say?"

"Unless you would rather run!"

"Haow you can be so fwivolous, Polly—— Ah, deah," sighed the languid one, as she let herself be 'hustled out of the derelict bus, "here's a catas-trophe, geals! We shall not be home until midnight, bai Jove!"

"We won't be home till morning, till morning, till morning!" chanted Polly, starting to waltz about with Naomer on the nightbound highway. "We won't be home till mor-or-ning, till daylight doth appear!"

"Who was it who complained of being tired?" smiled Miss Redgrave, turning away from a bit of grave talk with the chauffeur. "Well, girls, there is no help for it. We must tramp along, and, of course, you will keep more or less together."

It was the one bit of counsel that the youthful mistress needed to impart before the wearisome tramp should begin. Miss Redgrave and the girls were not going to push forward on foot, however, before they had lent a hand at getting the derelict car off the roadway.

"It might be as well, young ladies," the chauffeur said, looking grateful at the willingness with which they gathered round to help him. "I don't suppose for a moment there will be another car coming this way to-night. Still, she'll be better out of the way."

The engines were useless, and so it was a case of all combining to push the bus the few yards or so. Thoroughly enjoying the task, the stranded juniors took up their positions, and at a word from the chauffeur they heaved and pushed.

"Hurrah!" Polly must needs shout gaily, as they got the bus to move. "That's the way!"

"Yes, wather!" agreed Paula, standing apart to use her mirror by the light of the stars. "You'll do it, geals!"

Suddenly, when the bus was still

father awkwardly placed for any other traffic that might come along, they all heard the hum of an approaching car.

"Hark!"

It was a motor advancing at a great speed from the direction of Morcove.

The lights of the broken-down bus were still burning. Even so, Miss Redgrave and her girls felt that some warning should be given, if possible.

Another moment, and the roadway just a short distance ahead of them was lit by the wavering light of powerful headlamps. Then the approaching car swung round a bend, and the stranded revellers had the dazzling headlights flooding upon them.

"Whoa—whoa! Look out, there!" they chorused. "We are broken down!"

The car was slowing now, but not as if the driver were willing to pull up altogether.

"Surely, though, he will do that?" exclaimed Betty, moving to one side of the road with her chums. "He will want to know if he can render any assistance."

"Yes, wather!"

On came the car, however, at certainly fifteen miles an hour, until it was within a hundred yards of the stranded bus and its passengers.

Then, to the utter amazement of those standing about in the road, the driver of the car, seeming to see a chance of steering past the derelict quite easily, put on speed.

With a sudden rush, the large motor-car raced by, so swiftly that there were those who had no time to see much of the driver, especially as he was huddling down as if to avoid being noticed.

But Betty and her chums, they saw!

By the light coming from the broken-down bus they glimpsed the motor-driver's face sufficiently well to know him in a flash.

"Mr. Halden!" whispered Polly excitedly. "Oh, I am certain!"

"Yes, wather! Geal—geals——"

"Mr. Halden, from the Old Grange,

yes!" Betty muttered tensely. "And where is he off to, then, at this time of night?"

"Driving away from the Old Grange, not to it," remarked Madge Minden; "and he couldn't even stop to ask if we needed help!"

The few of them who were so suddenly agitated by the knowledge that it was Mr. Halden who was at the wheel turned to gaze after the car as it tore on, the rearlight becoming dimmer and dimmer in the darkness.

After such a startling occurrence as this, it was not surprising that the chums of Study 12 engaged in much whispered talk amongst themselves as they and the rest of the party trudged upon their way to Morcove School.

They had good cause for feeling a degree of agitation which did not trouble the others.

To Miss Redgrave and many of the girls the driver of the car was simply a speed-fiend who had been too selfish to pull up and inquire into their trouble; but Betty & Co. had only needed to recognise the man to have ample reason for feeling very excited.

Mr. Halden! And who else was he but the present tenant of the Old Grange, along with his handsome wife and the girl, Norma Halden—in other words, a man whom they had felt cause for regarding with the greatest suspicion?

"I don't like it! I don't like the look of it all!" exclaimed Polly fretfully. "The car was a closed one, and we could not see if there was anyone riding inside, but I thought it looked as if it were heavily loaded."

"So did I," murmured Tess Tre-lawney. "It's strange he should have a journey to make away from home at this time of night."

"And his driving past so furiously was suspicious, too," added Helen Craig.

"I say——" Polly paused, then exclaimed again: "I say! I suppose Mr. Halden hadn't got Norma and Mrs.

Halden on board that car, and that was why he could not stop?"

Betty pondered this gravely before saying:

"We were told an evening or two ago that Norma had gone away from the Grange, as she had been telegraphed for. If that was a mere falsehood——"

"And we have been greatly in doubt about the Haldens telling us the truth," put in Polly. "With good reason, too! We still call them the Haldens, but only because we simply cannot prove what we suspect, and that is that Mr. and Mrs. Halden are really Mr. and Mrs. Blain."

"Parents of Audrey Blain, the girl who used to be a scholar at Morcove," was Betty's murmured rejoinder. "And now—— Oh, but it is so awfully strange if Audrey herself is really at our school to-day as a 'tweenie'!"

"I tell you, geals, to pprove the twuth of our theowy," Paula now joined in the grave talk, "we shall simply have to wesort to a thumbpwint clue. The thumbpwint, as I have pweviously we-marked——"

"We know you have, Paula," came from Polly testily; "and what is the use of talking about thumbprints? We might get one from the 'tweenie' maid, Florrie Blair; but how on earth could we ever get one from Audrey Blain, to compare the two? You talk nonsense!"

So Paula subsided, and even her more brainy companions felt too baffled to be able to continue the talk.

There was silence amongst that batch of juniors which constituted Betty & Co. whilst the lengthy march continued. For, if the chums could not talk about the mystery that had been puzzling them for many days now, they certainly could not talk of anything else.

Even if there had not been that suspicious encounter with Mr. Halden in his car on the night-bound road, the chums would still have been kept in mind of the mystery. The very road which they were having to tramp was

going to take them close to the Old Grange on their way to Morcove.

In a few minutes they rounded a bend, which enabled them to see the great old house, lying far back from the road in the midst of its spacious grounds.

Eagerly they peered towards it, discerning the great dark bulk of the mansion under the starry sky. Not a light was visible.

Polly suddenly whispered again:

"I say, girls! Supposing we give a sudden hail as we go by—I mean, call out, as if in fun, to Norma? Miss Redgrave will only think it a joke of ours."

"Good wheeze!" Betty instantly answered. "It cannot do any harm, and it might do a world of good. Supposing——"

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove, geals——"

"Supposing Norma did not go away, after all—supposing she is still at the Grange, and not allowed to see us—then it would be fine to let her hear us calling as we pass!"

"We'll do it!" chuckled Polly. "Only wait a minute, until we are a bit nearer!"

The rest of the passengers from the derelict bus had drawn a little in advance of Betty & Co. Taking care not to overtake them just at present, the chums trudged along in silence until they were level with the drive in to the grounds of the Old Grange.

Then, with a suddenness that gave Miss Redgrave and the others quite a start, there went up a loud and cheery hail:

"Norma! Coc-ee, Nor-ma! Norma! Hallo-ee, Norma!"

Far and wide, in the silence of the night, the appealing cries rang out, whilst those who voiced them were all eyes for the distant mansion.

Miss Redgrave looked round.

"Whatever are you girls up to?" she laughed. "Norma, over there in her home, is probably asleep by now. Mr. and Mrs. Halden would not like it."

The chums had no answer to this remonstrance, which was only what they

expected. Nor, of course, could they repeat the outcry, dearly as they longed to do so.

For as long as possible they still gazed towards the night-enshrouded mansion, and still no light was visible.

"She cannot be there," was Betty's troubled murmur at last, "or surely she would have come to her window, and we would have seen a light!"

CHAPTER 25.

The Captive.

NORMA HALDEN sharply lifted herself up in bed.

What was that she had heard just then? Wonder of wonders, a loud call in the darkness—her own name, called by several girls in chorus!

Or had she only imagined it? Some cruel trick of the fancy, was it, due to her brain being at once very tired and yet very excited?

This attic bed-room, in which she was nothing better than a prisoner, under lock and key, was dark as midnight. Her captors had shown sufficient mercy towards her, however, as to leave her provided with a candle and matches, and no sooner had she softly slid from the bed than she struck a light and set it to the candle's wick.

Then she stood stock-still, except that her head moved with her excited glancing from the shuttered window to the locked door, and then back to the shuttered window.

Some of the Morcove girls, out of doors at this late hour, and calling her by name? But how could that be possible? Past eleven o'clock, and surely all Morcove School had gone to its repose fully an hour ago?

"No, it must have been my imagination," she sadly concluded. "I have been so longing for the sound of their voices again, it has made me hear them in fancy, just as I was nearly asleep. And yet—Hark!"

It was no repetition of the call from

out of doors that put her on the alert again. If only it could have been! But poor Norma was giving heed now to sounds inside the great old house.

Someone coming up the stairs to the attic!

She could hear the creaking of shabby timbers, a sound that had come to be associated with every visit her captors paid her.

Quick as a flash, she put out the light and silently got back to bed. For she had instantly realised that either Mrs. Halden or old Hannah was going to look in upon her, to see if she had heard that strange cry from not far off in the darkness.

There had been a cry, then! That was Norma's agitating conviction as she snuggled down and closed her eyes, to sham sleep. And no wonder that her captors, hearing it, had been rendered uneasy!

Suddenly the hasp of the lock rasped back, and then the stout old door was opened very cautiously. The person who stole in did so in groping darkness, but Norma took care to keep her eyes shut, lest the sudden flash of an electric torch should take her by surprise.

Nor was it more than a moment or so before an electric torch was switched on, although the person carrying it directed the bright beam away from the bed.

It was Mrs. Halden who stood just inside the doorway, her dressing-gown and slippers telling how she had got up from her own bed because of that startling cry in the night.

Pale and stern, she gazed at the apparently sleeping girl, and listened to her steady breathing.

At last Mrs. Halden whispered towards the bed:

"Norma!"

The girl gave a loud sigh and a slight movement, as if she were inclined to wake out of heavy sleep.

"Norma, you are shamming! Answer me!" the lady exclaimed fiercely.

Then Norma cleverly gave a violent

start, and sat up, guarding her eyes against the light.

"Who—what——"

"Were you really asleep when I came in?" asked Mrs. Halden, standing closer.

"Why?" Norma returned blankly. "You wouldn't ask if you knew what bad nights I have had up till now! To keep me shut up in this room, as you have done, ever since—oh, it seems weeks ago!"

"It is nothing of the sort, Norma. But it may be weeks before you go free, and you have only yourself to blame!" was the heartless exclamation. "You are not coming to any harm, so don't pretend you are!"

"I wonder how many people would say that this is treating me fairly, anyhow?" the girl answered bitterly. "Surely you were unkind enough when you stopped my friendship with those Morcove girls? As for this—this keeping me a close prisoner, it is cruel of you!"

Mrs. Halden shrugged her shoulders, and drew off to the door.

"You cannot be trusted to promise not to talk, Norma, and so——"

"I would not make any promise for you to trust me to keep or not!" the girl declared spiritedly. "Now that I know that you and Mr. Halden are doing things outside the law, I mean to make it known as soon as I get the chance!"

"No doubt!" smiled Mrs. Halden, from the doorway. Convinced now that the girl could not have heard the cry just now, but had been fast asleep, she was now inclined to be more mocking than harsh. "Well, go to sleep again, Norma, and I hope you have pleasant dreams!"

Perhaps it was Norma's dignified silence that stung Mrs. Halden out of the better humour which she had assumed. It may easily have been so, for the lady was one whose nature was both proud and passionate. In any case, she suddenly came away from the door,

the light of the torch revealing a handsome face distorted with rage.

"You defiant little minx!" was her fierce outburst, and with one hand she seized poor Norma by the shoulder and shook her violently where she lay in bed.

"When I think what your inquisitiveness may yet cost us," Mrs. Halden seethed on—"oh, I could do something to you that you would not soon forget! If ever we are taken by the police, it will be all your fault! You little——"

"Oh, stop! You are hurting me!"

"Nothing to what I would like to do, so be warned! Lie there!" came the passionate injunction, whilst Mrs. Halden flung the girl down upon her bed again. "And remember, if ever you make a sound, if this place does not content you, we know of another that you will like still less!"

Striding away to the door, the impassioned woman passed out. Norma was sobbing now, with her face pressed to the pillow. Mrs. Halden, unmoved by the distressing sounds, drew the door shut and locked it, then descended the attic stairs.

On a landing below she encountered old Hannah, hovering there as if she had come from her bed-room in case she might be wanted.

"It is all right, Hannah," the once wealthy lady said, with enforced calmness. "You heard that noise outside the house, did you, and feared that Norma might be trying to answer?"

"Yes, mum."

"The girl must have been asleep. All the same, it angers me, Hannah, to think that some of those Morcove scholars have been out and about at this time of night. How often does that sort of thing occur?"

She added tensely:

"And to-night my husband has taken another load away in the car! It is to be hoped that he was not seen by the girls. As for their calling out to Norma——"

"It was only their impudence, I expect, mum."

"Impudence, yes!" Mrs. Halden nodded angrily. "Just as Norma herself likes to show her impudence at times! Hannah, when I think of that girl having to be looked after by us, whilst my own daughter, one I reared in the lap of luxury, is forced to play the part of a common servant at the school, I tell you it maddens me!"

"Well, well, mum," murmured Hannah, who knew how to appease the lady's violent moods, "there is this about it—I am sure Miss Audrey enjoys it in a way. She always was such a daring one, Miss Audrey was!"

"That may be true enough!" Mrs. Halden nodded sullenly. "All the same, it seems only right that for every indignity my own girl has to suffer Norma should be made to suffer in return—and so she shall!"

For a moment, the haughty woman stood looking up the attic stairs with intense ferocity. Then, with another effort at dignified composure, she gave a shrug and moved away.

"Good-night, Hannah!"

"Good-night, mum!"

And the great old house would have been as silent as a tomb after that but for the faint sounds of piteous grief that came from the hapless prisoner in her pitch-dark attic.

CHAPTER 26.

Cora is Off Again.

"WHERE'S Florrie Blair, then, that she isn't on duty this morning?"

Cora Grandways asked the question in her false-sweet way at breakfast-time a few mornings later.

Every meal-time at Morcove School called for the presence of a good many maids in the dining-hall, and Florrie Blair had been regularly waiting at table for a week past. So Cora felt that it was quite safe to put the question, since other scholars must have marked Florrie's absence this morning.

"Florrie? She's been given the day off," promptly answered the maid whom Cora had addressed. "We have a whole day each once a month, miss."

"But Florrie hasn't been here a month?"

"No, miss. But as she is so young and new to the work, Miss Somerfield thought a day off now might seem a nice break."

"Oh, I see!"

Cora went on with her breakfast then, with every sign of having merely asked the questions casually, and of not being the least bit further concerned.

In secret, however, her crafty mind was running entirely upon Florrie Blair.

"Florrie Blair, indeed! Ha, ha!" Cora was chuckling to herself. "What a joke it is!"

Never in her life had Cora been as proud of herself as she was these days.

Very sweet to her had been the malicious triumph of finding out the whole mystery surrounding the return of Audrey Blain to Morcove School in the guise of a demure "tweenie."

Nor had the mere joy of finding out another's secret been Cora's only reward for the prying to which she had stooped.

Hidden away in her study cupboard were some of the loveliest silken articles and frock-lengths that Audrey had given Cora as a present, in return for her silence.

Above all, at a time when Cora had been simply starving for the companionship of a kindred spirit, she had been able to fall back on Audrey as a kind of crony in secret. That was just splendid!

As Florrie Blair, the "tweenie," it was impossible, of course, to associate with her. But there were times when the impostor could abandon that role, in secret, just as easily as she could take off cap and apron, and then it was Cora's delight to find that Audrey was still—Audrey! Just Cora's sort, even

as Audrey had been in the days before she was expelled.

So this morning what Cora began to wonder was whether she could have a bit of a "spree" with Audrey on the quiet, since it was that girl's day off and a "halfer" for the scholars.

Nothing could be done during the morning, except work in class, but as soon as midday dinner was over, what about a cautious visit to the Old Grange, to see if Morcove's model "tweenie" were not spending the day off there, at her parents' home?

"That's the idea!" Cora nodded to herself, after the school had risen from breakfast. "It's going to be a wet day, too, so I'm for a bit of fun with Audrey in the safety of that old country house, instead of moping about at the school!"

Sure enough, rain came on at the time which almost invariably means a "soaker"—midday.

By two o'clock some scores of macs had been donned by restive scholars who were cheerily resolved to brave the elements, a thing they were always encouraged to do at Morcove. If there could be no outdoor games, there could at least be a vigorous tramp in the rain.

So Cora was by no means drawing attention upon herself when she, amply protected against the rain, set forth all alone from the schoolhouse.

Hurriedly she tramped along, reviling the bad day. She was not an all-weather girl, by any means. Her love of finery made her detest the necessity of donning a waterproof and stout shoes. But she felt perfectly sure that this afternoon's trudge through the rain would not be for nothing. She and Audrey together, they would know how to amuse themselves!

More desolate than ever looked the old country house as Cora stepped towards it up the rain-soaked drive, under dripping trees. She could easily believe that the Blains were only renting the place because it was just suited to the daring game they were playing.

Smuggling! Doing a roaring trade in costly silks that were smuggled into the country, the stuff being landed at Gull Island by boats from abroad, and then brought over to this lonely country house, for the Blains to dispose of secretly. That was the game they were at!

"I have heard dad say there are none so likely to stoop to wrong-doing as grand people who have fallen upon evil times," Cora was thinking, as she came to the porch, "and the Blains are a case in point!"

Boldly she rang the porch-bell, in no dread of the door being opened by Mrs. Bain or old Hannah. They and Mr. Blain knew quite well that she, Cora Grandways, was in the secret, and had no intention of giving it away. Her silence was being called friendship towards Audrey, "for old times' sake," a bit of fiction that often caused Cora to grin these days.

As it happened, Audrey herself answered the ring at the bell, and in the very instant that she opened the door she was revealed as a girl absolutely at ease.

Not the least bit taken aback by the sight of her former schoolmate, she even had it in her to give a saucy smile.

"Hallo, Cora! What does this mean?"

"Thought I'd give you a call, guessing that it was your 'at-home' day!" grinned back Cora, quickly stepping into the hall. "A beastly day it is, too!"

"I know, a sickener!" agreed Audrey, shutting the door and putting it on the chain. "The mater and old Hannah were both furious at having to slop out, shopping."

"Oh, then you've got the house to yourself?" chuckled Cora, hurriedly divesting herself of her hat and mac. "Audrey, I feel damp and horribly untidy, especially with you looking as you do!"

Then the girl who was Morcove's

model "tweenie" glanced herself down and smiled. She was really exquisitely dressed. Her afternoon frock, with stockings and shoes to match, were such as she might have worn for going to a party.

"It's a welcome change, Cora, after being a skivvy all the week!"

"Must be, Audrey! And I don't mind saying it's a change for me to get away from the hateful old school. That's why I came. I guessed that you would be your real self to-day, and only too glad to have a bit of company."

"So I am!" purred Audrey. "You have been such a sport, to promise to say nothing to anyone! Come upstairs, and if you'd like to change, you can."

Then the pair of them scampered up the broad staircase to a first-floor room. Audrey flung open the door, and Cora, as she was waved into the apartment, caught her breath.

"My word, Audrey! This room yours?"

"Rather different from my servant's room at the school, eh?"

"You're the limit, as you always were!" Cora grinned, crossing over to a dressing-table, on which were set silver-backed brushes and other costly-toilet appointments. "You and your people ought never to have come down in the world."

"Oh, well, we shall get up again, if—if nothing happens!" Audrey said, with all her amazing airiness, whilst she stepped to a wardrobe and opened it.

"Cora, would you like to put this on, if you feel rather untidy after the rain? You can have it to keep, if you like."

The girl who was still a scholar at Morcove took a quick step to seize the costly silk frock.

"It's one of them, Audrey?"

"Of course! My people can't keep me in frocks like that these days, Cora—at least, not by buying them! Even your people would pull a face at the price a frock like that makes in town."

Cora nodded, as if she could quite believe that, whilst she stood eyeing and fingering the rich frock covetously.

Then suddenly, with a delighted, reckless laugh, she started to take off her own frock, to change into this other.

"How lovely! What a spree this is!" she exulted, as soon as the smuggled frock had been put on. "Oh, Audrey, I do love being up to a game on the quiet!"

Audrey came away from the dressing-table with a box of cigarettes.

"I'm having one, so don't be afraid!" she smiled, and next second both girls had lit up.

Then, whilst they whiffed at the mild Virginians, they either sat about or else admired themselves in the room's mirrors, talking of past days and making sneering allusions to Betty & Co.

The fact that Study 12's suspicions had come to naught delighted Cora no less than it pleased Audrey. Indeed, Cora would have been ready to shield the Blains in their daring scheme if only because it seemed like scoring off the Study 12 coterie.

"Come downstairs, and I'll put the kettle on for an early tea!" Audrey said blithely at last. "You can stay on until about five, Cora. Then you must go."

"Right-oh! My word, though, how it's pouring now!" Cora remarked, glancing out of the window. "Supposing I hadn't turned up, Audrey, wouldn't you have had an awful hump, absolutely alone in this gloomy old place?"

Audrey said nothing in answer just then. She was smiling in an amused way, however, as she scampered downstairs with Cora, and no sooner were they in a room where they would be having tea than she quietly exclaimed:

"Supposing I told you I would not have been all alone, Cora, even if you had not turned up?"

Cora stared.

"How do you mean, Audrey? If

your mater and old Hannah are away—and your pater is not about, is he?”

“You seem to be forgetting Norma!” laughed the daughter of Mrs. Blain.

“Norma? But didn’t you say something about her having gone away?”

“That was only a blind!” airily admitted Audrey. “As a matter of fact—and I am sure there is no harm in telling you—Norma is under lock and key upstairs!”

“She is?” was Cora’s incredulous cry. “Being kept a—a prisoner all this time? My word, Audrey!”

“Oh, it’s all right! She is not suffering the least harm, of course,” smiled the other girl.

“But how is it that she is so quiet? I haven’t heard a sound. I would never have dreamed that——”

“Norma is in an attic, right at the top of the house,” Audrey interrupted coolly, “and by now she knows that it is worse than useless to give any trouble. If you hadn’t turned up, I would have gone up to the attic and talked with her, just for fun!”

“Then let’s do that together—oh, I’d love it!” Cora now cried out, bringing her hands together with a little clap of delight. “I’m no friend of Norma’s, you may be sure, Audrey. I owe her one for the way she put on airs when I first met her. I’d love to have the laugh of her now!”

“Well, we’ll see!” smiled Audrey, going out to the kitchen to get the kettle on.

CHAPTER 27.

A Dash for Freedom.

FOR the next half-hour Cora was simply brimming over with a sort of false vivacity, the only vivacity she ever knew.

The prospect of being given a gloat-ing sight of a girl whom she disliked, one who was having a rough time of it at the hands of the Blains, ministered to Cora’s spiteful nature.

As for Audrey, not a minute passed but what in Cora’s eyes she was more and more the Audrey of the old days at Morcove.

The very way in which she queened it at the tea-table, her honeyed tone, and her trick of sitting in silence now and then, smiling at thoughts which could only be cruel ones—all this showed how little changed Audrey was.

If she had changed at all, it was only to become like her once “swagger” parents, more reckless than ever.

“Do let’s go up now!” implored Cora, almost licking her lips with pleasurable anticipation. “We can go in to Norma and tease her, Audrey?”

“Oh, I don’t know about that!” smiled Audrey, getting up to lead the way to the attics. “If you hadn’t turned up, I would have merely talked with her through the locked door.”

“But there are two of us now, Audrey! I mean to say, surely there’s no risk? Audrey, you must let me see her!” cajoled the girl who gloried in others’ misery. “There is something so nice in being able to—to tease a girl!”

Audrey smiled sideways upon her companion as they ascended the stairs.

“You don’t mean to forget what a game we had with one and another of those Study 12 girls more than once,” she purred—“Paula in particular! It used to be great fun, certainly, getting hold of Paula and tormenting her. Now this way,” she added, going along an upper landing, to the foot of a further flight of stairs. “The attics are just above us.”

A few moments later, with Audrey giving an indulgent sort of smile, Cora tapped at the captive’s locked door, and called out:

“Hallo, in there! How is Norma this afternoon? Ha, ha, ha!”

There was no response, and both girls quickly bridled at this dignified silence on the part of the prisoner.

“It hasn’t broken her spirit, Audrey, that’s evident.”

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Audrey,

"Just what my mother was saying a while ago," muttered Mrs. Blain's beautiful daughter, becoming tight-lipped. "If I had my way——"

"Well, you can have your own way, Audrey, just for this afternoon! Go on—I would!" urged Cora, nudging her companion. "Do—do unlock the door, and let us both go in! It's safe enough!"

Safe or not, Audrey was suddenly of a mind to gratify the whim. Her hand went to the key and turned it back, and then she opened the door and stalked in haughtily.

Close after her followed Cora, and a mocking, spiteful pair they made, standing to gloat over poor Norma in her sad plight.

The shuttered window excluded all light from that direction, and all they had to see by was the little that came in at the doorway.

Norma was sitting by a small table, and Cora thought it a huge joke to say at once:

"Stand up in the presence of your betters, Norma! Any complaints to make? He, he, he!"

"Sulking!" Audrey commented with a cruel smile.

"Sorry I couldn't bring Betty & Co. to visit you!" jeered Cora. "The fact is, however, I am not on the best of terms with those girls!"

Norma still let stony silence answer the goading talk, and now Cora walked all round the stoical captive, making further taunting remarks:

"She could do with a new frock, Audrey, one of the sort your parents import! He, he, he! So that's the bed where she sleeps! Good enough, too, for such a—— My goodness, Audrey!"

"Yes, look out, she'll be off!" came in a gasping voice from Audrey.

She suddenly found Norma making a dash for the open door, and herself the only one to prevent the escape.

"Cora, quick!"

"All right, hold her!" panted Cora, darting across to lend a hand

But she was too late!

For even less than a second had Audrey been able to grapple with the would-be fugitive. The long-pent-up anger in Norma was a force before which Audrey, the frail, was instantly swept aside.

That girl, indeed, was sent spinning, and Norma, after darting past the door, would have been able to flash round, pull it shut, and turn the key, only there was Cora with whom to reckon.

But Norma, in any case, had got out of the room, and—oh, the frantic relief it meant to her, poor girl!

Wildly she started to race down the stairs, with the two other girls already starting in pursuit. They were so close upon her heels that she could hear every word of wild dismay that was jerked from their lips.

Could she hope, then, to get clear of the house?

She would have a good try, anyhow! Only let her gain the open door—the back way out, that was best—and then——

At this thrilling moment, something happened that threw her into no less alarm than it threw her pursuers.

A loud peal at the front-door bell!

For only an instant did Norma pull up; then she fled on down through the house, desperately resolved to take her chance. Never mind who was at the front door, she would get away from the back!

But Audrey and Cora, they took more than a moment to get over the panic into which that unexpected ring at the bell had thrown them. Whilst Norma dashed on downstairs, the two guilty-minded girls stood as if petrified.

"My goodness," Audrey gasped out, after a moment or so, "we have done it now! That must be my mater, back already, and Norma has got away! Cora, what shall we do? It must be my mother!"

"No, it isn't!" was Cora's equally excited whisper, after she had peered through a front landing window. "It is Betty Barton, with her chums!"

CHAPTER 28.

Hide and Seek.

"YES, wather!" Paula Creel was saying at this very moment, as she stood under cover from the rain in the porch of the lonely country house. "Daring does it, geals! We'll see what that wing at the bell wproduces!"

"Hark!"

They all listened intently.

Not a sound came from inside the house. All that the girls heard was the depressing swish of the rain and the gurgle of one or two choked water-pipes.

"Doesn't look as if the ring at the bell is going to produce much!" was Betty's grimly smiling comment. "Is there no one at home?"

"Try again, Betty!"

"Yes, wather! I am sure it was a bwilliant inspiwation, geals, to——"

Ting-linkle, ting-linkle! swung the old-fashioned bell, as Betty again pulled at the rusty chain.

"Sh! I think I hear——"

"So do I—and I!" burst in whispers from several of the girls, who, like Betty, were listening again. "Someone is at home—must be!"

"Then they can't very well refuse to answer the door," Polly muttered. "Well, girls, remember, we have called to ask if we may put up whilst the rain is so very heavy."

"Yes, wather!" beamed Paula. "And, weally, it is the first time in my expewience that wain—bothah it—has served a useful purpose, bai Jove! Dweadful downpour just at pwesent! Howevah——"

"Listen! They should have answered the door by now!" Polly exclaimed impatiently. "Oh, let's jolly well try 'em again!" she exploded, and gave a good tug at the bell-pull herself.

Ting-linkle, ting-linkle, linkle, linkle! So the extra loud peal gradually died away, and still no one came.

Nor was that surprising, when the only inmates of the house at this moment were Cora and Audrey!

Norma, never dreaming who was at the front door, had fled out by one at the back of the house.

As for the couple who had been going to race after her, and never give up the race until they had recaptured her, they were at their wits' ends.

What, indeed, were they to do, since neither girl dare let herself be seen by Betty & Co.?

Audrey was not dressed as the "tweenie" of Morcove School. In any case, how could she plausibly account for being at the Old Grange on her day out?

And Cora—how could Cora possibly account for her presence in the place?

The wild idea seized her that she might plead the deluge. It had been more than her mac could hold out against, and she had been forced to run here for shelter and a change. But as she despairingly realised there was no one with her except Audrey, and Audrey must not be disclosed as the person who admitted her!

"It's that back door I am thinking about," Audrey whispered, her face as white as chalk. "The girls might go away, after getting no answer, only the back door is open!"

Loudly it was banging about in the wind, proving that Norma had neglected to slam it behind her, and as both guilt-stricken girls gave heed to the noise, they felt sure it was but a question of moments before Betty & Co. would be there at the back door, making bold to enter.

"Hide! We must hide!" Cora urged frantically. "Audrey, you know the house! Show me where I can hide! I wouldn't have those girls find me——"

"Quiet!" hissed Audrey. "Listen! Yes, there they are, round at the back door! Come away, then! Come up to the attics!"

Even as they breathlessly retreated upstairs, there came a cautious murmur which the Morcove chums had made bold to send into the silent house, now that they were grouped at the back door:

"Is anyone at home? May we come in out of the rain?"

Cora made signs to Audrey that she was going to slip down to the room in which she had changed out of her school frock. If she could only get back into her proper clothes, it would not matter so much if she were discovered by the other Morcovians. She could pitch some tale about having been driven to seek shelter from the rain.

But Audrey excitably gestured that it was too late to venture down into that room. Betty & Co., imagining that the house was temporarily deserted, might already be making bold to hunt around!

The very attic which had been poor Norma's prison, with its shuttered windows, was close at hand, and Audrey waved to her equally panicky companion:

"In there!"

Nor was Cora more than a second in flashing into the dark interior. She, too, now realised that it was the best thing to do. Audrey and she must lock themselves in this, the very remotest room in the house.

Audrey fully intended to nip in after the other girl, but she had first to get the key from the lock on the outer side of the door, so that it could be used from the inside. She was starting to do this, when she took fright at a murmur of voices from below. It made her think that Betty & Co. were on the way upstairs.

In greater panic than ever, Audrey pulled the door shut, turned the key and pocketed it, then flitted away.

Somehow, at that moment, it had seemed safer, from her own point of view, to do that, than to join Cora in the attic, even if there had been time to do so.

Silently she crept away, thankful that she had not got herself boxed up in that attic with Cora, since there was no telling to what lengths Betty & Co. might go. It all depended on how daring they might have been rendered by their suspicions in regard to Norma's fate.

But Betty & Co., uneasy though they were as to what had really become of Norma, were not going to act with the licence that Audrey feared.

"It is no use, girls, we must not go through the house!" Betty herself was exclaiming despairingly at this moment, as they crowded together just inside the back door. "We must play fair, and no one would say we are entitled to search the place."

"I suppose not," sighed Polly. "But what a chance it is! No one at home, and we found this back door wide open!"

"We were quite entitled to try the ruse of turning up in the rain to ask for shelter, so as to find out all we could by the way Mrs. Halden treated us, and by keeping our eyes and ears open," remarked Madge, "but— No, Betty is right!"

"You see, girls," argued Betty, "we've only suspicions to go upon, a theory that some people would most likely call a wild one. I'm as much tempted as you are, only—"

"We'll go—we must!" agreed Helen, with a regretful nod. "Searching a house without proper authority is a thing we cannot do!"

Then Polly had one of her inspirations.

"But look here!" she burst out, just as they were flung out. "Surely there is no harm in our calling Norma's name, like we did the other night?"

"Bai Jove!"

"Ooo, yes; queek—queek!" clamoured Naomer. "Eef she is in the house, zen she will call out!"

Dejected faces had already lit up at the suggestion. Betty closed the outer door, to shut out the noise of the wind and rain, and then a subdued call was voiced by several of them:

"Norma! Are you in the house, Norma?"

No answer.

"Louder next time!" urged Polly.

"One jolly good shout!"

"Yes, wather! No harm done, anyhow, zeals!"

And they fairly shouted, so that the appeal rang through the old house from cellar to garret.

"Norma! Morcove calling! Norma!"

Still not a sound came back.

"That settles it," sighed Polly. "She can't be anywhere about the place, and so, after all, I suppose she really did go away, as Mrs. Halden said!"

The others nodded, forced as they were to fall back on this belief.

"Well, it's a great relief, too!"

"Yes, wather!" Paula took up Betty, as they were passing out. "Good gwacious, geals, it would have been dweadful to find that the deah geal had pewhaps been kept pwisoner in the house!"

"Must we go back to the school, though, at once?" exclaimed Polly. "It does seem——"

"No, we can wait about under cover at the front porch until someone does turn up!" was the remark from Betty which met with delighted approval. "No harm in that, either!"

"Wather not, bai Jove! Far bettah, geals, than twooping home whilst the wain is pouwing down like this!"

So, leaving the unsheltered back door just as they had found it, slightly ajar, they went round to the roomy porch at the front of the house and clustered there.

Meantime, whilst Cora Grandways, in the dark attic, was simply standing about, heart in mouth, with the door locked upon her, Audrey was agitatedly preparing for a dash from the house, through the rain.

It was the only thing to do!

So she was saying to herself as she shakily donned the outdoor things.

It was all up now with the daring scheme out of which her parents had been reaping such a golden harvest. For Norma was at large, even now racing as hard as she could go—was there any doubt?—for Morcove School.

The one thing to be thankful about in the midst of the great catastrophe was that Betty & Co. had not dared to explore the apparently deserted house.

It meant that, after all, there might yet be a chance to slip away and fall in with her mother and old Hannah. As for Cora— Bother Cora! One couldn't worry about her!

Little Betty & Co. imagined, as they stood chatting in the front porch, that Audrey Blain could hear their subdued voices as she completed her hasty preparations for flight!

Yet so it was, and when the moment came she felt grateful to those murmurs. They told her just where the girls were located.

Silently she crept down the old staircase and stole to the back regions on the ground floor. A few moments more, and she was at the back door that was swinging to and fro in the wind.

She paused, stood nervously hesitant. Supposing, just as she darted outside one of the Morcove girls came round from the front?

Should she risk it? She must! The game was up, and those who did not fly whilst there was still a chance to do so would only be taken in the end—by the police!

"Now!" she suddenly urged herself, through clenched teeth.

And next second the pelting rain was lashing upon her fleeing figure, even as it had lashed down upon Norma when she came darting out by that same door, only a few minutes since.

CHAPTER 29.

All's Over, Unless——

ONLY a few minutes since, but what those few minutes were to cost Audrey and her parents!

So, at least, Audrey herself was thinking, as she went in full flight from the lonely house.

Her parents' roaring trade in smuggled silks must end now. It was all up with the daring scheme that had brought so much money rolling in. The best that could be hoped for now was that she and they would get clear

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of the district before a hue and cry
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And all this simply because Norma
had escaped from the attic, or, rather,
because she, Audrey, along with Cora
and ways, had rashly given the girl
the chance to escape.

Audrey could imagine how furious
her mother and father would be with
her.

The scheme had been going on splen-
didly, and might have been worked for
weeks and months, if only the grand
smash had not come about like this!

Fleeing through the pelting rain
across the grounds behind the house,
Audrey suddenly cast one anxious
glance behind her.

She dreaded the sight of some of the
Morcove girls in hot pursuit, but there
was no sign of them. Evidently they
were still under cover in the front
porch, and so she was all right just at
present.

"Yet what am I to do? Which way
now?" she frantically asked herself,
after slipping out through an old gate-
way into a ragged lane. "I've got to
find mother and old Hannah! I must
find them, or I shan't see them again
until the police have taken them and
me!"

How long the panicky girl might
have been compelled to stand crazily
uncertain which way to go there is no
telling, for at that moment her wild
eyes took note of something that gave
her a sudden throb of hope.

A girl's footprints in the muddy lane,
footprints made so recently that there
had been no time for the heavy rain to
wash them out!

Was there any doubt, then, that they
were Norma's?

She had fled in this direction, and
so perhaps she could be followed and
recaptured!

Audrey tore on again after that,
without another thought of trying to
fall in with her mother and old
Hannah. To go after Norma and over-
take her, that was the better plan by a
thousand times.

Only to see what plain tracks the

fugitive had left, thanks to the rain,
made Audrey's brain chaotic with re-
newed hope.

She felt that the luck was turning
in her and her people's favour again.

If only Norma could be retaken, then
the situation would be entirely saved.

And now, to spur on Audrey faster
than ever, there was the sudden
thought that Norma could not have
been equal to much hard running. She
had been kept indoors for several days
without exercise, and misery and
anxiety must have enfeebled her. That
few minutes' start did not count for so
much, after all, when the girl had to
run all the way to Morcove!

Clear as ever the tracks held out,
leading desperate Audrey along the
same unfrequented lanes by which she
had always made her secret journeys
to and from the school.

Every time she went dashing round
a bend in the path, she had the yearn-
ing thought: If only this turning a
corner could show her Norma, running
on at her last gasp!

And suddenly that very wish of
Audrey's was granted!

She flew breathlessly round one
sharp bend in the lonely lane, to see
Norma labouring on, obviously calling
on her last ounce of strength for the
flight.

Audrey herself tried to put on speed,
but she had already reached the limit.
Even so, she felt sure of gaining on the
fugitive. It was only a case of run-
ning her down and then overcoming
her somehow, whilst they were still in
the depths of this desolate, rain-swept
wilderness.

Suddenly, however, Norma looked
back.

At sight of Audrey in pursuit, she
managed to run faster. Not only so,
she struck aside from the lane, to go
dashing across some rough ground,
then through a plantation, and on
across a big field.

Audrey kept up the chase, and felt
she was even gaining a little. But she
realised that Norma was now trying to
reach the main road, in the hope of

encountering someone who would befriend her.

Would she do that—would she?

Or would the main road on such a drenching day be as deserted as the lanes?

With a desperate reliance upon luck, Audrey resolved that nothing should make her turn back except the sight of Norma with help at hand.

Through the driving rain this flight and pursuit continued. Norma breathlessly reached the main road, and still ran, making for Morcove. But closer and closer behind her came Audrey, with far greater strength for keeping up the race.

At last the foremost girl seemed to realise that she could not go a step further, but must stand and make a fight of it.

No help was in sight. The one building alongside the lengthy stretch of open road was but an old farmshed. Norma had given up when she was close enough to this building to discover that it was deserted. She had desperately hoped that there might be a man working about the place.

And now Audrey came dashing straight at the girl who was at bay.

"Got you!"

With that one panted exclamation, Audrey ran in upon Norma and grappled with her, feeling she had the will and the strength to drag her all the way back, if needs be. In any case, the girl must be got away from the road before someone came along.

"Give in to me, Norma! You had better!"

"I won't—I won't! Let go!" was Norma's breathless protest, whilst she struggled with what little strength remained to her. "I'll call for help!"

"You do, Norma!"

"Help, help!" the poor exhausted girl tried to cry aloud, but her weak voice sounded as nothing in the wind and rain.

To her sudden intense joy, however, at this very moment she beheld two figures mistily approaching through the downpour.

Still tussling with Audrey, she gasped out another word or two:

"Let me go, or it will be worse for you! There are people coming! They'll stand by me!"

"What! Where?" burst from Audrey in renewed dismay, but next second she was clutching on to her captive as fiercely as ever.

"Those two persons won't stand by you, Norma—not likely! They are my own mother and old Hannah!"

The words were barely voiced before Norma, with another wild glance at the onrushing couple, gave a moaning sob of despair and became a dead weight in Audrey's arms.

Mrs. Blain and Hannah came rushing up, looking terrified at the scene upon which they had come on their walk back from the shopping.

"Audrey!" gasped the girl's mother in utter consternation. "Oh, what is this? What has happened back at the house?"

"She—she got away, mother! I'll explain when there is time!" Audrey panted. "Anyhow, I gave chase and caught her again, so we can take her back. But not now—not now, mother! The Morcove girls are hanging about outside the house!"

"And they never saw the girl escape?"

"No! It—it was lucky for us. If only we can get her back, we shall be quite safe, after all!"

Old Hannah had her wits about her. Quickly she handed Mrs. Blain one or two parcels to hold, then took the swooning girl from Audrey, and carried her easily to the shelter of the way-side shed.

"Yes, that's best for the present," whispered Mrs. Blain, as she and Audrey hastily followed. "It will give us time to think. Oh, Audrey, if the girl had got away to Morcove School!"

"I know, mother; it would have been all up with us, then," the daughter shakily answered. "Don't worry, though. If we can stay here——"

They were all inside the shed by now. Like many buildings of its kind, its

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back was to the road, whilst the semi-
front looked out on to a broad
field, adapting the place as a shelter
for cattle in the winter-time. Mrs.
Blain gave an eye to Norma, who
showed no sign of rallying.

"No one passing on the road would
suspect that we are here," whispered
Audrey, "so we can wait."

"We must!" muttered her mother
travely. "As you say, we might run
into some of those Morcove girls. But
what is it now, Audrey?"

That girl took her eye away from a
cranny in the tarred timbers of the
shed. She looked wild-eyed with fright.

"My goodness, mother! Betty
Horton and the rest are even now in
sight, and they are all running this
way hard!"

CHAPTER 30.

So Near, and Yet—

BEAUTIFUL Mrs. Blain remained as
cool as she always did in moments
of emergency.

"Audrey," she said, "you mustn't be
seen here—nor, of course, must Norma."

She thought for one moment, but be-
fore any of her companions could say
anything, a plan had come into her
mind.

"Norma is too heavy for Audrey to
manage, but you can carry her,
Hannah," she said. "And now that we
know the Morcove girls are here, it will
be safe for you to go straight back to
the Grange."

"It will be safe for us all to go back
home once the Morcove girls run past
this barn," put in Audrey.

"If they run past," was her mother's
warning reply.

"Of course they will," Hannah stated
emphatically. "There's nothing to
make them want to look in this old
barn. They're hurrying back to Mor-
cove to get out of the rain."

"I'm taking no chances," declared
Mrs. Blain. "Hannah, pick Norma up.
Take her outside, and you, Audrey, I
want you to go, too—"

"But we'll be seen," gasped Audrey.

Her mother shook her head.

"Not if you listen quietly. You'll
hear the girls' footsteps and be able to
tell which way they're going. If you're
quick you'll be able to keep the barn
between you and the girls, whether they
run on down the road, or suddenly de-
cide to investigate this shed."

The others hesitated.

"Come on, do what I tell you," said
Mrs. Blain authoritatively to her
daughter and her servant. "If those
Morcove girls run on down the lane,
then I'll join you and we'll return to
the Grange together. If they come to
the shed they must only find me here.
I'll invent some excuse, and I'll delay
them whilst you get away—back to the
Grange."

Only then did Audrey and Hannah
see the wisdom of Mrs. Blain's plan,
and they had to act quickly because
the footsteps of the Morcove girls
sounded very near to the road near the
barn already.

Hannah picked up Norma and carried
her outside the barn, Audrey following.

Heads down to the wind and rain,
helter-skelter came the chums of
Study 12 along the main road from
the Old Grange to Morcove School.

It had been only a few minutes since
that Polly had had yet another of her
brilliant flashes. The idea had sud-
denly occurred to her—what if Norma,
a prisoner in the house until this after-
noon, had escaped and made off for
the school?

Polly's theory was that this would
account for their having found the
back door left open, whilst the house
was apparently deserted. Norma had
escaped whilst her captors were absent!

No sooner had a word of this been
said, than the chums were off and
away.

It seemed so certain that they had
only to get to the school to find Norma
there—a breathless, exhausted fugitive,
seeking their protection.

They little knew where, in fact, poor Norma was at this moment!

Little they dreamed as they approached a certain roadside farm-shed, how near she actually was.

And at that moment, the rain which had been falling so steadily all the afternoon, chose to come down so heavily that it was just as if a cloud had burst.

"Here, we can't go through this," declared Polly.

"Wather not, bai Jove," said Paula.

"Zere ees ze shed zere," shouted Naomer, enjoying herself, even though the rain streamed down her face in rivulets. "We 'ide in 'eem? Ooo, yes; queek, queek!"

Betty Barton gave a quick assent.

Even if they did want to get back to Morcove to make certain that Norma had returned there, there was no point in getting soaked to the skin. A few minutes' shelter in this handy shed, and then they could hurry on to the school again.

But as they climbed over a gate into the field, and scampered round one end of the barn to reach the door on the other side, they had no idea of the two figures, carrying a third, that disappeared just in time round the far end.

"Mother's precaution was right," gasped Audrey to Hannah.

Hannah was bad-tempered, because of the weight of Norma, and because of the teeming rain that was quickly soaking her to the skin.

"Right!" she scoffed, "turning us out into this rain——"

"Better than being confronted in that barn by Betty & Co.," Audrey returned.

"It's wicked luck that those girls should have turned into this shed; they looked to me as if they were hurrying back to their school——"

"Yes," mused Audrey. "I think they would have passed if it hadn't suddenly started to rain so very much faster—that's where mother's so clever, she seems to foresee every eventuality——"

"She foresaw that it was suddenly

going to rain so very much faster, I suppose," scoffed Hannah.

"No," answered Audrey, "but she did see that there was a chance that the Morcove girls might come to the shed. The reason for them turning from the road doesn't matter, nor even the chances for or against them doing so, the fact remains, mother was right, they did go to the shed."

"Oh, come on," said Hannah, "or I suppose your mother will be angry because we're not making for the Grange whilst she keeps them in the shed."

And though it was still raining as hard as the clouds could empty themselves, Audrey and Hannah, the latter with Norma flung over her shoulders, trudged back along the road towards the Grange.

Before they had gone a few yards they were soaked to the skin, but the rain served another purpose which was to their advantage—though grumbling Hannah was not in the mood to admit it—the shed was soon lost to sight behind a seething, silver sheet of rain.

When Betty & Co. had reached the door of the barn and flung it open, it had come as rather a shock to them to find Mrs. Halden in there.

By the surprised look on her face, the Morcove girls thought she was just as astonished to see them rush in.

"Why, hallo!" she said. "Girls from Morcove school, aren't you? Any port in a storm, eh? What a terrible down-pour! I was lucky to take shelter here myself just a few seconds before it started to come down as fast as it is now."

"Bai Jove, yes," said Paula Creel. "But fancy you——"

Before she could complete the sentence with the words "being here," Polly stamped on the elegant one's toe.

"Good-afternoon, Mrs. Halden," said Betty politely. "Yes, the weather is too bad for anything."

She took off her hat and shook the rain off it. Polly followed her example.

"What ze diggings?" cried Naomer, capering about excitedly. "I like 'eem,

"E make me full of ze beans, washes ze cobwebs from me!"

What with Naomer's light remarks, and a great show by Betty and Polly of shaking their hats and coats of superfluous rain, some moments that would otherwise have been filled with a very embarrassing silence, flitted by.

The Morcove girls were each asking themselves what Mrs. Halden's presence here meant. Did it mean that Norma was somewhere near? Oh, if only they could guess that she had been here, but every second was being taken farther and farther away!

Mrs. Halden was planning how to keep the Morcove girls here until such time as she was certain that Audrey and Hannah had got back safely to the Grange with Norma.

Betty at last decided to take the offensive. It was no use waiting for a cunning person like Mrs. Halden to speak and say something that would betray her.

If Mrs. Halden was to be surprised into an admission it was only by saying or doing something that she did not expect.

"This is the second time we've had to take shelter from the rain this afternoon," Betty told the beautiful but scheming person. "We took shelter in your house for a few minutes."

Mrs. Halden looked surprised, but whether that astonishment was real or simulated it was impossible to say.

"Indeed," she answered. "I hope Hannah looked after you nicely—gave you a cup of tea—"

"There was nobody at home," answered Betty. "We knocked and rang several times at the front door but there was no reply—"

"Oh, dear, I am sorry," replied Mrs. Halden. "Hannah must have gone out for something—I'm afraid there wasn't much shelter for you all on my front porch—"

"We went round to the back," said Betty, "and found the back door open—"

"And did you see Hannah then?"

"Why didn't she answer your knock?"

"Hannah wasn't there, Mrs. Halden."

A look of annoyance came over the woman's face.

"And yet you found the back door open?" she asked. "Wide open, or just not locked, do you mean?"

"Wide open."

"Why, I must speak to Hannah about that! I'm glad, of course, for your sake that it was open, but a tramp, thieves, burglars—anybody, might have got into the house. If Hannah had to go out, she ought to have seen the place properly locked up before she left."

"Perhaps she's country-bred," suggested Betty.

Her chums were leaving their leader to do all the talking, realising she was trying to draw the woman out, but unfortunately Mrs. Halden had realised that, too.

"Country people, you know, Mrs. Halden," continued Betty, "are not nearly so careful about locking their houses up—there's not as much chance of thieves and those sort of people being about in country areas as there is in towns. Why, people in country districts often leave their front doors wide open right through the night in hot weather, to keep the house cool."

Mrs. Halden merely nodded. She was not telling Betty whether she or Hannah were well acquainted with country ways, or whether they were more accustomed to town surroundings.

The conversation lagged for a few moments, but outside the rain continued to teem down as if the very clouds had burst.

Betty and Polly commenced to wander, apparently without any special object, from one part of the shed to another. Their eyes had first travelled round the building, for the idea had come into both their minds that Norma might be hidden somewhere in the shed, though how she was being kept quiet they could not guess.

Naomer capered about here and there. She jumped on one pile of hay that looked as though it might have

hidden something, but it apparently was as innocent as it looked, for it collapsed under the little African girl's weight.

An old cart stood in one corner.

"Like to have a look inside that cart, Naomer?" asked Polly casually, but with an eye on Mrs. Halden, and not on Naomer. It seemed to Polly that the woman seemed a little anxious.

"Ooo, yes, queek, queek!" screamed Naomer.

"Then come here, kid," said Polly, "and I'll give you a leg up."

But though Polly, with apparent mischievousness, gave Naomer such a leg up that the dusky little imp, with a cry of delight, pitched headforemost over the tall side of the cart into its depth beyond, no cry came from her to declare that anything or anyone was in that cart.

To make sure, Polly climbed up after her. Naomer was alone in the cart, and with much indignation was calling on Polly to pull her out again.

"What ze diggings, you geeve me such a beeg leg-up?" she demanded. "Help me out again, at once, bekas —"

Polly helped her out. Naomer was such a live wire that it would be more useful to have her running about the shed—if there was anything in the shed that Mrs. Halden wanted kept hidden.

Mrs. Halden kept up a pretence that she was anxious lest they should find something. She had decided it was the very attitude that would make them linger longest in the shed.

But at last Polly was certain there was nothing to be found.

She went to the door of the shed and opened it.

"I say," she called, "the rain is easing off, so don't you think we might push on to Morcove, Betty?"

"Oh, yes, queek, queek!" declared Naomer.

"Oh, howwows," was Paula's statement, however. "Polly deah, it's still coming down vewy fast, you know. I

wpopose we west heah a little longer —"

"You rest long enough, Paula," declared Naomer. "Come out, you look very dirty, and ze rain will wash ze dust of zise dirty old barn off you—"

Paula looked perturbed at the very idea that she looked dirty. She was quite prepared now to face the rain, but Polly, giving a last glance back at Mrs. Halden, thought she surprised that woman glancing up towards the roof of the shed.

Polly glanced in the same direction, and saw something that brought suspicion back into her mind—a trapdoor that evidently led to a loft.

"I think perhaps Paula is right," she said. "The rain is coming down still rather fast. We'd better wait a few minutes longer. Oh, I say, look, there's a trapdoor up there. Whilst we're waiting, let's explore the loft!"

"No, no!" Mrs. Halden spoke, even before Naomer could give a delighted assent to Polly's suggestion.

The cunning woman acted as if she had a secret to hide in the loft. Just this one more subterfuge, and then she could let the Morcove girls leave—Hannah and Audrey would have got back to the Grange by then with Norma.

The Morcove girls gazed at the woman suspiciously.

"I mean," continued Mrs. Halden confusedly, as if trying to cover a slip of the tongue, "I think one of your friends was right—you are getting rather dirty. Girls will be girls, I know, but I can't allow you to make your clothes worse by climbing up to that dirty loft."

"You can't allow—" Polly began.

"Hush, dear," said Betty. "Mrs. Halden is right, and we'll get into a dreadful row by going back to school covered with dirt we're bound to pick up if we go into that old loft."

She had her back to Mrs. Halden, and she winked at Polly as she spoke. Thus she did not see the smile of triumph that came on the woman's face.

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It was cunning against cunning in
the fact.

Mrs. Halden knew that Betty had al-
ready planned to pretend to leave the
barn in a few minutes, and then to
hide near and watch, and that was just
what Mrs. Halden wanted the Morcove
girls to do.

For another five minutes the Morcove
girls waited in the shed. Polly, though
puzzled by Betty's obvious lead, was
loyal enough to pretend to be in agree-
ment with her leader and to have for-
gotten all about the loft.

At length, Betty opened the shed
door again.

"It does seem to be easing off now,
girls," she announced.

A minute later and the Morcove
girls, with polite "Good-afternoons" to
Mrs. Halden, were leaving the shed.

Betty led the way straight to the
gate. The girls scrambled over it.
Along the lane they went in silence.
Polly was dying to question her leader,
but she waited for Betty to speak first.

Betty spoke directly they had turned
a corner in the lane and the barn was
out of sight.

"Quick, girls," she said. "Back to
those bushes near the shed, but don't
let yourself be seen from the shed."

"Then you do believe there's some-
thing or someone up in that loft?"
asked Polly.

"Of course," answered Betty.

But though they watched the shed
door until Mrs. Halden came to it, and
with a cautious look round, as if to
make certain no one was in sight,
turned and walked away towards the
Grange, they did not realise until some
minutes later how they were wasting
their time.

Then, after they had rushed into the
shed, and after feverish searching
round had found an old ladder by
which they could climb up to the trap-
door, then, and only then, did they
discover that the loft was empty, that
they had waited when there had been
nothing to wait for.

"Fooled!" said Polly Linton.

"But why?" asked Betty. "Because
she wanted to keep us near the shed
—"

"Why?"
"Whilst they got Norma away,
perhaps."

"Then let's go back to the Grange
and demand to see her."

Betty shook her head.

"No, we might as well go on to Mor-
cove now. Perhaps, after all, Norma
has escaped and gone there."

Hope rose again in the minds of them
all at those words. Perhaps they had
been mistaken in thinking Mrs. Halden
had deliberately schemed to keep them
near the shed.

Through the rain again, towards
Morcove, they ran at top speed.

On and on went the chums, with the
rain streaming from their macs. Paula
was lagging behind, of course, but even
she would have scorned to suggest a
slow-down. Back to the school, with-
out a moment's loss of time! That was
the order they had given themselves.

To think that Norma, for days on
end such an object of secret anxiety to
all of them, might be at the school
now, with what a story to tell of suffer-
ings at the hands of Mr. and Mrs.
Halden!

At last—but oh, what a time it
seemed to have taken them!—they had
the school gates in sight.

Other scholars were wandering back,
after a healthful ramble in the wet,
and some of these shouted to Betty &
Co. to ask what was wrong.

The chums had neither time nor
breath to spare for an answer. Darting
in at the gateway, up the drive they
panted, and so charged into the school-
house like a pack of mad young things.

Miss Redgrave chanced to be going
by in the hall, book in hand. Her
sudden look of amusement at the way
Betty & Co. had come dashing in out
of the rain changed to an expression
of blank amazement as they panted the
excited question:

"Norma—is Norma here, Miss Red-

grave? Has she turned up at the school?"

"Norma Halden, girls? Why, no! What makes you ask?"

Instead of answering, the chums could have groaned.

Paula, for one, did start a sorrowful lament as she dragged away with some of the others leaving Betty and Polly to tell the mistress that—well, they had thought Norma might be here!

"Dweadful, dweadful!" sighed Paula, collapsing into the Study 12 easy-chair, a minute later. "All that fuwious wush for nothing, bai Jove!"

"What a fiasco!" grimaced Polly, coming into the study with Betty. "Simply a case of 'as you were'!"

"But we won't give up, even now!" Betty declared, with cheerful emphasis. "No, we simply won't rest until we have found out whether Florrie Blair is Audrey Blain, whether Mr. and Mrs. Halden are Audrey's parents, and whether Norma has been fairly treated!"

"If she were all right, I wonder she hasn't written," mused Madge. "But perhaps she was forbidden to write. What a baffling business it is!"

"Never mind!" said Polly, and she thumped the table on which she had perched herself. "As Betty says, we won't give up!"

"Thumbpwints!" drawled Paula, from the depths of her easy-chair. "I tell you, geals—I wepeat—it will come to thumbpwint—"

"You and your thumbprints!" scoffed Polly, shying a ball of paper at the elegant one. "Say it again, and see what you'll get!"

Tess was looking out of the window.

"A regular soaker!" she commented. "If Florrie Blair is really Florrie Blair, then what on earth is she doing with herself, since it is her day off!"

The chums were to have no enlightenment on that point when the eventful day was done.

Rather before her official time for reporting back, Florrie Blair demurely

returned to Morcove School that evening. The chums glimpsed her as they were going up to the dormitory. He did Cora Grandways, who had come in a couple of hours ago, looking very sulky and subdued—why, was another matter about which Betty & Co. were to be kept in ignorance.

Morcove's model "tweenie" went up to her room for the night, and there, as she loitered over her undressing, she often smiled to herself.

"Safe, after all!" she was exulting. "Touch and go, and no mistake! But Norma is under lock and key again, Betty & Co. are none the wiser, and so dad and mother will make their fortunes yet!"

And the daring girl, when she was in bed, lay and thought of a time to come when she would be no longer a servant in the school, but revelling in that "swagger" life which was all in all to her!

CHAPTER 31.

Wanted: A Thumbprint!

"ONLY to think," exclaimed Polly Linton, mournfully tossing her head, "after all that we have done—"

"And the time that has gone by since the mystery began! put in Betty Barton. "It really is too bad that we are still baffled!"

"Most humiliating, to say the least," murmured Madge Minden.

"Besides being a real worry!" chimed in Helen Craig. "For, until we do know whether our theory is right or wrong, how can we help being uneasy about Norma Halden?"

There was a pause in Study 12 at Morcove School after this little burst of talk. Then Polly resumed, with another gloomy nod:

"It may be all right with Norma, or it may be all wrong! Bother it! When I'm given a puzzle to do, I do like to solve it, not get flummuxed!"

At this instant Paula Creel languidly

opened her pretty eyes as she lolled in the best armchair.

"Thumbpwwints!" said Paula gravely. "I wepeat, geals, we shall do no good until we have put things to the only pwactical test—thumbpwwints!"

Polly, although she looked like falling upon Paula and extinguishing her, allowed the beloved duffer to have her say out.

"Yes, dear?" Polly sweetly encouraged the fatuous one.

"It is a weal-known fact," argued Paula, rousing up to lecture her chums, "the thumbpwwint is the best possible means of pwoving whether—er—someone is—er— That is to say——"

"Go on, dear! We like to hear you. So improving!"

"That is to say," Paula tried again, feeling she was in danger of becoming involved, "if you know of someone whom you suspect to be someone else weally, you— You follow me, geals? You take a thumbpwwint of—er—someone, and compare it with the thumbpwwint of—er—er——"

"Someone else?"

"Pwecisely! Pwesuming that the two thumbpwwints match—weal, theah you are, what?"

"Indeed!" Polly said drily. "Now it's my turn. To prove that the new servant in this school, called Florrie Blair, is no other than Audrey Blain, who used to be a scholar in our Form——"

"Yes, wather!"

"We would have to get Florrie Blair's thumbprint, and compare it with Audrey's?"

"My meaning pwecisely, Polly, deah!"

"And how, pray, are we ever going to get Audrey's thumbprint," Polly continued witheringly, "since Audrey is no longer at the school?"

"Er—er——"

"Oh, it must be easy, Paula, to a brain like yours!"

"Yes, wather! Howevah——"

"Hurry up! Explain!"

"Ooo, yes; queek — queek!"

clamoured Naomer Nakara, starting to hustle Paula out of the chair. "Eggs-plain!"

"Willingly, geals! I would most willingly—er—answer the widdle, but, on reflection," Paula said, rubbing her forehead, "it is so obvious to me that —er— Weally, it must be obvious to everyone else—what?"

"I tell you what's obvious!" said Polly, ominously getting off the table-edge, ruler in hand. "You're all talk! You and your thumbprints!"

"Ow!"

"Lecturing us about what we know! Telling us to do the impossible!"

"Polly, deah—Naomer! Now, now——"

"Oh, let's have a little peace!" laughed Betty. "Quiet, some of you, please!"

"Certainly!" agreed Polly heartily. "Naomer, just help me to keep Paula quiet. She mustn't be allowed to——"

"Ow! Healp!"

"Allowed to make such a——"

"Ooo! Ow!" howled Paula, as she found herself thrust back into the armchair, so that Polly and Naomer together might sit upon her lap. "You geals, dwop it! This unwuly tweekment wenders me fuwious!"

The door opened, and Tess came in.

"Raining again," deplored Tess, "so what are we all going to do?"

"That depends upon what Paula does," announced Polly. "Unless Paula keeps quite quiet, I'm afraid we shall be under the painful necessity of putting her out. In which case, Naomer and I may need assistance!"

"Polly, deah, I won't bweathe another word, weally!"

"Right!"

And the teasers got off the long-suffering one's lap.

As soon as the smiles were fading, Betty turned to Tess.

"We were talking about—you know, the mystery. For a wet evening, there are enough questions to make up a nice little examination to pass the time

away. Question number one: Is Florrie Blair really Florrie Blair?"

"If not, is she Audrey Blain, posing as a 'tweenie' in the school?" chimed in Polly. "Question number two: If Florrie Blair is really Audrey Blain, then are the people at the Old Grange her parents?"

"If so," Helen Craig added, "there is question number three: Why did the Blains adopt Norma? And number four: Where is Norma now?"

Polly made pretence of putting on learned-looking spectacles as she gazed round upon her chums.

"You are allowed five minutes!" she gave out in the tone of a lady examiner.

"Maximum marks, fifty!"

Tess shook her head and sighed.

"It can't be done, girls. We've talked about it, got to dreaming about it almost, and still we are baffled."

"And the maddening thing is," Polly said in sudden great heat, "that Florrie Blair is mincing about the schoolhouse in cap and apron, laughing up her sleeve at us all the time, I am sure!"

"Ugh!" squirmed Betty. "It won't bear thinking about!"

"Geals," remarked Paula, smoothing her hair to rights, "I tell you what it is! Thumbpw——"

A hurled cushion effectually silenced the elegant one, but only for a moment. As she again put her hair to rights, she again remarked mechanically:

"Thumbpwints, geals! I tell you—— Polly, no! Dwp it!"

For Polly had found another cushion. Nor is there much doubt that it would have gone the way of the first, only in the very act of taking aim the madcap noticed a sudden excited look in Betty's face.

"Yes, Betty?" the madcap asked eagerly, tossing the cushion aside. "What is it?"

"Thumbprints!" breathed Betty. "It has just occurred to me, could we have the luck to get one of Audrey's, after all—one made by her, perhaps, when she was a scholar at the school?"

"Bai Jove, theah you are!" And

Paula proudly stood up. "What did I tell you, geals? My solution—my weasoning!"

"But how do you mean, Betty?" Polly asked, taking no notice of Paula. "Where on earth could we look for a chance specimen of Audrey's thumbprint?"

"Well, what about her old schoolbooks?"

"Bai Jove, theah you are! Geals, you see how my suggestion, the weally only pwactical one, as I—— Ow!"

Although Paula subsided abruptly in the face of another hurled cushion, no one laughed. Betty's desperate idea that they might look through old schoolbooks of Audrey Blain's had caused intense excitement.

Next minute they were all downstairs routing out a certain big store-cupboard where old schoolbooks were kept.

Eagerly and full of hope, the chums set about trying to find any book that had belonged to Audrey Blain during her time at Morcove as a member of the Fourth Form.

That it might be a futile search the chums realised full well. But they were going to leave no stone unturned, and Paula might well feel proud of the fact that her oft-repeated and oft-scorned suggestion in regard to thumbprint clues was being acted on, after all!

Would they have the luck to find any exercise-book or primer that had once belonged to Audrey with a thumbprint fatefully caused by some smear of ink? If only they could! But oh, how unlikely it was!

"Here we are! A book that was Audrey's!"

"And here's another!"

It was not surprising, perhaps, that the chums had come upon several of Audrey's old books in a batch. With ever-increasing excitement, those who now held one or another of the books looked through it page by page.

"After all, one never can tell!" Polly said feverishly. "I know that I myself

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have often accidentally printed off a
smear of ink with my fingers."

"Yes, wather! So pway keep on,
geals! Pway pewsevere!"

There was a laugh when that advice
came from Paula, who idly stood by,
beaming delightedly. Then the search
continued as gravely and as excitedly
as ever.

At last Helen Craig laid down the
book that she had been scouring
through.

"Nothing!"

"Nothing in this, either!" sighed
Tess Trelawney, as she too, cast a book
aside. "It was expecting too much, I
am afraid!"

Nor did any inspection of the other
books produce better results. One by
one the girls ended the almost frantic
search with a dejected murmur:

"Nothing!"

Going upstairs again, after putting
the cupboard in order, the disconsolate
girls smiled or laughed ruefully. So
much for the hope of achieving any
result from Paula Creel's "theory"!

Madge Minden turned back, to seek
the music-room piano. She had been
almost certain to gravitate in that
direction on a wet evening such as this.

Not that Madge was going to rid her
mind of thoughts about the great
problem which was so exasperatingly
baffling. Even whilst she sought piece
after piece from the old piles of music,
and played alone to herself, she would
be having anxious thoughts, especially
in regard to the girl Norma Halden.

Meantime, the baffling problem was
still the one topic amongst the rest of
the chums. Back in Study 12, they
stood or sat about, with very thought-
ful pauses in between fretful remarks
as to the way in which they were "held
up."

"Not a word has there been from
Norma ever since we were told by the
Haldens that she had gone away!"
came from Polly peevishly. "Wouldn't
you have thought that she would drop
us a line from where she is staying?"

Betty nodded musingly.

"Even though the Haldens forbade
her mixing with us," she muttered,
"Norma would surely feel entitled to
send us a line, a mere picture-post-
card!"

"So, then," exclaimed Helen, with a
very serious look, "her silence does
rather point to her not having gone
away, after all! Just think, if all this
time she is perhaps being kept under
lock and key by the Haldens!"

Polly thumped the table in sudden
exasperation.

"I jolly well wish we had searched
the Old Grange from attic to cellar
when we had the chance the other
day!" she exclaimed.

"We had the chance, but not the
right, to search," was Betty's woeful
rejoinder.

Another lengthy pause dragged by.
Then Paula spoke from the depths of
her easy-chair.

"Pity," she sighed, "vewy gweat pity,
our search for the thumbpint—"

"Hark!"

And there was a sudden, startled
silence, the girls all giving heed to the
sound of someone simply whirling up
the corridor.

Next second the door burst open, and
Madge was in the room.

Such a Madge! They had never be-
fore seen their quiet chum in such a
boisterous, excited state. She flourished
a folio of paper wildly as she breath-
lessly cried out:

"Girl, what do you think? Look!
Just look here!"

And, with the cry, she slammed down
the double sheet of paper upon the
table, for her chums to see.

Excitedly they gathered round.

"A bit of music that Audrey used to
play!" Betty said on the instant.
"There is her signa— Oh, and look,
just close to the signature, on this front
page!"

"Yes," panted Polly, "it is almost
like a thumbprint!"

CHAPTER 32.

Not to Be Caught!

ONE of the excited girls took up the sheet of paper, to look at the ink mark very closely.

"It is a thumbprint—it is! Not a proper one, of course, but it may be good enough!"

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove, geals——"

"Now then," said Polly, with a grim look—"now then, we can get to work at last! The next thing is to get a thumbprint from Florrie Blair without her knowing it!"

"Big order!" said Helen.

"Not at all!" chuckled Polly. "I know what to do! Half a sec."

In a flash she was gone from the room, leaving the other girls to smile at her impetuosity, and to wonder what brilliant idea had seized her now.

She had certainly looked like one who sees a great triumph in sight at last, and perhaps it would have been better if Polly had not whirled out of the room in such a hopeful mood.

For, as Fate would have it, Cora Grandways was just then coming along to her study.

She, the scapegrace of the Form, who had long since become aware of Florrie Blair's true identity, never let any of the chums go past her nowadays without watching for any sign of their being suspicious or unduly active.

Instinctively, Cora felt that Polly was as excited and in such a hurry as all this because she and her chums had overcome some baffling difficulty.

Exactly what it meant Cora could not guess. But, if only because she always gloried in baulking the chums, to say nothing of her doing so well out of the great secret, she instantly felt that it was up to her to put Florrie Blair more on her guard than ever.

Only waiting until Polly had passed out of sight, Cora Grandways turned back and went downstairs.

Cautiously she drifted about until she had come upon Morcove's model "tweenie" in one of the passages that served the main hall.

With a meaning glance for the girl in cap and apron, Cora went to a lobby in which the scholars hung old macintoshes and kept their roughest footwear. She was pretending to look for something in the pocket of an old raincoat, when the sham 'tweenie sauntered up.

"Can I help you, miss?" the darling girl asked demurely.

"Oh, no thanks!" Cora answered, just as blandly.

And then, under her breath, she gave the warning:

"Audrey, be on your guard more than ever against Betty & Co. I believe they have suspected something—found out something more!"

In spite of her audacious nature, Audrey turned pale at the warning.

"How do you mean?" she asked in a tense undertone.

Cora shook her head.

"I don't know what they are up to," she whispered back. "But Polly rushed past me just now, and I sort of read it in her looks. It was as if she and her chums had got past being so utterly baffled. So look out!"

Cora went away, and, indeed, she dared not stay any longer in talk, for this evening the schoolhouse teemed with girls cooped up by the rain.

As for the sham 'tweenie, her heart was beating fast. She stood about, trying to keep the nervous alarm out of her looks as she pondered the warning.

What did it mean?

In what was were Betty & Co. so suddenly a greater danger than ever?

In vain she racked her mind. Impossible to tell what was taking place in Study 12! All Audrey Blain could do was to resolve not to treat the warning lightly.

Full well she knew that Betty & Co., almost from the first, had regarded her with deep suspicion. Luckily for her and her parents, not a scrap of proof had come in Study 12's hands, or, of course, those girls would have instantly

placed the matter before the headmistress. But now—

What if they were intending to set a trap for her?

It was a thought to make the sham 'tweenie stand in dread of suddenly finding herself caught out at last.

The moment Betty & Co. obtained proof that she was no other than Audrey Blain in disguise, it would be time for her to make a bolt from the school.

Not only that, but the game would be up that her parents were secretly playing. They, too, would have to flee, to escape the police.

Suddenly she gave a nervous start. She could hear one of the scholars calling out to her from upstairs:

"Florrie Blair! Is Florrie Blair down there?"

Polly's voice.

The sham 'tweenie did not answer, but quickly made a pretence of having a task to do that could not be left. Whipping a duster from a side-table drawer in the hall, she began to use it upon the panelling, which the wet weather had deprived of its usual high polish.

"Florrie Blair!"

Polly was coming down the stairs now. With the blandest looks, she crossed the hall, to stand beside the girl in cap and apron who was so suddenly industrious.

"Didn't you hear me calling, Florrie?"

"Oh, yes, miss, and I answered!" was the other girl's false reply.

"Well, anyhow," said Polly, "can you come upstairs to Study 12 for a minute?"

"Must it be at once, miss?" Audrey demurred calmly. "I was just wiping the damp off this oak, as it does so spoil the appearance if it's left on. I—I could come presently."

"Oh, all right!" Polly said airily. It would never do for her to look baffled or impatient. "As soon as you can, please!"

"Certainly, miss, I will!" promised Audrey.

But was she going to keep that promise? Not likely!

The evening wore on, and still Betty & Co. were compelled to go down to join the muster. They were not in the best of moods, but, of course, it would have been fatal to let their exasperation show itself. Looking about for Florrie Blair, they failed to see her, and they knew what to make of this evasiveness.

She was on her guard, and that meant guilt, if only they could prove it!

Proof—proof was what they needed, and simply must have, if only it could be obtained!

As the various Forms went trooping off to the dormitories at bed-time, Polly broke away from the rest of the juniors, and scamped in search of the suspect. She came up with her on a landing leading to the servants' quarters.

"Florrie, you did not come to Study 12!"

"No, I didn't have time," answered the sham 'tweenie, with a sudden touch of insolence. "After all, miss, I am not supposed to be at the beck and call of scholars!"

"Of course not!" assented Polly. "But any other maid in the school would always do a reasonable thing for us girls, if asked properly. We scholars are always on the best of terms—"

"That may be so!" struck in Audrey, drawing herself up. At this moment her nerves were in such a state that she could not help her true nature, all insolence and touchy pride, showing itself. "But why did you want me?"

She added in a bridling way:

"You fetched me to your study once before, and I consider they were most insulting questions that you asked me! I suppose it was only to be some more of that silly nonsense!"

And, nose in air, she stalked away.

Nor, when she was alone in her room for the night, did she regret having made such a stand against Study 12.

Her behaviour might seem like gross insolence on the part of a girl in service. Never mind if it did! Anyhow, she had kept out of the trap!

But how, if baulked in one direction, would those girls set a trap for her in another?

It left her with a feeling of being hunted. From now onwards, she was going to be heart in mouth from morning to night. Those girls! Only too well she knew what they were like for refusing to give up!

She could not go to bed whilst her mind was so disturbed. Morcove School became perfectly silent after the last of its inmates had gone to their repose. Still the sham 'tweenie remained about in her little bed-room, fully dressed. Never before had she felt so acutely the danger in which she stood.

And at last, when the school chimes had pealed out eleven o'clock through the darkness, the panicky impulse came upon her to take a certain step, in case the worst happened.

Just as she herself had been given warning by Cora, so she had better pass on that warning to her parents.

She was at her bed-room window now, peering in the direction of the nightbound sea. As likely as not, this was one more night for the landing of those costly smuggled silks out of which her parents were making so much money.

A dangerous, unlawful business, but it must go on! Audrey was the last girl in the world to feel resigned to the loss of money which her once wealthy parents had sustained. She wanted to see them rich again, so that life could be just as "swagger" a time for her as ever.

But there was no mistake about it. If ever the organised smuggling trade came to an end, it would mean that her parents had been taken by the police. And why? Simply because Betty Barton and her chums had got to the bottom of the mystery that at present was baffling them!

Audrey suddenly turned away from the window, and stole across to the door.

Not a sound!

She went to a hanging cupboard, took out a raincoat and hat, and donned them. This done, she extinguished her candle; then crept to the door again, opened it, and stole away.

Five minutes later, a back door of the schoolhouse noiselessly opened, and someone slipped forth into the rainy darkness.

It was Audrey.

Silently she pulled the door shut, and flitted away.

CHAPTER 33.

At Dead of Night!

THROUGH the inky darkness of the rainy night, Audrey hastily made her way from the silent schoolhouse to the Old Grange.

She kept to the main road, rounding every bend with extreme caution, so as to be warned in time of anyone's approach.

But not a soul appeared to be about at this late hour. Without a hitch, she came at last to the gateway leading into the private grounds of that lonely country mansion which her parents had rented partly furnished.

Not a light was visible as she ran up the drive, under cover of dripping trees. It might be, too, that her mother and father were both away, but Audrey could be sure that in any case old Hannah was on the premises.

She did not give a tug at the old-fashioned bell-pull in the porch. Instead, the agitated girl rapped hard three times upon the outer door with her knuckles. It was the signal that had been agreed upon, in case of any emergency in the night.

Then she waited, with the rain falling drearily upon the rank grounds and a chilly wind sighing mournfully amongst the leafy branches of the old trees in the avenue.

At last her attentive ear picked up

the cautious footfall of someone within the house. There was still no light, and, although the door had a glass panel, she could not make out who was coming.

Bending down, she put her lips to the letter-slot and whispered through it:

"Audrey!"

Next second the door was unchained, unbolted, and then opened. In the tall, fully-dressed figure which stood dimly revealed Audrey recognised her handsome mother.

Quickly the girl stepped into the hall, and just as quickly Mrs. Blain closed and fastened the door.

"At this time of night, Audrey!"

"I had to come, mother! Not that anything has happened yet. Don't think we have got to clear out at once. But I felt that I simply must warn you!"

"Warn me of what?"

"Those girls at the school, the ones who have been the danger all along," Audrey breathlessly whispered. "I believe they are setting a trap for me!"

In spite of the deep darkness, Mrs. Blain's lovely face was discernible in all its sternness, so deathly pale had she gone.

"A trap for you?" she exclaimed sharply. "What makes you think that? What sort of a trap?"

"I do not know, except that their idea is to get proof of who I really am," answered Audrey. "They have been absolutely balked, as you know, and we have been able to laugh up our sleeve at them. But Cora warned me to be on my guard!"

Mrs. Blain received this in silence. She suddenly led the way to a room at the back of the house. The old-fashioned folding shutters were fastened across the windows, and so she was not afraid to light a lamp.

"Cora warned you, did she?" came the muttered comment at last. "It has been no disaster for us, Audrey, that Cora has found out?"

"Oh, Cora is all right! She's that

sort of girl!" Audrey said, with a bleak smile. "Betty & Co. are different!"

"Very!" frowned Mrs. Blain. "My dealings with those girls have taught me that much. And now you think they are as suspicious as ever, trying to put their suspicion to the proof?"

"Well, mother, I have been awfully careful, and you may be sure they won't easily take me off my guard. Only, I felt so jumpy to-night, at last I simply had to slip along and warn you!"

"Just as well," approved Mrs. Blain, with a nod. "It is what I would have had you do. And if—if things should come out at the school, then you must not lose a moment, Audrey—not a moment! At all costs, make for this place, so that we can get away together."

Audrey asked, in a hollow voice:

"Where is father to-night? Gone out again?"

"On another journey, yes," answered Mrs. Blain. "I tell you, Audrey, our secret system is working so splendidly we could soon make a small fortune, if only—if only nothing put a stop to it! Do all you can—"

"I will, mother, trust me! Ah, how I do hate those Study 12 girls!" Audrey suddenly exclaimed, in a gust of passion. "I always did find them a hindrance, in my way at every step! But if I detested them in the old days, how I hate them now!"

The mother looked entirely pleased at seeing her daughter roused to such a state of fury.

"You are one girl against many, Audrey. All the more credit to you, if you continue to outwit them. Well, you must go back now."

"Yes, mother; I mustn't stay. I'll just have a snack of something, though."

Audrey stepped to a sideboard, and took from one of the little cupboards a dish that held a cake. Cutting off a slice, she took a bite, and then laughed across at her mother.

"Don't you get enough to eat, then, as a servant at the school, Audrey?"

"Oh, rather! Of course, it's a good job, really," acknowledged the sham 'tweenie. "All the same——"

"I know, Audrey, I know!" broke out Mrs. Blain, with passionate intensity. "Ah, it's a shame that you, my daughter, should have had to wear cap and apron—and at Morcove School, of all places! But never mind, Audrey. You know how necessary it was. And if all goes well, some day we shall be rich again. There will be money——"

She paused. Of a sudden, there had sounded a noise somewhere in the great old house like the scratching or gnawing of a rat.

Mother and daughter looked at each other.

"I wonder what that was?" whispered Mrs. Blain. "Only a rat? There are enough rats about this place, it is true, but just a second!"

So saying, she took out a pocket electric torch, switched it on, and went from the room with a perfectly silent step.

Audrey followed. The mother shining the beam of light before her, ascended to the top of the house, with the girl creeping after her. In this stealthy fashion, they both came to the topmost landing—a very cramped one, serving one or two attics.

After a sign to Audrey to keep perfectly silent, Mrs. Blain noiselessly unlocked one door, set it open, and passed inside. She was now shining the light upon the floor, nor did she raise the light when she gazed towards a bed on which a girl was apparently fast asleep. Audrey stole in and stood beside her mother, gazing at the occupant of the bed.

There she lay—in deep slumber, it seemed—the poor girl whose hard fate it had been to become a helpless captive in the hands of Mrs. Blain!

Poor Norma, little had she dreamed when the Blains adopted her what a cruel mockery the adoption was going to prove.

Mrs. Blain gave another sign to

Audrey not to speak or make a sound, whilst she mutely said with her lips:

"She sleeps! Come away, Audrey!"

They crept from the room, and not a sound did the well-oiled lock make as the key was turned once again in the wards.

Left alone once more, really soundly the hapless captive seemed to sleep on, but only for a time. For suddenly she sat up in bed, fully awake, flung aside the coverings, and set foot to the floor.

"They heard me! They must have heard me that time!" she whispered to herself. "I must be more careful, then, in my efforts to escape. I'll manage better after this, and I'll yet manage to get away, somehow. I must—oh, I must!"

Nor was the scratching sound heard again that night in the lonely country house, although they were dark hours through which Norma, knife in hand, was toiling at her desperate task!

CHAPTER 34.

Polly Has Another Plan!

"I WONDER if she will come, girls!" "I wonder!"

It was a few minutes after the midday "dismiss" from classes. In Study 12 there was the usual muster of staunch chums, and they were waiting for Florrie Blair.

"Well, she promised, when I asked her just now," affirmed Betty. "Of course, it is rather a busy time of day for the domestic staff. All the same, if she doesn't turn up——"

"We are done!" Helen Craig laughed ruefully.

"Oh, no!" demurred Polly, swinging her legs, as she sat on the edge of the table. "I shall know what to do if she persists in keeping away from the study, like she did last evening. But we will wait and see!"

Tess Trelawney looked towards the closed door.

"Hope to goodness no one else but Florrie Blair comes in!" she exclaimed glumly. "Otherwise, it will rather spoil the little ruse. We don't want anybody else's thumbprint on the doorknob—only Florrie's."

"Don't worry!" pleaded Polly blithely. "If we do get somebody else's, by accident, it can easily be wiped away. Why doesn't the girl come, though?"

"Yes, wather! Most iwwitating this suspense!" said Paula, shaking up the cushion of her easychair.

"She doesn't come because she is afraid to come, that's why!" was Betty's grim remark. "I would just like to know, however, what put her on her guard?"

"Sh!"

But it was only some scholar or other going by in the corridor. Betty & Co. waited on, fuming with impatience, and still Audrey did not come.

"Very well!" Polly said, when at last the gong was calling them down to dinner. "As it is evident that Florrie Blair suspects a trap in this study, we will try a different plan!"

"But what——" began Betty, rather blankly, only to be cut short by an airy wave of the hand from Polly.

"You girls just go down to dinner," she entreated serenely. "I could tell you, of course, but I would rather have the fun of giving you a surprise."

"And so you shall, dear," Betty promptly answered. "As you have had the wit to hit upon another ruse, you must have a free hand."

"Yes, wather!" agreed Paula, languidly getting up. "As to that, however, let me remind you, geals, the thumbprint clue was originally pwoounded by me—yes, wather! Cwedit weah cwedit is due, but——"

"Ah, bah, you not once say anything that we do not know!" cried Naomer. "You talk and you talk——"

"Weal, I like that! The ingwatitude of some geals is beyond expwession!" protested Paula. "Now, what

are the facts? At a time when you geals were hopelessly baffled I bwrought forward the bwiliant suggestion——"

"Ooo, yes, and now I bwing you forward — queek, queek!" laughed Naomer, taking hold of the beloved duffer to drag her out of the room. "Queek, everybody, dinner!"

If ever there was a rush or a rumpus, Polly could generally be trusted to take the lead. But this time she stayed out of the boisterous scamper that set in, intending to perform a certain secret task upstairs whilst the moment was favourable.

"There is hardly ever a soul upstairs during dinner-time," she was saying to herself. "Just right for me! Florrie Blair herself will be waiting at table in the dining-room."

Whatever the task was that Polly had set herself, it did not take her long. Almost before her absence from the dinner-table had been noticed, she came in, jolly as ever, and so little behind time that she was not asked for any explanation.

"What's the menu, Betty?" she playfully asked, dropping into her seat. "Haricot mutton or steak-pie? Oh, then, pie for me, please, Florrie!"

For Florrie Blair, as demure as ever, had quickly come to Polly's elbow to ask what she would take.

The meal proceeded without any attempt on the part of Betty & Co. to engage in confidential talk. They joined in the general chatter, which mostly concerned the school's good fortune in getting a fine Wednesday "halfer" after a night of rain.

Upstairs in Study 12, however, as soon as the chums had returned thither, Polly was instantly surrounded by Betty, Tess, Madge, Helen, and Naomer, all clamouring for news.

Paula, settling herself for an after-luncheon rest, was also in great suspense.

"Polly——"

"Yes, Polly, come along, do tell us now!"

"I just shan't!" laughed the madcap. "Do let me have my little triumph, girls, if it comes off!"

"Aggwavating cweature!" sighed Paula. "Considering the whole idea of the thumbprint clue was a bwaiv-wave of mine, bai Jove. Howevah!"

And Paula suddenly lapsed into silence, observing a disposition on the part of Naomer to come at her.

"Well, then, what do we do," Betty asked Polly, with a laugh—"wait and see?"

"Wait and see—yes, girls!"

Paula lay back and closed her eyes.

"Ah," she murmured, more to herself than to the girls, "had I been entwisted with the unwavelling of this mystery— But, no; the mattah was taken out of my hands. I am not even to be given cwedit for— Ow! Off me—off me, Naomer!"

Paula, however, had done it now. She was doomed to nurse the impish one for such time as might have to drag by before the waiting was ended.

At last Polly went out of the room.

"Um!" commented Betty. "Well, Polly can usually be trusted to know what she's about, but it's rather like a parlour game!"

And they went on waiting.

The minutes crept by. Now and then the chums heard girls come away from other studies, to go down to the games-field or out for a stroll. Still, Polly's return was being anxiously awaited.

"What a shame if she has been outwitted by the artful girl!" broke from Helen at last. "There is not much doubt, the 'tweenie' is on her guard!"

"If the 'tweenie' is Audrey Blain, then we are up against a girl who is as sharp as needles," said Betty gravely. "When Audrey was a scholar at Morcove before she was expelled—"

"Hark!"

It was an excited finish to all talk,

as someone was heard rushing up the corridor. The door flew open. Polly danced into the room.

"Done it! Girls, girls—"

"What, Polly? What?"

"Bai Jove! I say!"

"I've got it!" Polly panted joyfully, waltzing round the room. "I've got it! Caught her at last! Hurrah!"

"Got what, Polly?" they clamoured, and she suddenly calmed down, to answer:

"The thumbprint, of course! And here it is!"

With the word, she held forth something that she had been holding behind her back—a girl's hairbrush.

"Gather round!" said Polly, although there was little need to make that request. "This is a hairbrush of Florrie Blair's. Before dinner I slipped up to her room, and treated the handle and back of the brush with the same stuff that we treated the doorknob."

"The floor-wax?" exclaimed Betty. "And so— Oh, Polly, darling, you mean to say that—"

"Look for yourselves, all of you!" laughed Polly, offering the brush round.

They took it to the window, to get a better light. Eagerly they scrutinised the spot where a thumb would naturally come to rest whilst a girl was handling the brush. Then Betty darted to the table, to whip open a drawer and rummage for something.

She soon found it—a pocket magnifying-glass.

"And here is the bit of music that has the other thumbprint," said Polly, coming forward with the folio. "So now—now to compare the two thumbprints! Now to find out if Florrie Blair really is Florrie Blair or not!"

"Yes, wather!"

"Ooo, yes; queek—queek!"

"Steady! Let's keep quiet!"

"Yes, wather, geals! Most thwilling! I am bound to wemark, howevah, that should the test pprove successful, the cwedit will west with—"

Paula got no further. A loud and

triumphant gasp from Betty, who was handling the magnifying-glass, meant only one thing.

The two thumbprints compared!

"They are the same—yes!" she breathed excitedly. "The glass brings out the similarity!"

"Then it is proved—proved beyond all denial!" was Helen's emphatic rejoinder. "Florrie Blair is really Audrey Blain, and the time has come for us to denounce her!"

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove, geals how gwand! Now we can go ahead!"

"Best of all," exclaimed Polly, "we can now find out what has been happening to Norma all this time!"

"It's splendid, just splendid!" declared Betty. "And, Polly, it is all thanks to you!"

Nor had a more hearty slap on the back ever come the madcap's way than the one she received just then.

CHAPTER 35.

Audrey is Afraid!

AT that very moment Morcove's model "tweenie" was entering her own little room in the schoolhouse, to spend a minute or so in front of the mirror.

It was going to be a quiet Wednesday afternoon for her and her fellow-domestics, or so she imagined. The fine "halfer" would be taking all the scholars out of doors. Those who stayed around for tea would most likely get their own in the studies.

Audrey was, perhaps, thinking of times when she, a scholar in the Fourth, used to have such dainty little "spreads" in the privacy of her study. For, as she came to her dressing-table, the sight of herself in cap and apron gave her another black look.

"What a thing for me to have come down to!" she suddenly muttered sullenly. "As mother said last night, to think that I should have to be a— But where's my hairbrush?"

Its absence from the dressing-table

instantly threw her into a state of alarm. Her brush, where was it? Who had been here and taken it away? Why—why had it vanished?

Then the awful thought burst upon her.

The disappearance of the brush had something to do with Betty & Co.!

How it could be so she could not guess, but something seemed to be telling her, warning her. She had fallen into a trap, after all!

"But—but how?" she gasped, looking as white as death as she stared helplessly. "Such a thing as a mere hairbrush, how could that help them?"

And again, like a thunderclap, one more dreadful thought shattered through her brain.

"My thumbprint! They have been trying to get one from me! That's what they were after last evening, and now— Oh," she moaned to herself, as if driven crazy with fear, "they have got it at last! My thumbprint!"

She saw it all. Betty & Co. had resorted to one of the simplest and most reliable devices for testing her true identity.

It must be so; and now, indeed, she realised that when she handled her hairbrush just after dinner it had felt rather greasy.

"And Polly Linton came in late to dinner!" she also remembered agitatedly. "That was because she had been to this room, to put a thin coating of stuff on the brush-handle! I see it now. I'm caught—caught, after all!"

Even as that hoarse exclamation of dismay burst from her, she began to rush about as if out of her mind with fear. She, daring daughter of such daring parents, had gone to pieces now.

She darted to her hanging cupboard. Out came her hat and coat, and tremblingly she donned them.

Flight!

It was the only thing now. She must get away at once!

For all she knew, Betty & Co. were

at this moment telling Miss Somerfield about their discovery, their triumph as amateur detectives!

With twitching fingers, Audrey buttoned her outdoor coat over the servant's uniform. She dare not pause to do more than that. It was also impossible to stay to collect her belongings. She must get away now, or she would be too late!

Thump, thump! her heart was pounding as she opened the bed-room door and crept forth, making for the side staircase. Stealthy as a thief in the night, she passed down the stairs. She had no right to be going out, and if one of the other domestics encountered her it might prove a fatal hindrance.

If only she could get clear of the school, get to the Old Grange in time to go off with dad and mother in the car! Oh, if only one could be in time to give the warning there! But was there still time?

The back door at last, thank goodness, and she had met no one! But how if at this very moment the hue and cry was being raised: "Stop the girl who has been in our midst as an impostor! Find her, before she can warn her parents!"

Fear got the better of all caution, and suddenly Audrey fled the short distance from the rear of the schoolhouse to a lane bordering the grounds.

Darting out by a garden gate, away she sped, straight across the fields.

Only let her gain a few minutes' start, and it might mean all the difference between freedom and imprisonment for herself and her parents. A few minutes' start, and perhaps they could get away in the car before the lonely country house was fairly stormed by Morcove School.

Every few seconds, as she raced straight across country, the panic-stricken girl was looking back. She would not have been surprised to glimpse some of Morcove's scholars coming in pursuit of her, like a pack of hounds in full cry.

But it was her tremendous relief to see no sign of a pursuit as yet. All the same, she dare not slacken speed.

Sobbing for breath, she laboured on, and at last her eager steps carried the terrified girl up the gloomy avenue to the old stone porch of the lonely country house.

Urgently she pealed at the bell. It might have been a fire-alarm, such was the violent clangour of the bell that disturbed the deep silence.

No wonder the door was unchained in a few moments, unlocked, and drawn wide. Mrs. Blain herself stood revealed, her handsome face already as white as death with alarm.

Audrey was almost collapsing as she staggered into the house.

"We must fly, mother!" she jerked out, in between her gasps for breath. "The girls at Morcove School, they have found out!"

"Everything, Audrey?"

"I don't know if they have found out about the smuggling, but they know that I am Audrey Blain! They—I— Oh, mother, it was not my fault! I did try, but they were too clever for me!"

Mrs. Blain listened in silence. It was not the time for her to start upbraiding Audrey for having been outwitted, after all. She moved a step or so, her dark brows drawn together.

"We must get away—yes!" she muttered tensely. "And if only they have not found out about the smuggling, it may not be so bad for us, after all. But it is going to be bad enough!"

"Oh, mother, don't let's delay! Even now they may be dashing across from Morcove!" was Audrey's agitated cry. "Miss Somerfield will have telephoned the police at Barncombe! Do let us go at once!"

She added excitedly:

"Where is father? What about Hannah? And Norma—what shall we do with Norma?"

"Your father is away!"

"With the car? Then what are we to do?" Audrey almost meant, wring-

ing her hands. "I thought we would have the car, and father to drive us."

"There is no car, Audrey. But keep calm," Mrs. Blain said, with sudden grim composure. "We will beat them yet! I know what we must do—the one thing left to us to do. Gull Island! We must get across to the island by our own boat, and hide there. One of the smuggling vessels from abroad is putting in to-night."

"You mean—"

"If only we can lie low, Audrey, and be taken on board a boat, it will mean our getting clear of this country! But Norma must go with us!"

"Why, mother? Oh, is it worth while now hampering ourselves with that girl?"

"Yes," declared Mrs. Blain fiercely. "The Morcove scholars may not be able to accuse us of smuggling. Norma can do that, if—if we let her go free. She must come with us. If she gives any trouble, she must be dragged every step of the way to the motor-boat that is on the coast!"

Without another word, Mrs. Blain hurried away, and Audrey was only too glad that action had given place to talk.

Seeing her mother proceeding upstairs, Audrey followed. She had an idea that if there was to be an inevitable delay of a minute or so, on account of Norma, she had better spend the time in changing out of her domestic garb. On the way upstairs, however, Mrs. Blain signed to her to follow still.

"I may want you, Audrey—you, too, Hannah," the desperately calm woman said, as Hannah suddenly came away from one of the upstairs rooms.

Audrey noticed that grey-haired Hannah was already dressed for out of doors. Evidently she had known, the instant she had heard Audrey's excited voice in the house, that the game was up.

All three of them hastily went up the last flight of stairs to the attics. The look on Mrs. Blain's face as she un-

locked the captive's door boded ill for poor Norma, if that girl should offer any resistance.

Mrs. Blain suddenly flung the door wide open.

"Norma—" she began, then stood transfixed, bereft of speech.

The prisoner was gone!

This attic that had been kept so dark by reason of its shuttered windows was now full of daylight. Those shutters were turned back, and the window itself was wide open.

Instantly, too, the guilty trio saw how Norma had escaped.

A knife lying upon the floor was the makeshift implement with which she had tackled the screwed-up shutters. Torn bedclothes, twisted into a rope, had enabled her to let herself down from the window-sill on to some hazardous ledge or parapet.

Mrs. Blain dashed to the window, and peered out and downwards.

"Gone! Yes, she has got clean away! There is a ledge that must have enabled her to clamber down somehow. The daring of it!"

"But when was it?" panted Audrey. "How long has she been gone?"

"Not long, surely," muttered Mrs. Blain, "or we should have had the police here by now. Why, look over there, Audrey!" she cried suddenly. "There she goes, running as hard as she can!"

"Yes—and look! Do you see, mother? Less than a mile away! Some of the Morcove girls, making for this house at top speed!"

Mrs. Blain drew away from the window sharply.

"Come on, you two!" she said hoarsely. "Not another moment now! We must evade those girls, and reach the motor-boat without being seen. If we fail, Audrey, you will have parents serving penal servitude for all that has been done!"

Not another word was said.

Down through the rambling old house rushed the guilt-stricken trio. Except that Mrs. Blain caught up a hat and

coat as she reached the hall and put them on, there was no thought of preparing for the desperate flight.

Norma had escaped! Girls of Morcove School were even now racing towards this lonely country house that had been nothing else than a smugglers' lair, and so, in utter panic, the mother and daughter, with old Hannah, fled as for their lives!

CHAPTER 36.

"After them!"

PAULA CREEL, rushing along with some half-dozen of her best chums, gave a sudden heave for breath, as if she had reached her last gasp:

"Phoo! Bai Jove!"

"Stick it, Paula! Don't give up now!"

"Wather not, Polly, deah! I'll wun till I dwop, bai Jove!"

"Ooo, yes; queek—queek!"

And on they tore together, red-hot and breathless, feeling sure that never before had even a relay race on Sports Day taken quite so much out of them.

Betty panted a tense word or so:

"It's pretty certain that Audrey has made for the Grange! Besides, Norma may be there, anyhow!"

"Yes, wather! Pouf! And, geals—pouf—that will be something to our cweedit, if we only——"

"Hallo, though!" was Polly's sudden cry of amazement. "My gracious, girls, look! Just look who is coming!"

"Norma! It's Norma herself!"

And Norma it was.

What an astonishing thing it was to have happened!

At the very moment when Betty & Co. were running like this to see what was happening at the country house, here was the very girl for whom they had been so anxious all along. Norma, unharmed, but—oh, what a pathetic figure of exhaustion and terror she made!

In a moment or so the girls were gathered around her. Poor thing, she

was not only as breathless as any of them, but was obviously very unstrung. They did not wonder at her bursting into tears whilst their amazed eyes were upon her.

"Norma! Oh, Norma, darling!"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove!"

"Ooo, yes; queek—queek!"

"Where have you been all this time, Norma? What has happened?"

"I have just escaped!" was the thrilling cry with which she left them more surprised than ever. "They had me under lock and key in an attic at the old house, but at last I managed to escape. I was rushing to you, my only friends——"

"And we," burst out Betty, "were just rushing to the house to try and catch Audrey! That is to say, the girl who called herself Florrie Blair!" added Betty. "She was a sham servant!"

"I know—oh, I know!" wailed Norma, as she stood getting her emotions under control. "They made a prisoner of me—her parents did—simply because I had found out!"

"You poor thing!" Madge exclaimed, putting gentle hands to the girl's shoulders. "One or two of us must stay and take care of you, Norma. You look so worn-out!"

"I'll be glad if you will," was the grateful murmur. "Oh, I am so done up, really, it is a relief to have met you girls! But don't let me hinder the rest of you," she added, with a sudden look of eager interest in their task. "If you can catch that sham servant, do so."

"We mean to!" Betty exclaimed, on the point of dashing on again with some of the others. "She doesn't deserve to escape!"

"But listen a moment!" was the cry with which Norma arrested the girls who had started to run on again. "It occurs to me, if she has been in time to warn the others, they will all have made off. In that case, it is my belief they will make for the coast."

"The coast? Why?" questioned Betty eagerly.

Norma was gesturing dramatically as she spoke on in a voice hoarse with exhaustion.

"I believe they have had some secret lair at a lonely part of the coast," she told her eager listeners. "This is why I think so. They have been doing a roaring trade in smuggled silks, and I am certain that the goods were landed on Gull Island first of all, then brought across by means of a motor-boat. They may make use of the boat to get away before the police can take them!"

The words had the effect of calling up a sterner look in the chums' faces. Madge and Polly were going to stay with Norma. As for the others, their best comment on what she had said, they felt, was to go on with all speed to the lonely house.

Would they be in time? The joyful meeting with Norma had certainly caused delay, but it was only a minute or two. So, after all, they might yet be in time to achieve their one great wish, and that was to see the cruel and ruthless schemers brought to book.

In a few minutes they were at the house, and now the girls were troubled by none of those fine scruples which had deterred them on a previous occasion from invading the place. The law was on their side, and what did they care if all the outer doors were locked and the windows made fast?

Crash! went one ground-floor window as Polly unhesitatingly smashed out the pane, the broken glass tinkling inwards upon the floor of the room.

"Come on!"

"Yes, wather!"

"Ooo, yes; queek—queek!"

One after another, over the low window-sill they scrambled, and started to hunt through the house.

Too late!

No more than a minute was needed to leave the girls convinced that the culprits had made off.

"After them, then!" cried Betty.

"To the seashore now!"

"Yes, wather!"

And in a few moments the old house was again deserted, whilst the determined schoolgirls raced off again in the direction of the coast.

CHAPTER 37.

Gull Island Again!

A LONG the rugged shores of North Devon, about a mile from Morcove, there is one tiny, cliff-walled bay, the descent to which, from the top of the cliffs, is by a craggy path far too steep for most people's liking.

And so, week in and week out, the small expanse of sands at the foot of the cliff remain untrodden by human foot. The gulls and the jackdaws have always looked upon this inaccessible spot as their own special fastness.

On this fateful Wednesday afternoon, however, three persons made the descent of the dangerous path in panicky haste.

Audrey, her mother, and old Hannah, down the steep and difficult path they made their way, gasping for breath after the flight from the lonely country house.

Mrs. Blain was leading. Gaining the sun-baked sands a few moments in advance of her companions, she anxiously looked back up the path, dreading to see pursuing figures starting to come after the three of them. Then she floundered across the sands to a small cavern, from which a deep freshwater stream flowed into the sea.

Moored just inside the dim cavern was a motor-boat.

"What are you going to do, mother? Are we going out to Gull Island at once?" asked Audrey Blain.

Mrs. Blain shook her head.

"No," she replied. "We must hide in this cave until it is dark. Those girls from Morcove are smart, and they were close on our heels. That Betty Barton, for example, I shouldn't be at all surprised if she guessed we might have made a getaway by sea. She

would reason that as we are connected with smuggling——"

"Yes, yes, mother, that's the sort of reasoning Betty would make."

"We must keep out of sight in this cave; after all, no one ever comes into this bay——"

They climbed into the motor-boat, and going into the cabin, seated themselves in the comfortable seats that were there.

But Mrs. Blain was curiously restive for her.

Anxiety showed plainly on her face.

After half an hour she rose to her feet.

"Hannah, and you, Audrey, stay here," she ordered. "I'm going to risk seeing what's going on outside the cave. I've got a feeling they're stealing towards the cave. Just nerves, I suppose, but——"

She crossed the deck of the motor-boat and clambered out on to the cave floor again.

Audrey and Hannah watched her, as carefully and cautiously she approached the entrance to the cave.

She could not have shown more than an inch or two of her head as she peered round the wall.

For a minute or two she stayed there, and then she came back towards the motor-boat, running hard.

So worried did she look, that Hannah and Audrey had run across the deck of the motor-boat and clambered out of it into the cave before she reached them.

"What is it, mother? Are they coming?" asked Audrey. "If they are, we must get in the motor-boat and put to sea at once——"

"No, no, not yet," panted Mrs. Blain. "They're not in sight yet, but——"

"Then what's worrying you, mother?"

"The sand," said Mrs. Blain. "Usually it's untrodden by human feet, but now there's a line of footsteps from the foot of the cliff path to this cave——"

Hannah and Audrey looked startled at that.

"If Betty & Co. get to the top of the cliff above and look down——"

"They'll see the footsteps——"

"And it'll be enough to make them suspect that we're down here."

"Quite enough for such quick-thinking girls."

"Then hadn't we better take to flight in the motor-boat before they come?" suggested Audrey.

Again Mrs. Blain shook her head.

"No; they may be there already, hiding at the top of the cliff, watching," she said. "If they arrived there soon after us, and could see no boat between the shore and the horizon, they would know we could not have escaped——"

"Then we're trapped. One of them may have gone for the coastguards."

"We're not trapped yet," hissed Mrs. Blain. "Once darkness falls we can steal away unseen. In the meantime, we must watch, in case they get tired of waiting, or in case the coastguards arrive, and anyone comes towards the cave."

Then came hours of anxious waiting and watching for Mrs. Blain, Audrey and Hannah. All three watched. Mrs. Blain along the sands and up the cliffs one way; Audrey, along the sands and up the cliffs the other way; Hannah, out to sea, watching for the people they felt were closing in upon them.

And Mrs. Blain was right.

Betty & Co. were hidden in the bushes on the top of the cliffs. They were anxiously waiting the arrival of coastguards, and mistress and other help from the school.

Would they never come?

But come they did at last, but already the light of the dull, short wintry day was ending.

The attacking party made their plans rapidly. They decided not to rush at the cave, not to give Mrs. Blain any more chance than they could help to see them closing in upon her.

But, great though the care that was

taken, very despair and anxiety made Mrs. Blain super-watchful.

As she gazed up at the cliff at the spot where the narrow path descended down which she and her companions had fled such a short time previously, her sharp eyes suddenly caught a movement.

Then she discerned the figure of a coastguard scrambling down the cliff, taking what cover he could find from the bushes that grew out of the cliff-face.

Then Mrs. Blain saw other coastguards and a Morcove schoolgirl.

"Quick," she called to her companions. "We can't stay any longer, we must take flight in the motor-boat now."

"To Gull Island?"

"No; not to Gull Island. We must save that rendezvous if we can. We must flee along the coast, shake off pursuit if we can, then leave the motor-boat to be discovered somewhere where it will give the impression that we have cut back inland. We must find some other boat to take us to Gull Island. A boat that we can borrow without it being suspected we have taken it."

"Perhaps we can bribe some fisherman."

"Your father told me of some such man."

Mrs. Blain clambered on board, and in the few moments that it took Audrey and old Hannah to embark, the woman got the powerful little engine to start.

"We are all right now!" she exclaimed as they floated out upon the stream.

Nor was it more than a few seconds before the boat was forging clear of a turbulent spot where the stream mingled with the sea.

There came shouts and cries as they flashed into the view of those climbing down the cliffs, but Mrs. Blain took no notice of them, but turned the motor-boat away from the direction of Morcove School.

It was from beyond Morcove School that the coastguard station lay, and

from which an excise motor-boat would come in pursuit of Mrs. Blain and her companions.

That it had already started on its way they had no doubt, and as a matter of fact as Audrey looked back over the white wake of her mother's boat, they saw, far behind, just rounding the headland by Morcove School, a tiny speck, which would be the excise boat.

Whilst Hannah kept her eyes upon the receding path down the cliff, which their pursuers were descending, Audrey watched the speck.

It seemed to grow no bigger as they gathered speed. Audrey hoped that that meant they would at least be able to hold their own, and perhaps eventually out-distance any pursuit.

"Mother, an excise boat is in sight. But we can travel faster than them, I believe, thank goodness!"

Mrs. Blain did not answer. With a fierce expression she sat steering the powerful little craft upon its way along the coast.

Once again Mrs. Blain's mind was working quickly. She could not afford to go too far along the coast because perhaps a coastguard station in this direction also had been warned, and might be sending a boat to search for them.

But she found the spot she sought at last.

A lonely fisherman's cottage.

Without a moment's hesitation she turned the nose of her motor-boat shoreward once again.

Right into the surf she let the motor drive the boat, and when the water grew too shallow for the boat to go any farther, she called to her companions to scramble out of the boat and wade ashore.

"Never mind the boat!" she told them. "Let the excise men find it. We'll make for that cottage there. The man will hide us, and declare that he has not seen us, and lead the excise men to suppose that we made inland for that wood there."

She pointed to a wood that stood

about half a mile from the beach, and then led the way to the nearby cottage.

It happened just as Mrs. Blain planned. The fisherman who lived in the cottage, and had at times helped Mr. Blain with his smuggling, was persuaded to hide them.

He did more than that. When the following excise motor-boat, seeing Mrs. Blain's abandoned boat, sent its men ashore at this point, the fisherman, when they came to his cottage to make inquiries, denied all knowledge of having seen Mrs. Blain and her companions.

He suggested that if they had cut inland they would have made for the wood.

And when pursuit had thus successfully been shaken off, and just after midnight, Mrs. Blain and Hannah, in a boat loaned by the fisherman, rowed themselves and Audrey to Gull Island.

Only when the mainland had been left a full mile behind did Mrs. Blain give a haggard smile.

"Safe, yes!" she exclaimed. "And we will yet do even better than escape the law. There may be a hue-and-cry for us all over the countryside, but Gull Island will not be searched, and so, with luck, we may even take all the silks away with us!"

But Mrs. Blain's desperate hope of yet saving some thousands of pounds' worth of contraband out of the wreckage of the great scheme was doomed to bitter failure.

As she and her companion fugitives were to find, the fact that no one had seen them get away in the rowing-boat from the mainland was not to mean that the pursuit was abandoned.

An hour before dawn, when the guilty trio had safely landed on Gull Island, but were still keeping an anxious, frightened watch for pursuit, it was Audrey's sudden dismay to see a boat—a small sailing-boat—coming across from the mainland.

One wild glance she gave the stout little craft, and then she turned and

shouted to warn old Hannah and Mrs. Blain, who came running up at once.

Morcove School had manned its own boat, and in a few minutes a whole batch of scholars, with a mistress in charge, would be landing on the island!

Mrs. Blain looked in the direction in which Audrey pointed, and then wrung her hands despairingly.

Vain was the hope that, after next nightfall, one of the vessels in the contraband trade could take away Gull Island's rich store of smuggled silks, and also its three fugitives!

Raging inwardly, Audrey's mother ran to the motor-boat again, and both Audrey and Hannah re-embarked in silence. Once again, flight was the one thing possible. And now it must be the open sea for the three of them, a desperate cruising about, until they should sight the foreign vessel that had been engaged in their nefarious trade!

The tuff-tuff! of the tiny motor died away, and peace reigned again around Gull Island—but not for long.

Soon the flocks of gulls were circling and crying about the cliffs once more, startled by the laughter and cheers of Morcove's landing-party.

Out of their boat scrambled Betty & Co., with Miss Redgrave and Ethel Courtway acting as their chummy "officers." Full well they realised that the guilty three were gone, but that was no humiliation. The girls may even have been thinking that perhaps it was just as well Audrey and her mother had escaped, since there would have been something very awful in seeing the couple taken by the police.

Be that as it might, Betty & Co. could take pride in thinking that a nice haul of smuggled silks was going to be made!

Nor was desolate Gull Island long in yielding up the treasures that had been stored there in huge secret dumps.

Long before police and the Revenue authorities had arrived upon the scene, Study 12 had discovered enough costly fabrics to supply all Society for a season.

They found them in all sorts of

places. The little caves which were on the seaward side of Gull Island all revealed treasures of silk and lace, cunningly hidden in nooks and crannies, so as to be out of the sight of any occasional visitor to the island who might enter one of the caves by chance.

On the upper part of the island, too, other secret "dumps" were found—well contrived hiding-places in the centre of clumps of gorse bushes, little cup-shaped depressions which were roofed over by foliage and grasses, so as to give the impression that there was nothing beneath them.

All these "finds" were taken down to one spot on the shore, near where the Revenue officers would be certain to land, and by the time they did land the shore presented an appearance like the stock-room of a big West End drapery store.

"Well, I think we have managed to bowl out the Blains all right!" said Polly, surveying the smuggled goods.

"Yes, wather!" beamed Paula, who had found the search for "dwess materials" greatly to her liking. "And, bai Jove, geals, I do think we deserve a fwock-length apiece as a weward, don't you?"

They all got far more than that for a reward in the end.

If Betty & Co. had cared to bank the

money that came their way as a reward from the authorities, they would have had nice little nest-eggs. But there was a debate in Study 12, and it was unanimously resolved that they all add their shares to Norma's, since she was an orphan, with the world to face.

To this day, only a conjecture can be formed as to why the Blains needed an "adopted" girl when they planned their campaign of fraud.

The belief is that Mr. and Mrs. Blain were bound to replace their own daughter when it was decided that she must go to Morecove School in the guise of a servant. No doubt they stood in fear of being identified as Mr. and Mrs. Blain after they had taken the false name of Halden, and people might have wondered why no daughter was living with them.

All this is mere conjecture, for the simple reason that nothing more has been seen or heard of Audrey and her parents, not to mention old Hannah.

What paths the one-time smugglers are treading now, who can tell? Betty & Co. often wonder. And just as often they wonder whether some day, somewhere, Audrey herself will turn up again!

"Well, you never know!" says Polly. "She may!"

And perhaps, indeed, she will!



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DON'T FORGET YOUR HOLIDAY FRIEND

Holidays are over—at any rate, for most of us—and haven't all of us made new friends whilst staying at the seaside, or in the country, or whilst on that never-to-be-forgotten cruise.

Nearly all of us have promised to "keep up the friendship"—to write to these new friends.

It is a promise that everyone of us should keep.

Some people may say that holiday friendships are just mushroom affairs—that sort of grow quickly and die quickly.

They grow quickly. There's no harm in that. Many a good friendship has started with an instinctive liking of one person for another. One girl sees another, and thinks:

"That's a girl I should like to know."

Being on holiday a meeting is easily arranged, and—the girl is just as nice as she looked, a friendship begins, and ripens rapidly.

And there's no reason why that friendship—loyally maintained by both parties—should not last a lifetime.

One reason why friendships die is neglect.

And holiday friendships are not immune from the danger of neglect. Perhaps they are more likely to suffer from it than any other kind of friendship.

If a girl lives in your neighbourhood you may not see her every day, and that may be the start of your neglecting her, but even if you don't see her by making an effort to go to her house, there is always the chance that you will meet her in the street somewhere.

But the girl whom you meet on holiday may live miles and miles from the town in which you live. The likeli-

nood of a chance meeting again is therefore very remote.

The only way that the friendship can be kept alive, until the day when you can plan another holiday together, or perhaps go to the same town when you start business, is by letter.

So always do MORE than your bit in keeping alive the correspondence.

If it's not your turn to write, but your holiday friend has neglected to answer your last letter, write to her again—don't be willing to let the friendship end.

If it is your turn to write, and you've neglected to write for such a long time that you feel ashamed, pocket your pride and write.

There'll come a time, quite probably, when the friendship begins to flag, when you will ask yourself, is it worth while to keep up this correspondence?

Decidedly it is—even if you never see her again. Do you know that many famous people have kept up a correspondence to the day of their deaths with people, perhaps, whom they have never seen, certainly whom they've not met more than once or twice, and have admitted that the friendship by letter has meant a great deal to them, even helped them a great deal in times of trial.

There are certain times of the year when you can always communicate with a person, even if you have neglected them. A Christmas card at the time of "Peace and Goodwill" has re-started many a temporarily broken friendship.

And ask your holiday friend for the date of her birthday. I have a friend whom I have not seen for years, but on June 6th every year I telephone her and wish her "Many Happy Returns of the Day."

Somehow we can't arrange a meeting, but we shall do so one day—and, anyhow, we both manage to recall once a year a very happy holiday we once spent together at the seaside.

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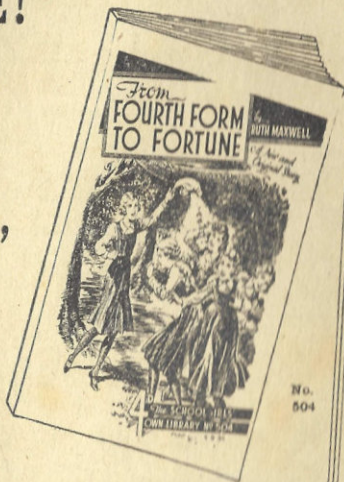
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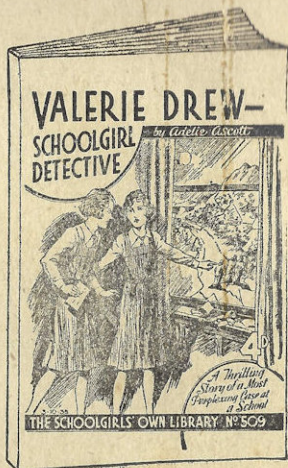
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