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THE GIRL MISJUDGED!

BY MARJORIE STANTON

A Tale of the Early Adventures of Betty Barron & Co of Morcove School



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THE GIRL MORCOVE MISJUDGED!

By MARJORIE STANTON.

An Enthralling Long Complete Tale of the Early Adventures of Betty Barton and Co., the
Most Popular Schoolgirls in the World.

CHAPTER 1.

One of Her Moods.

"M-A-D-G-E!"

There was no response to the long, drawn-out cry which Betty Barton had voiced.

Standing at the open doorway of the fine music-room at Morcove School, Betty could hear the bell ringing its summons to the Fourth Form to come in from "break." She could also hear Madge Minden playing on at the piano, utterly heedless of the bell. And so she thought it advisable to call again, half-laughing as she did so.

"M-a-d-g-e! Aren't you coming?"

Madge Minden turned a page of the music and went on playing.

Her hands crashed out wonderful chords; the whole vast room filled with the brilliant melody which she was playing so perfectly; and Betty Barton, at the risk of being late herself, just stood still and listened.

For Betty, captain of the Fourth Form, was fond of all good music. She could not play the piano like Madge Minden. No other girl in the Fourth Form—or, indeed, the whole school—could do that, but Betty knew when a difficult piece was being performed to perfection, and this was the case now.

There was a scurry of steps in the corridor, and several other girls of the Fourth Form joined Betty at the doorway.

"My word, Betty!" burst out Polly Linton; "I thought you were going to give Madge the tip that it's time to go into classes! When Madge gets at the piano, she——"

"Sh!" Betty raised a finger. "Let her finish the piece!"

"But that's the wonderful rhapsody thing that takes half an hour to play!" gasped Polly Linton.

"Yes, wather!" chimed in Paula Creel. "A wicidulous long whapsody, with a wengeance!"

"Madge! Madge!" shouted Polly. "You'll be late, Madge!"

The only response from the pianist was a sort of "Don't care if I am late!" shrug of Madge's shoulders. She turned over another leaf of the music and crashed on again.

Downstairs the bell for classes gave a last violent tinkle.

Polly Linton nipped across to the piano, looked over Madge's shoulder, and came back.

"She's at page nine!" grinned Polly. "And the piece runs to seventeen pages!" "Bai Jove!" breathed Paula. "Weally, a wicidulous bit of music, what?"

"It's wonderful!" said Betty, "and I am not surprised Madge forgets everything else when she starts playing it, but—— Bother! I feel you are right, girls; we simply must get her to come away."

"One last shout before we go, anyhow," said madcap Polly. "Madge, you suffer! That's enough for the present, Madge!"

"Yes, wather!"

"Have a bit of pity on the poor piano, Madge!"

"Bai Jove, yes! Madge deah—"

"Oh, bother you! Why don't you run away and play?" Madge glared round to cry at them suddenly. She was still playing faultlessly, knowing the piece almost by heart.

"Run away and play!" echoed Polly grimly. "We've got to run for the classroom, if we are not to be late! And you, Madge—"

"Do come now, Madge, dear," pleaded Betty. "Just to save a bother with Miss Massingham!"

"Oh!" Madge looked as if she had been about to say "Bother Miss Massingham!" But she checked the impatient remark, and went on playing.

"Weal, geals," drawled Paula Creel, "I wather think we had better get downstairs and leave her alone in her glory, what?"

"It's a pity," said Betty, grimacing. "But if we all stay that will only make matters worse."

And they moved towards the stairs. Just as they reached the Fourth Form passage, they beheld Miss Massingham, the Form-mistress coming away from the classroom with a quick, impatient step.

"Girls, how late you are, getting back into class! Go along to your places at once!" rapped out the Form-mistress. "Where is Madge Minden?"

There was no chance for the girls to make some discreet answer that might yet save Madge from getting into bother. For that wonderful rhapsody was still sounding through the whole schoolhouse, and Miss Massingham must have been deaf not to hear it.

"Surely," cried the Form-mistress, "that is Madge playing the piano! That piece, too—a modern Russian composer whom I abominate!"

Waving the girls to go to their classrooms, she went swiftly up to the music-room, striding close to Madge's shoulder as that girl was just rattling off page fourteen.

"Madge Minden!"

Madge did not reply. In fact, so interested was she in her playing that it was

doubtful whether she heard the Form-mistress' voice.

"Girl!" Miss Massingham almost shrieked. "Stop—stop, this moment!"

And at last Madge stopped!

"Oh!" she exclaimed, revolving on the music-stool. "I'm sorry!" She laughed. "I really had no idea, Miss Massingham—"

"Girl, you must have heard the bell!" broke in Miss Massingham sternly. "And you went on playing. You meant to go on to the very end!"

"I thought you would excuse me, Miss Massingham. The piece—"

"I shall not excuse you, Madge! The piece is the very last one I wish you to waste your time over, as I have told you before now. This ridiculous Russian stuff—"

"I beg your pardon, Miss Massingham, but—"

"Don't argue with one who knows better, Madge!"

"Excuse me, Miss Massingham, but that piece—"

"I dislike it!"

"It is played by all the great—"

"It is not going to be played by you or any other girl in my Form! I have given my views on the matter to the Head-mistress. I have told you, Madge, I prefer that my girls should learn pieces of the proper conventional kind. You have Mendelssohn—"

"Mendelssohn!" Madge said scoffingly.

"Girl, are you going to argue that the 'Songs Without Words—'?"

"I learnt them when I was ten years old," said Madge. "I'm sick of Mendelssohn! I—I like modern music!"

"I do not; and as for this piece of modern music," said Miss Massingham, who was thoroughly roused, "I will not have you play it again, you understand!"

Madge, as she reached out a hand to take the piece of music from the piano, shrugged.

It was shrug that would have angered any mistress in Miss Massingham's place at that moment, suggesting defiance. And suddenly the Form-mistress snatched at the music and tore it across.

"There, girl!" she cried, tearing the sheets again and again. "Perhaps that will teach you to be more obedient in future! Go at once to your place in class!"

Then Madge did another thing that showed the sort of girl she was.

Before obeying that order to go downstairs, she stooped and very deliberately picked up all the litter of torn music.

Miss Massingham might have been pardoned if she had felt more annoyed than ever. But suddenly she did a very creditable thing.

"Madge," she said, in a softened voice, "I made a mistake in forgetting your rather peculiar temperament. I must make allowances for your absolute passion for music, and your way of forgetting that you are still very young—still only a schoolgirl. We will forget all this that has happened."

Madge stood quite still, grimly mute.

"You have been self-assertive and rather impudent, Madge. But we will forget it," said Miss Massingham. "To restore a proper feeling between mistress and scholar, let me make a suggestion, dear."

Madge looked up at the Form-mistress in surprise.

"I have a great friend of mine arriving this evening on a few days' visit to the school," went on the Form-mistress. "I would like her to hear you play, Madge, for you are indeed a very fine player, when you keep off fantastic modern stuff!"

Miss Massingham laughed, trying to restore the girl's good humour by this bit of teasing.

"So, Madge, you will let my friend have the pleasure of hearing you, won't you? I'll let you know the time for the great recital when my friend has arrived. We will have a real musical recital, Madge, and you shall play some of your sonata. Beethoven—Beethoven is so beautiful, don't you think?"

"Yes," Madge spoke at last, "but if your friend is anything of a music-lover, Miss Massingham, she will be glad to hear the *Moffkowski* rhapsody. *Moffkowski*—"

"We will not discuss *Moffkowski* any more," Miss Massingham broke in, rather tensely. "I hope never to hear you play another line of that barbaric stuff!"

And then she walked off, perhaps dreading to stay another moment for fear of another flare-up.

Madge Minden followed; but just by the stairs she ran up to the next floor, to leave the torn-up music on her study table.

It was still there when all the school came out of class at midday, and Betty and Polly, chancing to go by in the corridor,

saw their musical chum trying to sort the fragments out.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Betty. "What have you got there, Madge? A musical jig-saw puzzle?"

"Oh, *bai Jovo!*" cried Paula, drifting into Madge's study after Betty and Polly had entered. "Why, gwacious, goals, 'it is—"

"The *Moffkowski* rhapsody, yes!" Madge burst out, her dark eyes aflame. "Torn to bits!"

"Torn! But—"

"By whom, Madge?"

"She did it—Miss Massingham!" blazed out Madge, dashing all the pieces of paper back on to the table. "And then—sort of adding insult to injury—she asks me to spend an evening later on, playing piffing old-fashioned stuff to a frumpish friend!"

"*Bai Jovo!*"

"Ha, ha, ha!" exploded Polly. "I'm sorry, Madge, but— Ha, ha, ha!"

"Don't laugh!" cried Madge, stamping a foot. "I tell you—"

"Half a sec., dear," Betty put in tactfully. "Miss Massingham was meaning well, I dare say, when she invited you to play to her friend!"

"I'm not going to play to her friend!"

"Oh, Madge, don't talk like that!" cried Tess Trelawney, who had come into the room, and heard a good deal of the foregoing talk. "It was a compliment!"

"I am not going to— Yes, I will, though!" Madge broke off, with a more fiery look than ever in her dark eyes. "I'll play to Miss Massingham and her friend when the time comes. And I'll play the *Moffkowski* rhapsody!"

"Madge!" gasped the girls.

"That's my intention!" Madge went on grimly. "I'll get another copy of the bit of music she tore up! And when the evening comes, I'll jolly well play it; let her tear it up again if she likes!"

"Madge—" they all began again; but she silenced them with a gesture.

"I'll get another copy of the rhapsody before the day is out! I can get one over in Barncombe. I'll go over on my bike after tea, and I won't come back until I've got another copy of that piece!"

"Madge!" pleaded Betty, half-laughing and yet half distressed, "don't do anything rash! As friends of yours, we—"

"Clear out! That's the best you can do!" Madge broke in. "Wait a bit, girls!

I—I— You know I'm awfully fond of all of you, but when it comes to having your favourite bit of music torn up in front of your eyes, then all I can say is—"

"Malheur—hard luck!" put in Trixie.

"Oui, oui!" chuckled Polly.

"Yes, wather!"

"Will you stop your nonsense?" Madge almost raved. "I say it is a cruel shame that I shouldn't be allowed to play a piece of music because it is a cut above the old stuff! Barbaric!" She swept the fragments of music into the wastepaper-basket.

"What a word to use!"

"Yes, wather a stwong expression," Paula said, still trying to pour oil on the troubled waters. "My own feeling is that the piece of music is all right in its way, but—er—a twistle long—what? Seventeen pages, bai Jove!"

"Seventeen pages too many!" grinned Polly. "All right, Madge! I—I was only— Madge!"

"Out you go!" cried Madge, rushing the laughing Polly into the passage. "And just stay out, too!"

Paula Creel dodged past the fiery girl, and Tess and Trixie also escaped into the corridor, where Polly was putting her rumpled hair to rights. On the whole, Madge seemed to be in a dangerous mood at present, and even Betty thought it best to come away, leaving friendly dissuasions until later on.

But, although the captain of the Form got Madge in a quieter mood, after dinner, and was allowed to say certain things without getting her head "snapped off," the interview was all in vain.

For, at a quarter to five that afternoon, Betty & Co. saw Madge riding towards the school gates on her bicycle.

"Oh, she's off to Barncombe," exclaimed Polly.

"Madge—Madge!" they all chorused, giving chase to the cyclist. "Now, Madge, don't go doing anything rash!"

"I'm going to get another copy of that bit of music," Madge called back over one shoulder. "And when I've got it I jolly well mean to play it!"

"But—"

"Ta-ta, girls!"

And, pressing harder upon the pedals with her shapely feet, Madge Minden skimmed through the gateway and took the road to Barncombe town.

CHAPTER 2.

"I shall be there!"

BARNCOMBE folk must have thought she was a very happy-looking school-girl who pedaled along the High Street round about six o'clock that evening.

For Madge Minden rode into the town looking as if she had not only enjoyed a very nice spin on the bike, but had had nothing whatever to ruffle her spirits during the day.

She made for the Creamery Tea Room, partly because that was a handy place at which to store the machine for an hour or so, and partly because she meant to have a late tea.

By now, another girl in Madge's place might have wished that she had induced a few chums to come with her on this jaunt, but Madge, although very fond of Betty and Polly and lots of other girls, could be happy for hours by herself.

She seated herself at one of the vacant tables, and gave her order to the waitress, and then looked through a weekly pictorial until the dainty tea was brought.

In a leisurely manner Madge drank her tea, and partook of the cakes, rounding off the meal with a fresh cream bun. Then, drawing on her gloves, she stepped to the pay-desk and settled her bill, and quitted the shop.

She made straight for the music shop and entered.

"Is Mr. Adamson about?" she asked the little child who came forward from a parlour behind the shop. "I want to buy a piece of music."

"No, miss," the girl answered very shyly, a hand twisting her pinafore. "Father's out on a round of piano-tuning."

"Oh!" Madge frowned. "When will he be back, then?"

"I couldn't say for certain, miss!"

"An hour's time—two hours?"

"Oh, he will be back before then, I should hope," said the child. "'Cos I'm all alone, you see, and father wouldn't like me to be by myself too long!"

"Haven't you any mother?" asked Madge.

"No, miss. Mother died last year, and there's only me and dad. We came here because the doctors said the place might cure her; but it didn't. And so she—she—"

"You poor little mite!" Madge murmured, as the child's eyes brimmed. "Well, look, here are some choccs! I bought them to take back to the school, but you can have them—do, to please me?"

The child whispered her shy thanks as she took the beautiful box of chocolates.

"I wish father was in," she said, "cos we don't hardly ever get any customers. It is only the piano-tuning that keeps him going, so I would like him to sell you some music."

"Oh, I'm going to buy the music I want, if he has it," Madge said, with a queer little laugh. "I'm going to wait for him. I'll look back presently. Ta, ta!"

And she smiled herself out of the shop, returning in about an hour's time to find the little child still all by herself.

"What, not back yet, little what's-your-name?" Madge said, laughing.

"Please, I'm Amy," the child confided shyly. "And the chocolates are fine!"

"That's good. I say, shall I play a bit of music on the piano?" Madge suggested, stepping to the old instrument that filled a dingy corner of the shop. "Just to pass the time away—eh?"

In that low-ceilinged place, with its window all crammed with music and printed bills that blotted out the fading evening light, there was already a deep gloom. Little Amy's far from rosy face had looked very woeful when Madge came into the shop, but it brightened now, and Madge thought to herself: "Poor kiddie! How lonely it is for her!"

Standing at the piano, and smiling round all the time at the child, the Morcové junior played a few bars of music.

"What do you think of that, Amy?"

"I—I think it is very beautiful."

"Not barbaric—eh?" Madge said, with a laugh. "Well, barbaric or not, that's the bit of music I want when your father comes in. Because I only half know it by heart, and I— Hallo!"

"Here's father!" cried the child joyfully. A thin man, with a stooping walk, came softly into the shop, murmuring a polite good-evening to the girl customer.

"Did I hear you playing a few bars of the Mofkowski rhapsody?" he said, his thin face creasing with a pleased smile. "Fancy you, a mere schoolgirl, if I may say so—"

"Oh, but I don't know it properly yet," broke in Madge, flushing at the half-spoken

compliment. "That's why I am here now, Mr. Adamson. I want a copy of that piece to take back with me to the school."

"Certainly, certainly," he said, setting down the little leathern bag in which he carried his tuning instruments. "Ah—um! Let me see now; the Mofkowski—yes! I think I have a copy."

He went behind the counter, rummaged out a portfolio labelled with a big "M," and whipped the right piece of music in front of Madge's eyes.

"Oh, good!" she cried. "I expect you think I have a queer taste in music, Mr. Adamson?"

"No; oh, no! That is a magnificent piece."

"You don't think it is a trifle—barbaric?"

"Barbaric!" He threw up his hands. "It is a sublime composition, young lady—sublime! The only thing is, so few people can manage it."

He thanked her for the money, gave her some change, and bowed her out.

"Good-evening, miss! Say good-evening to the young lady, Amy dear!"

"Good-evening, and fank you ever so much for the chocolates!" cried the child.

"Chocolates!" exclaimed her father. "Er—miss—"

But Madge was off. High time, too, she was thinking, as she made for the bakehouse yard where her bicycle was stored. Only by riding pretty fast all the way home would she be indoors before call-over.

It was still a calm Madge Minden, however, who was to be seen riding out of the quaint old town five minutes later.

Not until she had gained the open road did she begin to feel that haste would be better than dignity. Then she started in real earnest to make up for lost time, changing her graceful attitude for a hunched-up one, her pretty head coming well down towards the handle-bars, whilst she whirred and whirred at the pedals.

After the first half-mile, she had to flog slowly uphill; but there followed a lovely level stretch which she could skim along most easily, the wind being behind her. The sky was overcast, but the dark clouds only seemed to invest the surrounding hills with a greater grandeur, and Madge was looking to right and left all the time, drinking in the beauty of the wild Devonshire scenery.

And then, all at once—ping!

"Bother!" cried Madge, pulling up sharply.

It was a puncture!

Jumping from the saddle, she glared disgustedly at the flat tyre, and shook the whole machine savagely for "letting her down" like this.

A puncture, at this time of the evening! Just the sort of thing that would happen, of course!

"And I don't suppose for a moment I've got a— Yes, I have, thank goodness!" she said aloud to herself, opening the saddle-bag. "Just a little solution and one patch!"

But Madge, even if time had not been so pressing, would never have set about mending that puncture with very good grace. The girl who could play the Mofskowski rhapsody was not fond of jobs like this!

She slammed the bike on to the grassy bank beside the road, pulled off her gloves, and set to work, fuming short-temperedly when the rubber solution got all over her fingers, and when the tyre-cover, after taking five minutes to come off, took at least twenty minutes to go on again!

Altogether it was an exasperating job that had only been completed by a quarter-past nine, and Madge, for once, really was feeling quite panicky when at last she set off again.

Past nine o'clock, and at least another half-hour's ride in front of her! And at any moment—she felt she must hold her breath as the alarming thought came to her—at any instant that patched-up tyre might give another ping! Madge's puncture repairs always did burst inside of ten minutes!

Whirr, whirr, whirr! On she flew, while she still had the chance. The sun had set now, and the dark clouds were fast blotting out all the remaining daylight. To right and left the wild moorland landscape darkened with the onrush of night, whilst the lonely road had to be peered at harder and harder, if one was to avoid loose flints.

And now the level stretch ended in a dip downhill—a glorious free-wheel spin that Morcove girls always revelled in, although one had to look out for danger at the cross-roads at the bottom.

As Madge made the swift descent, the darkness seemed to deepen rapidly. That was because she was whirring down into a valley amongst the hills. It suddenly oc-

curred to her that she ought to be showing a light; but she couldn't pull up now, even if she wanted to. So she plucked away at the bell—tr-r-r-ring, tr-r-r-ring, tr-r-r-ing!—and kept the back brake gently on the scrape.

Whilst she was doing this, she caught sight of a lonely figure plodding up the hill towards her.

The solitary pedestrian was a girl who was already keeping well to the side of the road to let Madge pass. And all would have gone well, no doubt, only—

Ping!

That was the back tyre again!

Madge felt the whole machine jolt and wobble violently as the rear wheel began to run on its rim. Desperately she tried to steady the bicycle, at the same time trying to pull up; but the worst was still to happen.

The front wheel struck a loose stone in the road, and the next Madge knew she and the bicycle had crashed full into the shrinking girl beside the road, felling her to the ground.

Unhurt herself—although she had been thrown headlong from the saddle—Madge scrambled to her feet and ran to the other girl's side.

"Oh, are you badly hurt?" was the schoolgirl's anxious cry. "I'm so sorry! I am afraid you must be—"

"No; I—I— Give me a moment," faltered the other girl weakly.

She suddenly desisted in the attempt to rise, and, to Madge's horror, sank back upon the roadway, in an utter swoon.

In a moment, however, her senses came swirling back, and she made a brave attempt to smile as she saw the horrified look in Madge's eyes.

"I am so sorry," was all Madge could say earnestly. "It wouldn't have happened, only—"

"I know; you were not to blame," broke in the other girl. "I heard the tyre burst, and, of course, that did the mischief."

"But you are hurt—you are wincing with pain!" exclaimed Madge, still in great distress. "Oh, do tell me what I can do for you! Shall I find help?"

"No—oh, no!" And again the girl smiled bravely. "I feel quite all right," she added, getting on to her feet, "except that my arm—this wrist of mine—"

"Is it paining you?"

"Your handle-bars gave it a nasty blow, and I'm afraid—yes—"

"Gracious! I don't like the look of that wrist!" Madge cried. "It is going to be a lot of trouble!"

"It is not broken, anyhow," said the injured girl, trying not to wince. "I'll have it seen to when I get home, so don't you worry, please."

Madge now took a good look at the girl. She was about eighteen, exceedingly pretty, and with a certain air of refinement of which shabby clothes could not rob her.

"Promise me one thing," Madge exclaimed presently. "You—your must let me pay any doctor's bill, or bear any other expense arising out of this accident. Please!"

"Thank you; that is very kind of you," the girl said gratefully. "But you were not a bit to blame, and so it is all nonsense your talking like that. My wrist will soon be all right again. At least, I hope so."

This last remark escaped the injured girl before she could check it at her lips. And something in the sudden note of distress, the way in which the speaker's face whitened, as if alarming possibilities had occurred to her—these things made Madge more sorry for her than ever.

"You live in Barncombe, I suppose?"

"Yes, miss."

"I am Madge Minden—a scholar at Morcove, you know. Tell me, please, do you have to work for your living? Because, if so, you will lose your earnings by having to be idle for a bit."

"That—that is just what was worrying me," the girl answered ruefully. "I didn't want to bother you; but now you have spoken so kindly, I can't help confiding in you. I am an orphan, and I earn a little money by playing the piano."

"Oh, you play! So do I!" Madge cried eagerly. "I am awfully keen on the piano!"

"The piano is my instrument," said her new acquaintance. "And I have the strangest sort of paid engagement. Several times a week I go to a certain dingy house in Barncombe, to play to a blind old lady who lives there, all alone except for an aged housekeeper."

"How strange!"

"It—it is more than strange. I often think," went on the injured girl. "There is something mysterious—very romantic—about the whole business. The old lady never speaks to me. She just listens to my

playing, and then I come away. But the money—"

"And now you must lose it! What a shame!"

"Oh, well!" The girl shrugged her shoulders. "I don't mind losing the money so much so long as I don't lose the job altogether! That is my worst fear—that the lady may tire of waiting for my bad wrist to get well again, and may engage someone else."

"She shan't do that—she shan't have the chance!" Madge burst out impulsively. "Listen to me, please. I mean all I am going to say. Whilst you are prevented from playing, I'll go to that old house!"

"You!"

"Yes. I'll go there several times a week and play—"

"But you are only a schoolgirl. You may be able to play much better than I can; that wouldn't surprise me at all. But a school-girl—"

"My friends would tell you that when Madge Minden makes up her mind to do a thing, she does it!" Madge broke in, with a grim smile. "So, please, now, don't let us waste time over needless words. You are—"

"My name is Alva Forbes, and I live at Prospect Terrace, Barncombe."

"And the house where you go to play?"

"That is at this end of the town—No. 10, The Retreat, is the address. The old lady's name is Charteris—Miss Susan Charteris. I'd like to tell you what little I know about her strange history; but—"

"Yes, I must push on for the school," Madge broke in, sighing regretfully. "And you—you must hurry on to the town and get that wrist seen to. I shall see more of you, of course, as time goes on. Meanwhile—"

Madge picked up the damaged bicycle, and then, making ready to walk on, she held out her hand.

"Good-night," she said simply. "And you quite understand, Alva Forbes; I am going to take your place as the paid pianist! When must I go to the house?"

"To-morrow is one of the days—Wednesday afternoon."

"Wednesday afternoon is splendid! We have a halfer then. All right, I'll be there!"

"Oh, but—"

"Remember what I told you!" Madge

Minden smiled back at her new friend, as she walked away. "When I make up my mind to do a thing, I do it! And I have said—I shall be there!"

CHAPTER 3.
Off Again!

IN one of the Fourth Form studies at Morcove School two girls were alone together.

They were Cora Grandways and her younger sister, Judith.

It was quite dark out of doors now, and in the usual course the whole school would have been trooping up to the dormitories at this time, for call-over and prayers had ended ten minutes ago.

But the mistresses were rather disturbed about the unexplained absence of one scholar, and this anxiety had resulted in the girls as a whole being left to wait about, for the present, pending hoped-for news of the absentee.

"Hark!" said Cora, suddenly starting out of her chair. "I think that is Madge, back at last!"

But, after opening the door and listening for a mere second to some burst of talk downstairs, she turned away with a shake of the head.

"No, Judy. She's not back, even now!"

"Good job, too!" muttered Judith Grandways. "What I hope is that she has done something at last that will get her into a row!"

"I shouldn't break my heart, either," Cora said, with a malicious grin. "Not that I have any particular grudge against Madge. But Betty Barton and Polly Linton are very fond of the girl, and any disgrace she gets into—"

"That's just it!" smiled Judith. "Never mind how the trouble comes about—whether it's Madge's doing or anybody else's—we want to see Betty with her hands full of worry!"

Cora flung herself into an easy-chair again.

"I wish it was Betty who was out late like this!" she pondered aloud, champing at a coral necklace. "Oh, Judy, what wouldn't I give to see Betty Barton—not Madge or any other girl, but upstart Betty Barton—buddled out of the school. She— Hark!"

Cora sprang to her feet. She darted to

the door, whipped it open, listened eagerly, then flashed round.

"Yes, it's Madge! She's back!"

"Oh!"

"She is being questioned by Miss Massingham, downstairs. Come on, Judy!"

And next instant both girls went whirling along the passageway and down to the hall below.

Almost all the rest of the Form was there. Betty Barton and Polly Linton; Trixie Hope and Tess Trelawney; Paula Creel—these were only a few of the scholars in a crowd, which also included many members of other Forms.

And there, too, was Madge Minden—only this moment arrived indoors, looking very pale with fatigue, and yet still the same imperturbable Madge!

Cora and Judith, as they rushed forward to join the crowd, realised one strange thing instantly. Of all present, Madge was certainly the calmest, her dark eyes seeming to ask the bland question of mistresses and scholars alike: "What are you all so scared about?"

"You cycled into Barncombe at tea-time?" Miss Massingham was questioning the scapegrace, as Cora and Judith drew close to listen. "Well?"

"I had a puncture on the way home, Miss Massingham."

"That was unfortunate. But, if you had started back in reasonable time, Madge, you would not have been as late as this!"

"I mended the puncture," Madge said demurely. "That took me ages. It always does take me ages to mend a—"

"We all know that punctures take some time to repair," Miss Massingham cut in impatiently, "but how is it that you are so late, Madge?"

"The mended puncture burst—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed most of the girls, amused by Madge's coolness.

"And then?" questioned Miss Massingham.

"I had to wheel the bike home!"

"That sounds very plausible," said the Form-mistress, "but it does not explain away one unpleasant feature of the case. You must have started for home far too late, Madge! You were not breaking rules by cycling to the town so early in the evening. But what time was it when you started for home?"

"About eight-fifteen," Madge answered.

"Far too late!" frowned Miss Massingham. "I shall not gate you for the rest of the week, as perhaps I ought to do. But you understand, Madge, the town is out of bounds to you for the next seven days!"

The Form-mistress seemed to think that she could not do better than let that sentence of punishment sink into the minds of other girls who were crowding round. So, as a check to all the excited whispering that had started, she ordered everybody off to bed, and then hurried away to report the whole affair to her principal.

"Hard luck, Madge!" said Betty, when the errant schoolgirl was going up to the dormitory with the rest of the Form.

"Yes, wather!"

"Grand malheur—great misfortune!" sighed Trixie sympathetically.

"No going to Barncombe for a week!" murmured Tess.

"Oh, don't be so sure about that," said Madge. "If I want an ice at the Creamery, I shall get one!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Now, Madge—"

"Of course I shall go to Barncombe if I want to!"

Whilst Madge's scandalised chums were getting over the shock of this alarming statement, Cora Grandways nudged her sister, Judith.

Some moments later the two sisters dropped behind to exchange a few whispered words before passing into the dormitory, where all secret talk would be impossible.

"You heard, Judy?" whispered Cora exultantly. "She will go to Barncombe if she wants to!"

"And if she does that?" said Judith smiling maliciously in the dark—"oh, if only she does go to the town, and is seen!"

"We will take good care that she is seen, Judy," was the elder sister's sinister rejoinder. "You and I, dear, we always enjoy spending an afternoon in Barncombe. We'll slip over to the town to-morrow! And if only we have the luck of seeing Madge Minden there—"

Judith broke in with a soft laugh.

"That will be our chance—eh, Cora?"

"Yes. But—sh! No more talk now!"

They passed on to the dormitory, doubtless hoping that Madge Minden would let her tongue run away with her, making rash remarks about her intentions for to-morrow. But Madge, although so prone to give an

airy hint betraying her readiness to revolt, was not one to brag.

There was proof of this before the girls were half undressed; for Cora sidled up to Madge, and said, with a fawning sort of smile:

"You don't really mean to go to Barncombe to-morrow, Madge, in spite of Miss Massingham?"

"What is it to do with you, if I do or don't?" Madge retorted coldly; and she turned her back upon Cora, thus showing that she had no intention of indulging in a lot of boasts.

It was just this absence of boasting, however, that made Betty and other well-wishers of the spirited girl all the more uneasy on her account.

If Madge merely said once that she meant to do a thing—well, she was far more likely to do it than any girl who boasted fifty times!

That was the Form's opinion, based on past experiences with Madge, and so they all felt pretty sure that to-morrow the reckless girl would be doing reckless things again, worse than ever!

Could they do anything to save her from herself, as it were?

That was the question which Betty and Polly debated next day, in their study, with Paula, Tess, Trixie and Dolly present to make what suggestions they could.

"Weal, geals," said Paula, when the talk had gone on for some time. "I shall greatly wegwet it if Madge does go twapseing off to Barncombe presently." For the debate had taken place just after dinner. "But, bai Jove, we can't keep the geal on a stwing, don't you know!"

"Hardly!" said Polly. "Madge is the last girl to stand that sort of thing."

"Pweecisely," went on Paula. "How-cvah, I have a suggestion to make, geals."

"Then for goodness' sake out with it!" clamoured Tess, Trixie, and Dolly.

"I pwopose," said Paula, in her leisurely fashion, "that we go wound to Madge's study in a minute, and wepwesent to her that we shall be stwicken with gwEIF, if Madge is expelled for going wather too far—what? That is what I would wepwesent to Madge, if I may say so."

"Bravo, Paula!" laughed Betty. "Really, you have suggested the only feasible thing?"

"Didn't think you had it in you, Paula!" rused Polly.

"Pway wefwain from wadiculous wemarks!" said Paula languidly. "I have pweviously remarked, geals, we have bwains in our family, as well as beauty. Yes, wather!"

"Well," said Tess, jumping up, "let's get on with the business. Proposed and carried unanimously—"

"Yes, wather!"

"That this meeting do wait upon Madge Minden, and that Betty Barton, as captain of the Form—"

"Loud cheers!" put in Polly, thumping Betty on the back.

"That Betty Barton puts things to Madge, on our behalf," finished Tess. "Lead on, then, Betty!"

"Right-ho!" smiled the captain of the Form.

"Play up the band!" said the irrepressible Polly, falling into line with the others.

"Ta-ra, ta-ra, ta-ra! Tum, tum, tum!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Betty opened the door, and they all filed out into the passage. In a few seconds they were at Madge's door and the Form captain knocked.

There was no response.

"Encouraging for speeches!" muttered Polly. "She doesn't even want visitors of any sort, let alone deputations!"

"Pway wefwain—" Paula began again, but she was interrupted by an ejaculation of alarm from Betty, who had opened the door an inch or two.

"She's gone!" Betty exclaimed, in great distress, facing round upon her chums. "And her going off like this, without a word to anyone—"

"Barncombe, for a certainty!" groaned Polly.

"Yes, wather!" Bai Jove, this is—weally," sighed Pala, "this is most twying of Madge! Most distwissing!"

Betty pulled the door shut and then made a sudden rush for the stairs. The others chased after her, understanding what was in her mind when she led them downstairs and out of the house, still running on towards the cycle store.

In a minute the girls were inside the shed, and in vain they looked amongst the machines for Madge's.

It was not there!

"Then you were right, Polly," Betty ex-

claimed, at last tragically. "Madge has really gone to Barn—"

"Sh—sh!" hissed Tess, in great alarm; and she breathed the warning words: "Miss Massingham!"

That lady came to the shed doorway a moment later, talking with a couple of scholars who had joined her on the way across the field. They were Cora and Judith Grandways, and these two went straight to their machines.

"Girls," Miss Massingham said pleasantly to Betty and the rest, "have you seen Madge Minden?"

"Not since dinner," Betty answered, whilst her chums tried to look as calm as possible.

"When you see her, you might give her a message from me," went on the mistress. "Tell her please, that I would like her to come to my room round about tea-time, with some music. She will understand; I said yesterday that I would like her to play before a friend of mine some time or other."

"Yes, Miss Massingham. We'll tell her—"

"Yes, wather!"

"Let her know in good time," added Miss Massingham, turning away. "I expect you will find her round the place, for she won't have gone out for the afternoon, I imagine."

"We may come across her in Barncombe," Cora Grandways said with a laugh, and she and her sister were preparing to ride away. Miss Massingham stared.

"You are joking, of course, Cora! You know very well that Madge has been forbidden by me to visit that town for the present. Madge may have gone for a little ride round the countryside, of course. But Barncombe—no!"

And the Form-mistress walked away, whilst Cora and Judith looked at each other and sniggered, then set off on their bicycles, leaving Betty & Co. mute and still, with looks of great dismay.

CHAPTER 4.

The Blind Eyes Weep.

SO this was the house were the blind old lady lived! This dilapidated place, one of a forlorn row of dwelling-houses that could not have known a pound of outside painting for years and years!

Madge Minden, having found her way to The Retreat, Barncombe, after leaving her bicycle at a cycle shop in the town, had walked past No. 10 once already, taking a good look at the dingy exterior. Now she was walking by on the narrow pavement yet again, feeling that she liked the look of the house less and less.

That unwhitened doorstep, the tarnished knocker, the gloomy windows with the faded curtains—really one would have imagined that if anybody lived here at all, it was only the rheumatically caretaker of a house past all hope of ever being let or sold!

And now, to strengthen this impression, the face of a lean, withered woman suddenly appeared at a ground-floor window.

Her shrunken eyes stared out at Madge, and the sight of this sombre figure almost unnerved the schoolgirl. She walked to the top of the street again, wondering if she had better fulfil her mission after all.

Then the same thoughts that had urged her to come to Barncombe this afternoon, in defiance of Miss Massingham's command, conquered all scruples once again.

In fairness to Madge, it must be said that, rightly or wrongly, she felt there was no choice but to fulfil the promise given to that poor girl who had been injured overnight.

Perhaps it had been a promise that never should have been made; but Madge had been actuated by the best motives; and now the sense of being in honour bound to go through with the adventure put her on her mettle.

"If the girls find out that I came to Barncombe this afternoon," she was thinking, as she turned back along the dingy street, "they may jump to the conclusion that I was doing it out of pure reckless defiance. But they will be wrong! I promised Alva Forbes, so here goes!"

She had drawn level with No. 10 again. Taking a good grip on herself, and yet feeling her heart beating very fast, she stepped to the shabby street door, and knocked.

There was no immediate response from inside, and Madge spent the uneasy interval peering through the glass panels into the hall.

Then she drew away from the door a step, or so as she heard someone coming forward to open it. Bolts were drawn; a chain

was slipped off the catch, and very cautiously the old woman whom Madge had seen at the window opened the door just wide enough to show her face to the visitor.

"Good-afternoon!" Madge managed to say fairly steadily. "Are you Miss Susan Charteris' housekeeper?"

"Ay, I'm Janet," answered the old woman, and her tone was by no means as forbidding as her appearance. "What do you want, my dear?"

"If you please," said Madge, after fetching a deep breath, "I have come to play the piano, in place of the girl who usually plays. She met with an accident last night, and I offered to fulfil her engagement."

"Ay, but you—you are only a schoolgirl, my dear!"

"I can play the piano—rather well, some people think."

"Oh, ay! That may be so," nodded the woman. "But—I durno," she went on, with a shake of her grey head. "Anyway, my dear, Miss Charteris is very peculiar. She has her whims, has Miss Charteris. She may be rude to ye, my dear, at your coming instead of Miss Alva."

"Miss Charteris is blind, isn't she?"

"Oh, ay! Blind these last twenty years!"

"Then—please, Janet, do what I say, for the sake of that poor girl to whom the engagement means so much!" pleaded Madge earnestly. "Let me go in, and play, and come away at the finish without saying a word! Poor Alva is so afraid that her accident may lose her the engagement altogether. She will be able to play again in a little while, no doubt. So, in the meantime—"

The schoolgirl's rush of words was cut short by a silencing gesture from Janet.

"Sh!" breathed the old woman. "It can be done, my dear, because Miss Charteris often lets Miss Alva come and go without speaking a word. But don't let her hear your voice! She can hear a whisper almost three rooms away. Blind folk allus are so keen o' hearing, you know."

This was followed by a sign to Madge to step inside, and the girl obeyed, feeling all her misgivings set at rest.

One thing was certain; Janet, despite her grim looks, was a faithful, good-hearted soul.

"In here, my dear," the old woman murmured, throwing open a door on the left of

the passage. "Sit down, and start playing, and then I'll bring in Miss Charteris, if she'll come."

Madge went straight to the piano—a very old instrument, with the tone of a harpsichord. She sat down on the old-fashioned revolving stool, took some music from the case she had brought with her, and started to play.

And then, for the first time, she wondered—would the old lady notice any difference in the playing to-day?

Luckily, Madge had begun with a piece of music that most pianists know by heart. It was one of the "Songs Without Words." Hoping desperately that this was a piece that Alva Forbes had often played, she went on fingering the yellowed keys, whilst all the time she listened to the sound of steps at the door, and watched that door out of the corner of her eyes.

Suddenly it swung open, and Janet came in, giving her arm to a tall, stately woman who was garbed in black.

Madge's hand faltered for a moment, for Miss Charteris, halting just inside the door, turned her handsome, thin face to the girl, and it was hard to believe that those sunken eyes which Madge looked into were blind—blind!

But the blank look of a blind person remained in the tragic lady's face, and with a throb of relief, Madge realised that the unhappy woman knew nothing of the substitute who had taken Alva's place to-day.

Guided by old Janet, the strange lady went to her accustomed seat, and a little sigh came from her thin lips, after she had settled herself. Not a word to Madge; not a word to Janet even!

When the Mendelssohn piece had come to an end, the silence in the room was profound.

And now, what was the next piece that it would be safe to play? Madge was just asking herself that desperate question, when she caught sight of some old albums of music on the piano-top. It flashed upon her at once. Very likely, any of the pieces in one of these old albums would please the listener. Most likely, indeed, they were the pieces Alva was accustomed to play.

She took down one of the volumes, and turned the pages rather flusteredly.

All at once her eye caught sight of the famous Beethoven "Sonata Pathétique"—the "Pathetic Sonata," as it would be called

in English. Madge dropped her hands to the ivory keys, and commenced the piece, and in a moment she was rewarded by a deep sigh of intense satisfaction from Miss Charteris.

The schoolgirl pianist looked round, still playing, and old Janet, standing sentinel-like at the blind woman's side, nodded vehemently:

"Yes; go on."

And so, for the several minutes that that magnificent piece of music occupies in the playing, Madge gave herself up entirely to her task.

With such a passion as she had for music, it was a pleasant enough task. She forgot the strangeness of her surroundings, forgot the strange character of her tragic auditor, and simply played on with all her heart and soul in the impressive sonata, trying to render it faultlessly.

But afterwards—in the very moment when the piano was silent again—she felt as confused as ever by the romantic character of this queer adventure in which she had become involved.

Still not a word from the blind lady! Nothing but tragic silence whenever the piano had ceased to fill the faded drawing-room with its tender melody.

Madge was turning the leaves of the album, seeking another piece to play, when she was startled by a tap upon the shoulder.

She turned about with a nervous jump, to find Janet at her side.

The old woman beckoned her away, and, wondering what was going to happen now, Madge followed her out of the room.

Janet first closed the door of the drawing-room, then spoke in the faintest of whispers.

"Miss Alva always has an interval for refreshments," she said in that guarded tone. "'Tis the old lady's wish, you see. So come with me, my dear."

Then she shuffled out to a room in the rear of the dwelling-house, where Madge was to find another example of the strange mode of living followed by Miss Charteris and her housekeeper.

The place was no better than a sort of combined living-room and kitchen, and yet the china that was laid for tea was of the costliest kind.

When Madge was sitting down and taking the sup of tea that was handed to her, she felt horribly afraid of dropping it, in her

nervousness, and so smashing a priceless "antique."

"Did I play all right?" she whispered to Janet.

"Ay," nodded the woman, over her own cup of tea. "And especially that last piece of yours! I don't know much about music myself; but you played it better than Miss Alva, I should say, judging by Miss Charteris' looks."

"Did she seem—pleased?"

"She looked happy again for a moment, my dear. Not for many a long day ha' I seen her look so happy!"

"I do hope she won't guess that it was not Alva who was playing!"

"Maybe she thought Miss Alva had improved wonderfully," was the smiling rejoinder. "I shall know by-and-by, perhaps. What do you think of her, my dear?"

"Of Miss Charteris? I—I think she is a very tragic figure. Very mysterious, too. How long—"

"Curious, are you?" said the old housekeeper. "Well, I'll tell you just a bit o' the story. 'Tis forty years now since that lady began to live this sort of life. Miserly, you think? But that isn't the word for it."

"She is what people call a recluse?"

"Ay, that's the word! A rare happy, beautiful lady she was, all them years ago," went on Janet. "But she had a great sorrow come upon her life. Death took from her the man she was going to marry."

"Oh, how dreadfully sad!"

"Ay! I was with Miss Susan Charteris in them days. And I remember it all so well. He was a rare 'un for music, was the gentleman she was going to marry. What they call a genius, I suppose. And then when he was took ill, sudden-like, on the very eve of the wedding, and Miss Charteris came home from his funeral, a week later, and just shut the door on all the world. And it's been shut like that ever since—ay, that it has!"

Madge set down her cup softly. Her bright, girlish spirit was suddenly oppressed with the sorrow and tragedy that haunted the silent house.

"Never let her know I telled ye," Janet whispered, finger at lip, as they got up from their chairs to return to the front room. "Ye've o' this lonely life, and her allus a-brooding o'er the past—it has made

her a bit difficult. You unnerstand, my dear?"

"Yes. And yet—how I wish I could put my arms around her, and say how sorry I feel for her! Oh, it is so dreadfully sad!" Madge murmured. "Perhaps I have been playing one of the very pieces that he used to play."

"'Tis what she has Miss Alva here for," returned the old woman; "so she can sit and hear the old piece—especially that piece you played that pleased her so—and can dream of the days when she was a happy bride-to-be. Ay, poor dear, I'm sorry for her myself, I can tell 'ee!"

Pursing her lips after that pitying exclamation, the housekeeper led the way back to the sombre drawing-room, and Madge went straight to her seat at the piano.

Miss Charteris was still in the same erect, attentive attitude in her favourite chair, and like the mere effigy of a living being she remained whilst the recital went on. Piece after piece Madge played upon the ivory keys, with always that profound silence in the brief intervals. By-and-by the girl's wrist-watch told her that it was four o'clock, and she felt that she must make the next item the last. She glanced round at Janet to convey a hint that it was time to be going; and then a strange thing happened.

Just as if those sightless eyes had seen everything, Miss Charteris spoke.

"Play the 'Pathétique' again, Alva," she said. "You are staying longer to-day, I know. But I will make it up to you."

How Madge longed to reply; but that she dared not do. Hastily turning to the Beethoven sonata again, she played it through as carefully and as beautifully as before, wondering what would happen when she came to the end.

Would Miss Charteris engage her in talk?

But, as Madge took her hands from the piano for the last time, not a word came from the blind lady.

There she sat, as mute and still as ever; and yet—ah, she was like no lifeless effigy now! Out of those same sightless eyes tears were trickling down the withered cheeks!

Madge felt a lump rise to her throat.

In a few seconds the old housekeeper came softly into the hall, cautiously shutting the drawing-room door behind her.

"You ha' done well," she said, patting Madge on the shoulder. "I'd make ye vain

if I was to say what Miss Charteris murmured a second ago. Don't take it ill that she didn't speak her praises to ye."

"Oh, I didn't want hor to! I was dreadin'—"

"'Tis all right, so far as that's concerned," said Janet. "And so you'll come again—eh? Next Sat'day arternoon?"

"I— Yes, I'll come again. I feel I ought to—I must!"

"Thankee, dear! You are doing a good work, I can tell 'ee that. And now, my dear," went on the old woman, stepping with Madge towards the front door. "I wunner if ye'd mind doing me a little favour, afore you go? 'Tis only to run round to the cinema, in the High Street, and get a ticket for me for this evening."

She gave a low chuckle.

"Ye'll think me a queer sort, fancying the pictures—eh, dearie? But, ye see, I went in once, just to give 'em a try, and I found them such a change to all the queer life I spend with Miss Charteris, I've got into the habit o' popping in for an hour now and then."

"But must you get a ticket in advance?" questioned Madge.

"'Tis far the best, for me," nodded the woman. "I ha' to slip out last thing, you see, and sometimes I've found the whole place crowded out. So I get the milk-boy, or summun like that, to get me a ticket when I think I'll be able to manage an hour or two off. 'Tis only a few minutes from here, dear; still, if you'd rather not—"

"Oh, no, that's all right," shrugged Madge.

"A shilling seat, then, and perhaps ye'll tell 'em to keep a good place for old Janet this evening?" said the woman, slipping the money into Madge's hand. "Thank'ee, dearie, you are a right kind lassie!"

She drew back the latch, and set the door open, and Madge made almost a dart for the pavement, feeling a great sense of relief at being in the open air again.

CHAPTER 5.

Seen by Cora.

FOR two hours on end, Cora and Judith Grandways had been roaming around in Barncombe on the look-out for Madge.

Had she come to the town after all? With

malicious feelings of regret, the spiteful sisters were by now inclined to think that they were to be foiled, once again, in their attempt to stir up trouble.

They had visited the Creamery Tea Rooms, and had not found Madge there. Nor was her bicycle being taken charge of in the bakehouse yard.

Where was she, then, if she was in Barncombe at all? What doing?

Cora and Judith would have given a whole term's pocket-money for the chance of being able to say that they had seen Madge in the town, in defiance of the Form-mistress's command. But that chance, so far, had been denied them.

And all this while, with what different feelings were other seekers after the errant schoolgirl on the look-out for her!

Betty, Polly, Paula, and half a dozen other well-wishers—they had ridden over to the town in great haste, hoping to run across Madge and so be able to give her a friendly warning.

"Back to the school at once, Madge!" Back, full-speed, so that she might yet be in time to fulfil the invitation to play in Miss Massingham's room—that was to have been the cry from Betty & Co., if only they had encountered the wayward girl.

But they had not found a trace of her; and now it was all too late. Past four o'clock! And so, even if they should come face to face with her, the warning would be no use!

With this gloomy thought oppressing them, Betty and her companions were at last turning in at the tea-rooms, to get a little rest and a cup of tea after so much futile chasing about the town.

If one of the girls, taking tea in the upstairs room of the creamery, had chanced to get up from her chair and stand by the window, looking out at passers-by in the High Street! Ah, then what a difference it would have made to all that came afterwards!

But not one of them was at that window, to see Madge cross the road and enter that placarded foyer of the cinema. No one was a witness to the fact that Madge was only a minute inside the booking-hall, getting a ticket for the evening performance.

When she came out again, however, there were witnesses!

There had been a short, sharp, summer shower, and Cora and Judith Grandways had sheltered in the outer vestibule of the

cinema. As Fate would have it, they were still there when Madge emerged. From behind a stone pillar the Grandways sisters watched her as she came away from the place of entertainment.

Madge Minden went straight on, not looking to right or left, and failed to see the sisters:

"Cora! Why, goodness!" panted Judith excitedly. "She has actually had the cheek—the cool cheek—"

"My word!" broke out Cora exultantly. "So that's where she has been all the afternoon! The cinema—a place no Morcove girl is ever allowed to go to, except with a mistress!"

"I wouldn't have dreamed of such a thing," said Judith, whilst she and her sister kept well clear of the girl they were watching. "It's the limit, even for Madge Minden!"

"We ought to be able to make something out of this!" Cora smiled ominously. "We won't follow her—no! Let's get our bikes, Judy, and save everything until we and Madge and all the rest are back at the school. Then—my word, we'll have some fun!"

When the malicious couple got to the creamery, however, just across the way, they heard familiar voices floating out through an upstairs window, and the fact that Betty & Co. were having tea up there was too tempting for Cora.

She ran softly up to the tea-room and put her head inside the doorway.

"Glad you are enjoying yourselves!" she said mockingly. "Have you seen Madge Minden?"

"No!" exclaimed Betty and her friends.

"Well, Judy and I have! Madge is in the town, right enough!"

"Where—where?" clamoured the girls, starting up in great excitement. "Where has Madge been all this time?"

"That I will tell you by-and-by!" Cora answered, gloating over their alarm. "Good-by-ee!"

And she ran swiftly down the stairs, laughing shrilly.

No more thought had Betty & Co. then for their half-finished tea. In a minute they were out of the shop, trying to find Madge.

Dividing into couples, they scoured the main thoroughfares once again in all directions, but without result, and after

that there was nothing else to do but return to the school, sick at heart with the thought of what the consequences for her wilful conduct might be to Madge.

She had not yet come in when her anxious chums arrived indoors. Betty, passing Study No. 7 with most of her friends, saw that door standing wide open, and Cora and Judith in there.

"Well, did you find her?" sniggered Cora.

Betty promptly stepped inside the room, followed by the others.

"Did you really see her?" flashed the captain of the Fourth Form. "Or was it only another of your ill-natured japes?"

"We saw Madge," Cora said. "We saw her coming out of the cinema!"

"What!"

"The cinema!" echoed half a dozen girls, in tone of sheer horror.

"Yes!" exulted Cora. "And if Madge tries to deny it, she will be—"

"Half a sec.; here is Madge!" cried out Tess excitedly. "Madge—in here! You are wanted!"

And next moment the imperturbable Madge was standing there, her chums ranging themselves about her, whilst she faced Cora and Judith.

"Well?"

"I have told these friends of yours," said Cora quietly, "you have been to a cinema show this afternoon."

"I have not!" cried Madge.

"Madge, don't tell fibs!" struck in Judith hotly. "My sister and I saw you!"

"I am not telling any fibs! I have not been to see any cinema show this afternoon!"

"But we saw you coming out of the place!"

Cora's cry had the ring of truth in it, and the girls were astonished to see how Madge remained quite calm.

"That's another pair of shoes altogether," said Madge. "You are a bit too hasty in forming charitable judgments, Cora!" The emphasis was on that word "charitable." "Just because you saw me coming out of the cinema, that doesn't prove that I attended the show!"

"Oh, what nonsense!" cried Cora scornfully. "Madge, I'd be ashamed to try such bluff!"

"It's not bluff. You say I was at the show, and I say I was not. I merely went

to the paybox to buy a ticket for someone!"

"Rubbish! For whom would you want to buy a ticket?"

"That's my business!"

"It's a fibbing excuse—a bit of paltry bluff!" retorted Judith scathingly. "You've defied Miss Massingham, and have been to Barncombe. You've been to a cinema show all the afternoon, and you haven't the pluck to admit it!"

"Don't you question my pluck!" Madge said fiercely, taking a stride towards the sneering Judith. "I've got fifty times more pluck than you ever had, I know that!"

"You haven't the pluck to admit it! You were at the cinema——"

"I was not!"

"Madge—Cora—Judith!" interposed Betty. "This isn't doing any good at all. Madge has never been known to tell a falsehood yet, and I for one don't believe she is fibbing now! Do you, Polly?"

"Well——" It was a very hesitant answer from Polly. "I'm sure I don't know what to think!"

"Meaning, that you think I am fibbing?" Madge turned upon her angrily. "And you are supposed to be my chum!"

"I think I have been a chum, Madge," was Polly's reproachful answer. "We have all been spending the whole afternoon trying to save you from trouble. Like Betty, I've always known you for a girl who tells the truth——"

"Hear, hear!" murmured others.

"But when it comes to explaining your being seen at the cinema on lines like that—well!" And Polly shrugged her shoulders.

"Let's clear out of this study and finish the talk somewhere else," Betty pleaded desperately. "It won't make matters any better by standing here and letting Cora and Judith——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Cora shrilly. "You don't like to feel that we know the tricks Madge has been up to! You are afraid, and well you may be! No doubt you would like to hush things up, and save Madge from being expelled; but you have me and Judith to reckon with!"

"Come away, girls!" broke in Betty, walking to the door.

"Yes, wather!"

And the girls were all sweeping through the doorway, carrying Madge along with them, when they stood absolutely transfixed by the sight of—Miss Massingham!

CHAPTER 6.

For Alva's Sake.

THE Form-mistress singled out one girl with her eagle eye. And that girl was Madge Minden.

"I felt it was time to inquire into the meaning of your behaviour, Madge," the mistress said, in an ominous tone. "What do you mean by flouting my invitation for tea-time, this afternoon?"

"Invitation?" echoed Madge.

"Yes. I told all the girls to let you know that——"

"One moment, please," broke in Betty. "Madge—we—she—— The fact is, we failed to give her that invitation."

"And whose fault was that?" asked Miss Massingham sharply. "Did you all forget? I can hardly believe that such a thing is possible!"

"They did not forget," cried out Cora, coming forward. "They couldn't give the message to Madge, because Madge has been to——"

"Cora, if you dare!" Betty almost shouted, whilst other chums of Madge Minden murmured and glared fiercely.

"Oh, let her say it if she wants to!" said Madge, quite the coldest of them all.

"I will say it!" cried Cora. "Because I don't see why a girl should do wrong, and then be shielded by the Form's own captain and all her cronies! Miss Massingham, I think you ought to know that Madge Minden has been to Barncombe!"

"Never!"

"She has been to a cinema show in Barncombe!"

"Miss Massingham, I did not go to the picture house to see the show. I—I merely went to get a ticket for somebody."

Miss Massingham drew herself up and stared hard at Madge.

"Have you been—to—Barncombe—this afternoon?" she asked, with emphasis.

"Yes."

"In spite of my order that Barncombe was out of bounds to you for a week?"

"Yes. I can't help it, Miss Massingham. I——"

"What explanation—excuse have you to offer?"

Madge stared past her questioner at the wall. This gave the girl the appearance of looking stubbornly silent; yet Madge was not keeping her lips shut out of sheer perversity.

Explain! How could she explain? Even if explanation could save her from any punishment, they could only be made at the expense of that other girl's peace of mind.

Poor Alva! What would her grief be, if everything came out, and if a letter was sent to the blind lady, from the school, pointing out that a scholar had played as a substitute for the paid pianist, and that sort of thing must not occur again! Alva would get into a bother with the lady on whom she was dependant for a living, and Miss Charteris might refuse to allow Alva to play to her again.

"You are silent," said Miss Massingham sternly.

"I must be," was Madge's shrugged answer.

"Silence, in this case, means self-condemnation," was the mistress's rejoinder. "I deeply regret that Cora Grandways has felt constrained to reveal another girl's misdoeds. But I regret still more, Madge Minden, that those misdoeds should ever have occurred!"

She waved the miscreant to the door.

"Go to your Head-mistress's room, Madge! The offence of which, in my opinion, you stand self-condemned, is too serious a one for me to deal with. We will see what Miss Somerfield has to say. And," she added grimly, following Madge into the passage, "I feel pretty confident that Miss Somerfield will pronounce the one decree—expulsion!"

"Expulsion!"

The word burst from Madge's lips. So this was to what her actions had brought her! For a moment she stood motionless, and then she turned and made her way along the corridor, followed by Miss Massingham.

Betty and her chums gazed after the girl and the mistress, and then turned back into their study.

Was it to be so? Was that dread penalty to be inflicted upon their chum—a chum they all loved, in spite of her headstrong disposition? Whilst Betty's friends, crowding in her study, were all discussing the situation in lowered voices, Betty herself was standing silent and thoughtful.

"You are very quiet, Betty," Tess turned to her to say, whilst the talk was still flowing on. "What do you think about it, though?"

"I thought I had made it clear," answered Betty. "Madge was in Barnecombe—that is admitted. But as for the charge of visiting a cinema to see the show—I accept her denial absolutely."

"Then, for once," said Polly regretfully, "I must disagree with you, Betty. That yarn about going there to buy a ticket for someone—it is too feeble."

"It is Madge's explanation, Polly!"

"I can't help that. It is too feeble."

"Yes—er—wather!" murmured Paula sadly. "I would like to wefwain fswon stwong expwessions. But, geals, I agree with Polly Linton that Madge's explanation was wather a pwevavication—what?"

"Then am I the only girl here who still clings to all the old faith in Madge?" Betty asked, gazing from one to another.

A goomy silence greeted that question.

"You, Tess? And you—and you?" Betty faltered, appealing to one girl after another. "Are you going to believe that Madge not only went to Barnecombe, but that she also went to the cinema?"

Again—dead silence.

"And you, Polly?"

"I'll say exactly what I think," said Polly. "We know that Madge is crazed on music. My opinion is that she went to the cinema to hear the music there."

"Bai Jove, yes!" exclaimed Paula. "I wegard that theowy as wather weasonable, Betty—what?"

But Betty shook her head.

"Madge denied that she was at the performance, and I still have faith in her as a girl who could not tell any fib! You think differently—"

"I'm afraid I must," said Polly. "I'm sorry. We are not going to fall out about it, I hope; but for once, Betty, for once you and I are not in agreement."

Betty winced.

"Just so," she said, at last. "And this is the sort of thing for which Cora and Judith have been seeking! Something to come as a little rift within the lute! Something to make a shade of difference to the old, happy friendship!"

"No, Betty—no!" Polly exclaimed, taking a stride and holding out her hand. "We can still be friends—we are friends, dear, and always will be!"

"Yes, wather!"

Betty's face cleared a little then. "Hark!" cried out Tess, suddenly break-

ing the silence. "That's Madge's door closing now. She's back!"

"Then let's go—"

"Yes, wather!"

They swarmed into the passage and flocked along to Madge's door.

"Madge—Madge!" they clamoured, bursting in upon her as she sat in a chair by the table. "What did Miss Somerfield say? Are you—is it expulsion?"

"No. I'm not to be expelled this time. I'm sort of let off with a caution."

"Lucky you!" they chorused.

"But I am gated for the rest of the term."

"Oh!"

"So now you know," said Madge, drawing a book towards her and flinging it open. "Sorry I can't ask you in for a talk, but I am not in the mood for—company."

There was a moment whilst the crowd at the doorway waited there, staring. Then, finding that the miscreant really had no intention of saying more, they began to drift away.

"Well," said Ella Elgood, "lucky is right!"

"Yes, wather!"

"Yet gating is going to hit her pretty hardly," murmured Tess. "Poor Madge! Gating is no joke for any girl. But she really has asked for it!"

"Where is Betty?" said Polly, suddenly missing the captain of the Form.

They looked back, and were just in time to see Madge's door open again and Betty come out.

"Oh, you stayed behind!" Tess exclaimed. "Had Madge something to say to you, then, that she wouldn't tell us?"

"No; she would say nothing.

"Just as well," rejoined Polly, with a touch of bitterness. "I'd rather Madge said nothing than hear her telling more—fibs!"

Betty winced, and was silent.

CHAPTER 7.

Not Like Other Girls.

"POLLY dear."

"Yes, Betty."

For at least five minutes the two girls had been alone together in their study at Morcove School without breaking into talk.

Now Betty Barton, who was captain of

the Fourth Form, roused up to end a silence which she and her chum had been causing by their lapse into deep thought.

"I am just wondering, Polly, about to-morrow—Saturday."

"Queer," commented Polly Linton, "because I was just wondering, too, whether we can't get a bit of fun out of the halfer."

"We are not booked for any sports."

"And I am not sorry, for once!" struck in Polly. "For this heat wave— Thanks, Betty, I will have another glass of sherbet!"

There was a fine big tin of fresh sherbet on the study table. Also, there were glasses and a big jug of water. Polly scooped the sugary powder into a couple of the tumblers, added the right amount of water, and stirred vigorously.

"There you are, Betty. May as well propose a toast whilst we are about it; so— Long live the Fourth Form!"

Betty smiled.

"I was going to suggest that we take our tea out of doors to-morrow afternoon," she said. "We needn't fag far, but just a little way."

"Down to the shore?" suggested Polly gleefully. "All amongst the cool rocks, under the big cliff, I think I could really get cool for once. Hallo, come in, girls!"

"Cool! Gracious, geals!" drawled Paula Creel, entering the study. "What lucky creature is able to keep cool this weather?"

"You find it rather warm, Paula?" grinned Polly.

"Yes, wather! I much wewget using a stwong expression, geals, but I find the weather wather fwizzling!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A few other girls had drifted in with Paula Creel, and they all laughed at that girl's drawling verdict on the high temperature.

"Help yourself to the sherbet!" Polly invited them. "Paula, you'll have a glass?"

"Yes, wather!"

"Sherbet—my hat!" cried Tess Frolawney joyfully. "Whose bright idea was this?"

"Betty and I bought the tin yesterday," said Polly. "And it's lucky you all came in when you did. Another five minutes, and then the tin would have been finished. Who's going to fetch some more water?"

"Oh, I'll go!" cried Dolly Delane, and she did.

"Chaud temps, aujourd'hui—hot weather

to-day," said Trixie Hope, airing her French.

"The wemark, Twixie deah, was made pweviously, I wather fancy," drawled Paula. "Howevah, it was wather nice to hear it said in Fwench, bai Jove!"

"Oui, oui!" said Polly, who always mimicked Trixie's habit. "We will proceed with exercise one thousand and eleven. Have you seen the gardener's watering-can? Non, non. But here is Mademoiselle Dolly with a full jug. Hurrah!"

Then the spoon began to make its pleasant tinkle in the various glasses, coupled with the fizzing of the sherbet, and the tumblers were passed round.

"Betty has a brilliant wheeze for to-morrow," said Polly Linton. "She proposes tea out of doors down on the shore."

"Hurrah!"

"Whipping idea, bai Jove!"

"I'm glad you are all so keen," smiled Betty. "But, whilst we are together for the moment, girls, there's one little point I'd like to bring up. It's about Madge Minden."

"Oh, Madge Minden!" echoed two or three, rather gloomily. The rest kept silent.

"Madge is gated," said Betty. "Gated for the rest of the term, and—"

"Weally, Betty deah," put in Paula gently, "without wishing to use any stwong expwession, bai Jove, I wather fancy it serves Madge wight if she is gated—what!"

"It does," murmured the others, Polly included.

Betty Barton looked rather embarrassed.

"I am afraid," she went on tactfully, "bringing up Madge Minden's name is rather a risky business just at present. But—"

"Oh, it needn't be!" struck in Polly cheerfully. "It is quite true, Betty, that you and I had our first disagreement, thanks to Madge Minden, but we haven't been punching each other's noses, have we?"

"Gwacious, I should wather hope not!" put in Paula. "I always feel, geals, what-eva' little diffewences we may have, let's be fwends."

"Hear, hear!"

"Then, listen, girls; and if I'm making a suggestion that you don't like—well, it's for you to say so," Betty went on. "My idea was that we ask Miss Massingham to

lot Madge Minden come with us to-morrow afternoon, as a special act of grace."

"Oh, yes!" agreed Tess and Dolly promptly, whilst Trixie murmured: "C'est bon—that is good!" and Paula said: "Yes, wather!"

"What do you say, Polly?" asked Betty.

"Of course; I don't mind," was Polly's ready response. "But will Miss Massingham grant the favour? She was jolly wild with Madge for going over to Barncombe last Wednesday, when the town had been put out of bounds to her for a week."

"Madge may be allowed to join us on condition that she doesn't go out of our sight," said Betty. "Anyway, if you are all willing, I'm sure others will be, and so I'll put it to Madge at once, shall I?"

"Right-ho!" cried Polly.

Betty darted away light-heartedly. To see such harmony prevailing in the Form was bound to fill her with joy, for, although she did not put on airs as captain, at heart she was proud of her position, and her dearest wish was to retain the loyalty of her schoolfellows.

She had retained it so far—yes, in spite of persistent attempts at mischief-making on the part of two girls who were her avowed enemies. Cora and Judith Grandways, those two sisters were simply longing to bring about her downfall. She knew it, and she knew the reason for their malicious vendetta.

So long as she had a hold on the Form as a whole, the Grandways pair had no hope of getting together a nice little "set" of their own.

Madge Minden was alone in her study when the Form captain knocked and entered. A remarkably pretty girl, with large, dark eyes, that were capable of flashing fire when her spirit was aroused, Madge was sitting by the table, a despondent look upon her face.

It gave Betty—so quick with her sympathies as she was—quite a pang of distress to see her chum like this; but she shrewdly refrained from making any "cheer up" remark, knowing how Madge would receive it.

Madge was the too "independent" sort to feel ashamed of accepting other people's compassion in a time of trouble, and similarly she was very slow at confiding even in her proved friends.

In a roundabout, breezy fashion, Betty

led up to the idea about to-morrow afternoon. She expected to see Madge brighten up at the possibility of being granted liberty from the school bounds for that one afternoon. But Betty finished speaking, and still Madge sat silent and moody, not at all elated by what had been suggested.

"Perhaps you think it is too much to hope for?" Betty ventured gently. "I don't think so, Madge. It has been done before, you know. A girl in disgrace has just had to promise not to slip away from the others, that's all."

"Oh, no doubt!" Madge spoke at last. "Quite likely I'd be let out, Betty, on that condition. And it's very good of you to have thought of me like this. But"—she shrugged her shoulders—"I don't want to be taken out on those lines. Next thing I shall have to be kept on a leash, and even wear a muzzle, I suppose."

"Tea on the shore, Madge dear! Isn't it worth while giving your word that you won't give us the slip for a treat like that?"

"Not to-morrow," Madge said, with a shake of the head. "I don't want any picnics on the shore to-morrow. I want—I want— Oh, I can't tell you what I do want!"

"Madge!"

Betty Barton came across the room and stood with a hand on the dejected girl's shoulder.

"What is the matter with you, Madge dear? One way and another, you—you have been puzzling me lately."

"I'm sorry."

"Oh, it's nothing to be so sorry about! Only, why not end this state of things, dear? I mean, it is such a pity to make matters worse for yourself by keeping apart from everybody and brooding."

"Keeping apart from everybody!" echoed Madge. "Do any of the girls seem frightfully keen on my company just at present?"

"You know that I believe in you still, Madge dear, anyway. Then why—why not make a clean breast of everything to me now? Don't think I am inquisitive—oh, I detest hanging round people for the sake of getting their confidences!—but you—you are troubled, Madge, and I'm your friend—"

"As good a friend as any girl could

want—I know that," Madge said, with deep feeling. "All the same, I won't confide in you, Betty!"

"Then you don't wish me to beg you off for to-morrow?"

"Not on those lines, thank you!"

Betty, visibly disappointed, went away, and then Madge Minden shut the book and sat back in her chair, looking more dejected than ever.

In a few moments she drew a letter from her dress pocket and coned it with a strange expression of mingled pleasure and perplexity.

"Prospect Terrace,

"Barncombe,

"Thursday evening.

"Dear Madge Minden,—I feel I must write and thank you with all my heart for fulfilling your promise to play the piano yesterday (Wednesday).

"I called at the house in Barncombe, where the blind lady lives who engaged me to play to her, and I spoke to Janet, the old housekeeper. Janet told me that you did splendidly, and that Miss Charteris does not know that I am prevented from playing by my damaged wrist, and that you have been acting as my substitute.

"Janet also said that you had promised to go there again on Saturday.

"It is awfully kind of you, and I do thank you very much. I am sure that if you had not come forward as a substitute, Miss Charteris would have engaged someone else permanently, and then I would have lost the job and the money that is—oh, so great a help to me!

"I hope you will be able to read this letter, but my bad wrist makes it rather awkward for me to manage letter-writing. Still, don't worry about the injury. Although it was your bicycle that knocked me down the other evening, as I said at the time, you were not a bit to blame!

"Your grateful friend,

"ALVA FORBES."

Madge raised her large eyes from this letter and stared thoughtfully at the study wall.

The pleasure she had felt whilst reading the letter was inspired by Alva's heartfelt gratitude, and also by the knowledge that she, Madge, really had managed very well

last Wednesday. As for her perplexity, that can be very easily accounted for.

She had promised—yes, promised to go to the blind lady's house to-morrow, Saturday, and how was she to fulfil that promise?

In any case, it would have been difficult enough for her to get over to Barncombe alone and fulfil the engagement unbeknown to anybody at the school. But now, to make matters fifty times more difficult, she was—gated!

She got up from her chair and roamed about the room, frowning with stress of thought.

Must she resign herself to the situation—abandon all idea of getting to Barncombe to-morrow? Must she write to Alva and make the sad, humiliating admission that it had been impossible to go on with the undertaking?

How could she possibly go to Barncombe to-morrow—how? Only by flaunting all authority and breaking bounds! Should she do that? It would be very wrong of her, of course; but wasn't there some excuse?

Beyond all doubt, if she failed to fulfil the promise to play again to the blind lady, it meant trouble and hardship for poor Alva. The blind lady was a moody reclusive, capable of acting with irritable impatience. Finding that no one came to play to her, she would ask why it was, and then old Janet would have to explain that Alva had a damaged wrist. And then, most probably, Miss Charteris would say: "Well, engage some other player. I can't wait for Alva Forbes to get well!"

Breaking in upon Madge's desperate thoughts came a footfall which paused outside her study door. She thought it was one of the girls again, and was making up her mind to go down to the playing-field and roam away in search of fresh solitude, when the door opened, and she found herself face to face with—Miss Massingham!

This was the Form-mistress who, very fairly, had caused Madge to be gated for what had been a flagrant defiance of authority last Wednesday. Madge was not bearing Miss Massingham any ill-will on this account, and it is fair to say that the mistress was not nursing angry feeling against the miscreant.

On the contrary, there was a most con-

ditional look on Miss Massingham's face as she now confronted the girl.

"Ah, Madge," she broke out pleasantly, "I was on my way to the Form captain's study, and I thought I would look in here first! I want to say something that will make you happy, I am sure!"

Madge stood mute and still.

"A letter has just come from Lady Lundy, at Barncombe Castle, Madge. There is a small outdoor function over there to-morrow, and the Fourth Form is invited, amongst others, to give some of its part-songs."

Miss Massingham paused. She was wondering why Madge had not brightened up at once, for anything to do with music usually excited the girl.

"Of course, we shall go," the mistress went on. "And your gating will be overlooked for the occasion, Madge. You will go to Barncombe Castle with the others, for they will need you at the piano."

Then the mistress might well have asked: "What thoughts are running in your head now, Madge, that you look so strangely agitated?" For Madge was betraying great excitement at last, an excitement that had no delight in it, but was all nervous tension.

"I shall be very glad, of course, Miss Massingham, to be allowed to leave bounds to-morrow," she said at last. "Thank you very much!"

"Well, if you behave yourself in future, Madge, you may probably be allowed many other exemptions from the gating order, as the days go by," Miss Massingham said; and then she was gone, and Madge was standing there all alone.

"It's my chance!" she said to herself, in an excited whisper. "My chance to fulfil the promise!"

CHAPTER 8.

Taking Her Chance.

"BETTY, have you seen Miss Massingham?"

"No; why?"

Betty Barton made that answer as she sailed into her study, to find the usual half-dozen special chums looking very excited.

"Pity you were not here for the moment. Still, it doesn't matter. You can

see the Form-mistress presently," Polly rushed on. "She looked in to tell you a wonderful bit of news!"

"Eclipsing all the tea-on-the-shore idea!" chimed in Tess.

"Well?" said Betty. "Out with it!"

"Lady Lundy—we are to go over to the castle to-morrow!"

"Oh!"

"We are invited to an outdoor function, and we are to do some part-songs."

"My word, that's splendid!" cried Betty.

"It beats the other idea hollow, of course. Besides, we can have a picnic on the shore any old halfer!"

"Yes, wather!"

"And another thing," rattled on Polly.

"Madge Minden is coming with us!"

"Is she?" exclaimed Betty. "That's queer—I mean—"

"Why is it queer?" asked Polly sharply.

Betty was looking as if she regretted her ejaculation. But it had escaped her lips, and now it must be accounted for.

"Well, the fact is," she admitted, "Madge didn't want to come with us on any picnic, even if we could have begged her off."

"Oh, is that so?" was Polly's rather curt rejoinder. "But when an invitation comes along for Barncombe Castle, Madge can jump at that!"

"I—I wouldn't put it quite like that, dear."

"But it's true," insisted Polly, rather disgustedly. "Miss Massingham told us when she was in here just now that Madge had jumped at the chance of being let off the gating for once."

"And I call that sort of thing—well, paltry!" chimed in Tess Trelawney. "Really, Madge Minden is not going up in my estimation!"

"Nor is mine!" "Or mine!" murmured the others.

"Oh, but—" began Betty, only Polly cut in again.

"Of course, you are going to defend her, Betty! Really, though, doesn't this sort of thing make you feel a bit tired? We were ready to do Madge a good turn by getting her let out for the picnic, and now you say she didn't want us to trouble ourselves on her account! Then the invitation comes to Barncombe Castle, and she is keen enough to go to that."

"Well, Polly—"

"Just because it is Barncombe Castle, and all the people there are wealthy!"

"Oh, surely you know Madge better than that!" broke in Betty desperately. "She is no snob, whatever else she may be!"

"I'm not so sure now," said Polly. "I call it snobbery!"

"Hear, hear!"

"I think you are doing an injustice to Madge," Betty said frankly. "You forget one thing, girls. She is passionately fond of music. She probably jumped at the Barncombe Castle outing because we are to do the singing and she will be at the piano."

"Go on—keep it up!" Polly said, with a forced laugh. "Any old excuse for Madge!"

"But—"

"Madge is mad to go to the castle because she and Lady Lundy's daughter get on so well together. That's my opinion!" said Tess regretfully. "As for the singing and playing—"

"Geals, without wishing to use a stwong expwession," said Paula, "I wather fancy, don't you know, that the being mad to go just for the sake of the music is all wubbish!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Dear, dear! What a bone of contention poor Madge is becoming!" Betty said, with a forced laugh.

"'Poor' Madge! I don't see that she has much to be pitied for!" mumbled Polly. "She deserved the gating. If she hadn't gone to the cinema—"

"That's starting the old argument all over again!" broke in Betty gently. "Hadh't we better—or—talk about something else, girls?"

"Yes, wather!" cried Paula. "Whatever differences there may be, pway let's wemain fwriends all wound!"

And then they all laughed, and once again there was restored harmony, although Betty felt in her heart that each time Madge's name came up for discussion the feeling against her was becoming more and more acute.

Nor, to Betty's bitter disappointment, did Madge Minden give the girls cause for thinking better of her, either during that evening or on the following morning.

They had Miss Massingham's word for

it that Madge had "jumped" at the chance of being set free for the afternoon, instead of being kept within bounds. But Madge, whenever she was mingling with her Form mates, showed no desire to discuss the outing.

There was a certain aloofness in her attitude that jarred badly upon Polly Linton and the rest.

Betty noticed it, and deplored it, grieving that every day should see a really likeable girl like Madge becoming more and more independent.

Directly after an early dinner the girls trooped up to their studies, and, though it would be another hour before a start was made for Barncombe Castle, there was no thought of settling down to any serious task.

Doors along the corridor were mostly left wide open, and talk flowed on in a sort of shouted way between one study and another, whilst now and then one girl would break into a snatch of song, thus starting up all the rest. Best things to wear were being "looked over," and altogether the Fourth Form quarters were in a pleasant state of high spirits.

Cora and Judith Grandways, of course, were marking their hostility towards Betty by remaining to themselves in their study, and theirs was a closed door. So was Ursula Wade's; but then nobody cared a rap about Ursula, for she was a justly despised member of the Form.

But it pained Betty to see that Madge's door also was shut fast at a time when there was so much high-spirited romping to and fro in the passage.

She longed to have a talk with Madge, and so presently she made her way to the study.

"Hallo!"

Madge greeted her quite amiably, and yet with all the old suggestion of preferring to be alone.

"I say, Madge dear," Betty exclaimed, "we've another half-hour yet before we start on our bikes. So supposing we go down to the music-room and try over a few of those songs we are to sing at the castle?"

"Oh!" Madge gave a shrug. "No, I don't think we need to try them over. I could play those songs blindfolded."

"But wouldn't it be—well, rather nice?" Betty suggested. "I mean— Oh, I sim-

ply must put it plainly, Madge! I want you to come out of your shell this afternoon. The girls are all fond of you, Madge, but if you go on like this you will try their affections, you know."

"They are going to have the pleasure of my company all the way to Barncombe," Madge said, smiling grimly. "It will be time enough than for me to start being sociable. At present, I— No, I've got too much to think about."

Then with Betty standing a little way off, perplexed and pained, the strange girl lapsed into a preoccupied state once again.

What was she thinking now? Betty wondered. Surely her thoughts could only be the great event to which they were all invited at the castle, and the pleasure it was to mean?

"By the way, Madge, your bike is quite all right for the journey, isn't it?" asked Betty.

Madge gave a little start as Betty threw out that remark. She turned and gave the Form captain a direct look.

"It may get me as far as the town, Betty. Then I may have to look in at the cycle-shop, and get a few things done that ought not to take long."

Betty nodded, then laughed.

"Your machine always is in rather a bad state," she said. "You haven't the knack that some of the others girls have—of doing your own repairs. Even a puncture is a big job for you, eh?"

"A hateful job!" agreed Madge. "And that's why I shall most likely call at the cycle-shop, overtaking you later on."

Was Madge going to halt at the cycle-shop so as to break away from the party of girls?

It almost looked as if that was the case. But why should Madge want to break away from her schoolfellows in the town?

It could only be for the sake of being able to complete the rest of the journey alone, and of arriving alone at the castle, thus ensuring an individual welcome from Lady Lundy and her daughter! But that was not Madge's idea; Betty felt confident of that.

Less than half an hour later the whole party of girls set off on their bicycles, pedalling out on to the main road in twos and threes, and then whirring along with much merry jingling of the cycle-bells.

When they reached Barncombe, Madge

Mindon announced her intention of leaving the Fourth-Formers and calling at the cyclo-shop.

Many of the Fourth-Formers demanded the reason why, and to judge by the expressions on their faces they did not readily accept Madge's excuse that it was imperative for her bicycle to receive attention.

But Madge refused to be drawn into a lengthy discussion, and left the party of cyclists. She made straight for the cyclo-shop, and asked the man's opinion as to what the machine needed to put it in thorough repair.

"You ought to leave it with me for a week, miss," he told her, at the conclusion of his inspection. "There are a dozen jobs that I ought to do, but I couldn't tackle them all at once. I should have to fit 'em in like."

"That's quite all right," said Madge cheerfully. "But can you let me hire out another machine in place of my own?"

"Why, as to that, miss," the cyclo-agent said, scratching his head, "I have one machine that ought to just suit you. But this is our busy season, you know, with so many folk down from London for the holidays. The machine has been hired out, and won't be brought back until four o'clock."

"That will do beautifully!" Madge cried. "I'll look back then."

And next moment she was out of the shop, setting off at a rapid pace on foot through the quaint old streets.

The daring scheme had answered, and her purpose was achieved!

She was at large in Barncombe, free for an hour, at least!

That hour she would spend in fulfilling her rash promise to play again to the blind lady, and nobody—nobody at the school would ever know!

So she was saying to herself, little dreaming how all her daring plans were to be upset by the strangest turn of Fate!

CHAPTER 9.

Time Flies.

THERE was the shabby old house that Madge had visited before, and she could like it no better to-day than she had last Wednesday.

Slightly out of breath after her sharp

walk through the streets. Madge Minder knocked at the door, and in a few minutes she was being admitted by Janet, who had the care of blind Mrs. Charteris.

"Well, dear," was Janet's greeting, "you've kept your promise, then? Ay, but 'tis good of ye, young lady, that it is!"

"I—I felt I must come," Madge said, speaking in a guarded tone. For she had to remember that if Miss Charteris should chance to hear her voice, the lady would know at once that someone was acting as a substitute for the hired player.

"I am very thankful that you did turn up," said Janet, also speaking softly, "for the old lady seems to want the music to comfort her very much just at present. She's been very down, the last day or so, and has spoken more than once about music being the only thing that can make her happy. Ay, poor dear, 'tis sad—sad, indeed!"

Taking a few steps along the dingy hall, Janet threw open the drawing-room door and gestured to the schoolgirl.

"Go in, dear, and just start playing at once, like you did afore, and I'll bring in my mistress in a minute."

So once again Madge stepped into the room that had such a pent-up air about it, as if it was a mere storeplace of costly furniture, rather than part of a wealthy lady's home. And to-day the tragedy of it all impressed the girl more than ever, because she now knew the sad story of Miss Charteris's blighted life.

Now the room door swung open, and, with Madge still playing on at the piano, old Janet led her blind charge into the dim apartment, placing her in her favourite chair.

For all the schoolgirl pianist knew that the unhappy lady was quite blind, it always gave her a thrill when those same eyes were turned towards her. No shade covered them, and it seemed to Madge as if they must be staring at her and recognising her as a mere substitute player.

Not a word from Miss Charteris did Madge receive during the first break in the playing. As on the previous occasion, the grief-stricken woman just sat there, mute and still, listening, listening, whilst her mind went back to the long ago.

No doubt, Madge reflected, if she came a hundred times to the house to perform this good turn—for it was a good turn, done

both to Alva Forbes and to Miss Charteris alike—it would always be the same.

When the piano was silent, at the end of a piece, all Madge heard was a very faint sigh, and then she knew that her music was giving as much comfort as ever to the tragic lady.

Madge went through the wonderful *Sonata Pathétique*, remembering how that piece had made a special impression upon her blind listener the previous Wednesday, and then it was time for the usual interval.

Janet crossed to the door and beckoned to Madge to follow her out of the room, and a few moments later the pair of them were in the queerly furnished kitchen.

A kettle was boiling, and Janet made the usual cup of tea for Madge, pouring out one for herself.

"I wonder if my mistress would like one, too, just for once?" muttered the faithful old soul. "I've tried her afore, dear, but she has allus said 'No.'"

"I would certainly try her with a cup," Madge said. "Poor Miss Charteris, I cannot look at her without feeling so very sorry for her. Oh, it is all, all so sad!"

"Ay, sad's right!" murmured Janet, passing from the room with the cup of tea.

Madge heard the woman's step padding along to the drawing-room, and then, bursting upon the tragic silence of the house, there came a sound that made the school-girl's heart leap in her breast.

She heard a sharp scream of horror and dismay from old Janet.

Next moment the frightened woman was rushing back into the kitchen, gesturing appealing to the schoolgirl.

"Quick, quick, dear! My poor, dear mistress—"

"What's the matter?" panted Madge, setting down her cup and jumping up.

"She's badly, dear! She's ill—got a seizure or summat! Oh, my dear, fetch a doctor—quick! Find one somewhere, and get him to come at once! Quick—quick!"

"All right, I'll go!" Madge exclaimed, darting for the hall. "I'll be as quick as I can!"

"Thank'ee, dear—thank'ee! And tell him it's heart trouble, won't you? Oh, my dear, tell him to hurry!"

Madge, by now tugging back the stiff latch of the street door, nodded hastily. She dragged the door open and was off and away up the quiet street.

A doctor—where could she find the nearest one?

She was excited, fully impressed with the need for haste, but she was not flurried. The shrewd thought came to her, like some calm suggestion, that she could not do better than try the main street of the town, which was not far off.

So she ran in that direction, and in another minute her fleet figure was speeding amongst the leisured folk who were thronging the street.

At one point she had to go past the town hall clock, and at first she gave the big hands only a casual glance. Then, with a throb of alarm, she looked at them again.

Four o'clock!

It was four o'clock, and by five o'clock at the latest she must be with her chums at the castle, for at that hour they were to give the part-songs, with herself as the accompanist.

She had known all along that she would be a little late in getting to the castle, only that had not seemed to matter much, except that it might get her into hot water with Miss Massingham, if she found out. But being as late as all this—letting down the whole Form by not being there to play for them—how annoyed they would all be with her!

Then she thought of poor Miss Charteris again, and forgot all other anxieties, all personal perplexities. She stopped a passer-by and panted eagerly:

"A doctor! Can you tell me, please, where—"

"You want one at once, miss?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Dr. Marlowe lives at the white house, just past the County Stores. It's not a hundred yards—"

"Thank you!" cried Madge, and she sped on again.

But Dr. Marlowe was out on a round, and the maid who answered the ring of the bell did not think he would be back until six o'clock.

"Try Dr. Briscoombe, in East Street," said the servant. "He's generally in at this time."

But would he be in to-day? wondered Madge, as she sped off again.

Luckily she knew the shortest way to East Street. The route took her past the town hall clock again, and she saw how the

big hand had moved on, as time always must move on—relentlessly!

Ten-past four!

Madge's mind switched back to what would happen if she was late for the part-songs.

There would be such anger, not only from the girls, but from Miss Massingham and the headmistress, as would compel her to make some excuse for having been away so long. And what excuse could she make, except that she had been detained by having to find a doctor for someone who was ill?

That excuse would suffice, she knew, provided she could say who the person was who had been taken ill. And could she do that—dared she?

It meant making a clean breast of everything, and how would a full confession affect Alva Forbes?

That poor girl was living in dread of losing her paid position as Miss Charteris' hired pianist. If she, Madge, made a clean breast of everything to the headmistress, that lady would say that it was out of the question for a Morcove scholar to go on playing as a substitute under such strange conditions.

As soon as Miss Charteris was better—if she did get better—the headmistress would send her a letter, or call to explain matters, and then an entirely new professional player would be engaged, and Alva's position would be gone for ever.

East Street at last! And there on a house wall was a doctor's brass plate!

Madge spurred for the surgery door and pressed hard at the bell.

"Dr. Briscoombe—is he in?" she panted, when the usual trim maid opened the door.

"Yes, miss—"

"Then tell him, please—quick! He is wanted at No. 10, The Retreat. Miss Charteris—she's ill!"

"Wait one moment, will you?" said the maid, and she went away.

An eternity of waiting seemed to follow, but really it was less than a minute when Dr. Briscoombe came hurrying out to her.

"Well, young lady, you only just caught me!" he greeted her pleasantly. "I was just going out in the car. Will you come back with me to the lady's house?"

"No, thank you—yes!" Madge said, changing her mind suddenly. "I feel I must know what is going to happen to the poor

lady, whether she is going to live or die."

The doctor's chauffeur now brought the fine car round to the front of the house, and in a flash Madge was obeying a wave of the hand that meant "Jump in!"

Dr. Briscoombe seated himself beside her, and away they went, with the motor-horn blaring again and again as the car threaded its way swiftly through the narrow streets.

The front door of Miss Charteris' strange home was standing wide open when they got to it, and Madge, in spite of her agitation, found herself wondering how long it was since that door had been wide-flung like this? Years and years, as many as forty long years, perhaps!

Madge took no part in what followed, but went through to the kitchen and waited there, whilst old Janet remained with the doctor in attendance upon the patient. Tick-tock! went the old-fashioned clock on the mantelpiece—tick-tock, tick-tock!

Half-past four, and still the schoolgirl was beneath the roof of this house of sorrow and tragedy!

But now Janet's shuffling step came along the passage, and the old woman bustled into the kitchen.

"I dunno how to thank 'ee enough, dear," she said, pressing a hand to her beating heart. "The poor lady was so badly, if there'd been any delay—"

"She is better now, then?"

"Ay, happen she's out o' danger for the present," nodded the old housekeeper shakily. "But Dr. Briscoombe would tell 'ee, it's been touch and go with her, poor soul. There'll be no more playing to-day, of course, but happen you'd like to wait—"

"I would, indeed; but I mustn't," broke out Madge, with another glance at the clock. "I must be off at once, Janet. I shall be thinking about Miss Charteris all the time, though, and shall long to know how she is. If—if I can manage it, I will come again. But—oh, I am not sure where I shall be before the next few days are out!"

Expelled, perhaps! Sent home! That was the grim thought running in her mind, although she did not care to reveal it to Janet. Bidding her a hasty good-bye she darted into the street again, and now it was a breathless rush round to the cycle-shop.

"That bicycle you were to let me have on hire, is it in now?" she gasped out, when she burst into the shop.

"Yes, miss. Been in this last three-quarters of an hour," the man answered.

"There it is, miss, and—"

"Thank you!" she said, and, springing into the saddle, she pedalled off.

The machine came strange to her after the one she was so used to, and she started wobbling badly. But, setting her teeth and taking a good grip on the handlebars, she whirred away at the pedals, whilst the desperate thought ran on and on in her mind: Would she be in time, after all?

Seventeen minutes to five by the town hall clock!

Could she do it, after all? The road out to the castle was the usually hilly one common to this part of Devonshire. Could she do the journey in seventeen minutes? If so, she would at least be in time to play the part-songs, and none could ever say she had let down the Form.

Nor perhaps would everything have to come out about her visits to the blind lady's house. Let the whole school think what it liked, she could still keep silent for poor Alva's sake—could go again to the house and play for her, if only—

Ping!

In the centre of the busy thoroughfare Madge had to jump from her saddle and stare in sheer horror at the back wheel of her machine.

Just her luck—a puncture!

CHAPTER 10.

Betty Filled the Breach.

MISS MASSINGHAM, breaking away from one of the many groups of people who were thronging the grounds of Barncombe Castle, sauntered across the grass to where Betty Barton and her chums were standing.

"Well, girls," she said, "I am sure you are enjoying it all, eh?"

"It's glorious!" said Betty Barton.

"Weally wipping!" agreed Paula Creel.

"Magnifique—magnificent!" said Trixie Hope.

And murmurs to the same effect came from Tess Trelawney and Dolly Delane.

"You will be quite ready to give your part-songs in a few minutes!" pursued Miss Massingham, glancing at her wrist-watch. "Lady Lundy said she would like you to open the outdoor concert with your

items, at five o'clock precisely, and it is now five to five."

"Yes, Miss Massingham."

"All right, so long as you are prepared," nodded the mistress, beginning to wander off again. "Madge is going to play for you, of course. I have not caught sight of her, but she must be amongst the crowd."

Passers-by closed in between the mistress and her girls, and—oh, what a relief it was to Betty & Co. to be done for the moment with Miss Massingham!

For she was perfectly ignorant at present of a fact which had already made most of them feel very angry indeed.

Madge Minden had not turned up at the castle!

For the last hour or so Betty had been suggesting all sorts of excuses for the absence. But those excuses had come in for less and less patient hearing by Polly, Paula, Tess and the others. And now, when the moment had almost arrived for the singing to take place, matters had reached a crisis.

Between Betty, still clinging to her faith in Madge, and all the rest of the girls, the split was widening fast!

"I call it disgraceful!" fumed Polly Linton. "She has simply made that call us the cycle-shop an excuse for going off on her own."

"But, Polly—"

"Oh, don't trot out any more excuses, please, Betty!" exclaimed Polly impatiently. "You know no more than we do, all the time, and so why suggest that she may have met with an accident, and all that sort of nonsense? It is only making up a lot of rubbishy excuses!"

"Yes, wather!"

"To try and smooth things over," finished Polly. "And, so far as I am concerned, things can't be smoothed over any longer! Unless Madge is here on the stroke of five, I'm done with her!"

"And I!" "And I!" muttered the others.

Cora and Judith Grandways suddenly appeared, with smirking looks on their faces.

"Seen Madge Minden?" they called out loudly.

"No—where?" cried Betty's chums excitedly.

"Oh, we haven't seen her!" said Cora, walking away with her sister. "No one

has! I expect she is at the cinema again. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Just as if she would go to a cinema when she had this invitation to the outdoor fête!" exclaimed Betty. "I—"

"Gwacious, geals—hark!" struck in Paula, in dismay. "That's five o'clock striking now, bai Jove!"

"And Madge not here! All right," said Polly grimly, "this is the end of it! She's no longer a chum of mine! Letting down the Form like this!"

"One thing," muttered Tess, "she will have to pay a nice penalty for her goings-on! She will be expelled this time, for a certainty!"

"Yes, wather! But, geals, I—Gwacious!" Paula exclaimed. "Hoah is Lady Lundy, bai Jove, coming to ask us to start the concert!"

Betty, like the rest, cast a dismayed glance at the lady who was smilingly approaching them.

At the same time, the girls were aware of the throng setting towards the spot where the open-air concert was to be held.

"Girls!" cried Lady Lundy gaily, "I am so grateful to you for promising to open the concert, because I know how shy the soloists feel if there isn't a bit of chorus-singing to open with."

She turned and waved a dainty hand towards the concert-ground.

"You will find everything ready for you, girls, and the audience will be settled by the time you have assembled. So off you go, and I am sure Morcove School is going to give us a very fine musical treat!"

Then she had to hurry away, her duties as hostess keeping her every moment on the move.

"Umph!" said Polly, staring hard at Betty. "In a bit of a fix, aren't we? And all through Madge!"

"What a shame it is!" exclaimed Tess, frowning.

"You ought to have explained to Lady Lundy," one of the girls said to Betty bitterly, "we can't do our item because Madge Minden preferred to go off on her own."

"And a nice sort of thing that is to have to own to!" grimaced Polly.

"Yes, wather! Weally, geals, I—"

"Betty—all of you!" broke in the voice of Miss Massingham, from a few paces away. "Come along! They are waiting!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" pealed out a laugh, which

Betty and the rest knew was from Cora Grandways.

"Do come along, girls!" Miss Massingham repeated, striding towards them.

"Madge—where is Madge Minden?"

"She—she is not here," was all Betty could say.

"Not here! You don't mean to say that she—she has not yet arrived?"

Silence answered that question, and Miss Massingham lost all the good humour that she had been showing all throughout the afternoon.

"Not here! Then she has taken advantage of the special favour she was shown in being allowed to come, to get into fresh mischief! She has gone off to seek her own amusements!"

"She has let down the whole Form, anyway!" said Ella Elgood disgustedly.

"I should think Madge will be here soon," put in Cora Grandways, with a malicious grin. "The cinema closes for an hour at six o'clock!"

"He he, he!" sniggered Judith.

"This is no laughing matter!" Miss Massingham said sternly. "I— Really, nothing short of expulsion will teach Madge Minden a lesson, that is evident! But we cannot waste time talking about her now! The audience is—"

And there Miss Massingham paused, gasping with dismay.

"I am forgetting," she exclaimed. "Without Madge Minden, you simply can't give those songs! They are nothing without the piano!"

"We shall never hold together, I'm sure," murmured Polly, "if we do try them without the piano."

"I am annoyed—oh, I feel most annoyed!" fumed Miss Massingham. "What the Headmistress will say about this, I dread to think! It is making us all look so ridiculous, and all because of one girl! Well, I must find Lady Lundy and tell her that we—"

"Miss Massingham, one moment!" broke out Betty, who had been frowning and biting her underlip in an agitated manner. "Supposing I take Madge's place at the piano?"

"You!"

"My playing is not a patch on Madge's, I know," said Betty, going red and white by turns, "but if you will say the word, Miss Massingham, I—I'll manage somehow!"

"Surely, though, you will never——"
 "Yes, she will, Miss Massingham," put in Polly. "If Betty says she will manage, she will just do it!"

"Then, for goodness' sake, hurry, Betty! All of you!" urged the Form-mistress excitedly, "hurry along and make a start, before the audience loses patience!"

Betty set off, and the others swarmed after her. In a minute they were behind the curtained-in plot of ground that was reserved for the artistes, and there they took a moment for breath, whilst Betty rummaged out the songs which had been brought along by Miss Massingham in the car.

The warm, summer air was full of the hum of talk, but that subdued sound died away as Betty, taking a good grip on herself, stepped forward to the piano. Then someone started to clap, and the plaudits swelled out as all the rest of the girls trooped from behind the curtains on to the makeshift stage.

Betty took her seat at the piano. She opened out the first bit of music, and saw a whole page of prelude confronting her. That page had got to be played by her, and would be listened to by this critical audience before the voices joined in. What an ordeal for the girl who accounted herself no brilliant pianist by any means!

But she was on her mettle now. She struck the opening chords, and then she became deadly calm.

Hushed, too, was the big audience. Not a sound, save the ripple of the piano-notes, until, in perfect unison, the singing started.

"Thank goodness!" Betty was breathing to herself, "no blunder at the beginning!"

Nor was there to be any humiliating breakdown half-way through the song.

Betty played, and the girls sang almost faultlessly. So the audience seemed to think, at any rate, for the end of the first song was the signal for a round of sincere applause.

They gave another piece, and that, too, was received with delight. A third song should have been the last, but the audience clapped and clapped, and cried out for an encore, so that Betty had to hold a hurried consultation with "the choir," and then swiftly turn up another piece in the album.

"Bravo—bravo, girls!" applauded the audience, at the conclusion of this extra song. "Well done, Morcove! Bravo!"

"Oh, goodness, let's get out of this!" Polly was saying, below her breath.

"Yes, wather!" agreed Paula. "Gwa-cious, geals, I feel quite widiculous, bai Jove!"

But before they could scamper away someone came forward, holding up a hand for silence, and instantly all the hand-clapping died away.

It was Lady Lundy who had suddenly stepped before the audience.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she cried looking very pleased, "before we go on with the little concert—before these girls leave the stage, possibly to scatter over the grounds—I think I ought to say how gratified I am with what they have done, as I am sure all of you are!"

"Hear, hear!"

"I am all the more pleased," went on the hostess, "because I now understand that the girls have done their turn under rather difficult conditions. The girl who was to have played their parts has failed to turn up, and so——"

"Bravo, the pianist!" sang out one hearty old gentleman.

"Yes, indeed!" laughed Lady Lundy, smiling at the blushing Betty, "I think we all ought to give you a little cheer all to yourself, Betty Barton!"

"Yes, wather!" cried Paula, whilst Polly and the rest looked just as eager to applaud their Form captain's success.

"Hip, hip! then," cried Lady Lundy, with a wave of the arm.

"Hurrah! Hurrah!"

The cheering was tremendous, and it only died down when Lady Lundy raised her hand for silence.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she said, "although the Morcove girls have performed so creditably, and entertained us to such splendid music, I am going to ask them to give us just one more item. Will you, girls?"

"Hurrah!"

There was another terrific burst of cheering.

Had Betty and the others wished to refuse, they could scarcely have done so, in view of the reception that Lady Lundy's proposition had received.

The music was soon procured, and Betty was just playing the opening bar on the piano, when a red, breathless figure was seen to dash towards the platform.

It was Madge Minden, the girl who had failed the Form!

So surprised was Betty, that, for a moment, she paused in her playing, and the rest of the girls uttered cries of amazement.

And then Madge did a very wise thing. She saw what was happening—saw that the Form was giving the entertainment, and, turning suddenly she made her way to the back of the platform.

And the Fourth-Formers continued with their playing and singing, to be applauded at the end with a burst of cheering and hand-clapping that could be heard for miles around.

Madge had kept out of the way during the performance. What would her chums think of her? That was the question that was agitating her mind.

She was soon to know, for, after the performance they crossed over to her.

"Hallo!"

"So here you are, Madge!"

"Bai Jove!"

Cries of this sort came from Betty Barton and Co., as they came upon Madge Minden waiting at the back of the stage.

"Yes, I've got here at last!" Madge gasped. "I'm awfully sorry that I am late! But—but have you finished?"

"Yes!" Half a dozen of the girls spoke at once. "We've done our part in the programme!"

"Managed without you!"

"Yes, wather! And made a gweat success, bai Jove!"

"Thanks to Betty managing the piano!"

Madge Minden looked thunderstruck.

"Betty played beautifully, and was specially thanked by Lady Lundy!" said Polly Linden.

"I'm glad of that!" exclaimed Madge.

"I mean, glad she won such praise. Betty—"

"One moment, Betty," interposed Polly. "If you are going to let Madge Minden claim your company, then you are going to lose mine. That's all!"

"And mine!" "And mine!"

"Weally, Betty deah, I shall gweatly wegwet taking any stwong action, but if you are going to listen to Madge Minden, then I'm off, bai Jove! Yes, wather!"

"Wait—oh, wait a moment!" Betty pleaded desperately. "Madge has some explanation, surely! Fair play, girls!"

"Well?" said Polly, halting in the act

of turning away. "What is the explanation?"

Madge had recovered her breath, and was much calmer by now.

"I was detained," she said, "by being asked to fetch a doctor for someone."

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Cora and Judith, who were close to the group. "A beautiful excuse—if it is true!"

"It is true!" flashed Madge. "After getting hold of the doctor, I got a bike from the cycle-shop and started to ride hard. I would have been in time, I do believe, only—"

"You had a puncture?" suggested Cora, with another malicious smile. "I thought so!"

"Ho, he, he!" giggled Judith. "Another puncture!"

Madge bit her underlip.

"If you don't choose to believe me—"

"Oh, we believe the puncture happened, right enough!" sneered Cora. "Only punctures sometimes happen because someone sticks a pin in the tyre on purpose!"

"Puncture or no puncture," cried out Polly disgustedly, "you've let us down shamefully, Madge."

"No, Polly," said Betty quickly, "Madge says she had to fetch a doctor—"

"That doesn't matter; she shouldn't have been roaming about the town, and then she wouldn't have been dropped on for the errand!" Polly asserted angrily. "You've been away all the afternoon, Madge, and you ought to have been here. And I say that's the finish of it!"

The other girls were murmuring their full agreement with this angry remark, when Miss Massingham suddenly appeared in their midst.

"When did you arrive, Madge Minden?"

"A few minutes ago, Miss Massingham."

"Where have you been since you parted with the girls at the cycle-shop?"

This question drew no answer from the miscreant, and so Cora Grandways put in a sarcastic remark.

"Madge has had her bicycle punctured again! He, he, he!"

"Is that the excuse—the same paltry excuse that you gave before?" cried Miss Massingham, giving full play to her anger at last.

"She has another excuse," remarked Judith Grandways, grinning. "She had to fetch a doctor for someone. Ha, ha, ha!"

"For whom did you have to fetch a doc-

tor, Madge Minden. Tell me the name—tell me everything!"

Then Madge spoke again.

"If you please, Miss Massingham, I would rather not tell you!"

"It does not please me at all!" was the stern comment on this reply. "Madge, I am utterly disappointed in you. You were granted freedom from the school to-day, as an act of grace, and this is how you reward your Headmistress for her leniency."

Miss Massingham paused for breath.

"Go from here this very instant, girl!" she resumed. "You will find Miss Somerfield's car round at the castle front. Take your seat in it, and don't you dare stir until Miss Somerfield and I join you! If you have a bicycle with you, I will arrange to have it returned to the shop."

These commanding words were followed by a stern wave of the hand, and next moment, Madge, with drooping head and rather pale cheeks, was passing away.

Amongst the crowd of schoolfellows only one girl had a sorrowful glance for the culprit, and that girl was Betty. Polly, Paula, Tess, Trixie, and many others—they did not scruple to betray utter disgust for one whom they felt to be undeserving of the least compassion. And there, also, stood Cora and Judith, gloating with delight.

"Now for a thorough bust-up, Judy darling, between Betty and her cronies!" Cora whispered gleefully to her sister, as they moved away.

Judith nodded and smiled with equal assurance. And, indeed, there was ample proof in the course of the next hour or two as to the tense situation existing between the Form captain and her following.

The Grandways sisters rode home with the rest on their bicycles, and they did not fail to notice how gloomy the usually merry party of girls had become.

Hardly a word passed. When they got to the school porch, Miss Somerfield's car was standing there empty, and Betty made an eager dart at a senior girl who was passing by to ask a question.

"Where is Madge; do you know, please?"

The questioned senior was Ethel Courtway, the head girl of the school.

"Madge is in Miss Somerfield's study," she answered gravely, "and what is going to happen I don't like to think!"

"Well," burst out Polly then, "if Madge

is expelled, it will only be what she deserves! I can't help saying so!"

There was a chorus of murmurs to the same effect from all the rest.

But Betty sighed hard.

CHAPTER 11.

Losing Her Friends.

THE long summer's day was ended at last, and Madge Minden was sitting all alone in her study with a brooding look in her large eyes.

This evening there was an unusual silence in this part of the great schoolhouse. No cheery voices of other girls came to the one who was sitting here like this. Silence and gloom! In a vague way she was conscious of these things, and vaguely, perhaps, she felt that they typified what was in store for her for many days to come.

Silence, because she would be left all alone by those who had once been her friends; gloom, because her mind would be ever darkened by the thought of all the disgrace in which she stood.

But now—hark! Here was someone tapping at the door. It opened, and Betty Barton came in.

"Madge dear—"

"Oh, why did you bother yourself about me, Betty?"

"I had to come in for a moment before lock-up," the Form captain pleaded softly. "I couldn't bear the idea of going to bed and having to lie awake and think about you, without knowing the reason why you—why things have gone like this."

"If you are asking me to tell you where I went to-day, Betty, it is no use," Madge said, stiffening in her seat. "Not a bit of use!"

Betty sighed.

"I can't make you out at all, Madge. Don't you feel the need of someone—a friend—at this time? A friend who still believes that you can have done nothing to be really ashamed of?"

Madge turned her dark eyes upon the captain.

"Yes," she gulped, "I do feel the need, Betty. It's quite a new thing for me to feel I want to be less independent. You keep on showing your faith in me when everybody else has given me up as a bad

job, and I want to repay you by telling you—something.”

“Then why not—?”

“It wouldn't do, Betty. That's all I can say.”

Madge shook her head and then sat very still, staring at the wall. In the deepening gloom, she seemed to see a vision of those things about which she dare not tell Betty—the vision of herself at the old piano in that house of tragedy; the vision of a blind lady sitting mute and still, listening to the music. Would such a scene take place again? It might have to take place, so Madge was thinking.

The blind lady would get over her illness, and in a little while—in a few days it might be—she would be wanting to hear the old melodies again. But Alva Forbes would still be prevented from playing, and so—what must happen?

Was it not certain that there would be a sudden appeal for her—Madge—to go over to the house once more? It was quite certain, she felt, and this very certainty was the reason why she had been unable to tell everything to Miss Somerfield—why she could confide nothing to Betty.

“There are all sorts of vague rumours going around,” Betty broke out at last, “as to what Miss Somerfield is going to do with you. I should like to know the truth, Madge.”

“I can tell you that, anyhow,” was the answer. “I am to be strictly gated for the rest of the term, and I am not to come back to Morcove after the holidays.”

“That is—expulsion,” said Betty, wincing.

“Yes. It is a polite form of expulsion,” nodded Madge.

“I am awfully sorry for you, dear—I am, really! Because, even now, Madge,” whispered Betty, stepping close and laying an affectionate hand on the miscreant's shoulder, “I feel that you don't deserve it. If we only knew—”

“Ah, if you could only be told, it might make a bit of difference!” Madge broke in softly. “But I can't tell you, you see, and so—You had better leave me, Betty.”

“I'll say good-night now, Madge; but, in a sense, I am not leaving you, nor will I ever, if I can help it,” said the captain of the Form. “Good-night, Madge, and always remember that I am your friend!”

Next moment Betty took her departure from the study.

Slowly she went along the dim corridor to Study No. 12.

There she found Polly and a whole crowd of Fourth Form girls, all of whom fell silent as she rejoined them.

“I have just looked in upon Madge—”

“We guessed you had,” broke out Grace Garfield stiffly. “Well?”

Betty did not like the sound of that “Well?”

“She had nothing to say, even in confidence.”

“There is nothing she can say that will excuse her recent behaviour!” said Ella Elgood tartly. “That's what we all feel, don't we, girls?”

“Yes, Betty,” sighed Tess. “It is no use! If Madge has preferred to risk expulsion rather than give up the mad course she has been following lately, that's her look-out. But we are thinking that it is hardly the thing for our own Form captain to remain Madge's champion!”

Several of the girls murmured, as if they were pleased at the way Tess had put things.

“How can you go on defending her?” Polly burst out at last. “She has behaved disgracefully—has flouted our friendship, and been too jolly independent altogether!”

“Yes, wathor!”

“I do not defend her,” Betty said quietly, sitting down at the table. “At least, I mean, I am not wanting to make light of the things she appears to have done. They put her quite out of court, I know, but, supposing there is something she has been doing that is really all to her credit, if we only knew?”

“Oh, that's nonsense!” grimaced Polly.

Round the edge of the open doorway appeared the heads of two other girls—Cora and Judith!

Betty saw them, but paid no heed to the spiteful couple. What she did heed, with a pang of sadness, was the gradual drawing together of all the other girls, leaving her with a sense of isolation.

“Surely,” she pleaded earnestly, “it is nothing very terrible if I still cling to my faith in Madge!”

“It isn't fair!” said Grace Garfield. “If you are going to support her, then you can't expect us to support you!”

CHAPTER 12.

Trusted By One.

"Is that what you all say?"
"After what has happened to-day—yes,"
said Ella Elgood and half a dozen others.

"And you, Polly?"
"I think the Form captain ought to drop
Madge Minden now."

"And if the Form captain feels she
can't?"

Polly shrugged her shoulders, moving a
little farther from Betty.

"Then I must drop the Form captain,
that's all. But I hope it won't come to
that, Betty."

"Yes, wather!" said Paula, in great dis-
tress.

In the sudden, tense silence that fell upon
them all, they heard the bell calling them
to the evening muster in hall.

By twos and threes the girls drifted away
until Betty was aware that she and Polly
were the only two left behind.

"Shut that door a moment, Polly," the
Form captain pleaded gently. "Before we
go down, dear, let's—oh, let's see if we
can't agree to differ!"

But Polly kept the door wide open, and
took a step towards the passage.

"I am afraid, Betty," she said, "you are
a bit unreasonable. I'm like the rest—I
don't feel inclined to back you up when
you are all the time backing up a girl who
has played about with us—let us down—
shown that she doesn't care a rap whether
she gets expelled or not!"

"Madge does care, Polly! Oh, she
does!"

"So you think, and that is where we
differ, of course!"

Then Polly, like the others, was gone,
and Betty Barton sat for a full minute
alone in the study, her pretty face show-
ing very white in the deep gloom.

When at last she aroused herself with a
sharp sigh, and passed out into the corri-
dor, she came upon Cora and Judith, talk-
ing with Ella Elgood, Grace Garfield, and
two or three other girls.

"Very well!" Cora ended the conversa-
tion by saying, as the Form captain came
along. "Then Judy and I will see you in
our study at tea-time to-morrow."

"Yes, all right!" was the chorused an-
swer.

And Betty knew then that what she had
feared all along was now coming to pass.

All the friends she was loving so fast—
they were going to back up Cora Grand-
ways again!

FROM a shady corner of the big play-
ing-field at Morcove School, Madge
Minden stood watching a certain
party of girls at a pick-up game of
cricket.

Madge was quite alone, and a stranger
might have mistaken her for a "new"
scholar who had not yet had time to make
friends with other members of the Fourth
Form.

For she was not only quite apart from the
girl cricketers, but received no friendly hail
from them, although they must have been
aware of her presence fifty yards away.

Yet Madge was anything but a newcomer
to Morcove.

Watching the party at their game, she
could name every member of it, and could
remember when each of these girls had been
her friend.

There was Polly Linton, the madcap of
the Form. There was Paula Creel—aristo-
cratic Paula, with her amusing simper.
There was Tess Trelawney, one of the nicest
girls in the Form, and her chum, Trixie
Hope, who had a fancy for talking French.

Dolly Delane was also here—"Dolly the
Doormat," as she had been dubbed, be-
cause her obliging nature was liable to let
people trample on her feelings. And,
amongst others, there was—

No!

It was a thing that Madge Minden was
realising with a sudden nasty pang at this
moment. Betty Barton, the captain of the
Form, was not taking part in the game.
And why was that?

Why was Betty absent from the field alto-
gether at present?

Madge could guess the reason.

It was one that made her draw her dark
brows together over her large, lovely eyes.
Heaving a deep breath that was very much
like a sigh of distress, she suddenly walked
away, going straight towards the school-
house door.

It was that delightful part of the summer
afternoon round about tea-time. Classes
had been dismissed at three-thirty, and there
had been a full hour in which the girls
could enjoy themselves out of doors before
romping in to tea.

Betty Barton—without doubt she would
have been one of the first to throw herself
heart and soul into that game of cricket, if
only the rest of the girls had asked her to

join them. But they must have kept aloof from her to-day, and once again Madge Minden knew the reason why.

With that look of distress deepening on her pretty face, Madge made her way up to the Fourth Form studies, and, going past her own, knocked at Betty's door.

It was all as Madge had feared.

Betty Barton, the Form captain, was alone in this study, bitterly conscious of the fact that chums, once so eager to throng around her, were hardly chums any longer.

"Can we have a bit of a talk, Betty?" Madge asked, entering the room.

"Oh, yes; sit down," the Form captain said, brightening up with rather an effort. "The girls won't be indoors for ten minutes or so; and even then they—they mayn't look in here."

"Even Polly may keep away?" suggested Madge sadly. "Even Polly, who shares this study with you, and who used to be hardly ever out of your sight?"

"Oh, well"—Betty Barton gave a shrug, still trying to look cheerful—"little differences between friends are bound to occur, I suppose, from time to time!"

"Betty, it is no use your making light of things; I know how serious they are," Madge said, after a pause. "This is no trifling tiff between you and the other girls. Polly, in particular, was a great chum of yours, and even she has changed."

"Things are not very happy just at present; I pretend they are," said Betty. "But we 'maun bear w' it,' as folk say up in the north. What can't be cured must be endured, Madge."

"But it can be cured," said Madge Minden earnestly. "That's what has brought me here now, Betty. Down on the field just now I saw all your old chums playing together, and you were not there, and it—it hurt me, Betty, to realise that it's all through me."

"You shouldn't make yourself miserable on my account," said the Form captain. "After all, Madge, you didn't beg me to stand up for you when the other girls began to lose faith in you. I did it quite of my own accord. I did it—well, because I couldn't help feeling that you still deserved to be trusted instead of doubted."

Madge was not a girl to display her feelings very openly. She was of a reserved, independent disposition. But her eyes shone now with unmistakable gratitude towards

this true friend who had defended her at such bitter cost to herself.

"What can I say, Betty?" Madge said huskily. "Only that your confidence in me is not altogether undeserved. I really have not deserved one half of the hard things the girls have said about me. But there it is; appearances have been all against me, and I have no right to be angry with them, I suppose, for losing faith in me."

"Still, dear—"

"Wait a moment," went on Madge quickly. "That being the case, you really ought not to be expected to take this stand for me, since any outsider would say that the girls are right and you are wrong. I never wanted you to stand up for me, Betty; I ought not to let you."

"I am afraid you can't prevent me," smiled the Form captain. "If I choose to believe that Madge Minden, in spite of appearances, has never really done anything to be ashamed of, Madge Minden can't stop me!"

"No," said Madge, with a rueful grimace. "But I do feel I ought to persuade you, Betty. That's why I have come to you now, Betty. I can't bear the idea of your going on like this—losing friends on my account. I'm not worth it."

"Then I must differ from you, as I have differed from the others."

"You are an obstinate little brick!" Madge exclaimed, with a sharp laugh that had little mirth in it. "As captain of the Form your plain duty in this case is to take the same point of view that the rest of the girls have taken, Betty. They say that I have been doing disgraceful things again and again just lately; that I've as good as got myself expelled, because you know, I am not allowed to return to the school after the holidays, and so they can't trust me any more."

"Nor would I be able to trust you, Madge, if I were only guided by what has come to light," Betty rejoined. "You certainly appear to have covered yourself with disgrace in many ways. But—"

"You just feel that there has been something behind my conduct all along—something that, if it were known—"

"Yes, that is what I feel, Madge; and whilst that feeling remains I can't look upon you as a girl to be dropped and despised."

There was another pause between the two. Madge got up and took a turn about the room, sighing softly to herself.

"Once again, Betty, this is awfully brishish of you. I— You will never know what it has meant to me, finding that there is one school friend of mine who has never lost faith in me. Of course, what I ought to do is to reward you by taking you into my confidence."

"Oh, I have given up hoping that you will ever confide in me or anybody!" Betty said, with a sad smile. "You always were so independent—more's the pity!"

"It's not that so much now," Madge answered, with a slow shake of the head. "I know I have been rather one to keep my affairs to myself in the past. But—"

Pausing a moment, she took a sudden step that placed her close to the Form captain, and she laid a hand upon that girl's shoulder.

"Betty, do you know that I long to confide in you now, and I can't?"

"Oh, if you want to, Madge, then don't say you can't!"

"I daren't! I'm not being obstinate, Betty. I'm not keeping silent out of false pride, or— or anything like that. I really must not try to explain why it is that several times I've been away from the school for an hour or two under circumstances that made the Headmistress think I was doing rash, foolish things."

"You never went to that cinema in Barncombe, anyhow, Madge, although everything pointed to your having been there."

"No; I denied it at the time, and I deny it still, Betty. And then that other time I was supposed to have been enjoying myself in the town—there was nothing of the sort, Betty—nothing! If only you could know—"

"Madge, you must tell me!" Betty cried, jumping up. "You must, dear. I am not one to pry—you know that. I only want to be told—"

"You deserve to be told, Betty; but I can't—I daren't tell you!"

"Madge—"

"Sh!" cut in the girl who was in disgrace. "There are the others coming along the passage now!"

She quitted the room hastily, and Betty had not been alone a moment or so before Polly Linton, parting from the rest in the passage, came in.

Betty expected to see her study mate go out again at once; but no.

Polly dropped into an easy-chair, and sat

there, getting her breath back after the strenuous exercise out of doors.

"Well, I suppose we had better think about tea," she said presently.

Before Betty could answer, the door opened and Paula Creel looked into the room.

"Polly deah," she drawled, "aren't you weally coming to tea with Tess and Dolly?"

"No, thanks! You heard me say that I— Oh, I'm having tea here with Betty!"

"Vewy well, Polly," said Paula, with a shrug, and she withdrew her head and shut the door again.

"What's that about your not wanting to have tea with those others?" Betty asked gently.

"Nothing," said Polly lightly, "except that I—well, I thought I ought to be with you for a bit."

"Polly—"

"I'm sick of going on as if—as if—oh, as if we had had a violent split!" Polly burst out, jumping to her feet. "You didn't come down to cricket just now, Betty!"

"How could I, Poly? I mean, it only makes a sor of painful situation. We haven't quarrelled."

"No, we haven't quarrelled. But we— Oh, bother—bother Madge Minden, I say, for causing this upset!" rushed on Polly, storming about the room. "If it had not been for Madge we shouldn't be in this state!"

She was flinging open a cupboard door, to start getting out the tea-things, but paused to face round upon the troubled captain of the Fourth.

"And our sort of strained relations, Betty, that's not the worst part about it at all," she added gloomily. "There are some girls not content with being a bit huffy with you as I am—I admit it!—at present. They are not only 'off' with you altogether, but are 'on' with the Grandways sisters."

Betty winced.

"I know, Polly. Of course, Cora and Judith Grandways are glorying in this split. They always knew that my loss of a following would be their gain. That's why I did so want to avoid ever falling out with any of you."

"Then why didn't you avoid it?" Polly cried reproachfully. "Why didn't you have the sense to see that we were all bound to feel fed-up with Madge—disgusted with her, and that your defending her was very riling?"

"I couldn't adopt your attitude towards her, Polly."

"Not even to avoid a split?"

"No. You don't know how sorry I am, but—"

"All right; we won't talk about it. I don't want to quarrel, and we come very near to quarrelling when we bring up that hateful subject. We'll bury the hatchet over tea, anyhow."

"That's awfully nice of you, Polly. But—or—the fact is, I am not staying in to tea."

"Oh!"

"I am going out for a cycle ride, and shall get a cup of tea somewhere in the town."

"In that case," said Polly, slamming shut the cupboard door, "I may as well go and have tea with Tess and Dolly and the rest, after all."

"Yes, certainly. That's what I hope you will do," said Betty.

Then she started to put on her outdoor things, whilst Polly promptly went off to explain to Tess Trclawney & Co. how matters stood.

It cost the Form captain a pang to see her former chum go off like that; but she felt that it had been up to her to save Polly the ordeal of having tea in this study.

It would have been an ordeal, no doubt about that and for that reason Betty had spoken of going for the cycle ride.

She didn't want to go out. She would have preferred a hundred times more to stay in and have tea with Polly, even under rather strained conditions. But she was not thinking of her own feelings. She was trying to study Polly's.

In a couple of minutes she was ready to set off, and she passed quietly from the study, closing the door softly. Tess and Dolly's study was next door, and Betty heard a pleasant murmur of voices coming from the whole roomful of company.

That made her wince again; but the most painful moment of all was yet in store.

Even as she went forward along the corridor some five or six girls suddenly turned into it whilst at the same instant another study door was opened, and Cora Grandways looked out.

Cora gave a swift, hostile glance at the lonely Form captain, then cried to the approaching girls:

"Come on, all of you! Tea is made!"

She stood back, joining her sister Judith just inside their study.

With the table all laden with a very lavish meal, and with triumphant looks upon their handsome faces, the designing couple stood ready to give a gushing welcome to the girls who had accepted their invitation to the little banquet.

And Betty was a witness to it all!

Nothing could have pleased Cora and Judith better.

"Cheerio, Ella! Come along in, Grace!"

So the almost shouted greetings went on, the two sisters raising their voices on purpose to let Betty hear.

"Well, Etta, it's a long time since we had this pleasure!"

These were not girls who had been the Form captain's best chums up to the time of the "split." Ella Elgood, Grace Garfield, Etta Hargrove, Elsie Drew, and the one or two others who were now filing into the Grandways' study—they had been the last to give Betty their support when she was made Form captain, and they were now the first to switch their favours back to Cora and Judith.

But what else could poor Betty think except that it was only the beginning of the end?

As these girls were doing to-day so others would do to-morrow perhaps! Not Polly! No, surely she, at least, would never become friends with the Grandways couple! But Paula—Paula might. So might Eva Merrick and Diana Forbes, and Mabel Rivers. Tess, Dolly, and Trixie—were they even to be trusted not to let their disapproval of Betty's policy in regard to Madge Minden lead them into a mistaken friendship with Cora Grandways & Co.? Betty could not be certain.

Was it all a mistake, then, that she had made in clinging to her faith in Madge and so ruffling the feelings of other girls?

As captain of the Form—as one, too, who knew how fatal it would be for two girls like Cora and Judith to get a lead in the Form—ought she not to have given way to the general feeling about Madge?

No, and again no! So her straightforward nature answered these doubts as they arose in her troubled mind. One ought, at all costs, to be true to one's convictions. That was what she felt. And her conviction was that Madge Minden had had a reason for behaving as she had done of late.

Poor Betty! It was not only very disheartening, but bitterly humiliating, too, to

feel how she had lost all the firm hold upon the Form that had promised so well.

Here was a time, she reflected, as she drifted downstairs and into the open air, when she ought to be in the midst of a merry tea-party, such as she and the others had so often enjoyed together. But she knew that in Tess and Dolly's study there was a tea-party where her presence would only be an embarrassment, whilst in Cora and Judith's den—

She sighed hard.

How well she could imagine what was happening in that den!

Cora and Judith would be fawning upon Ella and Grace, and all the rest, using this tea-party as a means of inducing these girls to get others to come next time.

Never would the spiteful sisters cease their cunning work until they had won back to their side every former friend. Paula, Tess, Trixie—Polly even, if possible! That was their vow, Betty knew, to rob her of her following and leave her as utterly friendless as on the day she first set foot inside Morcove School!

Suddenly the sick-at-heart captain was roused out of her troubled state by becoming aware of a stranger running towards her.

Even as Betty's gaze was drawn to this visitor—a pretty girl, well past the age for schooling—she saw that the young lady looked thoroughly exhausted, as if she had come a great distance on foot.

"One moment, please!" the stranger appealed to Betty breathlessly. "They told me at the gateway where I could find the Fourth Form quarters. But I am so full of anxiety, I must ask you. Can you tell me if Madge Minden is to be found indoors?"

"Madge Minden?"

"Yes. She is a Fourth Form girl!"

"Oh, I know the girl you mean! I was with her a few minutes ago."

"Then she is indoors, and I can get a word with her?" the stranger to the school exclaimed, still panting for breath. "Oh, how relieved I am! All the way here I have been so anxious, dreading to find that Madge had gone out!"

"If you go indoors and up to the— Why, here is Madge!" broke off Betty, as the girl in question suddenly emerged from the ancient doorway. "Madge, there's a girl here wanting to see you!"

Betty was called upon to take no further part in the strange incident.

For now, with Madge Minden looking very white and startled, the visitor ran to meet her on the grass, and so the captain of the Form had nothing else to do but quietly walk away.

When she looked back, a few minutes later, it was to see the unknown visitor speaking to Madge in a wild, imploring manner.

What did it all mean?

Betty wondered!

CHAPTER 13.

The "Firm Hand" of Polly.

IF the captain of the Fourth Form had been of a prying disposition she could easily have loitered close at hand. And though she might not have been able to hear what passed, she would have seen strange things happening.

For Madge Minden betrayed great excitement when the visitor to the school ran up to her in that imploring manner.

"Wait! Don't blurt things out here!" Madge cut the girl short, with an uneasy glance around. "This way!"

And she led the girl to a more remote spot, looking very uneasy still when at last they were facing each other again.

"I was afraid you would be annoyed with me—" began the breathless visitor; but Madge cut in:

"I am not annoyed, only rather alarmed. You know everything has been kept secret about what I have been doing on your account, Alva Forbes?"

"So I understand; and I was not going to breath a word to anybody else if I had failed to find you at the school," Alva answered quickly. "It is not to be imagined that your headmistress would approve of what you have been doing. And yet— Oh, you have been doing a very fine thing indeed—a thing that shows how kind and sympathetic you are."

Madge Minden smiled feebly.

"I don't feel there is anything for me to pat myself on the back about, Alva. At the same time I do know that from first to last I have only wanted to help you."

"You have helped me very much indeed!" exclaimed Alva Forbes gratefully.

"That second visit of mine, last Saturday,

ended rather excitedly," said Madge. "Do you know that Miss Charteris was taken seriously ill whilst I was there, and that I had to search all over the town to get a doctor?"

"I have heard about it all from old Janet, the housekeeper—yes," said Alva. "And I am very, very sorry you were put to all that extra trouble and upset. Did you—did it mean your getting into a bother at the school?"

"Oh, it couldn't be helped!" Madge said evasively.

She was not going to tell Alva that through having to rush all over the town in quest of a doctor she—Madge—had been unable to fulfil an engagement to play for the Fourth Form at a certain open-air function at Barncombe Castle, and that her failure to do this had got her into very great trouble indeed.

"Well?" Madge asked after a moment's silence on either side. "What has brought you here to-day in such a state of excitement?"

All the old agitation came back to Alva. She again gestured imploringly to her schoolgirl friend

"Can you go to the blind lady's house again?" she burst out anxiously. "That is what I want to ask you. Oh, Madge Minden, can you manage it for me—just once again? I have heard to-day that she is very ill, and is asking all the time for me to play to her. You know how it is with her, poor, unhappy woman! Her only comfort has been to hear the music that is associated with her tragic past. She is asking for me, and I—I can't play the piano even now. My wrist is not recovered; I couldn't manage a note!"

"You want me to go at once, then?"

"Oh, if only you could do that!" Alva exclaimed wistfully. "I hated coming to ask you. Already you have done so much for me. But now," she went on quickly, "it is not so much for my sake—for the sake of my keeping the paid engagement—that I ask you to go if possible. It is for Miss Charteris' own sake!"

Madge nodded her understanding.

"You mean—"

"Things are in that state, Madge Minden; it would be a mercy to one who is perhaps in a very critical state for you to go and play to her. And not to go may mean that

she may aggravate her illness by fretting. Really, it is almost a case of life and death! The doctor himself told Janet that the longing for music must be gratified!"

Madge's lips parted, but she checked the words that were coming. There was so much that she dared not blurt out—how she was already in deep disgrace over the good turns done in secret, and how she was actually gaged, so that she had no right to go to Barncombe.

"Of course, Madge, you mustn't run risks—mustn't do anything to get yourself into a bother!" Alva exclaimed suddenly. "If it is at all difficult for you to get permission, then I must go back and do the best I can. But if you can manage it—"

"I'll manage it!" Madge Minden broke in, with that reckless decisiveness which was part and parcel of her impulsive character. "I'll be there as soon as possible."

"This evening?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Madge, how grateful I shall be for this—more than I can ever say! But you mustn't—"

"Don't be uneasy on my account. I'll be at the house some time this evening."

"Then I'll go back now and call at the house and tell Janet to expect you," said Alva Forbes. "And thank you—thank you very much for your kindness!"

With that Alva made her way towards the gates, and Madge Minden turned her steps towards the schoolhouse.

Half a minute later she was upstairs in her study, making hurried preparations for the secret journey to Barncombe.

Whilst she did this her mind was in a very calm state, planning all details.

She had no bicycle, for her machine was at a cycle shop in Barncombe being repaired. Nor could she possibly walk all the way to the town; that would take up too much time. But there was a train from Morcove Road, a little wayside station not far from the school; she could catch the train by starting off almost immediately.

Another thing—most serious thing of all! She had no right to leave the school bounds, being under the penalty of gating. So, in a few minutes, she must slip out unseen by anybody and leave the school precincts by any other way but the proper one.

At last she was ready to make the venture. It seemed a favourable moment, for

Trixie Hope, her study mate, was having tea in Tess and Dolly's study, and all the rest of the scholars were doubtless settled down to the afternoon meal.

She went softly to the door, and was just opening it, when she heard someone come away from another study. And then—

Trixie Hope came whirling into the study where Madge was, and their eyes met.

"Hallo," Trixie exclaimed, forgetting to speak French for once, "you are not going out, Madge, surely?"

"What's that to do with you if I am?" Madge retorted curtly.

"I just looked in to get another hanky," said Trixie. "I upset some tea just now and had to use one hanky to sop it up with. But, Madge, I don't like to see you like this. What's the matter with you?"

"Oh, find the handkerchief, and go back to your friends!" Madge exclaimed irritably. "I am nothing to do with any of you now!"

"Cela ne fait rien—that doesn't matter!" Trixie said obstinately. "If you go getting into fresh mischief I shall be forte triste—very sad! Madge—"

Madge Minden broke in with an exasperated stamp of the foot.

"You and your silly French jabber—I'm sick and tired of it!" she cried. "Just hold your tongue, Trixie!"

Then the door swung wider open, revealing several girls who had come away from Tess and Dolly's study.

Polly was there at the doorway, so was Paula Creel; so also were Tess and Dolly, Norah Nugent, and Sybil Farlow.

"What's the row?" asked Polly gravely. "Madge, you don't mean to say you are going out!"

"I don't mean to say whether I am going out or not!" Madge blustered furiously. "It is no business of yours, either way!"

"There you are mistaken," said Polly. "Yes, wather!" simpered Paula.

"Weally, Madge, we wather fancy you are in gweat enough disgwace at pwsent, bai Jove, without getting into worse—what?"

Whilst Paula was making this grave remark another girl joined the group at the doorway. It was Betty Barton.

"What is the matter?" she asked anxiously.

"The matter is," said Polly Linton, with a look of disgust, "Madge is going to break bounds!"

"What!"

"Isn't it perfectly obvious," went on Polly, "when Trixie and the rest of us have just caught her in the act of slipping off? Look at Madge now, Betty; there she is, with her hat on!"

"Can't I wear a hat for walking about the grounds?" flashed Madge.

"Do you ever wear a hat when you walk about the grounds?" retorted Ella tartly.

"Madge, it won't do! As Paula said, you are in deep enough disgrace as it is. You have made us all thoroughly disgusted with you—all, that is, except Betty!"

"And I should think this will just about end Betty's faith in you!" broke in Tess bitterly. "Really, Madge, you are the limit!"

"How many more of you wish to lecture me?" cried Madge angrily. "What right have you to stand there telling me what I am, and what I must do, and what I mustn't do?"

"None of us have any right to lecture you," said Betty. "But we have every right, Madge dear, to try and save you from yourself. I don't understand a bit what all this means; but the girls are evidently right. You were going to slip off again, and—"

"Go back to your tea-drinking and your gossip!" cried Madge. "Talk about me as much as you like somewhere else, but not here, because I won't—I won't stand it, so there!"

"Madge, dear," Betty pleaded again, taking a step towards her and plucking her by the sleeve, "now do think twice before doing anything to make further trouble!"

Madge's answer was to shake herself free of the Form captain's hand; and then Betty retreated a step, sighing with disappointment.

There was a moment's stillness in the crowded room, then Madge spoke.

"I can't hang about like this," she said. "Where I am going, or what I mean to do, is not your business at all! And so—"

"It is—it is!" burst out Polly hotly. "And I for one, am not going to let you make more trouble for yourself and the Form! If the captain won't act—"

"I have beggod Madge to be sensible!" broke in Betty desperately. "What more can I do, short of stopping her by force?"

"Then force is what we must all use, that's all!" was Polly's rash rejoinder. "Madge, you are not going out!"

"What!"

"I say you shall not go! If you try to pass that door I—I'll stop you somehow!"

Madge Minden instantly accepted this challenge.

Polly Linton sprang after her and seized her firmly.

"No, you shan't go—you shan't!" cried Polly fiercely. "I've said I would stop you, and so I will! Girls, shut the door whilst I hold her back until she sees reason!"

"Take your hands off me!" Madge panted huskily.

"I won't!"

"You will be sorry if you don't! I'm not in the mood, I warn you! Once again——"

"Sh! Look out, girls!" came Sybil Farrow's sudden whispered warning from the doorway.

Not a moment too soon, either!

Madge was still standing there with Polly's hand gripping her, when the throng at the door was parted in two, and Miss Redgrave, the undermistress of the Form, stopped into the room.

Polly Linton let go of Madge then.

More than that, she did her best, along with all the others, to give Miss Redgrave the impression that nothing whatever was amiss.

But the previous disturbance had been quite audible to the assistant mistress, and now she glanced from one to another of the girls, inviting explanations.

No one spoke.

"Well, girls," said the assistant mistress, "what is the matter?"

The girls looked from one to another, wondering who would speak first. But no one broke the silence.

"I heard violent quarrelling," Miss Redgrave went on. "What was the cause, please?"

Still no answer from the girls.

Looking very grave, Miss Redgrave turned her gaze upon Madge.

"I begin to form a certain suspicion, Madge," she said sadly. "You were the centre of the storm that was raging just now."

"Yes, they were trying to dissuade me from going down into the open, if you ever heard of such a thing!" said Madge indignantly. "Some of these girls think that by being gated gives them the right to keep me like a dog in a kennel!"

"Oh, Madge!" they all cried.

"You know, Madge dear," added Betty gently, "that is very unjust to Polly and the rest. They were only acting for your own good."

"Oh, rubbish!" said Madge.

Miss Redgrave frowned thoughtfully.

"Madge," she said slowly, "surely you were not contemplating running into fresh mischief?"

"Miss Redgrave," the scapegrace of the Form said curtly, "I have enough questions to answer when I get into disgrace and have to face the headmistress. I think I might be excused having to plead not guilty before I have even started to do a wrong thing!"

"You were starting to——" Polly began, but checked herself sharply. "Oh, come away, girls!" she cried, pushing to the door. "The less said, soonest mended now!"

"That, at any rate, is sound sense," smiled Miss Redgrave. "Yes, girls, you had better disperse."

She waited until they had drifted away, leaving only Betty here with Madge; and then she looked from one to another of these two girls.

"Now, Betty; now, Madge!" she broke out calmly, "can't we have a frank explanation?"

"I don't feel I can say anything," said Betty. "But I do wish that Madge would convince us that she had been misjudged by the girls."

Madge was wearing an aggrieved look. She picked up a book and started to glance through it. The hint could not have been a plainer one, and it was not lost upon either Betty or the under-mistress.

"You don't mean to say any more, Madge?" Betty questioned at last. "Very well, I may as well go!"

And she went.

"Now you have only me to speak in front of," said Miss Redgrave then. "Madge dear, will you tell me?"

"No, Miss Redgrave." It was the aggrieved tone again, forcing the under-mistress to think that Madge really had been misjudged.

"Very well! I, too, must give it up," sighed Miss Redgrave. "One word of warning before I go, however. If you were contemplating any fresh bit of mischief,

Madge, then I implore you to abandon it! One more misdeed, and you will be sent home at once. I could not intercede for you; no one could!"

"I have not been left in doubt as to what the penalty will be if I break the rules again," Madge said, with a bitter smile. "I am being warned—reminded—all day long!"

"You have friends around you, Madge, whose friendship you do not appreciate. That is what it amounts to," said Miss Redgrave sadly. "Whether they were right or wrong in fearing you were intending some fresh misdeed, they were acting for your own good, I am sure!"

And then the under-mistress passed from the room, the door clicked shut behind her, and Madge Minden was alone.

Only for a minute or two was she content to remain there in the study, and even during that brief period she was pacing to and fro, looking grimly desperate.

A glance at her wrist-watch told her the hour, and she thought of that train which would be stopping at Morecove Road Station.

Could she still catch it? In other words, was she to go through with her urgent mission or not?

"Rightly or wrongly, Madge's answer to that question was "Yes"; and all at once she was creeping out of her study with the utmost stealth.

A few minutes later Betty Barton got up from her chair in Study No. 12, where she was alone with her bitter thoughts, and stepped to the window.

By chance she sent a roving glance out across the school grounds, and with a violent throb of alarm she beheld a significant sight.

She saw a Morecove girl going warily towards the boundary hedge, keeping close to the shelter of shrubs and trees every step of the way.

The girl was Madge Minden!

Arrived at the hedge the miscreant cast a quick, cautious glance around, and then, with a sudden dive down and a hasty scramble, she was through the hedge, having found a place where it could be easily penetrated.

"Oh, she's gone—she's off!" Betty gasped to herself, in wild dismay. "Then it was true! The girls were right. She has actually broken bounds again!"

For a moment Betty, in the study, stood utterly distraught.

She could no longer see Madge, and had no idea which way the miscreant had gone. Yet it seemed too awful to hang about in this study after what had happened.

Was there no chance of overtaking the girl, of trying to bring her to reason, of coaxing her back before the disastrous action was discovered by others?

Betty darted to the door and whipped it open.

The passage was empty; all the Fourth-Formers were still in the various studies, chatting over their tea.

Without pausing to put on her hat, she hurried away, and in a few minutes she was beyond the school bounds, her mind charged with the almost frantic thought:

Where could she find Madge now? How could one hope to save her, after all?

CHAPTER 14.

There and Back.

MADGE MINDEN, meanwhile, was going by an out-of-the-way route, and as fast as possible, towards Morecove Road Station. The moment she had scrambled through to the outer side of that boundary hedge the rash girl had laughed recklessly to herself. And now, as she sped on, a grim smile hovered all the time about her lips.

As had been the case so often in the past, once her "boats had been burnt" she was not going to worry about almost inevitable consequences.

In a reckless state of mind she ran on and on over the sunny fields, giving that little laugh of hers every time she looked back and saw that there was no pursuit. But soon a glance at her watch warned her to make still greater haste, and she could not afford to look round after that, but had to race along faster than ever.

Just in the nick of time—as she thought—Madge got to the wayside station. Breathlessly she rushed into the little booking-office, thinking that the train would be on the move by the time she sprang into a compartment, for the "local" was even now alongside the platform.

"Barncombe—return!" she panted, slapping down her money.

"All right, miss—no hurry!" the booking-

clerk answered cheerfully through the pigeon-hole. "She's not going yet."

"Not—"

"She'll be another ten minutes, maybe. There's a ballast train in front of her this afternoon."

Madge didn't know what a ballast train was. But she did know that this sort of thing was just her luck, and, picking up her ticket, she went out on to the platform and walked up and down, longing for the moment when the guard would give the warning for her to take her seat.

She was the only passenger, and the entire station was in such a lifeless state it made her feel as if the train had no intention of starting until some time to-morrow.

Suddenly, as she stood on the platform, she saw a distant figure that startled her.

Far down the road from Morcove School a solitary figure was tearing along, the figure of a schoolgirl.

A Fourth Form girl, too!

Madge peered eagerly, and in a moment she knew who the girl was.

Betty Barton!

Squeak went a signal wire along by the metals, and now the guard cried lazily:

"Take your seat, miss; we're off!"

"Thank goodness!" panted Madge, diving into an empty compartment. "Another minute, and Betty would have been here, telling the guard not to let me go. But—Oh, we are not off even now!"

The train had certainly not started, and she put her head out of the window.

"Guard, I thought you said we were off!"

"So we are, miss, in one minute."

"One minute!" Madge breathed, whilst she shot another dismayed glance towards the road. "And Betty is coming on full pelt!"

Madge bit at her lip and stamped a foot. She was fast getting more and more worked up. Granted that Betty was meaning well; but this pursuit—it was intolerable! So the desperate girl was saying to herself. Why couldn't Betty and all of them just leave her to her fate?

"Right away!"

That was another cry from the guard. But even now were they really going to start, or would Betty get here in time to make a scene?

No—yes! They were actually off now!

The whistle blow, the engine puffed fussily, the train glided past the platform—

and there was Betty Barton, still a hundred yards from the little wayside station, still running as hard as ever, but too late!

"Thank goodness!" gasped Madge, flopping down on a seat. "Now I can breathe freely!"

The train rattled along, winding in and out amongst the valleys between the great Devonshire hills, and in a few minutes it clattered into the thriving old town, drawing alongside a platform crowded with passengers bound for Exeter.

Madge's own people lived at the famous cathedral city, two hours distant from here, and the thought crossed her mind whilst she was hurrying out into the teeming streets of Barncombe—would she herself be on the way home to Exeter this time to-morrow? Perhaps!

Her spirits fell heavily for a minute or so, then suddenly rose again as she found herself approaching the shabby old house where Miss Charteris lived. She had done right to come, that was the schoolgirl's decision. Be the consequences what they might, somehow she was always going to be glad that she had done this thing.

And now she was at the street door of the gaunt old house, and her hand was pressing the bell.

With a beating heart she stood there, waiting for Janet to come forward and open the door. There had been a lot of delay on former occasions, but this evening the summons was to be speedily answered.

"Oh, you've come, bless you, dearie!" was the old cronc's whispered greeting, the moment she set eyes on Madge. "What a relief 'tis to me, my dear! Time seemed to be a-dragging on, and no one came, and I was fearing—"

"How is Miss Charteris now?" Madge asked softly, stepping into the dingy hall.

"Well, dear, I hardly know what to say," sighed the faithful old housekeeper. "To see her as down as she is, one 'ud think she can't last long. And yet, now she's got over another of her attacks, the doctors say she really ought to mend a bit. Seems to me, dear, 'tis the music is going to do her more good than the doctor."

"I only came, Janet, because I understood that she was pining for the music."

"Pining! Pining ain't the word for it, dear! So come along into the drawing-room, and then you can begin."

The woman swung open the door of that

sombre room where the piano was, and Madge got a sudden shock.

She had been counting on Miss Charteris being in bed upstairs, and on having to play loud enough for the lady to hear the music quite plainly whilst up there. But entering the drawing-room, the schoolgirl at once saw the tragic figure of the blind lady stretched along a couch, with blankets wrapped about her.

It was one of the eccentricities of the unhappy woman that she never spoke to the pianist. Alva Forbes had been in the habit of coming and going without the interchange of a single word, and Madge had been subjected to the same strange treatment. Strange indeed! But Madge knew full well that no rudeness was intended. This poor woman who was before her eyes now—she had been a happy woman in the long, long ago, and it was a terrible calamity that had changed her into a morose recluse.

Madge sat down at the old piano, and started to play; and all the time she was thinking of the wonderful romance behind the blind lady's craving for the music.

After running through two or three pieces with hardly a pause, Madge was reaching down an album of sonatas from the pianist, when—wonders of wonders!—she heard Miss Charteris speaking.

"Thank you, Alva dear!" came the feeble voice. "I have never told you how great a comfort your playing has been to me. But this evening I feel I must, because perhaps you will never have to come again to play to me."

Madge stood up and faced the blind lady as she lay upon the couch.

The girl's heart was full of pity for her. She longed to voice that pity, only—dared she? For if she spoke wouldn't her voice betray her as a mere substitute player?

"Come here a moment, Alva dear," the blind woman whispered, after a moment. "I've something else to say."

Then Madge, crossing the faded carpet, resolved to speak a word or two—she felt she must speak—taking care to imitate Alva's voice as closely as possible.

"Dear Miss Charteris," she said tremulously, "I am so sorry for you! All along I have felt so sorry, and now, this evening—"

Tears rushed to Madge's eyes. If she had wanted to say more she could not have

uttered the words; for there was a big lump in her throat.

"Now, listen to me for one moment," went on that tired, sad voice. "Your playing has pleased me so much, Alva, I am going to reward you in a special way, apart from the usual payment. You have never once failed to keep the appointment, and you have played the pieces that he used to play with fine skill. People may think Susan Charteris a difficult woman to deal with; so I am, perhaps! But you, Alva, are going to find out that I can be generous when I like."

There was a pause, and Madge held her breath, wondering what was coming now.

"Whether I live or die, Alva, I am going to have a present of one hundred pounds sent to you by my lawyer. You are a girl whose circumstances are hard, I know; and you have been only too glad to play for the little that I paid you. Now you are going to receive the reward of your good conduct. You will get the hundred pounds in a few days. That is all I have to say."

Madge gulped.

"Miss Charteris, I—I don't know what to say! It is very generous of you, and—"

"Tut, tut, my dear! Just go back to the piano for a little while again and say no more. Only, play me the sonata that I like the best of all, Alva dear. The Sonata Pathétique—play it again, Alva—that piece, for perhaps the last time."

Janet was gesturing appealingly to Madge, and so the schoolgirl turned to the piano, sat down, and started the stately, solemn piece which she knew so well.

The last time, perhaps! With that impressive thought to stimulate her, Madge played the grand sonata as perfectly as she could; and yet even now her mind was hardly given up altogether to the music.

She was thinking of all that Miss Charteris had said to her just now.

Knowing nothing of Alva's having found a substitute to play the piano, the blind lady was making that handsome gift of money to the girl—a girl who stood in dire need of it.

One hundred pounds! What a blessing the gift would be to poor Alva, an orphaned girl forced to support herself as best she could! And if she—Madge—had not "filled the breach" whilst Alva was suffering from

that injured wrist this gift would never have fallen to the needy girl!

That was the fact on which Madge's mind was dwelling whilst her fingers drew wonderful melody from the old piano.

She felt proud and happy, conscious of having achieved great things for Alva at a time when that girl was in a serious predicament. Only, what Madge did not realise, as she should have done, was that she had gone the wrong way about doing a right thing.

Miss Charteris did not speak to her again. At the end of the lengthy sonata Madge took her hands from the yellow keys and stood up, and then Janet signed to her to pass from the room.

One last glance the schoolgirl gave to the blind lady, lying there upon the couch—the very last, indeed, perhaps. Then the door closed between Madge and Miss Charteris, and who could say whether the tragic lady and the youthful schoolgirl would ever meet again?

Hurriedly Madge said good-bye to old Janet, and in a few minutes the schoolgirl was back at Barncombe railway-station.

The evening was still not very far advanced, and there was a train to Morcove Road in five minutes' time. Could she hope, then, to get back to the school before her absence was discovered? Betty knew, of course, but Betty would never give her away!

During that interval of waiting on the station platform Madge began to feel a great longing to escape further trouble with the headmistress.

Even now there was no knowing but what she—Madge—might not be called upon to play again; and whilst there was the chance of this call being made upon her she felt it was impossible to confide in anybody at the school.

It was the old, old mistake. But she did not see the error of her way. Partly out of pride and egotism, and partly from sheer youthful innocence, she still failed to see how much better it would have been to enlist others' help and advice in the whole strange affair.

The train came in at last, and Madge spent another bad quarter of an hour sitting alone in a carriage compartment, with that anxiety growing apace in heart and mind. Would she get back to the school undetected? If not—

No one else alighted at Morcove Road Station. The sun had not yet set, and call-over would not be for another hour. But she was a girl who had been gated, and it was not a question of getting in by call-over. It was a question of creeping back to the school bounds without being seen.

Warily she made her way in great haste across the rosy fields and along leafy lanes. And by now the anxiety had become a gnawing one.

On and on she hurried. The school grounds came into view. She could even see, a couple of hundred yards away, the very hedge through which she had got to scramble if the coast was clear.

And then suddenly she got a violent shock.

Whilst she was going with slower, more cautious steps along the last stretch of leafy lane, some bushes close at hand rustled sharply, and a figure sprang from the shelter they had been affording it.

The figure was that of another schoolgirl—Betty Barton!

"Madge—Madge!" whispered the captain of the Form imploringly. "Stop—don't go on! You are going to get caught!"

CHAPTER 15.

The Price of Her Loyalty.

MADGE MINDEN stopped dead with a leaping heart.

"Caught!" she echoed; and for once this self-reliant, headstrong girl was turning pale with dismay.

"Yes!" whispered Betty, stopping closer. "Cora and Judith Grandways—they are on watch for you!"

"Those girls?"

"They must have made up their minds to lie in wait for you at the boundary hedge. It will give them extra power, of course, if they can catch you in the act of creeping back. I was looking out of my study window just now, worrying about you—"

"Ah, Betty, you worry too much!"

"No, I don't. Anyhow, I was looking from that window and I saw Cora and Judith going across to the boundary hedge. They hid themselves there; they are there now."

"And so"—Madge was silent for a moment, looking at this loyal friend of hers—"you came out towards me."

"What else could I do, Madge?"

"I am thinking what is it going to mean for you, Betty, if the Form finds out that you, its captain, have tried to save me?"

Betty shrugged her shoulders, setting her teeth.

"Never mind about that," she said grimly. "I'll manage. Only let me smuggle you in somehow, so that those sneaks can never have it in their power to say that they actually caught you in the act, and I don't mind what follows!"

Then, before Madge could say another word, Betty whispered her plan of action.

The hedge was being watched, so Madge must not dare return by that way. Nor could she dare enter at one of the ordinary gateways.

But there was a walled-in kitchen garden behind the school buildings, and in the high wall there was an arched gateway, the door of which was always bolted on the inside.

Scholars were forbidden to go in or out that way, and Betty would be risking deep disgrace for herself by carrying out her plan. But that was not going to deter her.

"I'll return to the school by an ordinary gateway, work round in secret to the kitchen garden, and unfasten that door!" she whispered to Madge. "You will be waiting outside!"

"But, Betty—"

"It's no use hesitating on my account!" Betty cut Madge short. "I must either let you in at that gateway, or you must be caught! And I am not going to have that happen!"

So saying, she darted off, thus giving Madge no chance for further argument, and the scapegrace of the Form could only set off cautiously towards the gateway in the wall.

Without a hitch she got to that spot, and there she waited, full of great anxiety on Betty's account now.

Vividly Madge realised the risks that the Form captain was running, all for friendship's sake! Now she wished she had flatly refused to let Betty aid her; but it was too late, and she could only hope desperately that no one would ever know.

Five minutes—ten—fifteen minutes must have crept by before Madge suddenly thrilled at the sound of a bolt being worked back on the other side of the wooden door.

Then suddenly the hinges creaked, the

door was dragged open a foot or so, and Betty's voice whispered:

"Quick—quick!"

Madge darted through.

With a wild throb of relief, she realised that she was within bounds again, and that now, no matter who met her, she was safe.

Safe! Thanks to Betty!

The captain of the Fourth Form pushed the door shut softly, and made the bolts fast. Then, checking Madge on the point of speaking, she gestured to her to hurry away.

Feeling very small, the scapegrace did so, stopping swiftly along a cinder-path between a lot of raspberry canes.

Betty, meanwhile, was making off in an opposite direction. She felt her heart throbbing with relief, for the whole thing seemed to have gone off so splendidly.

True, the Form knew that Madge had been missing for several hours since tea-time, but as Madge had now got within bounds again without being caught, how could any direct accusation ever be made against her?

Suddenly, however, all the Form captain's sense of joy at having saved the miscreant was cruelly banished.

A quick step warned her of someone's approach, and, turning, she saw a figure running towards her—the figure of Cora Grandways!

The look in that girl's eyes—it told Betty all.

Rage at the way she—Betty—had tried to checkmate the attempt to catch Madge in the act; gloating triumph at having found, after all, proof of Madge's breaking bounds—that was what Betty read in those glinting eyes!

"Well, you are a precious fine Form captain. I must say!" Cora broke out, with a sneering laugh. "All right, Betty Barton! Now I know!"

"And you are going to sneak, are you?" Betty could not help saying fiercely.

"I shall tell the whole Form—why shouldn't I?" returned Cora. "When Judy and I were on watch near the hedge it suddenly flashed upon me that perhaps you might try to smuggle Madge in. I thought of the gateway in the kitchen garden, and so I came along at once, leaving Judy still by the hedge."

"Wonderful cleverness!"

"Anyway, I was too clever for you."

smiled Cora maliciously. "My word, I wouldn't care to be in your shoes when the Form is told! They have been just about fed up with your championing of Madgo. This will be the last straw!"

Betty knew it, but she did not intend to bandy words with the sneak. With a shrug of contempt, she turned aside into another path and walked on, leaving Cora staring after her with a savage expression on her handsome face.

A few minutes later the triumphant sneak rejoined her sister at the boundary hedge.

"Come away, Judy darling—come indoors! It's all right! We have beaten Betty Barton beautifully!" was Cora's gleeful announcement.

And then they went together across the field picking up one Fourth Form girl after another on the way, by hinting that there was great news to be told indoors.

Grace and Ella, Diana Forbes and Mabel Rivers, Etta Hargrove and Elsie Drew—these were with Cora and Judith when they got to the schoolhouse porch.

So were Paula Creel, Tess Trelawny, Dolly Delane, and nearly all the rest of the Form. In fact, when Cora took a glance at all of them as they came crowding into Study No. 7 only a minute later, only one girl was absent whom she would have liked to see here.

Polly Linton—she was not present.

"I've called you together," Cora began, "because I think it is only right you should be told of a very serious thing."

"About Madgo!" questioned several eagerly.

"Madgo and Betty!" answered Cora. "You all had a suspicion that Madge must have broken bounds again this evening because no one has been seeing anything of her. She is back now, and I expect you will find her calmly in her den—thanks to Betty Barton!"

"What!"

"Betty has shielded her—actually helped her to get back to the school without being caught!" Cora went on, raising her voice. "Our Form captain—she has been standing up for Madge all along, and that was bad enough. But what do you think of this for the latest? She has actually smuggled that girl into the school!"

"No—no, Cora, I can't believe it!"

The ringing cry came from Polly Linton, as she suddenly appeared in the doorway.

"Cora, be careful what you say!" she cried out hotly. "It can't be true!"

"It is true! Betty Barton undid the kitchen garden door to let Madgo creep in! I was close at hand and saw everything!"

"Oh!"

"If you don't believe me, go and ask Betty herself, and see if she dare deny it!" Cora almost shouted at Polly.

"I will!" was that girl's fierce reply. "And if it really is true—well, I shall know what to do!"

Cora and Judith exchanged glances and smiles. It was Polly who had spoken like that—Polly!

If that girl finished with Betty utterly now, then who else would have anything more to do with the Form captain?

Polly strode along the passage to the study which she shared with the Form captain. Betty was not there, and so the excited girl turned back and went to Madgo Minden's den.

Only Madgo was there, sitting down by the window, book in hand.

"Have you seen Betty Barton?"

"Not for the last ten minutes or so," was the calm answer.

"Is it right that Betty let you in this evening at the kitchen garden door?" Polly demanded in a voice that seemed choking with anger.

"I think you know," Madge answered evasively. "I don't care about answering questions. Still less do I care about answering questions about other people."

"But—"

"I'm reading!"

And Madgo returned her gaze to the printed page.

Polly drew a deep breath and went out, stamping all the way back to her own study.

"It's true!" she said fiercely to the girls who were crowding after her. "Madge doesn't like to admit it, but—"

"Of course it is true!" insisted Cora, hovering in the background. "Do you think I would dare make up a story of that sort?"

"Then what are we going to do about it?" exclaimed Tess miserably. "It's too bad!"

"I know what I am going to do!" Polly cried angrily. "Stand clear, girls! I am going to get my things together and get out of this study!"

"What!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Phew!"

And at that instant, whilst all the girls were still letting cries of excitement escape their lips, Betty Barton appeared in the doorway.

She saw Polly in the act of collecting things together, as if preparing for a removal, and her face went deathly white.

"Please go away!" Polly appealed to all the others, and something in her tone compelled obedience. They dispersed without another murmur, to stand about in the passage waiting, whilst inside the study Polly and Betty faced each other.

"You are going to leave this study?" Betty asked at last.

"Unless you can give me a flat denial of a thing that has been charged against you," Polly answered. "Did you shield Madge just now by letting her in through the kitchen garden?"

"Yes, Polly, I—"

"Very well; there is no need to say more," Polly broke in bitterly. "I must find some other den to shake down in. One of the girls will take me in, no doubt."

"You mean that we—that you and I—"

"It's the end of our being together—yes! I'm sorry, Betty; but I think any girl would feel as I feel about it all!"

Betty seemed to answer "Yes" by nodding faintly.

"I have not been in a hurry to break with you," Polly went on, getting her things together all the while she was speaking. "Even when some of the other girls had absolutely given you up, Betty, because of your attitude over Madge—even then I wouldn't have a downright split with you! I felt, as others did, that Madge no longer deserved our trust or friendship. You felt otherwise, and we sort of agreed to differ. But now—"

She stood still for a moment, drawing a deep breath.

"Madge has been breaking bounds again, and that proves that we have been in the right all along, Betty, and you have been in the wrong! You have been wasting your sympathy over a girl who doesn't deserve it!"

Still no response from Betty.

"This evening, when you found that she had broken bounds, you even helped her to get back! I would do the same for any other girl, in different circumstances."

Polly went on. "But I wouldn't bend my little finger to help a girl like Madge!"

"Very well, Polly!"

"You don't even say why you helped her!"

"I will tell you why, only I should have thought you would have guessed," Betty said quietly. "I still believe that Madge, if we only knew it, has had some reason for her strange conduct."

"You still have faith in her?"

"I still believe that she could do nothing really to be ashamed of!"

Polly laughed bitterly.

"Well, I believe that she has been breaking bounds time after time simply for her own enjoyment!" struck in Polly. "And because you are still sticking up for her—you the Form captain!—I am going to leave this study!"

"Polly—"

"It's no use, Betty; I'm going!"

"I can't stop you," sighed Betty sadly.

"I can't even try to persuade you not to go. And yet—and yet— Oh, Polly!"

She swallowed back a lump in her throat and turned her eyes away for the moment, because they were brimming with tears.

"I hate to see you so cut up," Polly said, with a tremor in her voice. "But am I to blame, Betty, or are you? You have been losing your following, all through your mistaken faith in Madge; and you wouldn't let that be a warning. You've seen some of the girls actually going over to Cora and Judith again, and still you have clung to your obstinate belief in that girl!"

Betty looked round.

"You are not going over to Cora and Judith, anyway, Polly?"

"I am leaving this study—leaving you, that means," was the shrugged answer. "What will happen as the result of this split, time must show!"

A sudden stillness fell upon the room; and then there were rustling sounds as Polly went on rushing her things together in an agitated way.

Some of the girls came back to the doorway, and looked in, hesitated, and withdrew once more, without having spoken a word.

Then, presently, Polly went out with her first armful of things. She must have dumped them in the passage, for in a moment she was back in the study, taking up a second load.

Three or four times she came and went like this; and then, at last, she returned for the very last load.

Betty was standing by the darkening window, mute and still as a statue.

"There's the study—all to yourself now!" Polly said, backing out of the door with her last load. "Or perhaps you will invite Madge to share the den with you!"

Betty winced sharply.
"Anyhow, I'm finished here," Polly said grimly. "So I'll say—good-night!"
And then the door closed between them.

Half an hour had crept by. The bell for call-over was ringing and Betty Barton heard it as she sat alone in the darkening study, brooding over her desperate position.

Suddenly Madge entered, voicing one question sharply.

"Where is Polly Linton?"
"She is in one of the other studies now."
"Is it right that Polly has cleared out of here—left you altogether, Betty?"

"Yes."
"She has done that because of what you did for me this evening?"
"Yes," the Form captain was bound to answer once again.

Madge drew in a hissing breath.
"Betty," she said, after a moment, "your loyalty to me has cost you too much! You are paying too hard for it every hour of the day! I ought not to let you do it—I mustn't! And yet—"

She paused, held up once more by perplexing thoughts.

She wanted to go to all the other girls and make a clean breast of the whole business, so that they could judge better than whether Betty's loyalty and help had been deserved or not. Only, was she free, even now, to tell the whole story?

Once her lips had voiced that story it would be all over the school in no time. It would reach the ears of the mistresses; and what if, after this had happened, there should come yet another call upon her to go to the blind lady's house as Alva's substitute?

She would not be allowed to go; or, if she was allowed, it would be only under such conditions as would prove disastrous for Alva.

Miss Charteris would find out that a substitute had been playing for Alva. The hun-

dred-pound gift would be cancelled; and so all poor Alva's fears of unemployment and distress would be more than fulfilled!

"Betty," Madge broke out, when these alarming thoughts had had time to pass through her troubled mind, "can you bear with it all for a little while? I want to set you right in the eyes of Polly and all the rest of the Form; but I can't do it now—I daren't! It would perhaps mean grave hardship for someone else outside the school."

She stepped nearer.
"It is cruel hard on you, Betty, that you should be asked to endure things like this! But I will set you right in the end, if—only you will just wait awhile. Will you—will you do that, Betty?" And Betty, lifting her drooping head, answered readily:
"Yes!"

CHAPTER 16.

Under Sentence of Expulsion.

"MADGE MINDEN! The Headmistress wants you!"
There was a smile of malicious delight on Cora Grandways' face as she opened the door of a Fourth Form study at Morcove School, and sang out that announcement.

Madge Minden was sitting there, all alone. A book lay upon her lap; but it was certain that she had not been reading. Her whole mien was that of a girl brooding over troubles which she could share with—no one!

"So you had better look sharp!" added Cora, with a spiteful laugh.

Madge gave a dignified nod, that said: "You can go." Yet Cora still loitered in the doorway, exulting over this other girl's unhappiness.

For Madge Minden's troubles, during the past week or two, had been Cora Grandways' joy. Every friend lost to Madge Minden had been almost another friend gained by Cora.

Almost—but not quite!
It was a sore point with Cora that she and her sister had not yet "roped in" certain girls for inclusion in the "set" which they were trying to form.

"Well, what do you want?" Madge exclaimed irritably, slamming aside the book and jumping up.

"I—ha, ha, ha! I only want to see that you do go to the Headmistress! I was told to bring the message, Madge, and—"

"Your duty ended there!"

"Perhaps it did," sniggered Cora. "But you might decide not to go, and then plead that I never brought the message! You are such a girl for doing as you please, and you are not above telling a fib, when it suits you!"

"That's a bigger fib than I have ever told!" Madge answered fiercely. "But I make a mistake in bandying words with you!"

She strode from the room, almost pushing Cora in front of her, and then shut the study door—slam!

"All right," sneered Cora, walking off with a shrug. "You needn't think I am tempted to stay in that study! I've got my own room to go to, Madge Minden, and I've got heaps of friends for company, when I get there! Ha, ha, ha!"

With a white, set face Madge passed in the other direction, making for the stairs.

Reaching the ground-floor of the big school-house, Madge turned into a panelled passage, and came to a door marked:

HEADMISTRESS.

Private.

She tapped at once, and Miss Somerfield's own gentle voice answered the knock. In a moment Madge was standing before that lady, as she sat at her littered desk.

"Yes, Madge, I wanted to see you at once," Miss Somerfield began in a pleasant tone that was not without a hint of sadness. "I have had"—she picked up a missive from the desk—"a letter from your parents."

Madge drew a deep breath, but said nothing.

"It is only a brief note," went on the headmistress. "Your father and mother are coming to the school to-morrow."

"Yes?" Madge said, very composedly.

"It ought to be a bit of news affording pleasure to me as well as to you," Miss Somerfield said, laying down the letter.

"But, oh, Madge, how it grieves me to say it! I shall be compelled to tell your parents what disgrace you are in, at this time!"

The girl nodded.

"If your offences had been only minor

ones, Madge Minden, I could stretch a point and keep silent about them. But what has your record been during the last week or so? What is your position to-day, in the eyes of all the school?"

As the headmistress asked those questions she stood up, eyeing the scapegrace scholar rather sternly.

"Not once, Madge Minden, but several times you have defied all discipline in a most flagrant way! You began by making a visit to Barncombe after that town had been put out of bounds to you. You were gated, and again you visited the same forbidden locality. I warned you that you would not be allowed to come back to the school after the approaching holidays, and what was your reply to that warning?"

No answer from Madge!

"You actually went off again to Barncombe, as I was informed by certain girls only yesterday."

"Oh! Then Cora and Judith brought that tale to you, Miss Somerfield!" Madge exclaimed disgustedly. "The—the sneaks!"

"I have not said it was Cora and Judith Grandways," Miss Somerfield said. "My policy is all against tale-telling, and I was not pleased at having the story brought to my ears, especially as I could see that the girls were not acting for the good of the Form, but only out of personal spite. However—"

"Miss Somerfield, did they tell you anything about—someone else?"

"Yes." The headmistress looked very pained. "They hinted that after breaking bounds you were smuggled back into the school by the Form captain, Betty Barton."

"What a shame! Oh, Betty only did it to—"

"I can guess Betty Barton's motive," broke in the headmistress, "and you can trust me, Madge Minden, to make allowances for what Betty did out of pure loyalty to you, a friend whose waywardness has been a great grief to her. We will return to the point. Your offences have been so serious, Madge, I cannot alter my intention, which is, to tell your parents that you cannot come back here next term."

"Very well, Miss Somerfield."

"Is that all you have to say—Very well!"

"I can only say one other thing, Miss Somerfield. I—I am more sorry than you

may believe, at the trouble I have caused—especially to Betty Barton."

If Madge had been of a whining disposition she would have noticed the softened expression in Miss Somerfield's eyes, and would have wondered—was there yet a chance to plead for pity, a chance to make an abject appeal?

But no such entreaties came from the culprit's lips, and at last the headmistress hinted gently:

"Is it any use my keeping back the state of affairs from your parents, Madge, during their visit?"

"Oh, no. They have got to be told in the end, so the sooner it's over the better!"

Miss Somerfield gave a nod of agreement.

"I think you do right to resign yourself, Madge! You may go back to your study, then, and you will understand that when your parents arrive, I shall have to acquaint them at once of the position!"

The girl's head drooped submissively. Pressing her lips together, she turned and walked to the door, opened it, and passed out.

And then she sighed—hard.

Motionless she stood for a little while, in that silent passage, as if at a loss what to do with herself now.

Back to the study again, there to sit through another spell of lonely brooding? No, not that, at any rate, she decided at last.

An indoor clock struck the hour—four o'clock. Classes had ended for the day at half-past three, and most of the girls had been out of doors since then. Now they would be coming in from the playing fields, eager for tea. Whilst they were all indoors she would take a spell in the open air.

So, to avoid the main entrance, she went round to another rear passage, and out through a back door into the summer sunshine, thinking to escape an encounter with all other girls.

But fate was against her.

The burning heat of the afternoon had caused many girls to seek the cool shade to be found at the back of the big school-house, and Madge had hardly stepped into the open before she wished she was anywhere but here.

No use dodging back! That would seem cowardly. Taking a good grip on herself, she walked straight on, whilst a score of

heads were turned languidly, so that scornful looks might be flung at her.

Conscious of being cold-shouldered, scorned by all, Madge walked leisurely towards the other side of this shady courtyard, where so many of her schoolfellows were gathered. There was a gateway before her, and how thankful she would be to get past it, and so beyond reach of these hostile stares!

On the other side of that gateway, however, she was to come in for just such another ordeal, and this time they were her own Form-mates into whom she blundered!

At least a dozen of them, with Cora and Judith Grandways in their midst, were here, and once again Madge realised the cowardice of turning back.

Straight on she forced herself to walk, her dark eyes staring fixedly at nothing, whilst this crowd of Fourth Form girls stood still on purpose to demonstrate their feelings against her.

Cora and Judith Grandways exchanged audible remarks, and sniggered openly; but some of the others were in no mood to make a joke of Madge's disgrace. She was conscious of this, and it hurt her far more than the sisters' worst jeers could have done.

Such silent contempt—yes, that was the word—contempt for her, a girl with whom they had all been so friendly, up to a week ago; how it stabbed at her heart!

The bitter looks of reproach, the disgust which frowning eyes proclaimed, how hard were such things to bear without flinching! Harder still, because they were not deserved!

Cruelly misjudged by the whole school, scholars and mistresses alike!

That was what Madge Minden knew herself to be, at this time. And yet hers was not the case of a girl who, knowing herself to be free from blame, can find comfort in her own sense of innocence. She was being misjudged, and yet—she really had done many wrong things, lately!

That was the worst of it. She had gone the wrong way about doing a right thing!

Up to now she had felt compelled, for a certain reason, to withhold all explanations. But was the time at hand when she could confide in someone at last—Betty Barton, say?

On the top of that perplexing question, as it arose in Madge's mind, there came another. Supposing she did speak out

frankly, before everybody, would anything she had to say restore their faith in her? Would it save her from expulsion?

Very likely not! People had such scant pity for those who did wrong things in order to achieve a good purpose!

She was in mid-field now, wandering about in an utterly aimless manner, when she heard someone fluttering towards her, calling wistfully:

"Madge!"

It was Betty Barton, the captain of the Form—Betty, all by herself. And, indeed, was the poignant thought that darted across Madge's mind, whilst she turned in answer to the cry, whilst was Betty with any of the other girls now? By standing up for her—Madge—during the last week or two, the Form captain had suffered the loss of all her own friends. Even those who had not "gone over" to Cora Grandways and her sister were at least "done" with Betty.

"I only wanted to ask you, Madge, where are you having tea? At the school tables, or in your own study?"

"Tea—I hadn't thought about it," said Madge. "I suppose I must go to the school tables and have it there."

"No. Come up to my study, Madge. I am all alone. I mean—"

"Alone. Yes, you are always alone now—thanks to me, Betty!"

"Oh, don't say that," the Form captain exclaimed, taking the dejected girl by the arm. "My troubles are nothing, compared with yours. They are going to blow over, some day, Madge, but you—" Madge sighed heavily. "Term is drawing to an end, Madge; and you are not to come back after the holidays! Oh, how sorry it makes me feel!"

Then she added quickly, as if regretting that pained exclamation:

"Well, come up and have tea with me, Madge—you must! It is already laid for two."

"I will—yes," Madge said, with such sudden eagerness that Betty was startled. "It seems a shame to inflict myself upon you, when I'm the cause of you losing so many friends. But I will come this once, Betty, because—because— Oh, you'll see why, presently!"

And Betty knew, even then, what this meant.

At last, Madge Minden was going to confide in her!

The unhappy girl had reached a stage when she could no longer maintain the old independent attitude. She was hungering for someone's sympathy—and she should have it!

Undisturbed by any of the other girls, they took tea together in Betty's study, talking very little whilst the meal was in progress. But when it was over, and Betty had been helped by Madge to clear away, they each sat down in an easy chair, and then Betty gave her companion a direct look.

"Well, Madge," she broke out gently. "I know why you accepted my invite. You are going to tell me something, aren't you?"

"Yes! Pity I couldn't tell you days ago, Betty!" Madge burst out sadly. "But you know there was at least one moment when I came very near to telling you—"

"That was when Polly Linton cleared out of this study, because she found I had smuggled you back into the school," nodded Betty. "It upset you, Madge, to see me losing even Polly as a chum. But you asked me to bear with things for a few days, saying that then perhaps you could set me right in the eyes of the Form; could show that you had deserved my trust and help!"

"And so I will show them, very soon now!" Madge said, with flashing eyes. "Betty, they think I was continually breaking bounds to visit Barncombe all for the sake of enjoying myself at the cinema, and things of that sort. They were wrong!"

"I knew it! I always knew that your denials were truthful; that you really could not be doing anything to be downright ashamed of," Betty exclaimed. "What was the real reason, then, Madge? Every time you broke out of school and slipped over to the town—"

"I was doing a wrong thing, Betty, and for that reason I don't deserve pity. But I was doing it all for a good motive—"

"Oh, why didn't you tell us so!" Betty cried, jumping up excitedly. "If only you had told us, Madge!"

"I couldn't. From the very first, I had to keep silent, hoping that my friends in the Form would have faith in me; and what happened? They all lost that faith—all of them excepting you, Betty!"

"Forgive them, dear, for they will be sorry enough when they know the full story," Betty pleaded earnestly. "And you are going to tell them that story at once."

aren't you? If you like, I will go and get them all to come to this study now, or—"

And there the Form captain broke off abruptly, for the door had flown open, and she saw that there was no need to collect the girls together.

They were at the threshold even now—the whole Form, almost ready to swarm into this study, with Cora Grandways at their head!

CHAPTER 17.

No Proof!

"WILL the captain of the Form please grant us an interview?" Cora Grandways asked mockingly.

"As a matter of fact," Betty answered calmly, "if you had not turned up like this, I would have been calling you together in a minute or so. But let's hear your business first."

Cora swaggered forward, and Judith and the rest crowded after her, ranging themselves round the room.

"It's about you and Madge," the elder of the Grandways girls began, letting her eyes fill with all the old hostility as she kept them upon Betty.

"Well?"

"You have been entertaining Madge to tea, we believe?"

"And what if I have?" Betty flared up at once. "Is it any concern of yours?"

"We rather think it is!" Cora said, as haughtily as she could. "We talked the matter over when we heard that Madge had been brought in here to tea, and we decided to let you have our views on the matter."

"Well?" Betty asked again furiously.

"Our feeling is, Betty Barton, that you have done enough already, to disgrace the position of Form captain, without inviting to tea a girl who is under sentence of expulsion!"

"I would like to point out," Betty said tartly, "that Madge is here as my friend—yes, whether she is expelled or not!"

"Oh!" came in a shocked tone from quite a number of girls.

At this instant the door opened, and three or four other girls slipped into the already crowded room.

One was Paula Creel, another was Trixie Hope, a third was Tess Trelawny. And

here also Polly Linton, completing a quartet who, although "off" with Betty Barton, were not by any means "on" with Cora and Co.!

These new arrivals made no remarks, and Cora went on with the talk as if there had been no interruption.

"So Madge was invited here as your friend?" she sneered. "That just about finishes it, I think, girls! When the Form captain so far forgets her position as to proclaim herself the friend of an expelled girl, it is no use our saying any more—not to the Form captain, anyway!"

"Hear, hear!" murmured Judith and one or two others.

"We hardly expected you to shout about being Madge's friend," Cora went on, in the same sneering tone. "Some of us even thought you might have the decency to admit that it was a mistake, inviting Madge here! We came here, to give you the chance to apologise—"

"Apologise!" gasped Betty.

"To the whole Form—yes! But far from being inclined to apologise, you are ready to say, I suppose, that you will have Madge here again, if you wish to?"

"I certainly shall invite Madge when—"

"Then we had better go, girls!" Cora cut in, smiling round upon her following. "And the next thing to do is to lay a complaint before the Form mistress!"

"Hear, hear!"

"We simply are not going to have a captain who—"

"Stop—wait, all of you!"

It was Madge Minden who voiced that commanding cry, causing the whole crowd to stand motionless.

"Now let me have my say!" she said, her dark eyes flashing. "Your point is that Betty Barton has done a disgraceful thing, as captain of the Form, in clinging to her faith in me?"

"So she has!" some of the girls chorused.

"And you feel that you have done quite the proper thing in dropping me, as being a girl not fit for you to mix with?"

"You have covered yourself with disgrace, Madge Minden! You have forced the headmistress to expel you—"

"And for what reason have I done all this?" Madge took them up fiercely. "You say, just for my own amusement, out of pure recklessness. But you are wrong, and

Betty is right in one thing she has always asserted. I have not been doing anything to be really ashamed of!"

"Oh, nonsense!" scoffed Cora.

"I'm going to tell you why I broke bounds so often—a thing that was wrong, I admit; but you are going to hear how I was driven to do it, for the sake of helping others!"

"Slow music!" sneered Judith Grandways. "Turn on the limelight! Madge thinks she is a heroine, evidently."

"Oh, give that tongue of yours a rest, Judith Grandways—do!" came impatiently from Polly Linton. "We hear it a bit too often."

"Yes, wather!" simpered Paula Croel.

Judith made a face at the two who had spoken, but did not retort, for she was aware that even her and her sister's supporters were anxious for Madge to continue.

"I count myself anything but a heroine," Madge said, shrugging her shoulders. "I went about things in the wrong way. I took pity on somebody—did my best to help her without getting any outside help—"

"You always were so stand-offish!" struck in Cora. "I hope it has taught you a lesson, trying to do everything off your own bat! But what have you done, or tried to do, that excuses everything? We have yet to hear!"

"It was like this," Madge resumed, speaking to Betty. "One evening I knocked over a young lady named Alva Forbes, when I was riding back to school on my bike. The accident left her with an injured wrist, and I found she was dependent upon what she earned as a pianist. I offered to take her place—"

"At the cinema?" suggested Cora dryly.

"No! Alva Forbes' engagement was with a blind old lady in Barncombe. The lady is a recluse, who lives all alone with a housekeeper—"

"My word! How thrilling! You ought to write stories, Madge! This beats fiction!" chuckled Judith.

"Perhaps it is fiction!" added Cora, with a laugh.

"You can believe it or not; it is the truth!" Madge cried vehemently. "I broke bounds again and again to take Alva Forbes' place at the piano, so that she wouldn't lose the job she was dependent upon for her living. If I had not played

in her stead, the blind lady would have found somebody else, and kept the new player on permanently. She is very eccentric, and it doesn't do to disappoint her."

"Did you disappoint her with your playing?" smiled Cora.

"Oh, of course, Madge charmed the old lady!" sneered Judith. "We all know what a wonderful player Madge is!"

"Girls," broke out Betty Barton, "don't you think Cora and Judith are overdoing it in their attempt to show off their cleverness before you all? You may be wild with me, and utterly upset against Madge, but surely you still believe in fair play?"

"Yes, wather!" cried Paula.

"I was not meaning you, Paula," Betty said gently. "I mean the girls—Ella Elgood, Grace Garfield and others—over there, the girls who have been quite friendly with Cora and Judith lately!"

Ella Elgood was ready with a retort.

"You ask us, Betty, if we still believe in fair play. We do. That is the simple reason why we have had to stop backing you up as captain! On the face of things, Madge doesn't deserve the support you were giving her, and so if there has been any unfairness, it is on your side, not ours!"

"All the same," chimed in Sybil Barlow, "Madge should have a fair hearing now!"

"Yes, yes," agreed the others. "What Madge is telling us puts a different look upon everything."

"If it is true!" Cora hinted again.

"I'm not going down on my knees to beg you to believe it," Madge said curtly. "That is my explanation—"

"Why didn't you tell us before, then?" demanded Judith.

"Perhaps I was wrong in keeping silent," Madge answered; "but I felt it was out of the question for me to speak out. So long as there was the need for me to play in Alva's place, I felt it might upset everything by confiding in anybody. Even now, I don't know but what I may be wanted to play again, although I think that Alva's wrist really must be all right by this time."

"Then you expect all the girls to praise you now that you have spun your yarn," smiled Cora. "You—"

"I expect this!" flashed Madge. "I expect you to admit that Betty was right and you were all wrong. And I expect those of you who believe in fair play, as you say you do,

to end all this coldness towards the Form captain!"

"I shall feel more inclined to do that when your story is proved," said Grace Garfield, causing a look of delight to show in Cora's eyes.

"Give us the chance to prove it!" Cora challenged Madge. "Tell me where the blind lady lives, and I'll go there this evening—start off this very minute on my bike—and ask her if it is true!"

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" Madge retorted sharply. "Haven't I been trying all along to prevent the blind lady from knowing that I was Alva's substitute? I am not going to tell you where she lives, and have you seeking interviews!"

"Aha! Oho!" Cora laughed derisively. "What a jolly artful girl you are, Madge! You see her artfulness, girls? She has invented an excuse for not being able to give us the chance to prove her story!"

"It's a downright pack of fibs—that's my belief," said Judith, turning towards the door. "We'd be duffers to listen to any more!"

"I agree," said Grace Garfield, stepping after Judith; and she was not the only girl to do that either.

With a pang of anguish, Betty saw that all the one-time friends of hers, who were now friendly with the Grandways sisters, refused to place the least faith in Madge's story. They were drifting from the room, discussing the explanation amongst themselves in tones of utter scorn.

Madge was very white now. Her fierce eyes watched the girls trooping away, until the whole Cora "set" was gone, and only Polly, Paula, Tess, and Trixie remained behind.

"And you?" she turned upon them to ask passionately. "Do you also think I am telling more fibs than ever?"

"The story is too extraordinary to be believed, without proof," said Polly Linton.

"Yes, wather! Weally, Madge," Paula Creel pleaded, in her simpering tone, "without wishing to use any stwong expression, I wegard the story as most extwaordinary, bai Jove!"

"You must prove it, Madge—you really must!" said Tess Trolawney.

"I can't! I tell you, to let any of you go to the blind lady's house—it would be fatal for Alva!" Madge cried desperately. "Don't you see that?"

"I see that you have a very plausible reason for not letting us prove it!" Polly answered.

"Then don't stop here any longer, any of you, or you'll make me say things I don't want to!" Madge stormed, in her passionate way. "You've dropped me, and you've dropped Betty for standing up for me. If Betty isn't sick at heart about it all, I am!"

"Betty knows," said Polly, withdrawing to the door. "I was miserable enough when this split came about. I would rather have had anything happen than all this. But there it is. Without being as spiteful about it all as Cora and Judith are, I say that Betty has done a very wrong thing, as captain, in defending you all along!"

"My explanation shows that I deserve Betty's confidence!" cried Madge.

"Your explanation needs to be proved," Polly said; and with that she walked from the room, taking the three other girls with her.

The door snicked shut behind them, and all at once Madge sank into a chair and burst into tears.

"Hateful girls—all of them!" she sobbed wildly. "Oh, Betty, Betty—"

"Never mind, dear. Oh, don't cry, or else I shall—"

"I won't shed another tear about it all!" Madge jumped up to say fiercely, whilst she wiped her brimming eyes. "The loss of such girls' friendship is not worth crying about! I am going to leave Morcove School, and this makes me feel glad—yes, glad!"

"Madge, dear," Betty entreated soothingly. "Don't say such things. As regards your expulsion—your not coming back next term—surely, that can be wiped out now? You will explain to Miss Somerfield?"

"And be disbelieved, for lack of proof, by her!"

Madge sat down again, drooping her head.

"It's no use, Betty. My parents are coming to the school to-morrow, and they are to be told—"

"What!"

"Told that I must be taken away from the school!"

"No, no! Oh, Madge—"

"It is settled, Betty, and you must not grieve for me," Madge explained tragically. "I shall tell my parents, and they will believe me without proof. But they will not be able to get Miss Somerfield—"

believe the story, any more than I could myself. They—"

"Madge, listen to me!" Betty broke in earnestly. "Is it really the case that you dare not provide proofs? I can quite see that no one must go to the blind lady's house; but how about Alva Forbes?"

"Alva?"

"The girl for whom you have been doing all this? Why, of course!" cried Betty, brightening up. "You have only to get into touch with her, and she will come to the school and confirm everything you have said!"

"But—"

"Where does she live, this Alva Forbes, tell me?"

Madge did not answer for a moment. She reddened a little, then turned very pale.

"I—I don't know what you'll think of me, Betty," she faltered at last, "but I can't tell you where Alva lives!"

There was a sudden deep silence.

"You can't tell me, Madge!"

"I've forgotten where she lives in Barncombe!"

"You—have—forgotten!"

"Yes! She only gave me the address by word of mouth, at the time of the accident. She gave it to me, along with the blind lady's address, and I was fixing that in my mind and forgot the other. The blind lady is Miss Charteris, and she lives at No. 10, The Retreat. But—"

"No. 10, The Retreat," Betty echoed softly. "Then—"

She drew a deep breath.

"Someone lives with the blind lady, Madge?"

"Yes. There is a housekeeper—a woman named Janet."

After this reply there was silence again. Madge waited a while, ready to answer any more questions; but none came.

Betty sat down, with a thoughtful frown on her face, and suddenly the awful conviction seized poor Madge—even Betty was beginning to doubt the whole story!

That she, Madge, had forgotten Alva Forbes' address was perhaps too much for Betty to swallow! Anyhow, Betty's attitude had suddenly changed like this. She had nothing more to say—nothing!

A minute passed; then Madge crossed to the door and went out, her dark eyes full of sadness and despair. After all, she was saying to herself tragically, was it a wonder

if Betty had indeed begun to share the others' disbelief?

So, with a slow, dejected step, Madge Minden went to her own study, and shut herself in there—and she never knew how Betty, left alone, suddenly looked at the time, and then dressed herself hurriedly for some journey out of doors!

CHAPTER 18.

Betty Tries—And Fails.

JUST as the school chimes were striking half-past five, Betty Barton was getting her bicycle out of the school cycle shed.

It required no attention, and in a moment she was in the saddle and pedalling away.

Out through the great gateway she skimmed; then, with the road to Barncombe lying before her, she spurred along at top speed.

She was going to do what Madge had refused to let the other girls do.

She was going to call at the blind lady's house!

To Betty, at this time, had come a tremendous sense of relief.

The last few days had been days of miserable helplessness and dejection. Now she had started upon a quest which had all the thrill of detective work in it—a quest that might end oh! so happily.

Only let her get to No. 10, The Retreat, Barncombe, and make cautious inquiries there—taking care not to let the blind lady know there was a visitor—and what a changed situation it would be ere roll-call was over this evening.

Not only would Madge's truthfulness be vindicated, but all the old happy state would be restored to the Form!

The girls would see that Madge's worst offence had been, as she contended, that she had gone the wrong way about doing the right thing. The Headmistress would see it all in this light, too, and surely there would be no more talk of expelling the girl!

And so, to-morrow, when Madge's parents came to the school, no mention would be made of recent events.

Madge would be back at the dear old school when next term commenced: and before that—before this last week of the old term was over—the Fourth Form would

no longer be divided into several different camps.

Whir! whir! whir! went Betty's pedals, as she sent the bicycle speeding along the almost deserted roadway; and all the time her spirits were mounting up and up.

She even felt she wanted to laugh with joy, as she thought of the surprise it would be to all the Form when she got back to the school, later on, with proofs of Madge's story being a true one.

No one knew that she had started off upon this quest—even Madge did not know! And the joy of producing proofs, by and by, would be all the greater because everybody would be so surprised.

Whir! whir whir! Faster still raced Betty along the level stretches of road. Down the sloping parts she went, full pelt, and steadily she plugged away at the pedals on the rising bits of ground, refusing to dismount and walk.

So, in what must have been almost record time, her journey from the school to the outskirts of the quaint old Devonshire town came to an end. She was in the main street now, and she slowed down to ask a little girl the way to The Retreat.

"First to the left, and then to the right!" cried the child. "It's a very dingy old street!"

And so Betty found it to be, when she turned into it a few minutes later.

Leaving her bicycle against a wall at the corner, she went swiftly along the pavement, and came to No. 10. This seemed the very shabbiest house of all. It had a shut-up look about its exterior; the front steps had not been swept to-day, let alone cleaned; and the front windows were shuttered.

Betty walked past the house, taking a good look at it, then turned back and mounted the steps.

When she rang the bell, there was a full minute's wait before responsive sounds came from within the house. But at last the schoolgirl heard a step padding along the dim passage; the door was open a foot or so; and a very slatternly woman, with a sour face, looked out.

"Well, what do you want?" she snapped. "Are you Janet, please?" Betty asked, taken aback by this ill-tempered reception.

"No, I'm not," was the curt answer. "Janet—who is Janet?"

"Surely she is the housekeeper here?" Betty said, feeling more surprised than

over. "I was told that the housekeeper's name was Janet."

"Well, supposing I did happen to be Janet—which I don't," said the disagreeable woman, "what do you want with her?"

"I am a scholar at Morcove School," Betty began to explain, "and I have called to make an inquiry, although I don't want Miss Charteris to know anything about my calling."

"Miss Charteris—there is no one here of that name!"

"What!" gasped Betty.

"I'm telling you, Miss Charteris isn't here."

"But—this is the right address! No. 10, the Retreat."

"That's right. And the only person living here is myself," said the woman impatiently. "So don't bother me!"

"Please, though—oh, don't shut the door!" Betty pleaded desperately. "I had such an important reason for calling. I wanted to ask whether it is true that a girl from my school has been coming here, at different times, to play to a blind old lady named Miss Charteris."

"I tell you, Miss Charteris isn't here, and I don't know of any schoolgirl coming to play the piano!"

"Then—"

"You've been told a lot of nonsense, that's clear!" the woman cut Betty short, grimly. "So go back to your precious school, and don't come bothering here any more!"

Slam!

That was the door, as it was shut against Betty's face.

She walked away from the doorstep, feeling quite dazed.

After being lifted so high on that wave of hope, she was now cast down into a surging sea of fresh despair.

From what that woman had said to her, nothing was known of a blind lady at the house!

"A lot of nonsense!" That scornful cry of the woman's still rang in Betty's ears. But the girl felt that it was far worse than mere nonsense. It meant—oh, what else could it all mean, but that Madge had made up the story, after all, about the blind lady, about everything?

Betty returned to her bicycle, but she felt too upset to mount at once.

Slowly she wheeled the machine out of

one street into another, her mind all the time charged with the saddest thoughts.

So much for the hopes she had built upon this secret journey to the town!

Instead of finding proofs to take back to the other girls, she had only found out things that made it really hard for her to believe in Madge any longer.

The girls had been right all along, then! And she, the captain of the Form, had been in the wrong! Polly, Paula, Tess, Trixie—all of them. They were not to have cause to regret the attitude they had taken up. The regret was to be hers—yes, hers! She had got to admit by and by that now she knew how little Madge had deserved to be trusted.

And how Judith and Cora would yell with triumph, even if other girls were content to let her off with only a few reproaches. These spiteful sisters—avowed enemies of Betty's as they were—they would never let her hear the last of this unhappy affair.

The disappointment made itself felt most of all when she was in the main street of the town again, with the road to the school lying before her. Was there nothing else she could do, except go back now? Nothing!

Heavy-hearted, she made only a slow journey over this same open road along which she had come just a little while ago in such a hopeful mood.

Half a mile from the school she met a party of Fourth Form girls, who were also on cycles. They whirled past Betty without speaking, and the encounter left her even more miserable than ever.

If her mission had been successful, she would have stopped those girls with a triumphant cry that Madge's rectitude was proved! But the mission had failed, and she could only keep silent about it, unless she wanted Madge to be held in greater scorn than ever.

She stalled her machine in the cycle-shed, and then walked across the playing-fields towards the schoolhouse. At one of the tennis courts Polly, Paula, Tess and Trixie were playing a fast game. Time was when they would have paused, no matter how thrilling the game might be, to call across to her. But now—

She sighed hard to herself.

The one comforting thought, as regards those girls, was that they had not thrown in their lot with Cora & Co.

All the way back from Barncombe there had been no thought in her mind of speaking to Madge about the fiasco of the visit. But now, as she was making her way upstairs, she felt the sudden desire to confront the girl and give way to a little indignation.

Swiftly she strode along the corridor, and tapped at Madge's door, then walked into the room.

"Hallo!" Madge exclaimed, starting up from her chair with a brightening countenance. "I've been wondering what had become of you, Betty! You were not in your room when I called there, half an hour ago."

"No, I've been to Barncombe."

"Barncombe!"

"On my bike, yes. Madge, I've been to No. 10, the Retreat—"

"Oh!"

"And there is no blind lady there! Nothing is known of any schoolgirl going there to play the piano!"

Madge almost reeled back with the shock of these words.

"But—but," she stammered, "whom did you see?"

"A bad-tempered old woman—"

"Janet? Was it Janet?"

"No. She said her name was not Janet. She said that I must have been told a lot of nonsense! Oh, Madge, I went there, full of hope, thinking I was going to make safe inquiries that would prove the truth of your story. And that is what I was told," cried Betty bitterly. "It is a lot of nonsense!"

"Then you think I made up that story?"

"No—at least—oh, I don't know what to think! All the way home I have been feeling disappointed—miserable! But now—"

"Betty, look me in the eyes!" Madge broke in sharply. "For the last time, I declare that my story was all true! And now do you doubt me, like the rest?"

Their eyes met.

For the space of five seconds they gazed steadily at each other, and during those tense, silent moments Betty realised that she still believed in Madge Minden.

Yes! Despite the forgotten address of Alva Forbes—a plea that sounded so weak—and despite the fiasco of that journey to the Retreat, somehow the captain of the Form felt that she must still have faith in this girl who, doubted by all others, had become the outcast of the Form.

"I cannot understand it—you going to that house, and being told that!" Madge exclaimed at last. "And I can't go there myself to demand explanations. I am gated—like a prisoner in the school! If I break out again, I shall be put in the detention-room—a nice thing for a girl whose parents are coming to-morrow! But oh, this is driving me mad!"

And she paced about the room in a state of helpless rage.

"If only I could remember that address of Alva's!" she broke out again, sweeping a hand across her forehead. "Why you were spoken to like that, Betty, at the Retreat baffles me. I can't imagine who it was answered the door!"

Betty said nothing. She was letting Madge talk on, feeling that the girl's desperate exclamations all bore witness to her veracity, if nothing else did.

"Unless," Madge exclaimed, suddenly stopping dead, "Miss Charteris has gone away from that house, because she has been ill and needs a change of air. But then, why should the person left behind tell you that no schoolgirl was ever at the house? It's a shame—a shame!"

As the passionate outcry died away, Betty gave a startled glance towards the door.

Was she mistaken, or had there really been a sound of whispering from the passage outside?

With a few quick steps she reached the door, and whipped it open.

And there, in a stooping attitude, as if her ear had been at the keyhole, stood Cora Grandways, with Judith at her side!

CHAPTER 19.

Betty Tries Again.

"YOU horrid sneak—eavesdropper!" Betty Barton cried out fiercely.

"Ha, ha, ha!" was the brazen laugh which both Cora and Judith sent up.

"He, he, he!" "Sneaks, both of you!" Madge now panted, with even greater passion than Betty's. "Listening at the keyhole to talk that doesn't concern you!"

"Oh, doesn't it?" retorted Cora, scowling sullenly. "You are wrong there, Madge Minden! It is a matter of general interest, when the Form captain comes back

from Barncombe to say that no blind lady lives at the Retreat!"

Betty tried to say something; but she only emitted a gasp.

"Wait till the girls come in from their cycle ride!" Cora went on gleefully. "Judy and I will have a pretty story to tell them then! Ha, ha, ha! You must be feeling nice and small this evening, Betty Barton! Not much to crow about, have you?"

At this instant the footfall of several other girls sounded along the passage, and suddenly Betty and Madge saw Polly Linton and her usual trio of companions stop dead, close to the door.

"What's the row now?" asked Polly breezily.

"No row—only a great joke!" sniggered Cora. "Betty thought she would be clever, and run to Barncombe to get proof of Madge's story being true. Madge, it seems, told her that the blind lady lived at No. 10, the Retreat, and Betty went there."

"Well?" "Well, the joke is," chuckled Cora, "Betty got her head snapped off by the person who really does live there!"

"Bai Jove!" breathed Paula Creel. "In other words," interposed Judith, "instead of getting proofs to show that Madge has been telling the truth, Betty only got proof that the story was a made-up one! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Gwreat goodness—pwoof!" "Proof—that Madge has fibbed!" Polly exclaimed, falling back a step. "Very well, then! Betty, you are going to be done with that girl now? Say the word, and I'll move back into your study right away!"

"Yes, wather!" chimed in Paula. "Weally, Betty, after this, you know, you must agwce that we have been wight, bai Jove!"

"Which is it to be, Betty?" Polly went on impatiently. "Will you have me back this evening, or will you still maintain that that girl is entitled to be trusted?"

A tense moment or so ticked by. Then Betty spoke.

"I want you back, Polly. If I had a thousand friends—and I've hardly one to call my own at this moment—I'd still be lonely without you. But I can't ask you to come back on those terms."

"You still defend Madge Minden?" "I still have faith in her—yes!"

"Duffer!" exploded Cora Grandways. "Ha, ha, ha! What a captain!"

"Ho, he, he!" tittered Judith.

Polly glared resentfully at the sniggering couple, seemed about to say something, but held herself in check.

"Paula, Trixie, Tess!" she called to those girls. "I think we had better move on!"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove!"

And, with a pained look upon their faces, they all four passed on to other studies.

Cora and Judith were still hanging about the open doorway, gloating over Madge's misery, and that girl, flinging herself into a chair, gestured wildly to Betty.

"Shut that door, Betty! If I see much more of those girls I shall go for them!"

Betty shut the door swiftly, setting her teeth as she heard the sisters go away, laughing shrilly.

That derisive sound died away, and then, suddenly, the Form captain heard a strangled sob from poor Madge.

"It's not what they are doing to me!" the girl cried out, burying her face in her hands. "It is what it is costing you, Betty!"

"Hush, dear!" the Form captain murmured soothingly, with a hand on the girl's heaving shoulders. "Let me stay, Madge, and—"

"No, leave me! You have done all you can for me now, Betty!"

And although Betty stayed a little longer, she had to come away at last, feeling that Madge's despairing cry was only too true. What else, indeed, could one do for the unhappy girl now?

But, late that same night, when Betty was lying wide awake in her bed, pondering the whole sad situation, thinking, above all, how the morrow would find Madge's parents at the school, and how they must be told of their daughter's disgraced position, there flashed upon her an idea that almost took her breath away.

"Oh, why didn't I think of it before!" she said to herself excitedly. "If only I had had the idea when I was in Barncombe!"

Still, she comforted herself by reflecting it was not too late even now. To-morrow—yes, to-morrow was Saturday, and she would be free from after dinner onwards; free to carry out this idea that had come to her, and perhaps—

Perhaps she could yet vindicate Madge before the girl's parents arrived at the school!

In the morning Madge's wan face told of a night of broken rest and great anguish of mind, and it was a hard struggle for Betty to refrain from hinting at what she intended to do. But she intended to keep the plan secret, and that afternoon nobody saw the captain quit the school, nor would they have known whether she was off to, even if her departure had been seen.

She was off to Barncombe again. Not by cycle this time. Walking to Morcoze Road railway station, she joined the train there, and in a few minutes her short journey by rail was over.

And now, as she stepped on to the platform at Barncombe station, her fresh spell of detective work began at once!

She waited till the other passengers had passed through the barrier, then went up to the man who was collecting tickets, handed over her own ticket, and questioned him.

"Please," she said, "I wonder if you have seen a blind lady leave Barncombe by train during the last few days?"

"Blind lady, miss?"

"Yes. She would be elderly, and would have an elderly companion with her."

The ticket-collector scratched his head.

"No, miss, I can't say there's been any passenger of that kind. I don't know of any blind lady living in Barncombe, either."

Betty felt that this was the first blow at her renewed hopes; the first bit of fresh failure.

She could do no more at the station, and so she wandered out into the town, not beaten yet, but certainly disheartened. She would try other places—cab proprietors' yards, and the town garages.

One of the latter she came upon all at once, not far from the station, and she ventured into the ramshackle office.

A girl clerk was sitting there at a small table with a typewriter, and Betty made the same inquiries of her that she had made of the ticket-collector.

And then—oh joy! The schoolgirl detective saw that she was on the track at last! The young lady clerk was nodding in the affirmative.

"Yes, miss," Betty heard her saying. "we did have a car hired out by a blind old lady. She has gone to Braunton Sands, fifteen miles from here, and there's no railway, you know."

"Braunton Sands—fifteen miles!" echoed Betty excitedly.

She looked at the office clock.

"Oh," was her desperate cry a moment later, "if only I could get there and back this afternoon! It is so important! I would give fifty pounds if I had it—"

"I don't suppose you have fifty shillings, let alone fifty pounds," smiled the lady clerk. "And it would cost you quite four pounds to go there and back by car!"

"Four pounds?" Betty's heart sank again; but she whipped out her purse with a desperate feeling that she must manage somehow. "I've got twenty-seven—no, thirty shillings in all, no more!" she announced. "But I can get plenty of money; my people are well off. Oh, miss, could you wait—will you do your best for me?"

"How do you mean?"

"Get your people to let me have a car!" entreated Betty. "I'll pay this money now, and the balance shall be paid in a day or two, when I hear from home! It is so urgent! It may mean wonderful things for a friend of mine, if I can find that blind lady to-day! Do—do!"

The lady clerk was clearly impressed. She left the office, and returned in a few minutes with one of the chauffeurs.

"Our manager is out," this man said, "and I don't know that we ought to let you have a car on those terms, without his permission."

"It is urgent—oh, so urgent!" pleaded Betty. "Do stretch a point and get me to Branton Sands and back as quickly as possible! I'll give you all the money I have!"

"You got a car ready, Hawkins," said the lady clerk, "and I'll take the responsibility."

She added, as the man went off to obey this injunction:

"It is not the money I am inclined to fidget about, miss. You are only a school-girl, and I am wondering if you ought to be allowed to hire a car all to yourself. You are not running away from school, are you?"

Betty laughed.

"Oh, no!"

"All the same, it is most unusual, and—" The lady clerk suddenly had an inspiration. "I know! I'll leave someone else in charge of the office, and just take the afternoon off! Then I can come with you,

and see that you come back all right. I am sure the manager would approve."

"Oh, what a kind friend you are to a complete stranger!" Betty exclaimed fervently. "Thank you, miss!"

"Kate White—that's my name."

"And mine is Betty Barton."

The lady clerk was already taking her outdoor things from a hook on the wall.

In a couple of minutes she was ready for the journey, and both entered the car the chauffeur brought out. That journey was done in so short a space of time that Betty was astonished, and she thanked the good-natured Kate White from the depths of her heart.

The chauffeur pulled up right in the centre of the bungalow town, and Betty, having jumped out along with Kate White, got the direction from the man, and set off at top speed along a sandy track.

Soon she came upon the isolated wooden cottage where she had been told Miss Charteris was staying.

It was a ramshackle place, but the sunshine and the romantic surroundings made it look picturesque enough. Treading upon a sandy path that was lined out with big sea-shells, she came to a trellised porch, and paused there, panting for breath.

The cottage was in deep silence. All she could hear was the tick-tock of a cheap clock. What, then, had she better do? Should she knock softly, and perhaps rouse the blind lady from an afternoon nap? Oh, if only someone would come out to her, and

"Do you want to see Miss Charteris?" a gentle voice suddenly startled Betty by asking.

She faced about sharply, to find a tall young lady had come after her up the sandy path from the seashore.

"I—Miss Charteris? No, I don't want to see that lady," Betty jerked out in an agitated whisper. "I want to see Janet, if she is here, please."

"Janet has taken her mistress out in the bathchair."

"Oh!"

"But I am staying with the old folk. If there is anything I can do for you?" said the young lady. "My name is Alva Forbes."

"Alva Forbes! Then you," cried Betty wildly, "you are the very person I most want to see!"

CHAPTER 20.

A Race Against Time.

BEFORE Alva Forbes had time to voice a single exclamation of surprise, Betty rushed on excitedly:

"It is about my chum at the school—Madge Minden. She is in disgrace, and I believe most of it is all unmerited. She is going to be expelled—"

"Expelled!"

"Yes. And at this moment her parents are on the way to the school. They are to be told, as soon as they arrive, about their daughter's disgrace. But I want to prevent all that—I must! Oh, tell me quick!" entreated Betty. "It is true, isn't it, that Madge took your place as the blind lady's hired pianist?"

"Yes!"

"Then Madge is cleared—cleared! I can go back at once—get to the school before her parents arrive. And you will come with me, won't you?"

"To the school?" Alva Forbes was agitated as Betty now. "Oh, if it is to help Madge Minden, I must come at once, yes! And yet—"

She suddenly sighed desperately.

"No, I dare not come at once! I have to play to Miss Charteris directly she returns from her hour out of doors. But I will run over this evening, somehow. I will do that, I promise. I have plenty of money to hire a car—"

"How good you are!" Betty broke in, half sobbing. "But, after all, need you come, if you give me a letter?"

"No; I will come," Alva declared firmly. "You can go back at once, and speak for me, saying that I am coming along by and by. I can guess why Madge needs help. What she did for me is the cause of all her disgrace!"

"Then what shall I tell them at the school?" Betty asked eagerly.

"Tell them that Madge was acting all the time out of regard to my desperate position," Alva answered quickly. "Tell them that the engagement to play the piano meant so much to me, and that she saved me from losing the position altogether. More, it is thanks entirely to Madge Minden acting as my deputy that Miss Charteris, who knows nothing about my being laid aside by the injured wrist, has made me a present of one hundred pounds!"

"That's a welcome gift to one in your needy position!"

"It is," agreed Alva. "Only I feel that Madge ought to have the money. She—"

"She won't want a penny of it, I am sure of that!" Betty exclaimed, with a sharp laugh, due to her excited state. "She only wants to be cleared—to have it proved that she never made up any pack of falsehoods! The girls think her story was just a pack of fibs, and there has been no proving its truth up to now. I went to the Retreat, and was told that no blind lady lived there—"

"What?"

"And that no schoolgirl had ever been there to play the piano! Even now, I can't understand—"

"Then let me explain," broke in Alva, with a sudden look of comprehension. "I see why it was—yes! The doctor ordered Miss Charteris to come to the seaside place with Janet, and Miss Charteris begged me to come, too, to play to her. I accepted, for my wrist is all right now. Janet must have warned the old woman who was left in charge of the Barncombe house that nothing must be said about any schoolgirl having been there."

"Oh!"

"Don't blame Janet. She was acting, as she thought, for Madge's good," pleaded Alva. "Least said, soonest mended, you know. But in this case poor Madge has been the victim of too much secrecy!"

"Yes," said Betty. "When I think of what Madge is suffering in her mind at this moment, I feel I want to be off at once, and—"

"Then go!" cried Alva, clasping her hands. "And—oh, may you be in time to set everything right before Madge's parents reach the school!"

And there this strange, breathless interview ended.

Without another word Betty was off and away to the car. She saw Kate White down at the water's edge, watching the wavelets, and called to her excitedly:

"Quick! We have to go back immediately!"

The girl came running up at once; the chauffeur came away from a tea-shanty where he had been getting a glass of lemonade, and inside of another minute the car was humming along on its homeward journey.

"How do the trains run to Morocco Bay?"

at this time of the day?" Betty asked her companion presently.

Kate White looked at her wrist-watch.

"It's half-past three now. There's a train at four from Barncombe to Morcove Road—a train that comes from Exeter—"

"Exeter! Then Madge's people will be in that train!"

"I don't know anything about Madge. Who is she, or what have her parents to do with all this?" laughed Kate White. "But if you want to catch that train—"

"Oh, I must—I must!"

"Then, Hawkins! Let her rip!" Kate called to the chauffeur. "And go straight to the railway station when you reach the town!"

He nodded to show that he had heard and would obey, and faster than ever sped the car along the white ribbon of road until the town was at last reached.

A couple of minutes more, and a swift swerve brought them into the station yard. Betty jumped out almost before the car had stopped.

"Thank you—thanks, ever so much!" she panted. "I—"

"Never mind about the money now. Send it on! You must catch that train—it's already in!" cried Kate White.

And Betty, with the sudden clangour of the platform bell dinning in her ears, darted for the booking-hall, and rushed out on to the platform just as the train was puffing out.

CHAPTER 21.

Polly Moves Back.

INTO a third-class compartment Betty bundled, and then—phew!

She sat back, fanned her heated face, panted for breath.

At Morcove Road she found two other passengers alighting from a first-class compartment. They were a lady and gentleman, with luggage, and in a flash Betty saw the family likeness.

Madge Minden's parents!

"Hallo!" exclaimed the gentleman, as Betty was going past him and his wife. "One of Madge's friends, I expect! Can we give you a lift to the school? The headmistress has sent a car to meet us."

Barely had the car pulled up outside the school porch before Betty was jumping out.

Mumbling an apology to the other pas-

sengers for her rude haste, she darted into the house. In a moment she heard Mr. and Mrs. Minden giving their names to the maid at the door; and that maid came hurrying after Betty to the headmistress' private room.

"You wait, please!" Betty gestured to the girl in cap and apron, and next moment she herself was inside the private room, blurring out everything!

What Mr. and Mrs. Minden thought of their being kept so long awaiting a reception by the headmistress need not be set down here. Nor is there any need to record all Betty's breathless statements, and the bewildered cries that came from Miss Somerfield again and again.

We are only concerned with the result of that interview, which result could be gathered from a sight of Betty Barton's face, as she came swiftly from the room, ten minutes later.

She was beaming with joy.

Up the old stairs she pounded, three at a time, and so into the Fourth Form passage. It was that slack time, just after tea, when girls were to be found drifting about, and she came upon a number of them idling in the passage.

"Will you all come to my study?" she panted excitedly. "I've something very important to tell you!"

Then she threw open a certain door and cried wildly:

"Madge! Madge! It's all right, dear! Your parents are here, but you are saved!"

"What! What's that Betty is saying?" exclaimed a dozen or more girls surging into the passage. "Madge saved? What does Betty mean?"

"I mean this," Betty turned upon them all to cry, when she had reached her own study, and they were crowding in at the doorway: "Madge has been telling the truth all along! I have proof of it—"

"Oh!"

"Alva Forbes is coming here this evening to bear out what I say," Betty rushed on breathlessly. "Meantime, she told me to tell the headmistress—and I've done that already—that Madge was acting all through out of regard for her—Alva's—position. And what Madge has done, at so much cost to herself, has put a hundred pounds into a needy girl's pocket!"

"Great goodness!"

"Hooway!" shrilled Paula. "Bai Jove

"Then we—all of us—we've been misjudging Madge from the very first!" cried Polly Linton. "And you have been the only girl in the Form, Betty, to stand up for Madge, when she was made to feel like an outcast!"

"Hooway!" cheered Paula. "Weally, geals, this is a gweat welief, yes, wather! Why, we are going to be fwiends all wound!"

"Oh, of course, you and Polly and a few others are delighted!" Cora snapped fiercely. "You've shown all-along that you'd be only too glad to know that Betty was right and you were wrong! But there are some other girls—ones who have become friendly with me and Judy just lately—and I want to know, are they going to go back to Betty now?"

"I am, for one!" said Norah Nugent bluntly.

"And I!" "And I!" cried others.

With that the girls turned their backs on Cora and Judith, and made for the door.

Whilst the spiteful couple sat nonplussed in the room a maid in cap and apron came up to the group of girls.

"Is Madge Minden here?" she inquired, peering in upon the excited crowd.

"Yes, I am here—"

"Yes, wather! Heah's Madge, bai Jove!"

"Her parents are waiting for her," said the maid, turning to go. "They are with the headmistress now!"

Madge was standing close to Betty Barton. She straightened up for an instant, breathing jerkily; turned to the Form cap-

tain, with some incoherent murmur of gratitude, and then—

Thud!

It was the dull sound of a girlish figure falling to the floor.

Madge Minden had fainted!

It must have been fully an hour later when Betty Barton was sitting all by herself in Study No. 12, smiling happily at her thoughts.

She had returned to this study after being one of several girls to give prompt attention to Madge, when that scholar swooned away out of sheer excess of joyful relief. At the most, it had only taken the girls five minutes to bring Madge back to her senses, and they had seen her walk away after that, quite steadily, to meet her parents.

Thump, thump! came a sudden heavy kick against the closed door.

Betty started up from her chair to answer the violent summons, when somehow the door was thrown open—crash!—and into the old study sailed Polly Linton, with an armful of her belongings.

"Polly—"

"I've come back!" cried Polly, slamming down her hefty load. "I'm moving in again, right now, Betty; that is if you'll have me!"

"Have you! Oh, Polly—"

"Bai Jove!" struck in Paula's gleeful simper, as that young lady lounged into the room. "Weally, geals, this is a gweat welief! Fwiends all wound again—yes, wather!"

"And if—if we ever have another bust up, Betty darling," said Polly, "well—it won't be my doing!"



NOTE!—Two more splendid numbers of "The Schoolgirls' Own" Library will be on sale on Friday, June 5th. See page iv of cover for further particulars.

MAY'S THE TIME FOR WALKS.

Every season has its own particular attraction for the girl who likes walking in the country, but can there be any to beat the spring? Or any month in which spring shows its very best other than the merry month of May?

Nearly all the poets have said in suitable language how beautiful the country is in May, and, despite the queer habits of the English weather, it is the same to-day as ever it was. There's no doubt upon that score.

And another point that cannot be questioned is that the best and only real way to see the full glory of the countryside is by getting off the beaten track, by deserting the main roads, with their incessant stream of motor traffic, and making for the most beautiful and secluded spots on foot.

Some girls, with the spirit of the pioneer strongly developed, like to choose their own tracks, keeping to the road until a promising bypath tempts them to depart from it, and not caring whither they may go until the time for return arrives.

Others, more cautious souls, prefer to plan their route ahead, making for some definite spot, of which they have probably heard much from previous visitors.

Well, you can easily plan your route and yet keep away from the well-frequented paths, for there are many handbooks sold, complete with maps, which will provide a complete guide to the most out-of-the-way corners of your county.

In these special handbooks, the footpaths and byways are as well-charted as the main roads are on the Ordnance Survey maps, and as long as you heed their instructions you need never fear that your footsteps will unwittingly cause you to trespass, as may be the case if you select your paths at random.

If you have not yet felt the call to go rambling over the open country, you should certainly give it a trial now.

And don't forget that for health and beauty there is no finer exercise in the

world than walking, and no better place than the fields and woods of the country.

To the unimaginative, rambling is dull and uninteresting compared with such vigorous pastimes as tennis and cycling. Actually, it holds far more interest than either.

In your travels you will come across quaint old-world villages—villages that were once considered large and important centres.

In these places you will discover relics of other and more romantic times. Here you will find a set of stocks, perhaps bearing some quaint inscription, to remind you of strange punishments that have long since been out of fashion.

Old and picturesque churches are well worth visiting, for, as you stand in them, it is easy to imagine that you have slipped back two or three hundred years in time, and on their walls you will find inscriptions in Old English relating to folks whose names probably are mentioned in your school history books.

But, unless you are particularly interested in these matters, you will spare them only a brief time. Your main interest is in getting good exercise, recreation and fresh air.

Not many of us care for our own company so much as to seek pleasure alone. If you have a companion on your walks, you will discover that the joy of the open will tend to develop closer friendship.

Somehow or other it is easier to give and receive confidences in the sympathetic atmosphere of the green fields.

Besides human companionship, there are two other great aids to the enjoyment of country rambling—a dog and a camera. If you have a dog, he will show you just how much fun there is in the open-air.

Give him open green spaces and he's a different dog from the lazy chap who reclines sleepily in front of the fire at home.

As for the camera, there is no need to tell you how handy that will prove. There are so many happy moments in your country rambles that you'll be hard put to it to decide when to put the camera away and say "No more!"

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