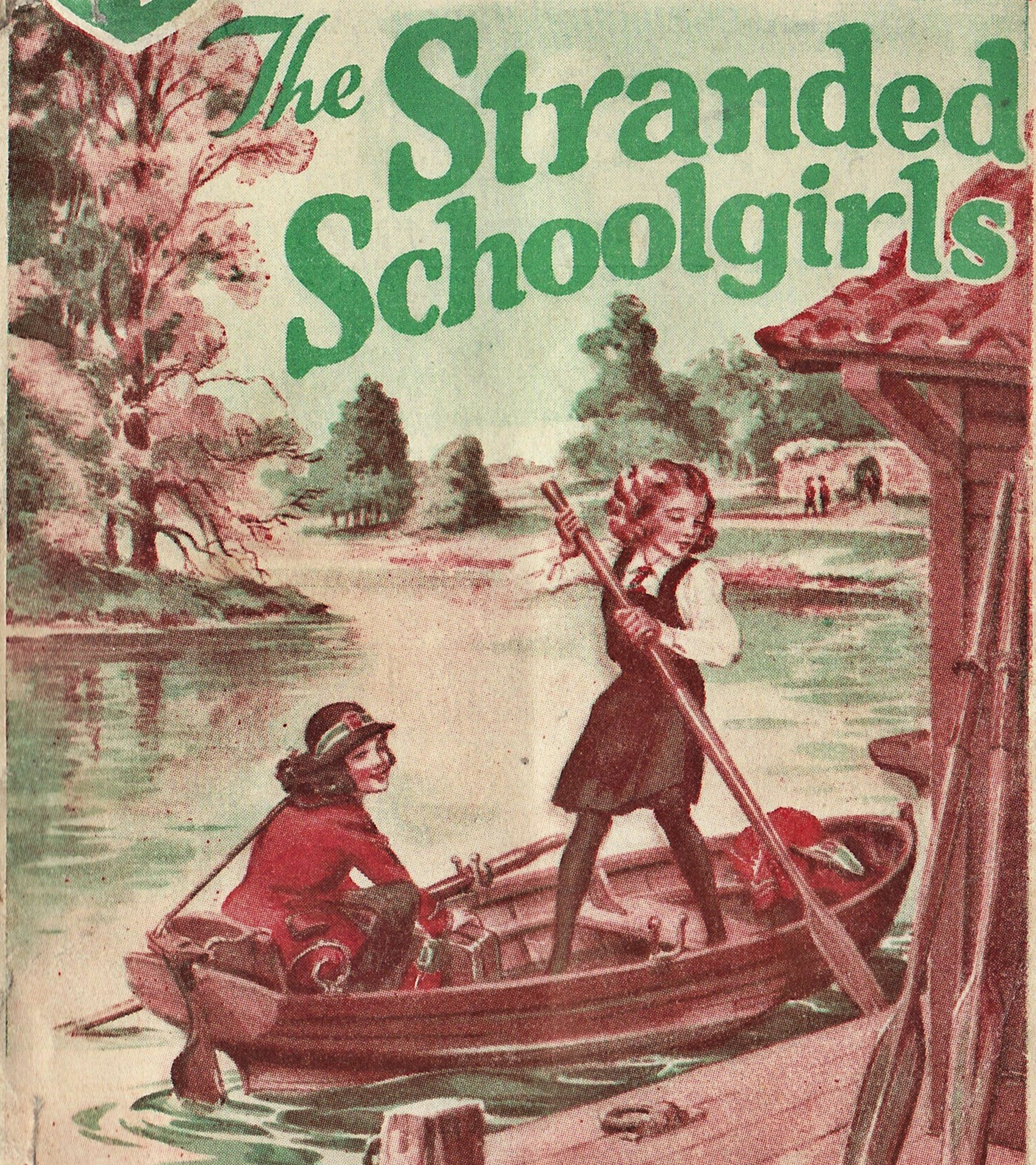




SCHOOLGIRL SERIES N°2

The Stranded Schoolgirls



HILDA RICHARDS *Authoress of*
BESSIE BUNTER

RATCLIFF

A COMPLETE "PAM DUNCAN & CO." STORY

4½

MASCOT SCHOOLGIRL SERIES No. 2

THE STRANDED SCHOOLGIRLS

by

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A "Pamela Duncan & Co." Story

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CHAPTER I.

TO GO OR NOT TO GO!

"NO!" said Pamela Duncan.

"Yes!" said May.

Pamela shook her fair head.

"We can't!" she said, decidedly.

"Guess again!" said May Carhew.

They were arguing in the quadrangle at St. Olive's, in morning break. The bell for third period was almost due. It was a glorious morning—the sun shining from a blue sky. The afternoon was a half-holiday: for which feather-headed May had feather-headed plans—which made Pam shake a wiser head.

"It's out of bounds, May," said Pamela, seriously, "You know as well as I do that the island in the lake is out of school bounds—"

"I know it's a jolly old island, and that I jolly well want to explore it," said May, "And we couldn't have a nicer day. We're allowed to go up the river—!"

"Not so far as Monk's Island."

"Who's to know?" argued May, "We push out our skiff for a run up the river. We're not going to borrow a megaphone, and shout out that we're going to Monk's Island. Once out of sight, O.K. See?"

"Miss Ducat would be angry, if she knew—"

"That's all right—the Duck won't know."

"I don't like keeping secrets," said Pam.

"Bosh!" said May. "Now, look here, Pam. I've made up my mind. I'm going up to Monk's Island after dinner. Will you come?"

"We really ought not—"

"Bother!" said May, "If you won't come, I'll ask Vera Sanson. And—!" The clang of the bell interrupted May, "Oh bother and blow! There's the bell! Come on."

And the chums of the St. Olive's Fourth joined the crowd of girls heading for the form-rooms.

May Carhew, always thoughtless but generally sweet-tempered, was frowning. Pamela Duncan looked, as she felt, worried. She was a good deal more sensible than her chum: if there was any thinking to be done in Study Two in the Fourth, it was Pamela who did it. May's view of school rules was that they were irritating things to be dodged when possible. But Pamela realised that Miss Buss, the Head of St. Olive's, must have good reason for prescribing school bounds, and that it was up to St. Olive's girls to toe the line.

Certainly, Pam liked the idea of a run up to the little uninhabited islet in Luce Lake on a fine afternoon, and exploring the ruins of the old monk's cell half-buried in thickets under the old trees. Miss Ducat had taken a party of Fourth-form girls there one afternoon. But exploring the little island on their own was much more enjoyable. But it was out of school bounds—and that settled it for Pam. Unluckily, it did not settle it for her best chum.

The third work-period that morning was geography. Pam gave attention, as usual, to the lesson, but May's thoughts were running on other matters. She was thinking of the planned excursion for the

afternoon, and when she was asked to name the city that was called the Bride of the Adriatic, she answered inadvertently, "Monk's Island"—an answer that made Miss Ducat stare, and caused a ripple of laughter in the Fourth.

"He, he, he!" chuckled Peg Pipping, nearly swallowing a bullseye in her amusement. Even Plump Peg knew that that answer wouldn't do.

"May!" exclaimed Miss Ducat, severely, "What did you say?"

"Oh!" stammered May, crimsoning, "I—I mean—"

"He, he, he!" came from Peg.

"Margery." Miss Ducat fixed her eyes on the chuckling Peg, "Tell May the name of the city in question."

May made a grimace. She knew the right answer, as a matter of fact, and it was annoying to be told by the fat duffer of the Fourth. But Miss Ducat's word was law in the Fourth Form room, and she was silent. Peg Pipping was only too willing to oblige. Peg liked showing off her knowledge.

"Oh, yes, Miss Ducat," said Peg, "Rome, of course. Didn't you really know it was Rome, May?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" came from the whole form. When Peg Pipping displayed knowledge, that was the kind of knowledge she generally displayed!

"Margery, you absurd girl—!" exclaimed Miss Ducat.

"I—I—I mean Paris!" exclaimed Peg, in a hurry, "I—I wonder what made me say Rome! I—I mean Paris, of course."

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked the Fourth.

"Upon my word!" said Miss Ducat, "Margery——!"

"Nunno, not Paris!" bleated Peg, realising that she had got it wrong again, "I—I meant to say New York, Miss Ducat."

That answer seemed likely to throw the St. Olive's Fourth into hysterics. Even Miss Ducat found it difficult to be grave.

"Be silent, Margery! Millicent, please give the name of the city."

"Venice!" said Millicent Wade.

"I—I was just going to say Venice, Miss Ducat!" bleated Peg, "I—I remember now that Venice was called the Pride of the Antarctic—!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" howled the Fourth Form.

"That will do, Margery!" gasped Miss Ducat, "You will write out twenty times, after class, that Venice was called the Bride of the Adriatic."

"Cat!" breathed Peg: not loud enough for Miss Ducat to hear. After which, Plump Peg was not anxious to show off her knowledge, for the remainder of that geography lesson.

When the Fourth Form came out, May touched Pamela on the arm, as they went out into the sunny quad.

"You're coming this afternoon, Pam?" she asked.

"We mustn't, May—!"

"Oh, bother and blow! Then I'll cut across and ask Vera!" snapped May. She was turning away when Pam caught her arm.

She did not want to lose her chum for the afternoon, and still less did she want May to pair off with Vera Sanson, who was likely to lead her into more mischief than her own feather head.

"Don't be a little donkey, May! I'll come," she said.

And May's frowning face brightened again at once. And so it was settled—to May's satisfaction, and Pam's inward misgivings—neither of the girls dreaming, for one moment, what was destined to come of that forbidden expedition.

CHAPTER II.

OUT OF BOUNDS!

"JOLLY, isn't it?" said May, enthusiastically.

Pamela nodded.

It was jolly, there was no doubt about that. They pushed off the skiff, after dinner, from the school boat-house, and Pamela rowed, while May steered. There were a good many boats out that fine afternoon: and Pamela and May were not likely to be specially noticed among so many. They were at liberty, if they liked, to pull as far as Hedges Bridge, the village of Hedges being the limit of bounds. Pamela pulled steadily, and the little boat glided swiftly up the sunny river, between green banks, and the village and its ancient stone bridge came in sight.

Then Pamela cast a rather anxious glance round, and slowed on her oars. Once past the bridge, they were out of bounds—and if spotted by a mistress or a prefect, that meant punishment—as well as a "royal jaw" from the Head. But there was nobody on the tow-path, nobody on the bridge: they seemed to have the river to themselves for the moment.

"Buck up!" said May, "We're all right on the other side of the bridge. Get a move on, slow-coach."

Pamela hesitated a moment. But she felt that she was in for it now, and if they were going out of bounds, the more swiftly they went, the better. But as the boat shot under the stone arch of the bridge, and emerged into the sunshine on the further side, she dreaded to hear an authoritative voice calling. But it was all clear: and she pulled on rapidly, and the village bridge dropped behind.

Half-a-mile beyond the bridge, the river widened into a broad sheet of water, which was locally called the "Lake." The lake, and the island in its centre, were included in the property of Sir Pulteney Peake, a local magnate of great wealth and possessions. Nobody was allowed on the island without special permission from Sir Pulteney—a circumstance which May Carhew regarded as a trifle light as air. Deep woods surrounded the lake, rarely trodden except by Sir Pulteney's keepers. It was a solitary spot—one of the beauty spots of the county—and from its aspect might have been a hundred miles from anywhere.

"You have to be careful here, Pam," said May, carelessly, "Currents, and all that."

"I know!" assented Pam.

She pulled for the island. Owing to the river passing through one side of the lake, there were somewhat uncertain currents, and care was needed in a small light craft. But Pam pulled on steadily, and May's eyes danced as they ran in to the island.

It was a tiny island, hardly more than a couple of acres in extent, but it was wooded down to the water's edge on all sides, with great branches of oak and beech shadowing the water: the interior between the tall trees, a mass of thick underwoods. May stood up to look for the landing-place, and the boat rocked.

"Is that what you call being careful?" inquired Pamela.

"Oh, blow!" answered May. "Bother and blow!" Which was her usual rejoinder to any remonstrance. "Straight on, Pam—there's the landing-place. I say, suppose there's somebody on the island, though." That thought occurred to May's volatile mind rather late!

Pamela laughed.

"In that case, we won't land," she said, "But there's hardly ever anybody here, especially when Sir Pulteney Peake is away—and he's in

London now."

"I'll give them a hail, and make sure!" said May, as the boat glided in to the little landing-place under heavy thick branches, and she shouted gaily, "Ahoy! Ahoy the island! Show a leg! Ahoy!"

Only endless echoes among the trees answered. There was no other reply, and it was assured that the little island was, as usual, untenanted. Pamela shipped her oars, and the boat rocked in to the tiny landing-place, and May jumped out on the grass, and took the painter.

"Happy landing!" trilled May, "I say, ain't it jolly having an island all to ourselves, like jolly old Robinson Crusoe. Look after the sandwiches and the thermos, Pam, while I tie the painter."

"Right-ho," said Pam.

She extracted the packet of sandwiches, the wedge of cake, and the thermos flask from the boat's locker, and stepped ashore with them, while May secured the painter to a willow root.

They were going to have a picnic tea, and pull back to St. Olive's in time for calling-over: and nobody, as May said, would be the wiser. Afterwards, of course, they would tell the other girls in the Fourth of their reckless excursion—but not a word had been said in advance. Nobody would have given them away: but a careless word might have reached the ear of a prefect. And it would have been a rather disastrous outcome of the expedition, if they had sighted a School boat pulling to the island, with Anemone Rance or Irene Dace or some other Sixth-Form prefect in it, to fetch them back!

"Nobody's likely to spot us here, what?" chuckled May, as they went under the trees, following a faintly-marked path into the interior of Monk's Island.

"Hardly," agreed Pamela.

"Might fancy yourself in the middle of a forest," said May, with a sort of delightful shiver, as she peered into the green gloom under the trees. "Hallo, here we are! This is better."

In the very centre of the little island was an open glade, into which the sunlight fell brightly, a pool of light in the midst of the surrounding wood. In the glade stood what remained of the old stone cell, once inhabited—according to legend—by a monkish recluse of ancient times.

The thick stone walls stood, but there was no trace left of the door that had once been in the arched doorway. Most of the roof had fallen in, in the course of centuries, and the interior of the cell was choked with rubble. Pamela put down the packet of sandwiches, the cake, and the thermos, in the grass, while May pushed on through the doorway, and scrambled among the rubble within. Clouds of dust rose from it as she trampled.

"Oh!" came a sudden howl.

"May! What is it?" Pamela scrambled into the cell after her. She found May sitting on a great block of stone, nursing her ankle, and making wry faces.

"Ow! Nothing! Only slipped and tumbled over," said May, cheerily, "Mind how you clamber over all this rubbish. I've torn my stocking—never mind! I say it's jolly here, Pam—must have been nice for the old johnny who lived here a thousand years ago."

"On a sunny afternoon," said Pam, laughing, "I shouldn't care for a night here."

"Oh! No!" agreed May, "It's jolly, but I think I'd rather get back to Study Two at St. Olive's for the night! Come out this way!" She pushed on through the rubble, to the wall at the back of the cell. It was partly fallen, and a great gap yawned in it, almost as wide as the doorway in front.

"It's a bit dusty!" said Pamela.

"Who cares for a spot of dust?" hooted May, scornfully, and she pushed on. There was plenty of room to pass through the gap in the back wall, but undoubtedly the rubble was dusty in dry weather, and May stirred up a good deal. There was a sudden yelp as her foot slipped among the broken masonry.

"Oh! What is it now?" exclaimed Pam.

"Bother and blow! I've torn my other stocking!"

"Better go back by the front door—"

"Rot! Come on!"

May pushed on, and Pamela followed. The cell backed on the wood, and from the gap in the old stone wall, they passed directly into dark shadow under the trees. May Carhew led the way, circling among the trees, to get back to the glade and the front of the old cell again.

They arrived there a little breathless, and considerably dusty—May the dustier of the two. She made a grimace at her torn stockings. But torn stockings did not suffice to dash May's cheery spirits. May was enjoying her afternoon—all the more, perhaps, from a spirit of mischief, because she was out of bounds.

"Shall we tea here, or in the cell, Pam?" she asked.

"Here!" answered Pamela Duncan, promptly, "I've had enough dust."

"O.K." said May: and they sat down in the grass, unpacked sandwiches and cake, unscrewed the top of the Thermos, and started. And if Pam—remembering school bounds, and Miss Buss, and Miss Ducat, was a little thoughtful, May was thoughtless and talkative enough for two, and the time passed very cheerily—till the red glow of the sun, lower over the tree-tops, warned them that it was time to move.

CHAPTER III.

STRANDED!

"PAM!"

It was a startled shriek from May Carhew.

Pamela jumped, and almost dropped the thermos. She spun round, staring after May. It was time to think of returning, for it was rather a long pull back to the school, and the bare thought of being late for roll-call, after an afternoon out of bounds, made even May serious. May had scuttled off to the landing-place, down the path through the thick trees, leaving Pam to clear away the traces of the picnic, and to gather up the thermos, and follow. May's startled shriek rang back through the trees, and startled Pamela.

"May! What—?" she called, anxiously.

"The boat!"

"The boat!" repeated Pam.

"It's gone!"

Pamela stood quite still, for a second. Then she raced after May.

In a few moments she joined her at the little grassy landing-place under the branches on the margin of the island. May's face was quite pale as she stood staring at the spot where the boat had been moored. And Pam's face paled too. That spot was empty now—and Pam, raising her eyes and scanning the lake, could not see a sign of the boat. She caught her breath.

"May! You never tied it safely—!"

"I—I did!" stammered May, "Look, here's the root I tied the painter to—I—I tied it all right."

"You little ass!" gasped Pam.

"I tell you I tied it all right! I—I—" May broke off. Even May's feather brain realised that, had the painter been safely tied, the boat would still have been there. And it was not there.

The two schoolgirls looked at one another with white faces. Obviously, May, with her usual hasty carelessness, had not tied the painter securely: and the currents round the island, jerking at the boat, had pulled it loose. The boat had floated off—how long ago, they could not guess: for it was no longer in sight. Somewhere, far away on the lake, it was drifting on the varied currents—or perhaps down the river. Anyway, it was gone.

"Good heavens!" breathed Pamela.

"We—we—we're stranded!" May choked, "Oh, Pam! It—it was all my fault—I—I made you come! Oh, Pam." May was very near tears, "Now—now we shall get into a fearful row—they'll know we're out of bounds—Oh, Pam!"

Pamela did not answer that. She was thinking of the "row" after going out of bounds. Only too glad would she have been to see a boat with a prefect in it, or Miss Ducat, or even the dreaded Head herself. They were stranded on the island in the lake—and nobody knew that they were there! Penalties were nothing—if only a boat came to take them off. But—nobody knew! No boat would come to take them off—they were as hopelessly stranded as Robinson Crusoe on his island!

There was a long silence. Slowly, May realised the seriousness of it, and the colour drained from her face.

"Why, we can't get off at all, Pam!" she almost whispered, "It—it isn't only a row with the Duck, but—but we—we can't get away—we—we're here for the night! Oh, Pam!"

Pam was utterly dismayed. But she kept a cool head. Poor May looked like breaking down: and Pam had to have resolution enough for two.

"We—we may sight a boat, May," she said, "The people up at the Hall come on the lake sometimes—"

"Not when Sir Pulteney is away," said May, with quivering lips. "Oh, Pam! I've landed you in this! It's all my fault."

"Never mind that, May dear," said Pam, gently, "We've both been very silly, but it can't be helped now. We've got to make the best of it. Thank goodness the weather's fine."

"Oh, bother the weather," mumbled May.

"Well, it would be worse if it rained," said Pamela, with determined cheerfulness, "We—we shall get off to-morrow, somehow, May."

May shivered. Already the sun was sinking low over the woods. The thought of the dark night, on that solitary island, was terrifying. Pamela pressed her arm.

"Keep your pecker up, old thing," she said, more lightly than she could feel, "We may see a boat before dark, and wave to it—there's always a chance"

May nodded, but her look was hopeless—and Pam had little hope, though she spoke with courage. From the landing-place, they had a wide view of the lake, and the wooded banks in the far distance. They fell into silence, as they watched the wide waters, in the faint, faint hope of seeing a boat, while the sun dipped lower and lower, and dark shadows stole over the lonely island and the water.

Behind them, under the trees, the island was now in black darkness. The light was fading on the surface of the lake.

May Carhew drew a long, quivering breath, at last.

"We're for it, Pam! They—they won't guess where we are, at St. Olive's."

"I'm afraid not," said Pamela, "We shall be searched for—but—but they're not likely to think of Monk's Island. We never told anyone where we were going—."

"They'll miss the boat!" muttered May, "Some of the girls must have seen us on the river. But—Oh, Pam, the Duck will think we've had an accident—she will be awfully cut up—Oh, Pam, I've been a little idiot—we ought not to have come."

Pamela smiled faintly.

"I shouldn't have given in," she said, "It's my fault as much as yours. Anyway that doesn't matter much now—we're stranded. We—we shan't be found to-night, May dear, but to-morrow—the whole country-side will be searched for us, Monks' Island with the rest—we've only got to stick it for one night—."

"Only!" shuddered May.

The darkness deepened. The lake was lost in shadow: the distant banks vanished in gloom. Faintly the wash of water came through the dark—an eerie sound to the ears of the two stranded schoolgirls. Pam stirred at last.

"We've got to camp out, May," she said. Her voice was firm, and her tone cheerful. "Let's get back to the cell. That's better than nothing."

"Yes, Pam, old girl," said May, in a very subdued voice.

They threaded their way back along the dark path to the glade in the centre of the island. All was dark now: but in the glade the darkness was less dense. The stars came out in a velvety sky, glimmering down on them.

"After all there—there's nothing to be af-af-afraid of!" mumbled May, "Nobody ever comes here, Pam. I—I wish somebody would. But—nobody does—so—so we needn't be funky." She tried to steady her voice.

"Of course not," said Pam, cheerfully, "Safe as Robinson Crusoe on his island."

"The savages came to Robinson Crusoe's island," said May, with a faint grin.

Pamela laughed.

"Well, no savages will come to Monk's Island, May."

"I—I say, Pam." May's voice shook at a sudden remembrance, "I—I say, I—I've heard that poachers have come here, to set night-lines for fish—Oh, Pam! If—if they should come—!" Her voice trailed off.

Pam started. But she forced herself to laugh.

"Stuff!" she said, "Poachers wouldn't eat us, even if they did come. Besides, they couldn't see us in the dark! We shan't walk up to them and say 'Please, Mr. Poacher, here we are, two silly schoolgirls out of bounds!'"

May laughed—something like her old laugh.

"You're a jolly old brick, Pam," she said, "I—I should die of fright if you weren't here! Oh, Pam, you can smack my head if you like for landing you in this, I say, let's get into the cell—it won't seem quite so—so beastly lonely."

"We'll camp all right," said Pam, cheerily, "And we've got a spot of tea left in the thermos, for brekker. And—and they'll find us to-morrow. We're all right, May."

May pressed her arm by way of answer. They pushed into the interior of the old stone cell. It was at least a shelter: it did not seem so lonely and desolate within the old stone walls. The starlight glittered

through the many gaps in the old roof, but there was a sheltered corner, if it should rain. In that corner, groping in the shadows, they piled handfuls and armfuls of leaves, all they had to make a bed. And by the time they had finished, they were both tired and sleepy: it was past their usual bedtime at the school. Luckily the night was fine, and not cold: and they settled down to sleep—as well as they could. But the sleep of the two stranded schoolgirls on the lonely island was very broken and fitful.

CHAPTER IV.

ALARM IN THE NIGHT!

“**W**HERE on earth’s Pam?”
“And May?”
“Goodness knows!”

There was excited discussion in the junior Common-Room at St. Olive’s. Two girls had failed to answer to their names at roll-call: Pamela Duncan and May Carhew. It was not unexampled for girls to be late for roll—especially thoughtless girls like May—but when they did not come in for prep, everybody began to wonder. And when, after prep was over, it was learned that still they had not come in, there was alarm.

Miss Ducat, the mistress of the Fourth, was seen to look very grave: Peg Pipping, who got news of everything, brought the tidings to Common-Room that the “Duck” had been to see the Head: and that Miss Buss had telephoned to the police-station at Oscombe.

“And how do you know that the Beak phoned?” inquired Millicent Wade. “Did she ask you into the study?”

“I happened to stoop to pick up a pin near the Head’s door,” explained Peg, “So I happened to hear what was going on in the study. Of course, I wasn’t listening—not the sort of thing I would do! You might!”

“You heard without listening?” asked Isolda Wentworth.

“Yes, exactly! I say, the Beak told the bobbies that two St. Olive’s girls were missing, and asked if they could get any news. She said she was afraid there had been an accident. I say, the Duck’s got a face as long as a fiddle,” said Peg, “I believe she thinks a lot of Pamela. I don’t know why. She said she would sit up to-night to wait for news.”

“Poor old Pam!” said Gwendoline Page, “What can have happened? Anybody know where they went?”

There was a general shaking of heads. Everybody knew that Pam and May had disappeared immediately after dinner, but where they had gone, nobody knew. It was known that Parker, the porter, had been down to Hedges to inquire: but no one in the village had seen anything of the missing girls. The boat-keeper had reported that Miss Duncan’s boat had been taken out, and had not been returned to the boat-house. But that Pamela and May could be still out in the boat, late in the dark evening, was impossible. Something had happened—but what? All the girls were looking very grave and concerned—excepting Peg. Plump Peg had her own theory to account for the absence of two of the Fourth.

“It’s all right,” said Peg, nodding her fat head, “There hasn’t been any accident—how could a boat get upset on a fine afternoon? I know what’s happened.”

“What?” asked a dozen voices.

“They’ve run away from school to be stowaways!” announced Peg. “Like a girl did in the newspaper, you know.”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

Peg's idiotic suggestion relieved the tension for a moment: and there was a laugh in Common-Room. Peg blinked indignantly at laughing faces.

"Well, you'll find I'm right," she said. "Of course, the Duck wouldn't guess—she hasn't my brains! The Duck's rather a donkey!"

"Dry up!" breathed Millicent, as the figure of Miss Ducat, mistress of the Fourth Form, appeared in the open doorway of the junior common-room.

"Shan't!" retorted Peg independently. Peg had her plump back to the door, and did not see Miss Ducat. "You all jolly well know that the Duck is rather a donkey! I said so, and I'll say so again. What are you making faces at me for, Gwen?" she added, staring at Gwendoline Page, who was making frantic signs to her to be silent. "You can make faces, if you like—but I said the Duck is a donkey, and—"

"Margery!" said a deep voice.

"Oh, scissors!" Margery Pipping spun round. Her eyes popped at Miss Ducat. "Oh crumbs! I—I wasn't speaking of you, Miss Ducat. I—I was speaking of another donkey—"

"Be silent, you foolish girl!" said Miss Ducat, sharply. To Peg's relief, she let it drop at that. Miss Ducat was too worried about Pam and May, to take much heed of the fat duffer of her form. She glanced over the crowd of girls. "No one here knows where Pamela and May were going this afternoon?" she asked. "It is strange that they should not have told anyone—unless they were going out of school bounds—and Pamela, I am sure, would not do that."

There was no reply—no one had any information to give. Peg—after a look at Miss Ducat's face—decided not to make her happy suggestion that Pam and May had run away from school to become stowaways! It seemed quite likely to Peg—she had read of such things in her favourite weekly paper "Film Thrills".

"Oh, Miss Ducat what can have happened to Pam and May?" exclaimed Millicent.

"We must not conclude that anything has happened, until we receive news," said Miss Ducat, very gravely. "Search is already being made, and I hope that news may be received any moment. I—I am sure that there will be good news before morning."

But all the girls knew that the mistress of the Fourth was deeply disturbed, as she turned and left the junior common-room. There was a buzz of excited discussion until the bedtime bell rang, and the girls went to their rooms—but few of them slept for a long time: for an hour, at least, there was a murmur of voices in the various rooms, and it was late when slumber at last closed the eyes of the girls of St. Olive's.

Miss Ducat did not go to bed.

She sat up in her study, waiting—hoping for news. The night grew older—the last door had closed, the last light was out, except that burning in Miss Ducat's study. Every minute she hoped to hear the ring of the telephone bell, to bring news of the missing girls. But there was no ring—and when the deep strokes of midnight sounded from the clock-tower, the mistress of the Fourth rose from her chair, and paced and paced the room, too anxious to keep still.

What had happened to the two girls? She thought of a capsized boat, and other dreadful possibilities. What could have happened? The long, long minutes of that night of watching seemed endless to Miss Ducat. If she could only have heard the distant tinkle of the bell in the porter's lodge—or the sound of a knock at the door! But there was nothing—the silence of the night was unbroken: till from

the clock-tower came the dull boom of one.

Miss Ducat still paced her study. She was tired, and her eyes were heavy—but she did not think of sleep. If only there would be a sound—some sound that would announce the belated return of the two wanderers—or news of them! The silence of the sleeping House was oppressive, as the long night wore on.

Suddenly Miss Ducat gave a start. Her ears were on the alert—and some sound had come to them in the deep silence. She started, and listened: and then, opening her study door quietly, she looked into the dark corridor and listened again.

There was some faint sound in the night-silence, and it puzzled her. She drew a deep, quick breath. Was it possible that those two foolish girls had gone a great distance out of bounds—perhaps getting in the wrong train, or something of the kind—and had returned at this late hour, and were trying to get into the school quietly? It was unlikely—but—what, otherwise, was that sound? Miss Ducat was almost certain that she had heard the sound of a window cautiously opened.

Had she been in bed at that hour as usual, certainly she would not have heard that faint sound on the ground floor. But awake, disturbed, listening intently, she had heard it, and she was sure that she was not mistaken.

For several minutes she stood at her study door, listening, her heart beating rather hard. Then, she quietly moved down the Staff corridor, and turned the corner, in the direction from which she was sure that that faint sound had come.

She caught her breath, as she stopped outside the Headmistress's study. From within Miss Buss's study came unmistakeable sounds. There was a movement, a faint rustling, a snapping sound, and a murmur of voices.

"That's done it Bill!" It was a low, hoarse whisper, but it reached Miss Ducat through the door.

She stood like stone.

She knew now what those sounds meant. That snap had been the opening of the Head's safe in the study. Thieves were at work—burglars in the House, utterly unconscious that a form-mistress was sitting up that night, and that they had been heard!

Miss Ducat felt the blood race to her heart. But she was a woman of courage—she was not frightened. That hoarse whisper showed that there were two men in the study—and they must have entered by the window: the door was locked at night, and Miss Ducat could not have opened it if she had wished: Miss Buss had the key. They had the safe open already: and Miss Ducat knew that there were many valuable things in the Head's safe—it was a rich haul, if they got away with it. For some moments she stood as if stunned—then silently, but swiftly, she hurried back to her study, ran to the telephone, and rang up Parker in the lodge. Through the silent night the buzz of the telephone bell in the porter's lodge reached her. No doubt it also reached the thieves in the Head's study, and must have startled them.

A hurried word to the sleepy Parker: and then Miss Ducat rang up the police-station at Oscombe. And even as she spoke to Inspector Bennett over the wires, she heard a sound from the quadrangle—a scamper of running feet, and a shout from Parker, already out of his lodge, and the loud bark of the porter's dog. The thieves in the Head's study had taken the alarm, and were on the run.

CHAPTER V.

DANGER!

"PAM!"

Pamela Duncan came out of slumber, in the dark cell on Monk's Island. For a moment she wondered where she was: then she realised that May, in the dark, was shaking her by the arm, and that she was not in bed at St. Olive's. She started up with May's frightened whisper in her ear.

"May! Yes! What—?"

"Quiet, Pam! Don't speak—don't make a sound! I—I'm frightened! Suppose it is the poachers, or—or—Oh' Pam! Listen."

Pamela sat up in the bed of leaves, and listened. Some sound in the night had startled May, and frightened her. In the dark of the dim cell, Pam could feel her trembling.

For a moment or two, Pam heard nothing, but the whisper of the night wind in the heavy branches of the island trees. Then another sound came more distinctly, and she started. It was the light splash of an oar.

"A boat!" breathed Pam.

"Yes! I—I woke up—I—I heard it—it's coming to the island!" whispered May, "Oh! Pam! Who—what—who can it be—it's long past midnight—Oh, Pam!"

"It's all right," said Pamela, "They may have guessed where we are—and sent a boat to take us off—it's possible! But—but even if it's the fishing poachers, they won't hurt us, May. Only—better keep quiet!"

"Not a sound!" whispered May, "Oh! I—I'm frightened, Pam."

Pamela pressed her arm reassuringly. Sitting up in the bed of leaves, they listened, with beating hearts. It was possible, at least, that it was a boat coming to search for them—from the bottom of her heart Pam hoped so. But she could not think it was that—it was only a hope. They kept very still, as they listened.

"If they're looking for us, they will call out!" Pamela whispered. "Then—then we can call back! Quiet—till then."

But she knew now that it was not a searching boat from the school, for the sounds, closer at hand, showed that it had reached the little landing-place, and still no call was to be heard. Obviously a search-party would have called out—a call would have reached every corner of the tiny island. But there was no sound, save the dip of the oars, the bump of a boat on the grassy margin of the isle, and then a rustle in the willows, from which Pam knew that the newcomer had landed, and was tying up the boat.

In the dark she could see the glimmer of May's face, white as chalk, with the eyes bright and dilated. May held her arm almost convulsively.

"Pam!" Her voice was a broken whisper. "Who—who—what—who is it? Oh Pam, if—if they find us here—"

"Steady the Buffs!" breathed Pam, "Keep cool, old thing. Whoever they are, they won't spot us in the dark here—only keep cool, and keep quiet."

May trembled and was silent. There was something strange, frightening, in that quiet and stealthy coming of the boat to the lonely island in the lake. It was plainly not a search party from the school—nor did it seem likely that it was the fishing-poachers intending to set night-lines—not at that hour. Pamela did not know what time it was, but she knew that it was long past midnight—probably two or three o'clock. Fishing poachers would hardly come so late as that.

But who, and what, else could it be? Who was rowing on the lake, visiting the solitary isle at such an hour? Only too certainly such night-birds were up to no good—and fear lay heavy on Pam's heart as well as on May's. But she did not lose her courage: and her quiet calmness helped to steady poor May.

"They're coming up the path!" breathed May. Footsteps could be heard under the dark trees, approaching the glade in the centre of Monk's Island.

"Quiet!" whispered Pamela.

The footsteps came nearer. Pam fixed her eyes on the doorway of the little cell through which, from the darkness within, she could see the starlit glade. In a minute or two she would see who came. Law-breakers of some kind, landing stealthily on the lonely island at such an hour—she felt that it must be so. The footsteps sounded like more than one—she thought there were two. And a few moments later she knew, for a muttering voice reached her straining ears.

"Show a glim, George."

"Better not," came another muttering voice, "Safety first, Bill."

"Think a light would be seen on this island?"

"You never know."

"Bill grunted, but there was no "glim": the two men came on in darkness, and Pam heard a muttered oath as one of them bumped into a tree-trunk. She caught May's hand and pressed it, fearful that the frightened girl might cry out in her terror. May's face glimmered white as a sheet, but she kept silent.

Both the schoolgirls realised that, so long as they kept silent, they were safe. The two men, obviously, had not the remotest suspicion that anyone was already on Monk's Island. In the dark interior of the stone cell, the schoolgirls were quite invisible even if "Bill" and "George" had locked in. Unless those two strange and terrifying men actually entered the stone cell, they were safe. And even then, flight was possible by the gap in the back wall, and they might hide in the thick trees. But safety lay in silence: and the terrified schoolgirls hardly breathed, as the shadowy figures of the two men emerged into the little starlit glade.

That the men must be law-breakers of some sort, Pamela already dreaded—and their muttered words, and their caution in showing a light, were proof of it. If they found that they were observed—! Pamela shuddered at the thought, and set her lips hard, and pressed May's trembling hand.

She could see them now—shadowy forms in the starlight. They had left their boat tied up at the landing-place, and come up the path into the little glade—why? She could not begin to guess what they wanted there. One of them was a short, squat man, who carried something in his hand—Pam could not see what. The other, taller, had a bag or bundle of some kind slung over his shoulder, and he dropped it to the earth as they stopped in the glade.

"Here, or inside the cell, Bill?" asked the shorter man. He moved as he spoke, and a glimmer of starlight fell on what he held in his hand, and Pamela saw that it was a large curved trowel.

Her heart almost died in her breast.

She knew now—they had come there to hide something. The trowel was for digging a hole in which to hide it. It could be for nothing else. No doubt the article to be hidden under earth was the leather bag the taller man had dropped into the grass. Thieves hiding their plunder—it could mean nothing else. If they learned that eyes were watching them—Pamela had to shut her teeth hard to keep her terror in

check. The man called "Bill" seemed to be considering—whether the bag was to be buried in the glade where they stood, or inside the old cell. If they decided on the latter, they would come in—and then—!

"Here," said the taller man, after a pause that was only a few seconds, but seemed like hours to Pam and May. "Safer here, with the turf over it. People come here sometimes and explore that old ruin, and anything hidden there might turn up. There was a party of schoolgirls on the island only a couple of weeks ago, and they was rambling and scrambling all over that cell. But nobody'll go digging in the turf 'ere."

"O.K." said George.

"We got a good haul, George, though mebbe we'd have done better if we hadn't been interrupted," went on Bill. "There's eight hundred quid in War bonds, and there can't be less'n fifty in this bundle of pound notes. And them silver pots is worth big money, with the metal at its present price, George. We got to keep it safe, George, till we get in touch with a 'fence' to 'andle it."

"There ain't a safer spot than this in the county."

"I believe you!"

"We've used this 'ere island afore, and we'll use it again," said George. "Jest made for us, I reckon. Well, pick out the spot, Bill, and I'll get going."

The two men moved in the starlight.

In the dark in the cell, Pam's eyes met May's. They knew now what it all meant—the two wretches, moving within a few yards of them, were burglars—hiding their loot in a safe, solitary spot, till they could dispose of it. What would they do if they discovered that their secret was known? Pamela's face was as white as May's—terror seemed to chain the two unhappy schoolgirls motionless. Two dark, lawless, desperate men, with their plunder and their liberty at stake—a dreadful thought was in the minds of the hidden schoolgirls, of the grasp of ruthless hands, a plunge in the waters of the lake: a secret hidden under deep rolling waters!

May was trembling like an aspen. Pamela, she hardly knew how, kept cool and collected. Her firm clasp of May's hand gave her chum courage. With their eyes fixed on the starlit doorway of the stone cell, they could see the shadowy figures—a little further off now, halting under the branches of a big oak. A mutter of voices came in the silence, but the schoolgirls could no longer catch the words. But they could see that the two ruffians had found the selected spot. The shorter man was already at work, removing the turf with the trowel. The other was examining the contents of the bag, in the glitter of the stars. The sound of the trowel, clinking occasionally on a stone, came to the schoolgirls' ears.

They crouched there in the darkness, in silence. May was conscious only of fear. But in Pamela Duncan's mind other thoughts were forming.

CHAPTER VI.

ESCAPE!

"MAY!" whispered Pamela.

May Carhew pressed her arm convulsively.

"Don't! They'll hear!" she moaned.

"They won't hear a whisper—they're further off!" Pamela's voice was barely audible, even to May. The two dark figures were across the glade, under the big oak, neither thinking of glancing towards the

old stone cell. "Keep cool, May! Dear May, have you the nerve to get away?"

"They'll see us—hear us—!" breathed May.

"Not if we're careful, dear. Think!" whispered Pamela. "We can get out by the gap at the back—same as we did this afternoon—and get through the trees—down to the landing-place."

May trembled.

"No! No! I—I daren't move, Pam. Keep still! Keep quiet! We're safe if those awful men don't find us! Oh, don't move—keep quiet."

Pamela drew a deep breath. She had the courage to carry out the plan that had formed in her mind, and she had to strengthen her chum for the effort and the risk.

"Listen, May." Her lips were close to May's ear as she whispered. "If we can get down to the landing-place before they catch us—," May shuddered so violently, that Pamela paused. Then she went on softly. "The boat's there, May! Do you understand, dear? If we can get off in the boat—!"

"I—I dare not!" moaned poor May.

"Dear May, we've got to dare!" whispered Pam, steadily. "Dear, we're not safe here—we shall be safe—in the boat! They've left their boat tied up, where we left ours this afternoon. If we get the boat, they will be stranded—instead of us. Once in the boat—!"

May trembled like a leaf. Pamela cast a look out of the doorway into the starlit glade. The clinking of the trowel came in the silence, and the mutter of a voice. They were busy—preparing the hiding-place for the loot. But it was not likely to take them very long to get through. When they had finished, would they go? They might—or they might remain. They might camp on the island for the remainder of the night, for all Pamela knew. It was clear that they were well acquainted with Monk's Island, and had visited it before, and knew how solitary and deserted it always was. The plan that had outlined itself in Pam's mind meant not only immediate escape—but it was the way to safety.

She pressed May's trembling hand encouragingly.

"Dear May, let's try. Keep hold of my hand—we're not safe here, dear, but we shall be safe in the boat. Steady, old dear."

She heard May gulp. But May's head was nodding: she was accustomed to following the lead of her comrade, and she was willing to follow it now. Quietly, cautiously, Pam rose to her feet. One last look she gave at the dark figures across the glade, and then she drew May towards the gap in the back wall of the stone cell.

They moved slowly—almost inch by inch—dreading that the clink of falling stone, the rustle of a dress, might reach ears across the glade. It seemed an age before they reached the gap in the wall—but they had made no sound. Pamela, with beating heart, drew May Carhew through the gap, and they were outside the stone cell at last, and standing under the blackness of the trees.

May leaned a hand on a gnarled old trunk for support. Her face showed like a white, colourless patch under the dark branches. Pam waited patiently for a long minute. From the distance, the trowel could still be heard, busily at work. Those terrible men heard nothing, suspected nothing, so far, and the two girls drew courage from the certainty of it. May stirred.

"Let us get on!" she breathed.

Pamela pressed her hand, and led on through the dark trees. The underwoods were thick, and their dresses brushed and rustled. It could

not be helped, but the sound was faint, little more than that made by the wind in the higher branches over their heads.

"Where's the path—can you find the path, Pam?" whispered May.

"I think so—yes—here we are!"

They emerged from the trees, into the little path that led down from the glade to the landing-place. There they stopped, to listen, with straining ears.

The sound of the trowel was heard no more. A mutter of voices was audible, and then, in a louder tone, words came to their ears.

"Only a rabbit, Bill."

The two girls felt each other tremble. Some rustling sound had reached the thieves in the glade.

"Quick!" breathed Pamela.

They pushed on down the dark path. The waters of the lake glimmered ahead, shining in the starlight.

By the willows at the landing-place, a boat bobbed on the water, thudding softly against the rushes. It was a small boat, with two oars laid on the thwarts. May cast a hurried, terrified glance back, and scrambled in, and Pamela followed her. She caught at the painter, kneeling in the bows, and striving to untie the cord. But it was tied fast—the night-thieves were running no risk of their boat drifting loose, as the schoolgirls had done, and Pamela fumbled desperately with the knot. Slowly, terribly slowly, she dragged it loose. If they came——!

But the painter came loose at last. May had dropped into the stern seat, her hand on the tiller.

"Quick, Pam, quick—oh, quick!" breathed May. Pamela threw down the loose cord, and grasped the nearest oar, in both hands. With a wildly-beating heart she drove it against the bank. The boat moved. Another desperate shove, and it glided out on the water. May Carhew gave a gasp of terrified relief.

Pamela seized the other oar. They dropped into the rowlocks, and she began to pull. May watched her with dilated eyes. Pam's eyes were on the dark mass of the island as she pulled. From that dark mass came a shout.

"The boat!"

Pamela knew that they had heard the grind of the oars in the rowlocks, in the deep night-silence. The alarmed shout was followed by the sound of running feet, and the crash of underwoods.

May gave a shriek—she could not help it. All was discovered now—the thieves on the island knew that their boat was being taken—they were running desperately down to the landing-place, in alarm and terror.

"Pull, Pam, pull!" shrieked May, almost frantic with fear.

But Pam's nerve did not fail. The boat was still close to the island—possibly within reach of a desperate spring—easily within reach of a resolute swimmer. All depended on the next few moments. If she had lost her nerve then, and floundered, all would have been lost. But Pamela Duncan did not lose her nerve. As steadily as if she were rowing in her own boat on the School Reach, she pulled at the oars, and the boat shot away from the island.

Trampling feet thudded at the landing-place.

Dimly, looking back as she rowed, Pamela saw the two dark figures under the branches. They panted and stared after the gliding boat. They were dim to Pamela: but the two girls, out in the clear starlight beyond the trees, were plainly visible—and the sight of them, in the boat, must have astounded the two stranded thieves. But the two desperate men had no time to give way to surprise, or to wonder how this strange thing could have happened. They were stranded, if they

lost their boat—to wait for the police to arrive and pick them up. One of them clambered on a great branch that extended far over the water, evidently in the hope of being able to jump into the boat. The other—the taller man—threw off his coat, kicked off his shoes, and plunged in, swimming after the boat with swift, desperate strokes.

May screamed.

Pamela did not scream. She bent all her strength to the oars. The boat shot on—and the man on the extending branch glared after it hopelessly, and spat out oaths. He was no longer to be reckoned with. But the swimmer in the water was coming on fast and his hard, set face, and gleaming eyes, kept pace, if they did not gain—and the fierce rage in that face sent a chill to Pam's heart. But she pulled and pulled, and the boat gained speed.

May, at the tiller, did not turn her head—she dared not. But she heard the swimmer's strokes behind. Pam's eyes were on him as she rowed—and in sheer agony, she watched him—it seemed to her that he was gaining. And, putting on a fierce spurt, he did gain, the savage face drawing nearer and nearer, within a couple of yards of the fleeing boat, Pam straining at the oars with wild strength.

But the man could not keep up that furious spurt. He slackened, and slowed—and the distance between widened. Then once more he made an effort, and drew nearer—but not so near as before. Pam rowed on as if her arms were made of iron. And again the distance widened.

They were far from the island now—it was a black spot on the shining lake. The boat drew further and further from the swimmer—and at length, to her infinite relief, Pam saw him turn back. He had lost the race, and he had to get back to the island or drown. The bobbing head faded away on the water, and Pam, almost exhausted with her wild effort, dropped to a slower pace. May looked back at last, and gave a cry of happy relief.

"Oh, Pam! We're clear! Pam darling, we're all right."

Pamela panted.

"Right as rain, May! Right as a trivet! Oh, May, what a night! " She rested on her oars for a moment, the boat shooting on. "Oh, May! If ever we break bounds again——!"

"I'll watch it!" said May. She looked at her little watch in the gleam of the stars. "Oh, Pam! It's three-thirty—half-past three in the morning! Oh, Pam, what a time to go in—the Duck will be wild!"

"And the Head will be wilder!" said Pam.

"We're for it!" said May.

"We are!" agreed Pam.

And she pulled on steadily: and the chime of four o'clock came through the night, when the boat, at last, rocked by the raft outside the school boat-house.

CHAPTER VII.

UNEXPECTED!

TING-a-ling-ling!

Miss Ducat gave a little jump. There were three in the Head-Mistress's study—Miss Ducat, Miss Buss, and Inspector Bennett of Oscombe. In some of the rooms above girls were awake, listening, wondering.

Miss Buss looked a little pale and her severe face was very set. No doubt the interruption of the night-thieves by Miss Ducat had prevented them from making a cleaner sweep: but the loss was heavy,

and a very serious one to the Head of St. Olive's. The burglars had escaped with their loot. Inspector Bennett and a constable had arrived swiftly: but the thieves were gone, and Parker, the porter, could only describe them from a glimpse in the dark as they fled—a short man and a taller man. Mr. Bennett had made exhaustive examinations of the premises, but clue there was none. He had been busy on the Head's telephone, warning stations in all directions: roads and railways would be already under watch! cars stopped and the drivers questioned. But the ultimate fact was that the thieves had got clear with more than a thousand pounds worth of plunder—and in her agitation and distress, Miss Buss had almost forgotten that two girls were missing from St. Olive's—though Miss Ducat had not.

All three started, as the tinkle of the bell in the porter's lodge was heard across the quad. Inspector Bennett stepped to the window, and called to a constable outside.

"What's that, Jenkins?"

"The porter's letting two young ladies in, sir."

Miss Ducat's eyes met Miss Buss's. Both ladies forgot the burglary, for a moment. The Duck did not stop to speak—she almost flew from the study. She had the House door open, as two tired and drooping figures came through the dark and arrived there.

"Pamela!" gasped Miss Ducat, "May!"

May Carhew burst into tears, and ran to her form-mistress. Pamela tried to smile.

"We're so sorry, Miss Ducat—we couldn't help it—we got stranded—"

"Come!" said Miss Ducat, and she led May to the Head's study, followed by Pamela.

Miss Buss fixed severe eyes upon them. Her relief at seeing the two girls safe was immense. But it soon changed to anger.

"Pamela! May! What does this mean? What——?——"

"It was all my fault, Miss Buss," sobbed May, "I—I made Pamela come out of bounds with me, and we've been stranded on Monk's Island—the boat drifted away—"

"Good heavens!" breathed Miss Buss. Her frowning brow softened. "You have had a dreadful experience. Miss Ducat, please see these foolish girls to bed now—they shall explain further in the morning—"

Pamela glanced at the police-inspector, who was regarding the two schoolgirls with a kindly sympathetic glance. She supposed that he was there in connection with her absence and May's—never dreaming of what had happened at St. Olive's that night.

"I'm sorry if we've given you a lot of trouble, sir," she faltered, timidly. "But—but I have something to tell you."

"What can you have to tell Inspector Bennett, Pamela?" exclaimed Miss Buss, staring at her in astonishment.

"There has been a robbery somewhere, Miss Buss," stammered Pamela.

"There has been a robbery here, Pamela," said Miss Ducat, "But what do you mean?"

"A robbery here!" exclaimed Pamela, "Oh!" She realised that it was not on her and May's account that the Inspector from Oscombe was there. A very keen gleam came into Mr. Bennett's eyes. He came quickly towards Pamela.

"What do you know about a robbery, please?" he asked.

"They—they came to the island," stammered Pamela, and May clung to Miss Ducat, and trembled at the recollection. "Two men—they came in a boat—and buried something in a bag in the glade—that is how we got away—we—we managed to get hold of their boat——!"

"You are a plucky young lady," said the inspector, with a smile. "Did you see them? Can you describe them?"

"One was a tall man, the other shorter," said Pamela. "And the names they used in speaking to one another were George and Bill."

"Bill!" Inspector Bennett glanced at Miss Ducat, who had given a start. "You heard one of the thieves here speak to the other, Miss Ducat, through the study door—and the name you heard spoken was, I think, Bill?"

"Yes!" said Miss Ducat.

Inspector Bennett drew a deep breath. His eyes almost danced. Two men with a bag of plunder they were hiding—one short and one tall—and one named Bill! It seemed clear enough.

"Sit down, Pamela, and tell Inspector Bennett everything that you know," said Miss Buss.

And Pamela told the whole story of the adventure on Monk's Island, the inspector listening with the closest attention. He did not speak till the schoolgirl had finished. Then he turned to Miss Buss with a smile.

"There can scarcely be a doubt," he said, "It is the same gang—and this plucky girl left them stranded on Monk's Island—waiting to be picked up!—with their plunder. I will take the boat they escaped in—and a constable—and proceed to Monk's Island immediately. I think there can be no doubt, Miss Buss, that the stolen property will very soon be restored to you."

Inspector Bennett was gone in a few moments more.

"Now to bed!" said Miss Ducat: and she went with Pamela and May up to No. 2 in the Fourth. In a very few minutes they were in bed, and Miss Ducat returned to the Head's study—where she found Miss Buss with a much less troubled face.

Pamela and May were tired out. But they did not close their eyes immediately. Pamela, to her surprise, heard a chuckle from May's bed.

"Oh, Pam!" said May. "Are we in luck? I say, fancy—it was was a burglary here—and they'll get all the stuff back—and the burglars into the bargain—and—and the Head can't very well scalp us, after that, can she?"

"Perhaps not," said Pamela.

"No perhaps about it!" said May. "Bank on it, old thing! We're all right—and thank goodness for that! But—no more breaking bounds for me, Pam."

"Or for me!" said Pamela. "Once is enough—and once too often! Good-night, May."

And they closed their eyes in slumber.

MAY was right! The breakers of bounds were not "scalped."

They were quite heroines the next day at St. Olive's, when the story was known: and it was known that the two rascals on the island had been taken into custody, and the plunder from the Head's safe recovered. The Head gave them a very severe lecture: and let it go at that—which was a fortunate ending to the adventure of the stranded school-girls.

THE END.