

# The Schoolgirls' Own Library No 36

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**WHEN  
BETTY  
CAME TO  
MORCOVE**

A Grand School Story, dealing  
with the early adventures of  
**BETTY BARTON.**

# COURAGE!

Miss Brown was one of the most popular captains in the whole of the Girl Guide movement, and, in the course of one of the friendly little chats she frequently had with the Guides under her control, she touched upon the question of courage.

"Courage," she said, "is the most admirable quality a girl can possess."

The assembled girls smiled in agreement, and more than one pair of eyes travelled to the lithe, graceful figure of Madge Stewart, who had so recently won praise and admiration from them all by reason of her pluckiness in rescuing a little, helpless puppy from a fire.

Without doubt they thought Miss Brown's words were intended mainly as a tribute to Madge; all agreed that she was the bravest girl in the patrol.

The captain saw clearly what was in their minds.

"No, girls," she said, "I wasn't thinking of any girl in particular when I made that remark."

And she smiled over at Madge as though to rob her words of disappointment.

"Don't you think," Miss Brown resumed, turning to the other Guides again, "that sometimes we mix up the meanings of the words 'courage' and 'bravery'? I would call Madge a brave girl; she has proved herself such by her actions. In fact, we usually associate bravery with action."

"Yes," struck in one of the girls. "One nearly always says, 'our brave soldiers'—"

"And sailors," added another.

"And firemen," cried someone else.

"Quite right," agreed Miss Brown. "They're all brave men. But isn't courage something rather different? Something that every girl can possess without proving it by valorous actions?"

"The other day I wanted a certain girl, whom I knew to have a very sweet voice, to sing at the coming Guide concert. But when I asked her to do so, she told me that she had never sung in public before, and that she thought she would be too scared to sing a note."

"I told her to 'pluck up her courage,' and, after a few moments of hesitation, during which time I could see that she was fighting a very hard battle with herself, she said that she would come and sing. Well, I call that real courage, don't you?"

That was practically the end of the Guide captain's chat with her company, and, as the

girls wended their ways homeward, many of them were thinking quite a lot about what Miss Brown had told them.

Before, they had never worried particularly as to the exact significance of the words that formed the subject of the little lecture they had received. Yet they realised that it was intended as a mild lecture, and that the instance of the girl who had been persuaded to sing was put before them as an example to follow.

Miss Brown had said that courage is the most admirable quality a girl can possess, and, as they all wished to stand high in the opinion of their captain, it made them wonder in what ways they, too, could prove their courage.

One girl soon had her opportunity. On arriving home she found that the exam. she had set her heart on winning had proved too difficult for her. She had failed to pass; so the letter her mother handed her informed her.

Tears of disappointment sprang up into her eyes, but the next moment, by a tremendous effort, she was smiling again.

"Never mind, mother," she said, with real courage. "I shall be able to enter again next year, and I'll work so hard till then that I shan't be able to fail again."

None but herself knew how bitter her disappointment had been, and how hard she had striven to pass the exam. It was sheer courage that made her hide all that, and think only of "next time."

A few days later another of the Guides had her courage put to the test. Accidentally, she broke a vase which her mother treasured. She hadn't an opportunity to confess, for her mother was out at the time.

That evening, to her surprise, her mother said:

"I'm so upset. The screen in the drawing-room blew over whilst the window was open, and it must have smashed the vase off the mantelshelf."

Coincidence had provided an opportunity for the girl to say nothing, and to escape the blame. It wouldn't be putting the blame on to anyone else's shoulders if she remained silent. It was difficult to speak out, for she knew how upset her mother would be at her carelessness.

Yet she knew it was not honourable to say nothing.

She summoned up her courage and spoke out, and, even after her mother's reproaches, she felt better for having done so.

The Guide captain's few words on "courage" had not gone unheeded.



# When BETTY CAME TO MORCOVE

A Magnificent Long Story dealing with Betty Barton's Arrival at Morcove School

By MARJORIE STANTON.

## CHAPTER 1.

### The Home of the Barton Family.

JUST one little face at the schoolroom window peeping but at the pelting rain!

Such a sweet, pretty face; but oh, how pale and thin, and with what a world of trouble in the bright blue eyes!

Would it never stop—this wintry rain that had been lashing down for two hours on end?

It was after mid-day now, and only this one girl was left behind in this big council school.

All the rest, being better equipped against the storm, had gone dashing homewards, whilst the schoolmistress herself had kept this one scholar back.

"No, Betty Barton; with those leaky boots of yours, you ought to wait a while. Gracious!" the mistress had said, "it is enough to give you your death, to go paddling through this! And you have only that rag of a shawl to cover your head."

Yes. Only a shabby old shawl, almost as far gone with wear as the leaky boots—that was all Betty had to protect her chestnut hair and her poor clothes from the downpour. And she knew it was kind of the schoolmistress to advise her to wait till the clouds rolled by. Only, would they ever do that?

Poor Betty Barton! No wonder she had

sad doubts about the matter. There were so many dark clouds shadowing her life just now, and none of them looked like ever breaking up to let the sunshine through!

"It's little Joe and Doris I'm thinking about," was her fretful murmur. "Whatever will they do, waiting there with nothing at all to eat until I get indoors and give them their dinner? Oh, I must make a run for it—I must!"

Spurred to action by that desperate thought, she suddenly made her way into the draughty passages and took her dash.

Across the half-flooded playground; out through the narrow gateway; then off up the mean street as hard as she could go.

On she ran, fighting a breathless struggle with the rough wind, whilst the merciless rain whipped her face and lashed about her.

Like all Betty's schoolfellows, the thousands of toilers from mill and factory had already slipped home to the mid-day meal, and just at present the streets were empty.

Betty's world was a wilderness of brick and mortar—nor had she ever known a better one—down by the canal. She got to the old iron bridge, and that was half-way home, thank goodness! But wot—oh, if she had just been dragged out of that same nasty canal, she could hardly have felt more bedraggled!

Now there was a rather wide street to

cross, and Betty had to wait for a motor-car to go by. Its swishing tyres sent fountains of liquid mud over her, and she could not help casting a bitter glance after the speeding vehicle.

That was the magnificent car belonging to the Grandways family. Every week-end it took the two Grandways girls to and from their school, which was called a "Private Academy for the Daughters of Gentlefolk."

There were plenty of folk in this workaday Lancashire town of Ribbleston who said that the Grandways were not such very "gentle" folk after all. In fact, there were people who said that Josiah Grandways had been poor himself many years ago, and had only acquired his wealth by profiteering during the war. He now owned acres of working-class dwellings, and was anything but gentle in his dealing with other people. And Mrs. Grandways never gave a penny to any good cause, except to have it trumpeted abroad by means of the local paper.

Betty knew all about the Grandways, because her crippled father had a light job at the mill which they owned, whilst her mother did a day's charring, now and then, at the Grandways palatial mansion at the other end of the town.

Away sped that luxurious car, after bespattering the humble council school girl from head to foot; and she thought to herself: Well to be the Grandways girls on a day like this!

Soft seats to loll at ease upon; costly clothes to one's back, and never had the least need to dirty a well-shod foot by slopping along the pavements! Well to be them, indeed! As for herself—

But Betty suddenly banished all the bitterness from her thoughts and looks, as she now came in sight of her humble home.

She saw her mite of a brother and sister on watch for her at the window, and how woeful were their faces!

With a last breathless rush she got to the streaming doorstep, lifted the latch, and darted into the dingy passage.

In a moment, Joe and Doris were about her, half-crying with hunger and all the misery of this cheerless home—cheerless through no fault of their loving parents, but only because misfortune had laid a heavy hand upon them.

"All right, Joe darling! All right, Doris dear!" panted Betty. "I know I'm late; but just hark at the rain!"

"We're so hungry!" wailed little Joe. He was holding Betty's rain-splashed hand, and was sorry enough to see how wet she was. Only—poor little chap, he was hungry, and couldn't help saying so!

"The fire's out, Betty," said Doris sadly. "We did try so hard to keep it going, but there was only the bit of coal dust, and it all went black."

"Never mind; I'll manage!" Betty cried, forcing a cheery note. "I'll soon get a bit of a blaze and have dinner on the table for you."

"But you are all so wet," said Doris softly. "You ought to see to yourself first."

"I'll manage!" Betty said again, with quite a gay little laugh. It was a favourite phrase of hers, these days; one she had got into the habit of saying, because so often she simply had to manage somehow.

Quick as lightning Betty got the fire going, and went to the saucepan of stew which mother had left in readiness. Of all Mrs. Barton's many troubles and trials these days, none grieved her more than the need of sometimes being away all day. But it couldn't be helped. Being only able to take casual work as a charwoman, she often had to go to houses that were right at the other end of the town, and that was the case to-day.

But what an able little deputy had mother left behind her in the person of Betty!

You should have seen her laying the cloth so quickly for dinner. You should have seen how brisk she was in getting that thin stew bubbling in the pot, without burning it.

Best of all, you should have seen her spooning out all the best scraps of meat, and what few bits of potatoes there were, into the plates for Joe and Doris, whilst her own plate came in for little more than gravy.

"There, Joe darling, you can do with a big bit of bread like that, I'm sure," said Betty, as she carved the stale crust. "And here's a nice slice for you, Doris!"

"But, Betty, you've hardly got any for yourself!"

"Oh, I'm not hungry to-day!" laughed Betty. "That's why I don't want any meat."

"It must be jolly not to feel hungry!"

said Joe, who was already tilting his plate to spoon up the last bit of gravy. "Just before you came in, Betty, I felt so hungry and mis'ble——"

"Yes, I know, you poor old chap! Well, have some more, Joe—come on!"

"I would like a little more, please," faltered Joe, "only I mustn't be greedy, must I? If there is just a little more, Betty——"

"There's heaps," insisted Betty, lading the last spoonfuls out of the saucepan.

"Now, if Doris wants any more——"

"Oh, no," said Doris, seeing that the saucepan was empty. "Joe, what a greedy boy, you are; you've left none for Betty!"

"Me—I shan't want what I've got," laughed Betty. "So do have it whilst it is still hot, Doris dear—do!" she pleaded, pushing her plate close to her sister's. "Some of it, then!"

"Well, if you really can spare it, Betty——"

"Yes, take all you want!" entreated the unselfish girl, knowing that there really had not been enough to go round.

"Thank you, Betty," whispered Doris, her eyes sparkling gratefully. "Only, I would feel mis'ble if I thought you were going without, just because—— Gracious! Who's that knocking at the door?"

The knock was a double rat-tat! causing all three children to jump in their seats.

Betty, still without her boots and stockings, went into the passage and opened the street door.

"Where's the missis?" came in a very gruff, loud voice from the man who had knocked.

He was a tall, burly man, with a red face that made him look as if he were always purple with anger. Nor was he in anything like a sweet temper at this moment; that was evident.

Stepping, uninvited into the passage, he stamped the rain from his waterproof overcoat, then glared at Betty.

"Now, my lass, you heard what I said! Where's the missis?"

"Mother's out working," answered Betty. "I'll tell her you called, Mr. Bowler. She——"

"You tell your mother more'n that," growled the man. "This makes four weeks she's behind with the rent, and it ain't good enough! You can tell her there must be a couple of quid for me by Saturday evening, or we'll have the brokers in!"

"Oh, sir!" gasped Betty.

"That's my order, straight from Mr. Grandways himself," the rent collector almost shouted. "Mr. Grandways has been going through the rents with me, he has, and he says I've got to get after folk as are behind. Two pounds off on Saturday, or out you go—mind that!"

"Mother will do her very best, sir, I'm sure. But——"

"Oh, ah! You're jest like your mother—all promises!" sneered the bully. "You look at this here rent-book——"

"I don't want to look at it!" flashed out Betty, on her mettle now. "I shall tell mother how you have threatened us with the brokers. And—and you can tell Mr. Grandways he ought to be ashamed of himself!"

"What?"

"Him, to talk about turning us into the street, when he knows how we are placed—what a struggle it's been for my father and mother!" Betty cried shrilly. "Mr. Grandways knows what father earns at the mills. Only eighteen shillings a week——"

"Ay, and that's more than he's worth!" growled Bowler.

"Dad was worth his five pounds a week before he got hurt by the machinery," spoke out Betty. "I know Mr. Grandways thinks it was sort of charity to give poor father a light job after that. But there's plenty of people who say that what father ought to have done was to have gone to law over his injuries, and then he would have got a proper pension. It was no fault of his that he——"

"Yah, old woman's talk!" shouted Bowler. "Your mother earns something; what does she do with it all?"

This was too much for Betty. She was going to make a very spirited answer, when someone came dashing up to the porch, and blundered into the passage, gasping for breath.

Betty stared at the newcomer in startled surprise. He was Chapman, the fat little grocer from the nearest corner shop, and he had come running here in his apron, and without any hat to cover his bald head.

"Your mother, lass—is she out?" he panted.

"Yes, Mr. Chapman—out working."

"Dearie me; oh, gracious me," gasped the grocer. "Here's an unfortunate business. Betty, lass, I'm sorry, but I've just had it

from one of th' hands at th' mill your father's been run over—"

"Oh, no, no!"

"Run over in the yard, and took to the hospital," Mr. Chapman went on breathlessly. "He's not killed—no. But your mother ought to go to him, Betty!"

"She must go to him at once!" faltered the dismayed girl, who had turned as white as a sheet. "Oh, whatever shall we do? Poor dad—oh, my poor darling dad! But I'll manage somehow!"

The old, old phrase! Even in this terrible crisis, Betty would manage somehow.

"Thank you for letting me know, Mr. Chapman," she said jerkily. "I'll run to mother at once. Don't stop there staring, Mr. Bowler; there's no rent for you, so you can go! Mr. Chapman—"

"My lass, I wish I could leave my shop and seek your poor mother. But—"

"Oh, I know how you are placed. It's all right, thank you all the same. I'll manage!"

Flinging the still wet shawl about her head and shoulders, she kissed the tear-stained cheeks of her brother and sister, and then ran to the street door.

"Shan't be long!" was her last cheery cry, as she sped away. But, after slamming the street door behind her, the anguish of her heart flooded over, and she ran on and on, through the dreary streets, sobbing to herself:

"Dad—poor dad! Oh, how he must be longing to see mother at his side!"

## CHAPTER 2.

### The Grandways Girls at Home.

**B**ETTY BARTON ran right through the noisy town, her heart thumping wildly. Soon she was clear of the squalid streets, had darted across wide thoroughfares where the trams glided by, and was in the richest part of the town.

There, in a beautifully quiet road, lined with leafless trees, she found Grandways mansion.

It stood amidst several acres of stately grounds, and it took her a full minute to race up the broad gravelled drive to the front porch.

There was a bell marked "Visitors." Betty gave it a violent tug, then waited in the huge stone porch, trying to get back her breath.

Whilst she was still panting hoarsely, the

glass doors were thrown open, and a pompous footman, in livery, stared down at her.

"What do you want?" he asked curtly.

"I want mother!" cried Betty. "Dad's been taken to the hospital, and she must go to him at once. Oh, please tell mother—let me go to her and tell her! There's not a moment to lose!"

And she was setting foot inside the handsome reception hall, when the footman pushed her back.

"Half a sec.," he cried. "Your mother can't be here—mother of a little urchin like you!"

"Yes, she is here—she's your charwoman—"

"Oh, my stars!" laughed the footman.

"Ha, ha, ha! Look here, my gal; you want to go to the back door, you know! Hop it, youngster—sharp! The idea of a little guttersnipe—"

"What's the matter, Saunders?" came a drawling voice from the back of the hall. And next moment the speaker appeared.

It was the elder of the Grandways girls, and she gave Betty a slighting look.

"Pray don't trouble yourself, Miss Cora," said the footman, with a bow. "This is only the charwoman's child!"

"What, Mrs. Barton's kid!" exclaimed Cora Grandways. "Well, the cheek of it! To come ringing at the visitors' bell!"

"Where's mother?" broke in Betty wildly. "I'm sorry if I came to the wrong door; but, oh, does it matter so much when I tell you that my poor father is in hospital? Mother—"

"Betty—oh, Betty darling!" broke in another voice at this instant. And Betty spun round, to find that her mother, coarse-aproned, and with her sleeves rolled up, had come rushing round to the porch.

"I heard your voice, Betty, whilst I was cleaning the back steps," the excited woman explained. "What's that about your father? Hospital—"

"Yes, mother—an accident! But don't be afraid; only go to him at once! I've run all the way here—"

"Bless you, Betty!" the poor distraught mother cried, tearing off her apron and unrolling her sleeves. "Oh, my lass, how good it was of you! I'll go at once!"

"You'd better get permission first, hadn't you?" broke in Cora Grandways coldly. "Mrs. Grandways is out, but there is the housekeeper—you can see her, you know."

"I won't see any housekeeper. I'm going!" cried Mrs. Barton, half crazily. "Oh, Betty darling, if only I had the money for a cab! I feel I want to fly to father!"

Betty thought of the Grandways' car. From where she was standing in the porch, she could see the motor in the garage, doing nothing. And in spite of her dislike of begging favours from these hard-hearted people she cast a look of appeal at Cora Grandways.

"You see how it is, miss," she faltered. "Oh, if you could do something for mother—let her go in the car—we would never forget your kindness!"

For answer Cora gave a burst of derisive laughter.

"The idea!" she chuckled. "What's to stop your mother using her legs and walking? It's not raining now! Even if it was, she has nothing to spoil!"

"Come away, Betty lass," quavered Mrs. Barton, who was all of a tremble. "I know what these people are, and I'll be done with them after this!"

"Glad to hear it!" said Cora. "Mr. Grandways will be glad, too, I'm sure! It will mean that you finish with him by paying all the rent you owe!"

"Oh, you cruel girl!" shouted Betty. "Haven't you a scrap of heart, that you can talk about the rent at a time like this? Mother, darling, you were right; we must go—"

"Yes, dearie; and let me run on, and you get back to Joe and Doris," broke in the distraught mother, hurrying down the wide steps. "It's the town hospital, I suppose. Anyway, I'll go there first."

And off she ran, looking the figure of wild anxiety, whilst Betty was still held there by the sound of a newcomer upon the scene.

She had some desperate hope that it might be someone belonging to the household who had a scrap of pity to offer. But she was mistaken.

"What's all the palaver about, Cora?" drawled the younger Grandways girl, sauntering out from the drawing-room.

"Oh, a great joke!" chuckled Cora. "Here's old Mother Barton's kid turning up at our front door as if she were a visitor—ha, ha, ha!"

"What about?" drawled the younger girl, eyeing Betty up and down.

"Oh, nothing!" answered Cora. "That malingering father of hers—he's met with an accident somehow. You know what he

is, Judith; always blundering about the mill. Dad says that he's very little use!"

"Then your dad is a wicked monster!" Betty could not help crying angrily.

"Are you going to stand there, letting that kid shout at you?" Judith said to her sister. "A nice thing we are coming to! Look at the mud she has brought into the hall!"

"Outside!" said the footman, taking the hint from the snobbish girls. "Now, cut away, sharp, and no more of your impudence!"

There was a peal of merriment from the Grandways girls, and Betty—her heart swelling with indignation—was going to cry shame on them both, but in an instant the footman had hold of her and was thrusting her forth.

"You didn't hear the best of it!" she heard Cora laughing to her sister. "The kid actually thought we'd let her mother go driving off in our own car—ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, dear—ha, ha, ha!" sniggered Judith.

Then the door was slammed shut, and Betty—with those derisive laughs still echoing in her ears—went blindly down the stone steps, to make all haste back to lonely little Joe and Doris, in that humble, poverty-stricken home which was now overshadowed by a blacker cloud than ever!

### CHAPTER 3.

#### The Darkest Hour.

IT was after dark when Mrs. Barton joined her three children in the stricken home.

There was a look of pent-up grief in the good woman's face as she entered the house, and for a few minutes Betty felt afraid to ask questions.

"Well, Betty—well, my lambs," the poor woman said at last, forcing a cheery tone. "It is not so bad as it might have been. Your dear father is having the best attention!"

"And he'll get well again, mother?" said Betty, very wistfully. "Oh, what do the doctors say, mother? Will he get over it?"

"They kept on telling me to hope for the best, my dears," answered Mrs. Barton, looking down upon all three children, who were now clustered about her. "It seems that poor daddy slipped on the greasy steps in the mill-yard, and a lorry nearly went right over him. But—"

"Poor dad!" exclaimed Betty, in horror. "It's as you have so often said, mother; he

ought never to have had to be about the mill, all lame as he was with that other accident. How often has he been nearly run over, getting to and from his work!"

"'Twill be many a long day now, poor man, afore he sees the mill again!" sighed Mrs. Barton. "They tell me he will have to have an operation at once. I wanted to keep it from you, my darlings, but 'tis no use. Oh, your poor father!"

And suddenly the sorrowful woman crashed into a chair at the table, and, hiding her face in her hands, sobbed aloud.

Betty wanted to run to her and put comforting arms about her. But she did what was perhaps even a better thing than that.

Seeing that Joe and Doris were starting to cry—and what wonder, poor little mites!—Betty drew them apart and whispered hopeful words in their ears.

"You sit still, mother, and have the cup of tea that you ought to have had ages ago! I'll see to Joe and Doris!"

And Betty had her own way, chatting ever so brightly all the time she was with her brother and sister, getting them undressed and washed for the night, and into their mended nightgowns.

As early as the following day there was comforting news from the hospital.

The operation had been a complete success, and the house surgeon was confident that Joe Barton would yet be seen about again in Ribbleton, hardly any worse for his cruel accident.

Only, it was going to be a slow business—of that, those at home were plainly warned.

Weeks—months, perhaps—might drag by before the patient could get his discharge. And in the meantime, how was the home to be kept going?

Mrs. Barton, brave woman that she was, answered that question by taking on extra days at her job of charwoman.

If only it had been possible she would have gone into the mills and worked the whole week through without missing a single day. But that she could not do, having two children so young as Joe and Doris, whilst even Betty was still only a mere schoolgirl.

Only a schoolgirl! It was a thought which gave pain to Betty often enough, these days.

How she wished she had been just a little older, so that she herself could have done something to bring in a weekly wage.

But in one way, at least, she helped the

money to come in. By being more than ever a deputy for her hard-working mother, she made it possible for the good woman to go out as often as she did.

The Grandways' house was no longer one of those to which Mrs. Barton went for a day's charing. True to her firm resolve she had finished with those hard-hearted snobs, finding work in other directions. No doubt this was very riling to the Grandways, and they would have hit back by putting in the brokers at once if the rent had been still owing.

But it was not owing at present. Mr. Chapman, the grocer at the corner, had spoken to the rent collector; when the pair of them met inside the Bartons' home, and the result had been a receipt for all the arrears of rent!

Bluff, big-hearted Mr. Chapman had wiped off the debt out of his own pocket. He had done this as if it were a mere trifle not worth mentioning, in spite of the fact that life was a bit of a struggle for him. In spite, too, of the fact that the Bartons had a little account with him for groceries supplied.

There was nothing of the Grandways nature about Mr. Chapman! Just a simple, honest tradesman, doing good by stealth, and feeling more than rewarded when he saw the tears of gratitude in Mrs. Barton's eyes!

So Josiah Grandways could not hit back at the poor woman by putting the brokers in. But he meant to have his revenge in another way, Mrs. Grandways having pointed out to him what a bit of impudence it was for a common charwoman to pick and choose her jobs!

Ten days after Joe Barton's admission to hospital, the bullying rent collector served notice to quit to the Bartons.

"And if you don't go at the end of a week from now!" he shouted at Betty—for it was she who answered his knock—"we are going to get a magistrate's order to have you put out! The whole pack of you—furniture and all—you'll be shot in the street, so mind you tell your mother that!"

Betty shut the door in his face, then stared at the official notice that had been thrust into her hands.

"The whole pack of you—furniture and all!"

Bowler's words were still ringing in her ears. She took her eyes off the printed sheet, and then gazed around the bare room.



Not much furniture would there be to put into the street! That was her sad thought—one that brought tears to her eyes at last.

For, in spite of mother's heroic efforts, things were getting every day more desperate. She was working her very hardest to provide for herself and the children; but her meagre earnings provided nothing towards the rent.

So, to keep the rent-book straight, she had been smuggling things, bit by bit, to the pawnshop and the dealer's, exchanging many a treasured bit of home for a mere shilling or two.

And now—oh, what a black day this was for the Barton family—there was another knock at the street door, and this time little Betty had to face an angry tradesman.

He was the baker—a different type of man altogether from Chapman, the grocer.

"Taking bread day after day from my shop, and never expecting to pay!" he thundered at Betty. "It's got to stop, my girl! I've put it in the lawyer's hands, and there's a summons coming along! Just tell your mother that!"

A burly policeman delivered the blue paper before Mrs. Barton got home that night. And so both grim documents confronted her, after Betty had paved the way for the shock, by putting arms about the poor woman's neck and kissing her, whispering:

"Don't worry, mother! Oh, mother darling, try not to worry! So long as dad is getting better, we will manage somehow!"

But those two stern documents—one, a notice to quit; the other a summons for the baker's bill—they could not be ignored.

Bravely as Mrs. Barton tried to make light of them, at heart, she was weighed down by a feeling of utter despair.

A week to find a fresh home to go to, when there was an absolute famine in houses, lodgings, anything that offered needy folks a bit of shelter! It was hopeless. And then the baker's bill. Unless it was paid in seven days, she must appear in court!

Rat-tat!

Mrs. Barton gave a nervous cry as the double knock sounded.

"Oh, who's that!" she exclaimed tremblingly. "Not more trouble, surely!"

"I'll go, mother," said Betty, and she darted into the passage, returning in a moment with a buff-coloured envelope.

"What—a telegram!" quavered the

mother, turning whiter than ever. "Gracious, what has happened now? Betty, lass—oh, my poor lambs, if this should be from the hospital, telling us that poor daddy is bad!"

"Hush—hush!" murmured Betty, to her brother and sister. "No, mother darling; things have got so bad I am sure they can't get worse! Open the telegram and see!"

Mrs. Barton did so.

With trembling fingers she tore the flimsy sheet from its envelope, and scanned the pencilled message.

Then, with a wild cry, the overwrought woman staggered to a chair and sank down, completely overcome.

#### CHAPTER 4.

##### Sunshine at Last.

BETTY BARTON darted to her mother's side and picked up the fateful telegram, which had fluttered to the floor.

After hearing that wild cry of her mother's, the anxious girl felt certain that there must be terrible news of some sort.

"What's this, mother? 'Handed in at Lime Street, Liverpool,'" Betty read aloud. "'Landed from America to-day; coming on by car.—UNCLE GEORGE.' Oh, mother darling, it is not bad news surely?"

"No, no! It is good news—wonderful news!" cried Mrs. Barton, rising unsteadily to her feet. "Only I have been so strung up, it sent me all to pieces. Your Uncle George—that's your father's brother, who went to America five years ago. I suppose you hardly remember him, Betty. He was down on his luck, and your dad gave him twenty pounds to emigrate with. And now—Hark!"

"Yes—hark!" cried Betty, as the unusual sound of a motor-car came from the mean street. "Perhaps that is Uncle George. 'Yes, it is! It is!'"

The car had stopped at the kerb. Betty, almost crazy with excitement, dashed into the passage and flung wide the street door, crying wildly:

"Uncle George—oh, is that you, Uncle George?"

"Ay ay, that's me, my dear!" sang out the car's one passenger, as he strode across the threshold. "And who are you?—Betty, of course! Well, I declare, what a little woman since I saw you last! And your mother—hallo, Nell!" he cried, looking to-

wards Mrs. Barton, as she appeared at the living-room door, with Doris and Joe. "All the jolly family, eh—except father? Where's he—where's my brother Joe?"

Then they told him—everything.

George Barton—sun-tanned, well-dressed, prosperous—was simply horror-struck when the tale of dire trouble had been brought to an end.

Sitting in the old armchair, with Joe on one knee and Doris on another, he just gaped in speechless amazement whilst his sister-in-law told how misfortune had pressed upon them.

But as soon as the distressing story came to an end, he dumped the youngsters on to the floor and stood up—a giant of a man, with a hearty voice that seemed to make the very walls shake.

"Notice to quit! Summons from the baker! What the dickens!" he roared, crumpling up the official papers and flinging them in the fire. "Look here, Nell, it's all right! Get that into your dear old noddle! I'm rich! I'm as rich as Grandways or any of them! Got down to my last dollar, then struck ile, as they say over there. So—notice to quit, ha, ha, ha! Ho, ho, ho!"

"George, dear—"

"I tell you what, Nell; I give you notice to quit! Out of this house you bundle! If you can't get a fine mansion in Ribbleton—the best part of th' owd town—then you shall stay at the Grand Hotel!"

"Oh, hooray!" cried Betty, starting to dance round the room. "Hurrah! Joe—Doris—"

"Boo, hoo! Can't we have something to eat!" howled Joe, throwing aside all restraint. "I'ee hungry, I tell you—I'se so hungry!"

"He's hungry—you're all starving!" cried Uncle George. "And here am I, with my pockets stuffed full of money! Oh, hang talking! I'll be back in a jiffy, Nell!"

He rushed into the street as he spoke, and, shouting an order to the chauffeur, was driven off, whilst Mrs. Barton—guessing what was in the wind—started to bustle around, singing blithely.

On went the clean table-cloth; out came the worn knives and forks, and the cracked plates; and on to the lifeless fire went the last pieces of coal!

When Uncle George came back, it was hardly like the arrival of a motor-car.

Rather was it like the unloading of a pan-technicon!

The things he had bought all inside half-an-hour!

Betty, darting in and out as she helped with the unloading, found a crowd gathering. People seemed to have guessed the good news, which was now flying all over the town. And Betty had just time for one quiet thought, amidst so much excitement and joy.

She wondered if the Grandways would hear the news to-night, and what they would say about it all.

During the next few days, Betty had many a gorgeous ride in her uncle's car. He had bought it on the spot the same afternoon that he landed in Liverpool.

No school for Betty these days! At the end of a week there was a formal note from the head-mistress asking why the girl was absent. Mrs. Barton handed the note to Uncle George, who just laughed as he crumpled it up.

"Send 'em a polite line, Nell, to say that your daughter is going to one of the best schools in the kingdom," he chuckled.

Then he turned to the astonished-looking Betty.

"What do you say, little girl? If I send you to a nice big boarding-school, close to the blue sea and the glorious country? Do you think you'll be happy?"

"Oh, uncle!"

"You'll be amongst some rich girls there, you know!" he smiled at her. "D'you think you'll keep your end up—eh?"

"Yes, uncle," was the answer. "I'll manage!"

Whereat Mrs. Barton joined with Uncle George in a burst of laughter, detecting the old, resolute nature in that simple answer; and their hands rested lovingly on Betty's shoulders, whilst she held up her face to be kissed.

What with all the bustle and excitement of moving into the fine mansion which he had bought and furnished, and what with engaging servants, and going twice a day to see the children's father in hospital, it was a wonder that Uncle George had time to bother about that new school for his niece.

But quite suddenly he calmly informed Betty and her mother that the whole thing was settled, and it only remained for them to do a round of the shops, to buy a tip-

top outfit for the future member of Morcove School, on the coast of North Devon.

That same day, Betty and her mother, after their visit to dad in hospital—where they found him still mending famously—spent a splendid time, buying everything that a girl at a boarding-school was likely to require.

On the way home, their car passed the one belonging to the Grandways, but the Grandways girls were not in it.

"I haven't seen them about lately, have you, mother?" Betty remarked. "I suppose they have gone away on one of their visits to friends in London."

Mrs. Barton nodded.

"Very likely, dear," she murmured. "They are allowed to stay away pretty much as they like at that precious Academy for Young Ladies. I shall be sorry to lose my little Betty for a time; but oh, I wouldn't have been happy, sending you to a school of that kind!"

"No," said Betty. "I think, if I were not going to boarding-school, I would rather keep on with the Council school than go to the same place as the Grandways girls! What I did learn at the Council school I did thoroughly. And there were no snobs there either!"

"I do hope," said her mother, after a moment, "none of the girls will look down on you, Betty darling, because you once went to a Council school. It will be a great shame if they do!"

"They won't!" said Betty, with conviction. "If they ask me, I shall just tell them, and, of course, they will feel jolly glad, on my account, that our sudden rise to honest wealth has given me a chance!"

Poor Betty!

How often, in the days to come, did she recall her simple faith in the goodness of other hearts—after that faith had been so sharply shattered!

## CHAPTER 5.

### ON to Boarding School.

**B**LUE was the sky on the morning that Betty Barton said her last loving good-byes to them all at the railway-station.

No clouds to-day! That was what she was saying to herself when at last she took her corner seat in the corridor train and peered through the window at mother, and Uncle George, and Joe and Doris.

Mother—well, of course, she was looking

rather moist about the eyes. But she was smiling, all the same, quite sure that her little girl was going to be so happy in the new, strange world of life at a boarding-school.

"I'll write and tell you all about it!" sang out Betty, jumping up to stand at the lowered window of the closed door as the whistle blew. "Good-bye, mother! Good-bye, Joe and Doris, you darlings! Good-bye, Uncle, and thank you ever and ever so much!"

"Dear lass!" cried Uncle George, waving his hat like a schoolboy. "She's going to be a credit to you, Nell—that bonny lass of yours!"

The train was gliding away, and Betty had only time for one last cry.

"Tell dad he must be here to meet me—at the station—when I come home for the holidays!"

"He'll be here, right enough, Betty!" was Uncle George's shouted answer. "Good-bye—good-luck, little girl!"

And then the express train drew clear of the crowded station, and in a few minutes Betty had dried her eyes and was taking her last glimpse of workaday Ribbleton, with all its narrow streets and giant mills and factories, and the tall chimneys that belched snakes of smoke over the busy town.

It was a famous express which was whirling Betty off to her new life. She was at liberty to wander from one end of the train to another, and there were dining-cars in which meals were served.

Betty had such a jolly dinner, later on, with a lady and gentleman who had promised her mother to look after her as far as Exeter.

It was rather late in the afternoon when they got to that important junction, after coming hundreds of miles through the most lovely scenery.

Here the lady and gentleman put their young friend into a slower train, which was soon puffing away across very beautiful country, all amongst rolling hills.

So, just as daylight was giving out, Betty reached the tiny station where she would be done with train travelling, although she knew that a long carriage drive still lay before her.

Such a quaint little, out-of-the-world railway station Betty had never seen before.

There seemed to be only one porter, and there were just a couple of dim oil-lamps

to lighten the gloom of the evening. The wind blew with a loud swoo-oo! and Betty sniffed at the breeze, scenting the smell of the sea.

A carriage had been sent to meet her, and a very jovial fellow, in the school livery, put all her luggage on board and made her snug for the journey. And then they drove off, with the carriage lamps shining brightly through the dusk.

Up and down the hilly road—clip-clopped the horse, at a steady pace. At first, Betty kept her face to the carriage window, trying to take note of the countryside; but it was getting too dark for her to see around the wild hills, and she could only feel that part of the world was very beautiful and romantic.

By and by the carriage suddenly swung round, to pass through a handsome gateway, and a minute later it drew up at the front entrance to the big school.

"Here we are, miss!" cried the jovial driver, getting down and opening the carriage door. "I'll have your traps out in a jiffy!"

"You've got back all right, Steggles?" called someone who appeared in the lamp-lit doorway. "Your passenger came by that train?"

"Yes, Miss Jackson!"

Then Miss Jackson, who was evidently an under-mistress, stepped forward and greeted Betty in a very pleasant way.

"How do you do, Betty Barton? I'm so glad you got through without any hitch. Such a long journey you have had. Here is my colleague, Miss Redgrave, another junior mistress. You will be in her form, so I will turn you over to her."

Miss Redgrave was just as nice to Betty as the other mistress had been. Only, perhaps she was not quite so vivacious. She seemed to Betty, at once, to be a young and pretty mistress, who could have been very bright and jolly, only something had touched her life with sadness.

"How tired you must be, Betty, after such a long journey," said Miss Redgrave, ushering her into the great square hall. "I know what a distance it is, because I come from the North myself."

"Oh, do you?" exclaimed Betty, feeling drawn towards this beautiful young lady. "My home is in Ribbleton—"

"Yes, I know it," said the youthful mistress quietly. Then she added quickly:

"The Form mistress is out for the evening, so I can't do better than take you straight to the study you are to share with some other girls. After a little chat with them, you can get them to take you to the matron. This way, Betty!"

With a hand resting lightly on Betty's shoulders, she led her to a broad staircase, and they went up it together to the second floor.

Plenty of lights were banishing the gloom of the great old place, and Betty exchanged glances with several girls who were standing about in the Fourth-Form corridor, chatting together. Some gave her a friendly smile at once, and that did a great deal towards driving away her natural nervousness.

"Study Seven—here we are," said Miss Redgrave, knocking at the door.

She turned the handle and pushed the door open, causing two girls to rouse up languidly from their low armchairs.

"Girls," said Miss Redgrave, "here is a new scholar who will share this study with you, and I hope you will be great friends. Come in, Betty Barton, and don't be shy!"

Betty stepped into the room. Remembering how those girls in the passage had been so quick to show friendliness, she began to smile. But it was a smile that froze on her lips.

For here, in the heart of Morcove School—in the very study she was fated to share with them—were the Grandways girls!

## CHAPTER 6.

### Not Wanted.

THE soft click of a closing door was the only sound that broke upon the silence.

Miss Redgrave had gone from the study. Betty Barton was left alone with these two girls.

They stood up, stiff as pokers, whilst the languid looks on their proud faces gave place to an expression of fierce disgust.

"What's this?" gasped the elder of the two at last.

"You know what it is," answered the younger sister. "It is the Council school-girl! Our charwoman's kid—come to this school!"

"Then all I can say is," said Cora Grandways fiercely, "she has come to the wrong shop! But what does it mean, Judith? How dare they have Council

schoolgirls at a school like this? How dare they!"

"And then, to thrust the kid on us, like this!" added Judith hotly. "To dump her into this study! My word, we have got to do something about it, Cora!"

"Do something? We'll soon have an alteration!" choked Cora, slamming down the book she had been reading. "Council school kids—here! It's the limit."

At this instant, and whilst Betty was drawing breath for a spirited word or two, the door opened and several girls drifted in from the passage.

"You don't mind, do you?" they said to the Grandways pair. "Miss Redgrave suggested we should look in and chum up with the new girl."

"Oh, chum away!" said Cora Grandways, with a bitter smile. "There she is! Have you been properly introduced, though?"

"That's right," sniggered Judith, guessing her sister's malicious intention. "Tell them who she really is, Cora!"

"Ladies," said Cora, pointing at Betty, "permit me to introduce you to the new member of the Fourth Form. Our charwoman's daughter, at home."

"Wh—a—a—t?"

"This is Betty Barton, yes," went on Cora, with that bitter smile of hers. "Her mother used to clean our steps!"

"Oh, no! You're joking!" they all cried blankly.

"Tell them, Betty Barton, whether it's the truth or not!"

"It is true," said Betty faintly. "My people were very poor once. My father was a cripple, and it was a great struggle for mother to keep the home going!"

"So she went out charing?"

"Yes. And I'm not ashamed to admit it!" flashed Betty, on her mettle now.

"And—ahem!" said one tall girl loftily. "Did you—er—make the acquaintance of the house-flannel and hearthstone?"

"I went to school—"

"Oh, really!" The girl with the lofty voice pronounced it "weally." "So you weally had some sort of an education!"

"A jolly good one, as far as it went," answered Betty, feeling deadly calm.

"And how far did it—ah—go?"

Cora Grandways struck in with her sniggering laugh.

"As far as the Council school—ha, ha, ha!"

There was another gasp of amazement from the crowd.

The girls began to move away.

"The Council school! Oh, help!"

"I say, you know, a jape's a jape; but don't carry it too far," said one girl, whose dismay seemed to have a flavour of merriment. "She can't really be a Council school girl. Why, her face is clean!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Betty waited until that latest laugh had died away. Then she spoke.

"Miss Redgrave said that some of you would perhaps show me where to find the matron. So, please, if one of you will be kind enough—"

"To be sure, what are we thinking about?" struck in Judith Grandways. "We must all form up in a line, girls, and make a fuss!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Betty turned very white now.

"Do you mean to say that not one of you mean to be the least bit friendly now you know I am a girl from a Council school?" she asked scornfully.

"I think that is the position," said Cora Grandways, turning to the others.

"Exactly!" they nodded.

"All right!" said Betty. "I'll manage!" And in another moment she would have stalked from the room, only just then Steggle, the porter, came to the open doorway with all her belongings.

"There you are, miss!" he said.

"Oh, thank you, sir—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Don't laugh at the poor dear," sniggered Judith Grandways. "No wonder she calls the porter 'sir'! She would have been glad to black his boots for a copper or two in the old days!"

"Here, Steggle," said Betty at the doorway. She had opened her purse and was giving him half a crown.

"Thank you, miss! I could bring them right inside—"

"Oh, no, thank you! I'll manage!"

So Steggle went off, whistling, and Betty took a bag in each hand and brought it into the crowded study.

With at least a score of her future school-fellows looking on, and never offering to help, she got the whole load of luggage into the study.

"So you think of settling down in here, do you?" asked Cora Grandways icily.

"Yes. This was the study Miss Red-gravo brought me to."

"And supposing we object?"

Betty looked very steadily at Cora.

"Whether you object or not, I suppose it won't make any difference! You are only the same as me—here to obey orders."

"The same as her!" Cora shrieked. "Did you hear that, girls? This washerwoman's daughter—this kid from a Council school—she puts us on a level with herself!"

"No," said Betty. "I put myself on a higher level, if anything!"

"What?"

"The cheek—the cool cheek of it!"

It was uproar for a moment, and again Betty waited patiently until she could make herself heard.

Then she spoke very calmly, standing erect before them all, and with a sort of pulse beating in her pale cheeks.

"I haven't come here with any big ideas about myself," she said. "I'm a new girl, and I expect to be sat upon a bit like a new girl anywhere. But I've got a bit of pride. In spite of the step-cleaning and the Council school, I and my people are as good any day in the week as the two of you that I know!"

The Grandway girls bristled with anger. "What utter rubbish!" shrieked Cora Grandways. "Our people have been rich for years!"

"And how have you used your riches all that time?" flashed back Betty. "What about all the slums in Ribbleton that your father owns—the slums that helped to make his fortune? Has he ever pulled them down, to build better houses for the poor? Has he ever used his riches to make others happy? For all their poverty, my parents have given far more pleasure to other folk than yours ever have, and I'm proud of them, and I say they always were miles and miles above you!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the snobs.

Betty felt her heart swelling with righteous anger.

The moment she had set eyes on the Grandways girls, in this study, she had known what to expect from them. But that all these other scholars—the whole Form, surely!—should be so full of sneers and derision; it was awful!

"Are you all going to be against me, then?" she asked huskily. "Oh, surely, in a great school like this, there must be some of you who have a decent spirit!"

There was a spell of frigid silence after

that, and then one of the girls gave a hard sign as she shook her head.

"It's the step-cleaning business——"

"And the Council school," chimed in another. "We can't get over that!"

"No," said a third girl. "We've got no use for Council school kids at Morcove School. It's a jolly disgrace that you have managed to squeeze into the place!"

"Hear, hear!" was the chorus. "And the sooner you clear out the better for you and for us!"

"I shall not clear out," said Betty. "I wouldn't even if I were free to do so!"

"Then stay!" snapped Cora Grandways, with a savage laugh. "And see the life we'll lead you!"

"Very well!" said Betty.

And without another word she passed from the room, holding her head bravely erect as she felt the eyes of all fixed scornfully upon her.

## CHAPTER 7.

### Betty's Resolve.

THEY slammed the door behind her, sending up a peal of derisive laughter. And what wonder if, as she found herself alone in the passage, with that contemptuous laughter echoing in her ears, she let her head droop at last, whilst her blue eyes filled with tears.

Her future schooffellows, and all were united against her!

Whilst she was still drifting about the passage, feeling utterly lonely and disheartened, the door of the study she had quitted suddenly whipped open.

Out of the corner of her eyes Betty saw Cora Grandways come whirling forth to make a rush for another study.

The snobbish girl entered this other room, but was only a few moments there. Then she darted into the passage again, calling:

"Here, Betty Barton! Paula Creel, our Form Captain wants to see you!"

Although the cry came from Cora, it filled Betty's heart and mind with a sense of renewed hope.

The Form captain!

Now, was it possible, Betty asked herself, that a girl in that proud position could fail to be nice?

Surely she must be a scholar who owed her very election to the captaincy to a number of fine qualities—a sense of fair play, a sporting spirit, and a fineness of character that was above paltry snobbery!

But Betty's expectations were doomed to another rough shock.

The moment she entered the captain's study she looked in vain for her ideal leader of the Form.

What she saw was a tall, slim girl lolling on a couch, with a very bored look in her eyes, the lids of which had a languid droop.

Paula Creel had tossed aside the book she was reading, and it was lying upon the carpet.

Her right hand toyed with a scented handkerchief, and as she fanned her face with this there was a jingling of gold bracelets.

"Hallo-ee, bai Jove, so theah you are!" exclaimed the captain, without sitting up. "Let's look at you, bai Jove!"

Cora had not quitted the room, and now a number of other girls came to the open doorway, perhaps to see the fun.

"I am sure she is a girl who will just suit you," said Cora, a remark which puzzled Betty, so nicely was it spoken.

"Yes, I like the look of her," said Paula, with an approving nod. "Quite a bright specimen, bai Jove!"

"She is strong, too," put in Judith.

"And experienced," added Cora.

Then Betty knew that she was to be derided once again, and she spoke with a hint of defiance in her voice.

"I was told you wanted to see me," she said to Paula Creel. "Well, what do you want?"

"Eh, want?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I ask you plainly, what do you want?"

"Bai Jove! I want a strong girl, don't you know," drawled the captain, sitting up at last. "A useful person, to do a bit of spring cleaning in this study. So what day can you give me, bai Jove?"

"You are either as big a snob as all the rest, or else you have been deceived," said Betty sharply. "I'm a new girl."

"A wh-a-a-at!"

"A new girl!"

"Oh, help! Bai Jove!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

With that sudden explosion of laughter dinning in her ears Betty promptly turned her back to the startled-looking captain and tried to push her way out of the room.

"Stop her! Look out!" chuckled Cora, and she and Judith laid hands on her.

"Steady a bit!" said the elder of the sisters. "We can guess your little game!"

"One they always teach at Council

schools!" sniggered Judith. "It's called 'Tell Teacher'!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, bai Jove! But take a hint from me, you Barton person," said the captain, with that fatuous smile of hers, "there's nothing of the Council school teacher about our Form mistress. Rather not, don't you know! Miss Massingham believes in tone! Same as I do—wather!"

"But there is the Head Mistress," remarked Cora, who was really in fear of Betty complaining to someone. "Unfortunately she is a Head Mistress who is so—ahem—democratic!"

"Jolly democratic!" said Paula Creel, shaking up a cushion. "And this is what comes of it, don't you know! A—a—what do you call her? A washerwoman's daughter, bai Jove! A—a—a—a proper common skivvy, what?"

"Ha, ha, ha! What a scream you are, Paula, once you are started!" chuckled Cora. "I guessed you'd be rather horrified!"

"Howwified, bai Jove! You girls shouldn't spring these japes on me, you weally shouldn't. A thing of this sort ought to be bwooken to me gently!"

With a sudden sharp gasp of utter disgust, Betty tore herself free of the Grandways girls, and pushed past the others.

This time there was no attempt to stop her, and once again the door was slammed shut behind her, whilst a fresh peal of mocking laughter pursued her.

The thought came to her that she ought to be seeking the matron; but was it a wonder if she felt too upset to feel like meeting anyone else beneath the roof of Morcove School?

Alas for the joyful hopes that had filled her heart directly she had word from Uncle George that he had meant to pay for her schooling at one of the best schools in the country!

All the happy daydreams that had been hers at the time when she, with her loving mother, made those rounds of the shops; buying an outfit for the school, they were dreams that had been shattered in this very first hour amongst the set of girls who were her future companions!

Her first hour beneath the roof of this great school that was a little world in itself—and what had that first hour taught her?

She was to be despised, shunned, just be-

cause they knew her to be the child of parents once so poor and needy.

And how long would it all go on? To what cruel means would they resort to carry out that vicious threat which Cora Grandways had voiced on behalf of all?

"Stay at the school—and see the life we will lead you!"

As those spiteful words went round and round in Betty's mind, she set her teeth.

"Let them do their worst, out of spite and snobbery," she said to herself, with flashing eyes. "Let the whole term go by without bringing me a single friend! If all the school is to be against me, even from first to last, then I will still manage somehow! I'll manage—alone!"

And in that heroic spirit did Betty Barton embark upon her new life amongst the girls of Morcove School.

### CHAPTER 8.

#### The Baiting of Betty.

**W**HERE is that Council school kid?"

"Do you mean the washer-

woman's child?"

"Yes, that's the girl we mean!"

These loud remarks came to the ears of Betty Barton as she sat all alone in her study.

The speakers were standing just outside the closed door of the study, and it was only too clear to Betty that the spiteful words were specially intended for her ears.

"That's her study," went on one of the girls in the Fourth Form passage. "You'll find her in there."

"All alone in her glory. Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled another girl, causing a general burst of laughter.

As the jeering talk and laughter died away there was a tap at the door.

Then two girls came into the study with a very mock-polite air, whilst a crowd gathered at the open doorway to watch the

"fun."

"Pray excuse us, Betty Barton," said the leading girl very sweetly, "but no doubt you would like to contribute to our usual annual collection?"

Betty made no answer. Several things warned her that she was to be the victim of another of those ill-natured japes which had been making her life a misery since she arrived at the school twenty-four hours ago.

The girls in the background were grinning. And was that a proper money-box

which the leading spirit now rattled? It was covered with a duster, and looked almost as big as a biscuit-tin.

Rattle, rattle, rattle!

"Now, Betty Barton, be generous, even if you can't be a lady," said the japer-in-chief. Her name was Grace Garfield, and she was a tall, fairly good-looking girl.

Betty made a pretence of going on with her work.

"Toll her what you are collecting for, Grace," said the mirthful girl who had entered the room with her.

"Right-ho, Ella!" Rattle, rattle, rattle!

"Hear the coppers, Betty Barton? They're in aid of the Home for Indigent Washer-women!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Betty Barton closed her books now, and sat back in her chair at the table, quite self-possessed.

"Isn't this getting rather played out?" she asked them all, with deadly calmness.

"Oh, no; just beginning!" they chorused, whilst Grace Garfield whipped the duster from the sham money-box and dumped that article in front of Betty.

"Do you see what it says, Betty—that label?"

"How can you expect the poor child to read when she's fresh from a Council school?" chuckled Ella Elgood. "Listen, Betty, and I'll read it for you. 'Stop! Think! Every little helps!'"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Every tuppence subscribed provides one Council school child with soap. Funds urgently needed!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Ha, ha— Oh, dear, look out!"

Crash! Bang!

That was the biscuit-tin money-box, as Betty snatched it up and hurled it, clean over the heads of the crowd, into the passage, where it smashed against the wall.

"My word!"

"Oh, the little fury!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You have gone just a bit too far," panted Betty. "Now clear out—the lot of you!"

"Wha-a-a-at!" drawled Grace Garfield.

She drew herself erect, but suddenly looked very small as Betty gave her a push that sent her reeling.

"Oh!" yelled the crowd. "The spiteful cat!"

"Spiteful! It is you who are spiteful, and



you know it!" cried Betty, with such righteous anger in her eyes as made her tormentors quail. "Setting up for being such grand young ladies, and yet stooping to sneer and jeer at me from morning till night! I can stand as much as most girls; but I'm not going to have my time wasted like this. Clear out!"

The crowd had scattered away from the door, and it was a proof of what a firm spirit in one girl could do amidst such hostile surroundings that a good many of the tormentors preferred not to show their faces any more.

Even Grace Garfield seemed to think it wiser to retire and think things over. And so the whole band of snobs slowly melted away, leaving plucky little Betty quite amazed at her own achievement.

She sat down by the table, and dropped clasped hands about her knees, whilst her pretty face slowly lost its angry flush and assumed a very troubled look.

Not a friend had she made yet—not one! And why was that?

This first twenty-four hours at boarding-school—what bitter disappointment it had brought her! And there seemed to be no respite for her. She was alone at this moment—but for how long?

Even if all the girls did not come swarming in again, after hatching fresh forms of cruel teasing, at least the couple who shared this study with her would be back directly.

Betty's blue eyes gave an angry glint as she thought of those two girls in particular, recalling how they had been the very first to set others against her the moment she arrived at the school.

Cruel misfortune, that she should have come to this school, looking forward so eagerly to a happy life, only to find that two enemies were on the spot to greet her.

"They tell me I am out of place here," Betty ruminated bitterly. "Well, from what I can judge, it is certainly more their style of school than mine. A worse lot of snobs I don't think could be found anywhere. Even the Form captain, Paula Creel, seems to have been chosen for her snobbishness. Not one friendly girl—not one! Oh, what would mother and dad think of it all—uncle, too—if they knew! But—"

Tap-tap!

Another knock at the door. And what did that portend? More cruel japing; more jeering allusions to the fact that her

mother had once earned daily bread for her little ones?

The study door opened, and Betty was surprised to see only one girl appear. All the same, she remained suspicious.

The visitor was Ursula Wade, a thin-faced girl, with pale lips and colourless eyebrows. Betty had already marked her out as a very quiet girl; but the quietness was of the sort that goes with slyness. At least, so Betty had judged.

"I've just been asked by the captain to bring you a message," said Ursula Wade, looking past Betty instead of at her. "You are to go to her study at once!"

"What for? Do you know?"

"Not the faintest idea." This was said with a sulky sort of shrug.

"All right," Betty remarked; "I suppose I had better go, although I can guess it only means some more fun at my expense. The Grandways girls are with Paula Creel, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"Then I've a jolly good mind not to go. Look here, Ursula, I'll ask you plainly, do you think it fair—"

"Oh, don't begin at me; I've got worries of my own!" shrugged Ursula Wade, turning to go out. "I've given you that message, mind!"

"Yes, all right. But, Ursula—"

But Ursula had passed from the room, and Betty was left staring at the door as it closed between them.

"Worries of her own!" A puzzled frown drew Betty's brows together. "I wonder what she meant by that? What worries? Have I misjudged her? Oh, how sorry I shall be if that is the case. Her quietness, that I felt was due to slyness—it is only because she has something on her mind."

Betty's hard life in the past had made her ever ready with sympathy. She darted to the door, whipped it open, would have called to Ursula again, but the girl had vanished.

So, feeling it was just as well to go along and find out what the Form captain really wanted with her, Betty went up the corridor and tapped at the right door—No. 12.

"Come in!"

Betty entered the showily furnished room, and the mere sight of one of Paula Creel's companions was enough to explain the summons.

Grace Garfield was here!

Betty, nerving herself for another firm

stand, took her eyes off Grace Garfield and glanced at the two other girls who wore here.

One was Cora Grandways, and Betty wondered what had become of Judith, the younger. Cora was sitting on the edge of the table, swinging a leg—a negligent attitude, meant to impress Betty with the fact that she, Cora, was great friends with Paula Creel, and was quite at home in this study.

The third girl was the captain herself, exceedingly tall and slim, and old for the Form she was in.

Betty found out afterwards that Paula Creel had "hung about" in the Form for a couple of years, partly out of indolence at her work and partly because she revelled in her proud position as captain.

"Oh, there you are, you geal!" said Paula, lolling back on a couch and fanning her face with a handkerchief. "I say, don't you know, there are complaints about you!"

"I'd like to know what they are," said Betty bluntly.

"Let me deal with her. Shall I, Paula dear?" said Cora Grandways. "You don't want the bore of all this, do you?"

"Wight-ho!" drawled Paula, with a half-yawn. "I don't know that I mind what you do about it. She pushed a girl in a most spiteful manner, and so, don't you know—" Paula broke off to rearrange a cushion for her head. "You'll have to get her to beg pardon, don't you know."

"Oh, that is the complaint!" exclaimed Betty. "I guessed as much when I saw Grace Garfield here. Well, I'm not going to do any begging pardon!"

"You are—what?"

"I'm not going to—"

Betty was cut short by the opening of the door to admit Judith Grandways, who came sailing in at the head of a small procession of Fourth Form girls, all in high spirits.

"Cheerio, geals!" their languid captain greeted them. "Just in time to hear a most pwiceless joke. This Barton person isn't going to do any begging pardon, don't you know."

"That's what she says," muttered Cora Grandways, with a vicious smile. "But perhaps she'll change her tune presently."

"You saw her strike me, anyway," broke out Grace Garfield, addressing the crowd. "Of course, girls, I wasn't going to lower myself by striking back."

"Rather not!" was the chorus.

"Yet a thing like that can't be passed over," said Cora. "It's bad enough for the kid to be here at all."

"Hear, hear!"

"But when it comes to gutter tricks—hitting people and—"

"Just the thing one might expect from a Council-school kid!"

And then Betty flared up.

"I pushed that girl away from me because she was going to make some more cruel taunts about my mother," she said spiritedly. "I felt mad with the lot of them; but this girl was the worst. And I won't apologise—I won't!"

"Yah, yah, yah!" said Cora Grandways, as if she were mimicking a very vulgar voice. "This is going to make our heads ache. Just remember, Betty Barton, you are not in the back streets of Ribbleton now!"

"Yes, do please wemember where you are, you geal," drawled the captain. "It is so extremely common, don't you know!"

"She knows no better," grinned Judith Grandways. "But that's no reason why she can't be taught!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Quite so," said Cora Grandways gloatingly. "And the first lesson shall be the correct way to apologise! Stand here, Betty, and—"

"Take your hands off me!" Betty cried, shaking her shoulder free of Cora's firm hold. "I'm not going to—"

"You are going to beg Grace Garfield's pardon."

"I won't—I won't!"

The fierce refusal was followed by a sharp scuffle, Betty struggling for freedom as the Grandways pair pounced upon her.

"I'll show you how to manage her!" said Grace Garfield. And, stepping close to the struggling group, she stooped down and caught Betty by the ankles.

With a sharp dragging action, Grace pulled Betty's feet from under her, and next moment the poor girl was down on the floor.

"There we are!" cried Grace.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Now!" chuckled Cora Grandways. She and her sister were towering over the new girl, forcing her to the floor. "Say after me: 'Please, Grace Garfield, I am very sorry, and I promise—'"

"I won't!" gasped Betty.

"She won't apologise," said Cora, thoroughly glorying in Betty's obstinacy. "So, Paula, it's for you to say what must be done to her."

"Oh, just do what you think best, don't you know," was the captain's shrugged answer. "But not in here, please!"

Nothing could have delighted the girls more than this languid remark of Paula's.

In a moment, whilst Betty was still being kept on her knees, a lot of whispering started. Then, giving chuckles of secret delight, some of the girls scurried away.

"Get up!" Cora Grandways said curtly to the captive. "You are coming with us, Betty Barton!"

"And don't struggle, or you'll spoil that wonderful frock of yours," Judith Grandways added.

The door was thrown wide open, and Betty—still struggling, but completely overpowered—was hustled into the passage and almost dragged to that study which she had to share with the Grandways girls.

Hardly had they got inside this room before the girls who had scurried off a few moments ago came hurrying in, carrying a strange assortment of articles culled from the domestic regions.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a loud peal of laughter as all the things were dumped upon the table—brooms, a dustpan, a sack-apron, blacklead and brushes, a lump of hearthstone, and a bucket.

"Topping!" was Cora's chuckling comment. "Shut the door, girls! And now lend a hand, some of you!"

They swooped upon her with such malicious energy as nearly set her swooning. Weaker and weaker grew her efforts to push her tormentors away. Pale and giddy, she had to submit at last, and then the cruel jape went forward with lightning speed.

Round her waist and up to her shoulders the sack-apron was tied. Brooms and brushes were forced into her hands, and when she refused to hold the things, the girls tried a different plan.

They tied the various articles to her wrists, so that they dangled there, whilst the iron pail was slung from her waist.

"We are getting on," chuckled Cora Grandways, stepping back to admire the effect.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But there are certain finishing touches,"

said Judith. "Her face—it's too clean for a charlady. You remember, Cora dear, when this kid's mother used to come to our house to clean the steps—"

"Yes, she always had a dirty face! He, he, he!"

"You wicked snobs, to say such cruel untruths!" Betty almost sobbed. "My mother was always tidy. She was the best mother that ever a girl—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

This time the laughter was caused by Cora dabbing blacklead against Betty's face.

"Bit realistic—what?"

"Real life. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Rather! Anybody can see what she is at a glance," chuckled Ella Elgood.

"But in case not," chimed in Grace Garfield, "we'll label her, eh?"

"Bravo, Grace!" applauded the heartless crowd, and in a couple of minutes this huge label was done in large letters on a big sheet of cardboard:

**"I Want Work!**

Steps cleaned by the hour, day, or week!  
Member of the Royal Society of Scrubbers!

Daughter of the World's Champion  
Charlady!"

When this label had been slung round Betty's neck, the gloating crowd stood laughing for quite a long time.

Then, with a sudden stifling of laughter, the door was thrown open, and the helpless victim of the so-called jape was thrust into the passage.

"Now, just to let the whole school know—altogether!" chuckled Cora. And she began to chant: "Ste-eps to clean! Any washing or scr-ubbing to-day? - Ha, ha, ha!"

**CHAPTER 9.**

**A Friend.**

IT was impossible for Betty Barton to try and hold back.

Mercilessly she was pushed and thrust by the crowd around her, whilst the mocking chant was sent floating through the whole building:

"Ste-eps to clean! Any washing or scrubbing!"

And now the few girls in the Form who had not taken part in the tormenting of the new scholar looked out from their studies, wondering at the commotion.

Directly they set eyes on Betty they burst out laughing.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Betty, helpless as she was, felt a raging anger in her heart. Perhaps the teasing crowd hoped to see her burst into tears, or beg to be spared; but, if so, they were doomed to disappointment.

Desperately she was bearing up, feeling sure that patient submission was a far more telling answer to this cruel persecution than any futile resentment could have been.

But, oh, how her heart raged with anger!

How she would have welcomed one pitying glance from a girl who felt the shamefulness of this treatment, and there was not one!

Still as friendless as ever, an object of derision to the whole Form!

The only girl who failed to join in the merriment was Ursula Wade. Ursula turned into the passage as Betty was being hustled along it; but she went past the whole crowd with a face as moody as ever.

And so, in a few moments, Betty was jostled to the head of the stairs.

It was quite clear to her that the laughing crowd meant to troop after her, down to the lower floor, exhibiting her to the girls of other Forms. But suddenly there was a check, Cora Grandways giving an excited exclamation.

"Hark! Oh, dear, it's Miss Redgrave coming up! What shall we do, girls?"

The crowd hesitated, and then—one or two of the most cowardly girls setting the example—it began to melt away.

"Betty Barton shall go down, anyhow!" whispered Cora, one of the last to flee. "Hurry up, duffer!"

And she gave Betty a violent push that sent her stumbling helplessly down half a dozen stairs.

With a subdued peal of laughter, Cora and her remaining chums fled back to the studies, whilst Betty checked her headlong rush just as Miss Redgrave came into view.

In the sudden deep hush that had fallen upon the scene there sounded a startled gasp from the mistress as she stopped dead, confronted with a girl so strangely dressed that recognition was almost impossible.

"What nonsense is this?" Miss Redgrave exclaimed at last, still staring. "Who are you?"

"I'm Betty—Betty Barton!"

"But what has possessed you to— Oh, I see why it is!" Miss Redgrave broke off,

in an altered tone. "How shameful to play such a cruel trick on you!"

"Please, Miss Redgrave, it's all right; I can manage now they've run away," Betty was saying, when the mistress checked her.

"Come with me," she said, "and I will help you to get rid of all that rubbish and make you tidy again!"

There and then she tore the mocking placard from Betty's chest; and untied the articles that were fastened to the girl's wrists.

Another moment saw the apron removed, and that bit of sacking was used by the mistress to wrap up all the other things.

"Here is my handkerchief, Betty; you can wipe some of those smears off your cheek, and then—"

"Let me run away and wash properly," pleaded Betty huskily. "I feel—so dreadful—"

"Very well," said Miss Redgrave. "Only come to me in my room as soon as you have made yourself tidy."

With a very bitter look on her face, she gathered up the apronful of kitchen utensils and hurried away. Five minutes later Betty found her, alone in the private room, still frowning at the things, which were now dumped in a corner.

The youthful mistress came up to the new girl, laying a soothing hand upon her shoulders.

"Ah, you look as bright as ever—that nice healthy colour again, instead of those vile smears." She smiled. "But you haven't taken enough trouble over your hair, Betty—such pretty hair it is! One moment!"

There was an odd comb on a little corner bracket. Miss Redgrave caught it up and passed it gently through Betty's ruffled hair, soon making it look nice and glossy.

"Betty," said the junior mistress gently. "I wonder what you think of the girls in the Fourth Form, when they treat you like this?"

"I don't know what to think, indeed I don't," said Betty bitterly. "If there were just two or three stuck-up girls, I would not be so surprised. But the whole Form—even the girl who is captain—"

"Yes, it is a sad state of affairs," sighed Miss Redgrave. "I have had to watch the snobbish element getting worse and worse for some little time. Those Grandways girls turned up here a week or so before you

arrived, and they made things worse at once."

"Is the whole school like it?" Betty could not help asking. "The other Forms—surely they can't all be so horrid!" Then she added, as Miss Redgrave shook her head: "Uncle said I was coming to one of the biggest and best schools in the kingdom!"

"Your uncle was quite right, in many respects," answered the young mistress. "Moreover has a great reputation. And there was a time when anything like snobbery would soon have been put down, if not by the girls themselves, then by the Form mistress. But changes came about in the Fourth Form when the present mistress was appointed."

"Miss Massingham, our Form mistress, seems quite all right," Betty rejoined. "She—"

"Yes, she may be in many ways," broke in the junior mistress, "only, like most of us, she has one fault, Betty. I hate to discuss my superior, of course, but I am trying to show you how it is that snobbery is so rampant."

Betty nodded quickly.

"You mean our Form mistress is a—"

"Sh!" The junior mistress shot a swift glance at the closed door. "Rightly or wrongly, Betty, Miss Massingham has encouraged the girls to boast about their parentage and that sort of thing. I am sure her intentions are good; but we see the result in the treatment you are receiving."

"I wonder I was ever accepted as a scholar," Betty said. "I am sure uncle did not get me into the school under false pretences. Miss Somerfield, the headmistress, must have known how poor my parents were at one time, and how I went to the Council school."

"Miss Somerfield is no snob. She is a good, true woman, and she would never be prejudiced," answered the mistress. "She welcomes to the school all who fulfil the conditions framed by the governors. Your parents may have been poor, but they were always respectable; and your own character, Betty, was blameless!"

Betty blushed now, and felt she wanted to change the subject.

"Miss Redgrave," she exclaimed, glancing all round the cosy room, "you must be very happy with such a lovely place all to yourself. How beautiful everything is!"

"I am afraid I have not done much to

beautify the room," the junior mistress said, forcing a laugh. "It is mostly as I found it when I obtained my post here, a little while back. My predecessor had heaps of money, Betty. I haven't!"

"I'm sorry," said Betty, with that ready sympathy of hers. "But, of course, you can't be what I call really poor—"

"I am really poor, Betty! I wouldn't mind a bit, if only—" A sigh was all that followed these quiet words.

"Oh, it is like that?" exclaimed Betty sadly. "You, too, have a lot to put up with in the school, just because there is something for which they feel you can be looked down upon!"

The junior mistress kept her face averted for a moment, whilst she seemed to ponder hard.

"The fact is, Betty," she broke out then, "you are the only scholar in the whole school who knows that I am poor."

"Oh!"

"I have told you a secret, yes. At least, I have confided part of it to you, because I am sure you are to be trusted. And perhaps, before long, I will tell you all the rest, Betty."

"How happy it makes me feel, that you trust me!" Betty exclaimed; and for the first time that day her eyes shone with joy. "But why, if nobody else knows, do the girls in our Form speak as if—as if—"

"You may say it, Betty."

"I'm sorry," faltered Betty; "but they do treat you rather as if they didn't care much about your authority, don't they?"

Ruth Redgrave was silent for a moment, biting her lip.

"Yes," she said at last; "and you shall know why it is, Betty. They have found out that I am not popular with Miss Massingham. They have often seen me snubbed by her. They have found, when I have called them to account, that they can usually get let off any penalties imposed by me, by appealing to the Form-mistress—"

Miss Redgrave paused, and glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece.

"I think you had better go back to your study now, Betty. I hope you will soon know happier times. Count upon me to help you all I can. I am your friend!"

"As I hope to be yours, always!" said Betty softly.

And, with that earnest rejoinder to the junior mistress's gentle words, the despised member of the Fourth Form passed from

the room, feeling certain that tears of anguish were again springing into Ruth Redgrave's eyes, now that she was left alone with her secret sorrow.

### CHAPTER 10.

#### As a Thief in the Night.

" 'S H! Hush! 'Sh! "

**S** Cora Grandways made a gesture for silence, as she stood listening at the door of the Fourth Form dormitory.

It was lock-up time, and most of the dormitories now held their full complement of scholars. In the big, airy room which was given over to the Fourth Form, only one girl had still to make an appearance.

That girl was Betty Barton.

"We'll have a game with her!" chuckled Cora Grandways, tiptoeing away from the door. "A few japes—"

"Oh, rather!" was the eager chorus; whilst Paula Creel expressed delight in her own favourite fashion—a drawing:

"Bai Jove! Topping notion, what?"

"Look!" went on Cora, whipping out a handful of string from her dress pocket. "It's an old wheeze, but it is always a good one. The bedclothes, you know!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Sh, sh!"

Then the laughter died down into very suppressed tittering, as Cora stepped across to Betty Barton's bed, and tied one end of the string to a corner of the bedclothes.

Unravelling the string—a task which took a minute or so—she laid it along the floor, passing it where necessary beneath other beds.

"There you are!" chuckled Cora gleefully, when the string was properly adjusted. "You just wait until the kid is getting into bed, and then whe-izz! Off go the bedclothes!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Then Betty entered the dormitory, and undressing quickly, got between the sheets. Not one of the girls spoke to her. United in their policy of snobbish aloofness, they settled down in their beds without a word for the "Council school kid," and the only "Good-night!" she got was that one which Miss Redgrave murmured during a last look-in at the dormitory.

The junior mistress glided away, the lights were out, and Betty was just getting nicely comfortable in her bed, when—whisk!

—off flew all the bedclothes, leaving her shivering in her nightgown.

It was, of course, the jape, worked by that bit of string which had been tied to one corner of the bedclothes.

"Oh, look at her!" chuckled Judith Grandways, as Betty could be faintly seen gathering up the bedclothes from the floor. "She's going off to the pawnshop with the blankets!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Force of habit!" sniggered Grace Garfield. "Even now that she has a rich uncle to pay for her schooling, she must grab all she can! I say, kid, do you find it cold standing in your bare feet?"

"She doesn't feel the cold—a kid who hardly ever had shoes and stockings to her feet!" sneered Cora.

And so they kept it up among themselves, this merciless jeering and scoffing, whilst Betty, untying the string from the bedclothes, laid them across her bed.

Her failure to fly into a temper was, however, a disappointment to the tormentors. They seemed to lose heart for further japes, although Cora's last remark to the others was that she had thought out some fine "wheezes" for to-morrow!

Betty snuggled down again, remaining for a time all on the alert. But she was left in peace, and soon she had the comforting belief that she was the only girl who had not dropped off to sleep.

But Betty was mistaken there.

Fully an hour later, when she herself was still a long way off from sleep, her weary head being so full of troubled thoughts, she was suddenly aware of someone in the dormitory rising stealthily from a bed.

Another "jape"—was that what it meant?

No wonder some such question darted through Betty's mind.

Her life at Morcove School had been, so far, such unbroken persecution, it seemed a very likely thing that one of the worst girls—Cora Grandways, perhaps—had purposely kept awake to perform some midnight trick.

But the girl who was stealthily getting out of bed—she was not Cora, nor yet one of the others who had been so actively hostile to Betty.

A little moonlight was shining into the dark room, and, with a throb of surprise, Betty had already recognised the girl, whilst pretending to be fast asleep.

Ursula Wade!

That was the scholar who had crept from her bed—one who had not, so far, been concerned in the badgering of Betty.

In the most guiltily nervous manner, the midnight prowler crept to the door, after putting on some of her day clothes, and went silently from the room.

Betty, pondering possible reasons for the girl's getting up, felt anything but reassured.

She could not ignore the fact that Ursula's every movement had been extremely stealthy. And this was the girl who had owned miserably to having "worries of her own!"

What, then, was the matter?

All Betty's former interest in the strange girl was now quickened. She felt anxious—uneasy about her.

That settled moodiness of hers; the remark, "I've worries of my own!" and now—this!

It was enough to make anyone feel uneasy, thought Betty; and suddenly she yielded to the impulse to get up, put on some clothes, and creep out on to the landing.

There she listened, holding her breath the while. But not a sound came to her betraying Ursula's whereabouts in the hushed house, or what she was doing.

Five minutes—ten minutes crept by, and Betty was still waiting, listening, her anxiety undiminished.

Such a lapse of time only increased her uneasiness, and at last she tiptoed to the stairs, and went down them without making the least sound.

Directly she got to the landing below, she knew where Ursula was.

At the far end of the Fourth Form corridor a chink of light was shining along the bottom of a study door, and from that study there now came a faint thinking sound.

"That is not Ursula's study—it is the one Ella Elgood shares with Grace Garfield," Betty realised, with another throb of anxiety. "What is Ursula doing in that study, when all the rest of the school is asleep?"

It was a question the answer to which Betty felt she was entitled to find.

So he went softly along the landing, and—scorning to play the spy, by peeping through the keyhole—boldly opened the study door.

As she did so, it was to give a startled gasp of horror.

For Ursula Wade had a money-box in one hand, whilst her other hand held an ordinary dinner knife.

She had given a shuddering gasp of terror as the door flew open, and now she stood like one stricken with dismay.

Betty, full of pity for the tempted girl, rushed at her, snatching both money-box and knife from the would-be thief's hands.

In doing so, the blade made a little cut in one of Betty's fingers; but she was too upset to take notice of this at the time.

"Oh, Ursula!" she whispered tragically. And all in a moment Ursula burst into tears.

"I know—I know!" she moaned, whilst Betty shut the door to prevent the girl's sobbing voice going farther than this room. "But I was so worried—so driven for money!"

"That was your worry—the need for money? Oh, why didn't you ask me?" Betty exclaimed compassionately. "I have plenty, Ursula. If only you had told me, I would have given you all you needed. I would give my last penny to keep anyone from doing a thing like this!"

There was a pause, whilst the weeping girl struggled with her emotions. Then she broke out, sobbingly:

"I had had enough of asking others to help me! It has only led to sneering refusals! And I—I thought you'd be the same!"

"How much do you need?" asked Betty.

"Nearly a pound," was the faltered answer. "It's a bill I ran up in the town. The shopwoman has turned nasty, and has threatened to come up to the school tomorrow, unless—"

"I'll give you the money in the morning," Betty broke in softly. "Go back to bed now, and don't worry any more. One moment, though! Had you got any money out of this box before I came in?"

"No."

"Then that's all right. Where is it kept?"

Ursula answered by taking the money-box from Betty, and placing it at a certain spot on the mantelpiece.

Then she took the knife and put it away in the cupboard, whilst Betty now gave a glance to her cut finger. It was bleeding slightly, and she put her handkerchief around it.

Ursula was calmer now; but suddenly, as she was going stealthily to the door, she turned back with a wild look of entreaty.

"You—you mean it, Betty Barton? The money—you really do mean to help me? Oh, if you fail me—"

"You shall have it before breakfast," said Betty.

Ursula did not stay to prolong the talk; but if she thanks were what Betty wanted, she got them next morning.

Fully half an hour before breakfast-time, the two girls met downstairs.

The Grandways sisters were not down yet, so Betty felt it was quite safe to ask Ursula into Study No. 7, that being the one which Betty shared with Cora and Judith.

And there, behind the closed door, the girl who was scorned by the Fourth Form did her secret act of kindness.

"I'll make it thirty shillings, Ursula—there you are," Betty said simply, handing over the paper money. "And now I hope this is the end of all your worries."

"Thank you—thank you!" quavered Ursula, putting away the money with a shaking hand. She was trembling from head to foot. "I'll do more than repay you, Betty. If ever I can help you—be a true friend to you—I will!"

And those words—oh, they seemed sweet as music in Betty's ears.

Her face lit up; her shining eyes showed the answer which she longed to voice, only one thought kept her silent.

"Then be my friend now!"—that was what she longed to cry out eagerly; but she was afraid that Ursula might think the gift of money had only been inspired by a cunning desire to buy friendship. And such a mean thing as that had never for a moment been in Betty's mind.

"I need a friend or two, goodness knows!" was all she said wistfully. "And after this, Ursula, I shall think of you as being one."

"Yes, yes!"

Once again Ursula spoke with fierce earnestness.

"How could I fail you at any time, Betty, after the way you have—"

"Sh!"

Betty gestured sharply for silence.

There were voices outside the door.

It opened, and the Grandways girls came in.

#### CHAPTER 11.

##### One Girl's Silence.

URSULA went quickly from the room, shutting the door behind her.

"Um!" muttered Cora Grandways, staring after the girl. "What was she doing here, Judy?"

"Trying to borrow money from the char-lady, I suppose!" sniggered Judith. "Ursula has been hunting money everywhere this week. I don't know how she can bring herself to do it—I couldn't!"

"Perhaps you may have to do it some day," said Betty, feeling it right to defend the absent Ursula, who was now her friend.

"Perhaps I shall," snapped Judith. "But if ever I do have to borrow money, it won't be from a kid who was in the gutter only a month ago!"

"Not in the gutter," said Betty. She felt like giving as good as she got, just at present. "I and my people were in one of those lovely slum dwellings that your father owns! One of the buildings—"

"Oh, that will do!"

"I wouldn't interrupt—it is rude," went on Betty. "And you pride yourselves on being such well-brought-up ladies, don't you? My home—please be more exact in future—my home was in one of those streets of houses that there was such a scandal about. You remember—"

"Will you be quiet!" yelled the Grandways girls.

"You remember how the town council were going to condemn them, only—"

A hurled dictionary, missing Betty's head by a mere inch, struck the wall, and Cora Grandways followed up this missile by making a rush at the girl she despised.

"Come on, Judy!" she called to her sister. "It's bad enough to have her in the study; but when it comes to saucing us—"

"Got you!" hissed Judith, as Betty avoided Cora only to fall into the younger sister's hands. "Now then"—slap! "Perhaps you will learn to"—slap, slap, slap!—"hold your tongue, you—"

Smack!

That was one on the cheek for Judith! In self-defence Betty could not help striking her enemy.

"Oh, the cat! Hold her, Cora!" panted the younger sister.

Cora simply hurled herself upon Betty, and another moment would certainly have seen the scuffle waxing fiercer than ever.

But now there was a sudden outcry from one of the other studies, and next second Ella Elgood and Grace Garfield came whirling upon the scene.

"Shut that door! We are giving the kid a lesson!" panted Cora savagely.

But Grace Garfield burst out excitedly:



"Hang the kid! Come along to our den, you girls! There's been a thief at work in the night!"

"What?"

"Nice doings—that's a fact!" was Ella Elgood's remark. "Some low thief has been trying to get coins from my money-box!"

Such startling news caused the Grandways girls to dart away after Ella and Grace, who ran back to their own study, picking up other Fourth Formers on the way.

This left Betty all alone; but she could not stay here.

Her heart was throbbing with dismay at what she had heard.

Setting herself to rights, after the fierce scuffle, she went along to the other study, where a whole crowd of Fourth-Form girls had gathered.

Ella and Grace were in the centre of the throng, talking excitedly about their discovery.

"There's the box—look!" cried Ella, holding it up. "It has a little grease in the slot, proving that some horrid thief was trying to get coins out, by means of a greased knife!"

"And here's the very knife!" added Grace dramatically. "It was put back in the cupboard, but we know it was cleaner than this. If you look at it in a certain light, you can see where grease was rubbed on, at the end!"

One of the girls standing by took the knife and scrutinised it, then gave a nod.

"What's this rusty speck on the handle, too?" she remarked. "Hallo! It might be—"

"It is!" cried Grace Garfield excitedly. "A spot of blood. Oh, hooray! Here's a clue, girls!"

"A clue?"

"Yes. Don't you see, the girl who used the knife must have cut her hand with it! So the girl who has a cut on her hand this morning—"

"She's the culprit!" went up the chorus.

"Girls," rushed on Grace, "I'm sure you are all quite ready to show hands—"

"Rather! Ha, ha, ha! This is great fun—except for the culprit!" they chuckled.

And, shuffling a little apart from one another, they held out their hands, turning them this way and that for inspection.

Betty was standing by the door. Her head seemed to be swimming with giddi-

ness, and the whole scene was a dreadful blur.

Ursula Wade had joined the crowd, and Betty could not help looking at her in great anxiety. But Ursula would not meet the eyes of the girl who had befriended her. She edged to another part of the room, and then—

Betty almost reeled with dismay, for she saw Ursula Wade holding out her hands just like the other girls!

"Yours are all right, of course—and yours, and yours," said Grace Garfield, working round the room to inspect the hands.

She passed on, and came to Betty.

"Hallo! Here's a girl who doesn't like to show her hands. Hold 'em out, Betty Barton. We don't expect them to be very clean. Girls who come from Council schools are—oh, I say! Look here, girls!"

The crowd surged close in a moment.

"A cut finger—"

"A cut that has not had time to heal!"

Every girl in the room, it seemed to poor Betty, was shrieking the words, excepting Ursula Wade.

Yet even that girl had pressed close, with the others, and was staring at the injured finger.

"How did you get that cut, Betty Barton?" It was Ella Elgood who spoke.

"Come on—no bluster!"

"I—I—"

"She can't answer! And look at her white face—look at the misery in her eyes!" sang out Judith Grandways. "She is the thief!"

"I am not!" cried Betty in a ringing voice.

"You are—you are!" Once again it was a chorus of fierce disgust. "The cut finger has betrayed you, Betty Barton. It is proof positive!"

"I am not a thief! I have taken no money from the box!"

"That's your artful bluster!" cried Ella. "No money has been taken; but you tried to get it."

At this moment, when the whole room was seething with excitement, several girls near the door were forced to make way for a newcomer.

It was the junior mistress. She had heard all the commotion, and wished to know what it all meant.

A babel of voices answered her, all lead-

ing up to the same cry of fierce scorn. Betty Barton was a thief!

"What do you think of it?" Grace Garfield's cry rose above the others. "A girl who has plenty of money herself, and yet she must try to steal!"

"It's in the blood—must be!" struck in Cora Grandways.

"Hush! You ask me what I think," the youthful mistress said, in great distress. "I think it is quite impossible that Betty can be guilty. Betty Barton, how do you account for that cut on your finger?"

"She can't account for it!"

"Silence, please!" Miss Redgrave spoke with some sternness. "Let Betty speak." And then they all waited—and waited in vain.

No answer from Betty Barton.

She herself was as conscious as any of the sudden deep hush that had fallen upon the scene; and she was wondering, desperately—when would Ursula Wade's voice end this tense pause?

For surely Ursula would speak out—would own up to clear her?

The very girl whom she—Betty—had saved from committing the actual theft; the very girl who had been so vehement in her thanks—surely she would prove her gratitude now!

Yet no word came from her—not one.

So much, then, for all those professions of gratitude!

So much for those earnest promises of proving a friend, if ever the need should arise!

Here was the dire need of help such as only Ursula Wade could give. And Ursula Wade was silent!

"We are waiting for you to speak, Betty Barton," the junior mistress said at last.

"I—I have nothing to say," was the husky answer, "except that I never even tried to steal any money."

The faltered plea of innocence let loose another string of fierce denunciations. A dozen tongues lashed at the poor girl, so that she swayed giddily and would have fallen, only the mistress steadied her.

"Come with me to the Form-mistress," said Ruth Redgrave quietly; and then the indignant crowd made way for them.

Cries of "Thief—horrid little thief!" pursued Betty as she passed from the room with the junior mistress. But oh, far harder to bear than even the worst of those cruel cries was the silence of that one girl!

Ursula Wade—still silent, knowing that in silence there was safety for herself!

"You may come in, Betty."

Miss Redgrave made the quiet remark as she came to the door of the Form-mistress's room, outside which Betty had been left waiting for a few minutes.

"I have explained all the circumstances of the case to Miss Massingham," the junior mistress whispered to the girl, leading her forward. "Now she will deal with you."

In a blind way poor Betty crossed the big room, and came to a standstill in front of the Fourth-Form mistress.

An impressive, aristocratic figure was Miss Massingham, in her stately black dress, and with her head of snow-white hair. Gold-rimmed glasses were in keeping with her distinguished looks; but, when the best had been said of her, she seemed rather a cold, statuesque being.

"What does this mean?" she asked Betty sharply. "Have we really a thief in our Form—my Form?"

"I am not a thief, Miss Massingham—"

"But it has been proved!"

"Only by circumstantial evidence," put in the junior mistress gently.

"Miss Redgrave, I do not require your assistance in dealing with this matter!" the Form-mistress said tartly. "Don't go—no. Only, pray keep silent, and trust me to deal justly. It is purely circumstantial evidence, Betty Barton; and that fact is, I fancy, all that is saving you from summary expulsion!"

"Oh, Miss Massingham!" gasped Betty.

"Tearful looks do not move me!" was the hard answer. "I would be far more impressed by some explanation, but that you cannot give me! Silence condemns you, Betty!"

"Unless—" Miss Redgrave exclaimed, and then stopped, biting a lip.

"Unless what?" demanded the Form-mistress.

"Unless she is keeping silent to shield some other girl!"

"You credit this girl with chivalrous instincts which, I am afraid, cannot have been implanted in one with her upbringing! No, Miss Redgrave. There are girls who nobly sacrifice themselves for others, but they are girls who belong to great families whose chivalry is traditional! As regards this most unpleasant affair of the

money-box, it cannot be proved except by circumstantial evidence; and so again I cannot do what I would wish to do! You may go away, Betty Barton!"

"But, Miss Massingham, do you mean that I am——"

"Come away, Betty!" the under-mistress whispered hastily. "Come with me!"

"But—but——"

Betty's choking voice failed her, and before she could swallow back her sobs of grief, she was out in the passage.

"Hush, dear!" said the junior mistress sympathetically.

"Oh, the cruel hardness of it—the wicked shame!" Betty muttered. "She sends me back to the girls, for all of them to go on believing that I did it! And I didn't—I didn't! I am not a thief! Oh, it is cruel—cruel!"

In the gloom of that dim passage, Miss Redgrave bent down, wound a loving arm about the innocent girl, and kissed her.

"My poor Betty, how my heart grieves for you!" she whispered. "But, however hard life may be for you, remember, dear, you are going to win your way in the end! Something tells me that you will yet rise to a place of honour and esteem, in the eyes of all the school!"

Betty went to her place in the class-room, and there she felt again the glances of cruel scorn that were being bestowed upon her; whilst all the time Ursula Wade sat there, still silent, still unsuspected of any part in the attempted theft.

With money of Betty's still in her pocket, to save her from disgrace, and knowing that it was her own midnight misdeed that had brought this trouble upon her friend in need, Ursula Wade could yet keep silent like this!

What was there left in poor Betty's aching heart but the bitter feeling that she was fated to remain the unhappy victim of treachery and malice; fated to be a lasting object of contempt in the eyes of the school; and all this, without ever finding one true friend to turn to in one's troubles!

#### CHAPTER 12.

#### Keeping Her End Up.

"ARE you going to clear out of this study?"

"No!"

"We will put you out!"

"You won't!"

"Bag and baggage, out you go, Betty Barton!"

And so saying, the Grandways girls seized hold of Betty's belongings with a violence that betrayed the desire to inflict injury upon them.

Cora, in the act of flinging wide the study door, spilled half the contents of an open bag. And Judith, following with another bag, simply kicked the spilt articles into the passage.

Her cheeks flaming with anger, Betty now whirled to the doorway, and sent Judith, bag and all, back into the room. Then she hastily gathered up the litter of things, returned them, to the other bag, and made a rush to re-enter the study.

Slam!

The door banged in her face, and from inside the room came a series of mocking laughs.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Then, suddenly, Cora Grandways opened the door sharply, allowing her sister to hurl more of Betty's things into the passage.

Quick as a flash, Betty stuck out one foot, so that the door could not be closed again. And then, fairly roused to a white heat of anger by so much cruel persecution, she made a grab at Cora's hair.

Betty pulled—hard! A shriek rent the air, and next moment Cora was only too glad to release her hold on the door, to induce Betty to let go of the plait she was pulling.

That was a win for Betty!

Into the study she swept, quite ready to continue the struggle up to the bitter end, rather than let the spiteful, snobbish girls think they had a spiritless victim to deal with.

The study door remained wide open, and now girls from other studies suddenly appeared, looking highly elated at the prospect of watching the "baiting" of Betty.

"What's the trouble, Cora?" chuckled one of the newcomers. "Have you given her notice to quit?"

"That's the idea," said Cora, putting her ruffled hair to rights. "And in two ticks you will see the thieving kid bundled out, traps and all!"

"Girls!"

The cry caused a flutter in the crowd. For that one word was the first hint they

had that their Form-mistress was amongst them.

"Ahem!" coughed Miss Massingham, as the throng fell apart to allow her to sweep into the study. "What is the trouble here? I heard—really, it was a most unseemly disturbance!"

Her hard eyes fixed themselves upon Betty, as the suspected cause of the commotion.

"Do you think it fair, please, Miss Massingham," broke out Cora Grandways, in a fawning tone, "that Judith and I should be asked to have this girl in our study?"

Betty Barton's face flushed with anger.

"Miss Massingham," she exclaimed, "this is the study I was told to occupy when I came to the school, so I refused to leave it!"

Miss Massingham frowned.

"Do not say 'refused.' 'Refused' is not at all a nice word, Betty Barton," she said.

"But—"

"Silence, Betty Barton!" cried the Form-mistress. And, turning to Cora Grandways, she added: "I presume the junior mistress placed this girl in here?"

"Yes—"

"Quite so! Miss Redgrave is so tactless!" sighed Miss Massingham. "Had you brought the matter to my notice, Cora, I would certainly have had the trouble remedied. But surely there is a spare study which Betty Barton can occupy?"

Some of the Fourth-Formers nudged one another and exchanged delighted smiles.

"All the studies are occupied," Cora hastened to say. "But there is that box-room round the corner, Miss Massingham."

The Form-mistress nodded.

"I know the place. When I looked at it some time ago, I decided that it could be used as a study in case of necessity. It will suit Betty Barton nicely! Betty—"

"I'll go at once, Miss Massingham!"

"Do, please!" said the Form-mistress.

And, with that remark, Miss Massingham marched away.

"Hurry up!" snapped Cora Grandways.

"Get along with all your traps!"

"She can't take them all at once, so let's help her!" suggested Judith.

And she set the example by snatching up one of Betty's belongings and taking it as far as the passage, where she let it fall.

The fun caught on.

In a twinkling, half a dozen girls were

having what they considered fine sport with the new girl's things, pretending to help in their removal, but really flinging them into the passage, and kicking them to and fro.

Betty was looking very pale now. It was a cruel life they were leading her, and few girls in her place would have kept the check on her feelings that she did.

After carrying two of her heaviest articles to the box-room, she returned for some of the things that were being kicked up and down the passage. She made several journeys of this nature, without uttering a word, and so at last all her possessions were dumped into her new quarters, and she was able to shut the door.

Slam!

It was getting on for six o'clock, and even out of doors the daylight was nearly gone. In this tiny room, with its grimy window, there was the deepest gloom. She found an electric-light switch, but when she turned it on, no light came, for there was no electric bulb in the pendant that hung from the cobwebby ceiling.

"Never mind—I'll manage!" she said to herself fiercely. "Once I get this place to rights, I'll have one thing to be thankful for—I shan't have those girls nagging at me from morning till night!"

Then she went downstairs, and calmly asked a maid in the kitchen for a candle and a few things with which to tidy up the place. It let her in for an argument as to why she wanted the things, but she did not mind that.

On the way back, laden with the candlestick, a dustpan, and a broom, she had to pass through the hall, and now she saw a girl, who was a complete stranger to her, entering the house, whilst Steggles, the porter, was bringing in a portmanteau.

"Hallo!" said the strange girl loftily. "you might fetch in my other things from the cab! Steggles is grouching, and I can't carry everything in myself."

"I'm sorry I can't help you; but I'm not one of the servants!" said Betty, rather resenting the other girl's manner.

"Oh!" said the girl, staring. "What are you then—not a scholar?"

"Yes, I am!"

"A scholar? But what are you doing with a dustpan and broom? A Morcove School girl—my word, this is something new!" laughed the new arrival, in a very amazed fashion.

"I am new," Betty said then, in a softened tone. "You will find out all about me soon enough, no doubt!"

And with that she continued on her way, reaching the Fourth-Form passage, to find almost the whole Form lined along the walls.

"Hooray! Here comes the world's champion charlady!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Now for a demonstration, ladies!" chuckled Cora Grandways. "This way to the show!"

They swarmed after her, as she went swiftly along to the box-room; and Betty suffered their malicious attentions patiently, having hit upon a good plan to "get her own back" presently.

Lighting the candle, she started to sweep industriously, whilst all the time Cora Grandways and Company hung about in the doorway, laughing and jeering.

So amused were the tormentors at their own play of wit, they did not notice how Betty was gradually sweeping the litter into a nice big heap, close to the door.

"There's the professional touch!" sniggered Cora. "See how the poor kid has inherited her mother's art? Ha, ha, ha! That's right, kid, sweep away! Don't forget the corners, you know! And how about the chimney? Got some soot down whilst you are about it!"

"It can't make her dirtier than she is!" said Judith.

Betty, suddenly shovelling up a whole panful of the litter, shot it clean into the passage—in other words, full at the jeering crowd!

"Oooooo! Oh, dear!"

With howls and wails of woe, the discomfited snobs scattered from the doorway, and next moment the door was shut.

Nor, for the time being, at any rate, did any of the dusty girls feel like bothering Betty any more!

### CHAPTER 13.

#### One More of Them?

**B**UT how little did even that temporary victory comfort Betty, when her task of tidying up was finished and she could sit down to ponder her position!

Alone! Utterly alone now, in every sense of the word.

"But I'll stick it!" she vowed to herself, dashing the tears from her eyes. "It's what I made up my mind to do the very first evening here. Even if I have to go through the whole term without ever finding one friend to turn to, I'll still keep my end up!"

Only, was the sad thought that made more tears glisten along her lashes, what a life it was going to be!

What a feeling of unmerited disgrace and shame it left one with to be here, in the heart of this great school, and to know oneself shunned by all!

Never to know a friendly smile; never to have any part in those things that every schoolgirl loves—games, sports, rambles out of doors with jolly parties of other girls.

A murmur of voices was sounding just outside the door, and she wondered if fresh mischief was afoot.

For once, however, she did not appear to be the topic of discussion.

"What sort of a time did you have, Polly?" she heard one of the girls asking.

Betty recognised the questioner's voice; she was Grace Garfield, a scholar who was as keen as any on the baiting of the "Council school kid." But Polly—who was Polly?

Then Betty understood in a flash.

Polly must be that girl whom she had met in the hall just now.

"Oh, it made a nice little holiday for me, going home those few days for the wedding," answered the girl who had been addressed. "Everything went off very well, too. But I had to rush for my train to-day, and that started a splitting headache."

"How unpleasant, Polly!"

"Oh, I'll be myself again in the morning! I just feel I want to tumble into bed and go to sleep!"

Then, although the conversation still went on, it sank to such a subdued tone that Betty, even if she wanted to overhear, could not have done so.

But there was no desire at all on Betty's part to hear any more.

Having been roused from her bitter thoughts, she felt it was best not to start thinking of her trials and troubles all over again. So, with only the dim candle-light to aid her, she sat about making the room as comfortable as possible.

The place could hardly be regarded as

furnished. There was a rickety old table and one creaky chair, and that was just about all.

"Oh, but I'll soon change all this!" Betty said to herself, with a grim smile. "I've got heaps of pocket-money. When I've made this room of mine look ever so nice, by buying things to my own taste, then the girls will envy me, instead of being able to chuckle over my misery! I'll buy a nice——"

Tap—tap!

She faced round to the door sharply. Who was outside now? What was coming—more trouble with her tormentors?

On guard against so-called "japes," she ignored the soft knocking; and now the door was opened a foot or so, and a girl looked into the room.

"Um!" she said, giving a glance all round the den. "So this is where they have put you!"

"Yes," said Betty. "And now you know what I wanted with that dustpan and broom."

"I don't envy you!" said the other girl.

"You will, when I've finished making the place what I mean to make it!"

Then the other girl gave her a very direct look, and for perhaps a couple of seconds they were gazing straight into each other's eyes.

"You must have upset the Form-mistress, to be stuck in here," said the girl at the door.

"I haven't wanted to upset anybody," said Betty. "But they are up against me—all of them!"

"So I'm told," nodded the other girl.

"It is an unpleasant business, and I reckon you'd be glad to leave the school."

"I don't mean to leave it!"

"You don't? Then you look like having a pretty rough time! We are a school for young ladies, you know!"

This may have been said with just the least touch of sarcasm; but Betty—was it a wonder that she took it as a sign that this girl was like all the rest, full of snobbery?

"Haven't you made any friends?" asked the girl at the door.

"No, not one."

"That's bad. There must be something pretty strange somewhere, for all the Form to be down on you!" The speaker added, after a moment: "I'm Polly Linton, you know. I share a study with Ursula Wade."

"Ursula Wade! Are you that girl's friend?" Betty exclaimed.

"I think I can call myself that," was the answer. "Why?"

But Betty only shrugged her shoulders. She was not going to blab about the bitter experience she had had with Ursula Wade.

Polly Linton waited for Betty to continue the talk; but, as no word came, she, too, shrugged, and then withdrew from the threshold, shutting the door.

Next moment the lonely girl heard a babble of talk start up in the passage, as Polly met the Grandways sisters and one or two others.

"Council school kid—positive disgrace to the place!" Phrases of this sort, all uttered with the greatest contempt, came to Betty's ear. "The sooner she goes the better!"

Then something was said by one of the snobs, in a low voice, causing a great shout of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Betty sat down at the bare table, and stopped her ears with her hands.

Why was it that this latest burst of derisive laughter hurt her more than ever? Why—except that she knew Polly Linton was amongst the scoffers, and must think of that girl as making yet another member of the jeering crowd.

One more of them to take delight in her humiliation!

One more of them to despise and shun her, as if she were the daughter of utter criminals!

Polly Linton, seemingly a nice girl in many ways—wonderfully pretty; full of high spirits, and evidently a girl of character. But was there any doubt that she, too, would join with all the rest in leaving the "Council school kid" alone?

Alone!

Once again the terrible sense of cruel isolation filled poor Betty's heart, and she dropped her head upon her folded hands, as she lay upon the table, and choked back her sobs.

Not a friend for her—not one!

#### CHAPTER 14.

##### The Cruelty of Cora.

**T**HAT night, when Betty Barton got to the Fourth-Form dormitory, her entry caused several girls to end a lot of whispering.

With quick nudges and a deal of mysteri

ous winking, Cora Grandways and Company moved apart, and began to discuss ordinary topics whilst they undressed.

Betty went straight to her part of the big room, at the end farthest from the door. Her bed was uniform with all the others, and it had the same warm mat beside it.

She was on the alert for "japes" at her expense, but when she turned back the bed-clothes to see if anything had been put between the sheets, nothing unusual met her eyes.

All in an instant, however, she was taken by surprise in an unexpected manner.

The mat she was standing on suddenly flew from under her feet, leaving her all a-sprawl on the bare floor.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a perfect scream of delight from her tormentors.

Cora and a few others had hold of a length of stout cord, one end of which had been tied to a corner of the mat.

With a lightning pull they had whisked the mat away, and that peal of laughter followed the thump with which Betty crashed to the floor.

"Hallo! This kid is having fits!" chuckled Grace Garfield. "What can we do to revive her?"

"Try this!" cried Grace's crou, Ella Elgood. And, grabbing up a pillow, she made a swinging blow with it at Betty's shoulders.

Biff!

Betty staggered under the soft but forcible blow, and next instant half a dozen of the snobs were belabouring her with other pillows and bolsters.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Biff! Flop! Thud!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove, girls, ~~we~~ never get to sleep for the dust you are waising!" drawled Paula Creel, who was disrobing languidly in the special corner reserved for the Form captain.

"Sorry, Paula!" said Cora. "It's the kid's clothes; they are so dusty! Just look!"

Biff! Biff! Thud!

Betty tried to rise, only to be floored again by another furious onset.

"Phew!" panted Judith, at last, giving up for sheer lack of breath. "Can't we find some less violent form of exercise, girls?"

"A change wouldn't be bad," agreed her sister. "I know!"

And with a rush, half a dozen of them were upon Betty, dragging her to one of the dressing-tables.

In vain she struggled; she was utterly overpowered, whilst her gasps of helpless desperation only caused more merriment than ever.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

As the gloating laughter died away a girl who had gone to bed spoke irritably.

"Can't you girls stop your row? Can't we have that light out? If you had a headache like mine you would soon hold your noise!"

It was Polly Linton who had spoken.

"Bai Jove!" sang out Paula, from the other end of the room. "Show a little consideration for Polly, don't you know! Stick a seween wound her, bai Jove!"

"All right, Paula!" cried one of Betty's tormentors.

There was a folding screen in a corner by the fireplace. In a moment it was taken across to Polly Linton's bed, and placed around it, the girl who did this murmuring teasingly:

"There, poor dear!"

"Oh, go away!" exclaimed Polly. "If my head weren't splitting so that I can hardly stand you wouldn't play about like this!"

"She'll be all right by the morning; let her alone," Cora said impatiently. "How's this, girls?"

With an extra malicious grin she rubbed a bristly brush against Betty's face.

"Topping!"

"Priceless!"

"He, he, he!" tittered Judith. "And now someone ought to do her hair!"

"Let me—"

"No, me—me!"

A dozen of them were eager for the further bit of "fun" at Betty's expense; but Cora pushed them all away.

"This reminds me," said Cora; "she pulled my hair a few hours back. And one good pull deserves another!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A gasping sigh of pain came from poor Betty.

Her hair was being pulled and tugged at most cruelly, and, what with this and all the indignities that had gone before, she was on the verge of a swoon.

"Look out!" exclaimed Grace Garfield, in sudden alarm. "Stop, Cora—that will do!"

"No—one more for luck. Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Cora, giving another wrench.

Then they let her go, and it looked as if Betty would drop to the floor in a dead faint.

But she pulled herself together somehow, and the others' sudden alarm only gave place to further merriment.

Feeling as if her heart were bursting with anger, she went swiftly back to her bedside. Against so many, what else could she do but simply suffer in proud silence?

Nevertheless, they were rousing in her such a fierce spirit as would, she felt, wreak ample retribution on all of them in the time to come.

Now all the girls were hastily preparing for bed, whilst they kept up a chorus of sneering remarks about their victim. But to Betty it seemed a trifling thing to have to put up with mere taunts and jeers. So long as they left her alone they could talk away as much as they pleased.

Yearning for her bed, where she hoped to forget all her troubles and sorrows by soon dropping off to sleep, she undressed as quickly as possible and got into her night-gown.

And then—crash!

Her bedstead had collapsed just as she was getting into it.

Br-r-rang! Crash!

It fell flat upon the floor, with poor Betty caught between the fallen ironwork like some wild thing in a trap.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, dear, look at her!"

Paula Creel sat up languidly in her bed. So did every other girl who was between sheets; whilst those who were still standing about the room simply doubled up with laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove, geals!"

"He, he, ho!"

Betty herself would have roared with laughter if this had been a good-natured "jape," for her position was very comical.

But the mocking laughter infuriated her. Madly she fought clear of the wreckage, causing the ironwork to slither and jangle noisily.

"Bai Jove, geals!" drawled the Form captain. "What has happened to that kid's bedstead?"

"Some giddy japer must have had a lark

with it!" tittered Cora. "I wonder who it was?"

"Will she be able to put it up again in the darkness?" asked Judith.

"No," chuckled her sister. "But we can't keep the light on for her!"

And—click!—out went the electric light, plunging the whole room into darkness.

But Betty did not mind. Hastily she set about trying to re-erect the bedstead. But some parts of it seem to have been taken away, making it impossible for her to get the ironwork securely fitted up.

And all her efforts only caused such a lot of jangling and slithering, highly amusing to the other girls, that she soon thought it best to bother no more with the thing.

Dragging the mattress and bedclothes clear of the ironwork, she spread them on the floor, and there laid herself down to rest.

Chuckling remarks and merciless titters came from all over the dark bed-room. She drew the coverings up to her ears, and still the bantering talk came to her, depriving her of that sleep for which her weary brain was craving.

And then, when at last the chatter died down, she found herself getting cold, so cold, lying there on the floor.

A fit of shivering seized her, and she could not shake it off. Tighter and tighter she drew the clothes about her curled-up form, and still the cold penetrated, seeming to strike up through the very bedding from the bare floor.

It must have been close on midnight before she dropped off from pure exhaustion.

How was it, then, when she awoke, just as the school chimes were ding-donging two o'clock, she felt quite warm and snug?

The startling sensation of comfort filled her with amazement.

She lifted herself up sharply, all but giving a cry of surprise as she saw that over her, as she lay sleeping, someone must have carefully placed extra things for warmth.

Blankets—two of them!

Utterly amazed, she stared at the extra coverings, whilst her mind tried to grapple with the question: Who had placed them here?

She could think of only one plausible answer to that question.

Cowardly uneasiness, not compassion for her, had inspired the secret action.

Out of all the girls who had been the



means of forcing her to pass the night on the floor, there must have been one who had been seized with the fear of the victim catching a serious chill.

"It must have been so!" Betty reflected sadly, sinking down to seek further sleep. "For what girl would ever have done it out of sheer pity? Who is there in the whole school who feels a scrap of pity for me? Nobody! They are all—all alike, scorning me night and day!"

### CHAPTER 15.

#### The Worst Trick of All.

**W**HEN Cora Grandways and Co. opened their eyes next morning, as the bell sent its rousing clangour through the school, their first action was to look at Betty Barton.

Then they chuckled.

Betty was still sleeping; and no wonder, after the broken night's rest that had fallen to her lot. She was sound asleep now, curled up there on the floor beside the tumble-down bedstead; and the joke of it was that she looked like lying there until the Form-mistress herself came up to see what was the matter!

"I see she has managed to get hold of some extra blankets in the night," Cora remarked softly, whilst she and her cronies were dressing quietly.

"Went to Miss Redgrave, perhaps, and told a tale about us," suggested Judith sourly.

"My word, if there has been any tale-telling," Cora muttered grimly, "she shall smart for it! In any case, I vote we have a game with her this morning, girls!"

"Rather!"

"Bai Jove, what an extremely pwootty cweature!" Paula Creel said, with that exaggerated drawl which she liked to affect at times. "Quite the sleeping beauty, bai Jove!"

"Sh! You'll wake her!" said Cora, with a gesture.

And after that the girls rushed through their dressing without making any sounds that were likely to disturb the weary victim of last night's "japes."

By twos and threes they all slipped off downstairs, and presently a half-dozen or so drifted together in the Fourth Form passage.

Cora Grandways sauntered to the door of that dingy room to which Betty had been assigned, and looked inside.

"Ha, ha, ha! I can't help laughing, girls!" she chuckled, as the others joined her in the doorway. "It does make such a lovely boudoir for our grand Council school kid!"

"Bai Jove!" chuckled Paula. "It is a bit bare, what?"

"He, he, he!"

"I know a topping lark we could have with her!" exclaimed Cora, bringing her hands together with a little clap. "The Barton kid is feeling simply mad, of course, at being dumped into this room all by herself. You can just imagine the things she has been saying to herself about such treatment."

"Well?"

"Here's the wheeze—a brand new one!" said Cora gleefully. "We'll scribble all over the walls, making it seem as if she herself has done the writing, of course. All sorts of insulting remarks——"

"Oh, I say!"

"Bai Jove!"

"About the Form-mistress, and so on," continued Cora. "Then, when the writing is seen by Miss Massingham——"

"My word!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Is it a go?" asked Cora.

"Rather!"

"Topping wheeze!"

Judith darted off to Study No. 7, and came running back with a couple of sticks of blue crayon.

Then they closed the door, and the cunning work of "decorating" the shabby walls went forward with all speed.

"For goodness' sake don't forget to write boldly, and in a disguised hand!" Cora warned the others. "It'll be a nasty thing for us if the kid can ever prove that we did it!"

"All serene!" answered Judith. "This is going to be accounted her bit of work, right enough, isn't it, girls?"

"Rather! And if it doesn't get her expelled, it will be thanks to some very wonderful fluke!"

"Bai Jove, yes!" chuckled Paula Creel, looking on. "If Miss Massingham gets only a glimpse of the writing she will—Hallo! Bai Jove!"

The study door had suddenly opened, throwing all the conspirators into great confusion.

"Oh, it's you, Polly Linton!" exclaimed

Cora Grandways, the first to pull herself together. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove, you did give us a surpris!" said Paula. "Extremely thwilling, in fact!"

"Come in, Polly!"

"Yes, do!"

It was an eager chorus from the whole mirthful band.

"See the game we are going to have with the Council school kid!"

"Not now; I'm not in a mood for games," said Polly Linton, stepping back to close the door.

And next moment she was gone, leaving the Grandways girls free to pass airy comments on her failure to join in the fun.

"She hasn't got over that headache of hers," said Cora lightly. "Never mind; she'll be feeling better after breakfast."

"Rather! We all know what a one Polly Linton is for japing."

Meanwhile, up in the Fourth-Form dormitory, Betty Barton had opened her eyes at last, to find herself alone in the room.

Out of her makeshift bed she scrambled, and simply rushed through her washing and dressing. No bells were going; and this, coupled with the fact that the whole school was very quiet, enabled her to fix the time.

It was the hour for breakfast. Whether she would get any remained to be seen. But one thing was certain—she had to miss the morning muster and first prayers, so trouble was surely awaiting her.

And here was the wretched, tumble-down bed to be put to rights! No use leaving it as it was, for the chambermaid to find and make a complaint about.

Directly she turned to at the bedstead she found that the missing parts had been restored. That told a tale of the other girls' desire to evade any trouble with the Form-mistress over their cruel "jape," and once again Betty could not help exclaiming:

"Cowards, the lot of them!"

For five precious minutes she was kept busy with the bedstead, and only then was she able to whirl off downstairs, going straight to the great dining-hall.

As she had feared, the meal was half over. Except for the servants, everybody was seated, and Betty felt a hundred pairs of eyes upon her as she went to her chair at one of the Fourth Form tables.

"Good-morning, Miss Redgrave!" she said confusedly.

"Good-morning, Betty!" answered the junior mistress softly. "I presume you had a bad night; I remember you looked very pale last thing."

A titter went round the table, and Ruth Redgrave frowned, then bit her lip. When she spoke again it was still to Betty.

"Try and make a good breakfast," she said. And then, turning to one of the maids, she added: "Marion, let Betty Barton have some porridge, and then the bacon."

Just as the maid was bringing the porridge from a sideboard, Miss Massingham, sitting at the head of another table, cried in a loud voice:

"Er—Miss Redgrave! Aro you letting that girl have the full breakfast?"

Ruth Redgrave stood up to answer.

"Yes, Miss Massingham. I felt it would be a pity——"

"The rule is, a scholar late for breakfast must have what is on the table when she takes her place," said Miss Massingham. "So Betty Barton will have bread-and-butter, and perhaps a little marmalade."

That ended the discussion; but it did not end Betty's distress.

To see the porridge taken away before she had tasted it was nothing to her; nor did she worry about having no bacon. But it hurt her to hear her champion snubbed.

Directly the signal was given for all the girls to rise, Miss Redgrave hurried away. So did the Fourth-Formers, amongst whom Betty had noticed a great deal of winking and smiling, as if some fresh bit of mischief was afoot.

Another thing that Betty noticed was the fuss many of the girls seemed to make of Polly Linton.

She was the centre of a chattering group as she passed from the room, and one of the girls put an arm about Polly's waist in a very affectionate manner. Only, Polly wriggled free of that clinging embrace, as if it wore a bore to be so popular.

Coming almost last from the dining-hall, Betty afterwards found Polly Linton strolling about at the foot of the stairs all by herself. The eyes of the two girls met, and Polly nodded.

Only a nod; but it meant a sudden wave of feeling in Betty's heart. She hesitated, colouring with nervousness, then ventured a remark.

"I hope your headache is better this morning?"

"Oh, rather!" said Polly. "A most unusual thing for me to have such a splitter; but I started it by running for my train yesterday."

Betty took a step towards the stairs, halted again, caught sight of the clock, and then gave up all idea of further talk. She had been late at breakfast; it would never do to be late for morning lessons.

Swiftly she mounted the stairs and made for her study. It was by no means a comfortable den at present, but Betty intended to transform it in such a fashion that it would make the rest of the Form feel envious.

On the way along the passage she noticed that most of the girls seemed to be standing about, with rather expectant expressions. None made any sneering remarks as she passed, and that, too, was significant.

What was in the wind, then—another "jape"?

The question was answered in the very moment that she reached her den.

Amazing was the sight that met her eyes.

None of her belongings had been tampered with; but, just as if she herself had yielded to furious rage at being given this box-room for her study, the shabby walls were scrawled over with remarks of a most rebellious kind.

"I won't live here!" was one sentence, done in thick blue crayon.

"This will get the sack for Miss Massingham!" read another violent phrase. "And serve her right!"

"Expel me if you like!" was yet a third flaring inscription. "I don't care!"

And then, to crown all, there were these bold words:

"There is only one decent girl in the school—and that's myself!"

Standing just inside the doorway of the den, Betty gazed in blank amazement at the writing on the walls.

For the moment she could not fathom the cruel cunning that had inspired this bit of work, which must have been carried out whilst she was oversleeping herself this morning.

If the flaring words had been insulting remarks directed against herself, she could have understood the reason for their being here. But such words as these—what was their intention?

The answer came to her in an instant, as several of the girls suddenly drew close to

the open doorway and looked into the room.

"Oh, I say!"

"Oh, fancy!"

"My word, if the Headmistress sees this!"

"Cheek! Impudence! The sauco of it!"

Such were some of the cries of pretended amazement which rang out, drawing all the rest of the girls to the spot.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, my word!"

"But it won't be a joke for her, when Miss Massingham hears about it!"

"Rather not!"

Betty's heart was beginning to beat rapidly. She faced round, her eyes blazing with wrath.

"You cruel girls!" she cried hotly. "You know I never did this!"

"What?"

"Bai Jove!"

"It's a plot—a plot to get me expelled!" Betty rushed on furiously. "You want Miss Massingham to think that I wrote the words!"

"Aren't they just the words you might be expected to write?" sneered Cora Grandways.

"Hear, hear!" sang out Judith. "You know very well, Betty Barton, you were mad about being put in here!"

"That doesn't matter," panted Betty. "I never wrote those words! I—"

"Hush, girls! What is all the trouble now?" broke in the voice of Miss Redgrave.

And next moment she was in the midst of the crowd, giving a horrified gasp as she stared at the rebellious phrases.

"Oh!"

"Miss Redgrave, I did not write the words!" cried Betty desperately. "You may let Miss Massingham see them, if you like; I can't help it! I did not—"

"No; Miss Massingham must not see them under any circumstances!" the junior mistress exclaimed sharply. "Quick—hand me that duster!"

Snatching at the cloth, she started to rub away one of the inscriptions; but they still showed faintly on the wall.

"This needs indiarubber," she broke out desperately. "One of you girls go quickly, and get a good quantity. You, Polly Linton—quick!"

The girl in question raced away; and then the junior mistress still went on rubbing at the writings, rendering them all faint and hardly readable.

"You must keep at them with the india-

rubber, when it comes, until the writing is quite rubbed out," she paused at last to say to Betty. "Those words—they would get you expelled, if your Form-mistress saw them!"

"I know—I know!" cried Betty passionately. "That is why they were written!"

"My word! She's suggesting that we wrote them!" cried Cora Grandways. "If there is to be any taking her word against ours, Miss Redgrave, we will ask to have the whole matter handled by our Form-mistress!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Bai Jove, geals!"

"That will do," said the junior mistress calmly. But she was very pale. "I don't intend the matter to come to the knowledge of Miss Massingham."

"Because you—"

"Silence, Cora Grandways!" said Ruth Redgrave, with such spirit as made that girl flinch. "I say, whoever wrote these shameful words, it should be everybody's desire, for the good of the school, to hush the matter up."

"I did not write them!" insisted Betty.

"She did—she did! If she didn't," chorused the girls, "then who did?"

"I say you did!" was the ringing retort—not from Betty, either.

## CHAPTER 16.

### A Friend at Last.

THE earnest cry fell like a bombshell in the midst of the excited crowd.

In sudden utter confusion, Cora and the rest of them fell apart, then stood gaping at the speaker.

"I say they did do it!" repeated Polly Linton, all breathless after her run downstairs for the indiarubbers. "Betty Barton is speaking the truth, Miss Redgrave, and they are not!"

A howl of disgust went up from the plotters.

"Oh!"

"Polly!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Listen, everybody!" cried Polly excitedly. "I'm a girl who hates blabbing; but there is something in all this that fairly sickens me, and the truth has got to be told by me."

"Well?" asked the junior mistress quietly.

"I saw some of these girls—I won't say which ones—doing that writing on the walls before breakfast!"

Another howl of rage.

"Sneak—sneak!"

"Boo! Shame on you, Polly Linton! You, whom we thought to be above siding with a girl like Betty Barton!"

"You thought wrong—that's all!" Polly Linton answered bluntly. "Say what you like about Betty Barton; fair is fair! You have simply put your heads together to get her expelled; but—"

"Boo! You have said it once, sneak!" went up the savage chorus again. "Tell-tale! Sneak!"

"Shout away!" said Polly, drawing herself very erect and facing them all. "This has been coming for a long time, and now—I'm glad! Yes, glad to be done with the lot of you!"

"Boo!"

"Silence! Silence, all!" rang out Miss Redgrave's voice. "Now, girls—and you in particular, Cora Grandways—in view of what Polly Linton has said, are you still sorry that I am going to hush this matter up?"

No answer from Cora! No answer from any one of them!

"Are you still anxious to have the whole thing brought to Miss Massingham's notice?"

And again—no answer!

There was a look in Ruth Redgrave's eyes that showed she was anything but content at having to spare the real culprits; but she was acting on the wise old rule: "Least said, soonest mended."

"Go to your classes, and consider yourselves utterly disgraced—in my eyes at least!" she said, with withering scorn. "Betty Barton—and you, Polly Linton—remain behind, and remove the last traces of that abominable writing!"

Shame-stricken and sullen, the humbled snobs went shuffling away, followed by their scornful mistress; and then Betty and Polly were alone, looking straight into each other's honest eyes.

"How can I thank you?" was Betty's faltered cry at last.

And Polly said, holding out her hand:

"How can I help you, Betty? For that's what I want to do! And there's another thing. Perhaps you feel this place is rather small for two girls to share it? But, with a bit of a squeeze—"

"You mean, you want to come into this den with me?"

"That's the idea!" said Polly. "And mighty glad will I be to be done with Ursula Wade!"

"I—I don't understand," faltered Betty. "Last night, when I asked you if you were her friend, you said you called yourself that."

"And so I can, if being a friend to a girl means helping her many a time on the quiet! But whether I can think of her as being my friend, in return, that's another matter!" said Polly bitterly.

"Then she has served you exactly as she served me!" exclaimed Betty. "I did her a good turn—never mind what—and she was oh, so extravagant in her gratitude. But when it came to proving her words—I tell you, the disappointment fairly broke my heart! I was longing for a friend—just one true friend—but I didn't find that friend in Ursula Wade!"

She added, with deep regret:

"And then, yesterday, you turned up, and I jumped to the conclusion that you were like all the rest! I was feeling so bitter—oh, how I misjudged you! You, who have proved yourself to be such a friend indeed!"

"I only wish I could have taken my stand beside you last night," said Polly gravely. "But that splitting headache of mine simply would not allow me to interfere when those girls were treating you so shamefully in the dormitory. I was bad, Betty!"

"I know."

"I was miserable, too, on your account. I was sorry for the way I spoke to you downstairs, and long after the others had gone to sleep, my poor head was full of sad thoughts about you. I thought how cold you must be—"

"And it was you who put the blankets over me!"

"Oh, well—"

"Polly"—there were tears in Betty's eyes; she seemed to gulp back a sob—"what a good chum you were to me, in secret!"

"Nothing to what I want to be, in public!" was the smiling rejoinder. "Paula Creel, the Grandways couple, and all the rest—oh, I have been feeling terribly fed-up with them, I tell you! Isn't snobbery a hateful thing, Betty? Wouldn't it be glorious if somebody could fight it—stamp it out—bring back the fine old spirit that the Form was once able to boast! You and I—"

"You and I!" echoed Betty, with a sudden radiant look lighting up her pretty face.

"It can be done, Betty," said her new-found chum earnestly, "and we are the couple to do it! It will be a stiff struggle;

but think of the fun, too! You see how I am spoiling for the fight—the fight against snobbery! And you, Betty—there is something in your eyes; you are thinking—"

"I am thinking of something Miss Redgrave said to me in a quiet moment yesterday," Betty answered dreamily. "It seemed so strange then—so impossible! But now—"

"What is it? Tell me!"

"Only that she had a conviction that I would win my way in the end; would some day win a place of honour and esteem in the school!"

"Just so!" said Polly, giving one of her gay laughs. "Betty Barton, captain of the Fourth Form!"

"Ha, ha, ha! What nonsense!" laughed Betty.

"The day will come," insisted Polly. "And when it does, don't forget that I predicted it!"

But Betty still smiled, and shook her head.

"Only," she said, suddenly catching at Polly's hand, "one thing I am quite sure about now. Come weal, come woe, life for me at Morcove School will be different after this! So lonely I was, and longing for just one true friend to turn to in my troubles! And I have found that friend in you!"

"Your friend, Betty, through thick and thin—always!"

"Yes," said Betty, with a sigh of intense joy; "my one true friend—at last!"

## CHAPTER 17.

### What a lark!

"H A, ha, ha!"

"It's lovely!"

"Priceless!"

And another peal of laughter came from the group of mirthful girls who were gathered in Study No. 7.

The study door swung open, and the merriment grew louder than ever as the girls saw who it was that had come to join in the fun.

"Hallo, Paula!" was the gleeful greeting which the newcomer received from Cora Grandways. "Yes, come in! We want you to hear about the latest wheeze!"

"Paula, do look!" pleaded Judith Grandways, drawing the captain's attention to the manuscript! "Isn't it simply spiffing?"

"Hallo! Oh, help!" drawled Paula Creel, casting her eye over the written pages. "This looks like the book of words of a sort of play, don't you know!"

"Right first time!" grinned Cora Grandways. "Just a little fill-up for the school concert to-morrow evening."

"Oh, weally, bai Jove—"

"Ha, ha, ha! Say, Paula dear, what do you think of the title?" chuckled Judith Grandways. "Isn't my sister jolly clever to have planned all this? Do read a line or two, Paula!"

There was some half-stifed tittering as Paula, with raised brows, glanced at the first page.

"'Little Mother—A Scene From Weal Life,'" the Form captain read aloud. "This sounds as sewious as Shakespeare! Weally, you know, is it the sort of thing they want at the concert? I always think sewious plays such an awful bore, don't you know. Now something funny—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Something with a skit in it—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed all the girls again, and they rolled about the room, so helpless they were with laughter.

"Because, don't you see—ha, ha, ha!"—Cora tried to explain in between her titters—"this is going to be funny, Paula! A real scream, in fact! 'Little Mother'—don't you see? That's the Barton person—our Betty Barton! Ha, ha, ha!"

Paula tossed the manuscript on to the table, and sat down.

"Bai Jove!" she cried, starting to rock with mirth. "Haw, haw, haw! Now I catch the dwift, you geals. I say, what a pviceless wheeze it is! Haw, haw, haw! Your work of genius, Cowa Gwandways—it is just a hit at the Barton person!"

"That's it!" chuckled Cora. "We've got it all here. You know what she was before her rich uncle came homo from the States and sent her to this school. We show her in her old home, in a Lancashire slum. We show her poor-hardworking mother—"

"He, he ho!" sniggored Ella Elgood. "I'm going to be the poro 'ard-working muvver!"

"Bai Jove!"

"And then there are the other members of the Barton family," said Cora Grandways, whirling the pages of the manuscript. "Betty Barton has a brother and sister called Joccy and Doris. In the play they will be Joris and Doughy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, weally, you geals! Haw, haw, haw!"

"I'm Joris," said Judith Grandways. "I shall dress up in awful rags, somehow, to look like a girl that hasn't had her face

washed for a month. And Lucy Lyddon is going to be the boy Doughy!"

The Form captain threw back her head and laughed long and softly.

"Bai Jove!" she finished. "And what about the pviceless hewoino, eh? What about 'Little Mother,' don't you know?"

"Oh, I'm the heroine! Ha, ha, ha!" pealed Cora Grandways. "I am Barty Botton, and I'll do it all to the life, you see!"

"It's going to be a scream from start to finish," laughed several of the girls.

"Scweam?" drawled the captain. She got up and walked to the door. "Bai Jove, it will bring the house down, don't you know! It must be an awful fag, swotting up the parts, but, weally, I guess it's worth the twouble! Well, geals—"

She broke off as the door-knob which she was holding was suddenly turned by someone on the outer side. Then the door opened, and Miss Redgrave, the junior mistress, stepped into the room.

"Excuse my interrupting you," said Ruth Redgrave, in her cordial tone, "but Miss Masingham asked me to inquire whether you girls can say what you are going to do as your share in the concert to-morrow evening."

"Oh, it is all settled," answered Cora Grandways. "We have just been telling Paula. We want to do a little play—"

"A play! That is a capital idea, girls," said the under-mistress. "May I ask what it is about? The title, too—I ought to have that for the programme."

Some of the girls took out their handkerchiefs and put them to their faces; others bent down to tie shoelaces, or turned to the window so as to place their backs to the lady usher.

But Cora had a perfectly straight face as she answered:

"It is a play called 'Little Mother.' It is drawn from real life, Miss Redgrave, and it ought to be very—"

"Pathetic," said Judith Grandways.

"Very well," said Miss Redgrave. "I will just give the title of the pice to your Form-mistress, and repeat what you have told me—that it is a pathetic little play of your own composition."

"Thank you, Miss Redgrave," Cora said demurely.

The junior mistress withdrew from the room.

After going a few steps along the corridor she turned back, tapped at the door, and then looked into the room again.

Cora and the others were simply convulsed with silent laughter.

"I have just remembered to ask you," the under-mistress said, after waiting a moment for the girls to quieten down. "Is there a part in the play for Betty Barton? And Polly Linton—what about her?"

"Oh, Betty Barton figures in the play," smiled Cora. "As for Polly Linton, I don't suppose she wants to have anything to do with it, as it is our getting up. She seems to be done with the lot of us!"

Miss Redgrave nodded, to show that she had taken in this remark, and then went off again. Her fine dark brows were drawn together in a frown; she was walking in a very preoccupied manner towards the stairs when two girls came hurrying up to the landing laden with heavy parcels.

"Oh, Betty—Polly!" exclaimed the under-mistress, a smile suddenly lighting up her lovely face. "I was just thinking about you. But whatever have you got in those big parcels?"

"Ah!" laughed Betty Barton, whilst Polly Linton came very near to winking at the questioner. "It's a secret for the present, Miss Redgrave."

"Very well; not a guilty secret, I'm sure," smiled Ruth. "As a matter of fact, I think I can guess. Shall I?"

"Do—yes!" exclaimed the breathless pair eagerly.

"You have cycled into Barncombe, and have been buying things to make your den comfortable."

"Right!" laughed Betty.

"And why shouldn't we, Miss Redgrave?" cried Polly.

"Why not, indeed?" was the answer, given with a sudden sharp sigh. "Now I really came along to speak to you about to-morrow night's concert."

Polly Linton shrugged her shoulders.

"We are not taking any part in it, Miss Redgrave."

"Not!"

"Well, you see," said Betty, "the—the fact is"—she looked at her friend—"I haven't been asked, and Polly won't take part without me, she says."

"Oh, don't make a fuss about nothing!" blushed Polly. "Miss Redgrave, I am only doing what every girl should do. When I came back to the school, after being absent a few days for the wedding at home, I found Betty here being slanged and shunned because her people were once so poor and she

herself had to go to the Council school. And so—"

"You took your stand beside Betty—yes, I know," the under-mistress exclaimed kindly. "You did the right thing, Polly."

"I am perfectly certain I did," said Polly quietly.

Miss Redgrave smiled.

"Well," she said, rather slowly, "you say neither of you is taking part in the concert. And yet the girls have just told me that you, Betty, figure in the play they are acting."

"They must have changed their minds," said Betty. "Even if they haven't, we can manage somehow—eh, Polly?"

"Rather!"

And with that firm resolution both girls hurried on with their bulky parcels upstairs to their study.

"My word, it looks a bit different, doesn't it?" chuckled Betty, as she threw open the study door and gazed around.

"A bit of an improvement, rather!" Polly agreed heartily.

Having shut the door, the two chums were just starting to carry on with the work of making their quarters thoroughly comfortable when they heard a step stop short outside.

Then the door opened a few inches, and Cora Grandways thrust in her head to speak.

"Just a word to you two," she began curtly. "Not so much hammering in nails, and—"

And then Cora broke off, suddenly impressed with the fact that the study, which was to have been a standing joke amongst the Fourth Form, was looking quite transformed!

She almost gasped with surprise, whilst a jealous look showed in her eyes.

Without another word she went away, shutting the door quickly.

"That's the beginning! Ha, ha, ha!" Polly laughed softly. "Simply green with envy she is. There'll be other girls along in a minute to take a peep, you see."

"They shall find us still busy," said Betty. "Here we are, Polly—this parcel that we didn't have time to open a few hours ago!"

Whilst Betty was trying to unknot the string, Polly snipped it with some scissors, and then the eager hands of both girls claved away the paper wrapping.

"How's that!" cried Betty.

"There's not another study in the school can boast such lovely curtains," declared

Polly. "And this chenille table cover, it's lovely!"

"Bai Jove!"

The door had opened again. Paula Creel, captain of the Fourth Form, was looking round the room with jaws agape.

"Oh, weally!" she exclaimed. "You are rayther going it, what?"

"Why not?" returned Betty calmly.

"This is our study."

"And visitors are not wanted!" Polly chimed in bluntly.

Paula Creel was too fatuous a girl to be ready with a retort. With another feeble gasp she beat a retreat, and the laugh was with Betty and Polly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Just as they were trying the curtains to see how they would look when hung, there was a heavier footfall in the passage, and then a thumping knock at the door.

Betty nipped across the room and answered the summons.

"Oh, Steggles—yes, they are for us, thanks!" she cried gaily, as the school porter appeared in the doorway. "In here, please!"

Steggles, with one wicker armchair over his head and another slung at his side, stamped into the room.

"This here is a mere trifle," he said, setting down the two chairs. "But, my sakes, young ladies, you've been buying some stuff to-day! There's a noo carpet, and a corner bookshelf, and—"

"Bring them up, Steggles!" said Polly sweetly.

Then she plumped down into one of the new chairs, and leaned back with ankles crossed and her hands folded in her lap whilst Betty followed suit with the other.

Steggles went out, leaving the door open, and in a moment prying eyes were looking into the room.

"What do you want?" Polly asked, still lolling back in great comfort. "This is our study—not yours, Judith Grandways!"

"Call to-morrow," added Betty. "We may have some old lumber to give away then."

"Oh, the cats!" was all Judith could fume to herself, as she walked away.

Presently Steggles came clumping up the stairs and along the passage, almost staggering under the load.

"Phoe-ew, young ladies!" he breathed, setting down his burden. "One carpet, one

corner bookshelf, a hearthrug. I think that's the lot."

"Thank you, Steggles," said Betty, slipping a tip into his honest palm. "Now, Polly."

And at it they went again.

In three minutes the beautiful carpet was properly opened upon the clean floor.

The hearthrug was placed in position, and now Polly set about nailing up the corner bookshelf, whilst Betty "carried on" with the curtains.

Bang, bang, bang! went Polly's hammer.

After the second nail had been driven home a door slammed violently next door, and someone came whirling round to this study in a terrible fury.

It was Ella Elgood who burst in upon the chums, her face red with anger.

"Stop that row! I won't have it!" she yelled.

Bang, bang, bang, bang!

"You are bringing down all the plaster in my room!"

Bang, bang, bang, bang!

"Do you hear me? Stop—stop!"

Polly Linton suddenly looked round in surprise, as she stood upon her chair, hammer in hand.

"Hallo, what do you want?" she asked Ella curtly. "This is our study, not yours. All old lumber will be given away to-morrow!"

"If you dare to hammer in another nail I'll—"

Bang, bang, bang!

"I tell you I'll—"

Bang!

Ella Elgood stormed away, speechless with rage, slamming the door behind her.

"Ha, ha, ha! Well, there we are, Betty dear," cried Polly, jumping down. "That bookshelf is a fixture, I think. Oh, those curtains—how jolly they look!"

"I like the way they go with the carpet," said Betty. "It was a good idea of ours to—"

Another break in the talk! For once again the door had opened, and now a girl named Grace Garfield was peering into the room.

"And what do you want?" asked Polly.

"I've come to see all the rubbish you've bought," jeered Grace.

"Oh, she has come to look at the rubbish we don't want," said Betty, keeping a very



straight face. "We were going to give it away to-morrow; but still, you can take it now."

"You—you—" spluttered Grace. "Who wants your old things!"

"Well," said Polly sweetly. "This rag of a carpet we are throwing away could give points to yours. Take it, Grace."

"Oh, don't be funny!"

"It's being generous, not funny!" grinned Betty. "We are letting you have first pick at all the old lumber before your chums have a look in. Do you want an empty packing-case? Here's one that we

Slam!

"That's the way to talk to them!" laughed Polly, as she and Betty found themselves alone again. "Nothing like keeping one's end up!"

"Hear, hear!" agreed Betty. "We are going to give them as good as they give us!"

After which emphatic remarks the high-spirited couple continued their getting-to-rights.

There was no further trouble with the snobs, and the two chums were able to settle down to their prep., and get through it without once being disturbed.

#### CHAPTER 18.

##### Some Unrehearsed Effects.

IT was not until after seven o'clock that Betty and Polly were put on the alert again.

What they then heard was the soft opening and shutting of several doors along the passage, and some whispering and smothered giggling.

"Hallo!" muttered Polly, with an eye on the door. "That sounds suspicious!"

"Let them all come," said Betty. "We'll keep our end up somehow."

But "they" did not come. Instead, the whispering girls could be heard presently going downstairs in a bunch, their laughter and talk growing less restrained as they reached the ground floor.

Polly got up, went to the study door, opened it, and listened.

"Mischievous brewing, that's a cert," she said. "I wonder—"

"Perhaps it is something to do with the play for to-morrow night," said Betty. "A rehearsal perhaps!"

"My word!" exclaimed Polly. "That's

about it, Betty! Well, what about getting a look in?"

"I don't like prying, Polly, and neither do you. But—"

"Exactly! It is pretty clear the whole play is going to be a sort of joke at our expense, and so—"

"At my expense, Polly!"

"Same thing," said Betty's chum. "What they do to one of us, they do to both, you know. So down we go, eh?"

"I'm game, if you are!"

"Half a sec., though! Suppose we give them five minutes to get started?" suggested Polly brightly. "Then we can walk right in and catch them in the midst of it. I expect they are rehearsing in the common-room."

"That's the idea!" agreed Betty.

And so they waited, allowing a good ten minutes to creep by before they set off downstairs.

By that time the rehearsal—if a rehearsal it was—had thrown Cora Grandways and Co. into fits of merriment.

As Betty and Polly reached the foot of the stairs they heard shrieks of laughter coming from the Fourth Form common-room.

"That's a rehearsal, right enough," said Polly. "You can hear them talking in stagey voices, clowning about—"

"And they have given out that it is a pathetic piece," Betty exclaimed, with a sudden flashing of her eyes. "Oh, we have not been far out in our guess as to what the game is, Polly!"

"Hark!"

They both listened as there came another shriek of laughter.

"Betty, you stay here a moment," said Polly, in a whisper. "I'll go and walk right in, and come out again, and then in a minute you can take a turn."

Betty nodded approval, and then Polly walked straight to the common-room door and entered.

In a cleared space at one side of the room were several of the girls going through their parts. They were not dressed up; but, even so, the rehearsal was delighting those who were looking on.

"Clear out of here!" Cora Grandways snapped, catching sight of Polly Linton.

"Betty Barton is not here, I see," said Polly.

"Is it likely?" snapped Judith Grandways. "You won't find that kid mixing with us!"

"Well," said Polly, "I know Betty is rather particular about the company she chooses!"

"Oh, go away!" burst out Cora furiously. "I have no wish to stay," said Polly tartly. And she went out, closing the door behind her.

"I wish that girl had not taken up with the Council school kid!" exclaimed Ella Elgood. "I did hope we should see Betty Barton going without a single friend right through the term."

"I suppose it's no use trying to win Polly away from the kid?" said Lucy Lyddon.

"We might try, but I'm jolly certain we'd never succeed," said Grace Garfield bitterly. "There's something about Polly Linton you can't get over easily. Oh, well, let's carry on!"

"Yes, come on!" cried Cora, gesturing with a handful of manuscript. "You see how the play goes on, girls. The whole family are squabbling and snarling, and then—"

"There is a cry of 'Fire—fire!'"

"That's right," said Cora. "And then we have the chance of showing Barty Betton, the wonderful heroine, in a strong light."

"Red fire, in fact," chuckled Grace Garfield.

"Yes, the stage will all be lit up with red fire," nodded Cora. "We'll get permission to use a little. And Barty will be rushing about, yer know, saying she must save the dear old 'ome!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove, it's priceless!" said Paula. "Really clever, don't you know?"

At this instant the common-room door opened, and Betty looked in.

"Clear out!" cried the snobs.

"Polly Linton—she is not here, is she?" said Betty, looking all round the room.

"No, she is not, so you be off!" snapped Cora Grandways.

Betty went out, and the girls were on the point of resuming their talk when Cora gestured for silence.

Snatching up a big sponge, which stood beside a jar of water on the floor, she steeped it in the liquid.

Then, with a look that said "Watch!" she called aloud:

"Half, a sec., Betty Barton! Come back!"

No response from outside the closed door.

"Betty Barton—here!" all the girls sang out, in quite friendly tones. "Quick!"

Then a step sounded on the threshold. The door swung open, and Cora Grandways let fly with the sopping sponge.

Whizz-z-z!

Plop!

The sponge shot through the air right at Betty's head. But in the nick of time Betty ducked. The missile sped swiftly over her head and smote the wall.

"Missed her, bai Jove!" gasped Paula from the doorway.

Betty smiled to herself as she hurried along the passage. She felt that she had good cause to smile; and there was no doubt she had.

Cora Grandways and Co., somewhat disappointed, proceeded with the rehearsal. They felt that Betty Barton had scored again by escaping that sopping sponge, and fiercer than ever was the desire to stop this continual "turning of the tables."

"But only wait!" Cora Grandways said fiercely to her cronies last thing that night. "Wait till the play comes off. If that doesn't make the kid squirm a bit I shall be mightily surprised!"

"Another thing," exclaimed Judith Grandways, with a malicious chuckle, "we can have a game with her over the programmes. If Paula Creel, as captain, tells her she is to sell programmes—"

"Bai Jove!"

"She'll have to sell them," finished Judith. "And what a lark we can have!"

"Rather! Ha, ha, ha!"

One or two girls patted Judith on the shoulder for having thought of such a "grand wheeze."

"We shall be sitting in the front row during the first half of the show," chuckled Ella Elgood. "We'll have a topping game with the kid. He, he, he!"

And so, about six o'clock the following evening, when the big hall was filling up for the concert, Betty Barton found herself suddenly confronted with Paula Creel, who held a sheaf of cyclostyloed programmes.

"Here, you kid, take these and sell 'em!" said Paula loftily.

"But—"

"Don't argue with your captain, bai Jove! If I tell you to do a thing, do it,

"don't you know! You are not doing anything else towards the concert!"

Betty took the sheaf of programmes. And was she distressed at having such a task thrust upon her? No; not in the least!

"Here's a bit of luck for me, Polly!" she whispered gleefully, sidling up to her chum. "You know how I wanted to be able to leave the audience when the play came on, so that all their jibes would miss fire? Well, by selling the programmes—"

"Oh, topping!" chuckled Polly. "That job gives you the chance to keep out of the audience during the performance. I'll take a few and sell them."

"No!"

"Yes!"

And Polly had her way. She insisted on taking at least half the programmes, and a few minutes later she was amongst the audience with Betty, retailing the sheets at twopence each.

There were some savage glares for Polly from the Fourth Form snobs, as they saw how she had taken her share of Betty's task. But Cora Grandways and her cronies had one fact to comfort them. Betty's humiliation was not in having to sell programmes, a thing that any girl might have been pleased to do; it came about in the way she could be spoken to during the sale of the sheets.

"Pro-gramme!" sang out Cora, beckoning to Betty. "Come on, duffer! And no giving the wrong change!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"She makes a good programme-seller, doesn't she?" laughed Judith. "That's what comes of practice. You used to sell evening papers, didn't you, Betty Barton?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Don't rake up the dreadful past," sniggered Ella Elgood. "Besides, she didn't sell papers. Her mother used to go out washing, of course. But the family couldn't have gone into the paper trade. They hadn't the money, poor things!"

Another ripple of laughter.

"Give me one, Betty Barton," said Grace Garfield. "There's a sixpence, but you can keep the change."

"Thank you!"

"Oh, don't thank me; it's only to avoid taking coppers from your hands!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Thank you," Betty repeated, loud enough for girls in the other rows of chairs to hear; "but your sixpence isn't a sixpence at all. It's only a silver-papered farthing."

"Oh!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Wha-a-at!" shrieked Grace Garfield. Then she forced a laugh. "He, he, he! Of course, I was only having a joke, girls!"

"You were getting a programme for nothing, if I hadn't spotted the trick," said Betty. "And that is—"

"You be quiet!"

"That is a very mean thing to—"

"Hold your noise!" raved Grace. "It's only a joke—a trick I've often played."

"What a lot of people you must have cheated then," said Betty; and now there was a roar of laughter from the audience in general, whilst the Fourth Form snobs looked very sick and savage.

The selling of the programmes went on smoothly after that, and Betty had sold out by the time the lights were lowered and the concert began.

The overture, which was played by a quartette of senior girls, was well rendered.

Other items just as well done followed—songs, recitations, violin solos, pianoforte pieces, and so on. At the conclusion of each item Betty fairly stung her hands with clapping, because it was all such a new experience, such a great treat, for her to be listening to such good music. There had been no concerts for her in the old days at home.

When the interval arrived Cora and her cronies all got up from their seats and trooped off to be got ready for their "turn."

Presently there was a ringing cheer as Cora Grandways stepped before the curtain.

"Ladies," cried Cora, facing the audience, "with your kind permission some of us in the Fourth Form are going to give you a pathetic little play entitled, 'Lit-tel Moth-her!'"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bravo, bravo!"

Amidst much merriment—for it was obvious the "pathetic" play was going to be a screaming farce—the delighted audience settled down and hushed itself, and there was solemn silence for half a minute.

Then a bell tinkled behind the stage, and as the curtain went up Betty and Polly slipped quietly out of the hall.

There was an immediate roar of laughter as the curtain went up, revealing the scene that had been set for Cora's "pathetic" play.

A bare deal table, with rickety legs, broken-backed Windsor chairs, a washing basket, draped with an old shawl—these were some of the "realistic" effects.

At the back of the scene was a folding screen. This had newspapers pinned on it, to resemble wall-paper, and one picture was hanging up, all lopsided.

To the right of the stage there was a rusty old stove, with a saucepan and kettle.

Then suddenly a lot of squealing sounds started, off the stage, and two awful-looking characters slouched into view, screwing their knuckles into their eyes as a sign that they were weeping.

"Boo-hoo! Boo-hoo!"

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

"Ow, dear! Boo-hoo!"

The two weeping characters were Joris and Doughy, acted by Judith Grandways and Lucy Lyddon. These two "kiddies" were dressed up in bits of sacking and old aprons, and as they mounded round the stage, howling, their big boots went slap-slap-slap on the boards.

"Boo-hoo! Ye-ow-ooo! Ow, I'm hungry," wailed Joris.

"Yer ain't so 'ungry as me, yer ain't!" yelled Doughy.

"Garn away wiv yer!" retorted Joris. "I'm more 'ungry than you, Hi ham!"

At this point a fresh voice took up the squalling, and Joris made a dash at the wash-basket.

She took a small bundle out of the basket, and began to swing it up and down, as if it were a baby.

"There, there, 'old yer noise, do!" she said.

"'Ere, that ain't the biby!" cried Doughy. "That's the washing as muvver takes in to keep the 'ome fires burning."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Garn away! Yer knows yer muvver's took all the washing to the pawnshop, to get a few bob to buy 'erself a fur coat wiv!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"'Ush! Slow music!" said Doughy. "I hear the fairy footprints of our Barty!"

"Little Barty, the lee-hight of the 'ome!" said Joris, still swinging the bundle. "'Ere she comes, strite home from the Council school!"

And on to the stage pranced Cora Grandways, dressed up in sheer rags, with all her hair floating loose.

"The porc old 'ome, 'ow it breaks me 'art to see it!" she cried, clasping her hands.

The audience laughed again.

"Well, Barty, old gel," said Doughy, "'ow did you get on at Council skule 'er day?"

"Oh, foine, I did! Teacher says as 'ow I'll soon be hable to go to a proper boarding skule. I'm that clever, I am. Yuss! You won't 'ave no little muvver to look after yer then!"

"You'll be a lidy at boarding skule, Barty!" said Joris.

"Ra-ver! If I don't set up to be as good as any of them my name ain't Barty Betton. You wait and see! Wcn muvver gets the money from uncle—"

"'Oo's uncle, Barty?" asked Joris.

"'Wot, don't yer know who yer uncle is?" cried Barty, causing another yell of laughter. "Why, yer rich uncle, as has struck ile out in Ameriky, yer know! He's going ter come 'ome and pay for me to go boarding school, he is!"

At this point there was a terrible stumbling noise, and then another awful figure, in a sack skirt, shawl, and big bonnet, almost fell on to the stage.

"'Ome agen, me de-harlings!" cried the figure, which was supposed to be the hard-working mother of the family. "In luck, too, for wunst! Mrs. Waysgrand gimme a jar o' dripping!"

"'Ooray!" cheered all the children. "'Ip, ip, ip—"

There was another big noise off stage. Then the father of the family—Ella Elgood—in a man's overcoat, borrowed from the school porter, and a battered bowler hat, came on to the stage.

"'Ullo, me darlings!" was the father's greeting. "Once again I'm back in the old 'ome, just in time for dinner!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, little muvver," cried Mr. Betton, turning to Barty, "where's the grub?"

"Yuss; 'ow long are yer going ter be with that there 'stoo?" demanded Mrs. Betton, whilst Joris and Doughy began to wander about the stage wailing:

"I'm so hungry! Ow, I'm starving!"

"You all sit down at the tible, and I'll soon 'ave dinner for yer!" sang out Barty Betton, going to the stove.

Then there was some comic business with the rickety table and the broken-down chairs, which bit of fun, being of a more simple kind, with no snobbery for its origin, went well with the audience.

"Tike yer 'at off wen yer sit down, farver!" Barty turned round to call to Mr. Betton. "Fancy you, farver of a gal wot's going to boarding skule, not knowing better nor that! Jist remember I'm going to boarding skule, so you must give yourself airs now, same as me!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Just as this rather feeble laugh died away there was a surprise for the audience.

Barty Betton set a match to the fire, which gave a mild sort of explosion.

Then a roddish glow suffused the whole scene, as the red fire began to burn.

"Wot's gone wrong wiv the fire?" yelled Mrs. Betton, jumping up in pretended alarm. "Erc, Joey—"

"Oh, muvver, the house is on fire!" yelled Barty Betton.

"Ooray!" cheered Mr. Betton. "Now fer the insurance money!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The moment had now arrived for Cora, as Barty Betton, to "bring down the house" by a bit of mock heroism.

"Save yourselves, and let me save the dinner!" she cried, rushing about the stago. "Never shall it be said that little mother was a kee-oward!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The audience had an idea that the actors were getting a bit confused; but they did not suspect that anything was wrong. They thought any hitches were simply due to the fact that the play had been got up at short notice.

But something really was wrong, and Cora Grandways knew it!

She knew that the red fire had gone off with unexpected fierceness, starting a real fire on the stage!

And that fire was growing bigger every moment!

Dense smoke was filling the air, making it hard for her to see properly. There was a moment of great agitation for her, whilst she wondered what she should do; and then, getting into an utter panic, she made

a frantic sign for the girls in the wings to lower the curtain.

As the draperies rustled down, the audience clapped and cheered, thinking that was the right ending of the whole bit of nonsense.

"Oh, what shall be do?" gasped Cora distractedly. "Look!"

"Good gracious!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Put it out, quick!"

"We can't!"

And then a thing happened that was to the lasting disgrace of Cora and the rest of the snobs.

One of them bolted.

Others followed, infected with cowardice, utterly off their heads for the moment, and behind the lowered curtain the flames went on spreading this way and that, whilst in front there was that light-hearted audience, still laughing and clapping and crying.

"Bravo! Bravo!"

#### CHAPTER 19.

##### The Girl who Loved the School.

"BETTY—Betty!"

"Oh, is that you, Polly?"

"Yes!"

The two girls rushed together at the spot from which Cora and the others had just fled in panic.

"Look—look!" quavered Polly, aghast with dismay. "They have started a real fire! Oh, Betty!"

"I know. I was just outside the hall when they came rushing away, and I heard them talking. And the audience—"

"Betty, we must avoid a panic," whispered Polly, with desperate calmness. "Perhaps I can do something—find help on the quiet—if—"

"You want me to keep the audience amused?"

"Oh, if you could, Betty! If you could go and sing—"

"I'll recite to them," Betty broke in quickly. "Singing takes time to arrange. I mean, you know, someone would have to be at the piano. But I'll recite if you will—"

"I'll manage the curtain, yes, trust me!"

Betty's answer to that was a look which said, "Trust me, too!" And then she went through the smoke, and took the centre of

the stage, in front of the lowered curtain.

"Ladies——"

"Bravo, bravo, Betty Barton!" went up the burst of applause.

"With your kind permission, I am going to give an item that is not on the programme."

"Bravo!"

"It is only a little recitation that I learned before I came to this school. But I hope it will please you. It is called——"

Poor Betty! Whatever was she going to recite?

Every word of everything she had ever learned seemed to have gone from her mind.

"It is called——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Buying a Hat!"

"Bravo, bravo, Betty!"

And then Betty struck an attitude; and began her recitation.

Mercifully, title and all had suddenly come back to her, and she hoped to struggle through somehow. If she got stuck half-way then—well, she must simply "make it up" as she went along!

The recitation was a witty one. Betty was supposed to be a girl in a West End hat-shop, picking and choosing, and finding fault, and changing her mind fifty times over, and at last walking out without having bought a hat at all!

The fun was all in good taste, and Betty soon had the whole audience rocking with laughter, whilst behind the lowered curtain——

Behind that curtain—which Betty feared might burst into flame at any instant—was the fast-spreading fire!

Starting with some litter which had been thrown down carelessly during the setting of the scene, close to the make-shift stove, it spread to some flags and other draperies on the walls.

Those, after burning for a few seconds, had dropped in a fiery mass on to the other combustible stuff, and so the hungry flames had plenty of food to devour!

Polly, with a handkerchief bound round the lower part of her face, was behaving with sublime courage. Yet, as she made use of one fire-bucket snatched from a hook in the wall, she was thinking only of Betty's bravery in going through that calm, word-perfect recitation, knowing all the time what a dreadful crisis this was.

Slash! Splash! The bucket of water went a very little distance towards extinguishing the flames.

Here and there Polly damped out a bit of the blaze, only to see bigger flames than ever leap up as some fresh stuff took fire.

She left the stage for a moment, but only to seek fresh means of fighting the conflagration. And well was her calm courage rewarded.

In an out-of-the-way corner the dancing light of the fire suddenly showed her a red-painted object, standing on a bracket.

She knew it at a glance. It was a patent fire-extinguisher—a metal canister, charged with liquid chemicals, and having a brass nozzle at the top.

Snatching it up, she rushed back to the fire, at the same time giving a twist to the nozzle cap.

For a moment she had an awful fear that the cap would not unscrew. But at the third wrench of her fingers it slipped round, and in a trice the chemicals were spraying from the uncovered nozzle.

Wonderful invention! Wherever the fine spray fell upon the fire the flames died down in an instant. This way and that way she directed the jet, her heart bounding with relief as she saw how swiftly, at last, she was conquering the blaze.

Siss-siss-hiss! went the nozzle, and the chemicals still sprayed forth; and above that faint, hissing sound Polly could hear Betty's calm voice, speaking the words of the recitation, and the peals of laughter that were rising, again and again, from the audience.

Then suddenly—as if the fire meant to make one last bid for mastery—it sent a flame licking at the curtain!

The stuff took fire, being already dry and hot with the blaze that had been going on so close at hand. Up that side of the curtain ran a tongue of flame, visible to the people in front.

At the self same instant Polly realised that the chemical was almost used up.

She rushed close to the burning curtain, and played the last drops of the stuff against the burning part, sobbing with relief as she saw the flames die down. And then——

"Fire—fire!" went up a wild cry from someone in the audience.

Polly was almost swooning with heat and smoke, but she bore up bravely.

Clawing the muffler from her mouth and

nostrils she darted round the edge of the curtain that had been in flames, and raised a gasping cry.

"Stop! Stand still! There is no fire!"

The audience had risen to its feet. Some of the more nervous girls were in the act of climbing over their chairs, to get to the exits.

"Keep calm!" Polly pleaded gaspingly. "There is no fire at all. We will raise the curtain and show you! Come on, Betty!"

Like so many figures in some enormous tableau, the scholars remained perfectly still, whilst Polly and Betty darted to the wings and raised the curtain.

Then there were renewed cries of alarm, as the whole stage was seen to be packed with smoke and fumes.

"The fire is quite out; there is nothing whatever to be alarmed about!" yelled Polly. "Isn't that so, Betty?"

"Yes, it is all right! Polly has put it out," cried Betty, in a ringing voice. "Keep calm, please!"

In the renewed stillness that fell upon the audience one figure at the front could be seen moving.

It was the figure of Miss Somerfield, headmistress of the school, who had come into the hall just before the conclusion of Cora Grandways and Co's so-called play.

She scrambled past the piano and climbed to the stage, where her first action was to give a reassuring gesture to the scholars.

Then she turned to Betty and Polly. "There was a fire, then! Merciful goodness, there has been quite a big blaze!"

"It was getting pretty bad," said Polly, "but as soon as I had hold of the extinguisher I—well, any kid can use one of those!"

"Let me understand properly," said Miss Somerfield, her composure returning. "You two girls—you found yourselves called upon to avert a panic. The other girls started the fire."

"By accident," said Betty. "The accident was perhaps excusable, said Miss Somerfield. "But their running, away—oh, that is abominable of them. Where are they now? Miss Redgrave, will you go and find them, please—and bring them back!"

The undermistress hurried away, and at the same time Betty and Polly tried to sneak towards the stage wings; but Miss Somerfield was too sharp for them.

"One moment, you girls! I have some-

thing more to say about all this. It means that you, Betty Barton, actually came out to do that recitation knowing there was a fire behind the curtain!"

"I—I—I knew that Polly would do her best to—"

"Polly Linton did do her best, and a very fine best, too," broke in the headmistress quickly. "But what of your courage, Betty Barton? What would have been happening at this very moment if the pair of you had not rivalled each other in the display of such heroism as— Really, I have never seen the like of it before!"

And with that emphatic outburst the speaker turned to the hushed audience.

"Girls of Morcove School," she cried, "do you all realise what has been happening? Two girls—"

"Yes, yes!" clamoured the scholars excitedly.

"It is entirely thanks to them that a serious panic has been averted! Is there one of you, then, that will not respond, when I call for three cheers for Betty Barton and her friend Polly Linton? Now, girls—"

"Hip, hip, hip—"

"Hurrah-h-h-h!"

It was such a cheer as Morcove had never heard before, but almost louder was the next, whilst the third and last seemed to Betty and Polly—full of confusion, and blushing as red as beetroots—to take a minute to die away.

When at last it did so, Miss Redgrave stepped upon the stage, at the head of the collected batch of runaways.

"Ah," said the headmistress, turning a stern eye upon the sheepish-looking row of girls. "Did they seem reluctant to come back, Miss Redgrave?"

"No."  
"Of course not—when you were able to tell them that the danger was past! You girls—"

Miss Somerfield paused. Not often was she seen to swell with anger, for hers was a calm, even-tempered nature, equal to most of the trials and perplexities which filled her daily life as the able principal of this great school.

But for once the usually gentle eyes assumed an angry look.

"I am disappointed in you girls," said the Headmistress. "I am amazed that you should have exhibited such shameful cowardice in running away directly the fire

broke out! I will say no more," wound up the irate Miss Somerfield, calming down again, "except to add that your cowardice was on a scale as great as the heroism—the splendid heroism—of Betty Barton and Polly Linton! You may go!"

"Bravo! Hooray! Hear, hear!" And, despite the gesture for silence which the headmistress made, the cheering and hand-clapping went on and on, until the whole building seemed to shake to its very foundations!

#### CHAPTER 20.

##### An Appeal.

"MAY I come in, girls?" As if any of the girl scholars of Morcove School had the right to refuse admission to their own Headmistress.

But it was just like Miss Esther Somerfield to speak so graciously; just like her to seize every chance of putting true womanhood before pride of position. There was nothing of the snob about the Headmistress of Morcove School!

"Dear me, you have a very charming little study here!" she exclaimed, looking all round the room in pleased surprise. "Delightful!"

"We have made it so," said Betty, with a smile, as she looked past the Headmistress and saw Cora Grandways peering round the edge of the doorway. "Polly and I made up our minds that this should be the jolliest study in the whole Form!"

"And I must say you have succeeded!" declared Miss Somerfield, causing Cora, in the background, to scowl savagely. "If I remember aright, this particular room had been shut up for a long time. In fact, I seem to remember ordering that it should not be used."

She added, after a pause:

"You had orders to move in here, of course?"

"Yes, Miss Somerfield," said Betty, and added quickly: "It is quite all right now, at any rate."

The Headmistress nodded.

"It must have been far from all right when you were placed in here," she said, "and I am astonished that you were ever told to make your abode here. Surely there are plenty of other studies where you could have been accommodated, along with other girls?"

Then Betty looked at Polly, and Polly looked at Betty.

It was Miss Massingham, the Fourth Form mistress, who had ordered Betty to occupy this particular room, but neither Betty nor Polly had any intention of acquainting Miss Somerfield with this fact.

"Ah, well!" exclaimed the Headmistress, dismissing the matter with a shrug, much to the chum's relief, for they would have hated having to tell the true facts to Miss Somerfield. "Even if you found this room slightly bare at first, you have got your reward now. I declare, your own Form captain might envy you this place!"

From somewhere out in the passage there sounded a gasping whisper, which was very much like Paula Creel's: "Bai Jove!"

Betty and Polly smiled again. It was clear to them that all the snobs were listening in the passage; and, like all listeners, they were not hearing anything to their advantage.

"You are doing very well, Betty Barton," continued the Headmistress. "That is something you can tell your people at home when you write. Your true conduct at the concert I have already told them. Your parents also," to Polly.

There was another splutter of whispers in the passage, which the Headmistress appeared not to heed.

"You can tell your people I called you both a credit to the school," said Miss Somerfield.

And with these kind words the Headmistress passed out, leaving Betty and Polly wearing "the smile that won't come off."

"This shall be celebrated!" cried Polly. "You stop here, Betty, and guard the place whilst I go and get the biggest and best bar of chocolate cream I can buy. Shan't be long!"

And with this Polly flung out of the study like a shot from a cannon.

She had not gone more than a couple of minutes when a knock came on the door.

"Who's that!" called out Betty, instantly on the look out for enemies.

"It's me—Ursula Wade. Do let me in."

Betty opened the door, and Ursula crept inside.

"Well?" demanded Betty.

"Betty, I wouldn't have come to you, only I am in a bit of a fix—"

"Not for money, surely!"

"Yes."

"Really, Ursula, I am rather surprised



that you have the check to come to me—for it is check, isn't it?" said Betty.

"I—I told you, I wouldn't have come to you, only I can't get help from anybody else," replied Ursula.

"Yet you regard all the other girls as friends, whilst as far as I'm concerned, you've never been the least bit friendly with me!" exclaimed Betty.

Ursula cast down her eyes, biting her nails again.

"That is really the case, isn't it, Ursula?" asked Betty.

"Yes, I suppose——"

"You suppose!" said Betty. "I don't want to rake up the past, but asking for money makes me think of that other affair, Ursula—an affair I would have been only too pleased to forget. I gave you money one night; it was to save you from playing the thief. I was sorry for you. I could see how driven you were——"

"Yes, you were good to me, Betty. I—you know how grateful I was!"

"You said you were grateful. But the very next day—how did you show your gratitude? By siding against me with all the other girls!"

Again Ursula was silent, knowing how true was the bitter reproach.

"To this day they think that I was the would-be thief! And you never said one word to clear me!"

"How—how could I?" gulped Ursula, with a gesture.

"All right! But how can you expect me to come to your help again? No, Ursula! And Betty shook her pretty head. "I am not hard-hearted, I hope; but that other affair—it taught me a lesson!"

"Then you—you won't——"

"I'm sorry; but I don't feel I am called upon to give you money again."

"Betty——"

"Well, what do you want it for, anyway? Tell me that, and then, perhaps, just to help you—although I can't feel you are a friend of mine——"

"I want the money badly, Betty. But I—I can't tell you what for—I can't!"

"Oh, then I can't give you any, that's all."

Ursula heaved her narrow shoulders with another big sigh, and at last slunk out of the room.

The moment the girl was gone, Betty Barton stood staring at the door. One could see by her eyes what was passing in

her mind. She was thinking—had she been rather too firm after all?

Then the door swung open, and Polly Linton sailed into the room.

"Hallo! Why are you looking so worried, Betty?" she cried.

"Polly, that girl Ursula was hero a moment ago," said Betty, closing the door. "If she had asked you to lend her money, would you have——"

"Certainly not!" broke in Polly. "I don't think my worst enemy ever called me hard-hearted; but I have had so many bitter experiences with Ursula——"

"Yes. And you know——"

"You have had one experience of her, too, although you have never told me the details," said Polly. "So if she expected you to help her, it was downright cheek on her part!"

"Oh, well!" sighed Betty. "But, after all, I'm always in funds. It wouldn't have hurt me to give her a few——"

"That's not the point," insisted Polly.

"The point is that Ursula Wade is a downright undeserving case. Don't talk to me about Ursula, Betty dear. When I think of that girl, it makes me——"

Polly broke off abruptly, rearing her head to listen.

"Hark!" she exclaimed. "Why——"

"The school-bell!" broke in Betty, in amazement. "At this time of day—just after tea-time!"

Dong, dong, dong! the deep-toned bell was chiming. Dong, dong, dong!

Polly Linton gave a soft whistle of surprise.

"Phew! I wonder what has happened?" she said. "That's the bell for a special muster!"

## CHAPTER 21.

### Ursula Wade's Secret.

**D**ONG, dong, dong! With that rather solemn bell sending its iron-tongued voice through the great building, the girls of Morcove School came trooping into the assembly hall.

Form by form the girls lined up, facing towards the raised platform from which it was supposed that their Headmistress would be addressing them on some matter of startling importance.

None knew, at present, the meaning of this summons.

Even the senior girls did not know; and

when questions were asked of the Form-mistress, there were shrugs and head-shakings for reply—nothing more.

In a few minutes the muster was complete, and now the vast assemblage began to quieten down.

The only sounds were the answering voices of the girls as their names were called from the roll. That was a formality ended in a minute, and then the girls were as still as soldiers at attention.

Even so, there was a formal cry of "Silence, all!" as a door at the side of the platform clicked open.

Then, amidst that deep hush, Miss Somerfield, the Headmistress of the school, advanced to the centre of the dais.

"Miss Massingham!" she called across to the Fourth Form mistress. "I would like you to step up here, please. Miss Redgrave will take charge for the moment."

Then the Fourth Form knew that this special muster had something to do with them—or else why was their Form-mistress asked to go on to the platform?

A little excited whispering broke out amongst the row of girls, which included Polly and Betty; and Miss Redgrave, the junior mistress, pleaded softly:

"Hush—quiet, girls, please!"

After that there was a moment whilst Miss Somerfield sent a roving glance over the assembled girls. Then she spoke.

"Girls of Morcove School," she began quietly, "I am sorry it has been necessary to call you here at such a time as this; but a matter has been brought to my notice about which I have to speak to you all. An article of great value has either been lost or stolen!"

"Presumably, stolen!" struck in Miss Massingham, in a harder tone than that which the Headmistress was using.

"The facts, girls, are these," went on Miss Somerfield. "Miss Massingham had a necklace, which she values at fifty pounds, and that necklace is missing!"

"Pheo-ow!" gasped the Fourth-Formers.

"Miss Massingham tells me that she has always kept the necklace with her other trinkets, in a drawer of her dressing-table. She has not worn the necklace for some time; but this afternoon she looked at her trinkets, and found the necklace was gone."

"And it could not have got mislaid—of that I am certain!" Miss Massingham added grimly. "The theft—"

"One moment, I beg," interposed the

Headmistress gently. "I think I had better say all that is needed, Miss Massingham."

"Very well, if you will make it quite clear that—"

"I mean to make it quite clear, girls, that all the circumstances point to theft, rather than to loss by accident," said Miss Somerfield, "and I wish to ask you, here and now, do any of you know anything at all about the necklace?"

The row of girls rustled excitedly, but no one spoke.

"I will put my question in a clearer form," said the Headmistress. "Does any girl happen to have heard of a necklace being found—talked about—anything of that sort—by an outsider, we will say?"

Still no answer.

The girls were craning their heads to look this way and that, in case any scholar could be seen who was on the point of speaking. Betty Barton bent forward and glanced along her row, and thus it chanced that she caught sight of Ursula Wade.

Ursula was standing as mute as any, but her face was deathly white.

"Very well," said Miss Somerfield, with a shrug. "I take it that no one is keeping silent—I won't say because of guilt, because that is unthinkable, that any girl of this school could have committed a theft! I hope it is absurd to harbour such an idea for a single moment. But I did think that perhaps some girl might have—well, heard something which she would now feel it right to repeat."

Then there was a pause—a long, heavy pause—whilst the Headmistress waited for her words to sink home in the minds of all who had heard them.

"Let me make one thing quite clear," she resumed at last. "I am ready to receive any information at this moment, or it can be given to me in complete confidence later on."

Once again after that she let a full minute go by in silence. Then, as the rows of girls only rustled and buzzed with pent-up excitement, she gave the sign for dismissal and quitted the platform.

"Girls, you may dismiss," said Miss Redgrave; whilst the same remark was given by those in charge of other Forms.

And in an instant the ranks were broken, and a jabber of talk burst out.

Seniors went off in twos and threes, debating the sudden sensation in grave voices. The Fifth and Third Forms, always glad of an excuse for showing their rivalry with the

Fourth, treated their rivals to scornful looks, as if it was certain that the Fourth must be mixed up in the affair, since it was the Fourth Form mistress who was the victim.

And that, of course, did not leave Paula Creel and Co. in any better mood about it all.

"Oh, come away!" snapped out Cora Grandways. "This is sickening!"

"Bai Jove, it's extremely embawwassing, what?" complained Paula. "I do wish it was some other mistress, don't you know! Our Form—"

"If it's not one bother, it's another!" muttered Judith Grandways, following her sister. "And it will always be so, as long as anybody is allowed to come to the school who can afford the fees."

Polly nudged Betty.

"Oh, bai Jove, you don't weally mean—" bogan Paula Creel.

"I had better not say what I mean, Paula!" said Judith Grandways.

"No," burst out Betty hotly; "not whilst I'm within hearing!"

"Oh, dear!"

"Bai Jove!"

Half a dozen of the most hostile girls had faced round upon Betty Barton at once.

"I'll say what I mean, though," the one-time Council schoolgirl went on calmly. "If Judith or anyone else insinuates that I had anything to do with the theft—"

"You're pretty touchy, considering I never mentioned your name!" laughed Judith.

"Perhaps the cap fits!" chuckled Ella Elgood.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove, powhaps it does, don't you know!"

"Come away, Betty dear," whispered Polly. "These girls are beneath our contempt!"

Then, suddenly Miss Massingham loomed close to the group.

"Well, girls, are you not going to disperse? I am sure that none of the members of my Form could be implicated in the abominable theft—for that is what it is. No, no! I flatter myself that all of you would be above committing such an act," said Miss Massingham. She glanced at Betty. "Of course, some of you might feel inclined to suspect a girl in your Form, but— Did you speak, Betty Barton?"

"Yes, Miss Massingham." The girl was

very white now. "I—I hope you are not suggesting that I should be suspected. of —"

"I—really, Betty Barton, you must not challenge your Form-mistress like that!" exclaimed Miss Massingham, with great dignity.

"Betty has been roused," interposed Polly, standing by her chum, like the loyal girl she was. "And what you said, Miss Massingham, it really did seem—"

"Silence!" cried Miss Massingham. "If you cannot speak to your Form-mistress in a better tone, I shall have to seriously think about placing you in another study, away from Betty Barton!"

And with that grim remark, the stern Form-mistress walked away, leaving Cora Grandways and Co. to troop off to their studies in high glee.

If only Miss Massingham would separate Betty and Polly—oh, the joy it would be! They had done their best to woo Polly away from her chum, and all in vain. But, if Miss Massingham made it an order that the two girls were not to associate—well, that order would have to be obeyed.

"Oh, Betty dear!" Polly exclaimed sadly, as they were going last of all up the stairs. "What have I done? Did you hear what Miss Massingham said? If they part us —"

"It—it was only a threat," faltered Betty, trying to make light of the sinister words; but they were weighing heavily upon her heart. "Don't think anything more about it, Polly."

But Polly, when she and her chum had reached their study, suddenly burst out again, in great sadness.

"We have made the study look so beautiful and comfy!" she cried. "And we have been such great chums, too, Betty! Oh, if — Hallo! Where are you off to, dear?"

"Back in a minute!" was Betty's cheery answer.

And then, shutting the door quickly after her, she went straight to the study which Ursula Wade had all to herself.

The unhappy girl, was there, staring moodily out of the window. But when she turned round and saw who it was had entered, her white face lit up with relief.

"Oh, you have thought better of your refusal," she panted. "Are you going to lend me the money, after all!"

Betty Barton shut the door and stood with her back to it.

"I am going to ask you, straight out," she said, very steadily: "Did you take the necklace?"

And Ursula Wade burst into tears.

It was a moment of horror for Betty Barton.

Those tears of Ursula's—the wretched girl's wild burst of grief—gave the answer to that thrilling question.

Here stood the self-confessed thief—and she was a scholar of Morcove School, after all!

"Yes, I took it," Ursula faltered. "It was about the same time that I—that I was tempted to take the money; that time when you stopped me!"

"Well, where is the necklace now?"

The guilty girl gestured despairingly.

"I haven't got it," she faltered. "That's why I want the money so badly—to get it back! If only I could get it back, and put it somewhere so that it would seem as if it had been only mislaid—"

"Yes; but where is it? You have parted with it?"

"I—I pawned it!" muttered Ursula.

"Pawned it?"

"Over in Barncombe," faltered the culprit, drying her eyes, and trying to steady down. "I've got the pawnticket, of course. I always meant to get the necklace back, but I never had enough money. Then I heard there was to be a party on Saturday, and I knew that Miss Massingham would miss the necklace when that time came, if not before. As it is—"

"She has found out her loss to-day! No wonder you looked so upset in the hall just now!" exclaimed Betty.

"What do you mean? Did I—did other girls notice me, do you think?" Ursula panted, in fresh agitation. "Oh, don't tell me that I am suspected!"

"You are not," Betty said quickly. "And perhaps you can pull through all right, if I help you. But—"

"You will help me—you mean it—truly?"

"I must, of course," was the brisk reply.

"How can I refuse, when I have discovered exactly how you stand? But can you get that necklace, if I give you the money—I mean, get it without risk?"

"Yes, yes!" Ursula clasped her hands excitedly. "I can go now—there is still time, without my being back late! I can ride my

bike—pedal hard all the way there and back!"

"Very well," said Betty, pulling out her purse. "How much is it?"

"Oh, it is an awful lot of money!" moaned the distracted girl. "Three pounds—"

"I've just about got it," said Betty. "Here you are!"

"Thank you, Betty Barton! Oh, I don't know how to thank you for helping me like this!" panted the miserable girl, snatching at the notes. "I know I didn't prove very grateful that other time; but this time, Betty—"

"Don't make any promises, and then you won't break any!" Betty broke in. "You had better be off. But pull yourself together!"

"Yes, I must. It won't do for me to look like this," Ursula said huskily, staring at her haggard face in the mirror. "But don't you bother, Betty. Now I have the money, that's everything!"

"I wish it were!" sighed Betty, turning to quit the room. "But I shall be terribly anxious until you get back from that risky errand!"

She was passing out of the room, when Ursula made a dart after her, plucking her excitedly by the sleeve.

"One moment, Betty! You—you won't say a word about this to anybody—not even to Polly?"

"As if I would want to!" answered Betty.

Ursula stepped back, gazing tearfully at her friend in need.

"What a good girl you are, Betty Barton!" she said. "It is a shame, the way they run you down! After this, I won't allow any girl to call you names!"

"We shall see about that!" Betty answered drily.

Then she closed the door behind herself and Ursula, and went to her own study, where Polly was singing away, blithe as ever, at the same time re-arranging some pictures.

"Hallo! There you are!" cried Polly.

"I say, how do you think this picture looks here, Betty—and that one, there? Goodness, though, don't look so miserable! What have I done, Betty?"

"You, done!" exclaimed Betty. She forced a laugh, then suddenly caught her chum by the hand, swinging it in the old

affectionate manner. "Just as if you could do anything to rile me! No, Polly!"

"Well, then—"

"Don't ask questions, and you'll be told no fibs!"

"You'd never fib to me or anybody, Betty. But, of course, I know what's upset you—you are brooding over that little fluster you had with Cora and Co., after the muster in the hall," said Polly.

"No, I'm not," said Betty smiling. "To tell you the truth, I'd almost forgotten about Cora and the others. Their attitude doesn't worry me in the least—and it won't whilst I've got you for a chum!"

Polly coloured slightly, and then, starting to hum a tune, she entered heart and soul into the joyful task of improving the study's appearance.

She thought one far corner would look better if it had a photograph hung there. So she stood on a chair to hang up the picture—and that was Betty's chance to slip out of the room again, without being questioned.

In spite of the cheerful manner she had adopted in talking to Polly, Betty was still feeling concerned about Ursula Wade.

Had she gone off yet, or was she still hanging about—perhaps funking the whole risky errand at the last moment?

With such uneasy thoughts as these harassing her, Betty thought she would have no peace of mind until she had made sure that the unhappy girl had at least started off. And so she went to Ursula's study door, and knocked.

"There was no answer.

Betty opened the door, and peered into the room.

Ursula was gone—that was evident. Her outdoor things were no longer to be seen hanging from their usual hook, and here and there were a few tell-tale signs of her hasty getting ready for the urgent journey.

A drawer from which she had snatched her gloves was wide open; on the floor, beside a chair, were the indoor shoes she had kicked off, and a buttonhook that had been thrown down after it had served its purpose.

"Untidy kid!" Betty muttered. "Just the sort of thing to lead to trouble, too! If anybody should look in here there is enough to set them wondering what's thrown the girl into such a fluster."

So, stopping right into the room, Betty thought it was only doing another good turn

to her miserable schoolfellow to put everything to rights.

She put the discarded shoes out of sight, picked up the buttonhook, and then—

"Oh, good gracious!" she gasped. "What's this?"

It was a piece of pasteboard lying upon the carpet—a cardboard ticket with some writing on it in ink.

Betty snatched it up, examined it eagerly, and knew that her sudden fear was justified.

It was a pawnticket—the very ticket which Ursula Wade should have with her to redeem the necklace!

"And she's gone without it!" gasped Betty. "She has dropped it in her haste and excitement, and doesn't know that it's here! She won't find out until she gets to the pawnshop, and then—"

Betty plumped down into a chair and sighed deeply.

At the journey's end Ursula Wade would be unable to get the necklace after all!

## CHAPTER 22.

### A Tragic Encounter.

WHAT a nice muddle was this! What a fiasco, after all that Betty Barton had done in the way of lending Ursula money to save her!

Such thoughts as these passed through Betty's own bewildered brain as she sat there staring tragically at the pawnticket.

But only for a moment—no longer—did the sense of despair hold her in its grip. She jumped up, stuffing the cardboard ticket into her dress-pocket, and then slipped out of the room.

Her mind was made up. She must chase after Ursula somehow, and restore this ticket that had obviously dropped from the girl's pocket or purse during her agitated preparations for the journey.

In the corridor Betty came face to face with Polly.

"Going downstairs for a hammer and tacks!" sang out Polly gaily. "Shan't be a moment!"

Betty gave a bright smile and a nod; but at heart she hoped that her good chum would be much longer than a moment!

Back in their own study, she caught up her outdoor things, and then made off again, slipping down to the ground floor by way of some back stairs.

—And so, in a couple of minutes, she was getting her cycle out of the shed alongside the gymnasium.

"I'll follow the main road to Barncombe," she said to herself when she was pedalling off. "Then I shall meet Ursula if she has turned back, finding she hasn't got the ticket. But I don't suppose for a moment she will miss it until she gets to the place!"

Whirr, whirr! Betty's feet were a mere blur as she kept the pedals turning. At the start this was a level bit of road that lay before her, and she wanted to fly like the wind along it. For only on the levels could she hope to gain on the girl she was pursuing. The hills—and what hills they were!—would have to be walked up, whether one was in a hurry or not.

How she wished she knew the district better—knew of some side roads that perhaps avoided these huge Devonshire hills; leafy lanes winding, perhaps, along the valleys.

It might be that Ursula was following such a route, for Ursula had been long enough at Morcove School to know all the country round about. Never mind—it couldn't be helped! If she—Betty—chanced to miss the girl after all—well, Ursula could never say that the best had not been done for her!

And now the first steep ascent confronted Betty. Panting for breath, she jumped from her saddle, and started to wheel the machine uphill. The climb left her red-hot and gasping; but she reached the top at last, and after that she was off again, whizzing down the other side.

The road was quite deserted, and she let herself go, the machine quivering with its speed, whilst every now and then it jarred over a loose stone. And then, suddenly, disaster came!

Just as she was starting to pedal again, after reaching another level strip, there was a startling "ping!"

And that was a puncture!

"Oh, dear!" groaned Betty, pulling up. "A puncture; and that means a delay of ten minutes, even if I've got a repair outfit with me!"

She started to open the saddlebag, but suddenly she desisted, whilst she straightened up and stared ahead.

The noise of a railway engine blowing off waste steam had come to her ears, giving her a brilliant idea.

The railway!

She could see the engine; it was standing with its train of five coaches at the little wayside platform of Morcove Road Station—

only a couple of hundred yards from where she had been landed with this puncture; and perhaps the train was not leaving for a minute!

Betty acted then with lightning speed.

Dragging her machine off the road, she jammed it amongst some bushes, where it was completely hidden. Then off she sped, with her anxious eyes watching that train at the wayside station.

The engine was hissing as if with impatience to be off. Within fifty yards of the station she heard the combined porter and booking-clerk slam shut the booking-office door. Then he clumped out on to the platform, and waved his flag.

"Right away!"

Betty made a last desperate spurt.

"Stop—wait, porter!" she cried, with her last bit of breath. "Stop!"

But the whistle blew. Betty could never have caught that train if it had not been for the leisurely habits of the railway folk in this out-of-the-way part of the world.

With his hand on the lever ready to turn on steam, the driver leant out of the cab to have a last joke with the station "staff."

Betty, knowing the booking-office door was locked against her, made a dart for the platform fence, climbed over it, and dived for a compartment.

"Ticket, miss!" exclaimed the porter.

"Pay other end!" gasped Betty, flopping down on the cushioned seat of a first-class compartment.

The porter waved "All right!" and off went the local train with Betty almost the only passenger.

"Oh, my word!" she puffed. "What a scramble!"

For several minutes she could only sit there, alone in the compartment, panting for breath. The train halted for a while at another wayside station, where again there was hardly a passenger for it, and then puffed on again.

The line curved sharply, this way and that, following the trend of the valleys, whilst on either side Betty saw the giant hills looming against the evening sky.

The sun had set, and it was small comfort to Betty to notice how early the darkness seemed to be gathering in the fold of the hills.

But she knew that the journey would be over in a few minutes now, and so she stood up in the carriage and put herself to rights. What with the rush on the bicycle, and then

that spurt to catch the train, she felt a pretty sight! However, when she stepped on to the platform at Barncombe Town she looked very calm and tidy.

"I hadn't time for a ticket," she said to the collector at the barrier. "How much, please, third class?"

"Tenpence, single, miss."

"Give me a return, please. And what time does the train go back to Morcove Road?"

"Eight-fifteen, miss!"

"Wha-a-a-at?"

"Eight-fifteen is the first train back, miss."

Betty almost dropped.

"Eight-fifteen!" she echoed, with a gasp.

"Oh, my goodness! Here's a nice thing!"

The elderly porter looked reprovingly at Betty.

"You should have consulted the timetable, miss!" he said.

"I—yes, but I was in such a hurry!" said Betty. "I had a bike—I— Oh, never mind; you don't want to know about that!"

The collector handed her the voucher for her fare, and then gave her the change out of a half-crown.

"My last half-crown, too!" muttered Betty.

She went out into the twilight station yard, and was instantly seized with a feeling of guilt at being about in the town so late in the day. If anybody from the school chanced to see her—well, it might mean a severe punishment, never mind what excuse she had to plead.

And what excuse could she plead, if such a disaster happened? She could not betray Ursula by telling about the necklace at the pawnshop!

The moment came, however, when Betty put that guilty feeling to flight. She told herself that her conscience was quite clear, and so long as that was the case, why should she slink about in such a trembling fashion?

Barncombe was a fairly big provincial town with some modern shops, as well as fine old churches and a quaint market-place. Betty went through the latter during her hunt for the pawnshop, the address of which she got by consulting the pawnticket.

After looking at that bit of folded card for the name and address, she put it back very carefully in her purse, where her small store of money was reposing.

"A nice thing if I go and lose the ticket after Ursula's dropping it in the study," she

thought to herself grimly. "But it will be safe enough in my purse."

Swiftly she threaded her way along the darkening thoroughfares, making for East Street. Having made the journey by train, she was pretty sure that she had raced Ursula to the town; and so every now and then she looked behind her to see if she could catch sight of that girl riding up on a bicycle.

But no! Betty reached her journey's end, and took a few turns in front of the dingy pawnshop, and still there was no sign of her schoolfellow.

Then the night seemed to shut down with cruel swiftness upon the quiet town. A lamplighter came along lighting the old-fashioned gas lamps, and the pavements glowed here and there with the illumination flooding forth from the more up-to-date shops.

"Bother!" fumed Betty. "Why doesn't she come? If only I had the money I could go in and get the necklace; but I haven't anything but a few coppers, worse luck!"

And so she paced to and fro for another five minutes. Then, thinking that she had better not be seen even by the folk of the town hanging about for so long close to the pawnbroker's, she walked a little way in the hope of meeting Ursula on her bicycle.

There was very little vehicular traffic in the street, and so she could see a good distance along it. When a cycle lamp glimmered at some distance away coming towards her, she felt her heart give a bound—but it was not Ursula.

Presently, with eyes that were getting blurred with so much straining ahead, she saw a beautiful car gliding slowly towards her. Its glaring headlights dazzled her, and she looked down at the pavement to avoid the blinding rays.

In this attitude she meant to remain until the car had gone by; but, even as it drew level with her, a gloved hand rapped sharply at the window, signalling to the chauffeur. He stopped at once, and then the window of the door was slammed down, and a head was thrust out.

"Yes, I am right; it is a Morcove scholar!" cried a familiar voice. "One of our girls—here, in Barncombe Town!"

Betty Barton, standing transfixed, stared stupidly at the lady who was looking out of the car.

Miss Massingham!

Yes, it was Miss Massingham, the Fourth Form mistress!

The latch of the car's door clicked sharply, and the door itself swung open violently.

Swelling with dignity and indignation, Miss Massingham stepped down to the kerb.

"Betty Barton!" she exclaimed, in a withering voice.

"Yes," said Betty. And, indeed, that was about all she could say!

"A girl from Morcove School—from my Form!" went on the astounded Form-mistress. "Oh, abominable—disgraceful! Girl, what have you to say for yourself? What excuse— But there can be no excuse for this—none!"

Yet the angry mistress' next words were a fresh demand for explanation.

"Tell me!" she rapped out furiously. "How do you come to be here? How did you get here?"

"By—by train."

"Train!" ejaculated Miss Massingham.

"And are you in the habit of making secret visits to Barncombe at any time you please? Do you care nothing for the school's rule, which says that no girl—not even a senior—may visit the town except on half-holidays?"

"I—I have never done anything like this before," said Betty helplessly.

"What are you here for, guilty of an offence equivalent to breaking bounds?" demanded the Form-mistress. "Was it to buy something?"

No answer.

Betty's purse was in her hands. With a sudden pounce, Miss Massingham snatched it from the girl.

"I have a right to find out, if possible, why you are here. If there is much money in your purse, I shall conclude that you came here to frivel it away!"

"Miss Massingham, please—I—please return that purse!" gasped Betty. "Oh, it is not fair!"

"What do you mean—not fair? Girl, I am your Form-mistress, and responsible for your good conduct! I shall open the purse and see how much money you— What? Oh, what is this—this ticket?"

It was the pawnticket, of course, and Miss Massingham held it, at arm's length, between finger and thumb, as if it were a thing with venom in its sting.

"A—a—a pawnbroker's ticket!" she

panted. "So that is why you are in this town, unbeknown to anybody at the school! This ticket—why, my goodness, it is for a lady's necklace!"

For a few moments the Form-mistress stood scanning the fateful writing on the ticket. Then, saying nothing to Betty for the time being, she turned to the amazed-looking chauffeur.

"Turn round, William!" she ordered. "I shall not need to go to the police about my necklace, after all. There will be no need to print bills offering a reward. I—oh, the shame I feel at saying it—I understand where my necklace is now!"

Then, as the driver started to turn his car in the narrow street, the Form-mistress glowered upon Betty again.

"You stole my necklace!" she exclaimed.

"No, Miss Massingham!" said Betty.

"But there is proof! How can you deny it? Adding falsehoods to your original offence of stealing! You stole the necklace—pawned it—and you were here this evening to redeem the pledge!"

"No!"

"It is perfectly clear, girl! You wanted to get the necklace back without your misdeed being discovered!"

"Miss Massingham, that is not true!" Betty protested hotly. "I am not a thief! How could I have been going to redeem the pledge, when you see I have no money on me?"

"There may be money in your pocket, besides the small change in your purse. Or perhaps," Miss Massingham conjectured shrewdly, "you were going to pawn some other article."

"I was not going to the pawnshop!" cried Betty. "Indeed, I was not, Miss—"

"But the ticket was in your purse! Did you find the ticket, then? Tell me, did you find it?"

"Yes!"

It was the truth. Betty really had found the pawnticket—in Ursula's study.

"Where did you find it?" asked Miss Massingham.

"That I cannot tell you," was the husky answer.

"Then, do you know what I am going to tell you?" returned Miss Massingham, her eyes flashing with scorn. "I am going to tell you that your feeble pleas are not convincing. You may try to make out that you found the ticket, but I simply don't believe you!"



The chauffeur had brought the car back to the kerb, after turning round. Miss Massingham whipped open the door, and then gestured to Betty.

"In with you!" she exclaimed.

With a sinking heart, the poor girl blundered into the car, and the Form-mistress joined her there.

"Back to the school, William, as fast as possible!" she cried, slamming the door.

Then, sinking back on the cushions, with her fierce eyes dilating upon poor Betty, she snapped out one grim prediction.

"You can take it from me, Betty Barton, this means expulsion!" she said.

And, less than an hour later, the door of the detention-room at Morcove School was being unlocked and thrown open, for Betty to pass inside.

White as death, trembling from head to foot, there she stood in that dim-lit passage, whilst Miss Massingham herself unlocked the door with a key handed to her by the Headmistress.

For Betty had been taken before the very highest authority in the great school—her own Headmistress. And even Miss Somerfield, after hearing the case against the almost speechless scholar, had been forced to share Miss Massingham's belief in her guilt.

"In there for to-night!" said Miss Massingham, as she threw open the detention-room door. "And to-morrow, as you must have gathered from the way your Headmistress spoke, you will be expelled!"

Lurking well back in the shadowy passage was an unseen listener to those impressive words.

It was Ella Elgood—and Ella crept away, then went dashing up to the Fourth Form studies with the sensational news:

Betty Barton was to be expelled!

#### CHAPTER 23.

##### Nothing to do with her?

TING, ting, ting!

It was the silver bell of the pretty clock on a study mantelpiece at Morcove School striking the

hour.

Polly Linton glanced up from the book she was reading, as she sat in an easy-chair, then flung the volume aside.

"And even now," she muttered, staring at the hands of the clock, "she is not back! I do wonder where she has got to!"

Springing up from the chair, she went to the window, and drew down the blind. For it had been quite dark out of doors this last half-hour, and Polly had not troubled to draw the blind when she switched on the light.

To shut out the darkness now made the study seem all the brighter and cosier; but it also made Polly feel more than ever shut up with herself.

"Oh, bother, I can't settle down somehow!" she exclaimed. "I do wonder——"

And, wondering, she went out into the corridor and listened.

From the various studies came a murmur of talk and some bursts of laughter. Then Polly saw a solitary girl come away from one of the rooms and go with a slinking step towards the stairs.

"That you, Ursula?" Polly sang out. "Have you seen Betty Barton?"

"No!" Ursula faced about sharply to answer. "Why?"

Polly shrugged.

"She's been away from our study ever so long, and I can't make it out."

"I—no, I have not seen anything of her," said Ursula, licking her lips. "I have been by myself, in my study, this last half-hour. I went for a cycle ride, and— and came back!"

That bit of information did not interest Polly. She swung away, returning to the study which she shared with Betty.

For another half-hour, perhaps, she waited about, wondering more and more what had become of her chum. And then suddenly she heard a girl whirling along the corridor, and thought that must be Betty.

But it was not.

The hurrying girl turned in at one of the other studies, and now Polly heard a great babel of talk start up.

What did it mean?

She went out into the passage and listened, just to catch the drift of all the chatter.

"It is a fact, I tell you!" a girl in Study No. 7 was insisting loudly. "I saw her taken to the detention-room!"

"What?"

"Bai Jove!"

"Saw her with my own eyes," the news-bearer rushed on, above all the startled cries of other girls. "She was caught in Barncombe town by Miss Massingham!"

"Oh, great Scott!"

"Bai Jove, you don't mean it!"

"Oh, she is going to be expelled, right enough!" It was Ella Elgood who was speaking, with great pride at being in possession of sensational tidings. "I've heard what Miss Massingham remarked to Miss Redgrave a minute ago. It's expulsion!"

"But why? What for?"

And then the door of Study No. 7 crashed open, and Polly stood before all the startled gossips, voicing her own question.

"Yes—what for?" she demanded fiercely. "What has Betty Barton done, that she is to be expelled?"

Cora Grandways and Co. stared resentfully at Polly Linton.

Then suddenly their angry looks gave place to smiles of malicious glee.

"Well, listen, and I'll tell you!" crowed Ella. "Miss Massingham caught Betty Barton in the town, and Betty was going to the pawnbroker's!"

"The wh-a-a-at?" yelled Cora Grandways and Co.

"The pawnbroker's shop," said Ella. "And what do you think she was going there for? A hundred tries, and you'd never guess! She was going to get the stolen necklace out of pawn!"

"Oh, I say!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Impossible!" flared Polly. "You are making all this up, Ella. You—"

"Am I? Find Miss Redgrave, and she will tell you!" flashed back Ella Elgood. "If it is not true, how is it that Betty Barton is in the detention-room, and is to stay there all night?"

Polly Linton backed towards the door.

"Very well!" she cried. "I will see for myself!"

And next moment she was going swiftly along the passage.

Down the stairs she whirled, then became suddenly cautious as she was making for the detention-room. For it was a rule that no scholar must seek to approach any other scholar who was banished to that place of punishment.

Polly seemed to be in luck, however. The dread room, so seldom used, was in an out-of-the-way corner at the end of a passage with several turnings in it. She tip-toed along this dim-lit passage without seeing a single girl, and it was only a question of five seconds before she was kneeling

down at the locked door, with her lips to the keyhole.

"Betty—oh, Betty dear, are you in there?" she whispered.

"Yes, Polly! I—"

"Sh! Not so loud!" Polly exclaimed, in a hushed voice. "I ought not to be here, Betty dear; but—"

"How thankful I am to hear your voice, Polly! Oh, I have been wondering what you would think of it all when you heard!"

"But, Betty, surely it is not true what they are saying about you?" Polly whispered, with a sob in her voice. "That you were getting the stolen necklace out of pawn—it can't be true?"

"It is not, Polly. But—"

"You had the ticket on you?"

"Yes. Oh, don't ask me to explain!" came Betty's heartbroken whisper through the keyhole. "Only believe in me, dear, like the good friend you have been all along—my one true friend, Polly!"

"I do believe in you, Betty. Only I must do something for you. I—I can't bear it. Betty dear, tell me—"

And there the desperately anxious girl broke off, startled by a footfall close at hand behind her.

She looked round, at the same time starting erect.

"Polly Linton!" cried the Fourth Form mistress angrily—for she it was. "How dare you—how dare you try to converse with a scholar in the detention-room!"

"Because, please—"

"Silence, girl! There is no possible excuse!"

"Yes, there is, Miss Massingham! Betty is my chum, and I can't believe this thing about her! It can't be true!"

"It is true!" snapped out the Form-mistress. "The whole school will learn to-morrow, from the Headmistress herself, that Betty Barton is a thief!"

The bell of Morcove School was making itself heard from end to end of the vast historic building, calling the girls to their classes.

But suddenly, when the spacious passage-way on to which all the class-rooms opened was teeming with girls, the hubbub died away in an unusual fashion.

Everybody stood quite still, the girls even

holding their breath as if suddenly stricken with awe.

"Yes, here she comes; you'll see her now!" was the excited whisper which one girl managed to voice, as she stood motionless as the others.

In the deep silence that ensued, the approaching footsteps of two persons were audible. Then, emerging from a dim, narrow passage, Miss Massingham appeared, with a white-faced girl at her side.

"This way, Betty Barton—and don't lag behind!" she said, with great asperity.

It was an entirely needless remark.

Betty Barton, who had just been brought away from the detention-room, where she had spent the night, was walking swiftly, and would have been only too glad to hurry in advance of her mistress. For this ordeal of being led past so many girls—it was agonising!

Their frigid silence; the way some backed away, as if afraid of coming into contact with her—how awful it was!

Miss Massingham suddenly darted a watchful glance at Betty.

"Now, be careful; you know what I have warned you!" she rapped out. "No girl under detention is allowed to communicate with another, even by exchanging glances!"

Then the Form-mistress swept on with a quickened step, conducting Betty along the passage leading to the Headmistress' private room.

Miss Somerfield looked up as they entered.

"Betty Barton," she began, "I felt that the evidence against you last evening was absolutely conclusive, or I would not have placed you in the detention-room. I said then that perhaps you would have something to say—to plead for yourself—when the morning came. And so, if there is anything, let me hear it at once!"

Betty, with her lips tight-pressed, shook her head.

"Nothing? Betty, this is all very bad—very serious indeed!" the Headmistress exclaimed; whilst Miss Massingham stood by, listening grimly. "You know what it must end in?"

"Expulsion—yes," the girl answered, with a sort of gulp.

"You will have to be expelled," Betty Barton—yes," said the Headmistress heavily. "It is my only course!"

Then she drew the Form-mistress to the

other end of the room, and they talked there in whispers for at least five minutes.

"Miss Massingham will take you back to the detention-room at once," the Headmistress announced, coming across to the condemned scholar. "And to-morrow, Betty Barton, you will leave Morcove School—for ever!"

These last words were not spoken harshly; but Betty shook from head to foot as she heard them.

There was a moment whilst she stood very still, a hand pressed to her fluttering heart; then, with another gulp, as if she were swallowing back a great sob, she walked to the door.

Miss Massingham followed her out of the study and round to the detention-room. There was no sunshine on that side of the house, and the so-seldom-used place looked as gloomy as it was bare.

"Take your meals when they are brought to you," the Form-mistress said curtly. "It is no use refusing them, as you did your breakfast this morning. And when you want anything else, touch the bell."

She went out, closing and locking the door like a wardress in some prison.

And then at this, the bitterest moment her life could surely know, Betty Barton sank down on the edge of the iron bedstead, and burst into sobs of anguish.

Innocent, utterly innocent, and yet she must suffer as if guilty!

Expulsion from the school was the sentence that had been pronounced.

No hope for her—none! To-morrow she would be in the train, on the way back to her home in Lancashire; and, as Miss Somerfield had said, the school would know her no more.

She was to be banished in dire disgrace; banished for ever, with that stigma upon her name—the stigma of proved guilt!

And all the time the real culprit was at large in the school, not a breath of suspicion attaching to her; a girl who was mingling with her school-fellows as if she were as innocent as any!

But that compassionate thought was followed by one of intense bitterness. Ursula's base ingratitude—oh, how it rankled! She had been amongst all those hostile girls in the passage-way just now; she, the real culprit, had been one of those whose eyes were full of contempt!

All over again yesterday's incidents re-

bearsed themselves in the girl's weary mind, until at last she could bear the thought of them no longer.

She got up from the bed, took a few sips at the glass of milk which had been brought to her when she refused her breakfast, then crossed to the window.

The school chimes sounded, and it startled her to find how the time was flying. She must have been sitting there for nearly two hours, although it had seemed only like ten minutes, for now the girls were coming out into the quadrangle.

But, hark! What was that cry which came faintly to Betty's ears?

Some girl was outside the detention-room window—all alone out there, calling softly, urgently:

"Betty! Betty dear! Oh, Betty!"

She darted to the window, and peered out.

"Polly! Oh, Polly, you ought not to be here, trying to talk with me!" she said.

"I must!" panted the loyal chum, standing close under the window. "But there is only a moment, Betty, for I ought to be going into lessons now. Tell me—"

"Polly, it is no use. I can't!"

"You can—you must tell me, your chum!" cried Polly.

"It is no use, I tell you," said Betty. "I was lying awake all night nearly, thinking—"

"So was I, Betty," broke in Polly; "and I've vowed I'll help you somehow! You, to be expelled, and for a thing like that! Oh, I must save you, Betty!"

"Hush!"

Betty gestured excitedly, then stepped away from the window, for she had seen Miss Massingham suddenly loom round the corner, eager to pounce on any girl who might be talking with the one in detention.

Polly's back was to the Form-mistress, and the only warning was that gesture of Betty's—a warning that came too late.

"Polly Linton—how dare you?" cried Miss Massingham, making a dart at the girl. "You have been talking through the window with Betty Barton in defiance of the rule! Don't deny it!"

"Am I trying to deny it, please?" asked Polly calmly.

"And now you are impertinent!" was the angry rejoinder. "Did I not give you lines

yesterday evening for trying to speak with that girl in the detention-room?"

"I have done the lines, Miss Massingham—"

"You will do me another five hundred, and will be gated until Monday," the mistress broke in sternly. "I am certain if the Headmistress knew that this is your second offence, she would give you double the punishment! Now, go in to your class!"

Polly walked off with a toss of the head. She was in a reckless mood—felt almost ready to do something that would get her expelled, along with Betty.

At the best of times there was something very hot-headed about Polly's behaviour; and this was one of the very worst of times, as she was grimly telling herself.

But she did the wise thing, for once, by going quietly to her place in the class-room, though she still grimaced rebelliously at the thought of having to do another five hundred lines.

"Bothered if I'm going to do them to-day!" she said. "Not whilst I have to think of Betty in that hateful detention-room—her last days at the school! As for being gated—oh, blow! If I want to go out, I shall go!"

And—as events were to show—when Polly said that, she meant it!

## CHAPTER 24.

### Ursula Gives Herself Away.

FOR hour after hour that night, Polly Linton remained wide awake in the Fourth Form dormitory, whilst all the other girls were fast asleep.

For the second night in succession she was worrying about her ill-fated chum; thinking of her dragging through these last hours of hers in that horrid detention-room, and of what the morrow had in store.

How could the poor girl's expulsion be averted? How could she be saved—how?

Polly was feeling almost crazy with desperation. To put those questions to oneself was the same as asking how it was that Betty, an innocent girl, had been involved in such a web of circumstantial evidence. And that was a mystery, a puzzle, that simply defied solution!

Polly was dropping off to sleep at last, out of sheer weariness, her mind refusing to grapple any longer with all the hopeless questions. After being so determined to save her chum, it seemed awful to be sink-

ing to sleep like this, in sheer despair of doing anything after all.

Once her eyes were closed, she would be asleep, and then in a twinkling the morning would be here, and by midday Betty would be leaving the school for ever.

Polly was not an emotional girl. She was of the madcap, headstrong type, seldom given to any display of anguish, however much she might be feeling it. But for once the tears glistened along her lashes, as she turned over wearily in her bed, and gave a last tragic thought to Betty.

And then suddenly the dozing girl was startled by a wailing cry from the occupant of another bed.

Polly's nerves were in a tense state. She started up at once, all of a tremble, at the cry of distress which had come to her. It was only some girl crying out in her sleep, and it had awakened none of the others. All the same, Polly could not settle down again.

Softly she slid from her bed, and stepped across to that part of the dormitory from which the feeble cry had sounded.

There she found that one of the beds was Ursula Wade's, and it must have been Ursula who had emitted that plaintive cry, for she was even now stirring in her sleep, as if troubled with ugly dreams.

Polly Linton bent over her and roused her gently.

"Ursula—wake up for a moment. You are dreaming!" she whispered.

The girl started, wide awake in an instant, and sat up with a moaning gasp.

"What—what's the matter?" she quavered, gazing excitedly at her schoolfellow.

"Nothing, I hope," said Polly. "But you cried out in your sleep, and so I thought it best to wake you, in case you might go on dreaming, and end by yelling out. Was it nightmare?"

"I—I was dreaming!" Ursula panted, sweeping a shaking hand across her forehead.

"What about?"

"Oh, don't ask me—I don't know!" was the wailing answer. "But it was horrible! Polly, I'm feeling so miserable. I—I—"

"Go to sleep again, that's best," Polly broke in soothingly. "It's very late!"

"Is it? Then why are you awake? But perhaps I only woke you up?"

"No; I haven't been to sleep yet. I've been thinking about poor Betty!"

Ursula said nothing then, but sank back

on her pillow. And Polly added, with a touch of bitterness:

"Of course, you don't care about Betty being expelled! You are like all the rest, Ursula—"

"What good can it do, bothering about her?" broke in the girl who knew herself to be the culprit. "It only makes me more miserable than I am!"

"I don't see why you should be so miserable," Polly said, as she turned away. "What have you got to be miserable about?"

Ursula did not answer; but in a sudden flash of enlightenment Polly got a possible reply to that question, directly she was between the sheets again.

Was it Ursula whom Betty was shielding? In her hot-headed way, Polly felt like leaping out of bed and going across to the girl, to challenge her there and then.

For she felt almost certain that she was on the right track at last.

Rapidly the whole case was piecing itself together in her brain, from which all weariness had suddenly fled.

Ursula, she knew, had made some secret appeal to Betty, round about the time the theft of the necklace had been made known in the school. And surely it must have been an appeal for money to redeem the necklace from the pawnshop!

"Why—oh, why didn't I think of Ursula before?" Polly fumed to herself. "I know her character. If there is one girl who is likely to have taken that necklace in the first instance, it is Ursula! And she is going to let Betty be expelled, rather than confess to everything! Not if I know it!"

Once again the impulse came to her to nip out of bed and go across to Ursula.

"No—steady!" she said to herself. "You'll never do any good that way. She will deny it—bluster from first to last! Didn't she say to me, after Betty had been caught with the ticket in her purse, that she had nothing to do with the affair? It is like Ursula—to tell any fib to save herself!"

Trembling with the excitement of her convictions, and full of rage against the cowardly culprit, Polly set her wits to work. The guilty girl would never confess if merely challenged—that was certain. What could one do, then, to prove the thing against her?

She was not deserving of the least mercy—she, the guilty girl, mingling with other girls all unsuspected, and only troubled in

her dreams about what she had done; whilst Betty—poor, innocent Betty—had already suffered so much unmerited shame, and to-morrow she was to be expelled!

To-morrow!

As if to remind Polly how fast the time was flying; the chimes now dinned out upon the nightbound world. She knew that she ought to get to sleep, because nothing could be done until the morning. But even when the morning came—oh, what could she do then to avert this terrible miscarriage of justice?

"It's school for me—stupid old lessons!" she pondered distractedly. "Have I got to go into class, and try to give my attention to lessons, whilst poor Betty— No, I won't! I can't!"

And that same desperate revolt against her position was seething in her mind when the morning came.

Directly after breakfast she made for the study which she had shared with Betty Barton. In a few minutes the bell for first school would be clanging; but she was not going to heed it.

There was a thing she could do, to right the wrong—a thing that had occurred to her the moment she had awakened. It meant a big breach of discipline; but it was for Betty's sake—for the sake of a chum who, in a few hours now, was to be expelled from the school for a misdeed of which she was absolutely innocent!

On the way to her study, Polly overtook Ursula Wade. That girl cast an anxious look at her, and then spoke.

"How—how do you feel, after last night?" she faltered. "I—I'm sorry I spoil your rest!"

"If that is the only thing you have to be sorry about, you needn't look so miserable!" Polly retorted grimly. "By the way, you haven't told me yet why you are so miserable!"

"It—it was nothing," gulped Ursula, her shifty eyes falling away. "I only meant, I was dreaming."

"I know you were," said Polly. "And I can guess what your dream was about!"

Ursula gave a visible start; she put a hand out to the wall to steady herself.

"What do you mean?" she panted, looking deathly white. "I suppose you are hinting that I ought to be where Betty Barton is? But don't you dare suggest to anyone that I had anything to do with the pawning of the necklace, or—"

"You will deny it, of course!" said Polly. "I am not going to suggest it, Ursula. I am going to prove it!"

And with that parting shot, Polly hurried to her own study, leaving Ursula staring after her with eyes full of wild dismay.

In the study, Polly tugged open a table drawer and started to rummage through a mass of old letters, postcards, birthday greetings, and other oddments which she had accumulated whilst at school. She was looking for a photograph, and at last she found it.

"Hurrah! Here we are!" was her triumphant exclamation, as she dragged out the mounted print.

It was a good photograph of the Fourth Form, taken by the local photographer at the commencement of the present term. All the girls were there—excepting, of course, Betty and the Grandways sisters, who had not then come to the school.

Paul Creel, Grace Garfield, Ella Elgood, Ursula Wade, Polly herself—there was a small but good likeness of all the girls, with Miss Massingham and Miss Redgrave at the back of the group.

"Now!" said Polly, folding up the print so that it could be stowed away in her pocket. "Now for the next step in my bit of detective work!"

The bell was ringing for first school. She did not heed it.

In another ten minutes she had crept by a back way out of the school, and was on the road to Barncombe Town!

## CHAPTER 25.

### Polly's Loyalty.

WHAT the good folk of the quaint old Devonshire town thought of her, when she walked amongst them at ten o'clock that morning, Polly did not like to think.

To get a bicycle from one of the sheds had been out of the question. Nor had she been able to hang about for a train at Morcove Road Station: So here she was at last, in the heart of the old market town—with shoes and stockings white with the dust of the roads.

But Polly was not the sort to be thrown into a panic just because a few people looked at her askance.

Let them think what they like; she knew very well why she had tramped all this way to the town, instead of going into school!

It was a most daring thing to have done,

and if she failed— But she was not going to fail! Only let her get to that pawnbroker's shop in East Street, and her case against Ursula Wade would be complete!

With such strong faith in her impending triumph, Polly even felt quite cheerful as she threaded her way along the narrow streets of the town. This was an adventure, and the thrill of it was to her liking.

"Here we are!" she muttered joyfully, catching sight of the shop she sought.

It was a very old-fashioned, low-fronted shop, with one window given over to the display of jewellery, whilst other windows were stocked with a weird collection of unredeemed pledges—men's suits, musical instruments, fishing tackle, pianos, and what not.

Polly walked right past the shop, then turned back.

She saw that there was a little alley-way up one side of it, and in that alley was the pledge department entrance. It had a swing-door, with a pawnbroker's sign suspended above it. She supposed she had better make her inquiries in there; and so, after another turn on the street pavement, she darted up the alley and took her plunge through the swing-doorway.

Slam! went the door behind her, and she found herself boxed up in a cupboard-like compartment, with a very high counter opposite the door. The place was very dingy, and the air reeked of camphor balls.

A stout man came forward and asked her what she wanted.

"Are you Mr. Solomon, please?" she asked.

"Ach, yes, mees!" the pawnbroker said. "Und vot you vant with me?"

"I come from Morcove School," said Polly.

"Creashus me! Morcove School!" ejaculated the man, getting very agitated. "Is it a letter from your Headmistress, then, or vot is it?"

"Did you expect a letter, sir?"

He spread out his hands in a gesture of despair.

"I not know vot I expect next!" he sighed. "Your meestress come to me yesterday, to get a necklace out of pawn. I am told, then, that it was stolen by the girl who pawned it with me. But how vos I to know that at the time, vot?"

"I don't suppose Miss Somerfield blames you, sir!"

"She has no right to blame me, vot?"

protested the pawnbroker. "When that necklace is brought to me, it is brought by a girl who says she is a visitor to this town. Well, I have had that happen before—often. She says she is short of money on the holiday, and asks for only a little money on the necklace. So I give it her—vell, vy not—vot?"

"She was a Morcove scholar, sir," said Polly. "Of course, you know all about that now. But it is the wrong girl who has been blamed for the theft, and I want to get justice for her!"

"Shustice!"

"For my chum, yes!" rushed on Polly. "It is not Miss Somerfield's fault that my chum has been deemed guilty. But, oh, sir, will you look at this, please, and see if you can pick out the girl who brought you the necklace?"

Polly had started to drag the folded photograph from her dress-pocket. She pulled it forth with a final wrench, and held it in front of Mr. Solomon's bulging eyes.

"Look at it!" she said.

"But, creashus me—"

"The thief is in that group, I am certain!" Polly insisted excitedly. "Look carefully, and see if you can recognise her!"

Old Solomon whipped out his gold-rimmed glasses and stuck them upon his hawk-like nose.

Then he took the photograph, and went close to the shop door for a better light.

"Vonderful!" he ejaculated, a moment later. "Here, leetle girl—see here!"

As Polly darted close to his side, he whipped off his glasses and used them to indicate a certain face in the group.

"There it is, my leetle girl—"

"Ursula Wade!" Polly almost shouted.

"Vot? Yes, perhaps that is the real name; I do not know," he shrugged. "It has been told me how the name that was given, when the necklace was brought here, was a false von. Only, that is the girl, yes!"

"Ursula Wade—as I guessed!" exclaimed Polly, taking back the photograph with trembling hands. "Oh, you are sure about it, Mr. Solomon—quite, quite certain?"

"After seeing such a fine bortraid, yes!" he declared. "Und now, vot do you do?"

What Polly did was to bolt straight out of the shop, as if she were going to run all the way back to Morcove School.

But she whipped round in a few moments,

and came darting towards the dazed-looking Hebrew.

"I can say you will identify the girl, Mr. Solomon, if she is brought before you?" she asked.

"Ach, yes! But——"

But Polly was off again, thrusting the photograph back into her pocket as she hastened along the pavement.

Just after eleven o'clock!

How could she get back to the school in time to stop Betty's expulsion. To walk the distance would take an hour at least, and there was no train until close on two o'clock—that she knew.

Polly took to her heels and ran her hardest.

Supposing—Betty had already left the school!

#### CHAPTER 26.

##### A Thunderbolt.

"HERE she comes!" was the sudden cry that went up, as Betty Barton, bag in hand, came out of the house and walked slowly towards the gates. "Now then, girls—get ready!"

"Rather!"

At this moment a girl came running, alone, agitated, and joined the group without making any remark; but her sudden appearance did not escape comment.

It was Ursula Wade!

"Hallo, Ursula!" grinned Cora Grandways. "Feeling better now?"

"I—yes!" stammered the unhappy girl feebly. "My turn in the open-air has—has done me good."

"You don't look very grand, all the same!" said Judith Grandways.

"That you don't, Ursula!" chimed in others. "Good gracious, what's the matter? You are all of a-tremble!"

"Oh, it—it's nothing!" quavered the girl, in great confusion. "I have been running!"

"So as not to miss the send-off, eh? Well, you are only just in time!" crowed Cora. "Here she comes—so now then, girls! All together!"

"Boooo-oo-oo!"

"Hiss-s-s-s!"

"Thief—thief!" yelled Cora, leading the cruel demonstration against the poor girl who, white of face, was drawing nearer to

the gates, outside which a cab was waiting to take her to the station. "Thief!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a peal of gloating laughter, as Betty shot an indignant glance at her tormentors.

"Good-bye, Betty Barton!" cried Cora Grandways. "My love to your mother, the charlady!"

"Mind you tell them that you didn't steal the necklace!" added Judith. "Poor, innocent little lamb, aren't you?"

"Ha, ha, ha! Boo!"

The rest of the Fourth Form had crowded close to Betty Barton. They swarmed about her, voicing derisive cries, taunting and jeering, and shrieking with laughter at one another's "jokes."

And then suddenly the ill-natured girls were thrown into confusion by a commanding voice—the first hint they had that Miss Somerfield had come hurrying down the drive to check the demonstration.

"Stop! Girls, what is this unseemly behaviour?" cried the Headmistress, with a dart that placed her in the midst of the jeering crowd. "How dare you!"

"Surely she deserves it!" Cora Grandways spoke up insolently. "The girl has disgraced the school!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Oh, wather!"

"Boo-oo-oo! Go home, Betty Barton, and——"

"Silence, all!" Miss Somerfield cried again. "If another girl makes a sound I will punish her severely!"

Betty Barton reached the gates at last, and made to climb into the cab.

"No! Stop—stop!"

The wild, breathless cry caused Miss Somerfield to face around with blazing eyes.

She thought it must be some scholar still showing sheer defiance of authority. But it was not so.

"Miss Somerfield—oh, tell him to stop!" panted the same girl who had cried out before. "Betty mustn't go to the station! She mustn't be expelled!"

"What?"

"She is innocent—quite innocent, I tell you!"

The startled Fourth Form girls had scattered to right and left, leaving Miss Somerfield confronted with the excited speaker.

It was Polly Linton—Polly, breathless and exhausted as if with running.



"Polly Linton!" gasped the headmistress, falling back a step. "The girl who absented herself from school this morning, without permission!"

"Yes, I know!" panted Polly. "But you will excuse all that, I am sure, when I tell you. I've been to Barncombe Town—to the pawnbroker's! I've seen the man there, and I've got proof that Betty is innocent!"

"Innocent?"

"Yes!" said Polly. "The man has seen a photograph of the Fourth Form. He has picked out the girl who pawned the necklace! It was not Betty at all, Miss Somerfield, as he will tell you. Here is the photograph. Look!"

"And the girl—the girl he identified?"

"There!" cried Polly excitedly. "That is the girl—the girl who is standing here, trying to look innocent!"

"Ursula—"

"Ursula Wade—yes!"

Miss Somerfield was looking very agitated. She tried to call to Ursula to approach, but her voice failed for the moment, and she could only make a beckoning gesture.

Ursula came slinking forward, with all the other girls staring aghast at her.

"Do you admit it?" Miss Somerfield asked the culprit sternly. "Answer me, 'Yes' or 'No'!"

"No!" said Ursula huskily.

But her very eyes gave the lie to that answer.

"I see!" exclaimed Miss Somerfield bitterly. "But how it is that you, Betty, had the pawnticket on you a couple of days ago?"

"She must have found it in the school!" Polly chipped in excitedly. "She's such a brick, you know, she rushed off to get the necklace out of pawn, and then—"

"Is that so, Betty?"

"Yes!" gulped Betty, a rich flush of colour replacing the pallor of her cheeks. "Polly is right; though how she has managed to piece everything together I simply don't know! I—I felt I couldn't give Ursula away! I—"

"Betty—oh, Betty!" exclaimed the headmistress, almost overcome with admiration. "What can I say about it all?"

"Nothing, please! I—"

"Indeed, nothing I can say at present will do justice to the case!" Miss Somerfield broke out. "Get back into the cab; and you, Polly Linton, go with her. William,

turn round and drive them to the school-house!"

Hand in hand, Betty and Polly made a dive for the cab. They bundled in with almost comical haste, and then, whilst the cab was turning, Miss Somerfield swept her gaze over the great crowd of excited girls.

"Well?" she cried, half sternly. "Are you going to be silent now? You, who were ready to hoot Betty Barton a minute ago—are you going to refuse her a cheer, now that you know she is innocent? Or does your sense of fair-play—"

"Yes, come on!" broke out a score of girls belonging to the Sixth and Fifth Forms. "Hip, hip, hip—"

"Hurrah! Hooray!"

"And again!" cried Miss Somerfield. "Hip, hip, hip—"

"Hurrah!"

But Cora Grandways and Co.—they were silent!

Miss Somerfield swung round to stare sternly at the sullen group. She was on the point of saying a few words that would have left the ill-natured girls squirming with discomfort. But now she saw Ursula Wade cowering in the background, and she addressed herself to that girl.

"Come here, Ursula Wade!" she ordered. "You will go with me to the schoolhouse—straight to the detention-room! And tomorrow you will be—"

"Expelled!" was the word that Miss Somerfield was going to voice. But it did not come.

She broke off abruptly as she saw Ursula Wade take one tottering step, and then drop to the ground in a dead faint!

\* \* \* \* \*

The eventful day was over. In their cosy study, Betty and Polly had switched on the electric light and drawn the blinds. To celebrate their joyful reunion, the chums had indulged in quite a high tea, chatting all the time.

Now they were nicely settled in their lounge-chairs, leaving the clearing away of tea-things to be done later on.

"My word, but this is jolly!" Polly said, at least the fiftieth time in the last couple of hours. "To think that I might have been sitting here this evening all alone—"

"Polly, I really think you had better stop that sort of talk!" pleaded Betty, with a queer little laugh. "It sort of gives me

a pang every time you remind me of what so nearly happened!"

"All serene!" chuckled Polly. "I won't say another word about it, then! Only, it was a close shave for you, wasn't it?"

"There you go again!"

"Well——" Polly joined in Betty's light laugh. "But, Betty, how can I help it? A thing like that doesn't happen every day in the term!"

"The queer thing is, in a way I feel glad that it did happen. For it has all helped to show me, better than ever, what a splendid chum I have in you!"

"Well, I'm jolly glad things worked out so well!" said Polly. "There is only one thing that is inclined to spoil my happiness——"

"And what is that?" asked Betty quickly.

"I'm thinking that Cora and Co. are going to be more bitter against you than ever after this," was Polly's answer. "You have been righted in the eyes of all the school, Betty. You are going to stay on, of course; and the girls in the other Forms have shown pretty clearly how high you stand in their estimation. But Cora and Co.——"

"They can do what they like!" said Betty. "So long as I've got you for a chum——"

"You'll have me, right enough," broke in Polly cheerily. "All the same, I see rocks ahead of you, which means, for the pair of us! Cora and Co. were glorying in the fact that you were to be packed off. It has left them feeling very small, your being proved innocent; and when girls like that are made to feel small——"

"I know," nodded Betty. "But never mind; we'll keep our end up somehow, Polly; they——"

There was a knock at the door, and then it opened to admit Miss Redgrave. Without a word she went up to Betty and clasped her in her arms.

"I am so glad, Betty dear!" she murmured. "And you, Polly—what a loyal friend you have proved! That misguided and mean girl——"

"Ursula Wade!" cut in Polly. "Thank goodness she is not likely to trouble us any more. She'll be expelled——"

"Oh, that I cannot say!" returned Miss Redgrave. "The headmistress hasn't yet made up her mind. She may be given another chance. Miss Somerfield always tries to be as lenient as possible."

"Well, I'm glad," said Betty. "This is the best way things could have ended."

"Yet there is another ending I want to see," murmured Miss Redgrave, "and that is the end of this absurd feud against you, Betty. All the other Forms but your own are ready to take you at your own good worth. It is only the Fourth who stand aloof."

"Never mind," smiled Betty. "With Polly's help, I'll manage."

Polly laughed gaily. "Mark my words, Miss Redgrave," she said. "One of these fine days the Fourth will wake up and discover that they want a real good captain, and then——"

She paused with a dramatic gesture, and added:

"They'll choose Betty Barton!"



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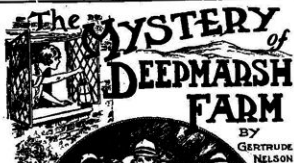
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