



THE Motcove Election

An Early Adventure of Betty Barton

MARJORIE STANTON

VOTE FOR CORA GRANDWAYS



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THE MORCOVE ELECTION

A Magnificent Tale of the early days of Betty Barton at Morcove School.

By **MARJORIE STANTON.**

CHAPTER 1.

Wanted—A Captain.

"JUST before I dismiss you, girls—
Attention, please!"

A sudden tense hush fell upon the Fourth Form classroom at Morcove School.

In the well-filled desks the girl scholars exchanged excited glances out of the corners of their eyes, whilst they held their breath in suspense.

They could guess the reason for Miss Massingham's suddenly delaying the afternoon dismissal.

But knowledge of what was to come only made the girls, if anything, more wrought-up than complete ignorance would have done.

"I merely wish to give you a formal reminder," said the rather stern Form-mistress. "To-morrow—Wednesday—at two o'clock in the afternoon, the Form will elect a new captain."

She paused, her frowning, spectacled eyes warning the girls not to break into any buzz of excited whispering, for she had not finished yet.

Taking a slip of paper from her desk in front of the class, she scanned it.

"According to the school's custom, candidates for the post of Form captain have lodged their names with me, each candidate having the requisite nomination of three supporters. I will read the candidates' names."

Miss Massingham gave another glance at the paper, and continued:

"Cora Grandways is nominated by three of her friends—that is to say, by her own sister Judith, by Grace Garfield, and by Paula Creel."

"Bravo, Cora!"

"Silence, girls! There is no need to show any election excitement in class," Miss Massingham reproved the girls grimly. "There is only one other candidate. Her name is Betty—"

"Barton!" almost yelled a girl in a seat by the window. "Hurrah!"

"Polly Linton, if you don't behave yourself, I shall—"

"Sorry, Miss Massingham!" grinned the girl who had allowed her feelings to get the better of her. "But I felt I must—"

"And I said that there were to be no demonstrations in class!" frowned the mistress. "The name of the other girl who stands for election is Betty Barton."

Miss Massingham looked across at the desk where Betty was sitting next to Polly Linton. The look was not for Betty at all, but for Polly, and it said:

"Now, Polly Linton, make a sound, and I will punish you severely."

Polly made no sound.

All the same, she managed to show her delight at Betty's candidature by thumping Betty silently on the back.

Some of the girls grinned; but others scowled sullenly. These latter were supporters of Cora Grandways, and they did not like to see the rival candidate being backed up so keenly by Polly Linton.

"Dismiss!"

The word almost took the class by surprise, and Miss Massingham herself had hurried away from the room before the girls sprang to their feet and broke into a babel of talk.

"Well, cheers for our new captain—Cora Grandways!" led off Grace Garfield, throwing an arm round Cora's neck. "Hip, hip, hip—"

"Hooray, wather!" chimed in Paula Creel, in her simpering way. "Congwatu-lations, my deah Cowa!"

"I'm not elected yet," said Cora; but her flushed, excited face was that of a girl who feels that triumph at the poll is assured, and in her handsome eyes there was a look that said she meant to win anyhow—yes, by fair means or foul!

"Cora for captain, hurrah!" crowed Ella Elgood.

"Hoo-way—yes, wather! Bai Jove, geals. I feel quite woused!" declared Paula Creel. "Quite worked up for once, bai Jove!"

"Speech, then, Paula!" entreated Grace Garfield. "Come on—up with you on to a chair!"

"Oh, geals!"

"Yes, yes, speech from our late captain!" laughed the supporters of Cora Grandways.

For Paula Creel had been captain of the Form up to now, holding the position with such scant credit to herself, and such little good to the school in general, that she had been deprived of the post at last by the Headmistress.

"If you don't think I shall look wather ridiculous standing on a chair, geals—"

"No, no—up with you, Paula! Ha, ha, ha!"

Paula's drawing way always amused her companions, and now they fairly screamed with laughter as the ex-captain—a very aristocratic girl—mounted gingerly on to the chair.

Betty Barton and a few of the others, including Polly Linton, were on their way out of the room together. But, with a chuckle, Polly now suggested they should stay and hear the "speech."

Betty shook her head and flushed prettily. She was not proving quick at "coming forward." Indeed she had only consented to and for election after a great deal of persuading by the few friends she had.

"No, Polly dear, I'd much rather not," she pleaded softly. "What good will it do, getting drawn into a squabble?"

"But squabbles are just the fun of an election!" asserted Polly. "Aren't they, Madge dear? Of course, we'll heckle the ex-captain! So, Betty—"

But Betty had bolted.

"He, he, he!" was Judith Grandways' sneering comment on the rival candidate's departure. "Fine cause she must feel for offering herself, when she can't even show her face at an open meeting!"

"You'll see Betty showing her face before the finish!" Polly retorted, with conviction. "You'll yet hear Betty Barton getting to work with her tongue—getting votes, too! Meantime, get on with the washing, some of you!"

"We don't take in washing!" jeered Cora Grandways. "We leave it to Betty Barton's mother to do that!"

Polly was rather taken aback by this retort, and one of her friends made a whispered remark.

"You shouldn't have mentioned washing," said Trixie Hope. "That was a—"

She paused to find the right word in French, out of a French as-it-is-Spoken textbook. "A faux pas—a false stop, Polly."

"Yes, wather, bai Jove!" said Paula Creel, beaming round upon the crowd from her makeshift rostrum. "Well, geals, unaccustomed as I am to public speaking, bai Jove, I feel I must make a few wemarks, don't you know."

"Hurrah! Speak up for Cora, Paula!"

"I will bai Jove!" said Paula. "I weward Cowa Grandways as the pwooper goal for captain, bai Jove! Having held the position myself for—for a gweater length of time than I caro to wemember, bai Jove—"

"And having made a hash of the job," said Polly Linton. "Yes—well?"

"Pway let us have no wude interwup-tions," pleaded Paula. "I wewent, geals, knowing what a lot of bother it is, bai Jove, being captain of the Form, I have much pleasure, don't you know, in wewommending my deah fwied Cowa for the job—what!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I may not be expressing myself quite pwooperly," said Paula, unable to fathom the cause for laughter. "But, wewally, I have the gweatest pleasure in I say I have the gweatest of pleasure in—"

"Falling off the chair! Ha, ha, ha!" ex-

ploded Polly, as Paula did indeed suddenly lose her balance and tumble to the floor.

"Bai Jove, geals!"

"Never mind, Paula!"

"But I came such a cwopper!" wailed the crestfallen ex-captain. "Weally, I am quite wuffed!"

"You came a worse cropper than that when the Headmistress deprived you of the captaincy!" Polly remarked, with a teasing grin. "But let's hear the candidate speak! This is great fun, isn't it?" she said, with a chuckle to her friends.

"Oh, be quiet!" burst out Cora Grandways savagely.

And then, without risking the chance of making herself look foolish by jumping on to a chair, she rushed into a speech.

"I have been asked to put up for the captaincy by a good majority of the Form," she cried, "and I'm going to get in!"

"Rather!"

"Yes, bai Jove! Bwavo, Cowa!"

"It remains to be seen!" said Polly.

Trixie Hope tried to find an apt comment in the French book, but was unable to do so in time.

"If I get in," went on Cora, "you know what I stand for! I want to see the Form what it always has been—a party of girls who can boast they are young ladies, and not jumped-up kids from the gutter!"

"Hear, hear! That's one for Betty Barton!" cried Cora's delighted supporters. "Hurrah!"

"Hooway, bai Jove! Bwavo!"

"I don't believe in us girls being made to play games almost every spare hour of the day," cried Cora. "I don't believe in a girl not being allowed a moment to pay attention to how she looks."

"In fact," struck in Polly Linton, "the esteemed candidate believes in slacking about."

"You can call it slacking; I don't!" Cora flashed at the heckler. "A week or two ago the Headmistress said we were to take the sports more seriously, and since then—"

"We've had to play cwicket, bai Jove!" wailed Paula. "A silly game that has nearly caused me a nervous bweakdown!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Games are all very well," went on the would-be captain, "but I say that girls of our age ought to have a little time to them-

selves. They ought to have time to think of how they look, and—"

"Might I ask the esteemed candidate," struck in Polly, "whether she believes in free powder-puffs for the public?"

Even some of Cora's supporters laughed at this, for Cora—and she was not the only member of her set, either—had a snacking fancy for powdering her face when the powder could be used without being seen by a mistress.

"So if I get in," Cora rushed on, ignoring the teasing remark—"as I know I shall get in—you girls can expect a bit of freedom. I shan't worry you to take the games seriously. But if Betty Barton gets in—"

"Loud cheers—hurrah!" yelled Polly.

"Come on, Madge—Trixie—Etta—all of you! Hip, hip, hip—"

"Hurrah!"

Including Polly, there were eight supporters of Betty in the room, and, standing in a friendly bunch, they gave a very hearty cheer.

"If Betty Barton gets in—"

"Hurrah for Betty! Hurrah!"

"Oh, that's enough!" snapped Judith Grandways. "Go on, Cora dear!"

"Yes, bai Jove, wather! Your wemarks, Cowa deah, are most wewfeshing!"

"If Betty Barton gets in, it means that the Fourth Form at Moreove has a former Council school kid for captain."

"Groans!"

"Loud cheers!" yelled Polly. "Hurrah! Come on! Hip, hip, hip—"

"A Council school kid!" Cora fairly shrieked above cheers and counter-cheers, "who will put games before all else!"

"Oh, help!" cried Paula. "Cwicket, hai Jove! Geals, it makes me feel faint, the vewy thought of it! I must weticre—"

"Half a sec., Paula!" Cora pleaded, calming down. "Before this meeting disperses, I would like to invite all members of the Form—yes, whether they are my supporters or Betty's—to tea in my study!"

"Bribery and corruption!" Polly laughed.

"What a mean game to play!"

"It is nothing of the sort!" flashed Cora; but her handsome face was very white. "The voting is to-morrow, and it is only right we should have a chance of talking things over. So girls, you can all come to tea."

"In half an hour's time," chimed in

Judith, who shared her sister's study. "We shall be quite ready for you then."

"Bwavo, bwavo!" applauded Paula. "My dear Cora, I accept with great pleasure! I don't weally know whether the Barton person will be giving any invitations—"
"She will not!"

It was a startling cry from the classroom doorway.

The whole crowd of girls, electrified by the interruption, looked in that direction, to see Betty herself standing there, a spirited light in her eyes.

"I am not giving any lavish teas before the voting," Betty said, advancing a step into the room. "Any entertaining I do will be after the election—when I'm Form captain!"

"Hurrah!" yelled Madge, Trixie, and the others.

"Oh, dear!" sniggered some of Cora's cronies.

"Bai Jove!"

As for Cora herself, she stood mute and still, glaring at her rival.

Crimsoning cheeks told how furious was that rage for which she had no words.

Suddenly she rushed across the room and flung herself upon Betty.

The spiteful action was greeted with laughter even by Cora's own friends.

But when Judith Grandways called; "Come on; let's bundle her out—Betty, and all of them!" the cry had instant effect.

In a moment a scene not often witnessed, surely, in any girls' classroom was taking place here.

It was the spectacle of two rival sets of girls, one set well in the majority, enjoying a fearful scrimmage.

If Polly Linton wanted a bit of fun to form part of the election, she had got it now!

Nor was Betty Barton at all slow in taking up the challenge voiced by her opponents.

She tackled Cora quite capably, whilst all over the room tussled other wrestling couples, Polly's opponent being for the moment Judith Grandways.

Madge Minden "took on" Grace Garfield, whilst Trixie, uttering the most amazing battle-cries in French, dragged Paula Creel all round the room.

For the short space of time that the set-to lasted, the room was pandemonium let loose.

Dust flew up, yells and shrieks mingled with some smothered laughter. But most of Cora's party had soon had enough of the business, since it involved the ruffling of their hair.

Paula was the first to flee. As if Trixie were some fury of the time of the French revolution, she scuttled in terror from the room, and others broke away and followed her.

And so, in a few moments, it was just a tussle between two remaining couples—Betty and Cora, and Polly and Judith.

"Bundle us out, will you?" Polly laughed breathlessly. "But you don't know how to bundle out a girl, so let me show you!"

And, still laughing, for the whole business, so far as the Bartonians were concerned, was a bit of riotous fun. Polly rushed Judith Grandways across the room and fairly shot her into the passage.

"Oh!"

"Bai Jove!"

Judith turned round in the passage and came charging back.

Unlucky for her, however, instead of dashing madly at Polly she dashed into Cora, who at this instant was bundled from the room by Betty.

The hapless sisters crashed together in the doorway, and the Bartonians yelled with laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"All right, you beauties!" panted Cora Grandways, putting her ruffled hair to rights. "We'll have our revenge some day!"

"You are welcome to come and take it—if you can get it!" said Betty Barton.

"Oh!"

"Bai Jove, geals!"

"What cheek!" gasped all the discomfited members of the Cora party. "She deserves to be—"

"Sh! Look out!" Cora, suddenly hearing a footfall from somewhere round a corner. "Miss Massingham!"

In a twinkling, the defeated "slackers" were making themselves scarce, fearing trouble with the Form-mistress. As a matter of fact, however, it was only the junior mistress, Miss Redgrave, who suddenly appeared round that corner.

"Betty—Polly, why, gracious, what a smother of dust!" exclaimed the junior mistress, looking into the room.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What is the joke, you girls?" the junior

mistress asked, unable to repress a smile at the Bartonians' merriment. "What is the game you have been playing?"

"A new parlour game, please," chuckled Polly. "Only we were playing it in the classroom. They call it 'Bundling Out Betty!' Only in this case, it has proved a game of 'Bundling Out Cora!'"

"Some election excitement, I suppose!" laughed Miss Redgrave. "If you are like this to-day, girls, what will you be to-morrow?"

"Oh, we shall have plenty of strength left for shouting when Betty tops the poll, shan't we?" chuckled Polly.

"Rather!"

"Mais, oui—but, yes," agreed Trixie, in her best French.

"There, run along, the lot of you," said Miss Redgrave, "and I'll open the window wider to let some of the dust blow out."

Betty, flushed and triumphant, like all her friends, led the withdrawal to studies upstairs, and as the girls were passing away, Miss Redgrave looked after them with affectionate eyes.

"Every hour of the day I feel more and more certain," she was thinking to herself. "The change that the Fourth Form has been needing so long—it is coming at last! A new captain, and that captain—"

She gave a little sigh of extreme satisfaction.

"I always knew it—yes. To-morrow our new era will really begin when Betty Barton tops the poll."

CHAPTER 2.

"Cream buns or cricket?"

HALF an hour later Cora and Judith Grandways were waiting in Study 7 for their guests to arrive.

Tea was on the table, and never had the Grandways couple made the lavish display that they were making to-day.

It was, in fact, a gorgeous "spread" for which the two girls had made secret preparations well in advance.

Cora, just now, had given her invitation to the girls as if it were an idea that had come to her on the spur of the moment. But she and Judith alike knew, at the time the invitation was given, that their study larder was richly stocked with eatables, specially bought for the occasion.

All the best tea-things had been brought out this afternoon. There was eggshell

china set at the top of the table, where Cora would preside. The rustless-steel knives shimmered on the spotless cloth. Flowers helped to give colour to the centre, where dishes of rich cake and French pastries and cream buns could be seen.

Nor was this all.

At each corner of the table there was a big be-ribboned box of expensive chocolates, which the guests could open and dip into when tea was over.

As for the hostess and her sister, they had not omitted to make their own appearance in keeping with such grandeur.

Hastily they got rid of the ruffled effects of their "scrimgage" in the class-room.

Cora had even found time to change her frock, and she certainly did look very beautiful in the one she was now wearing.

Her hair was carefully done, and at her throat she had fastened a lovely brooch—a thing of pure gold and costly pearls, which had been given to her on her last birthday by her father, who was reputed to be almost a millionaire.

But any charm the girl might otherwise have had was spoilt by her excessive vanity.

She was one of those girls who are never tired of looking at themselves in the glass.

She would make a toilette and put the finishing touches to it, and in a few moments she would be back at the mirror, giving another finicky twirl to a lock of hair.

So in this moment of idleness, whilst she and her sister were waiting for the guests to turn up, she stepped to the little mirror that hung upon the wall and pirouetted in front of it.

"I wish they'd hurry up!" muttered Judith, pacing about the room. "We shall be a big party—simply squashed for room—and it will take time getting a start."

"I expect some of the girls are changing frocks," said Cora, coming away from the mirror. "That's what I like about Paula Creel and most of the others—they always pay you the compliment of coming to tea well dressed."

"That's Paula now, thank goodness!" exclaimed Judith, as a step sounded at the door. "Yes, come in, Paula!"

"Oh, bai Jove! My gwacious, goals!"

"You've been to tea with us before, so come in," smiled Cora.

"Yes, wather, bai Jove! But, weally—My deah Cowa, how extremely topping! What a perfectly gorgeous spweed!"

"Sit down; the others will be along in a

moment," said Cora. "Swarms of them, nearly the whole Form are coming."

"Cora is right," declared Judith. "I'm sure we shall see even some of the girls who have gone over to Betty Barton's side just lately. People can't resist an invitation to tea, can they?"

"Well, we'll bury the hatchet for once," smiled Cora cunningly. "I lost my temper just now, I know, and it was a mistake. When those friends of Betty turn up, we'll speak to them nicely—eh?"

"Wather, bai Jove! Ewery nice word may win you a vote at the poll, Cowa deah," simpered Paula. "That weminds me, I—"

"Hark, here's someone else! Oh, Ursula Wade!" cried Judith, as another guest put in an appearance. "Welcome, Ursula! Sit down."

"Yes, do!" pleaded Cora.

Ursula, after a covetous glance at the loaded table, took a seat in one corner of the room. Then she met Cora's eyes, and smiled in a way more crafty than pleasant.

"I felt I would like to come, Cora," said Ursula. "I am going to vote for you, of course."

"Thank you, Ursula. Very kind of you!"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove! Ewery vote for Cowa—"

"Come in!" sang out Judith excitedly.

"Here's a whole crowd at last, Cora."

But it was not a crowd at all.

There had been several girls outside the door; but some of them must have suddenly turned back, leaving only two to enter.

"Hallo, Grace! Hallo, Ella dear!" Cora greeted them. "Where are the rest?"

"Oh, they—"

Grace shrugged her shoulders.

"They aren't coming, after all," Ella explained, with a grimace. "Turned back at the last moment."

"Why?"

"Oh"—more shrugs—"didn't want to, we suppose."

Cora and Judith looked at each other uneasily.

"Bai Jove," drawled Paula, "that's wather unpleasant—what! Ewery vote for Betty Barton is a vote for ewicket! And, bai Jove, who wants to play ewicket? I don't!"

"You want your tea, like the rest of us," Cora said, with a forced laugh. "So

we'll begin, and no doubt the others will come along presently."

But the queer thing was they did not.

Chairs were set ready for them at the table, which, of course, had been specially lengthened for the occasion. So, when Cora Grandways and her very few guests had sat down, those empty chairs made a very depressing appearance.

Both the Grandways girls were pretending not to feel upset by the gaps at the table, but all the time it was only too plain that they were listening for the arrival of belated guests.

None came.

After pouring out for the very small party, Cora tried to start some light-hearted chatter. It fell very flat.

Then Judith set to work to coax what guests there were to "make a good tea."

But this only seemed to call attention to the fact that huge quantities of delicacies had been laid out for a big party that had turned out a small one.

"That, too, was very depressing. Nor did Paula Creel help matters by the remarks she made.

"Bai Jove!" she drawled presently. "If ewery geal in the Form had turned up, there would have been a eweam bun for each. And ewery cream bun would have meant a vote for Cowa—what!"

Nobody said anything.

"I twust I am wight in what I say," went on Paula. "For where is the geal who could eat a candidate's eweam bun, and then go and vote for the other candidate—what?"

"We were not out to bribe the girls," said Cora. "It was just a cup of tea, to give us all a chance of talking."

"Yes, wather, bai Jove; and I'm the only one who is talking!" said Paula. "Jolly bad form of those geals not to turn up! I hope I am not corwect, Cowa deah, but their wudeness in staying away seems wemarkably like a—"

"Have a piece of cake, Paula darling," Judith broke in hastily.

"Oh, tha-a-nks! Wemarkably like a—"

"More tea, Paula darling?" Cora exclaimed.

"Oh, tha-a-nks—tha a nks! Ursula deah, may I pass your cup? Bai Jove, I can see Ursula is making a good tea—what! Quite wight, Ursula! Ewery geal who is

going to vote for Cowa deserves a wipping tea!"

Then Paula gave the rest of the company a chance to say something. But no one else seemed to have anything to say.

"Cweam buns or cwicket—that's what it amounts to, bai Jove!" the ex-captain exclaimed brightly, after an awful spell of silence. "The geals had the chance of wipping for cweam buns and Cowa, or Betty Barton and cwicket, and, bai Jove—"

"Yes, Paula, but—"

"The geals pwefer cwicket, don't you know."

Smash!

That was Cora, the hostess, dropping a bit of eggshell china into the sugar bowl.

"Oh, bother!" she burst out savagely.

"Everything is going wrong to-day!"

"Oh, pway don't say that!" pleaded Paula soothingly. "We are making a wipping tea, I'm sure. The few of us that are heah—only six, bai Jove—we are weally doing wippingly!"

"Yes, but I should have liked to see more," Grace Garfield could not help saying frankly at last. "I—I don't like the look of things. That turning back at the last moment—"

"Oh, you can see what it means!" broke in Ella, also deciding to speak frankly. "The rest are going to vote for Betty Barton!"

"But why? Why should they?" burst out Judith angrily. "Why have more girls suddenly gone over to that kid?"

"I think I know why," said Ursula, who had hardly spoken a word as yet. "They are not all mad on cricket."

"What a relief!" said Paula.

"But they are rather inclined to think," continued Ursula, "that it would be better to vote for Betty, after all."

"Why—why?"

"They have an idea—it's silly, of course," said Ursula, with a fawning smile for Cora—"an idea that if they vote for you, Cora, you will be apt to 'queen' it over them a bit too much."

"What nonsense!" blazed out Cora. "My whole policy is just the opposite. I say, let every girl do as she fancies."

"Yes, of course," said Ursula smoothly.

"But that is the idea they've got."

There was a fresh spell of awkward silence after this.

Neither Cora nor Judith could hide their

dismay, and they got so lost in thought that the others felt quite uncomfortable.

Presently Paula glanced at her wrist-watch. She made some gushing remarks about having enjoyed herself very much; all the same, she seemed very relieved to get out of the room.

Then Grace and Ella found that they, too, must be "off." They tried to rally the sisters at parting by a few flippancies, but Cora and Judith were not to be cheered up.

"Are you in a hurry, too?" Cora said to Ursula, who was now the only guest left behind.

"Don't let us detain you if—"

"Oh, no!"

Ursula spoke as smoothly as ever. She was a smooth-tongued girl, known throughout the school for a sly, self-seeking creature, always ready to toady.

"I—I'm sorry, Cora, if I blurted out too much," she ventured meekly. "I only want to help you all I can to get the captaincy."

"It doesn't look as though your help alone will be much good," Cora returned sullenly. "Out of all the following I had a week or so ago, I've only got Paula Creel, Grace and Ella, and you."

"But we are not going to stand it!" Judith burst out, in a desperate undertone. "We can get those girls back, Cora—we must!"

"Yes, somehow!" panted Cora, letting all her rage break out again. "Somehow I've got to get their votes. I won't be beaten at the poll by Betty Barton. I'd like to—to—"

"You just win the captaincy, and Betty will have to take a back seat then," struck in Judith soothingly. "That's the thing to do—beat her at the election! But, oh—how, how can we do it?"

Cora, champing her teeth against the necklace, which she had taken between her red lips, walked about the room, thinking hard.

"If only we could damage the girl in the eyes of all the Form!" she fumed desperately. "Then—"

"If you don't mind my saying so," put in Ursula softly, "that plan won't work. If anything happens to damage Betty in the eyes of the Form, a plot will be suspected."

"But—"

"I've got an idea, though," she went on

slyly. "I'll help you carry it out, if you like."

"Oh, Ursula, will you? Will you do that?" Cora exclaimed, in a tense whisper. "If you will, I'll be your friend always, Ursula! When I'm captain, I'll do anything to favour you. Only help me now."

"The idea is this," Ursula cut in, with her crafty smile. "Why not get something to happen that will damage you in the eyes of the Form?"

"Damage me!"

"Yes. Then, don't you see, the Form will think in the end that Betty has plotted against you."

"Good—splendid!" Judith clasped her hands softly. "Ursula is right, Cora dear. Hers is much the better plan. If anything happens to damage you in the eyes of the Form, and if it is proved to be the work of somebody else, it will switch all the girls' feeling back to you."

Cora was nodding. She understood—saw the deep cunning of the whole artful scheme.

"Well, then, what's to happen?" she said to Ursula. "Perhaps you have a plan all ready to suggest?"

"I—I have thought of one way it could be worked," Ursula answered. "Somebody ought to see you doing something that is against the school's idea of proper conduct—smoking, for instance. It won't be you, really, but somebody made up like you. In fact, I—I—"

"You'll personate me, Ursula?"

"Yes, I'll do it. I don't mind, because I know you'll remember it in my favour by-and-by," said the toady. "I'll put on a frock of yours in the twilight, and get seen by somebody out of doors—say, the school captain—smoking a cigarette on the quiet."

"Splendid!" chuckled Judith again. "Ethel Courtway, the school captain, will be mad about that."

"And I shall be able to prove that it was not I who was smoking, but someone posing for me," Cora nodded delightedly. "When Ethel Courtway comes along to make trouble for me, I shall be able to prove—"

"Yes, we'll see that you can produce half a dozen reliable witnesses to say that you were in some other place altogether at the time Ethel thought she saw you smoking," exclaimed Judith. "I think the whole idea is great!"

"The best of it is, of course," rejoined Ursula, "when you have proved your innocence, the Form will start asking who it was tried to get you into a row, and the natural thing will be for them to suspect Betty Barton."

Cora Grandways reached out a hand and patted Ursula on the shoulder.

"You are a good sort, Ursula—a real trump!" she said, smiling upon the toady. "I won't forget you, either, when I'm captain of the Form."

"Thank you, Cora," was the smooth reply. "I think you will always find me useful when you want any bit of help to get you out of a corner. I like being friends with you and your sister."

"You shall be," said Cora.

And, indeed, this was the commencement of an alliance between the Grandways girls and Ursula Wade that was to last for many a day, and an alliance fated to have sinister effect upon the fortunes of Betty Barton at Morcove School.

CHAPTER 3.

The Cunning of Ursula Wade.

"**P**LAY!" cried Madge Minden. She took a sort of hop, skip, and a jump, and sent a ball whizzing down the practice pitch.

Smack!

Polly Linton did not even look to see how far she had batted the ball. Instead, she made ready for another from Betty Barton.

"See if I can't do better this time," Betty laughed. "We've simply got to have Polly's middle stump. So—"

Smack!

Polly met the ball with a perfectly straight bat, and sent it soaring high into the air.

"Ha, ha, ha! Roll, bowl, or pitch!" Polly sang back from the wicket. "Now, Trixie dear!"

"Regardez! Voila!" Trixie Hope exclaimed, in the French of which she was so proud. "Bon, n'est ce pas? Good; is it not?"

Polly answered in a practical fashion by slashing the ball to the boundary.

"The daughter of Monsieur Hope cannot play the cricket," Polly remarked, waiting for the next ball to come in. She always spoke like an English translation whenever Trixie was "showing off" her French.

"The bowling of Mademoiselle Betty is better than it was, oui, oui!" went on Polly Linton. "But the daughter of Monsieur Linton has a brother, who has taught her much. Therefore—"

Smack!

And Polly punished another ball which Betty had fondly hoped would lay out the middle stump.

"Pouf!" laughed Betty, flinging back a tress of hair. "My arm will be out of joint soon."

"I'll give up now. Yes, I've had a good five minutes," said Polly, coming away from the wicket. "And you must have another innings each."

She handed the bat to Trixie in the end, Madge Minden, saying she would go in later, whilst Betty suddenly begged ten minutes off.

"I simply must pop indoors and finish that letter for home!" she exclaimed, all breathless and rosy red with the healthy exercise she had enjoyed. "Else it will miss the post, and dad and mum will think me too bad. But I'll come back presently."

"Right-ho-ee!" cried Polly. "Now, Trixie, keep up your wicket—if you can!"

And so the practice with the bat and ball went on as gaily as ever, whilst Betty ran indoors and up to her study, to add a last few lines to the letter which she had been writing at odd moments through the day. It was half-past seven.

Perfect was the evening out of doors, and lifeless seemed the great schoolhouse as Betty passed up the stairs. But, going along the Fourth Form corridor to the den which she shared with Polly, she suddenly found that there was one girl, at least, who had stayed indoors.

Ursula Wade. The door of that girl's study was ajar as Betty went past it, and Betty had a glimpse of her idling about in the room.

Not a word passed between the two girls. Betty, in fact, hardly knew whether or not the other girl had seen her. Still less did she know how, when she herself had got to her own den and shut herself in, that other girl looked out into the deserted passage and listened cautiously.

That was what Ursula did, and a moment afterwards she crept along to Betty's door and peeped through the keyhole.

She saw Betty sitting down to write a letter, and without a sound she straightened

up and tip-toed back to her study, with an excited gleam in her crafty eyes.

She was thinking to herself that this was her chance.

Softly shutting her door, she turned the key in the lock and then changed quickly out of one frock into one that had been lent to her for the purpose by Cora Grandways.

Any time after school hours the girls were free to change into frocks that pleased their fancy, so long as the garments did not clash with certain rules about dress.

The borrowed one that Ursula now put on—a one-piece frock that was hooked about her in a moment—complied with all the rules. At the same time, being one of Cora's, it had certain of those distinctive, stylish touches which that girl always favoured.

Its colour alone was one to make it seem rather unique—a beautiful carmine, with dead black trimmings.

Ursula, in these borrowed plumes, could not help spending a few moments admiring herself in the glass. She was not the child of poor people. Her allowances were perhaps as ample as those of many other girls at the school. But never yet had she been satisfied over the matter of dress and pocket-money.

She never mixed with the really wealthy girls—the snobbish ones, that is, like the Grandways sisters and Paula Creel—without envying them.

But the thought came to her now—what she was bound to do, if all went well this evening—she, Ursula, could be in and out of the captain's study as much as she liked, and how fine that would be!

Stepping away from the mirror, the crafty girl darted to the window and peered out.

She had a view of the playing-fields, and could see that scores of girls were down there now, some practising cricket at the nets, others playing tennis, whilst many, waiting their turn at wicket or court, were looking on.

At this moment she saw Polly, Madge, Trixie, and other Bartonians going on with their practice, watched by Ethel Courtway and one or two other senior girls who had sauntered up.

As for Cora Grandways and Co., Ursula had a clear idea as to where they could be found. For the sole purpose of being able to prove an "alibi," as it were, by-and-by, Cora and a few of her companions had gone

round to the school croquet lawn to play a game there.

And Betty—Betty was alone in her study! "It's splendid!" Ursula said to herself, smiling.

She rustled a hand into the dress pocket and found what she expected—a box of matches and a dainty little box of cigarettes.

Leaving them in the pocket, she now crossed to the study door, turned back the key silently, and peered into the passage.

The coast was clear. Gathering her breath, she darted into the passage, shut the door behind her, and flitted away.

No one met her on the way down to a back door. Quitting the deserted school-house by that exit, she walked swiftly along a shrubbery path. It was a pretty place to saunter in, twisting this way and that, farther and farther from the house, one of several winding walks through the well-grown shrubbery, which bounded one side of the playing-field.

Ursula could easily have found paths in that shrubbery where she would have been all the better screened from chance observation. But to be seen was, of course, her very purpose.

So she kept to the path that was nearest the edge of the shrubbery, with the merest thin line of laurels between herself and the open field.

Soon she was less than a hundred yards from the piece of ground where Polly and her other Bartonians were at cricket practice.

Ethel Courtway, the school captain, was still watching this game, exchanging critical comments now and then with her chums.

"I never did see such a girl, either at bowling or batting," Ethel remarked of Polly presently. "Did you see the way that ball went down then?"

"It's all through her brother's teaching," declared one of the other seniors. "Lucky to have a brother who can put you up to the tricks so nicely."

Ethel nodded.

"At that rate, what a capital thing it will be for Betty Barton if she spends some of her summer holidays with Polly's people," she murmured. "I have heard the youngsters talking to that effect. Betty could do with some tuition, of course."

"By the way—"

"Yes, where is Betty?" exclaimed Ethel

Courtway, looking all round the field. "Polly!" she called. "Where's Betty?"

"She's gone indoors to finish a letter!" was the shouted answer. "She'll be back in a few minutes."

"Oh, I see!"

Ethel gave a nonchalant nod, and seemed like drifting off to watch the tennis. But one step was all she took. Then her companions saw her stop dead and stare hard towards the shrubbery.

"Queer!" she exclaimed. "I feel sure I saw someone loitering about in there. I caught the sparkle of a lighted match."

"One of the gardeners, perhaps," suggested another girl.

"I suppose so; and yet I thought I had a glimpse of a girls' frock," muttered Ethel. Saying no more, she began to walk swiftly towards the shrubbery.

At a distance of twenty paces, her approach caused a slight commotion amongst some of the shrubs.

It was a sound like that caused by someone making off through the bushes in a hurry.

"Queer!" Ethel muttered again. "Why should a gardener—"

"Hallo—look!" cried her chums.

"One of the girls—yes!" Ethel exclaimed, as they all caught a distinct glimpse of a carmine frock.

She called out loud:

"One moment, there—stop!"

But the cry had no effect, except to cause the wearer of the carmine frock to scamper off in greater haste than ever.

Ethel Courtway strode swiftly to the shrubbery edge, worked her way between the bushes, and then halted on the path, where she was joined in a moment by her friends.

"Can you smell cigarette smoke?" she asked, sniffing at the warm, still air.

"Certainly!" the others answered.

"But—"

"It is a clear case, I'm afraid," frowned Ethel. "Oh, how I hate this sort of thing! Some horrid girl has been sneaking around in here to smoke cigarettes."

"You ought to report it, Ethel. Really, that sort of thing—"

"It must be reported; there's no help for it," sighed Ethel. "Or, at any rate, I'll deal with the culprit on the spot. I think I know who she was, too."

"I'm positive I know," returned one of the others. "That carmine dress—"

"There's only one like it in the school," nodded Ethel, with a stern look. "Cora Grandways has a carmine frock."

"Cora Grandways, the girl who is out to be elected captain of the Form!"

Ethel Courtway grimaced with disgust.

"I'll see whether she becomes captain of the Form or not!" she said. "Excuse me, girls; I think I had better go after her at once."

The others gave murmurs of approval, and sauntered away, discussing the incident, whilst Ethel Courtway hurried along the shrubby path towards the back of the house.

All the way, she had the faint scent of tobacco smoke in her nostrils, convincing her that the girl in the carmine frock must have been strolling about enjoying the secret cigarette for several minutes.

"Disgraceful, the sort of thing I detest!" she exclaimed fiercely, passing in at the back door.

And with a disgusted look still in her eyes, she was soon at the door of Cora Grandways' study, knocking sharply.

There was no response from within. Turning the handle, Ethel opened the door a few inches and looked into the room. It was deserted.

"Trying to give me the slip!" she muttered. "Hiding somewhere, that is evident. But—"

She broke off as a door farther along the passage was whirled open and a girl came hurrying out.

It was Betty, holding a letter ready for the post.

"Hallo, Betty!" Ethel greeted her. "Been writing a letter to the people at home?"

"Yes," Betty answered breathlessly. "I've made rather a rush of it, but dad and mum won't mind. So long as they hear from me regularly, that's all they care."

"I'm looking for Cora Grandways," said Ethel. "If you should see her, tell her I want to speak with her at once."

"I will, Ethel. I thought, though, that Cora was—"

Betty broke off abruptly.

There were familiar voices on the stairs. In a few moments several Fourth Form scholars came trooping into the passage, and one of them was Cora.

Cora, but not in a carmine frock!

CHAPTER 4.

Turned Against Her.

ETHEL COURTWAY looked utterly amazed.

She waited until Cora and her cronies had come along the corridor. Then she spoke.

"Didn't I see you in your carmine frock just now?" she questioned Cora.

That girl raised her brows. "Me—in my carmine frock? What ever do you mean, please?"

"I and some other senior girls caught a glimpse of a girl in a carmine frock, skulking around in the shrubbery. She was smoking a cigarette."

"And so you jumped to the conclusion that it was I you saw!" exclaimed Cora Grandways.

"I'm not one for jumping to any rash conclusions," said Ethel coldly. "It was your frock—there can be no mistake about that. There is no other frock of the same colour being worn in the school."

"You did not see me smoking!" flared up Cora. "That's all I have to say about it."

"Don't be impudent!" Ethel admonished her, with growing sternness. "This is a most serious matter; all the more serious as you are a candidate for the captaincy of your Form. We can't have Form captains who sm—"

"I have not been smoking, I tell you!"

"But the girl I saw—the frock—"

"Look at me—am I in a carmine frock now?" Cora cried hotly.

"You may have changed it. That would only take a moment or so."

"You are determined to get me into disgrace!" Cora rushed on passionately. "But luckily the plot won't work."

"Plot! What on earth do you mean?"

"The plot to damage me in the eyes of other girls, so that Betty Barton will be elected captain of the Form!"

"Absurd!" shrugged Ethel Courtway. "There is not a girl in the school who would imagine that I could stoop to such a thing!"

"And there's not a girl in the place who will believe your accusation against me!" retorted Cora. "For the simple reason I can account for my movements during the last hour or so. I've been playing croquet on the front lawn, so there!"

"That's quite right, Ethel!"

"Yes, wather!" Paula chimed in. "We've

been playing cwoquet, bai Jove! And, weally, it's worse than cwicket!"

"So you see," sneered Cora, caring little that it was the school captain she was venturing her scorn upon, "it couldn't have been me you saw smoking, after all!"

Ethel bit her lip.

"I'm sorry. I apologise, Cora. My only excuse is that the frock was yours, or one absolutely the same colour. And we know of no girl who has a frock like it. I simply cannot understand—"

"I can!" burst out Cora. "Oh, I see it all now! If you haven't been wanting to get me into disgrace, some other girl has. Someone has been wearing my frock, on purpose to get me suspected of smoking."

"Oh!"

"Bai Jove, geals!"

"And I can name the girl!" Cora almost screamed. "There she is—Betty Barton, my rival for the election!"

"Gweat goodness!"

"Oh, I say!"

"Less noise, please, girls!" Ethel entreated gently. "Betty—"

"I don't know anything about carmine frocks or cigarettes," Betty said calmly, shaking her head. "Cora is talking utter nonsense!"

"I'm not, and you are a fibber to make out I am!" cried Cora furiously. "Who else would have tried to get me into this disgrace but you? You, my rival for the election, on the very eve of the voting!"

"I've done nothing, Ethel, really," Betty said. "I merely came up to my den, a little while ago, to finish a letter, as you know. There's the letter—"

"What proof is that that you've spent your time writing it?" demanded Cora. "No, her story is not good enough, is it, girls?"

Cora's companions gave a chorus of "Noes," whilst even the few of Betty's friends who had been drawn to the scene looked as if the case wore a very nasty complexion.

Etta Hargrove, Elsie Drow, Norah Nugent—these were three girls who had lately become friendly with Betty, and these girls were now present.

Betty turned to them, but they had nothing to say, their silence implying that she had better make haste and prove her innocence.

Then Sybil Farlow and Eva Merrick came romping along the passage, with Polly,

Trixie, and Madge. A burst of talk acquainted these newcomers with the situation, and they became thrilled bystanders.

"Well," burst out Cora, "isn't it a clear case against her, girls? All she can say is that she has been alone in her study, finishing a letter."

"I declare that is all I have been doing!" cried Betty earnestly. "Isn't my word good enough, girls?"

"For me—yes," said Ethel Courtway.

"And me—and me!" cried Polly, Trixie and Madge.

But the rest, they were gloomily silent, feeling their recently formed faith in Betty suddenly shaken.

"So what are you going to do?" Cora demanded hotly of the school captain. "You were precious quick about accusing me—"

"Cora, I will not be spoken to like that! Understand—"

"You can think what you like of the way I speak; I don't care! I—"

"You are naturally upset, Cora, and I make allowances for that," Ethel broke in gently. "I will discuss the whole matter with you, and attempt to get you vindicated, when you have calmed down."

"You—a fine lot you will do to clear me!" sneered Cora. "Walk away—yes, now that everything points to Betty Barton being the culprit!"

"Everything does not point to Betty Barton being the culprit," Ethel looked back to say. "You have made a very far-fetched accusation against her, which she has done her best to refute. I am satisfied that Betty Barton—"

"Oh, of course! More favouritism!"

Ethel stood quite still for a long moment, looking at Cora. Then she shrugged her shoulders and passed on to the stairs, her departure being the signal for a burst of excited talk from all the girls.

Cora, after a steely look at Betty, went to her own study.

Her sister followed her there, and so did quite a number of the other girls. Then the door was slammed, and from its inner side came a fresh burst of argument.

As for Betty, she was like one dazed. Not until Polly slipped an arm about her waist did she pull herself together.

"I—I—"

"It's all right, Betty, darling! It's all right!" insisted Polly.

"Mais oui—but yes," said Trixie, none

the less emphatically because she spoke in French.

"Is it all right?" returned Betty huskily. "Etta, Elsie, and Norah—they've gone into Cora's study. They believe the charge against me. And you, Sybil Farlow—you, Eva Merrick?"

Those girls looked uncomfortable.

"It is a most unfortunate business," said Sybil. "Happening the very evening before the election."

"Either say you believe I could not have done it," Betty cried, "or else say you believe Cora! I've given you my word—my word of honour, so it must be one or the other!"

Sybil looked at Eva, and Eva looked at Sybil.

"Oh, let's come away to our den!" Sybil said gloomily at last. "We must think about it, Eva."

And they turned into their study, leaving Betty alone now with just Polly, Trixie, and Madge.

The four went together into Study No. 12, where they sat about, talking far less than they were thinking.

"On the very eve of the election!" Betty exclaimed bitterly, all of a sudden. "I hate the idea of making counter-charges against my rival candidates, when I've nothing with which to back them up. But it looks as if I'm the victim of a conspiracy—not Cora."

"Of course you are," said Polly desperately. "If not, how does it happen that the time chosen was one when you were alone in the study?"

Madge Minden nodded gloomily.

"They've got us there," she sighed. "How you are going to convince everybody, Betty, that you really were in the study finishing a letter, I don't know."

"I can't convince them," was the tragic answer. "Those that won't take my word of honour for it must do the other thing. But—oh, it's hard!"

"Cruel hard!" agreed Polly. "To think that you were in such a fair way of beating Cora at the poll, and now nearly all your supporters have been turned against you like this!"

"They may yet vote for Betty," said Trixie hopefully. "Etta, Elsie, Norah, and the rest—"

"They won't!" exclaimed Betty. "You see!"

And, sure enough, just before call-over that evening a note was suddenly slipped under the door of Study No. 12.

Betty had an idea of its contents even as she darted across the room and snatched the missive from the floor.

Watched by Polly, the only chum who was with her now, for Madge and Trixie had gone, she tore open the envelope and scanned the pencilled lines.

Then, without a word of comment, she handed the note to Polly.

"The undersigned think it best to let you know," Polly read, "that, in view of what has happened this evening, they can no longer give you their support in the election. They will therefore record their votes in favour of Cora Grandways.

"(Signed):

"Etta Hargrove,	Sybil Farlow,
"Norah Nugent,	Diana Forbes,
"Eva Merrick,	Mabel Rivers,
"Kathleen Murray,	Elsie Drew,
"Tess Trclawney."	

CHAPTER 5.

The Hands Go Up.

"I THINK," said Cora Grandways, "I will wear the carmine frock for the occasion."

"I would, certainly!" agreed Judith.

And then both girls laughed.

It was half-past one on Wednesday afternoon. At two o'clock precisely the Fourth Form must assemble in the common-room for the vital purpose of electing a captain.

Only another half-hour—just a few more minutes—and then up would go a whole forest of hands in favour of Cora Grandways!

No wonder that she and her sister were in good spirits just at present!

No wonder that Cora, quitting her study to make the change of frock somewhere upstairs, laughed spitefully in Betty Barton's face as she passed that girl in the corridor.

Betty heaved a hard, silent sigh, and turned into her own den. Polly was not there. Betty had been wondering, in an absent manner, what had become of her dearest chum since the school rose from dinner.

She pushed the door shut and sat down by the table, resting her elbows upon the board and her chin between her hands.

Tick-tock! went the pendulum of the study clock—tick-tock, tick-tock! And in another half-hour—

Try as she might to bear the cruel position with fortitude, there was such bitterness in her heart as could not be banished. In a quiet moment like this it would have been a welcome relief to her to give way to tears, only crying seemed such weakness—a thing to be ashamed of.

Should she go down to the meeting presently? She must, unless she wanted to give more cause than ever for mocking jeers from Cora, when that girl came away from the assembly, the victor at the poll.

And yet—

How awful it was going to be, how galling!

To attend the meeting and hear her own name read out as a candidate, to hear those in favour of her asked to hold up their hands and to see only three girls doing so—Polly, Trixie, and Madge!

As for the rest, the letter overnight had put things clearly enough. They were going to vote for Cora.

Cora Grandways, captain of the Form!

Her election was going to be a disaster to the school. She was going to make a far worse captain than Paula Creel had made. For Paula had been a slacker, and nothing worse than that, whereas Cora had a nature that took sheer delight in mischief.

Oh, if only it had been possible for Polly or, say, Madge to stand as a candidate at the last moment!

But rigid rules of the school, too ancient to be tampered with, precluded any girl making an eleventh hour bid for votes. She must either be duly nominated, at a proper time in advance of the election, or else not stand at all.

So there it was. In a few minutes Cora would be returned practically unopposed!

Tick-tock, tick-tock! How fast those last minutes were passing!

Betty got up from her chair and took a turn about the room.

Already she could hear girls meeting together in the corridor, laughing and chatting as they sauntered away to be early at the meeting.

"Here's Cora! Oh, she's wearing the carmine frock!" Betty heard Grace Garfield suddenly exclaim, with a laugh.

"Bai Jove what a great idea, Cowa!"

"Ha, ha ha! Yes," chuckled Judith. "It won't help to make Betty Barton feel more comfortable down at the meeting."

"I don't suppose she'll venture to show her face," said Ursula Wade smoothly.

Then the chattering remarks became less audible to Betty, and soon she was encompassed by silence—a heavy silence, only broken by the rapid tick-tock of the clock on the mantelpiece.

Two o'clock!

The chimes were actually dinning out the appointed hour. The meeting would be starting punctually, and so—

"Betty! Betty, quick!"

She felt her heart give a big leap as that sudden, excited cry came to her from the stairs end of the passage.

It was Polly calling to her.

Before she could make a guess as to the reason for such sudden excitement, there came a flurry of steps along the passage, the door crashed open, and Polly stood there, panting wildly.

"Oh, quick, Betty—the meeting!"

"I—I was going down at once, Polly. But—"

"Quick, I tell you!" urged her chum wildly. "There is not a moment to lose—not an instant! Oh, if the voting has started—if we are too late!"

"Why, Polly, what does it matter?" exclaimed Betty. "You know I don't stand a chance!"

"It may not answer, after all," was Polly's puzzling answer. "All the same, come along! We'll be in time, if possible!"

Catching her chum by one hand, she simply dragged her off, at the same time calling to Madge and Trixie, who now came out of their study:

"Come on, Trixie; come on, Madge—the meeting!"

Then, being utterly out of breath, as if she had been rushing hither and thither during the last half-hour, the excited girl dashed on down the stairs.

Her strange agitation infected Betty and the others.

Utterly bewildered, they hastened after Polly, and followed her into the common-room, only to see her take her place quite quietly.

But perhaps there was a simple reason for Polly's sudden effort at calmness.

For the meeting had started. Standing before the assembled girls, Miss Redgrave was saying a few preliminary words.

"It is my duty to remind you of the rules governing these elections," the junior mistress was saying, as Betty, Trixie, and Madge quietly joined the gathering. "Only

candidates who have been duly nominated can be voted for, and no girl may vote for more than one candidate."

She paused. A visible nervousness had seized her. Hearing a whisper and a laugh from Cora Grandways, she turned very pale.

"I am sorry to say—yes—very sorry indeed!—to-day's election has been seriously prejudiced, so far as one candidate is concerned, by a thing that happened last night. I have been warned by Miss Massingham not to say too much about that affair, but—Cora Grandways, why are you tittering?"

"I'm sorry, Miss Redgrave!" smirked the hopeful candidate. "I beg your pardon, I'm sure!"

"I am at liberty, and it's my duty, to beg all of you to take the voting very seriously," went on the junior mistress. "That is all I have to say, girls, and so—"

"Please, Miss Redgrave, may I speak?"

That was Polly Linton, and in a flash every eye in the room was upon her.

"Yes, Polly, certainly, if you—"

"Oh, must we listen to a lot of twaddle from her?" wailed Cora impatiently.

"Don't talk like that, Cora!" frowned Miss Redgrave. "What do you wish to say, Polly Linton, before the vote is taken?"

"Only this," answered Polly, stepping to the front. "Betty Barton did not dress up in Cora's frock last night!"

"Pooh!" sneered Cora. "We've had enough denials already!"

"I can give you proof!" retorted Polly. "Yes, absolute proof!"

The words caused gasps of amazement from all present.

"Miss Redgrave—all of you, please listen," rushed on Polly. "It is supposed that Betty, wanting to damage Cora's chance of winning the captaincy, dressed up in Cora's frock and got herself seen smoking a cigarette. But it was not Betty at all who was in the shrubbery wearing Cora's frock."

"What!"

"G'wreat goodness, g'wreats!"

"Go on, Polly; tell us, then—"

"It was Ursula Wade—yes, you Ursula!" Polly cried, in a ringing voice, pointing straight at Ursula. "And I dare you to deny it!"

"I—I—"

"She does deny it!" Cora almost screamed. "Don't you, Ursula? Why don't you speak out, you duffer!"

Ursula licked her lips.

"I—yes, of course, I do deny—"

"Then you are denying the truth!" Polly flashed. "I can prove it was you who went to the shrubbery dressed up as Cora!"

"Prove it, then—go on, prove it!" jeered Cora.

"Yes, yes—"

"Bai Jove, wather! Let's have p'roof, you know."

"My proof is this," said Polly. "Just before dinner I went in the shrubbery, feeling I wanted to look at the part where Betty was supposed to have been seen. I chanced to find Ursula there—"

"What of that?" sneered Cora.

"Ursula was looking for something. But when I spoke to her, she said she had only come there out of curiosity, like myself."

"And why shouldn't she have?"

"Cora," interposed Miss Redgrave gently, "don't interrupt. Give Polly a chance to finish."

"I felt jolly certain my notion was right. Ursula was there looking for something," Polly went on. "And suddenly it flashed upon me—she might have lost something there, if she was in the shrubbery last evening."

"Oh!"

"Ursula went off at once, and I myself had to come in for dinner in a minute or two. I—I didn't like to tell Betty even," said Polly, meeting her chum's eyes, "in case it all came to nothing. But directly dinner was over, I rushed off again to the shrubbery. I hunted about, and—and look what I found!"

With the words, she whipped a hand from behind her back and held it open.

On the palm lay a small amber-coloured hair-slide.

"That's Ursula's!" Polly cried. "She won't deny that, I think? And so, Miss Redgrave—all of you, if this not a proof—"

"It is—it is!" sang out Madge and Trixie. "Who can believe otherwise?"

"Hush! Let me speak now," said Miss Redgrave, in great agitation. "Ursula Wade, is that your hair-slide?"

"I—ye—yes."

"When did you lose it?"

"Just before dinner to-day—I mean—"

"It's not true!" broke in Polly. "She's had her hair done without a slide—done differently from her usual way—all day!"

"So she has, now you mention it!" cried Madge. "Miss Redgrave—"

"I noticed your altered style of doing

the hair early this morning," the junior mistress said to Ursula. "There was no hair-slide then. So how did you come to lose the hair-slide just before dinner?"

"I didn't—"
"But just now you said you did. Ursula, you are utterly self-condemned!"

"And Betty is cleared, then!" cried Polly deliciously. She did one of her mad capers. "Oh, Betty!"

"Oh, Polly!" burst out Betty, who had been too amazed to utter a single word up to now. "You have saved me—cleared me in the eyes of the whole school! Polly—"

"Oh, bother! She is going to say a lot of stuff about being grateful!" laughed Polly. "But I shall be rewarded well enough when I see her topping the poll. So please, can't we get on with the election, Miss Redgrave?"

"By all means!" was the junior mistress's happy rejoinder. "I do not think I need make any comment on these timely revelations!"

From Etta Hargrove, Elsie Drew—all the girls who had signed that chilly note to Betty overnight—there came nods and murmurs.

"Then hands up—" began madcap Polly; but she was gravely checked by the junior mistress.

"I'm in charge, Polly Linton! Hands up the girls in favour of Cora Grandways!"

Up went a very few hands, almost sneakishly, and Miss Redgrave counted them.

"Now, hands up those in favour of Betty Barton!"

Whirr!
They were like a lot of rockets. the hands that went up now!

"Nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen," counted Miss Redgrave. "Cora Grandways, seven votes; Betty Barton, fourteen! Betty Barton is—"

"Captain of the For-rm!" yelled Polly.

"Hurrah!"
"Bai Jove!"
"Bravo, Betty! Hurrah! Hip, pip, pip—"

"Hurrah!"

"Girls, I—I—"
"Hurrah!"

The meeting was breaking up in great disorder.

All who had voted for Betty were swarming about her, as she stood there in great

confusion, overwhelmed with joy, her chum Polly slapping her wildly on the back.

As for Cora and Co., they were backing towards the door, seething with whispered talk.

Miss Redgrave forced her way through the crowd about the victor, and held out her hand.

"At last, Betty!" she said. "The moment that I have hoped might come. The position that I always felt would fall to you in the end, be your trials and difficulties never so great! Captain of the Form—a position well deserved and well won, too!"

"Won for me by Polly!" said Betty, with a bright shining in her eyes. "You were saying I was going to thank you, Polly. I never can thank you enough! But I'll try to prove my gratitude in the one way that I know will please you best."

"And that is—"
"By being as good a captain for the Form as I can manage to be—always with your help!"

"That," said Polly, "is the stuff to give them!"

Meanwhile, upstairs in the Fourth Form passage, Cora Grandways was suddenly flashing round upon Ursula Wade, who had come slinking after her.

"Get out of my sight, you!" Cora hissed fiercely. "A nice thing you've done for me! You've got me expelled, for a cert!"

But neither Cora nor Ursula was to pay as dearly as that for the cruel shame they had come to grief over, richly as expulsion may have been deserved.

At Betty Barton's request, Miss Redgrave kept the affair of the carmine frock from the ears of Miss Somerfield and the Form-mistress.

That was an act of sheer mercy, inspired, so far as Miss Redgrave was concerned, by the deep conviction that Cora's power for mischief was utterly broken now that the reins of leadership had passed into Betty's hands.

But was it?

CHAPTER 6.

Her Enemies Still.

"A PACKET of your special tea, please."

"Yes, miss."

"And about two pounds of your best cake."

"Thank you, miss."

"About three dozen mixed pastries."

"Three dozen?"

"Yes, please. And let me see——"

Betty Barton paused.

She looked first at a slip of paper in her hand, and then at her chum, Polly Linton.

"You are quite sure you can make ice-cream, Polly dear, if I hire the freezing machine?"

"Rather!" said Polly.

"Then will you please send an ice-cream machine with the other things?" Polly said to the manageress of the Creamery Tea-rooms at Barncombe.

That lady nodded and smiled.

"To Morcove School?"

"Yes, please. The name is Betty Barton, Fourth Form, Morcove School."

"Better put 'Captain of the Fourth Form' on the label!" Polly struck in. "My chum is captain of the Form now!"

"Oh, I must congratulate you!" the manageress exclaimed, beaming upon Betty.

Betty Barton laughed, blushing very prettily. The honour of being Form captain was one she was bearing with a very charming modesty.

"I suppose you are giving a high-tea to some of your friends to celebrate the occasion?" smiled the teashop lady.

"High tea! It's to be a regular banquet!" declared Polly Linton. "I say, Betty, if you've done ordering, I'm going to start in!"

"But I haven't!" said Betty. "And you are not to order a single thing, or we shall have our first quarrel, I warn you! Three dozen cream buns, please, and a good big box of chocolates, some lemon-curd cakes, and——"

"Yes, miss."

"Oh, put in all the nicest things you have, suitable for a party of at least twenty girls."

"Thank you, miss!" said the manageress, as she finished writing. "The things will be delivered in the morning."

"That will do nicely," nodded Betty. "Come along, then, Polly!"

The two girls, who had cycled into Barncombe for the express purpose of fixing up the banquet, had had an ice each before they went to the counter to give the orders. They were passing out of the shop when three other girls, wearing the Morcove hat, came swaggering in.

At sight of Betty and Polly, one of the

newcomers stood aside in the doorway and swept Betty a very mocking bow.

"Make way for the captain, girls! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ho, he, he!"

"Oh, bai Jove, wather!"

Two of the mockers were sisters—Cora and Judith Grandways—whilst their simpering companion was Paula Creel, the former captain of the Form.

Betty and her chum took absolutely no notice of the newcomers' sneers. Their calm ignorance of Cora and Co. stung those three deeper than any retorts could have done.

Cora Grandways, in particular, looked furious with rage as she found how ineffectual were cheap sneers.

Her underlip held between her teeth, she looked as if she would like to dart after Betty and pull her hair.

But the two chums had gone, and so Cora, Judith, and Paula—practically all that remained of what, at one time, had been a hostile party bent on making Betty's life a misery—passed into the shop. It was very crowded, and the three had to take seats at a small table near the counter.

Cora gave the order.

"Ices, please—two vanillas and a strawberry."

"Yes, wather," said Paula; "stwawberry for me."

The luscious ices were brought to the girls, along with fresh, dainty wafers, and the trio were taking their first spoonfuls without much talking, when they heard the manageress speaking to the cashier.

"Just book this order for the morning, Miss Jones. To be sent to Betty Barton, captain of the Fourth Form, Morcove School——"

"Bai Jove!" whispered Paula Creel, with a spoonful of ice-cream half-way to her mouth. "Heah that, geals?"

Cora frowned in a way that said:

"Be quiet; I want to listen!"

"A packet of our best tea, Miss Jones; two pounds of wedding-cake——"

"Three dozen mixed pastries——"

"Bai Jove! Gwecat goodness, geals! Pastwies and——"

"Three dozen cream buns, as well, Miss Jones."

"Cweam buns!" breathed Paula.

"A fifteen-shilling box of chocs——"

"Gwacious, Cowa deah!"

"One ice-cream maker——"

"Ice-cweam! They are going to make ice-cweam, bai Jove!"

"Lemon-curd cakes, three dozen and——"

Cora Grandways refused to listen to the rest.

With an impatient shrug of her shoulders, she went on with her ice, at the same time distracting Judith and Paula by making a sneering remark.

"Let the kid buy up the whole shop, who cares?" she sulked. "Of course, her head is turned, now that she's our high-and-mighty captain!"

"Precious little is she going to captain me!" muttered Judith.

"And, bai Jove, don't you know, pwecious little will she twouble me!" chimed in Paula. "Weally, it was a great pity you didn't get elected, Cowa deah!"

"Oh, don't start again about my defeat!" snapped Cora.

"I wegwet it so vewy gweatly," pleaded Paula. "I wegard it as a most aggwawating gwiewance that washerwoman's kid getting all the votes at the election."

"Not all!" said Judith.

"Pwactically all," sighed Paula. "I naturally voted for you, Cowa. So did Judith, your sister, and Gwace Garfield and Ella Elgood——"

"Don't mention those girls' names!" Cora exclaimed, pushing her ice away half eaten. "They voted for me, but already they seem to be going over to Betty, now that she is captain."

"They have accepted her invitation to the wonderful banquet, anyhow," grumbled Judith. "Turncoats!"

"Oh, I wouldn't wegard Gwace and Ella as lost to us, just because they are going to the banquet, bai Jove!" said Paula. "After all, one often has to attend functions given by people wather beneath one."

"Perhaps you will go to Betty's party?" said Cora sulkily.

"I—weally, now you ask me fwankly, Cowa darling," simpered Paula, "I will say fwankly I wou'd wather like to go."

"You would?"

"Yes, wather! I'm not gweedy after cweam-buns and ice-cweam—pway don't wegard that as the weason! But, after all, don't you know, Betty is captain—big majority at the poll, bai Jove!—so theah you are. Just for the occasion, buwy the hatchet—what!"

"I shall not bury the hatchet!" Cora

said fiercely. "If you want to go to the precious banquet, go! But, as for me——"

"And me!" struck in Judith.

"For all Betty is captain of the Form," finished Cora, speaking through clenched teeth, "she'll yet find her path is anything but one of roses all the way!"

In an ill-tempered manner the speaker beckoned to the waitress for the bill. It was made out, and the three girls quitted the shop, Cora coming last into the open, after paying at the cash-desk.

Their jaunt into Barncombe Town, by train from Morcove Road Station, had not been quite a success.

The golden sunshine of this early evening—it was only a quarter to six—was pleasant enough, and the shops were as attractive as ever. But the fact was, nothing could afford the Grandways sisters any pleasure at present, for Cora's defeat still rankled.

Paula, too, was not in the best of spirits. She was too fatuous a girl to take her friend's election defeat much to heart. But the very fact of Cora and Judith being so out of temper made her rather "depressed."

And now Paula had not helped matters by confessing that she would not be above going to Betty Barton's "banquet."

Cora and Judith could not get over that. They were "short" with Paula during the rest of their look round the town, and altogether it was a very gloomy party of three that presently made for the railway-station.

The train for Morcove Road was signalled, the last but one for the day. There was another at eight-fifteen, but, of course, girls were not allowed to stay as late as that in the town unless they were accompanied by a mistress.

Amidst all the usual sudden bustle, the train came in. Cora Grandways and Co. made for the nearest first-class compartment.

A girl was all by herself in there, with an amount of luggage that suggested she had come from a distance.

She had made rather a litter of the carriage during her journey—magazines and a tea-basket were all over the place, along with her handbag, the hat she had removed from her sunny curls, a chocolate box, and an empty lemonade bottle.

Cora was just in the mood for a squabble with a stranger. She remained standing

after she and her chums had entered the carriage, although there was plenty of room to sit down.

"Just shift some of this rubbish away, will you?" she ordered the long-distance passenger.

Judith and Paula expected a quarrelsome reply, as did Cora.

To their secret amazement, the girl-stranger obeyed the imperious request most obligingly.

If she had been Cora's own servant-girl, she could not have cleaned up that carriage better than she did!

Cora and Co. felt interested after this. It was just occurring to them—could the girl be a new scholar for Morcove? If so—oh, what a nice, tame sort of girl to treat just as one wished!

To people who will do exactly what they are told to, is given the name of "doormat."

They are presumed to be people so lacking in spirit that they would willingly lie down and allow themselves to be trodden upon—to be used as a doormat.

Was this girl a "doormat"?

Cora Grandways resolved to find out before the journey was over.

CHAPTER 7.

Dolly the "Doormat."

"I WONDER if you are a new girl for our school?" Cora Grandways began.

She spoke in a patronising way.

"I'm going to Morcove School," answered the long-distance passenger. "I'm Dolly Delane, and I shall be in the Fourth Form, so I'm told."

"Bai Jove!"

"Our Form!" said Judith Grandways.

The new girl looked very pleased. She looked, indeed, as if it took very little to please her. She was on the plump side, with brown eyes that were capable of a very demure expression.

"You'd better make friends with us at once," said Cora loftily. "We are rather a set on our own up at the school, and you must belong to it."

"It's practically the only set worth mentioning," added Paula Creel. "As a member of our wather exclusive set, you will wegard games as a bore."

"Yes," said Dolly.

"Especially cwicket, don't you know."

"I'm rather fond of cwicket," confessed

Dolly Delane. "But if you say I mustn't play, then, of course, I shan't."

Cora nudged Judith.

"That's the style," Cora said, smiling quite nicely. "As a sort of novice, as it were, in our set, you will have to make yourself useful. But then you would have to fag for some girl or other, in any case."

"Yes, wather," said Paula. "But you don't mind fagging—what?"

"Oh, if it's the custom for new girls to be fagged, then, of course, I must fag," said Dolly.

Cora nudged Judith again. Clearly Dolly Delane was a "doormat"!

And this was made clearer than ever when they all alighted at Morcove Road Station.

A carriage had been sent to meet the new girl. It was an open carriage, with only one upholstered seat, the other seat being a wooden "tip-up."

Dolly, being a new girl for whom the carriage was intended, had every right to "bag" the cushioned seat, and even use the rest of the space for her luggage, which was too much to go up with the driver.

But Cora Grandways and Co., inviting themselves into the carriage, had soon made themselves quite comfortable at the new girl's expense.

First they turned her off the cushioned seat, so that two of them—Cora and Judith—might face the way they were going. Then Paula, being next to Dolly on the wooden tip-up, complained that the seat was only big enough for one.

"You'd better get up with the driver," Cora said, looking quite seriously at the new girl. "That's what you'd better do."

"Very well!" said the obliging Dolly.

And she did!

Cora and her sister chuckled, whilst Paula breathed a soft:

"Bai Jove, how wudicrous—what!"

"Half a sec., driver!" Cora sang out, just as the carriage was starting away. "I can't sit here with these fatboxes and things about my feet! Dolly, have them up there with you, on your lap!"

"Very well," said Dolly; "pass them up, please."

"Hadt'n't you better come and fetch them?" suggested Cora coldly. "We are not new girls, you know!"

Dolly reddened. In haste she clambered down, and scrambled about for a minute or two with the surplus luggage.

When at last the horse clopped away, the Doormat was sitting up next to the driver, with luggage on her lap and luggage piled all round her.

And that was how Dolly, the Doormat, arrived at Morcove School.

For Cora and Co. it was the first bit of real enjoyment they had had since the election defeat gave them such a knock-out blow.

Up in Study No. 7, by and by, they sat around in easy-chairs, chuckling and talking about the new girl, whilst they waited to see if she would do all the things she had been told by them to do on arrival at the school.

"Just think what a useful sort of person she is going to be," grinned Cora. "I suppose she is certain to share this study with you and me, Judy, since we told her to ask that she might be put with us. Well, then, we'll fag her——"

"From morning to night, rather!" assented Judith.

"Bai Jove, you geals have done a good thing for yourselves!" Paula said enviously. "I shan't have anybody to fag for me, don't you know. I never had a fag, even when I was captain, bai Jove!"

"We'll send her round to do any odd jobs in your den when you want her," smiled Cora. "She'll oblige. But the beauty of it is, of course, we can make use of her against Betty Barton."

"My word—yes!" Judith said, with a clap of the hands. "Tell her to do something that will be awfully riling to Betty, and then——"

"Oh, I've got a brighter notion than that!" Cora broke in. "You'll see."

"Bai Jove, Cowa, darling, you might tell us what it is! I twust you quite understand, although I shall go to the Barton banquet, I shall still wefuse to be on fwiendly terms with Betty. So, Cowa, deah——"

"Sh!" gestured Judith, starting up.

Then Doormat came in.

"It's all right," she said gaily. "I've been before the headmistress, and I've finished with the matron, and I've had five minutes with Miss Redgrave, who said I could be in this study."

"You said just what I told you?" questioned Cora. "That you were our friend, and wanted to be with us?"

"Yes, of course," said the Doormat.

Cora could not trust herself to meet the

other's eyes. She felt that if she did so she must explode with laughter.

"Well," Cora said, lolling back in her armchair, "would you mind getting my house-slippers from that corner, Dolly, and taking off these walking-shoes of mine?"

"You can do mine, too, whilst you are about it," said Judith.

"Bai Jove!" Paula looked comically envious. "I wish my slippers were in heah, don't you know. Then Dolly could see to me, too, don't you know."

"Let her fetch them for you," drawled Cora. "Dolly, go to the study next door but one, and bring Paula's shoes."

"All right."

And off went the Doormat, leaving the three girls who were abusing her obliging disposition in sheer convulsions of laughter.

"Bai Jove, what a sweam!" tittered Paula. "She must be wather weak-minded—what!"

"Oh, no!" said Cora. "Don't you make any mistake; she's not a duffer! She is just an obliging sort of girl."

And Cora was right.

It would have been as wrong to imagine that Dolly Delane was a duffer as it would have been to suspect that she wanted to "toady."

She was a girl of intelligence and character, with just this one weakness for being too ready to do whatever she was told, out of a desire to oblige.

Of course, no nice girls would ever have dreamed of abusing what was, after all, a very pleasing weakness. But Cora and Co. were not nice girls, although Dolly Delane was too "new," at present, to be aware of that.

She came back with Paula's shoes, and then the strange spectacle began of Cora, Judith, and Paula, each lolling back in their respective chairs, whilst the Doormat, kneeling down, unlaced their walking-shoes and fitted the slippers on to their feet.

"Thanks," said Cora, at last.

"Yes, wather, bai Jove!"

"You can dust those walking-shoes before you put them away," said Judith. "And then just straighten up the table."

"All right."

"And if you have any time, don't you know, when you've finished in heah," simpered Paula, "you can tweat my study to a few improvements."

The ex-captain of the Form was going away to her own study as she said this, and the Grandways girls followed her into

the passage. In the act of closing the door of Study No. 7, however, Cora suddenly remembered to say something to the new girl.

"If a girl called Betty Barton comes chasing after you," she said, "don't have anything to do with her. You'll find she calls herself captain of the Form, but the way she got elected is no credit to her."

Dolly looked rather surprised, but her brown eyes seemed to say: "All right; I suppose I must do as you say. Anything to oblige."

"Remember," Cora added impressively, "you are our friend, not hers."

Then she drew the door shut, and she and her sister went with Paula to that girl's study, whilst in No. 7 the Doormat looked around for a duster with which to wipe the shoes.

She had just found one, and was giving the first rub to one of Cora's expensive shoes, when a knock at the door sounded.

Instead of calling "Come in!" the Doormat went to the door and opened it.

"You are the new girl, of course," said Betty Barton, for she it was who had knocked.

"Dolly Delane—yes," was the answer. "Can I do anything for you?"

Betty smiled. "You seem to be doing enough for other people at present," she said. "Those are Cora's shoes, surely!"

"I'm just dusting them—yes," said the Doormat. "As a new girl, I've got to fog for my friends, of course. It is the custom—"

"It is nothing of the sort!" Betty broke in, with a look that was half-admiring and half-pitying.

"Dolly, they've been making a fool of you. Come and meet the other girls of the Form. I came here to invite you to a tea which I am giving in my study in celebration of my election. Do please come along."

And Dolly, because she was so obliging, immediately did so.

CHAPTER 8.

Paula Puts Her Foot in it!

THEY found Study No. 12 already crowded, most of the girls giving a helping hand in arranging Betty's "celebration" banquet. Dolly had just been introduced to most of the girls

when Madge Minden suddenly came back from the passage pantry, where she had been to get hot water, with a tale of woe.

"Bother! The hot water has gone off!" she whispered to Betty. "Whatever shall we do? It's quite cold!"

Betty felt the two jugs of water. Their contents were certainly not hot enough for making tea.

"All right; I'll manage," she said. "Madge, you might run and ask Miss Redgrave if we may light a spirit-stove on a small table in the passage, explaining why. And by the time you are back, I'll have it all ready."

"Right—oh!"

And Madge was off in a flash, returning in a couple of minutes with a serene countenance.

Miss Redgrave had given permission for the spirit-stove to be used, feeling sure the girls would be very careful.

By that time, a small bamboo table from one of the other studies had been dumped down outside the study door, and on this the kettle and stove were set, close to the ice-cream mixer which Polly Linton was working.

"Anything doing yet, Polly?" Betty asked, after she had lit the stove.

"It's getting harder to work, if that means anything!" said Polly. "But—Here, girls, have a look!"

The girls looked at the alleged ice-cream, and—well, they did not look twice!

"Urrrr-r!" shuddered Madge Minden. "Give me tea!"

"Oui, oui!" agreed Trixie Hope, sticking to French, as usual. "Vite—quick, Betty! Thé pour moi—tea for me!"

So, a little tactfully, the girls persuaded Polly to leave the ice-cream to make itself, whilst she joined them at the festive board.

The two big pots of tea were filled with boiling water, and then Madge placed a further kettle of water on the stove just outside.

She was returning to the room, ready to sit down with the others, when someone suddenly turned up at the door with a simpering smile at her lips.

It was Paula Creel.

"Bai Jove, geals! My gwacious, what a spwead!"

Betty Barton looked round, with the teapot poised over a cup. Then she set down the pot and got up.

"What do you want, Paula?" she asked coldly.

"Bai Jove—er—weally, I thought I would just look in, don't you know."

"Well, you've looked in," said Betty. "and I hope you've seen enough to feel certain we are going to enjoy ourselves."

"Yes, wather!"

"So now you can go."

"What! My gwacious, though—weally! What about buwyng the hatchet, bai Jove?"

"There are limits" said Betty, amidst an approving murmur from the seated guests. "You were in the know about the shabby game Cora and Judith were having with Dolly Delanc. After that——"

"You weally mean to say I am not welcome?"

"I mean just that."

"Bai Jove!" gasped Paula. "Oh, vewy well, geals! In that case, I—I will with-draw!"

But what Paula Creel really did was to step backwards into the ice-cream mixer, setting one foot in the chilly mixture.

"Oh!" she gasped.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Burr-rang, crash! Smash!

And Paula Creel, the ex-captain, extricating a dainty foot from the overturned machine, hopped away, leaving blobs of ice-cream all along the passage.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Poor Paula! Ha, ha, ha!"

Betty Barton's guests were in convulsions of laughter as she shut the door and joined them at the table.

Even in the days when lots of these girls had been chummy with Paula, they had always been ready to chuckle at her fatuous ways. Her simpering talk of her great pride in being an indolent, drossy "awistow-cwat" had caused many a yell of laughter before now. But never had she been quite so amusing as when she made her exit into that ice-cream mixer!

"But I wish it had been Cora and Judith," said Polly Linton, whilst the cups were being handed round.

"Hear, hear!" agreed Madge Minden. "Only, of course, those girls are much too bitter to feel like showing their faces. Paula—she's just a stupid, not to be taken seriously. But Cora and Judith——"

"Oh, don't let's talk about them!" pleaded Betty Barton, looking very happy now that she had finished pouring out tea.

"I meant to bury the hatchet to-day, but that came to an end when I found out about that business with Dolly Delanc. Are you making a good tea, Dolly?"

"Splendid, thanks!"

"Have a cream bun, Dolly?"

"I've had one."

"Have another, then."

"But—— Oh, all right, since you say so!"

The Doormat gave in obligingly, and there was another roar of laughter as she took the pastry she did not want.

Then the girls round about began to offer her things from all the different plates. She saw what they were up to, and tried to make a stand against them; but habit was too strong.

Polly said: "You must have a jam-puff!" so the Doormat took one. Etta insisted that she must have a second lemon-curd cake, and so she took one of those, too!

Her plate, in fact, was getting quite piled up with eatables accepted to oblige the other girls, when Betty intervened again.

"Do stop your teasing, girls!" pleaded the captain of the Form. "Dolly knows it's all good-natured; still, you will—— Hallo!"

Betty broke off in a rather startled way. She turned sharply in her seat at the table, to look towards the door.

"Queer!" she exclaimed. "I thought I smelt——"

"Something burning!" said Sybil Farlow, sniffing.

"My ice-cream refrigerator, working at last!" jested Polly Linton. "I say, Betty—— Gracious!"

With Polly jumping up, giving that startled cry, all the rest of the girls also sprang to their feet.

Betty had stepped to the door and opened it.

The passage outside was full of smoke, and, although Betty slammed shut the door in an instant, what all the girls saw was enough to warrant the terrified cry which burst from their lips.

"Fire! The passage is on fire!"

CHAPTER 9.

Dolly's Bravery.

NOT one girl was there whose face did not turn with alarm.

On the outer side of that slammed door there was a blaze of fire.

Only that brief glimpse of it had they

obtained before Betty Barton wisely slammed shut the door. But that glimpse was enough to convince them all that they were in great peril.

A fire in the passage—the very worst place where one could have broken out, since it cut off the girls' escape.

No need to wonder how the blaze had started. The spirit-stove was to blame. It had either exploded through some fault in the making, scattering methylated spirit all over the bamboo table, or else Paula, when she blundered into the ice-cream machine, must have upset the lamp without knowing it.

After one moment of utter dismay, Betty opened the door again, just a few inches, and peered out.

Even as she did so there was a mild explosion close to the burning table, and then a greater blaze of flame.

She knew the cause.

The glass bottle of methylated spirit had burst, and now a full quart of spirit was adding to the mischief.

Always a girl to grow calm in any sudden crisis, she pulled herself together and faced round to appeal for steady action. Ere she could voice one word, however, the fatal thing happened.

Two or three of the girls lost their heads completely.

Uttering frantic cries of dismay, they darted to the study window, only to turn away, wringing their hands and moaning with despair as they realised that the room was thirty feet from the ground, and the window offered no means of escape.

Their panic proved infectious. Another moment, and the greater number of school-girls were seized with the same wild alarm.

They surged to the window, then blundered together towards the closed door, only to fall away from it with cries of despair.

In the terrible commotion some of the girls knocked over others without being aware of it, whilst one or two swooned away and knew no more of what was happening.

"Order—order!" pleaded Betty desperately. "Polly—"

"Yes, Betty, I'm keeping calm," declared Polly; and it was true enough. "Girls, let's take it quietly, and then—"

"We can make a rush for it, one by one," Betty called out above the confusion of

voices. "Only keep calm, and it will be all right!"

She signed to two of the girls to stand apart, close to her, and then she opened the door. But at sight of the blaze in the passage the couple whom she had singled out to be the first to dart past it shrank back in terror.

Then one of the others, almost crazy with panic, made the rush.

She must have got past the fire without injury, for they heard her cry out joyfully; and that cry should have done much to allay the panic.

Instead of that, however, it caused at least half a dozen girls to rush at the door all in the same instant.

They crushed together there, and Betty and Polly had all they could do to drag back one or two, easing the way for others.

And now nearly all the rest came packing around the door, with the fire raging before their eyes.

The thought in all their panic-stricken minds was all too apparent.

Since the only means of escape was to dash through the blaze, chancing any burns, each wanted to be first. For those who stayed to the last were certain to meet with greater risk, since the fire was growing fiercer every moment.

In the midst of all this wild scene, Betty was vaguely conscious of Dolly Delane becoming one of the latest victims of the panic. That girl began to join in the mad scramble, and Betty cried out to her:

"Keep back, Dolly! Keep back, I tell you!"

It was plainly an effort for Dolly to obey, but she did so. Betty took no more notice of her, but continued the exciting task of easing the crush, dragging out girls who were on the point of fainting.

Then suddenly the jam at the door was ended. Several girls surged headlong into the passage and dashed past the conflagration without succumbing to the heat.

Others followed. In twos and threes they made the risky dash for safety—risky, and yet it was the wisest thing to do, all things considered.

The room was full of smoke by now. Betty, conscious that most, if not all, of the girls had got away, made a rush all round the study to see for certain that no one was still there. The only girl she blundered against was Dolly Delane, and her she seized by one arm and hustled to the door.

"Go on, Dolly! Quick!"

"All right; but you told me to—"

"It's your turn now!" panted Betty.

"We can both go, for we are the only ones here. Polly—she's gone, yes. Come on!"

And together they made their dash for safety.

Taking a deep breath, and shutting their eyes against the searing heat, they darted desperately through the very heart of the fire, flames playing about them for a moment.

Betty was almost overcome as she reeled with Dolly out of the danger zone; but even whilst Polly Linton was beating out sparks that had fallen upon her chum's dress, the captain of the Form pulled herself together.

In a confused way she saw that one of the girls had run for a fire-extinguisher, and was trying to use it. It was Madge Minden, and that girl cried out hoarsely:

"How do you work the thing? Quick! Tell me!"

Betty snatched at the brass cylinder. She knew how to work it.

"All right, I'll manage. Get another—quick!" she panted, unscrewing the nozzle. "And water from the pantry—quick!"

At that instant, when a lot of the girls were turning to rush off for further means of coping with the fire, there was an alarming cry:

"Tess Trelawney! Where's Tess? She's not here!"

"Not here!" gasped Betty. "But—"

"She is still in the study—must be!" was the cry of dismay from several girls. "Oh, what can we do? What can we do?"

"Here, Polly! Hold this!" Betty said.

But Polly shook her head.

"No, I'll get her cut, Betty. You stick to the extinguisher; you are the best hand at that."

With those words, Polly made a dash to get back through the fire to the study; but a tongue of flame suddenly licked all about her, and she dropped, having to be pulled back to safety by Dolly Delane.

The new girl saw that Betty dare not hand over the extinguisher to any of the other girls without making matters far worse. Every fraction of a second told in the use of the chemical by a deft hand.

She saw a look in Betty's eyes which plainly said:

"I'd go if I could, but I must—I must leave it to somebody else."

So Dolly went herself.

With a rush she was back through the burning doorway, and for those in safety in the passage there were moments of terrible suspense, moments that seemed like hours, whilst they wondered had she only got to the study to fall senseless to the floor.

And then—

"Hurrah! Hurrah!"

It was one great, hoarse cheer of mad relief as Dolly Delane came dashing through the flames again, her mouth and nostrils swathed about with some bits of white cloth.

In her arms she held a swooning girl—Tess Trelawney, whom, as she explained afterwards, she had found lying unconscious almost under the table.

Eager hands relieved the brave rescuer of her limp burden, and then Dolly Delane clawed the muffler from about her mouth and tried to speak.

But no words came from her parted lips.

Emitting only a gasping sigh, she suddenly drooped her eyelids and toppled to the floor in a dead faint.

CHAPTER 10.

Cheers for Dolly Delane.

OPENING her eyes at last, after what seemed to her a very big lapse of time, Dolly Delane found herself in the Fourth Form dormitory.

She had been put to bed, and seated at the bedside now was the junior mistress of the Form.

The great room was darkening with the fall of night. Dolly glanced this way and that, hardly stirring, and what with the deep gloom and her own stillness, she had been conscious for a full half-minute before Miss Redgrave looked round upon her and saw her wide-open eyes.

"At last, Dolly!" the junior mistress exclaimed happily. "And you feel quite all right, do you?"

"Oh, yes—yes!"

"We all felt certain there was nothing very much the matter with you, dear," said the junior mistress gently. "You were just used up for the time being. But that was more than two hours ago."

"Two hours!"

"Yes, as long ago as that."

"It is all very quiet," Dolly said, after a moment. "The last I remember, there was such an awful noise and excitement. The fire—"

"If you had not lost consciousness when you did," broke in the junior mistress, "you would have seen the fire got under in the next few minutes. That was largely thanks to Betty Barton. She stuck to the extinguisher work, and then some of the others helped with pails of water. When Miss Massingham and I got to the passage, having heard the disturbance, the fire was no longer a menace to the building. But it must have been quite that at one time."

"A nice thing if the whole place had been burnt out!" Dolly Delane exclaimed simply. "Will there be a—row about it, please? I mean, the spirit-stove—"

"Oh, none of you girls were to blame; you can set your mind easy about that!" Miss Redgrave hastened to assure the girl. "But what terrible peril you were in for the moment! No one else in the school knew that a fire had started."

"No, of course," nodded Dolly. "All the Form was at the party."

"All excepting the Grandways girls, Ursula Wade, and Paula Creel," rejoined Miss Redgrave. "Paula was upstairs, changing; Ursula was in the quadrangle; and the Grandways sisters had gone for a walk, being in a bit of a sulk about the party, I suspect. So there was absolutely no one to notice the fire when it first started."

"Well, if no one has suffered worse than me," smiled Dolly, "there is nothing to make a fuss about, thank goodness!"

"Yet we are going to make a fuss, a very great fuss, by-and-by," Miss Redgrave said, smiling down into Dolly's brown eyes. "You are going to have your name on the honour board, Dolly."

"Me—a new girl! Why, I've only been here a day or so! And—and what did I do—"

"You risked your life to save Tess Trelawney! You—"

From the head of the stairs came stealthy sounds as of several girls approaching the dormitory very cautiously.

Dolly and Miss Redgrave watched the door.

Presently it creaked a little wider open, and in the gloom a cluster of anxious faces became visible.

"'Sh! 'Sh!" whispered a voice. "Miss Redgrave, how is she now, please?"

"Oh, you may come in, girls!" the junior mistress answered, in a normal tone. "Dolly's quite all right."

Then all the stealthiness gave place to

a whirling rush of at least a dozen girls to the bedside, headed by Betty Barton.

"Dolly—oh, Dolly!" they began; but Miss Redgrave checked them with a gentle laugh.

"Now, girls, steady! The last thing Dolly wants is to be smothered, after being nearly smothered by the fire."

"But she wants to be thanked! She—"

"I don't want to be thanked at all," said Dolly. "All I want is not to be laughed at any more for being such a doormat."

"The Doormat you got yourself called, Dolly, dear, and the Doormat you must remain," said Betty. "But—"

"Oh, all right!"

"Ha, ha, ha! As obliging as ever!" chuckled a few of the girls.

"But when you hear us calling you that," went on Betty, "you know it's only affection, Dolly. 'Doormat'—it makes one think of doors, doesn't it? And when we think of this Doormat, girls, we shall always think of a fiery door—"

"And Dolly coming out of it with Tess in her arms!"

"Here's Tess!" said that girl, stepping close to the bedside. "And Tess wants to know if you'll settle down in her study, Dolly, starting to-morrow? You simply must—"

"All right!" said Dolly obligingly; and there was yet another peal of laughter.

"Oh, but we are proud of you!" cried Betty. "If we thought it really wouldn't do you any harm to give you a cheer, we— Miss Redgrave, may we?"

"Well, girls, not too loud."

But that cheer, once it had started, swelled and swelled until the very ceiling seemed to shake, whilst one after another all the girls claimed a handshake with their heroine.

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Hip, hip, hip—"

"Yes, wather—hoowah!" chimed in a simpering voice, as the girls were giving their last long-drawn-out ovation. "I quite agree, geals, Dolly is a hewoino—what!"

And across the room came Paula Creel—Paula, with all her faults and weaknesses, not such a bad girl at heart, after all! Not like Cora and Judith, anyway, who, hovering at the threshold of the room, merely scowled sullenly.

"Bai Jove!" said Paula, holding out her hand. "If you will permit me, Dolly Delane, it will give me gweat pleasure! You simply must, bai Jove!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I do not regard myself as friendly with geals who are friends of Betty's," said Paula. "I cannot forget, either, that I was made to feel widiculous—extwemely widiculous—by being pushed into the ice-cweam maker! Howevah, there are times, don't you know, when one weally must buyy the hatchet—what!"

"Hear, hear!" laughed all the girls. "And this is one such time, Paula."

"Yes, wather. I weally think I—Hallo, Cowa, darling! Hallo, Judy! I say, bai Jove, aren't you coming in?"

But Cora and Judith turned quickly in the doorway, and went downstairs together.

"Paula, too!" hissed Cora fiercely. "Just see what it means, Judith! She's going the way of all the rest!"

"Let her!" muttered Judith.

"But it means," said Cora, through her clenched teeth, "we shall be left all alone soon! Just you and I and Ursula—but she's no use—the only girls in the Form still against Betty Barton!"

CHAPTER 11.

Bearing it Alone.

"**B**ETTY, what a glorious day for the match!"

No answer.

"Betty, isn't it simply a topping afternoon?"

There was something the matter with Betty Barton, captain of the Fourth Form at Morcove School, that was evident.

Half a dozen time in the last two minutes her greatest chum, Polly Linton, had made a remark without getting any response.

The two girls were in the study which they always occupied together. Polly stood by the window, gazing out delightedly upon the sunny school grounds, whilst a fresh breeze from across the sea blew in upon her, fluffing her hair.

But Betty, with her back to the window and the sunshine, was seated at the table, looking very thoughtful.

Ding, dong! went the school chimes. Ding, dong!

"Half-past two," said Polly Linton. "The Combe House team will be here any minute now, Betty, dear—"

"Yes, Polly. Were you speaking?"

Polly stared at her chum in amazement.

"What the dickens is the matter with you, Betty?" she exclaimed. "You've been like this ever since first thing this morning.

Yet you got out of bed in such high spirits—as excited as any of us about the match. Betty, dear, is there something—"

Polly's usual flippancy was all gone now. She was the loving friend, standing close to Betty, with one hand resting sympathetically on that girl's shoulder.

"If there is anything worrying you, Betty, dear, surely you can tell me?"

"I—no, Polly."

"Nothing worrying you?"

"Nothing that I feel I ought to worry you about," said Betty. "I know what you are, Polly—always so ready to go halves with any trouble. But—"

"Tell me, Betty. I think you might!"

"I think I'd better not," answered Betty. "It's nothing to do with the school or my captaincy."

"News from home, then—bad news?"

"Oh, Polly, please—"

"All right! I'm sure I don't want to pry, dear—"

"You are not prying. You simply want to help me if you can, and—and I feel it is not right to let you!"

Betty got up from her chair, took a turn about the room, and at last looked out of the window.

"Just help the Form, as I know you will, Polly, for all you are worth. Help defeat Combe House, and for one day you will have done quite enough to show what a brick you are!"

"All right!" nodded Polly, marching back to the door. "If that's all, I can easily promise you satisfaction."

And she passed from the room, affecting all her usual madcap spirits, although she did not slam the door behind her with the usual boisterous crash.

Left to herself, Betty commenced to pace to and fro. Now and again she seemed to make an effort to banish the anxieties that troubled her, and with the intention of going down to the field she even got as far as the study door.

But always her secret trouble chained her to this quiet room, and presently she was back at her chair by the table, sitting there with elbows on the table-edge and her pretty face framed in her hands.

The chimes sounded again, but even the iron-tongued bells failed to rouse her with their summons.

Heaving a deep sigh, she took a crumpled letter from her pocket, spread it upon the table, and read it through very slowly.

There were portions of the letter to which her eyes returned again and again, and all the time she sighed heavily.

Then suddenly the bells pealed once more. Ding, dong! went the quarters, and after they had ended the biggest bell of all vibrated on the air.

Bong! Bong! Bong!

Three o'clock!

The Combe House girls had turned up in good time. Down on the field now the rival teams were waiting for Betty.

What overwhelming anxiety was hers that she could no longer even fight back the tears that had been trying for hours to flood her eyes?

She was almost crying now. Only by the greatest effort did she check the tears by wiping them swiftly from her lashes and then jumping up, to walk about the room. Poor Betty, suddenly saddled with such a big load of secret sorrow on a day that had promised to be such a happy one!

Happy had all her days been just lately, and often had she caught herself thinking how wonderful it all was—that she, who had been so despised when first she came to Moreove School, not so many weeks ago, should have become the Form's elected captain; should have won for herself such fine friends as Polly Linton, Trixie Hope, and Madge Minden; should have made such a change, too, in the whole life of the Form. But now—

This sudden secret trouble had befallen her, coming like a bolt from the blue, and here she stood, feeling utterly broken down with grief and anxiety, whilst down in the field many tongues were asking what the Form captain meant by keeping them waiting.

"Start without her!" exclaimed Cora Grandways, her tone betraying all her undying animosity towards the absent captain.

"That's right!" agreed Cora's sister Judith.

The two girls were secretly glorying in Betty's absence, hoping that it would give offence all round. And, indeed, there were not a few girls who, friendly as they had been towards Betty, were looking irritated.

"It's swank—sheer swank!" went on Cora, trying her hardest to make mischief. "Just because the girl is captain, she thinks she is entitled to keep us all waiting!"

"Bai Jove, Cowa, deah," simpered Paula Creel, "it weally is disgwaeful!"

"I don't see that you need make a song

about it, anyway," said Polly. "You are not playing in the match, Paula!"

"Much to my great welfief!" answered Paula. "Cwicket, to my mind—"

But the crowd on the field was spared Paula's scathing opinion of cricket, for suddenly several girls cried out joyfully:

"Here's Betty! Come on, Betty—slow-coach!"

The breathless girl was soon the centre of a chattering crowd, which included most of the visiting team, and now Cora and Judith Grandways walked apart together, exchanging whispers full of malice.

"She's worried about something, of course. But what?" Cora asked her sister softly.

"I say, Judy, I wonder if—"

"She had a letter from home this morning; we know that, anyhow," whispered back Judith.

"Then it's some trouble to do with her people, you may depend upon that," Cora reasoned gloatingly. "A trouble she feels she must keep secret, too; that's the queer part about it!"

"Yes. She hasn't even confided in Polly, although they are such close friends!"

Cora gave a sudden smile.

"My word, I do hope it is something that means an end to her being at this school. Judy, I tell you what—"

"Well?"

Cora spoke in a lower tone than ever.

"I'll write home to dad and mother about this business. Betty's people live in our town, don't they?"

"And dad always knows everyone's business!" chuckled Judith. "My word, yes, it will be a lark if we find out!"

The scheming sisters checked their whispered talk as Paula Creel came up.

"Your side is fielding first, geals," she drawled, "so I wish you good-bye, don't you know, and good luck, what! I shall go for a stwoll myself, cwicket matches being to much of a stwain for me to watch."

"Good luck, did you wish us?" grinned Cora. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"He, he, he!" tittered Judith.

"You see, Paula darling," Cora explained, "we are not exactly keen on winning the match! It only means winning it for our precious captain, for her to get all the credit."

"And so," chuckled Judith, "if I muff a few catches, and get out first ball, you'll know why it is. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove!" said Paula, with her mouth

wide open. "Well, geals, I don't pwofess to be a fwend of Betty Barton's. The fact that she once went to a council school, bai Jove, is a gweat dwawback, I'm afwaid. But aren't you playing it wather low-down on her?"

"Oh, we know you are not half as bitter against her as you used to be," Cora said sulkily. "You are going over to Betty like all the rest."

"I wogard Betty with mixed feelings," said Paula. "As a member of an awistocwatic family, don't you know, it is too much to expect me to be weal fwends with her. Yes, wathah! At the same time, Cowa deah, the geal has her good points."

"All right! We don't want to have a list of them!"

"I will only mention one," said Paula. "Betty mak-s a far better captain than I made. Yes, wathah, bai Jove!"

And with that emphatic remark—which was surely to her credit—Paula Creel, with that mincing step of hers, departed for her "stwowl," cutting a very stylish, dainty figure as she drifted across the grass.

"Never mind, Cora," Judith Grandways soothed her sister, who was biting a lip savagely. "You and I are now going to play—cricket!"

"Cricket!" muttered Cora. "It's going to be anything but cricket I shall play—as Betty Barton will see before the match is over!"

CHAPTER 12. Not "Cricket."

IT is safe to say that the Combe House team had come over to Morcove expecting a licking. They went in to bat with courageous feelings. At the same time, their private opinion was that they would be lucky if they knocked up thirty runs between them.

But now, wonder of wonders for the visitors, the match had been going on for ten minutes or so and not a wicket of theirs had fallen.

No thanks to Polly Linton, as the Combe House girls were saying to themselves. For Polly was at the top of her form, and her bowling was full of cunning. If the Combe House girls at the wickets were keeping their ends up, and even snatching a few runs now and then, it was because the Morcove fielding was not on a par with the bowling.

Already Cora Grandways had muffed a catch, and twice her sister Judith had bungled a throw-in when, if she had only been reasonably sharp, somebody might have had to walk off with a rueful shrug at having been "run out."

Nor were the Grandways girls the only couple who seemed to be letting down their side in a most shocking way.

Betty was not making a brilliant showing by any means.

In her case, however, it was plain to all who watched that she was simply out of form, and wild with herself for being so. Some of the onlookers soon began to suspect that Cora and Judith didn't really care whether their side won or lost; but nobody could harbour such a suspicion against Betty.

Ten runs to the good were Combe House when the first wicket fell. And up with a bound had gone their spirits by the time the next girl had gone in to bat.

Polly made one or two changes in the field, and then the first ball of a new over went spinning down the pitch.

It was for the girl who had just come in to tackle it. She swiped blindly, and the ball went up, up—an easy catch for Betty, towards whom it was going to fall.

And Betty missed it!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The fortunate Combe House girl sighed with relief.

"Betty, you duffer!" sang out one or two members of the Morcove crowd. "Pull yourself together, Betty!"

"Sorry," Betty cried, very ruefully. "I—I'm doing my best. At least, it is the best I can manage to-day."

"She's dead off the game," muttered Ethel Courtway, the head girl of the school, watching from the shade of a big elm-tree. "What's the reason, I wonder?"

Nobody troubled to answer, for now another ball was speeding down. Another swipe, and then a shouted "Go on!" from Combe House, for Cora failed to field the ball.

It shot past her, and was stopped instead by Madge Minden.

Madge threw in, with the batting girls still running hard; but the throw fell short, and Cora ought to have caught it up and sent it the rest of the way in a flash.

Instead, she handled it in the most listless fashion, threw in blindly, and another run was seized.

Then the disaster seemed to infect other girls who were fielding.

They allowed Combe House to get twos when there should have been only ones. They missed catches time after time, and it was entirely thanks to Polly Linton that any change at all took place in the batting.

For Polly's fellow bowler—Sybil Farlow—was soon off the game, too, and Polly's were the only balls that laid out any stumps.

Fifty-three runs had Combe House scored at eight wickets down. Fifty-three!

For once in her lifetime Polly, the cocksure, must have felt anything but hopeful.

"I'm sorry," pleaded Sybil. "I did hope to do better at my end, Polly, but I seem to have caught the complaint of other girls. Can't you try someone else?"

"But who is there?" sighed Polly, looking around. "No one that I can rely on, unless— Dolly! Here a second!"

Dolly Delane, a new girl who had been dubbed "The Doormat," owing to her obliging disposition, came running up at once.

"Your fielding hasn't been so bad, anyway," said Polly. "Can you bowl a few overs?"

"Anything to oblige," said Dolly. "Yes, certainly!"

"Go to the other end and bowl," said Polly grimly. "Bowl as if your life depended on getting the rest out without another run! You at your end, Dolly, and I at mine, have got to stop this business! Fifty-three! Oh, help! What would my brother say?"

So Dolly did just as she was told, as was ever the way with her. It was said of her that if you asked her to lie down and let you wipe your feet on her she would do it to oblige. And so she was called "The Doormat."

"What will she do, I wonder?" Ethel Courtway pondered aloud, still watching from the shade of the elm. "It's always nice to see an untried girl take a hand at the bowling, and—"

"Whee-ooo!" breathed a score of other onlookers. Look at that! She's—"

"Out!"

No mistake about it.

With her very first ball Dolly had lain a middle stump flat upon the turf!

"It's great—topping!" Polly commented.

"But—oh, let me weep and gnash my

teeth! Send for sackcloth and ashes—quick!"

"Feeling a bit jealous?" asked Grace Garfield.

"Jealous! I'm thinking what a noodle I was not to put Dolly on before. Dolly, you're to get that next girl out ditto!"

"All right! If I can," was the obliging answer.

And Dolly did!

There was no repetition of that middle stump business, but she sent down a tricky ball that the batting girl just tipped and instantly wished she hadn't.

Polly made a whirling dart, one arm stretched to the sky.

The ball lodged between her finger-tips, and stayed there, and again the loud cry went up:

"Out!"

All out, too, this time. But what a score for Moreove, in its present bad form, to try to beat. Fifty-three!

Cora Grandways and Diana Forbes went in first, and whilst they were getting ready for play Betty came up to Polly, looking very shamefaced.

"Polly, I—I don't know what you must think of me. I do feel wild with myself for the awful game I've played!"

"I only feel wild about one thing, and that is your not telling me what's been getting on your nerves," Polly answered. "As for the match, never mind! We licked them that other time. Besides, we are going to win, after all."

Some of the Combe House girls, hearing this, smiled amongst themselves. They knew Polly.

"Aren't you just a little bit optimistic?" one of them suggested.

"Bless you, yes!" Polly answered, beaming. "Never say die! That's our motto! I say, Dolly! Here a second!"

Dolly came up, obliging as ever.

"I'm going in next, said Polly. "When you join me you're to help me pull this match out of the fire—see?"

"All right!"

"It's up to us," said Polly. "Betty is—I say, Trixie, what is it they say in French when you're out of action?"

"Hors de combat," said Trixie promptly.

Trixie Hope prided herself on her French, although it did not always compare with the text-books.

"Oui, oui!" nodded Polly. "Betty is off the game completely, Sybil, and some of

the others have gone to pieces. So remember!"

At that instant Cora was out for a "duck," and Polly went in to bat, cutting the first ball to the boundary.

That first hit seemed to be a bit of a fluke, however, for she certainly did not pile up the runs during the rest of the over. And then Diana Forbes was caught, and Dolly Delane was already wanted for the other wicket.

A fine partnership she and Polly made of it.

After spending a rather nervous minute or two getting "set," Dolly started in to punish the Combe House bowling quite as desperately as Polly. Twenty-six runs was the score by the time the Doormat was dismissed by being caught at slip, and twelve of those runs were hers.

Polly Linton, left behind, saw Betty coming out to join her, and she had great hopes of her chum doing better at the wicket than she had done on the field.

But, alas, after scraping through one over in which Polly knocked up several runs, the captain of the Form was in disgrace again.

Snick! went her bails, and Betty was out for a "duck."

It was awful!

So she was saying to herself, and so others were saying openly, as she returned to the bit of shade under the elms.

Ethel Courtway came up to her in a minute or so, mixing a word of sympathy with her regret.

"This is very terrible, Betty," said the captain of the school. "What's the reason?"

"Oh, don't ask me, please!"

"But it's not like you to go to pieces," went on Ethel. "I'm afraid something must be wrong. If that's the case, and you are in need of any help, any advice, you know—"

"Thank you, Ethel; it's like you to be so kind," Betty said, rather gulping out the words. "But— Oh, Madge is out now, and she hasn't scored!"

"Gracious!" was Ethel's comment. "Another 'duck,' too!"

Another duck's-egg of a nought was entered in the score-books.

Cora Grandways went by close to where the school captain was standing.

"Wonderful show we are making, aren't we, Judy?" the jeering girl called to her

sister. "Wonderful how the Form has bucked up at games since Betty was made captain!"

Ethel Courtway was bound to hear the sneer; but she chose to ignore it, casting a pitying glance at Betty as she walked away.

Presently the sneering started again. One or two more wickets had fallen, Polly still being the only girl who could keep her end up, and Cora strolled across to look at the scoring sheet.

"Ha, ha, ha! How ridiculous it is!" she chuckled. "Thirty-six runs, and six wickets down!"

"Oh, we've lost," declared Judith, with a shrug. "And I hope it has taught some people a lesson. The Form was going to do such wonders under Betty Barton's captaincy!"

"Well, I, for one, can remember our doing far better than this under Paula Creel," said Mabel Rivers. She was a girl who had been supporting Betty lately, but who now seemed inclined to lay the blame for the coming defeat upon the Form captain.

Nor did poor Betty feel that this was unfair. She had no great opinion of herself as a cricketer, but she did feel that for the Form captain to have played such a poor game was largely the cause of others in the team going to "pieces." If only she could have come on to the field with a steady nerve and a proper spirit matters wouldn't have been going like this.

But, oh, it was no use! That letter from home had been preying on her mind all the time. In a sense, she had not been taking part in any cricket match this afternoon. Heart and head alike were far away from Morecove—far away in that Lancashire town from which the letter had come. Mother—dad! She was with them all the time in the spirit. And—oh, if she could only be with them!

A sudden outcry brought her back to her actual surroundings.

Combe House was cheering again at the fall of another Morecove wicket.

The score was only thirty-nine, and now the last girl was going in to bat with Polly.

Invincible Polly, still keeping her end up grimly, was fighting such a single-handed fight as would have made her brother shout his praises had he been here to see her.

And maybe Polly was saying to herself if only she could get the batting she would get every one of those runs needed to win

the match. It might be a case of "sneaking" some, but if only her partner would run—just run hard at every possible chance—the winning score might yet be achieved.

What a partner was this, however, for desperate Polly. It was Judith Grandways who had gone in last, and Judith little cared about backing up Betty's chum. Help Polly to win the match? Not likely!

A few more runs Polly was able to hit off, and then suddenly the end came.

Polly made a cut at a ball that should have meant one safe run. She herself sped off, calling to Judith:

"Come on—quick!"

Judith ran out from her end, but only a yard or two. Then, with Polly already half-way down the pitch, she turned back.

The ball had been fielded. Polly, finding that Judith had not backed her up, darted back to the empty wicket.

Furiously she dashed to save that wicket, but too late! Off went the bails, and up went a delighted cry from all Combe House.

"How's that?"

"Out!"

The match was over. Polly, let down shamefully by Judith, had been run out, with twenty-seven runs to her credit.

The Morcove total was only forty-four, and Combe House had won by nine runs!

"I'm so sorry I let you down, Polly," grinned Judith Grandways, coming across to the one girl who had distinguished herself in the match. "I really couldn't help it."

"I suppose you couldn't," said Polly. "After all, sportsgirls, like sportsmen, are born, not made!"

And she walked away, leaving Judith squirming at the thrust that had been dealt her.

CHAPTER 13.

Beware, Betty

THAT evening the junior mistress of the Fourth Form heard a tap at her study door.

"Come in!" she called, and then stood up to welcome the visitor with a very friendly smile.

"May I have a word with you, Miss Redgrave?" asked Betty.

"The very girl I have been feeling inclined to send for," replied the mistress. "So you can tell how pleased I am to see you. Well, Betty?"

She drew forward a chair for the Form

captain, but Betty remained standing, looking very ill at ease.

"Were you really wanting to see me?" the schoolgirl broke out. "It must have been because you were disgusted, like everybody else, at our losing the match."

"No, Betty—"

"I am not exactly in high favour this morning," said Betty woefully. "Miss Massingham gave me anything but a pleased look just now—and no wonder! We ought to have won that match."

"The best of teams will go to pieces sometimes, Betty."

"It is very kind of you to say that," returned poor Betty. "But I didn't come here to try and explain away the defeat, or to get it explained away for me. Miss Redgrave, I—I—"

Betty paused in confusion.

"Well, dear?"

"I came to see you about the Pinkerton Prize."

"The Pinkerton Prize! Why, I had no idea you were interested in it."

"I have made up my mind to go in for it if I am eligible."

"Oh, you are eligible, Betty," said the junior mistress, persuading the Form captain to sit down at last. "It is open to every girl in the school—"

"I mean to say, if I am in time to give in my name as a candidate."

"You are just in time," answered Miss Redgrave. "The list goes on the board in the morning, and that list is final. But—you mustn't mind my saying this, Betty dear—do you think you had better enter for the prize this term? You have not been long at Morcove."

Betty was silent, but the look in her eyes showed that she was very keen on winning that prize if she could.

"You know the form in which the prize is competed for, of course," went on Ruth. "It is a prize of twenty pounds. There is only one subject for the examination—a surprise subject."

"Yes."

"That is the sole purpose of the Pinkerton Prize," continued the junior mistress. "It is intended to test girls' general knowledge, their papers being judged according to the standards of knowledge expected from the different Forms. For example, supposing the surprise subject turns out to be a certain period of English history."

As Miss Redgrave paused, Betty gave an attentive nod.

"Well, you and other girls in the Fourth Form would write the best paper you could about that period of English history. Girls in higher Forms would do the same, and perhaps their papers would show a much greater knowledge of the subject. But when the candidates' varying ages and their Forms were taken into account it might easily be that you or any other Fourth-Form girl would secure the prize."

"That is just how it has all been explained to me by Polly Linton," said Betty.

"And so, really, there is no reason why I should not compete—"

"Except the reason I have hinted at," broke in Miss Redgrave. "Of course, dear, I don't want to discourage you; it is not my duty to do that. But you have not had time to acquire much learning at Morcove, this being your first term."

"Oh, I know there is a great chance of my making a duffer of myself, like—I did on the field to-day," Betty said, with a sad smile. "At the same time, the surprise subject might happen to be one that I—"

"Yes, dear, I know. You were no ignoramus when you came to the school. The teaching you had prior to that was a sound one, and I fancy you have always been a great reader. So enter for the prize by all means, Betty, and good luck attend your efforts."

The two were standing up now, and the mistress' right hand went out to Betty.

"You know, dear," added the junior mistress, very quietly, "your career at this school is one I am watching, night and day, with the keenest interest. When you were made captain, replacing a girl who had let down the Form very badly with her slacking, I was so thankful. I felt sure that with you as captain a new era had dawned for the Form."

"There was a good deal of the old era about to-day's match!" Betty grimaced.

"Better the match!" laughed Miss Redgrave. "It is not an isolated disaster that counts, but the general striving for a goal, day by day. You were off the game this afternoon, Betty, and so were others."

"Wasn't Polly wonderful?" exclaimed Betty. "And she hasn't been a bit savage with me at the way I went to pieces! It's some of the girls who played as badly as I did who are rounding on me so bitterly."

"You will find it is like that all through life, Betty," was the half sorrowful answer.

"Polly is not the sort to make a song about your being a bit off colour. For that is all it amounted to in your case, Betty. And I was only wanting to see you this evening to ask: Is anything worrying you?"

"Nothing that I feel it is wise to talk about, please," answered Betty. "You don't know what a temptation it is for me to explain, when I have such offers of sympathy from you, and Ethel Courtway, and Polly. But—"

She drew a deep breath and shook her head.

"There are some troubles one ought to bear alone, that's how I look at it," she said. "If it were anything to do with the school, or the life of the Form, then it would be so different." As the mistress released her hand, after pressing it, she added: "So you will enter my name for the Pinkerton Prize, won't you?"

"Certainly, Betty! But what do you want with twenty pounds?" jested the junior mistress. "Are you not rolling in wealth—you and your people—now that your uncle is home from the States with a huge fortune?"

"I—I want to win that prize."

"The girls will think you greedy," smiled Miss Redgrave. "What does Polly Linton say about your going in for an exam. that is only held for a money prize?"

Betty coloured.

"Polly doesn't know yet. I—I am going back to tell her now."

"I expect," said Miss Redgrave, following the girl to the door, "you have some fine reason, really, for wanting to win that twenty pounds. If you win it, Betty, we shall find you giving it all away to some deserving cause. It would be just like you."

"No, I—"

"Go along with you, and don't pretend," laughed the junior mistress. "Good-night, dear, and good luck!"

Then the door closed between them, and Betty went very slowly back to the study where she had left Polly, whilst the mistress found a list of names of Fourth-Form scholars who had already entered for the contest, and added Betty's to it.

That list was given an hour later to Miss Somerfield, the headmistress, and on the following morning the whole string of names

appeared in typescript on the school's chief notice-board.

It was a notice that did not excite much interest at first.

The Pinkerton contest took place once every term, so it was by no means a novelty. And again it was a contest for which the usual entrants were girls who could do with a little hard cash. Such girls were not looked down upon as being "paupers"—except perhaps by just a few snobs, such as one finds at any school.

But the very fact that the prize was scrambled for by needy scholars caused most of the other girls to turn a blind eye to the whole business, so as to spare the competitors' feelings.

In other words, amongst nice girls at Morcove, it was not considered good taste to make the Pinkerton Prize a topic of conversation. One never knew whose feelings one might be wounding.

But by-and-by that list on the notice-board caused enough talk amongst a certain section of the school, and that section was the Fourth Form.

Loud talk, too!

"Why, look! Betty Barton has entered!" Cora Grandways almost shouted, coming out of school at midday.

"Bai Jove," ejaculated Paula. "Oh, I say!"

"Oh!" jeered Judith. "Now we know why our wonderful Form captain let down her side yesterday. She was bothering all the time about winning a precious money prize!"

The sneering outcry arrested other girls who were coming away from the classroom.

Many of these, whatever their own achievement on the field had been yesterday, were feeling very sore about Betty. She was captain of the Form, and captains mustn't go to pieces, whatever others do!

And now their attention was being drawn to the fact that Betty had entered for the Pinkerton!

"Rather infra dig, to say the least," remarked Mabel Rivers coldly.

"Infwa dig, bai Jove! Weally, geals," drawled Paula. "I may have done some fweightful things when I was captain, but I didn't go gwubbing after money prizes, what?"

"Twenty pounds! What does Betty want with twenty pounds?" exclaimed Elsie Drew bitterly. Her own name was on the

list, and she had not sought to disguise the fact that twenty pounds would be very useful to her. She came of a good family, but they had been badly hit by the war.

"It's in the blood," said Cora scornfully. "If you have a washerwoman for your mother, and a cadging cripple for a father, you can't help picking up a copper where you can."

"I thought the Bartons were all rolling in wealth now," said Norah Nugent.

"Yes, bai Jove! Simply wolling in it, what?"

"Perhaps that was only Betty's swank," said Grace Garfield. "Giving us to understand that she had heaps of money."

"Oh, no," said Cora. "Judy and I know all the facts, for Betty comes from our town, remember. The Bartons have really got tons of cash now, and this grubbing for more is simply in the blood, I tell you."

"Gweat goodness!" commented Paula. "How welieved I am when I wecollect that I belong to a wather aristocwatic family, above all that sort of thing, what?"

"And they made her captain—you, all of you, made her captain!" Cora cried reproachfully at the girls standing around. "You voted for her, and now see what you've done for yourselves!"

"Yes, bai Jove! You know, geals, I always did wegard it as a gweat pity that Betty got in. Her family is wenowned neither for beauty nor bwains—can't be!"

"Her family," sneered Judith. "It's only a few months ago her mother was cleaning our steps at home, and her humbug of a father was being kept out of charity."

"That's right," added Cora. "I think we told you—"

"Yes, wathah you've told us a gweat deal too often," said Paula, fearing she was going to be "bored." "Pway, spare my feelings, Cowa darling. I wegard this going in for the Pinkerton as vewy infwa dig, don't you know. But pway let it end at that!"

But Cora and Judith would do nothing of the sort.

With secret delight they had seen how this entering for the Pinkerton had lowered Betty's prestige. Many a girl who had been supporting the new Form captain was now feeling her loyalty severely taxed. And that sort of thing had got to be taken advantage of.

"Judy," exclaimed Cora, as soon as the two were alone in their study, "we've got a really great chance now! There is Ella Elgood and Grace Garfield, Etta Hargrove, Elsie Drew, Sybil Farlow—oh, I believe I could count a dozen of our old following who may come back to us over this!"

Judith nodded, her eyes agleam with delight.

"Put it that Polly, Madge, Trixie—oh, and the new girl, the Doornat persou—will stick by Betty through thick and thin," she said, "we can reckon all the rest will come back to us."

"Especially," said Cora, lowering her voice, "if Betty wins the prize—and wins it unfairly!"

"Unfairly!"

Cora took a prowling turn about the study, thinking hard.

"Yes," she exclaimed at last, very softly, "I've got a splendid idea. It means we shall want someone to help us, Judy; but

"Ursula Wade?" suggested Judith.

"It's the sort of job for Ursula."

And Cora nodded, smiling.

"Quite right, Judy darling. It is just the job for Ursula!"

CHAPTER 14.

A "Job" for Ursula.

AFTER dinner Cora Grandways came into the study, bringing Ursula Wade with her.

"Sit down, Ursula," she said.

"Then I will tell you what my sister and I want you to do for us."

Ursula seated herself, her shifty eyes glancing from one sister to the other.

She was a sly girl, generally despised, nor had Cora and Judith any fondness for her company. Indeed, it was not so long since Cora had vowed that she would have nothing more to do with this girl, who had bungled badly over a scheme which, had it succeeded, would have been a big blow at Betty Barton.

But at present Cora, being in real need of an ally who was not troubled with scruples, was disposed to forget all about that.

"You know all about the Pinkerton Prize, of course," she began.

"I'm going in for it myself," said Ursula.

"I'm never too well off to despise money!"

"Oh, you are going in for it! So much

the better," smiled Cora. "You will be all the keener, then, about trying to beat Betty Barton."

"She can't need the money as much as I do," Ursula said, in that sullen way of hers.

"But she means to grab that twenty pounds if she can," rejoined Cora, "and—Ursula, I won't beat about the bush. My sister and I don't mean Betty to get that prize! Or, if she does get it, she is to be accused of cheating afterwards."

"It amounts to the same thing, you know," said Judith. "She will have to give the money back."

"Besides being expelled, very likely," nodded Cora.

Ursula wetted her lips.

"Well," she asked huskily.

"This is our idea," went on Cora, in a whisper. "First, we must get to know somehow, if possible, what the subject is that will be set for the exam. It's a surprise subject—"

"Yes."

"Supposing for the moment the subject is geography—a certain part of the world—the British Colonies we will say. We must get Betty suspected of having got to know that that was to be the subject, and having read up all about the British Colonies. See?"

"But—but—"

"It will be quite easy," rushed on Cora softly. "One or two of us will borrow books from the library dealing with the subject to be set, and we shall slip them into Betty's study on the Q.T. Then, if she happens to pull off the prize—"

"We can charge her with cheating," struck in Judith. "And then, Ursula, perhaps the prize will go to you."

Cora was nodding and smiling, whilst Ursula still looked from one to the other, drinking in everything eagerly.

"Because, don't you see," Cora went on, "you will have had a chance to read up the subject, Ursula. You will be the only girl who will have had a chance to do so. Only find out for us somehow what the surprise subject is to be, and that prize is as good as yours."

Ursula's eyes flickered.

"Yes, I see what you mean," she said.

"But aren't you asking me to do the impossible? Find out what the surprise subject is going to be? It—it can't be done!"

"It can, I do believe," Cora answered excitedly. "We all know the course that is followed every time this contest comes round. A registered letter arrives from the school governors for Miss Somerfield. It contains the printed question which the headmistress is to put before the candidates at the time of the exam. So, Ursula—"

"If you can only get a look at that letter!" struck in Judith. "Can't you do that, Ursula? Can't you nose round—seize your chance to find out what the subject is to be? History, geography, scripture—think what it means for you if you know in advance."

The sly girl got up from her chair. She was trembling slightly.

"It's very risky," she said. "If—if I should get caught—"

"You won't—not you!" urged Judith.

"And even if you do," added Cora, "Judy and I will try and get you out of the bother. We—we'll make it up to you somehow, Ursula. You know Judy and I are not exactly paupers. Besides, you can always plead that you were tempted—turn on a few tears—and it will be overlooked."

"Yes," Ursula's white face was looking less uneasy now. "I suppose I could always get myself out of any trouble that way."

"Then you will?"

"I'll try, yes!"

"Good!" burst out Cora, clapping her hands softly. "Then it's settled, Ursula, and, to avoid any suspicion, we are not going to talk about it any more after to-day."

"The exam. comes off on Saturday," Ursula said, halting on the way out. "And this is Thursday. I should think that registered letter will come in the morning."

"If it hasn't come already," rejoined Cora. "I'm not certain; there was a registered letter for Miss Somerfield this morning, but it may not have been the right one."

"Still," urged Judith, "you had better not delay in setting to work, Ursula."

"I shan't," was the smooth reply. "I want that twenty pounds. I—I shall do my best, trust me!"

And then she opened the door and slunk out of the room, stepping aside to let Paula Creel saunter in.

"Hallo, been having a call from that

geal?" drawled the ex-captain, after the door had shut. "Well, Cowa darling, you know your own business best, bai Jove, but I—weally, I've no use for that Ursula person!"

"Why not?" asked Cora sharply. "Anyhow, she is not one of your Council school sort."

"That is twue" said Paula. "And so one can't plead that excuse for her, as one can for Betty Barton, when all is said and done. You know, geals, I—I wather feel I'm being a bit pwejudiced against Betty Barton. It's only wather natural, I suppose. As a member of a wather awistocwatic family I was bwrought up on pwejudices. But, bai Jove, I wather fancy I ought to twy, don't you know!"

"Try what?"

"Well, Cowa, twy to make allowances, what? The peoah geal—I'm weferring to the Barton person—has circumstances she is weally not to blame for."

"Oh, all right! Go on—"

"Cowa, pway do not jump down my thwoat," pleaded Paula. "And do wefwain, I beg of you, from expvessions like 'Go on!' It is so vewy like the vulgar 'Garn!' one heahs vulgar people say."

"So you are calling me and Judy vulgar, are you?" flared up Cora.

"My deah Cowa, not at all," was the bland reply. "Only when you cweate such an awful outery you do wemind me of a fact that I always pwefer to forget."

"What do you mean?" demanded both sisters hotly.

"I wefer," said Paula, "to the fact that you are not—you weally are not—members of an awistocwatic family. I would like to wefrain from further talk, but—"

"Oh, you'd better clear out!" said Cora furiously. "Go on with you! If our company isn't good enough—"

"My deah Cowa—"

"Go and make friends with Betty Barton."

"Yes, go on!" shrilled Judy, as mad as her sister. "Go and take up with Betty! You've been wavering for days about her!"

"Weally, geals, I—"

"Anyhow, clear out now!" said Cora.

And as soon as Paula had drifted into the passage, looking quite flabbergasted at this sudden storm in a teacup, Cora shut the door with a terrific—

Slam!

CHAPTER 15.

Found in Her Study.

NOTICE.

Candidates for the Pinkerton Prize will assemble for the examination in Small Hall at half-past ten this (Saturday) morning.

Such candidates are excused attendance at other classes.

(Signed) ESTHER SOMERFIELD,

Headmistress,

Morcove School.

POLLY LINTON gave a fleeting glance to this notice as she came out of class at "break" that Saturday morning.

It was twenty past ten, so she knew that if she was to have a last word with Betty before that girl sought the examination hall there was no time to waste.

As the notice stated, Betty and the other candidates had been excused from ordinary classes this morning, and so she and Polly had been apart since morning school began.

Bounding upstairs in her madcap way, Polly was soon whirling into the study, to find her chum seated at the table.

This latter was littered with a whole heap of books, suggesting that Betty had been spending her last hour or so refreshing her mind on a dozen different subjects, any one of which was likely to be "sprung" upon the examinees.

Yet Polly had a strong suspicion that her chum had not been studying so very hard, in spite of the big show of books. At any rate, she caught Betty in a very penwise attitude.

"Well, dear," cried Polly, giving a friendly slap to her chum's shoulders, "since you made up your mind to lift the prize, may it come to you to-day. The best of luck, Betty—the very best I say!"

"Thank you, Polly."

"How do you feel, dear? A bit jumpy?"

"Well, I don't know. I—"

"Rather like you felt on the day of the match, eh? Whoa, though!" Polly checked herself. "Mustn't mention that cricket match. I say, Betty, I do wonder what subject they will take you in? Not that it matters much; you are great at them all!"

"Oh, Polly, how you do—"

"Well, you are such a clever little person

—so different from me. Lucky thing I don't need any extra pocket-money, because the moon would fall out of the sky before I won the Pinkerton or any other prize!"

The door opened, admitting Trixie Hope, Madge Minden, Dolly Delane, and a fourth girl—Tess Trelawney.

Dolly Delane was in Tess' study, and Tess was great friends with her, the result being that Tess was another of the very few girls who were still friendly with Betty.

If Betty were good enough for Dolly, she was good enough for Tess—that was the simple way Tess argued the matter.

"Trixie," cried Polly, "what's 'good luck' in French?"

"Bon—er—bon something-or-other," said Trixie.

"Oui, oui!" said Polly. "Of course! How could I have forgotten? Well, girls, we all wish Betty the best of bon something-or-other, don't we?"

"Yes, Betty," laughed the girls. "Mind you win that prize! For we are perfectly certain you have some plan up your sleeve for spending the money when you get it."

"And when the exam. is over," rattled on Polly, "then we'll see you your old happy self again. Because of all the humpy girls I've ever known you've been the limit, Betty, the last few days!"

"I—I'm very sorry, Polly. I'm quite aware—"

"Oh, I'm only teasing, so don't look so distressed. I say, girls—"

But what Polly was going to say did not transpire, for suddenly a bell clanged out downstairs, and full well she and her friends knew its meaning.

"There you are, Betty, that's for the Pinkerton candidates!" Polly exclaimed.

"So off you go, dear, and once again—"

"Vive la capitaine!" cried Trixie.

"Oui, oui! And many of them," said Polly. "Ta-ta, Betty!"

They followed her into the passage, watching her until she had passed out of sight at the head of the stairs; then they all turned back into the study.

"Well," said Madge, after a rather heavy pause, "have you been able to make anything of her this morning, Polly?"

There was a sudden sad sigh from the usually high-spirited girl.

"Can't understand it a bit," she confessed ruefully. "I have felt almost wild with Betty now and then, yet I know it was

wrong of me, for it's evident she has a good reason for not confiding in me."

"It would be a relief to know what has been preying on her mind this last week," murmured Dolly Delane.

"Her going in for the Pinkerton Prize is as puzzling as anything," added Tess Tre-lawney. "Especially at a time when she certainly seems to have enough trouble to keep her mind occupied."

"Oh, well," sighed Polly, "perhaps she went in for the exam. just to take her mind off the trouble. Look at all the books," she added, waving a hand at the littered table. "I may as well straighten up the place whilst we are talking. Here, a second, Dolly! Just help me, will you?"

Dolly, needless to say, was as obliging as ever, and so, whilst the others stood by, talking amongst themselves, she and Polly set about returning the books to some shelves in a recess of the wall.

"Hallo!" Polly suddenly exclaimed, as she was fitting in her last batch. "Library books! I didn't know we had all these in here. 'India, Past and Present'—um! 'Races and Religions of the Indian Peninsula'—um! 'The Conquest of India'—"

"How much more about India?" laughed Madge.

"That's what I'm thinking," answered Polly, still kneeling by the bookshelves. "Here's another—and another—"

"And this is about India, too," said Dolly—"this book that was tucked away under the bottom shelf."

"Gracious!" Polly gave a laugh. "Of course, Betty is responsible for all this. She has been reading herself silly about India. Strange place for a girl to keep interested in!"

"Let's hope the Pinkerton subject turns out to be India," remarked Trixie. "In that case, Betty ought to do a great paper."

"Oui, oui!" said Polly.

Then the bell rang for all the school to reassemble after the morning "break," and she and her chums scurried off downstairs.

On the way into the Fourth Form classroom Polly, for one, took a peep through the glass panel of a door opening into Small Hall.

She saw a score or so of girls sitting for the Pinkerton ordeal. Girls of all ages and out of all the different Forms were there, sitting well apart from one another, each with a spotless blotting pad and clean sheets of foolscap placed in front of her.

The surprise subject must have been announced only a few moments ago, for the candidates were just in the act of taking up their pens to write.

Polly saw Betty. She was sitting in one of the front desks, with Ursula Wade for her right-hand neighbour. Both girls, oddly enough, had started to write, as if finding the surprise subject one that was just to their liking, whilst many another girl was still staring woefully at the ceiling as if utterly "dished."

Then Betty looked up from her writing at the end of a sentence, and Polly just waved through the glass—"Good luck!"

Miss Somerfield was taking a turn about the examination chamber, and, catching sight of Polly's roguish face, she gave a frown that ended in a smile.

"Come away, Polly! How dare you?" cried Miss Redgrave, who was passing at the moment. She also could not help laughing, although she had to affect shocked surprise. "The idea of looking in there!"

But Polly had had her glimpse, and she felt she would not have minded a month's gating as a penalty for it, because the sight of Betty working away with such composure and facility had been a very fine thing to see.

It was half-past twelve when the Pinkerton candidates came out of Small Hall. Betty Barton, going straight to the study which she shared with her chums, found waiting there not only Polly, but also Trixie, Madge, and Dolly.

"Well," they clamoured eagerly, "how did you get on?"

"Oh, not so bad, I hope!" smiled Betty.

"I took a squint at you," said Polly.

"You seemed to be pegging away as if the subject was just one that suited you, and I was jolly glad, Betty. By the way—"

"Yes," broke in Madge, "what was the subject, Betty?"

"India."

"What?"

"We were asked to write all we knew about India."

"Oh, good!" said Polly. Then, turning to the bookshelves, she added: "We've got a lot of books that really belong to the school library, so I may as well take them back. You've done with this?"

"Oh, yes, thanks. In fact, I didn't know I had been using any library books!"

Betty spoke in an offhand way, sitting down in her old place at the table. Her

back was to Polly, who stood still for a moment, looking at her. It seemed to Polly rather strange that Betty should know nothing about the library books on India.

In a moment or two, however, she had collected the half-dozen books about India, and gone with them to the door.

In the passage, just as she was going past the Grandways' study, Cora came whirling out. It was strange that she did this, for Polly, carrying the books, had seen her only a moment previously enter the study.

"Bother!" cried Cora, as if she were vexed with herself. "I've just forgotten that I— Oh, I'm so sorry!"

The laughing apology came as Cora knocked violently against Polly, scattering all the books upon the floor.

"Clumsy of me!" Cora cried, with another laugh. "Let me pick them up for you!"

In a flash she was on her knees gathering up the volumes, some of which were heavy.

"My word, what some of you good people read!" she commented, glancing at the titles. "'India, Past and Present.' 'Races and Religions of India.' Why, Polly, every blessed one is about India."

"Let them alone!" Polly almost shouted.

And, catching up all the books, she rushed off with them to the library.

CHAPTER 16.

Called a Cheat.

THE Pinkerton exam. was not one of those contests in which the candidates have to wait ages for the result.

Under the terms of the trust creating the prize, authority was given to the headmistress of Morcove School to judge the papers immediately after the exam.

So over that week-end Miss Somerfield gave many a quiet hour to the scrutiny of the essays on India, and by Monday midday she was able to have this announcement affixed to the school notice board:

THE PINKERTON PRIZE.

The result of the examination for the above prize will be announced to-morrow—Tuesday.

The whole school will assemble for the purpose of hearing the result in Large Hall at twelve-thirty.

(Signed) ESTHER SOMERFIELD,
Headmistress,

Morcove School.

In the interval of waiting no doubt most of the candidates went through all the anxious suspense of wondering which of them was the fortunate winner. As for the rest of the scholars, a little desultory talk about possible results went on, but nothing more than that. None, it is certain, were greatly excited. Only it was remembered afterwards that Cora and Judith Grandways seemed to be rather wrought-up about something, although they let fall no remarks suggesting that their excitement was due to the coming result.

"Goals," Paula Creel said to the sisters, drifting into their room a few minutes before the appointed time for the muster in Large Hall. "I have been thinking seriously."

"Wonders will never cease," was Cora's laughing remark.

"If the prize is to come to the Fourth Form," went on Paula, "then I pway that it may be any goal but Ursula Wade."

"Oh, you want Betty to be the winner?"

"I shall wegard it as a great pity if Ursula gets the pwize. As for Betty Barton—" Paula paused, as if she realised that she was about to make an historic remark. "I am not sure but what, if Betty pwoves the winner, I shall not wegard myself as her weal fwind at last.

"Oho! Now you are showing your true colours!" sneered Cora.

"I twust it is nothing to be ashamed of," said Paula. "I am not forgetting that I come of a wather awistocwatic family. Nevahtheless, goals, I am gwowing more and more inclined to see thro is something in what the headmistress always says: Class pwejudice doesn't help to make the world go wound."

"Ha, ha, ha!" sniggered Cora. "What a duffer you are, Paula. Come on, Judith darling; it's time we went down!"

And the two sisters scurried away, leaving Paula to drift after them at a slower pace.

Just as she was passing into the Big Hall a minute later, the ex-captain was overtaken by the present captain of the Form. Paula glanced at her, and something in Paula's eyes showed that she was feeling the direct impulse to step close to Betty and shake hands with her there and then.

But somehow the impulse was not acted upon—only perhaps because Paula was too indolent by nature to do anything in a hurry. And Betty went to her own place in the big assembly utterly ignorant of the

goodwill which another one-time ill-wisher was beginning to feel towards her.

With all the usual briskness the different rows of scholars were formed up, names called and answered to, and then the vast assembly hushed itself unbidden by the Form mistresses.

There was a low platform, or dais, at the upper end of the hall, and straight towards this faced all the girls, waiting for Miss Somerfield to appear. According to custom, none of the Pinkerton candidates were on the platform. The winner's name would be announced, and she would have the pleasant ordeal of leaving her place in the muster and stepping up to the platform amidst deafening plaudits.

The click of a side door, and then the worthy headmistress stepped before the meeting, taking her stand in the centre of the dais.

"Silence! Silence!" was the formal cry from some of the Form mistresses.

Miss Somerfield was obviously discharging a very happy duty. She smiled out upon the vast sea of faces confronting her, glanced towards some windows where the sun was streaming in, and then spoke.

"Well girls, I am not going to detain you more than a moment. But before announcing the result of the Pinkerton examination, I feel I must say a word of praise for the papers that were submitted. All showed very great merit, which means that the winning paper had to be exceptionally good indeed to stand out from the others."

A rustle of delight went through the great assemblage.

"There were, in fact, two papers of very outstanding merit," went on the speaker.

"Both, you may be rather surprised to hear, from the same Form. The Fourth—"

"Bravo, the Fourth!" sang out Polly Linton

"Ursula Wade—no, she is not the winner," Miss Somerfield said hastily, as some loud whispering became audible. "But hers was the essay that came very close to the one I deemed quite the best. Girls of Morcove School, the Pinkerton Prize goes this term to the captain of the Fourth Form—"

"Betty Barton!" yelled Polly. "Bravo, the Fourth! Hurrah!"

"Hooray!" went up cheers from all parts of the room.

"Yes," cried Miss Somerfield. "Come

forward, Betty Barton, and let me have the great pleasure of—"

"Please, Miss Somerfield—please may I speak?"

It was a voice from the row of Fourth Form scholars.

Cora was standing a step forward, with one hand upheld—the usual action at Morcove for any scholar desiring to be heard.

"Well?" demanded Miss Somerfield, breaking the startled silence. "What is it?"

"I—I wish to lodge a very serious objection to the award, if you please," Cora said, looking as if she were discharging a most unpleasant task. "I—I'm sorry, but—"

"I will hear anything you have to say, Cora Grandways. What is the objection?"

"It's this," Cora cried back across the great hall. "I am convinced that Betty Barton knew what the surprise subject for the exam. was to be."

The words caused a terrific sensation.

"The subject was India I have been told since the exam," Cora went on, in a ringing voice. "Well, I wish to say that Betty Barton had half a dozen books from the library days before the exam, and they all dealt with India."

"Oh, oh!"

"Bai Jove!"

Miss Somerfield was as staggered as were all the girls. All she could do was to make a beckoning motion to Betty and Cora to join her on the platform.

They did so amidst a babble of excited talk, and then there was a cry for silence.

"What you have said, Cora Grandways, constitutes a very serious charge," said Miss Somerfield impressively. "What is your answer to it, Betty Barton?"

"I did not know what the subject was to be."

"Did you have a lot of books on India from the library?"

"No."

"She did!" Cora insisted quietly. "Polly Linton will tell you—"

"Come forward, Polly Linton."

But Polly was already there—she was, at least, in the act of mounting to the platform.

"Have you seen a suspicious number of books on India in the study, Polly?"

"Well, Miss Somerfield, I—"

"You know you did!" flashed out Cora.

"You know very well I ran into you in the passage when you were taking them back

(to the library. Five or six books all on India!"

"That isn't to say that Betty had them cut."

"Did you have them out for your own reading?" sneered Cora.

Polly, like Betty, was very pale now.

Miss Somerfield drew a deep breath and frowned.

"This is very unpleasant," she said. "And I am sorry to say it revives another unpleasant incident that I had dismissed as being the result of pure imagination on my part. I refer to the fact that on Thursday evening last week I had a sudden suspicion that my room had been entered, and that papers in a certain drawer had been slightly disarranged."

Waiting until the buzz of excited whispering had died away, she turned her keen eyes upon Betty.

"In view of Cora's statements, Betty Barton, I feel bound to harbour a very grave suspicion. I feel bound to ask you—did you find out prior to the examination what the subject was going to be?"

"I have said that I did not know in the least!"

"It's very queer, that's all I can say," interjected Cora. "Why should a girl suddenly want to borrow heaps of books on India?"

"I did not borrow them."

"But it is admitted that they were in your study," said Miss Somerfield.

"I had nothing to do with them."

"And you, Polly Linton?"

"No," Polly shrugged miserably. "I—I was only very surprised to find them there."

Miss Somerfield suddenly took a turn about the platform. Her lips were puckered, and her brows were drawn together. All watched her, and all were quite certain she was arriving at one of her swift, fair-minded decisions.

"Well," she stopped to say at last. "I am very, very sorry, but I cannot consider you absolved from suspicion, Betty. The evidence is too—too overwhelming. And yet it is still incredible to me that you could have stooped to cheating."

"I did not cheat. I have never in my whole life—"

"Let me speak, Betty. If the exam. had been one offering a chance of advancement in the school, even then it would have been hard enough to imagine you would feel like cheating. But it was only for a twenty pound prize. And what is twenty pounds

to you when your people are now so well off?"

"They are not well off." Cora spoke up again, in a loud voice. "I had a letter from home a day or so ago. I have heard that Betty's people are almost penniless."

"What!"

Miss Somerfield, falling back with a sharp gasp, stared again at Betty.

"Is this the fact, Betty? If so—"

"Yes, it is true," gulped poor Betty, brushing a hand across her wet lashes.

"That's why you wanted the twenty pounds!" sneered Cora.

"Yes, that's why I wanted that money," faltered Betty, "and why I have been feeling so upset."

There was a heavy pause before Miss Somerfield asked:

"What has happened to your people, Betty?"

"It's all to do with uncle," she almost sobbed. "He came home ever so rich from America; but now it seems that his right to the fortune is being disputed, and they—the law—have stopped his handling a penny of it. There is someone in America claiming that uncle had no right to the land which brought in so much money. I—I don't understand these things—"

"I can understand," broke in Miss Somerfield, a little less sternly. "I can sympathise very deeply, too. But, Betty, misfortune should not have tempted you to become a—"

"Cheat? You—you are going to call me a cheat!" burst out Betty.

"I am going to award the Pinkerton Prize to the writer of the second-best paper. Ursula Wade, come forward, please!"

Ursula quitted the Fourth Form row with a pleased smirk on her pallid face. No one cheered. In silence she worked her way to the platform, and the next the whole school knew Miss Somerfield had quietly handed over the coveted twenty pounds, murmuring a few half audible remarks.

"That, girls of Morcove School, is all I can do at present," the headmistress cried out a moment later. "The matter cannot end here, of course. The—the culprit is a Form captain, and I must take some action. I—"

"Let me save you the trouble of taking any action," pleaded Betty, removing her hand from her eyes to speak. The tears were coursing down her cheeks now. "A cheat cannot be captain of a Form, and, since you hold me guilty of cheating—"

"I am forced to accept all the evidence!"
 "Yes, Miss Somerfield. Oh, I know—I see how you are placed," cried poor Betty.
 "But I didn't cheat—I didn't! You won't believe me, though, so I can't be captain a moment longer!"

Then she burst into a violent storm of weeping; and there was Polly—Joyal Polly—winding an arm about the poor girl's neck, and saying, loud enough for scores of others to hear:

"All right, Betty darling—all right! I believe in you. Yes, I do! And I don't care if——"

"Polly Linton," exclaimed Miss Massingham, the Form mistress, "you forget yourself!"

"Ah, one must make allowances," Miss Somerfield said to the colleague who had a moment since mounted to the platform. "You had better go away with Polly, Polly—that is the best thing. Go with her at once. This—this is too painful!"

"Hush! Silence!" the other mistresses were pleading, as they stood with all their girls in the body of the hall. And again there was a tense, stillness, only broken by poor Betty's violent sobbing as she suffered Polly to lead her from the meeting.

As soon as Miss Somerfield gave the order to dismiss, Cora and Judith hurried away upstairs to their study.

Slam! went the door, and then Cora turned and faced her sister, giving a malicious chuckle.

"That's that, Judy! What a triumph at last!"

"Splendid!"

"Ursula gets the twenty pounds, so she is satisfied," went on Cora. "And you and I——"

"We are to have the pleasure of seeing Betty Barton expelled. For it will come to that, of course!"

The door opened, and Paula came in, looking quite dazed.

"Geals——"

"Why so dismal?" asked Cora, with another laugh. "You ought to be overjoyed, Paula."

"I am not," said Paula, with a sigh. "I am thoroughly wretched, bai Jove! To think that I was almost on the point of shaking hands with Betty before the muster——"

"Lucky you didn't," said Cora. "But, I say, Paula, you will have to put up for captain again. The Form hasn't a captain now."

"Pway do not mention the captaincy," drawled Paula. "I weally haven't any desire to be captain. I wegard being captain as a bore, don't you know!"

"Well, cheer up, and vote for Cora," chuckled Judith.

"I will vote for Cowa with pleasure," Paula said. "But I cannot cheer up, geals. I—I feel too thoroughly wretched."

She stood up, and drifted aimlessly to the door.

"Because," she added, turning the knob, "I weally thought I was going to be gweat fwiends with Betty in the end. There seemed to be something about that geal that—that did me good, bai Jove! But now——"

She opened the door a little wider.

"Pway excuse me, geals. My hopes have been stwampled upon, and I feel stwicken—yes, stwicken with gwief, bai Jove!"

Then she went out, shutting the door softly, whilst from inside the study came a peal of shrill laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

CHAPTER 17.

Polly's Plans Upset.

"POLLY——"

"Oh, don't bother me!"

It was not usual for Polly Linton to answer like that. But she evidently had a very fair excuse for being a bit "short" with other girls to-day.

Sitting at her table in the study which she shared with Betty Barton, Polly Linton looked as if she was trying her hand at authorship.

Her fingers were inky, her face was flushed, her eyes had an excited sparkle.

In addition, there were about fifty fresh blots of ink on the carpet, it being Polly's habit to shake most of the ink off the nib every time she dipped it in the pot.

"But now you have looked in," she calmed down to say to the girl who had just put her head round the door, "you can tell me how to spell 'necessary.'"

Madge Minden grinned.

"It will be necessary for me to consult the dic. first," she said. "You've a dic. there. Why not use it, Polly?"

"Too busy! And, after all, these notes are only for myself," Polly went on, putting a few papers together. "As it is absolutely certain there will have to be another election for Form captain, Madge,

I feel it is advisable to— Hallo, Trixie! What do you want?"

"Bon jour!" greeted Trixie Hope, who always spoke French when she could. It was French of a kind; but Trixie had great hopes of being able to converse freely with the natives when her parents took her to the Continent during the summer holidays.

"Don't bon jour me!" cried Polly Linton. "It's not a good day at all. It's a sad, bad day for me, and for everybody else in the Form!"

"I quite agree," sighed Madge Minden. "From what I have just been told—"

"Please don't repeat it," pleaded Polly. "I can guess exactly what is. As Betty Barton has been suspected of cheating over the exam, for the Pinkerton Prize, she is no longer captain of the Form. And so there is to be another election."

"But—"
"I don't want to hear about any formal notices on the board!" rushed on Polly. "I know exactly what you are going to tell me, Madge!"

"All right! But—"
"There is to be another election, and Cora Grandways is going to offer herself as a candidate. And she reckons to get in, of course."

"She—"
"I tell you I don't want to hear!" insisted Polly. "I know exactly what Cora Grandways is saying. It's going to be a walk-over for her, she thinks, because most of the girls in the Form have made friends with her again, now that Betty is in such disgrace."

"Where is Betty?" asked Trixie. "Ma pauvre chere amie—my poor, dear friend! Helas!"

"Oui, oui," said Polly, using the only French word she was certain about. "Betty has gone for a long, lonely walk. Poor old Betty! It—it's absolutely broken her heart!"

"It's cruel!" said Madge. "But we three, anyway—and Dolly Delane and Tess Trelawney, they are two more—we are certain Betty simply could not have cheated!"

"Unthinkable!" declared Polly. "But there it is; all the facts were against her, and out of all the following she had, in the Form, there are only five of us left. And Cora Grandways is overjoyed, of course! She thinks she is bound to get the captaincy! But she won't get it!"

"Polly, you had better let me tell you what I—"

"No, Madge dear; I don't want to hear it!" cut in Polly again. "It will only rile me! Let Cora brag as much as she likes, she will not get the captaincy. She is going to find she is up against-me!"

"But, Polly—"
"See these papers!" Polly still rattled on, snatching up her smudgy manuscript. "These are notes about things I mean to draw attention to when I start canvassing! Because I'm going to stand for captain."

"But you can't, Polly!"
"Can't? Madge, don't be silly!" Polly exclaimed. "You girls can nominate me, and there you are! Once I'm formally nominated, I start canvassing! And won't I just tell the girls what it means if Cora gets in! Nothing but snobbery and slacking for the Form! Worse than it was in the old days when Paula Creel was captain!"

Madge tried again to get in a full sentence without being cut short.

"Polly dear, I'm awfully sorry for you, but—"

"Sorry for me? What ever for? Be sorry for Betty Barton as much as you like; but why pity me?"

"Because you can't be captain!"
"Can't be! Oh, don't talk piffle!"

"You can't be captain," insisted Madge sadly. "You can't even put up for the captaincy, because—there is not going to be an election!"

Polly sat down, gasping.
"Not going to be an election? Madge dear—Trixie—what's all this?"

"Only what I have been trying to tell you the last five minutes," said Madge. "But you wouldn't let me get a word in edge-ways! You know there are certain rules about the holding of Form captaincies."

"Yes. I believe there are printed rules somewhere; but who wants to bother about them? We all know the usual routine. As Betty has had to give up the captaincy, another election must take place."

"Wrong—quite wrong!" said Madge, shaking her head. "There is one rule we've all been forgetting about, because it so seldom applies. But it applies in this case, exactly!"

Polly jumped up with a sudden wild look of dismay. It was quite clear that all in a flash she had remembered the rule Madge was hinting at.

"Rule 7!" Polly jerked out excitedly. "Oh, I remember now! Something about

if a girl has to give up the captaincy within one month of her election—"

"That's it!" broke in Madge grimly. "Listen to this. I've copied it out of the rule-book, so as to get the exact wording."

And, opening out a slip of paper, she read aloud:

"If, for any reason, a Form captain is compelled to give up the position within one month of her election, the girl who came next to her at the last polling shall take office for the rest of the current term. In such case there shall be a new election directly a new term commences."

"Oh, Madge!" gasped Polly. "Trixie! It means, then—"

"Cora Grandways came next to Betty at the last election," nodded Madge gloomily. "And so Cora Grandways is already captain!"

"For the rest of the term!" sighed Trixie. "Malheur—bad luck!"

Polly pondered for a moment; then she took a few turns about the room, looking half crazy with dismay.

"It's awful!" she wailed. "That rule ought not to be applied in this case. The Headmistress—"

"I'm afraid the Headmistress can do nothing—nothing!" said Madge. "She is bound to go by the rules. Once start tampering with them, and where would the school be?"

"But that girl—Cora Grandways—captain for the rest of the term!" cried Polly. She looked as if she could tear her own hair with despair. "My goodness, what a time we are in for!"

"It's jolly hard luck," agreed Madge. "I only heard the news a few minutes ago, and I haven't nearly got over it yet."

"So much for my plans!" Polly exclaimed bitterly, staring at the littered table. "All my plans for getting the captaincy and holding it until poor Betty had had a chance to prove her innocence and so become captain again! That was my one idea, girls. I thought if only I could hold the captaincy, it might make things better for poor Betty. But now—"

She took up the papers again and crumpled them into a ball.

"That's that!" she muttered, throwing the ball into the waste-paper basket. "No getting nominated; no canvassing; no fresh election! We've got to go on for the rest of the term under Cora Grandways! And she— What do you want, Judith Grand-

ways?" the speaker broke off curtly, as Cora's younger sister suddenly appeared at the open doorway.

Judith Grandways was looking very jovial. There was a smirk on her face that fairly maddened Polly.

"I've only come with a message," said the visitor sweetly. "You are wanted, Polly."

"Wanted by whom?"

"By my sister Cora," said Judith. "The captain of the Form!"

CHAPTER 13.

One Thing to Fear.

POLLY LINTON caught her breath. She was a most impulsive, headstrong girl; but for once she kept a good grip on herself.

She looked at Madge Minden and Trixie Hope. Then she walked to the window and stood there, looking out upon the sunny prospect.

"The captain of the Form," said Judith Grandways, "wants to see you at once, Polly!"

"Bother the captain of the Form!" blazed up Polly, without turning round. "The captain of the Form can come to me if she wants to see me! But, no! I don't want her in here!"

The infuriated girl turned round now. "I'll go and see the precious captain, if it's only to give her a bit of my mind!"

And she stormed past Judith into the passage, reaching a neighbouring study in half a dozen quick strides.

After a polite tap at the door, she sent that door swinging open very violently.

"Ah, Polly—"

"Well, what do you want?" Polly demanded sharply of the handsome, proud-looking girl who was greeting her with a half-mocking smile.

Another girl was in the study with Cora Grandways; this was Paula Creel, the girl who had been captain of the Form before Betty secured that proud position.

Paula was a good-looking, stylish girl, proud of her aristocratic birth.

She had not taken it a bit to heart when she was forced to give up the captaincy on account of slacking. Nor, much as she prided herself on being a very aristocratic young lady, did she cherish such bitter hostility towards Betty Barton as did the Grandways sisters.

"Oh, come in, and sit down, and be friendly!" Cora said sweetly to Polly. "I suppose Judy ruffled you by bringing word that the captain of the Form wanted to see you? Ha, ha, ha! That was only a joke, Polly!"

"It sounded very much like swank," was the retort. "But I understand you really are captain——"

"Oh, yes! It's on the notice-board downstairs, and all the Form knows by now! There's not going to be any election, and so—ha, ha, ha!—I am not going to have the pleasure of being your rival candidate, Polly!"

"Well?"

"But I do hope I am going to have the pleasure of being your friend, Polly?"

"I am not fond of feuds," said Polly. "But friendship with you is—unthinkable!"

"Oh, come——"

"Even if Betty Barton had never entered the school and become my dearest chum," Polly went on, "I couldn't have been your friend, Cora Grandways. I know what you are, the sort of snobbery and slacking about that you believe in. No games; not a bit of regard for the sports that the Fourth Form once had such a record for. You—you are simply not my sort!"

"Well, let's try to mix together——"

"It's trying to mix oil with vinegar, and that's without taking into account the fact that I'm Betty's chum, and you are cruelly down on Betty!"

"Isn't there cause to be down on her?" burst out Cora, giving up the attempt to wheedle. "She was only a washerwoman's kid when she came to the school. And what has her record been lately? Look at that business of the Pinkerton Prize! Cheating——"

"She didn't cheat!"

"She did! She must have cheated!"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove!" Paula chimed in at this point. She was not fond of taking part in any angry argument; but now and then she would offer a feeble, drawing comment.

"If I may make a remark, Polly dear," she said, lolling on the study bench, "it is perfectly obvious that Betty Barton cheated. It has been proved that she needed money badly——"

"Oh, I know all about that!" cried Polly. "Betty has admitted that her people are in terrible straits again, and she was dead keen on winning the twenty-pound Pinker-

ton Prize, so as to be able to send home a little cash. But she was out to win that prize fairly!"

"You and one or two other girls are the only people in the school who believe it!" sneered Cora. "There's just a few of you who would call black white, if it concerned Betty!"

"How many times have you called white black, when it concerned Betty?" retorted Polly hotly. "You've been down on her all along! Just because she once went to a Council school!"

"She ought not to be at Morcove. I said it when she first came to the school, and I say it now!" cried Cora.

"And, weally, don't you know," drawled Paula, "I must agree with Cowa. I admit, Polly, I was beginning to feel wather drawn towards Betty. I was beginning to feel I had been just a twifice pwejudiced."

"You are prejudiced. It is nothing else but horrid snobbery!"

"Well, you know, as the member of a wather awistocwatic family," simpered Paula. "I was wather bwrought up to look down upon geals like Betty. But, weally, if it had not been for this business of the Pinkerton Pwize, I might have been friends with her. A great pity, weally!"

"It's just as well Betty did get shown up over that affair," muttered Cora. "It saved you from making a duffer of yourself, Paula. Making friends with that kid—pooh!"

"Well, I'm friends with her," Polly reminded the new captain bluntly. "So it is hardly likely I am going to be very friendly with you!"

Cora scowled.

"Very well! Go away and hang round your poor Betty!" flared up Cora. "You'll find before the day is out that I've got all the friends I want!"

But Cora was to make the speedy discovery that she was not to get back all the old following of girls, even though she had jumped into the captaincy.

A few minutes after Polly had slammed out of that study, the new captain and her sister went downstairs and into the open.

It was a Wednesday halfer, and the playing fields were a scene of great activity.

The Fourth Form was the only one that had no "fixture" for to-day, but quite a number of the members of that Form were in evidence. In some cases they were playing a quiet game of tennis, whilst others were looking on at cricket matches which

were in progress, both the Sixth and Fifth Forms having met visiting teams on the home ground.

Cora's object in sauntering down to the field was simply to air her new dignity as the stop-gap captain.

Walking this way and that, with her sister always at her side, the proud girl had a smiling look for everybody—a look that seemed to say:

"Well, girls, aren't you going to congratulate me?"

A few did so—but only a few. Ella Elgood and Grace Garfield were a couple who had been very slow indeed in taking to Betty. So they were all the quicker in resuming their attachment to Cora.

Then there were Diana Forbes and Mabel Rivers; they, too, were ready enough to be quite "thick" with Cora again.

But all the rest—no; they did not exactly fall over one another in their eagerness to congratulate the new captain and promise their support!

It was not that they felt there had been any miscarriage of justice over Betty's affair of the Pinkerton Prize. With varying degrees of regret, they had been compelled to believe that Betty really had cheated, and so she was quite unfitted to hold the post of Form captain.

Only, that was not to say that they had wanted to see Cora jump into the captaincy like this.

They were sorry about that rule which made a fresh election contrary to the tradition of the school. No doubt it was a well-meant regulation, intended to obviate frequent elections with all the excitement and disturbance of election times.

Generally speaking, too, what could be fairer than that the girl who had polled next to the winner in the most recent election should step into the vacancy caused by the winner's sudden forfeiture of the post?

The system was fair enough—that, the girl admitted. But they were sorry it had come as such a stroke of luck for Cora. For the simple truth was, they had always felt that as captain of the Form she would be just too autocratic.

It was for this reason that many of the girls had even voted for Betty Barton a few weeks back, although they had been members of Cora's set at the time. Cora was all right up to a point; but as captain—no! There would be a bit too much of the high-

and-mighty touch about her for their liking!

And so this afternoon Cora did not have the pleasure of hearing any terrific cheering when she sauntered on to the field. She did not find all her old following swarming around her offering "congrats." Nor did she find many girls ready to accept her invitation to tea in study.

"Never mind," she said, with a sour smile to her sister Judith later on in the evening. "I'll do something in style, Judy, and that will rope them in!"

"A sort of study banquet——"

"No; that would seem like copying Betty Barton because she gave a study feed," said the new captain. "Besides, it's not the time of the year when girls want to be cooped up indoors. Judy, how about a glorious picnic?"

"My word!"

"I'd stand treat to everybody who likes to come," Cora went on. "We will go to Cove Castle—those wonderful ruins about two miles from here along the cliffs——"

"Topping!" ejaculated Judith.

"On Saturday," continued her sister. "So, to do the thing properly, Judy, let's get out a list of the girls we will invite!"

Judith was all enthusiasm. She flopped into a seat at the table, and took pen and paper.

"Ella and Grace, of course," she said, starting to write. "And Di Forbes and Mabel Rivers."

"Yes; and Paula, don't forget! Then there is Etta Hargrove, and Elsie Drew, and Norah Nugent——"

"In fact," struck in Judith, still scribbling away, "the whole Form are fairly certain to accept, with the exception of Polly, Trixie, Madge, Tess, and Dolly. And those we shan't invite!"

"So they won't have the chance of declining!" rejoined Cora, with a malicious grin.

"Ursula, though?" Judith asked, suddenly pausing gravely. "What about Ursula Wade?"

"That girl! We are not going to ask Ursula to any picnic!" Cora exclaimed scornfully. "We know what she is!"

"Yes. But don't forget——" Judith glanced uneasily at the door. "Ursula knows what we are, Cora! Don't forget that she——"

"Sh!" gestured the new captain, with a sudden scared look. "What do you want

to bring up that subject for, Judy? You can't be too careful! They——"

She broke off with a nervous start, for someone was tapping at the door.

"Come in!" she called out.

And Ursula Wade entered.

CHAPTER 19.

The Old, Old Spite.

URSULA WADE was a girl who was known in the school for her sly, slinking disposition.

She usually kept to herself—or, rather, was left to herself. Nobody liked her, and her unpopularity was deserved. Even the Grandways girls, though they had not been above using Ursula as a confederate once or twice, despised her as much as she was despised by others.

But Ursula did not look such a slinking sort of girl just at present.

With a secret throb of uneasiness, both Cora and Judith realised that their visitor was wearing a rather bold air.

"Well, Cora!" she said, shutting the door behind her. "Well, Judy!"

"I'm only Judy to my friends!" said the younger sister.

"And I'm captain of the Form, please remember that!" added Cora haughtily.

Ursula smiled a sickly sort of smile. Then she invited herself to a seat.

"I suppose I can call myself a friend of yours?" she said. "Considering it's thanks to me that you are captain, Cora!"

Cora caught at her underlip, biting it hard.

"What do you mean?" she demanded, looking very worried all of a sudden.

"Look here, Ursula, we don't want any raking up what's over and done with! That business with Betty Barton and the exam."

"I'm sure I don't want to talk about it," Ursula broke in. "Only I did think that you were going to count me amongst your friends—one of your set, as it were—after what I did for you the other day."

"You did a pretty good thing for yourself, whilst you were about it!" snapped out Judith. "So you've no reason for grumbling! The prize was passed on to you when it was found that Betty had cheated!"

"Yes!" Cora scowled at Ursula. "You got the twenty-pound prize, which was what you were after, and I reckon you ought to feel content!"

"I am very pleased to have the money, goodness knows," Ursula answered smoothly. "Still, I do think that there is something still owing to me from you, Cora. I—I did think you'd do your best to get the other girls to—like me."

"Rather a hopeless task, isn't it?" Judith remarked, with a harsh laugh. "No, Ursula——"

"We really can't make a fuss of you just because you fell in with our plan for getting Betty Barton in disgrace over the exam.," Cora chimed in.

Ursula stood up, looking bolder than ever.

"I'm sick of being cold-shouldered by other girls," she declared sullenly. "I admit the prize money was a—a big inducement for me to do what I did; but I was expecting something else besides. I don't want to be nasty——"

"Thank you!" Cora struck in haughtily. "On the other hand, Judy and I don't want to be—well, we don't want you hanging round us, thanks!"

"Perhaps you may have to have me, whether you like it or not," Ursula said quietly; and the menacing words fairly staggered the sisters. "You wouldn't like it if I gave the whole game away, would you?"

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Cora, with all the composure she could muster. "You can't blab about us, Ursula, without condemning yourself!"

"That she can't!" said Judith fiercely. "It was you, Ursula, who found out what the surprise subject was to be for the Pinkerton exam, and then borrowed books from the school library, on the quiet—books that dealt with that subject——"

"And put them in Betty Barton's study," chimed in Cora, "so that we were able to say that Betty had been reading up the subject, knowing what it was to be! You did everything——"

"You suggested everything," retorted Ursula. "And you are mistaken if you think I can't tell about you without condemning myself! There is such a thing as an anonymous note to the Headmistress, accusing you of the whole scheme, without mentioning myself."

"Anonymous notes will only go into the waste-paper basket!"

"Don't be so sure!" was the sly girl's answer. "Anyway, I can manage it if I want to. But what do we want to talk like

this for? I'm sure I only want to be friends. I came here just now to say how pleased I was at your getting the captaincy, and I felt sure you would be—grateful."

Cora was in a desperate fix.

She turned to her sister, but could gain no help from that quarter.

"Well, what do you want us to do?" the new captain of the Form burst out savagely. "Do you want us to have you in this study to live with us?"

"Don't be silly!" smirked Ursula. "I only want to be put on the same level with your other friends."

"With Paula and Ella and Grace——"

"Yes!"

"What cheek!" gasped Judith. "And I suppose you expect to come to our pic——"

"Judith, be quiet!" Cora exclaimed quickly; but she was too late.

"Picnic? So you are going to have a picnic?" Ursula said, looking very pleased.

"Then, of course, I shall expect to be invited! That will be just the sort of chance I want—a chance to mix with the others, as if I was one of them, and not an outsider."

The unhappy captain took a desperate turn about the room.

"Oh, all right! Go away!" she snapped at last. "I suppose if you haven't pride enough to stay away from where you are not wanted, we must put up with you!"

"I certainly think you had better," said Ursula, crossing to the door. "So it's settled—eh? When is the picnic to be?"

"We don't know—at least, it's not quite fixed yet," blustered Cora. "You—we—I'll let you know."

"Thank you, Cora, I'm sure," said the sly girl; and she went out, certainly the winner in the rather ticklish encounter.

Cora and Co.—they were absolutely furious.

"A nice thing!" the elder girl fumed. "Oh, Judy, what an awful hole we are in! Think of Paula and Ella, and—and all of them! They simply bar that girl! She'll lose us all of them as friends before she's finished."

"Well, it can't be helped," sighed Judith. "We've got to keep in with her. If we don't, she—she really can make trouble, you know, without getting into trouble herself."

Thus the two raged on, until suddenly a tap at the door heralded another visitor.

It was one of the school maids, in can

and apron. She had a rather battered-looking brown-paper in her hands, and she held this out to Cora.

"Excuse me, miss, but are you the captain of the Fourth Form?" the maid said.

"Yes, I'm captain——"

"Then I suppose this parcel is for you," the girl went on. "It has just come in by carrier from the railway-station, with other things for the school."

Cora glanced at the label, which was partly torn, then nodded:

"All right!"

But the moment the servant had withdrawn there was a look in the new captain's eyes which suggested that things were not quite "all right."

"Here, Judy—look!" she muttered.

Judith came across the room to scrutinise the parcel.

It had suffered badly in the transit; nor could it have been very securely done up at the time of sending off. The knotted string was almost slipping away from the crumpled wrappings, whilst the gummed-on label was one-third missing.

There was, in fact, no name on the label now; but, just below the portion that had got torn off in transit, there was still sufficient address:

"Captain of the IVth Form,
Morcove School,
North Devon."

Those lines of writing were still there; in addition there was the official stamp showing where the parcel had been sent off—Ribbleton, Lancashire.

All this left no doubt whatever in Cora's mind—and in Judith's, too—that the parcel was for Betty Barton, from her home up North.

"Her young sister must have sent it," scowled Cora. "Look at the kid's clumsy writing. Well, I suppose Betty must have the thing, some time."

Judith gave a sudden chuckle.

"I say, Cora, what a lark to open it! And why not? It says 'captain of the Fourth'—and you are captain!"

"But—— No, there is the Ribbleton stamp, Judy."

"Well, don't we come from Ribbleton?" retorted Judith gleefully. "Do open it, just for a lark! You can always plead that it was a pure misunderstanding. We both thought it was from our own people—eh?"

Cora hesitated a moment. Then, with a sudden reckless laugh, she tore away the string and unwrapped the brown paper.

One or two small garments fell to the floor.

"Gracious!" sneered Cora. "Has Betty been asking them to send old clothes, for her to hawk round the school?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" pealed Judith. "But look—there's a note as well!"

Cora snatched it up. The envelope was not gummed down, the note having been slipped amongst the folded garments.

"Read it!" urged Judith. "We can always say we had to read it because we were puzzled!"

And Cora read it.

With her sister looking over one shoulder, the elder girl took the note from the unsealed envelope, and glanced it through.

"It's from Betty's sister, right enough," grinned Judith. "What a lark!"

"It makes one thing quite clear," muttered Cora. "Betty hasn't had the courage to write home and say she has lost the captaincy. That's why the kid up yonder addressed the parcel to 'The Captain of the Fourth Form.'"

"Of course, the kid would want to let all the world know that her sister was captain!" sneered Judith. "And so the old rags of things have been sent for Betty to give away to some poor person round about here. What nonsense it is!"

"The sort of thing Betty would like to do, just to show off," said Cora. "But I reckon she and her people had better keep all their old clothes for themselves now. They look like needing them. Do you see what the kid writes about their—Hark!"

Cora crushed up the letter as she heard whirling steps in the passage.

Next instant the door was flung open, and Betty Barton darted into the room.

"Oh! You have opened it—my parcel!" she cried out disgustedly. "You mean creatures!"

"Steady a bit!" flashed Cora, glaring at the justly indignant girl. "Don't you be quite so free with your compliments!"

Betty slammed the door behind her, and then drew herself up.

"So you are—mean creatures, both of you, to do a thing like that!" she burst out. "I heard that a parcel had just come for me—"

"For you! How were we to know it was for you?" struck in Cora, with affected indignation. "Look at this label on the wrapper. 'Captain of the Fourth Form'—"

"How long have you been captain?" retorted Betty scornfully. "A few hours, that's all! And you could see that there was a name, only it had been torn off—my name, as you must have known!"

"We didn't know—"

"Look at the official stamp, telling you that the parcel came from the town where I live! There is no excuse!" Betty rushed on passionately. "You have deliberately opened the parcel—you've read the letter. Give it to me, Cora!"

And she snatched the note from Cora's hands.

"You've done this so as to pry into my affairs!" the indignant girl went on, panting for breath. "Oh, it's too bad—too cruel! You make my life unbearable with your spite and your mischief-making!"

"What do you mean—spite, mischief-making?" blazed out Cora. "You are up to the old injured-innocent game, are you? Trying to make out that you didn't cheat at the exam., and that we—"

"Ever since I came to Morcove you have been hitting at me one way and another," Betty cried out. "And I can't even have my sister write to me without you—"

"We tell you it was an accident!" shouted Judith.

"It was not! It couldn't have been!"

"Are we telling fibs, then?"

"Yes—yes! I can see it in your eyes! You— Don't touch me, Cora Grandways! I'm not in the mood for putting up with anything more, I warn you!"

But Cora simply rushed at Betty Barton. "Come on, Judy! We'll teach her to call us fibbers!"

Judith, as much beside herself with rage as her sister, made a clutch at Betty.

That girl's hands were loaded, for the moment, with the contents of the parcel and the little note that had been enclosed with them. She didn't like to drop all these things, and so the sisters had her at a disadvantage.

"Now!" hissed Cora, dealing a blow with her open hand. "Take that, Betty—and that!"

Slap, slap!

"And that from me, too!" panted Judith. Gasping with indignation, and looking as

white as a sheet, Betty tried to tear herself free.

Next moment she was down on the floor, having lost her balance in the struggle to get free.

"Now beg our pardon for calling us fibbers!" Cora ordered her, half kneeling upon the prostrate victim. "Come on! Say you are sorry!"

"I won't—I won't!"

Dropping the things she had been holding, the poor girl made another desperate attempt to struggle free; but again the effort was in vain.

"No, my dear, you can't get away!" Cora taunted her. "You don't leave this room until you have begged our pardon, and promised not to tell anybody about that parcel!"

"I won't beg your pardon! You opened it, knowing it was for me, and I— Oh, you are hurting me! Don't, don't! Cora, Judith!"

Crash!

That was the door, as it was sent swinging round against the wall, and in the self-same instant Polly Linton was in the room, almost shouting:

"What's the matter? Betty— Oh, Cora—Judith—"

CHAPTER 20.

Polly Makes a Difference.

"YOU stand still!" Cora Grandways cried at the newcomer upon the scene. "The girl has insulted us, and she is going to apologise!"

"I won't! Polly, this was no insult! They've opened a parcel—read a letter for me from home. And I couldn't stand it any longer. I—"

"Be quiet!" Cora cried, dealing the prostrate girl another smack.

Then Polly sailed in!

Whatever the rights or wrongs of the case might be, that smack settled things, in Polly's opinion!

She seemed to take a lithe spring clean through the air, with Cora for her objective.

Next moment it was Judith who was sprawling on the floor.

Then, before there had been time for any crowd to gather at the doorway, Betty and Polly made off, the former carrying all the things that had come in the parcel.

The sound of Cora and Judith scrambling

to their feet and spluttering with anger, whilst one of them slammed their study door violently, might well have left the chums chuckling over their triumph. For triumph it had been—a triumph that brought out, once again, the unfailing loyalty of Polly towards Betty.

But there was an element of gravity in the whole affair that forbade all levity.

Alone together in their own study, the two chums were grimly silent for quite a long time. Betty, after putting her disordered hair to rights, read through the letter from home, and examined the things that had come with it, whilst Polly was lost in thought.

"You see, Polly," Betty broke out at last, "Cora could not possibly have been mistaken about the parcel. She hasn't been captain long enough for parcels to come for her, by rail, addressed to her as 'Captain of the Fourth Form.'"

"It's disgraceful!" exploded Polly. "Of course, the thing can't be reported; but if it did get to Miss Somerfield's ears, it would mean an end to Cora's captaincy!" She added, in a softened voice: "What's the news from home, Betty? Are matters mending, dear?"

"I'm afraid not," sighed Betty. "You shall read the letter in a minute. I wrote to Doris—not wanting to bother mother about it—asking her to send a few old things for the child of a poor woman down here. The woman and her husband are living in an awful sort of tent place, in an open field, and the poor child is such a sad sight. Just Doris' age. I found they had hardly any warm underclothing for her; and so—" Betty shrugged her shoulders.

"What a brick you are, Betty darling!" Polly exclaimed, with the old admiring look. "And you're the girl that others deem guilty of cheating at an exam. I'd like to tell all the school about your kind thoughtfulness for those poor people."

"If you do, Polly, I—"

"Oh, I suppose I shall have to hold my tongue!" grinned Polly. "You'd be angry, I know. And so there is no better news from home about your people?"

"No, Polly. Doris is only a child, and she doesn't exactly understand the position. But she says that mother and dad and uncle talk as if they hadn't a penny to call their own. I suppose they really haven't, either, as uncle is not allowed to touch a penny

of the fortune he came home with, now that someone is disputing his right to it."

Betty looked again at the letter.

"My sister says how she wishes I were at home! She little knows how near I have come to being sent home—expelled!"

"Betty, darling, don't—"

"But it's true," was the sad rejoinder. "Miss Somerfield told me yesterday that, after thinking things over, she had decided to let me finish the term here, but only as an act of grace. She thinks my people have enough worry—and so they have—without knowing that I—that I—"

There was a sudden sob in Betty's voice. She could say no more, but had to turn away to hide her brimming eyes from Polly.

"Dear," said Polly, coming close to her chum, who was sitting down by the table with a sudden droop of the head, "how can I say all that I want to say, Betty, dear?"

"There is no need, Polly. I know—oh, I know how you feel for me! Whatever happens, I've always got you. And there is Trixie, and Madge—Dolly, too, and Tess—they still believe in me. But all the rest, Polly—"

"Some day," whispered Polly, with a hand on her chum's shoulder, "you will be righted in the eyes of the whole school, as you have been righted before. You didn't cheat at the exam., but someone else did!"

"Oh, Polly—"

"I am sure of that, Betty—quite, quite sure, or I would not say so. It was all a plot, of course, and I am waiting and watching, Betty, dear—waiting and watching to find out who the plotters were."

Betty pressed her loyal friend's hand; and after that there was silence.

"Well, dear?" smiled Polly at last.

"I'm thinking," answered Betty softly. "I'm thinking of something that I read in a book of poetry a few days ago. It was that poet, Robert Browning, whom people say they never can understand. But I understand the lines I'm thinking of:

"What a glorious thing friendship is,
World without end!"

Polly gave a merry laugh.

"Oh, if you are going to quote poetry!" she cried. And she sailed from the room, whistling gaily.

THE affair of the parcel from Ribbleton did not reach the ears of Miss Somerfield or any of the other mistresses.

But Polly Linton did not scruple to acquaint the girls of the Fourth Form with what had happened, and with some of them the feeling of indignation was great.

Ella Elgood and Grace Garfield treated the whole matter as a joke; but, then, they were ready to be apologists for anything that Cora might do, now that she was captain.

But Paula Creel, in a vague way, felt what had happened was "not quite the thing, bai Jove!" And she said as much to the Grandways couple, but was soon talked round, Cora pleading that the opening of the parcel had been a genuine misunderstanding.

There remained in the end, however, at least a half-dozen girls—beside those who were Betty's chums—who considered the affair of the parcel was just an instance of Cora's high-handed manner now that she was captain.

It confirmed them in their uneasy feeling that she was going to be "too jolly uppish," and so, to give her a bit of a take-down, they firmly declined the invitation to the wonderful picnic!

In vain Cora and her sister tried to wheedle these girls into a better mood. It was not to be done.

Saturday came, and not one of the refusals had been changed into an acceptance!

Looking at the list of girls who were to form the party, Cora could not help scowling. She could only count, including herself and Judith, eight girls. Nine with Ursula Wade!

"Less than half the Form!" was her rueful thought. "And how many are coming just for the sake of what they can get?"

Scanning the list again, she could decide that four at least were joining the picnic simply for the sake of the good things that would be going. So, altogether, the girls who had accepted out of genuine friendship were by no means numerous!

Nor was the weather inclined to favour the grand outing.

Saturday morning was hot and sunny—blazing hot. But the glass was falling, and everybody agreed that there was thunder about. Miss Massingham, the Form mis-

tress, discussing the intended excursion with Cora, after dinner, warned that girl to keep an eye on the sky.

"We don't want you all to come back drenched to the skin," said the Form mistress. "So you had better take your macs."

It was getting on for three o'clock when the party set off, Cora Grandways feeling secretly relieved that Ursula had not joined the muster at the school gate.

To look at the stylish aristocratic Paula, and one or two other girls, was to realise how they would turn up their noses when they found that Ursula was invited! For Cora and Judith had kept very quiet about Ursula's invitation.

Slowly the picnickers dawdled along the cliff road for a mile or so, in the full glare of the sun. Although they were high up on cliffs towering a couple of hundred feet above the open sea, they hardly felt a breeze stirring. The sea itself was like a sheet of molten metal, calm as a mill-pond.

Then, striking away from the road, when it turned inland, they crossed the undulating grassland, always keeping close to the cliff's edge. A mile or so of this gentle sauntering, and they reached their destination, thankful to scatter themselves around in the shade of the thousand-year old ruins.

Cove Castle was the merest relic of bygone times, and its fragments of walls and towers—the walls were five feet thick—gave little suggestion of what the mighty stronghold had been like in former days. But the cluster of ruins made a very picturesque scene, famous for picnic-parties. One of its great charms, too, was its complete isolation.

"Bai Jove, how womorphic!" exclaimed Paula, feeling inclined to talk after she had been lolling for ten minutes in the cool shade. "Cowa darling, this is great!"

"Gracious, it's four o'clock!" laughed Cora, glancing at her gold wrist-watch. "Who says tea?"

"Tea," said Paula, sitting up languidly, "would be vewy wewfeshing, Cowa darling. But—Hallo! Bai Jove! Who's this person?"

It was Ursula Wade.

Cora shot a glance at the approaching girl, and then she did not know which way to look.

She could tell, by the sudden silence, that Ursula's appearance had caused an immediate fall of spirits.

"Hallo, Ursula!" Judith sang out, with

enforced amiability. "So you've come to join us!"

This was said in the hope that the others would think Ursula had invited herself. But Ursula quickly made her position clear.

"You invited me, didn't you?" she smiled.

"Bai Jove, geals!" breathed Paula. "You know, I—I don't like to be pwe-judiced; but—weally!"

"That girl!" muttered others sullenly. "We might just as well have had Betty Barton with us!"

"I would rather have had Betty, any day," confided Eva Merrick.

"Yes, bai Jove! If we are to have outsiders, we—oh, well, geals! It's weally, too hot to make stwong wemarks!" Paula finished, lolling back again.

Both Cora and Judith went in for a lot of false merriment after that. But the picnic was falling flat. Cora could feel that.

Nobody could be made to laugh, nobody was in the mood for chatter. Nor were there any wonderful expressions of delight when the dainty cloth had been laid out on the shady grass, and covered with its showy array of catables.

"Come along, girls—come along, Paula! Gather round!" pleaded Cora, with another false laugh. "Ursula, you—you might sit there." She pointed out a special place, remote as possible from the others. "All the rest can squat where they like. Paula, come on!"

Paula was very slow in bestirring herself, and so Cora went across to her and started to haul her up.

"Bai Jove!" breathed Paula, as she was dragged to her feet. "I say, Cowa darling—just a whisper, if I may! That geal, you know—"

"Oh, don't bother about her!"

"I would pwefer to overlook her presence," said Paula, in a stage whisper. "But, weally, I can't help looking at her, don't you know. She—she dwesses so badly, what?"

"She dwesses miles better than Betty Barton!"

"Well, I'm not so sure," doubted Paula.

"Betty Barton always looks pretty, what? As for Ursula—Bai Jove, Ursula," the drawler went on, going close to the "spread"; "I say, would you mind wemoving that bwocch fwom your fwocch?"

"My brooch?" stared Ursula.

"Pwecisely," said Paula sweetly. "It can't be weal diamonds, so—if you wouldn't

mind wemoving it, please? The glare, bai Jove! Like a lot of miwwows—looking-glasses, don't you know! Oh, thanks!"

With a shrug and a smile, Ursula had taken out the offending bit of cheap jewellery.

"I'm sure I don't want to make myself objectionable!" she said. "I only want to be friends!"

"Yes, wather," said Paula. "Of course, we all see you want to be friends. Only we—er—don't exactly want to be—"

"Your tea, Paula!"

"Oh, tha-a-anks, thanks!"

Cora was pouring out, still trying to cause laughter by having little accidents with the cups. But the mood of the party in general was like the mood of the weather—thundery! The brightness had gone out of the gathering, and so had the brightness gone, suddenly, from the surrounding scene.

For a haze had dulled the sun, and now the smooth sea was all copper-coloured—two unmistakable signs of an imminent storm.

"As I was wemarking," said Paula, finding that nobody else was inclined to talk, "we know you want to be friends, Ursula. However, I feel constwained to wemark that I—"

"Try a cream bun, Paula dear!"

"Tha-a-anks, Judith dear. But I would pwefer a morsel of cake, don't you know. I wather fancy Ursula is watching those cweam buns, and I don't wish to depwive her of them. I should wegwet being gweedy, what?"

Some of the girls laughed—quite hearty laughter for once.

"I have often wemarked," went on Paula, encouraged by the amusement she was creating, "life is weally made up of pwejudices, what? Some of us are pwejudiced in favour of cweam-buns, some of us pwefer cake! In the same way, geals, some of us like flashy jewellery—bwooches, and such like, whilst some of us wegard cheap bwooches as—"

"Another cup, Paula?"

"Thanks, no more, Cowa darling! Bai Jove, how sultwy the sky looks, what? I hope—"

"Hark!" broke in Ella Elgood sharply.

A sudden rumble overhead drove an uneasy cry from all the rest.

"Thunder!"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove!"

"Look at the sky—black!" exclaimed

Grace Garfield, jumping up in alarm.

"Cora, what are we to do if it rains?"

"Oh, bother rain! It won't—"

"But it's raining now!"

"Yes, wathah! Bai Jove! Gwacious

A blaze of lightning shimmered in the inky clouds, and the crash of thunder was followed by a few more splashes of rain.

"It's nothing!" cried Cora ill-temperedly. "Anyhow, we can take time to pack up and make for home."

But her companions were of a very different opinion.

Huddling together for a few moments, like a lot of frightened sheep, they felt convinced of two things. One was, that the storm might burst at any instant; the other, that the ruins offered not a scrap of shelter.

For the rain, when it came, would be a deluge!

Out of the deep gloom came another blaze of lightning, and it lit up faces that were blanched with fear.

Then there was such a rattle and crash of thunder as made the girls cower down.

Cora, pulling herself together, started to bundle the tea-things back into the picnic-baskets and bags, whilst she called to her companions to help her. But only Judith responded.

Then, suddenly, two or three of the most terrified girls deserted. They simply bolted for home, unable to bear the thought of being caught in a violent storm anywhere along the cliffs.

Their flight was the signal for others to make off.

In vain Cora and Judith yelled to them, above the hurly-burly of the thunder peals; on they scurried, leaving only Paula, Ella, and Grace to keep the sisters company.

"I say, bai Jove," palpitated Paula, "this is sewious, what? We've no macs., don't you know! If we get dwenched—"

"Let me get the things packed up, and then—" Cora began; but a perfect pandemonium of thunder, right overhead, overwhelmed her shouting.

"Come on!" fumed Ella, getting as panicky as the girls who were now a good way ahead.

"But the baskets—"

"Oh, bother the baskets; come back for them some other time!" burst out Grace.

Cora and Judith alike were only too

anxious to get away. So, what with the others' urging, and the blinding flashes of lightning, and the pealing of thunder, they gave up caring any more about the tea-things.

With a rush, Cora stowed the baskets, and other articles into a rough-and-ready hiding-place amongst the ruined walls, and then she chased after her companions, who had already bolted off.

"Bai Jove!" panted Paula, starting to labour for breath ere she had run a hundred yards. "This is weally sewious! I say, goals, I—weally, you know—"

See-iss! The lightning burned again, streaking down the inky sky, and then the whole heavens racketed once more.

There was a feeble cry from Paula, and the others looked round at her. She was staggering along as if half-blinded by that last glare.

"Don't be a duffer!" Cora shouted angrily. "Come on! Hurry!"

"But—but— Oh, my gwacious! Cowa! I say, Cowa—all of you! Help!"

Paula had stumbled heavily over a big stone as she blundered on.

"I'm hurt, goals! I say, don't leave me!" the girl shrieked piteously. "I've spwained my ankle!"

But neither Cora nor Judith heard Paula's appealing cry.

On they ran, helter-skelter across the storm-darkened uplands, whilst Paula Creel remained where she had come to grief, sobbing and moaning with pain every time she tried to drag herself along.

CHAPTER 22.

What a "Bwick."

"IT'S still holding off!" panted one of the girls who had been the first to flee from the ruins. "Shall we wait for the others then?"

Her companions, exhausted with running, looked up at the inky sky.

"I don't know," one said uneasily. "There may be a deluge any moment! Hadn't we better keep on, and—"

"No; let's wait a minute, anyhow," broke in another. "They can't be far behind!"

So they all hung about.

The spot at which they had come to a standstill was just where they had emerged on to the cliff road, after a long race across the grass. There was still no shelter for

them, if the rain should start, and it was only a minute or so before a few of them were anxious to be off again.

Then, suddenly, a vivid flash of lightning showed them Cora and three other girls racing towards the roadway.

"But where's Paula?" exclaimed Diana Forbes, with a throb of alarm. "She's not with those girls, and they are the last we have been waiting for! It's queer—"

"Yes," muttered some of her companions. And in a moment they were all shouting at Cora:

"Where's Paula? You didn't think she was with us, Cora?"

"Bother Paula!" gasped the new captain of the Form, as she and her three companions came rushing up in a breathless state. "I'm not going to wait for her. Come on, unless you want to get wet!"

Even as she gave the cry, large drops of rain began to splash down.

That settled it, so far as bothering any more about Paula was concerned!

On again ran all the girls, with the desperate hope that they might yet get indoors before the rain got bad enough to drench them.

In a few seconds the scared throng had passed out of sight along the winding road; and their disappearance was the signal for a solitary girl to emerge from the shelter of some bushes, close to where the others had just waited.

The girl was Betty Barton.

She had not been crouching amongst the bushes to seek shelter from the coming rain. There was, indeed, not the slightest shelter from rain either there or anywhere else close at hand. Besides, she had a water-proof cloak over her other garments.

Betty had, in fact, hidden herself amongst the bushes simply to escape being seen by the picnickers.

She was returning to the school after taking the bundle of garments to the poor folk who had excited her pity some days ago, when she became aware of a whole bunch of girls running hard for the school.

Knowing them for Cora's party, and not wishing to have an encounter with them, she had slipped into the bit of "cover," so as to let them go by and get in advance of her.

But now that they were all running hard, so far ahead, she did not follow. Instead, she looked in the direction from which they

had all come, her pretty eyes doing their best to pierce the stormy gloom.

Again the lightning blazed, lighting up all the countryside with great vividness, but even then she could see no sign of Paula Creel.

Another crash of thunder, and then down came the rain, full pelt!

The deluge fairly roared in Betty's ears, and she could even feel the sting of the falling drops through the thickness of her waterproof and other garments.

The mackintosh was keeping her dry; all the same, this was such a storm as nobody would wish to be out in for a moment longer than could be helped.

Yet Betty turned her back to the only source of refuge, the distant school. She started to run, labouring along through the heavy deluge in the direction of the distant ruins.

On and on she struggled, the mackintosh flapping about her knees, the rain streaming down her flushed cheeks.

The lightning glare was almost continual now, and soon she could make out the ruin, a low mass of crumbling walls showing starkly against the black sky.

Drawing swiftly closer, she was even able to see, of a sudden, a pitiful figure floundering about on the rain-whipped grass.

It was Paula Creel.

Her feeble cries of distress sounded pitifully whenever there was a lull in the thunder, and Betty felt she simply wanted to fly the rest of the way to the hapless girl's aid.

At last she was with her, and they cried out to each other above the noise of the dreadful storm:

"Betty! Oh, where did you come from?"

"I felt sure you were in need of help, Paula. How awful, to see you as helpless as this!"

"It's my ankle, Betty! Gwacious, I've never had such pain! The others have wun away, too, leaving me like this! But you—"

"I'll help you," said Betty, and unbuttoning her waterproof she dragged it off.

"There you are, put that on, Paula!"

"But you? Oh, bai Jove, Betty, you don't weally mean I'm to—to wear your coat?"

"I do!"

"Then you are a downright bwick,

Betty!" declared Paula unhesitatingly. "And I'm— Bai Jove, I'm jolly gwateful to you!"

Betty helped her to struggle into the waterproof, which was at least going to protect Paula, all lightly clad as she was, from a chill.

"Thank you, thank you!" gasped out Paula, who was in real pain from her ankle. "You weally are a bwick, Betty! I won't forget this, bai Jove! But I wish you hadn't given me your coat, don't you know. I— Oooo! Careful! I must be careful, bai Jove!"

"Yes, take your time," Betty advised, helping the girl to rise. "Can you venture to walk at all, do you think?"

"I—I must! We can't stay out in this awful storm," gasped the injured girl. "Only, you'll stay and help me, won't you, Betty? I say, you won't wun away like the others?"

"No, Paula."

And then the lightning flashes, blazing out again and again, revealed Betty half-supporting the injured girl across the drenched grass, whilst the rain drummed down with tropical violence, and the thunder roared and rumbled incessantly.

CHAPTER 23:

Life or Death.

PAULA CREEL could just walk, and only just. Every now and then she gasped aloud, or winced with pain; but when Betty, growing alarmed, suggested running off for help, the injured girl would not hear of it.

"Gwacious, no!" panted Paula. "It's not weally making my foot any worse, I'm sure of that. If you don't mind going slowly, Betty deah! I—I'm so gwateful to you, weally. But you are getting dwenched!"

"That's nothing!" laughed Betty. "I'm as hard as nails!"

"Weally, I'd give something to be as hard as nails myself," said Paula. "But, Betty, won't you let me give you back the mac.?"

"What good would that be? I'm soaked!"

"Half, then!" Paula said, rising to a height of unselfishness to which she had never before attained. "Bai Jove, Betty, we—we must go halves, what?"

And they did!

At least, for all Paula knew, Betty was having a fair share of the mac., now that it was being used cape-like about the pair of them. But Betty secretly took care to take far less than her proper share.

In this fashion they struggled along, very slowly, until they got to the road.

Then, with the rain coming down harder than ever, and with Paula's foot slowly getting more painful with the strain of limping along, they made a sheer snail's pace for a couple of hundred yards.

"You are going to drop," Betty exclaimed suddenly. "It's too much for you, Paula!"

"I—I weally am in gweat pain now," confessed the injured girl. "But what else can we do, Betty? If only there was a bit of shelter!"

"We couldn't wisely take shelter, Paula, now that we are drenched. I mean—"

"Are you drenched? Wight to the skin, Betty? I'm not, and that's because— Bai Jove, what a bwick you are!"

"You said that before," Betty laughed. "Look here— Oh, she's fainting!"

It was true.

With a sudden weak, moaning sigh, Paula would have collapsed upon the rain-washed roadway, only Betty held her up.

And now, what was Betty to do? Simply lay her swooning schoolfellow beside the road, for the rain to lash down upon her, whilst she herself ran for help? It was a course that some girls might have followed; but Betty—

No; she could not bring herself to do it.

In that fearful deluge of rain, with the terrifying lightning play and the crash of thunder, it seemed heartless to leave Paula alone like that. She must be carried the rest of the way; that was all! To abandon her, even temporarily, was unthinkable.

Gathering breath for the effort, and calling up her remaining strength, the courageous girl raised her drooping companion, lifting her clear of the ground. And, holding her thus, Betty staggered on—splash, splash! through how many puddles of rain, with the rain all the time whipping down.

She had been drenched to the skin five minutes ago; but that would have been less serious if no more rain had soaked through her clothes. But it was sopping through continuously, keeping the garments next to her skin always icily cold.

Betty, however, still had no thought of her own plight.

On and on! What an unending journey it seemed to her! Not a soul did she meet; and all the time Paula was lying like a lifeless being in the girl's saving arms. On and on, with the rain lashing down ever faster, as it seemed to Betty, and with her burden growing ever weightier.

At last, when the shimmer of lightning gave Betty a glimpse of the school, she was almost at her last gasp. But she struggled on and reached the school.

Right up to the front porch she carried the swooning girl, to be met there by an excited throng of mistresses and scholars.

Some cheering mingled with all the excited talk; but Betty had an idea that the plaudits were mock ones. She knew that she must present a bedraggled sort of appearance—"like a drowned rat!" she was thinking—and so it was no wonder if a few girls were inclined to cheer ironically!

Paula was taken in hand at once, none of the mistresses asking for details of what had been happening, but simply urging Betty to hurry away, and change into dry things.

So off she went, the throng hanging back to bestow sympathetic remarks upon Paula whilst that unconscious girl was being carried gently away.

Half an hour later Betty was scrambling into dry clothes behind a bathroom door, when she heard a loud knocking.

"You in there, Betty?" It was Polly singing out lustily. "I say! When am I going to get a word with you? And Paula is asking for you, Betty! And Miss Redgrave—"

"All right!"

"Miss Redgrave wants to see you as soon as poss.!"

"Right-oh!" Betty answered again.

She completed her dressing hurriedly, and then went downstairs to present herself to the junior mistress. The sense of being in a glowing heat was passing; she caught herself shuddering once or twice, and her steps were a bit staggery, as if she were still carrying Paula.

"You are sure you haven't taken a bad chill, Betty?" Miss Redgrave asked her.

"Oh, no! I'm as hard as nails!"

"Thank goodness for that!" exclaimed

the junior mistress. "How I wish that you could come as well out of your other troubles, Betty. I— Oh, here comes Polly!"

"I'm sorry, please," Polly Linton pleaded, as she slipped into the room; "but I'm fed up with waiting about for a word with Betty! You— Oh, I don't know what to call you, Betty! Doing all that for Paula—for Paula!"

"Is Paula one of your bitter enemies, Betty?" Miss Redgrave asked, with a pained expression.

"She used to be against me—"

"She isn't now, I can tell you!" struck in Polly. "She is in her study, looking quite the grand invalid, all swathed in a dressing-gown and blankets and things! And matron has made her a basin of gruel. Ugh!"

"Her foot—"

"It's nothing, after all," grinned Polly. "She just moved it about, and all of a sudden it came right again! So it couldn't have been a 'pwoper spwain' after all!"

"You had better run along and see Paula," Miss Redgrave suggested to Betty, "and get some of that gruel for yourself, Betty, then jump into bed and keep warm!"

"I think I will," said the modest heroine of the storm.

With that Betty and Polly left the junior mistress's study. Betty was about to make her way to Paula's study when she hesitated.

"Paula can see me in the morning," she said. "I—somehow. I—I'd rather leave things until the morning. I shall feel more like it then."

But, come morning, Betty Barton was a flushed, feverish, half-delirious girl, causing the greatest anxiety to the Headmistress, the matron, and the doctor who had been 'phoned for.

Swathed in blankets, they took her across to the school "san," there to be tucked up in one of the little cots. The doctor was round again just after dinner, and Polly, hovering near the sanatorium entrance, saw how gravely he was shaking his head as he came away from his second visit.

"We must hope not," he was saying to Miss Somerfield; "but her condition does not improve!"

Again, about five o'clock, the medico

made a third visit, and this time his departure was followed by sending off a telegram to a certain address up north.

"Your child Betty seriously ill. Come at once!"

And that night a solemn hush brooded over the whole of Morcove School. Even the loud, spiteful tongue of Cora Grandways was silenced for once.

Life or death for Betty Barton—which was it to be?

In the solemn quietude of the twilight hour, there came someone to talk with Polly Linton as that girl sat all alone in the old study.

"Pway excuse me, Polly," pleaded the visitor, sinking miserably into a chair. "I don't want to interwupt you at all; but I—I am so miswable! I feel—"

Paula Creel took out her dainty handkerchief and wiped her eyes.

"She was such a bwick, don't you know!" was her quavering remark, after a little sniffing. "And, weally, it is coming home to me now how cwuel I often was!"

Polly Linton stood up, staring out at the fading afterglow in the western sky.

"Perhaps," she said softly, "it has all happened to make other girls realise, Paula, how cwuel they have been!"

CHAPTER 24.

In the Hour of Crisis!

"POLLY!"

"Yes, Madge?"

"Is there any fresh news? Anything to cheer one up a bit?"

As Madge Minden asked that question her chum, Polly Linton, gave a sad shake of the head.

"Come in and sit down, now you are here," Polly said, for Madge was only hovering in the study doorway. "No, I'm afraid there is no change."

The other girl sighed heavily as she shut the door and dropped into a seat.

"Betty's people are on the way here, at any rate?" she said, after a spell of silence.

"Yes, Madge. They wired that they were leaving Ribbleton early this morning, and they'll be here long before dark. Done your prep, yet?"

Madge Minden shook her head.

"Couldn't get my mind on to it at all," she confessed.

"Same with me," shrugged Polly Linton, looking at some school books standing open on the table.

She added, as the door opened and another girl looked in:

"Hallo, Trixie!"

"Any news, Polly?" asked Trixie Hope, drifting dejectedly into the study. "I thought perhaps you might have heard something?"

"I've just been telling Madge; it's a case of no change either way."

"Well, so long as poor Betty isn't worse, that's something," said Trixie. "Je suis tres triste ce soir—I am very sad this evening."

Trixie was not showing off her French, nor was she using French for fun. There was little inclination for fun amongst any members of the Fourth Form at Morcove School at present.

Trixie's French was just a habit. She had been studying it up very hard for some time now, her parents having hinted that they might be going on the Continent with her for the summer holidays. As yet the girl could not speak quite "like the native." Nor was her French like that one gets in the grammars. It was, in many respects, a special brand of her own.

But Trixie's French and everything else, indeed, was of little importance at the present time. The only thing that counted in the minds of the Fourth-Formers of Morcove School just now was the condition of Betty Barton.

She talked sympathetically with Polly for several moments, trying to relieve the unhappy girl's anxiety for her chum, and when she seemed just a little bit more cheerful, Madge got up from her chair, and Trixie followed suit.

"We may as well get back to our own den, Trixie," Madge said listlessly. "As there is no fresh news I—I don't know what else there is to do except moon about."

Trixie nodded in agreement, and the two girls sauntered away, leaving Polly alone in this den, which was hers and Betty Barton's.

Dear old study, where they had spent so many hours together! But now—

Would the cosy little room ever know Betty Barton's sunny presence again? Or were the happy times when Polly had only to glance up from her work to see the chum

she loved smiling back at her across the table gone for ever?

For Betty Barton was very, very ill.

A violent chill had developed into rheumatic fever, and at this very moment the poor girl was lying almost at death's door over in the school sanatorium.

Now Polly Linton heard a tap which heralded another visitor, and she called softly:

"Come in!"

The girl who entered was Paula.

"Well, Polly," she said, with a sort of simpering sigh, "I was wather hoping you had heard something fwesh, perwaps?"

"No, Paula. Our only bit of comfort is that Bettys' parents will soon be here now."

"Bai Jove, what a welief!" exclaimed Paula very earnestly. "I—I say, Polly, I know I'm looking in upon you pwetty fwrequently lately, but, weally—"

"That's all right, Paula. I'm only too glad to see you, knowing what it means. You are as sorry as any of us about poor Betty."

"I weally am," declared Paula, sitting down dejectedly. "I have weason to be twuly sorry, Polly. For Betty would never have got wheumatic fever if she hadn't sacrificed herself for my sake in that dweadful storm!"

"Yes, Paula. It was just like Betty—"

"It was jolly bwickish of her, as I kept on saying at the time," went on Paula. "When she came out to find me in the storm, because she knew I'd hurt my ankle and couldn't walk."

"I know."

"She w'apped her own mac. aaround me, Polly. She had to cawwy me in the end, too, bai Jove! And I—I'm a geal who used to look down on her, bai Jove!"

"You don't now, Paula. All that's past and done with; forgiven and forgotten by Betty."

"If only I could think so," sighed Paula, looking as if she were on the verge of tears. "But I—they won't let me go into the sanatorium and speak to her, don't you know!"

"They daren't let one of us bother Betty. But she did send out one message to you, didn't she, Paula?"

"Yes, wathah. And I tell you it upset me, Polly. I'm twying all the time not to cwry, you know; but I—weally, when I think of how cwuel I often was, siding with Cowa and Judith against the poor geal, and

now—"Tell Paula all the past is forgiven and forgotten!" That was the message, Polly deah, and I— Bother it, I weally must cwy!"

And Paula sat there, dabbing a scented handkerchief at her tearful eyes, and giving little quavering sobs until Polly went up to the repentant girl and kissed her.

"Paula dear, do you know, I always felt that somehow you were not as bad at heart as you sometimes seemed to be. And now you are going to make good altogether, eh?"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove! When I think of the way I went on—"

"Don't think of it, dear!"

"I've just one wemark I would like to make," said Paula, standing up. "I—I wather fancy I've been a bit of a snob up to now, what? Nevahtheless, Polly, I—I do not mean to be a snob any longer. No!"

Polly caught Paula's hand and pressed it.

She knew that all hostility between Paula and Betty had ended, never to start again.

CHAPTER 25. Self-Betrayed

THERE was good news for Betty when at last her father and mother arrived at Morcove. For a cable had been received from America, saying that her uncle's claim to his land had been allowed, and the family fortunes were all right again.

Business called Mr. and Mrs. Barton away from Morcove, but their visit, brief as it was, cheered up Betty considerably and helped her past the crisis of her illness.

Cora and Judith Grandways were furious at the turn events had taken, for the girls of the Fourth had flocked again to Betty, and waited anxiously for news of her.

On one thing, however, they could congratulate themselves, Betty was not yet cleared of cheating over the Pinkerton prize affair. Only one person could do that—and that girl was Ursula Wade. But Ursula dared not speak for her own sake!

As they were discussing the matter, a knock came to the study door, and Ursula Wade entered.

"Well, what do you want?" snapped Cora Grandways.

"A little civility, for one thing!" retorted Ursula, closing the door.

She had the reputation of being a sly girl, without much spirit. But her attitude towards the Grandways couple had been getting very bold just lately. No wonder, either, when Ursula held the pair, as it were, in the hollow of her hand!

"Say what you want, and clear out!" Cora exploded again.

She disliked Ursula, and was rueing very bitterly the day when she had made an accomplice of this girl in the plot to get Betty suspected of cheating over the Pinkerton exam.

Instead of "clearing out," Ursula invited herself to a seat.

"You had better not, either of you, keep up this tone with me," she said, with an unpleasant smile. "I thought it was part of my reward, for what I did for you, that I was to be treated as a friend. So at least you might be civil!"

"Ursula, it's no good my pretending that I like your company, because I don't," said Cora flatly. "And you needn't think I am afraid of you, because I'm not."

"Oh?"

"You've been showing yourself here time after time just lately," went on the captain of the Form, "and I'm tired of seeing you! So you had better stop it—see?"

Ursula only smiled.

"Judy and I have talked it over, and we are quite satisfied that you can't give us away without giving yourself away, too!" said Cora, speaking with greater vehemence than was perhaps wise. For she was raising her voice to a risky extent. "It was all your doing—"

"It was all your planning," broke in Ursula, with a calmness that only maddened Cora the more. "You suggested that I should find out what the surprise subject was to be for the Pinkerton exam, and then put books in Betty's study dealing with that subject, so that—"

"You did it all, anyhow! And you had the prize money, when Betty was disqualified as a cheat!" broke in Cora violently. "So you're as guilty as we are! And—"

"Oh, Cora, don't talk so loud!" exclaimed Judith nervously. "We don't know who may be passing in the corridor!"

She stepped across to the door and opened it, then slammed it shut and turned about with a white face.

"Cora! Ursula! Someone has been listening!"

"No, no!"

"Yes!—She was outside when I opened the door! And it was Paula Creel!"

"Paula! Oh!" Cora wrung her hands. "What was I saying? Could she have heard enough to—to understand everything? Hark!"

Mute and still the guilty trio stood listening.

From a neighbouring study came the murmur of voices talking excitedly.

There was a rush of steps along the passage, and Cora and Judith backed across the room as the door was flung open, admitting Polly, Paula, and a dozen others.

"Cora!" came the furious cry from Polly. "Then it was all your doing—your planning! And now we know—we have proof—that Betty didn't cheat!"

"Shame—shame on you, Cora!" cried others. "You and your sister, and you also, Ursula—shame!"

"I—I'm not to blame!" Ursula protested huskily. "I—they tempted me! It isn't fair to blame me! I am not so rich as some of you!"

"You got that twenty-pound prize unfairly!"

"I was tempted!" was all Ursula could plead again, with a frantic gesture.

"She was tempted, yes! And it is that couple who really are mostly to blame!" Polly rushed on, pointing a finger of scorn at the sisters. "Ursula is merely their accomplice!"

"Shame, shame!"

Cora Grandways made a desperate effort to pull herself together.

"What are you all making such a row about?" she asked defiantly.

"Oh, drop that!" cried Polly. "The truth has come out. You've given yourselves away, thanks to your bad-tempered jabbering. Paula heard—"

"Paula is a sneak!" Judith hissed.

"Pway let me speak!" pleaded Paula. "I much wewget, as these girls know, that I heard what was not intended for my ears. As a member of a wather aristocwatic family I am not in the habit of listening at doors! But—"

"You were listening at the keyhole, you sneak!"

"I pwotest that I was not listening at any keyhole," said Paula. "That is an accusation I stwongly wesent! I was just going to tap at your door, when I heard you saying the most remarkable things about

the Pinkerton Pwise. If any other geal in my place had not felt bound to stand still, too surprised for anything, then—"

"You were not doing anything mean, Paula!" some of the girls cried out. "Considering the very mention of the Pinkerton Prize was bound to make you think of Betty—"

"Poor Betty, yes!" broke out Polly Linton, almost tearfully. "She's been suffering all the shame of being called a cheat, she's had the captaincy taken from her, and it's all your doing, Judith Grandways!"

"Shame, Cora, shame!"

"Clear out!" was almost all Cora could say frantically. "I—I deny everything, so there! Paula didn't hear—"

"Now you are trying to save yourself with bluster," said Polly. "But it won't answer, Cora Grandways! You are not going to hold the captaincy any longer! We will take jolly good care of that!"

"Hear, hear!"

"You are going to—to tell the headmistress?" Cora said, her voice sinking to a husky whisper.

"My idea is this, girls," Polly turned to say to her friends. "We will give Cora half an hour in which to say if she will make a full confession in the proper quarters. If not—"

"I won't! It means—it means expulsion!"

"Well," said Madge Minden scornfully, "didn't it mean something as bad as expulsion for Betty? She would have been sent home, only, as her parents were in such trouble, the headmistress wanted to spare them a further upset."

"Are we agreed about that half-hour?" asked Polly.

"Yes, yes."

"Then come along!" said Polly, and she marched out of the room, the others following.

Most of them kept together in Polly's study, whilst the minutes were ticking away. At first they were seething with indignant talk about the revelation; but, as the time drew near for Cora to answer the ultimatum, a tense silence fell upon all.

So, at last, the clock on the study mantelpiece showed that the time limit had expired. Without a word, and without waiting another second, Polly went back to the sisters' study, followed by her friends.

Ursula Wade had gone away. Judith was standing moodily by the window, whilst

Cora was huddled up in a low basket-chair, the very picture of despair.

"Well?" demanded Polly Linton.

There was no answer.

"Are you going to confess, Cora? With Betty lying as ill as she is, we are not going to waste time!"

And then, coward that she was at heart, Cora burst into tears.

"Oh, show a little pity!" she cried imploringly. She tried to rise, but ended up by grovelling at Polly's feet. "Think what it means if I confess! Three of us! We shall all three be expelled!"

"Then you are not going to make a clean breast of things?"

"I can't! Oh, Polly—Paula—all of you—wait a little while!"

"No!" Polly spoke the flat refusal, but it was echoed by all the rest. "Not with Betty lying there, with the thought preying on her mind night and day that nearly the whole school deems her a cheat!"

"Oh, what shall I do—what shall I do?" wept Cora. "Judy, shall I confess—shall I?"

"No!" burst out Judith. "Fight it out somehow! They—they can't prove it! Paula may have made it up, about what she heard!"

Polly Linton turned back to the door.

"I think we'd better go!" she said.

"Yes, wather, bai Jove!"

And they all went out again, the girl who was the last to leave shutting the door with a slam.

Then they held another grave debate in Polly's study, and the upshot of it was that Polly was deputed to go to the junior mistress of the Form, Miss Redgrave, and place all the facts before her.

Miss Redgrave was in her private room when Polly arrived there, and so there was no delay in acquainting the junior mistress with the grave state of affairs.

With undisguised amazement and horror, Miss Redgrave listened to what Polly had to say, hardly making a single interruption until the story was ended.

"The girls all thought it best that we should tell you first, Miss Redgrave," Polly wound up. "To hush the thing up was unthinkable, of course. And yet—well, it's awful to think of three girls getting expelled!"

The junior mistress nodded, her brows drawn together.

"Expelled they will be, that is certain,"

she said, "if this affair gets to the head-mistress's ears. But you have come to me in the hope that I—that perhaps—"

"Yes!" Polly exclaimed eagerly. "Oh, if there is a middle way that can be taken—a way that will mean Betty being righted, and yet a bit of mercy being shown to those three—then let's take it!"

The junior mistress took a thoughtful turn about the room.

"Polly, send Cora Grandways to me, please," she said.

"And Judith—Ursula?"

"I will deal with them later. Cora is the principal culprit."

"Oh, Miss Redgrave, if you think you can do something that will answer the purpose without—"

"I know what you mean, Polly. Well, you will see what I intend to do. I want Cora."

Polly hurried away, and in a few minutes there was a nervous tap at the junior mistress' door, and Cora came slinking in.

"Stand there, Cora Grandways!" said Miss Redgrave.

And the captain of the Fourth Form felt as if she were a self-condemned prisoner, arraigned at the bar of justice!

CHAPTER 26.

"Keep the Flag Flying!"

"YOU have refused to confess?" was the first remark Miss Redgrave made.

"I—I've nothing to confess!" Cora gasped huskily. "It wasn't true what Paula said she heard!"

"Your eyes tell a different story, Cora," said the junior mistress. "Now listen.

The truth of the matter is this. You and your sister induced Ursula Wade to find out what the special subject was to be for the Pinkerton exam. When Ursula had done that, she borrowed books from the library dealing with the surprise subject, and placed them in Betty's study."

Cora Grandways was silent.

"The result was, when Betty came out top in the exam, as having done the best essay, you were able to suggest that she had known what the subject was to be, and had studied it up from the books."

Still not a word from Cora.

"The charge against Betty was be-

lieved, and the prize given to Ursula—to Ursula, who had done the second best essay. And no wonder, when she had known all along what the subject was to be! Ursula got the twenty pounds, Cora, and you—you got the captaincy!"

"I—I—"

"Now let me tell you, without a moment's delay, what is to be done about it all. You will go straight from here, Cora, and write out your resignation of the captaincy, giving as the reason that you know Betty did not cheat at the exam."

"That's as good as confessing!" panted Cora. "It means expulsion just the same!"

"Not necessarily. You will not own that you, and Judith, with Ursula, were at the bottom of the whole business. As a sheer act of grace towards the three of you, I allow you to maintain silence when you are questioned as to how you know that Betty was innocent. I myself shall say nothing, but shall make it quite clear that I have had proof that Betty really is innocent. Miss Somerfield will see that I am giving someone in the Form a chance, and she will decide not to probe too deeply into the matter. So, Cora, the three of you will escape the expulsion you deserve, and if you do not make amends in the days to come—well, there will be no mercy for you next time!"

Cora opened and shut her hands with nervous tension.

"Do you accept the chance I give you?"

"Yes, I suppose— Oh, but give me time!" wailed the miserable culprit. "Miss Redgrave! Show a little pity, and give me time—until to-morrow—"

"No. I feel as Polly and the rest feel about it. Poor Betty must not be allowed to pass another night, ill as she is, without knowing that she has been cleared of the awful, unmerited stigma!"

The junior mistress pointed to the door.

"Go away and write out the resignation," she said sternly. "You have half an hour in which to write it and bring it to me here!"

Cora drew a hard breath as she turned away. Slowly she slunk from the room, and then Miss Redgrave sat down to wait.

Only a minute after the half-hour had expired when Cora came in with the letter. Miss Redgrave took it, read it through,

then nodded her dismissal of the culprit, saying not a word.

Hardly had Cora skulked off again before the junior mistress herself departed, in search of the headmistress. And what passed at that interview may be gathered from what followed.

When the sun had set, and the last red embers of the afterglow were dying out in the west, Polly Linton received a summons to Miss Redgrave's private study.

"Ah, Polly!" the junior mistress greeted her, with untroubled eyes. "Miss Somerfield and I, along with your Form mistress, Miss Massingham, have just ended a long talk by going over to the sanatorium."

"Oh, have you seen Betty?" exclaimed Polly. "How—how is she now, please?"

"Worlds better, thanks to what the headmistress and Miss Massingham had to say to her. But you are to go over to the sanatorium and see Betty yourself, so I needn't say any more!"

She added, smiling, as she nodded Polly to the door:

"Now, don't you stay too long, mind! And no scaring nurse by doing a waltz round the ward!"

"I promise!" laughed Polly. "But, gracious," she was saying to herself, as she rushed off downstairs, "whatever is happening now?"

There was a touch of the old madcap Polly about the way in which she sprinted for the sanatorium doorway. And she was up the stairs in a moment, for all her great care about not making any noise.

Nurse opened the door of the ward to her, smiling a welcome.

"Please, nurse, may I—"

"Oh, yes; I've been expecting you, and so has Betty!" said nurse. "It's rather dark—"

"Is it? I don't mind, anyway!" Polly whispered breathlessly. "Betty—Betty, dear!"

"Oh, Polly!" came faintly, but in a tone of great joy, from the bed where Betty lay. And in a moment Polly was there, and her head went down so that her lips might shower kisses on her loved chum's cheeks.

"I can hardly see you, dear," Betty whispered, with a little catch in her voice; "but we don't mind not having a light, do we? We're together, Polly—"

"Yes, dear." Polly felt for the ailing girl's hand, and held it fast. "And so long

as we are together nothing seems to matter, ever!"

"Just what I was going to say," murmured Betty. "And you've come, Polly, because—"

"I was told to come. But I really don't know why, except that I'm sure you are ever so much better, and it's quite, quite all right about—about that exam. business!"

"Yes, Polly. Oh, if you only knew how much better it has made me feel!"

"I knew it would. That's why I—why all of us wouldn't allow another night to pass!"

"You are a good, true friend, Polly! And the others are all like you now; Trixie, and Madge, and Paula; Tess and Dolly; they—"

"We are just longing to have you back, Betty, dear, as our captain once again!"

In the darkness a very happy sigh came from the bed.

Nurse came across the ward and made a motion with her lips that meant:

"Now, Polly, time's up!"

"All right, nurse! I'm going. Only, before I do say good-night, Betty, I—No, I don't know that I can say anything after all!" Polly finished, with a helpless laugh. "I feel as if—as if I must do that waltz round the ward, after all! But I won't, Betty!"

"Do it when you get back to the old den, where I hope to be with you again soon!" smiled the girl in bed.

"Soon—soon, yes, come back soon!" Polly exclaimed, holding her hands again. "That's what I want to say, Betty, dear! On behalf of Madge and Trixie, Paula, and all the rest—it's all there is to say; get well soon."

"I'm sure I shall," said Betty. "now I've nothing to weigh upon my mind. So good-night, Polly, dear, and—good luck!"

"Keep the flag flying! I won't forget your words, Betty! Good-night, dear! Sleep well! You've got to get right again soon!"

CHAPTER 27.

Back to Her Captaincy.

At last! That was the joyful phrase running in Betty Barton's mind, at twelve o'clock a few days later.

The school chimes were dinning out the

hour of four—the welcome hour of her release from the school sanatorium!

Oh, but it had seemed a long, weary time of waiting for this happy moment when, bidding a loving good-bye to all who had tended her so faithfully during her critical illness, she could walk out of the silent building and plunge once again into all the life of the school!

True, she was not going to take her place in class for a few days. But she was going back to Study No. 12—back to the old happy life with Polly Linton, and with all the other girls who had become just as loyal friends as Polly!

And the Form had already turned out to give her a rousing reception—no mistake about that.

Even if nurse had not drawn Betty's attention to the crowd swarming outside the sanatorium entrance, Betty would have known the meaning of all the jabber that now floated up to her through the open windows!

Polly, Paula, Tess, and Trixie—Madge, too.

"Well, it was no use "funking" the terrific demonstration that was certainly in store for her. That was what Betty said to herself, as she crept softly down the stairs to the entrance porch.

"Hurrah! Here she is!"

"Hooray!"

"Yes, wather! Goals, hip, hip, hooway for Betty Barton!"

"Hurrah!"

The storm of cheering had burst, and it was no use Betty dodging back into the porch, feeling that she could face things better in a few moments!

Eagerly the girls of the Fourth Form rushed at her, and out into the open they had her in a twinkling, three or four of them lifting her shoulder high.

"Bai Jove, geals, what a twent it is to see Betty out again!" cried Paula Creel.

"Yes, Betty," they were all shouting heartily, "we are glad, you know!"

And, as they flocked around her, after she had been set upon her feet, the cheering was resumed:

"Hurrah!"

"And again, geals! Hip, hip, hip, hooway!"

"Paula, do be quiet!" laughed Betty Barton. "Stop it, Polly, dear, do! Tess, Trixie—shake hands, and let it rest at that, please! Hallo, Madge, dear!"

Now the crowd suddenly opened out to let in Miss Somerfield and one or two of the other mistresses.

"Congratulations, Betty, dear!" the head-mistress of the school cried heartily, holding out her hand. "You didn't feel you wanted to stop with nurse another week?"

"No, indeed!"

"I'm sure you didn't," laughed Miss Somerfield.

She stepped back whilst Miss Massingham and Miss Redgrave each took their turn at greeting Betty on her happy return to school life.

Then a general movement was made towards Study No. 12. It was really amazing the number of girls who managed to crowd into that study, all happy and cheering because their captain was back.

Polly, of course, had known that this was to be the day of Betty's return, and Polly had planned a little surprise.

They left Betty alone when the bell rang for afternoon lessons; but, as soon as lessons were over, the girls were back again in Study No. 12.

"Clear out, you girls!" cried Polly. "Come back again in half an hour, and tea will be ready."

Paula came straggling in at that moment. She was overloaded with parcels,

for, as soon as she had been freed from lessons, Paula had dashed to the tuck-shop and laid in a supply of goods which bade fair to eclipse all previous study "spreads."

Polly succeeded in clearing the study of most of the girls, although a large number remained to set out the tea-things and prepare the meal.

And what a meal that was! Nearly every girl in the Form was there. The Grandways girls, of course, remained aloof; but they knew that their domination of the Form was as good as sealed.

"Girls!" cried Polly, in the midst of all the hubbub, standing on a chair and raising a glass of ginger-beer. "Here's to Betty Barton, the best captain the Form ever had! Here and now I welcome Betty back to her own!"

"No, no, Polly!" cried Betty. "You must carry on—"

"I shan't do anything of the kind, Betty," replied Polly. "You're the captain, and the captain you shall remain!"

"Yes, wather!" came the voice of Paula Creel; and the next moment every girl present had sprang to her feet with a glass of ginger-beer, and was pledging:

"Betty Barton, captain of the Fourth Form!"



NOTE!—Two more splendid numbers of "The Schoolgirls' Own" Library will be on sale on Friday, Mar. 6th. See page iv of cover for further particulars.

The Most Popular Girls' Hobby.

What is the most popular girls' hobby?

That question, put to half-a-dozen girls, elicited a wide variety of replies, but none of them thought of the most common hobby of all, a hobby that is popular not only with girls but with people of all ages in every country of the world.

And that hobby is collecting things.

It is doubtful whether there is a girl in a hundred who has not at some time or other fallen to the fascination of this pastime. Indeed, it might almost be said to be an inherent trait in the human character.

Perhaps the reason is that it is the simplest hobby, and one of the few which makes no regular demand on one's time, pocket and ingenuity. Besides which it offers a tremendous field for one who has plenty of time and a little spare cash, and can also be used as a means of adding to one's pocket money.

In earliest girlhood nearly everyone collects her toys for a period long after she has outgrown her use for them. Then comes a time when she becomes a enthusiastic collector of weekly periodicals. The papers that contain her favourite characters are saved, often with the intention of one day going over them and re-reading all the old stories, but very frequently with no other object than just collecting's sake.

Later, the hobby is developed on more discriminating lines, and the objects are saved with an eye to their value—more frequently educational or sentimental than of actual cash.

Under this heading comes the collecting of stamps, coins and picture cards. Haven't you at one time or another treasured some? All three of them may give you a better knowledge of the world than your studies in geography and history.

One girl I know filled several albums with the stamps she had gradually collected over a period of years. They did not cost her a halfpenny, for she enlisted the aid of all her friends in getting them together, and had a regular system of exchange with other enthusiasts.

Soon she found that the stamps of each country had a language of its own. The pictures on them told of the industry and the life of the various countries, the postmarks made her familiar with the important towns,

the prices on them taught her the system of coinage and many other things of real value.

Recent history, too, is very largely reflected by the manner in which stamps are surcharged and altered. For those who gain an intimate knowledge of philately and are careful in their specimen-collecting, there is a fair chance of making it a paying hobby.

Cigarette-cards are very popular with young collectors nowadays. There are so many series of widespread interest nowadays that we all find ourselves joining in the craze. Zest is added by the fact that there is an element of chance in getting all the numbers we desire, and the nearer we get to completing the collection the greater our keenness grows.

The obtaining of signatures is another collecting craze that has a constant vogue. There are some girls who limit their activities to the circle of their friends and acquaintances, and there are others who disregard their friends for the more precious signatures of celebrities.

The latter are naturally more difficult to obtain, and for this reason many girls are satisfied with reproduced copies which are to be found occasionally in papers and periodicals. There is little value in them, but, nevertheless, they provide the hobbyist with a sense of satisfaction that she herself would find difficult to explain.

Few would care to try to give a reason for responding to the craze; sufficient is it that it undeniably gives pleasure and occupies what would otherwise be dull spare moments.

So far only the most popular collections have been mentioned. There are others as peculiar as they are original, but all no doubt with their own fascinations.

Perhaps it is the unusualness that attracts—certainly one would find it difficult otherwise to explain away the collecting of different specimens of wood, rock, stones, etc., from all parts of the world.

Souvenir-gathering is another strange hobby, yet there are innumerable girls who make a point of bringing home and saving odd trifles from any new place they may visit.

But, however out-of-the-way or commonplace your collection may be, you will find that it has few limitations, and the pleasure it affords is never-ending.

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