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BY
MARJORIE
STANTON



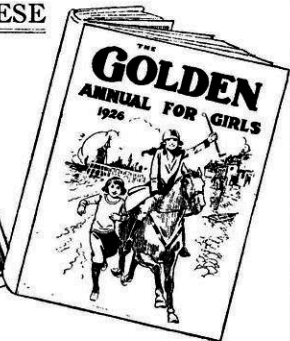
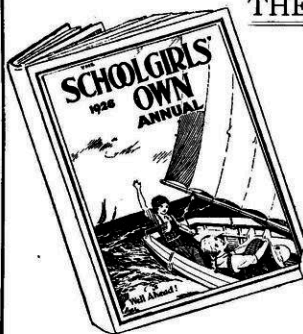
THE
MYSTERY
OF
**HERON'S
HAUNT**

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A Magnificent Tale of Betty Barton & Co.
of Morcove School on Holiday.

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THE MYSTERY OF HERONS' HAUNT!

BY

MARJORIE STANTON.

A Charming Story of the Early Adventures of BETTY BARTON and Co.,
of Morcove School, on Holiday.

CHAPTER 1.

The Home of the Mannerings.

"PORTER!"

"Yes, miss?"

"How long is this train going to be before it gets to Heronvale?"

"Next station, miss!" sang out the aged porter at whom Betty Barton had shouted that question just as the train was puffing out again.

"Thanks!"

And Betty, drawing in her pretty head at the carriage window, turned with smiles of delight to the schoolgirl chums who were making this tedious journey with her.

"Next station, girls—thank goodness!"

"Hurrah!" cried Polly Linton. "It will be jolly to be out of this stuffy carriage at last and faced with a nice walk on a glorious day like this!"

"Ripping breeze!" chimed in Tess Trelawney, sitting in a corner where the fresh wind blew in upon her face and sported with her hair. "And there will be leafy lanes, of course, where we shall be out of the broiling sun."

"Yes, wather!"

"So cheer up, Trixie dear!" Betty cried, with a laugh, to the only member of the

party who was keeping silent. "You know very well, dear, you are going to enjoy the holiday with us at Herons' Haunt far better than you would ever have enjoyed that trip to France."

Trixie Hope shrugged her shoulders. It was one of the shruugs she had practised, along with a good deal of French conversation, in expectation of being taken to the Continent by her parents for the summer holidays.

Only a few days since a hitch had occurred, making this projected trip out of the question, and so poor Trixie had not yet quite recovered from her disappointment.

She had gone to such a lot of trouble during the last few weeks learning to speak the language like a native.

"Eh, bien—ah, well!" she sighed, with another shrug. "Cela ne fait rien—it doesn't matter!"

"Tell you what," chuckled Polly. "Whenever you want to talk French, Trixie, have a go at me. I'm the one—oui, oui! Exercise ninety-one. Have you seen the gardener's watering-can? Non, non! But there are lemonades on the hat-rack, and I vote we finish them!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Yes, wather!"

So up jumped the merry holiday-makers,

to reach down the last unopened bottles of fizzy refreshment.

There was just one apiece, and when the glass stoppers had been pushed in these joyous young ladies out of the Fourth Form at Morcove School made no bones about the absence of cups or tumblers.

"Here's to our holiday at Herons' Haunt—hooray!" proposed Tess Trelawney.

"Hurrah! Hooray!"

"Geals," said Paula Creal, "I weally cannot wefwain fwm addressing a few wemarks to you. Heah we are, bai Jove, fwends all wound—weally great fwends—what?"

"Yes, wa-ther!" they laughed, mimicking her.

"And what is the wospect with which we are confwonted?" went on Paula, who really had quite a happy knack of talking like a platform speaker. "We have come fwm all parts of the countwy, bai Jove! Only a few hours ago we met at the junction, after twavelling fwm our wespective homes, and—er—hoah we are—what?"

"Oui, oui!" said Trixie, beginning to enter into the holiday mood.

"Exercise one hundred and one," said Polly Linton. "Have you seen the gardener's—"

"Pway wefwain fwm fwivolous wemarks," said Paula Creel, with much dignity. "Heah we are, geals, and we twust to be at Hewons' Haunt in the course of an hour. Awwived theah, bai Jove, we—er—we—"

"Shall have tea, let's hope!"

"Yes, wather! I twust tea will be woady," said Paula. "Howevah, we have come wprepared to wough it, we must nevah forget that, geals! But I am convinced we are going to have a downwight wipping time, and so—"

"Once again—"

"Hurrah for the holidays!" They all cheered and had another drink of lemonade.

"Now I feel better," chuckled Polly, rolling the empty bottle under the seat. "My word, though, it is going to be jolly, our getting together like this for a whole fortnight of the hols.!"

"We have your dad to thank for it all," said Betty Barton. "It is awfully kind of him to have made arrangements for us to go to Herons' Haunt."

"Oh, well," said Polly, "I don't know! Perhaps some of you may find Herons' Haunt a bit tame after all. It is a grand old place—no mistake about that! But there is only poor Mrs. Mannering living there, with her daughter, and just one maid to help with the work. So it will be rather like spending holidays with a caretaker, instead of with the actual owner of the house."

"Cela ne fait rien—it doesn't matter," Trixie said again. "Nous avons beau temps—we have lovely weather!"

"Yes, wather! And— Hello, geals—"

"Hurrah! Heronvale—at last!" went up gleeful cries from the girls as the slow train crawled alongside a tiny station, the platform of which was utterly deserted.

"Here we are! Hooray!" Then, for the one be-whiskered individual who was porter, ticket clerk, and station-master all in one, there was a moment of excitement to which he was not at all used.

He came lumbering out from his little shanty, to find a party of boisterous school-girls, all in a madcap holiday mood, swarming along his platform.

To add to this worthy's agitation, the guard of the train was bundling out quite a mountain of luggage—most of it Paula's, by the way—which luggage the girls began to give instructions about, all speaking at once.

"That's our property, porter!"

"Yes, wather! And, I say, portah!"

"You'll send it up to Herons' Haunt, won't you?"

"See that we get it early this evening!"

"And, portah, will you have a little wegard for my hatbox?" pleaded Paula, slipping a shilling into the dazed man's brown hand. "I shall twuly wegwet having to bwing any action against the wailway company for damages—yes, wather!"

"Er—er—lemme see!" stammered the bewildered official. "Luggage—all yours! 'Erons' Aunt!"

"Oui, oui!" said Trixie Hope.

"I beg parding, miss?"

"Tres bien!" Trixie said. "Very well!"

"I'm quite well myself, I thank 'ee, miss," stammered the porter.

"Ha, ha, ha! Exercise one hundred and fifty," chuckled Polly. "Have you seen the gardener's watering-can?"

"No, miss, not me; I ain't," sighed the porter. "Has he lost one, then?"

"Yes, wather!" said Paula. "How-eh, we will wise from the widiculous to the sublime! How far to Hewons' Haunt, portah?"

"Well, young ladies, some say a matter of two mile—"

"Wh-a-a-at!"

"And some say three."

"Gwacious! Bai Jove, geals—"

"But that's by road," said the porter ponderously. "If you care to cut across the field and down the lane—it's downhill all the way—you can do it in half an hour."

"Loud cheers!" laughed Betty Barton. "Come on then, girls! Best foot forward!"

"Yes, wather!"

And away they went.

Nor, whether they had wanted to walk or not, could the girls have found any other means of getting to their destination.

The station was a little wayside one, on a branch line, and outside it the girls found hardly another building in sight.

Such a thing as a waiting cab was evidently unheard of, and they could see that the porter would have to trundle the luggage along by-and-by on a ramshackle barrow.

"What an out-of-the-world spot!" exclaimed Betty, when they were half-way across the sunny field following a little-used footpath. "Have you ever seen a lonelier spot than this?"

"Jamais, jamais—never, never!" said Trixie.

"Glorious country, though!" chimed in Tess.

"Yes, wather!"

They were, in fact, amidst some of the most lovely scenery in the heart of England—some of the wildest, too. At the end of the footpath they clambered over a stile, and then giant trees embowered them as they went down the shady lane of which the porter had spoken.

High banks, all smothered with ferns, shut them in on either side, whilst overhead the trees interlaced their great branches, hardly letting through a shaft of sunlight.

How little this part of the world saw of human beings was evident from the number of usually shy creatures that caught the girls' eyes. Rabbits bobbed off by the

dozen at the approach of the chattering holiday-makers; there were squirrels, too, and rare birds only seen in very remote places.

The air was full of the carolling of the little songsters, and suddenly, to add to this melody, Betty Barton and Co. heard the tinkle of falling water.

Down and down they wended their way to the bottom of the lane, and there a sight met them that drew murmurs of ecstasy from the whole party.

A little streamlet ran along the bottom of the valley, falling here and there in tiny cataracts. Standing on the rustic bridge which they had to cross, the girls saw a kingfisher and also several herons.

"The haunt of the heron," murmured Betty. "That's how the house we are going to gets its name, of course—Heron's Haunt!"

"Oh, I see!" said Tess Trelawney. "I had a sort of idea that a chap named Heron haunted it; but now I understand!"

"Well, the place is haunted right enough, so dad told me," said Polly Linton. "But, mind you, he may have been pulling my leg! How much farther, I wonder?"

They roamed on, feeling that such a glorious walk might last another hour and they would not be a bit tired.

Suddenly a twist in the winding lane placed them in sight of a very high, mossy old wall, with a gateway that had once been very handsome. Drawing level with this gateway, they peered into spacious grounds that were all gone to rack and ruin; and there, in the very centre of this lonely wilderness, stood Herons' Haunt!

"Gwacious!" gasped Paula Creel, as she and her chums stared towards the vast old house. "I weally didn't think it would be quite such a dweadful wuin!"

And the others' wide eyes and dropped jaws showed how they, too, were almost dismayed by the appearance of the place.

Never had they set eyes on what, at one time, must have been such a stately mansion; and never had they seen a house, still supposed to be hospitable, in such a forlorn state.

It was more than out of repair. With so many ancient trees standing sentinel-like around it, the great old place looked so desolate and ruinous, the sight of it sent a creepy thrill through the girls.

They felt that it was like some picture of Castle Dangerous, in a fairy tale.

"Look, Trixie!" said Polly Linton, as they all walked forward rather hesitantly up the weed-grown avenue. "If you were in France you wouldn't see more turrets to a house than that! It's quite the French style—a sort of old chateau!"

"Oti!" said Trixie. "C'est bon—that is good!"

"Look, there's the lady who lives here, waiting to receive us!" Polly struck in. "So things are looking up!"

Then they stopped their chatter whilst they hurried along, full of eagerness to meet the lady who—as the result of a letter from her distant relation, Polly's father—had said she would be only too glad to have the party of girls as her guests.

Directly they got within speaking distance of her the holiday-makers felt quite at ease.

Middle-aged and handsome, she looked very stately in her black dress, whilst her sweet face had the most kind expression. One could not say that she was smiling. She seemed, indeed, like one whose life had been so shadowed with trouble that she had almost forgotten how to smile. But there was a sweet gentleness and goodwill in her eyes, and this and the way she shook hands with each girl in turn, simply won their hearts in a moment.

And now they took note of Mrs. Mannering's daughter, who had come out from the house-porch to take part in the informal welcome to Herons' Haunt.

She was a girl of about fourteen, very beautiful, but with, oh, such a fragile look about her whole slender figure.

They could see she was lame. Although she seemed able to make quite rapid movements, it was all too evident that the trouble in her lame foot was serious, accounting for her wasted looks.

How large and dark were those eyes that looked out from a face all so thin and pale, a face in striking contrast with the Moreove girls' healthful features and rosy cheeks!

"I am so glad you have come to stay with me and mother for a little while," she said half shyly. "It is such a change for both of us!"

"Well, I shouldn't think you have much company," Tess Trelawney remarked, with a laugh.

"No," said the lame girl, with a smile that was very pathetic. "It's just a week to-day since anyone came up that path. And then it was only the doctor."

In her stately way Mrs. Mannering made a move towards the house entrance, where a big stone portico made the doorway very dark and uninviting.

"Come in, girl," she looked round to say softly. And then, as she reached the threshold, she added in that same whispering tone which the girls were to find she hardly ever departed from:

"Nell and I welcome you to a house that is still the home of the Mannerings, even as it was their home centuries ago! You find it in a sad state of ruin and decay, but the day may yet come when you will see some of the departed glory of the place brought back again. Life has served us very cruelly; but, who knows, perhaps some day—"

She checked herself with an abruptness that startled the girls, and then sighed sharply. It was as if a wave of despair had suddenly rushed over her.

"It will come, mother darling—it will come," said the crippled girl, limping close to the lady's side. "That day you spoke of then. Oh, I am sure it will come to us in the end!"

"Ah, Nell, Nell!" answered the mother, kissing her. "What should I do without my little girl to share this sad and lonely life?"

CHAPTER 2.

Who is Esther Hone?

ERE they had been five minutes inside this strange old house the chums of Moreove School felt that this was more than a holiday they were going to enjoy.

It was a wonderful adventure!

There was a thrill for them in the mere act of being shown up to the rooms they were to occupy.

The whole house was furnished in keeping with a place of such stately dignity, but the furniture was old—ages old.

And so the girls went up a grand staircase which—wide enough to take a coach and pair, as the saying used to be—was all rich panelling, with massive pictures, and many a bit of furniture that must have

been in the same spot for several generations.

Oaken coffers and high-backed chairs stood about on the spacious landings, the sunlight shining in upon them through stained-glass windows. And then in the bedrooms which had been set apart for the girls at the end of one dim corridor, there were old bedsteads, more old oak chests, wooden stools that seemed as heavy as iron, and wonderful pieces of old tapestry.

It was Mrs. Mannering who showed the girls up to these rooms, Nell remaining downstairs because of her lame foot.

Although the rooms were so grimly ancient, there was every comfort for the holiday guests, and Mrs. Mannering was able to return downstairs feeling sure that the girls were going to be quite comfortable, for they declared that everything was "topping!"

There were two bedrooms, lying next to each other, with a communicating door. Betty and Polly had one room, whilst the next, being slightly bigger, accommodated Tess, Trixie, and Paula quite comfortably.

Pending the arrival of the luggage, the girls could only just have a cooling wash, and then ran a comb through their hair; but even this made them feel deliciously fresh after the hot, tiring journey. Still in a very thrilled state, feeling as if they had been spirited back to the days of Queen Elizabeth, they came away from the bedrooms, and started to "explore."

"Here, where does this lead to, I wonder?" exclaimed Polly Linton, starting off along the corridor. "My word, what a rabbit-warren of a place it is!"

"Goals!" whispered Paula Creel, in an awestruck tone, "this is wather sweepy—what?"

"I'm admiring the panelling," murmured Betty Barton, scanning the shining oak walls. "What acres of it there must be!"

"Dust—look at it!" grimaced Tess Trelawney, drawing a finger along a ledge. "But you can't wonder at that, of course. Fancy Mrs. Mannering and her daughter living here like this, with only one servant! How would you like to spring-clean the house, Paula dear?"

"Bai Jove—" Paula began to answer; but the rest of her remark never came.

All in an instant the girls were huddling

together, startled by a strange scuffling sound that came from—where?

"Bai Jove!" Paula breathed at last shakily. "Weally geals, that was wather cuwious—what? Gweat goodness—"

"There must be rats!" shuddered Tess. "Oh, dear, I do detest rats!"

"Rats to them!" scoffed Polly Linton boldly. "How can you expect to spend a holiday at a house that's in this state without finding there a few hundred four-legged guests running about in the walls?"

"Polly doah—"

"Bit of fun, I shall call it, if we find them scuttling over our beds in the night—ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Polly. "Hark, there's another!"

"Oh, good gwacious!" palpitated Paula, clinging hold of Tess. "Weally, geals, that must have been a wather big wat!"

"Let's go back," suggested Betty. "This is the most out-of-the-way part of the house of any, I should think."

"No, come on; I'm enjoying this!" cried madcap Polly. "I—Hallo!"

She stopped dead, and then backed into the other girls, a startled expression on her face.

Just as startled were her chums, and not without cause, either.

All five of them had felt certain that they were alone together in a corridor which had a dead end only a few paces ahead of them. And yet suddenly they found someone standing before them in the half darkness—a maid in cap and apron!

The girls might not have been so startled if this individual had made any warning sound when she appeared.

But, having appeared before them almost like a silent spectre, she stared at them with marked hostility, and the girls were bewildered.

"I am Esther Hone, Mrs. Mannering's servant," she introduced herself, rather needlessly. "Are you girls looking for anything?"

"Oh, no!" they murmured. "We were only roaming round, exploring the house!"

"It is such an old, interesting one, you see," added Betty.

"You had better turn back; there is nothing to be seen here!" Esther Hone said hastily.

She was standing close to Tess and Trixie, and she actually gave them a slight push, as if to send them to the right-about.

This was too much for the girls. They all took their ground.

"Perhaps you are not aware," said Betty Barton, "that Mrs. Mannering gave us full permission to go wherever we like."

"Yes; but"—Esther Hone frowned irritably—"I am only telling you; there is nothing to be seen along here!"

"All the same, don't you know," said Paula Creel, with a drawing dignity that obviously angered the maid, "we prefer not to take orders from you!"

Then Esther Hone seemed to realise that she had handled the girls wrongly. She forced a smile to her lips and cringed.

"I am sure I don't wish to give orders!"

"That's all right," Betty put in, anxious to make peace. "Only you did seem a bit domineering in trying to send us to the right-about like that."

"Yes, wather!" said Paula. "Without wishing to be wude, Esther Hone, I would like to wemark you are not the mistress of this house!"

Esther Hone drew a deep breath and pursed her thin lips.

She said no more, but walked away; and then the girls—if only to assert their right to enjoy privileges conferred by Mrs. Mannering—went right to the end of that corridor before turning back.

They were just going to try their luck in another direction when a gong boomed out downstairs, calling them to the meal which Mrs. Mannering had hinted would be ready immediately. And so, filling the dark old house with sounds that must have been quite new to it—the happy sounds of light laughter and talk—they went swarming down the grand staircase to the living-rooms below.

Esther Hone was there to fulfil her duties during the hearty meal which the girls found set before them; but towards the end of that meal she was free to go away, and in a minute she was upstairs again, going softly along that very corridor where the girls had first encountered her.

With a stealthy step she went right to the far end, stood there a few moments, listening, and then, finding that all was utter silence, she seemed to feel relieved.

"What was it that dressy girl said to me?" she muttered, going softly back to the stairs. "I am not mistress of the house!"

Her white teeth flashed in a very sinister smile as she said those words.

"Not yet," she added to herself, in a hissing whisper. "But the day is not far off, perhaps, when Herons' Haunt will all belong to me!"

CHAPTER 3.

Is the Old House Haunted?

"OH, what a quaint old piano?"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove!"

"Piano—that's not a piano at all!" scoffed Polly Linton, following Betty and Paula into a faded drawing-room that could have known no entertainment of company for many a long year. "That's a harpsichord!"

"Try it, anyhow, Betty!" pleaded Tess Trelawney.

"Shall I?"

"Yes, wather!"

Tea had ended half an hour ago, and the girls were again exploring, finding fresh thrills in every room that they peered into.

Now, dispersing themselves over this huge public apartment that was doubtless one of the biggest in the whole great house, Betty's chums found seats for themselves, whilst she herself sat down at the ancient musical instrument.

Its keys were very yellow with age, and yet when Betty nervously struck a few chords the notes sounded quite in tune.

"We want Madge Minden here," she smiled across at the others. "This harpsichord will be something to delight her when she joins us."

"Meantime, have a go at it," said Polly. "We don't want to wander from this room until Mrs. Mannering's daughter is able to join us. She said she wouldn't be long."

So Betty called a simple piece of music to mind, and started to play in earnest. Very strange the melody sounded to all who listened—very enchanting, too.

Softly, sweetly, the simple air was tinkling on, when the door swung open, and poor, lame Nell came into the room.

"Oh, don't stop playing!" she begged of Betty. "It is a treat for me to hear someone who can really play!"

"But I can't," Betty laughed modestly. "You must wait until Madge Minden turns up in a day or two. She— Oh, she's a marvel with her music, isn't she, girls?"

"Yes, wather!"

"But you play, Nell?" suggested Tess eagerly.

"Just a little; not half so well as Betty was playing then," said the lame girl, dragging across the floor to a vacant seat. "Mother used to play often at one time; but now——"

She broke off whilst she seated herself.

"I wonder what you think of everything here?" she said, looking from one to another of the girls. "Of the old house, in such a state as it is; of mother, so quiet and—and tragic; and of me, so unlike other girls of my age?"

"I know what I think," Betty said, changing her seat so as to be a little closer to the lame girl. "Your mother is a darling!"

"Yes, wather!"

"And you, Nell—oh, how sorry we all feel for you," Betty went on, with great feeling. "I remember when dad was hurt in the old days when he worked at a cotton-mill in Lancashire—that was before we became better off; it used to make me cry to see him limping about!"

"Well, don't cry for me," Nell said, smiling bravely, and yet there was a little catchiness in her voice that told of a heart deeply stirred by the girls' compassion for her. "After all, I may get better some day. Mother is so good about it; she would go without her very bread, I know, to pay for the doctor who comes to see me from time to time."

"What I can't make out is this," said Tess. "Why do you and your mother live here like this? The place is hers, and yet it is miles too big for her and you; so why not sell it?"

Nell smiled sadly.

"Tess, you forget," put in Betty quickly. "Sometimes when people own a house that has belonged to the family for ages and ages, they feel they would rather die than give it up!"

"Ah, but it is not that so much, in our case," Nell said, shaking her head. "We couldn't sell it, even if we wanted to. Mother speaks of it as her house, and so it ought to be by rights. But her claim to it was disputed long ago, and it got into Chancery."

"What's Chancery?" exclaimed Trixie.

"I don't know that I can explain properly," said Nell. "But when two people

go to law against each other over a property, and the lawyers and judges can't decide things one way or the other, then the property is taken over by the Law Courts."

"And then it goes to rack and ruin!" added Polly bitterly.

"That's the usual result, yes," said Nell; "and it has been so in this case, with a vengeance! Mother is allowed to live here, but only as a sort of caretaker. Not a penny can be spent on the place, and it can't be sold. Mother and I, we have no income at all. We only keep going by taking paying guests, when we can get them."

"Then what a good job we came along this holiday-time!" exclaimed Betty. "Oh, if only we had known, we'd have got the whole Fourth Form to join us, so that your mother would have been in clover!"

"How kind you all are!" Nell said.

"It's Polly's father who was kind," said Betty. "It was he who arranged for us to come here!"

"Oh, dad is not a bad sort!" grimaced Polly. "But look here, Nell, we want to know more about the story of Herons' Haunt. Who is the person that went to law with your mother?"

"He must be a rascal, anyhow," said Tess.

"I don't want to be unfair to him," said Nell; "but he really has been most cruel over the whole business. It isn't wise to speak of him in front of mother; she is so bitterly heartbroken about the matter. Mother is quite certain there was a will leaving the place to her; but it has never been found. And this distant relation of hers—his name is Julian Jenner—he has tried to make out that there was no will, and that the property ought to go to him."

"And so," said Betty shrewdly, "if ever the will should be found, it would settle the whole dispute in five minutes!"

Nell's pale, drawn face suddenly lit up.

"Yes," she said. "If only the will could be brought to light—oh, it would be like the waving of a fairy's wand over mother's life and mine! Thousands of pounds would come to us, and we could make the old home as sound and beautiful as it used to be, long years ago! But time goes on, and that will is still undiscovered, and so, is it a wonder that poor mother is full of despair?"

The ailing girl saw how deeply her listeners were stirred by these pathetic

words, and she seemed to be sorry at having saddened them with the whole tragic story. She stood up, forcing the old brave smile to her wan face.

"What a shame it is, my boring you with that talk!" she said. "You are down here for a jolly holiday—"

"We shall have a jolly one, too, be sure of that," Betty made haste to assure her. "At the same time—"

"I know what Betty is going to say!" Polly struck in boisterously. "If we do happen to come across that will, then that will make the holiday jollier than ever!"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove! Geals—"

"Nell must never despair," Tess exclaimed, laying a gentle hand upon the crippled girl's shoulders.

"Jamais, jamais!—never, never!" chimed in Trixie.

"I don't mean to despair," said Nell, a tinge of colour creeping into her pale cheeks, as she realised the warm friendship all these jolly schoolgirls had for her. "I live in hopes of the will coming to light some day, and then—"

"You'll come to Morcove School, and be one of us. Hurrah!" Polly cried.

"How I should love that!" was Nell's wistful murmur.

Betty had crossed to the window, and was unfastening the bolts.

It was a golden evening out of doors, and, for all the novel sensations that the girls had enjoyed, whilst they sat about in that handsome drawing-room, they felt a sort of relief at passing out into the fresh air.

Mrs. Mannerling joined them there, and for more than an hour they sauntered around the spacious grounds, going from point to point, always very slowly, because of poor Nell and her dragging step.

The crippled girl, with an unselfishness that was very beautiful to see, would have liked to drop out of the happy party, but Betty and Co. were not having anything of that sort!

And so, now at her mother's side, and now walking between a couple of the girls, she stayed with them all, and what a joy it was to her to know this sudden change from such blank days as made up her normal life at Herons' Haunt!

That first evening at the great old house—never would Betty and Co. forget it!

No matter where they roamed, there was always something to deepen the sense of romance and mystery.

The massive wall that ran the round of the whole grounds; the gardens that were still so beautiful, in their sadly neglected state; the great trees that studded the lawns, casting long shadows upon the grass—these were things that set the girls' imagination on fire.

Above all, how it thrilled them to stand still and look towards the house itself, and see the sunset light flaming upon those ancient walls, and windows looking like sheets of red flame, and the tall turrets showing like huge spearheads against the evening sky.

"What a place for a holiday—it beats everything!" was Betty's verdict, when at last they were making their way back to the dingy porch. "I wouldn't change places with anybody at the seaside, or in Switzerland or France, not for worlds!"

"I quite agree," said Paula.

"And I! And I!" cried Polly and Tess.

"Je suis forte contente—I am very content!" Trixie remarked.

Which, considering Trixie's recent disappointment in connection with the grand trip abroad, was quite a great compliment to the charms of Herons' Haunt!

In a panelled dining-room that was only lit with candles, the girls had a good supper; and then, being really very tired after their day's travelling, they said good-night to Mrs. Mannerling and Nell, and went up to their rooms.

"Rather different from the old dormitory at Morcove School!" laughed Betty Barton, setting a match to a couple of candles in the bedchamber.

"Yes, wather!" said Paula. "Womance with a vengeance, this is, geals! Only I do hope there won't be any wats!"

"Rats or no rats, I'll be asleep the moment my head touches the pillow!" declared Polly.

And she was almost as good as her word.

Within a few minutes of their all being in bed, Polly for one was fast asleep, and Betty's eyes were ready to close at any moment. In the adjoining room, with their communicating door standing wide open, the measured breathing of Tess, Trixie, and Paula was the only sound to be heard.

Suddenly, when another moment would

have found Betty as sound asleep as her chum, there was a noise that made her start up in her bed.

Was somebody opening the door and creeping in?

That was what she wondered, for it was like the creaking of hinges that she had heard.

But no; the door opening on to the passage was still shut fast.

She was going to settle down again, half-inclined to think she must have imagined the noise, when again the deep silence was broken.

This time it was the same sound that she and her chum had heard in the corridor, just before tea-time; a sound like some creature scuttling about in the darkness.

Then a familiar voice wailed softly from the other room.

"Gwacious, geals! I say, bai Jove! Did you heah?"

Betty slipped out of bed; and this action awakened Polly.

"Hallo! What's up, Betty?" exclaimed Polly, wide awake in an instant.

"Oh, it's nothing, surely," was Betty's reassuring answer. "But Paula and I heard queer noises—"

"Yes, wather! I say, geals—"

"Sh! Don't let's make a row, or we may disturb Mrs. Mannering," Betty pleaded, padding into the other bed-room.

By now, Tess and Trixie were rousing up in the bed which they were sharing, Paula being in a bed all by herself.

"Geals," whispered Paula, "if that was a wat, then it was a jolly big one! Yes, wather! Weally, I thought it was someone stealing into the woom!"

"So did I!" confessed Betty. "But—I know! Perhaps it is an owl, flopping about in the corridor."

"Hark!"

It was Polly who whispered that injunction, standing close to Betty.

All the more sinister and unnerving, because of its faintness, there was a repetition of that faint scuttling sound.

"Why, goodness me!" panted Tess, scrambling out of bed. "Someone is moving to and fro in the passage!"

"What?" palpitated Paula. "Heah, gwacious! Bai Jove!"

"Hush! Sh!" Betty whispered again.

All was deep silence now; but the scared

girls could not think of going back to bed before they had tried to solve the mystery.

Of one accord they all started to put on their everyday clothes. When their hurried dressing was completed, they assembled at one of the doors opening on to the corridor, listening intently the while.

"We shall laugh at ourselves over this in the morning!" Betty said, with a grin. "I don't believe there is anything the matter at all. Herons' Haunt is simply getting on our nerves!"

"Still—" said Polly.

"Yes, wather!" whispered Paula. "Betty deah, it will be a gweat welief to have a look wound, bai Jove!"

"All right!"

And Betty took hold of the knob of the door and turned it softly.

Creak, cr-r-reak! went the hinges; and she and Paula could have declared that there was the same sound which had first alarmed them.

Out of doors there was a full moon in the sky, but it was not shining on this side of the old house. Forth from their darkened bed-rooms stepped the girls, to find themselves in just as dark a corridor.

"Well," murmured Betty, after a moment, "there is nothing here! We—"

"Oh, what's that?" was the startled cry with which the others cut Betty short.

For all had heard a sound more terrifying than anything that had gone before.

A moaning sound from somewhere in the darkness, and then—

Thud!

It was like the dull noise of someone stumbling heavily, and then falling headlong!

CHAPTER 4.

What Does it Mean?

FOR several moments the girls stood rooted to the floor.

All were seized with a dreadful sort of fancy that the old house was haunted.

"Where did that moaning noise come from?" said Betty Barton. "I thought from downstairs—"

"Yes, wather!" said Paula Creel, whose knees were knocking together.

"Then we'll go down—"

"Yes, right you are!" Polly Linton broke out excitedly.

"Come on, then!"

And now the whispered talk ceased.

Keeping close together, cautiously the five girls padded along the dark corridor, pausing every few paces to listen.

Not a sound!

They came to a spacious landing, and here the groping darkness was relieved by moonlight. For a great staircase window of stained glass was before them, as they started to go softly down the stairs, and this window was in the full light of the moon.

Eerily the bright beams struggled through the coloured glass, throwing fantastic shapes upon the wide stairs, and dappling the girls' figures with light and shade. With such a light as this shining into the house, it would not have been surprising if Betty and her chum had imagined all sorts of spectral shapes were lurking here and there. But they showed no sign of fresh alarm until they had reached the half-landing, and were turning to go down the last flight.

Then they huddled together again, with good enough excuse for being wildly scared.

At the foot of the stairs—what was that dark shape which all their eyes beheld? No fanciful one, due to the play of moonlight. No!

"Look—look!" Betty gasped out, pointing down the stairs. "It is a woman lying there! See, it is— Oh, it is Mrs. Mannering!"

Betty was right. The others knew it, in the very instant that their peering gaze rested upon that prone figure.

In wild alarm the girls hastened down to her.

"Mrs. Mannering—oh, Mrs. Mannering!" breathed Betty and her chums. "What has happened? Why—why are you here?"

They could not help asking these excited questions, as they saw that the poor lady was suddenly stirring back to consciousness, and was even opening her eyes to stare at her schoolgirl guests.

"Ah, Betty—Polly—all of you!" she faltered weakly. "I—I am so sorry! Did you hear—I mean, did it give you a fright?"

"Never mind about us, please!" Betty exclaimed. "You, Mrs. Mannering—you have had a bad fall surely? Only tell us what we can do, and then—"

"No; I—I am going to be all right; I am not hurt," she made haste to assure

them, whilst they helped her to her feet. "I did not fall down the stairs, if that is what you think. I—I must have fainted suddenly."

"But—"

"We heard a moaning sound, and then someone falling," Betty said.

"I am sorry," Mrs. Mannering faltered again. "What a shame I should have scared you like this! But you see, I am better now, so—"

She broke off abruptly, turning rather unsteadily to gaze up the staircase.

Two persons were coming down. One was Nell, limping, and holding on to the banister-rail with both hands; the other was the maid, Esther Hone.

"Oh, Nell darling," the mother exclaimed sadly, "you should not have left your bed to bother about me! Think of your poor foot!"

"Mother! Have you been taken ill, or what? I was fast asleep, and did not wake up until these girls were calling out in alarm."

"There is nothing anybody need be concerned about now," Mrs. Mannering said, speaking calmly. "I was at the foot of the stairs, just here, when I—well, I had such a sudden attack of faintness that I cried out. That cry, and the noise of my falling, roused the girls."

"But before that," broke out Betty, "we had heard the most queer sounds."

"Yes, wather!"

"Close to our room," said Polly. "There were sounds as if someone was moving softly up and down the corridor!"

Mrs. Mannering gazed at them all with wide eyes.

"So you were out of your beds before you heard me?" she exclaimed.

"Oh, yes! We—"

"Did you see any—anything?"

"No, Mrs. Mannering. We were looking about in the darkness, but there was nothing."

"What could there have been?" Mrs. Mannering rejoined, with a forced smile.

"No, girls; I can quite understand how the noise of my fall startled you. But as for any other sounds—I have not been to your corridor since you went to bed, and so any noises there must have been fancied ones!"

Betty & Co. maintained a silence which showed that they could hardly accept this theory.

"I know what the old house is," put in Esther Hone softly, "for being full of queer sounds at night-time. I used to be awfully scared, thinking there were ghosts and things, when I first came here. But you soon got used to it," she finished, with a sickly sort of smile.

"I, too, have heard noises in the night," said Nell, "and it is only natural, I suppose, to feel a bit scared about them. Mother, I'm afraid our guests will want to be off in the morning!"

"Oh, no; not a bit of it!" Betty Barton hastened to say. "Why, it is the novelty of staying in such a queer old house that we like more than anything else!"

"It'll be something to talk about when we get back to school!" Polly said, with a grin. "Only, Mrs. Mannering, we do hope any further scares won't end up by our finding you in such a nasty plight!"

"It has never occurred before, my dears," Mrs. Mannering answered, "and it shall not occur again. I'll take good care! So off to bed, girls, and thank you ever so much for—for being so good about it all!"

Esther Hone stood aside on the staircase, to make way for the girls.

"Can I do anything for you, ma'am?" they heard her asking Mrs. Mannering in a smooth tone.

"Oh, no, thank you, Esther," was the answer. "If I had needed any help, I would have got those girls to render it. So back to your bed, and good-night once again."

"Good-night, mother darling!" Nell called softly.

"Good-night, my child—good-night!"

Betty and her chums turned back to accompany the lame girl upstairs. She seemed indisposed to talk about the strange occurrence, and they did not like to pester her with comments.

Nor, next morning, was there any serious talk about it all.

"Well, girls," Mrs. Mannering greeted them all at breakfast-time, with that sweet expression which was as far as she ever got in the direction of a smile, "I hope you were not kept awake by any more uncanny noises in that corridor of yours, after you went up?"

"Oh, no!" laughed Betty. "None of us look as if we were any the worse for our

scare, do we? But you, Mrs. Mannering—do you feel quite all right this morning?"

"Quite, thank you for being so sympathetic," was the gentle answer. "Yes, Esther, what is it?"

The one maidservant of the strange household was hovering by the door, after bringing in the breakfast.

"I wondered if I might make a suggestion, ma'am," she murmured, in that same suave tone which the girls somehow felt betokened a sly disposition. "If your visitors would like to move out of the bedroom they are in, I could easily get others ready in another part of the house."

"Oh, fancy putting you to so much trouble!" demurred Betty quickly. "We are quite satisfied—aren't we, girls?"

"Yes, wathiah!" said Paula.

"Besides, we like it!" Polly grinned. "It's all part of the adventure!"

"I was only thinking you might get scared some other night," said Esther Hone meekly.

"Cela ne fait rien—that doesn't matter!" said Trixie, sticking to her beloved French. "Voilà!—behold," she went on, waving towards the window, "Il fait beau temps, aujourd'hui—it is going to be a fine day!"

And after that the girls began their substantial breakfast, chatting the while about what they meant to do with themselves, this first day of their holiday at Herons' Haunt.

Their idea was to keep about the grounds during the morning, so that Nell could be with them all. But she told them that it was the day for the doctor to call, and, as he would turn up during the morning, they must not keep about the place for her sake. Better to do that some other time, she said, in her unselfish way, when she and mother would both be free.

So the upshot of it all was that the girls put on their hats and set off for a ramble to the village.

Mrs. Mannering warned them that Heronvale was really only a tiny hamlet, half a mile from the wayside station, and that they must not expect to find any grand shops there. But Betty & Co. were sure that there would be a baker's shop, and also a confectioner's, and they wanted nothing more than that.

"If only we can get hold of a nice box of chocolates for Nell, we'll be all right."

Betty said, as they came away from the iron gates of Herons' Haunt.

"Yes, wather!" said Paula. "Weally, geals, I feel awfully sowwy for that poor geal, and I do twust that you will lot me pay for the choccs.—what?"

"Not at all," said Polly. "I pay!"

"No, you don't!" objected Tess. "I'm going to do that!"

"J'ai beaucoup d'argent," was Trixie's way of remarking that she had plenty of money. "Voulez-vous—will you—"

"No; we won't let you pay!" laughed Betty. "We'll all pay together—"

"Yes, wather!" Paula cried out, realising that this was perhaps the best plan. "And then, geals, we shall remain fwends all wound—what?"

They rambled on, as happy a batch of holiday-makers as anybody could have wished to see. There seemed to be a main road all the way to the village, and the girls chose this route as a novelty, meaning to return by the pretty lane which they had traversed yesterday.

Not a hundred yards had they gone along the main road, however, before they wished themselves well off it.

A gusty wind was blowing, and the dust flew along in clouds—sure sign of a falling glass and rain before long.

Betty and Polly made up their minds to grin and bear it, every time the wind whirled the dust about them.

"Oh, help, here's a car coming, to make matters worse!" exclaimed Polly Linton suddenly.

"Wh-a-a-at!" cried Paula. "Bai Jove!"

"Now for it, girls—look out!" laughed Betty.

The car was a huge touring one—a regular leviathan of the highway. It came surging along with much blaring of the brass horn, whilst behind it the dust arose in thicker clouds than ever.

"Tr-r-r-rump, tr-r-rump!" roared the motor-horn.

The girls drew to the side of the road, and were ready to shut their eyes to the billowing dust, when they chanced to take note of the car's occupants.

"Hallo! Look!" yelled Polly.

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove!"

"Oh!"

"Just fancy!" gasped Betty. "There are the Grandways girls!"

Yes; there they were, sure enough! There, with their wealthy parents, sat Cora and Judith Grandways, the snobbish sisters who were Betty & Co.'s avowed enemies at Morcove School.

The malicious couple had spotted their schoolfellows standing beside the road, and they, too, were surprised. In a flash, however, surprise had given place to the desire to use even this encounter as a means of making Betty and her chums feel small.

Cora, the elder sister, shouted "Faster!" and the car seemed to leap to forty miles an hour, raising still bigger clouds of dust, just as it was passing the schoolgirls.

Whooo-oof! the white clouds billowed around them; and, whilst they were forced to stand amidst the needless smother, Cora and Judith shrieked with malicious glee.

"Just the sort of thing they would delight in doing!" was Betty's bitter comment, after the car had whirled on its way, and was out of sight.

"Pway do not spite of it," sighed Paula, beating the dust out of her clothes. "You know my opinion of those geals!"

"The old spite against us!" Polly said fiercely. "So we know what to expect when next term commences!"

"Cela ne fait rien—that doesn't matter," shrugged Trixie. "We'll keep our end up somehow!"

"Yes, wather!"

And Betty Barton, taking a quiet glance at the chums who were with her now, and thinking of how many other chums who would be around her when schooldays began again—Betty Barton could walk on with a light heart, after that, feeling that Trixie had spoken aright.

Let Cora and Judith do their worst during the term to come; Betty and her loyal chums of the Fourth Form would, through thick and thin, manage to keep their end up—somehow!

CHAPTER 5.

The Man in the Rain.

THAT evening, Betty Barton and Polly Linton came hurrying back, alone together, from a journey to the village.

There had been a telegram from Madge Minden's parents, just after tea, asking Mrs. Mannerling if it would be convenient for Madge to join the Herons' Haunt party

on the morrow. And with what joy had the two chums sent off an answering wire, just now, saying "Quite convenient; do come!"

Now the two girls were making for Herons' Haunt in some haste, for a heavy storm was imminent.

The gusty wind had dropped; the sky was dark with massed rain clouds; at any moment Betty and Polly expected to hear the patter of rain on the great trees that embowered their homeward way.

They were returning by the winding lane, and between those tall banks, with the tree branches interlacing overhead, they felt that night had already shut down.

"Pouf!" panted Polly, at last. "I can't go any farther at this pace! Rain or no rain, it is too jolly close for such hurry!"

"And the gnats!" laughed Betty, sweeping a hand across her hot face. "How they are biting this evening! If Paula had come with us, she would have said they were worse than wats!"

"Yes, wather!" Polly mimicked Paula's familiar phrase. "Well— Hurrah! There are the gates at last, and so—"

"Oh!" exclaimed Betty sharply, as the first flash of lightning suddenly blazed them, leaving them half-blinded.

"My word!" cried Polly. "Now for it, Betty!"

Barely had she made that grim remark when the storm burst upon them.

One tremendous peal of thunder crashed out above their heads, and then the rain streamed down in torrents.

Flash after flash of lightning now lit up a scene that was otherwise growing every moment darker.

Again and again the thunder rolled and boomed, whilst the very drumming of the rain upon the ground was almost an alarming sound.

Bending their heads, the girls pelted towards the old iron gates of the ancient house, and started to race up the weed-grown drive. But in a few moments they felt the wisdom of darting aside for shelter.

It seemed foolish to run on through such a tropical deluge as this, when perhaps in a few minutes the rain would have ceased off.

"That bit of ruin over there!" Betty panted. "It will give us shelter, Polly!"

"Right-oh!"

And so, leaving the weedy track, they

dashed across the grass to the nearest place of refuge. Betty had termed it a ruin, and so it was—the ivy-clad relic of what had once been a private chapel in the grounds.

Panting for breath, the two chums fetched up at last close to a sheltering bit of the ruined walls, and there they were glad enough to stay.

Every time the lightning blazed in the inky sky, it seemed to light up a drowning world.

The drenched trees, the rank grass, and the old house in the distance—all were only visible through a mist of pelting rain.

Now a cool wind suddenly arose, driving the rain aslant, and adding to the hurly-burly of the storm by tossing the tree-branches wildly.

Of a sudden, Betty cried out excitedly:

"Why, Polly, look—look!" she had to shout, to make herself heard above the roar of the storm. "See—over there—making for the house!"

"Goodness, who can he be—that man?" Polly broke in, just as startled as her chum at the figure which she saw.

Through the blur of heavy rain, that lonely figure was faintly visible, like a spectre moving swiftly towards the ancient mansion.

Except that it was clearly the figure of a man, the girls could not be certain who he was or where he had come from. There were no menfolk about the house—that they knew—and Mrs. Mannering had not hinted about expecting any.

"Somebody out walking, and caught by the storm, I suppose," Polly remarked, as the figure, after being visible again in a vivid flash of lightning, vanished into the gloom.

"But who should he be—wandering about the grounds, which are private, at a time like this?" demurred Betty. "I say, Polly, I think Mrs. Mannering ought to be told about him!"

Polly nodded her full approval of that suggestion, and half an hour later, when the two girls rushed into the house-porch, after seizing their chance during a lull in the storm, they mentioned the strange occurrence.

Mrs. Mannering was saying she was glad to find that the two girls had not got wet enough to need a change.

"Oh, we are all right!" laughed Betty. "But we rather expected to find someone

else taking shelter here, and asking for a chance to dry himself!"

"Yes; he looked as if he was getting a good drenching," said Polly.

"He?" echoed Mrs. Manner. "Whom do you mean by 'he,' my dears?"

And then, with their chums standing by, the two girls told of that vague figure which they had seen running hard through the rain towards the house.

"No one has been here for shelter," Mrs. Manner said. "Have you seen anybody, Esther?" she asked, turning to the maid, who had just entered the room.

"No, ma'am," Esther Hone answered meekly. "I expect he was only a tramp, making a short cut across the grounds to the village."

Betty and Polly exchanged glances.

They were both thinking that that suggestion of Esther Hone's was about the most ridiculous one anybody could have made!

In a vague way, Betty was beginning to feel a strong mistrust of Esther Hone, whilst even the less observant girls, like Paula and Tess, felt that she was anything but a pleasant character.

CHAPTER 6.

Esther Hone's Secret.

"HALLO! That's the signal for Madge's train at last!"

"Hurrah!"

"Yes, wather! Hooway, geals!"

Betty, Polly and Paula were standing together on the platform of the wayside station of Heronvale the following day.

"I wonder what Madge Minden will think of the place when she gets out of the train?" laughed Betty. "The same as we thought, I dare say—that Heronvale is at the world's end almost!"

"It certainly is pretty well off the map!" agreed Polly Linton with a chuckle.

"Yes, wathah, bai Jove!" said Paula Creel, with that simpering air which was rather engaging.

"Look, there it comes—the same fussy little train that brought us here a day or two ago!" cried out Betty, as the tiny engine and its few carriages came into view round a curve.

"And there's Madge! See! Coo-ee, Madge! Hurrah!"

"Yes, wather! Hooway! Geals, how glad I am to see Madge again!"

"With Madge Minden as a member of our holiday-party at Herons' Haunt, we shall be jollier than ever!" agreed Betty heartily.

"I agwee," said Paula. "Yes, wather!"

The train slowed down and stopped alongside the platform, and, with a rush, the three girls charged towards their chum, who was making all haste to quit her compartment.

"Well, Madge?"

"How are you, girls? Where are all the rest? Gracious, what a journey it is! And where in the world are we?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We thought you would feel it was a bit lonesome," said Betty, as they all finished their laugh. "I say, do you mind walking to Herons' Haunt? It's not far."

"Oh, no!"

"That's a good job," grinned Polly. "Because it would be all the same if you did mind! You must either walk or go in the porter's barrow!"

"That reminds me!" exclaimed Madge. And away she darted to exchange a few words with the aged porter about the delivery of her luggage, which had been slung out of the van by this time.

In a trice she came running back.

"And now I'm ready!" announced Madge, her pretty face wreathed in smiles. "Lead on, girls, and tell me all about Herons' Haunt, because I'm simply longing to know what the place is like!"

"Madge, it's a weird old place," said Polly breezily. "Not only is the house ages old, with ancient furniture and all sorts of dingy rooms, and dim corridors, but—"

"There are wats—yes wats!" simpered Paula. "And, Madge, they are wather big wats, too!"

"There are other thrilling things besides rats," laughed Betty. "Oh, Madge, we've such an exciting story to tell you! We've had the most strange adventures since we got to Herons' Haunt."

"I want to hear that story!" cried Madge eagerly.

And so, as the girls wended their way down the shady lane that would bring them to Herons' Haunt, Betty told Madge of their experience.

"It's our opinion, Madge," said Polly, when Betty had finished, "that we have a clever scoundrel to deal with—a man who is prowling about the house, trying to find that will and destroy it, so that Mrs. Mannering and Nell can never win their case in the law courts."

"So, if we upset his little game——" began Madge.

"It will be a feather in our caps!" said Betty. "Oh, it will be something to make you happy for ages and ages! Just think, Madge! How glorious to be the means of making poor Mrs. Mannering and her crippled daughter quite rich! Their life is so hard and lonely at present; they do deserve a change of fortune!"

"So our plan is," Polly explained, with immense enthusiasm, "to keep our eyes and ears open, and try to catch that man when he is up to his tricks. We are watching Esther Hope, too, feeling sure that she is helping him!"

"You mean, she is supplying him with food and other necessaries?"

"Yes!"

"Have you told Mrs. Mannering of your suspicions?" asked Madge.

The girls shook their heads quickly.

"No, Madge; after talking it over, we decided not to say a word, at present, about our theory. Mrs. Mannering might feel uneasy on our account, and want to bundle us off home."

"And we don't want to be bundled off home!" declared Polly. "We jolly well want to stay at Herons' Haunt, and solve the whole jolly mystery!"

"Yes, wather!"

And so the talk flowed on, whilst Madge, as she listened eagerly, took note of the marvellous beauty of this lonely lane down which they were wending their way.

In a little while the girls crossed a rustic bridge that spanned a tiny streamlet. There was a waterfall here, and a kingfisher flashed by in the air, whilst several herons rose up sharply, startled by the passers-by.

"It is simply enchanting!" was Madge's comment on the whole scene. She was a girl who loved nature, music, and art.

"Wait till you get your first sight of Herons' Haunt," said Polly. "It's like a sort of Castle Dangerous, in a fairy story!"

"Like a chateau in France, too," said Betty. "In fact, we told Trixie Hope that

the place is as good as any chateau that she might have seen, if her parents had taken her on that long-promised trip to France for the summer holidays."

"Is Trixie still speaking French, like she was at school all last term?" smiled Madge.

"Yes, wather!"

"Oui, oui!" chuckled Polly, mimicking Trixie. "Exercise four-hundred-and-one! Have you seen the gardener's water-can? Non, non! But there is Herons' Haunt, Madge, so—viola! Behold!"

"Oh!" said Madge.

Her handsome face filled with an ecstatic look as she took her first admiring gaze at the great old house.

The girls had reached the main gateway in the high wall that encircled the estate, and there stood the ancient habitation, in the centre of timbered grounds that had grown rank with neglect.

"And there are the other girls—look!" cried Betty gaily. "There's Trixie Hope and Tess Treclawney, rushing to greet you, Madge! They offered to stay behind to keep Nell company."

Madge Mindon made a sprint up the weedy carriage-drive, followed by Betty, Polly and Paula, and in a few moments more greetings were being exchanged.

"Well, Tess! Well, Trixie! How are you?"

"Tres bien!—Very well!" said Trixie.

"Et vous—And you?"

"All the happier for being here with you girls!" Madge declared. "I suppose this is Nell?"

Yes, this was Nell—poor, ailing Nell, coming forward with her limping step.

On her thin, wan face there was a smile of welcome for Madge. The crippled girl held out her hand to the new arrival; but handshakes were not good enough, Madge felt. She kissed Nell as if she was already quite in love with her. And perhaps she was!

"Here's Mrs. Mannering, too," said Betty, as a tall lady in black came from the house-porch with a slow, majestic step.

"Yes, this is my mother, and now you have met all the household!" Nell said, with a shy laugh. "Not a very big family, are we?"

"Welcome to Herons' Haunt, my dear,"

murmured Mrs. Manning, kissing Madge, and stroking her glossy brown hair. "So you are another Morcove scholar! Dear me, what splendid girls the school can boast!"

"Yes, wather—I mean," Paula corrected herself, as the others began to laugh, "we do wather pwide ourselves on keeping fit, bai Jovs!"

"Just feel as if you were quite at home," Mrs. Manning said to Madge. "our chums will share you to the bed-room I have given you and the other two are free, of course, to roam wherever you please. But I expect you are hungry," she added, with that winning look which was as near as she ever seemed to get to smiling. "Well, tea will be ready in a few minutes."

"Come on, Madge! Come indoors and upstairs, and just see how it feels to be living in a house with walls as thick as a castle's!" cried madcap Polly.

Then, for the next few minutes, there was for Madge Minden just the same thrill of delight that had come to the other girls when they first arrived at Herons' Haunt.

She was taken through the great old raftered hall, and up the handsome staircase, where there were stained glass windows as big as those in a church. She went along ditto panelled passages, and came to the two bed-rooms which the party of girls occupied.

These two rooms had a door of communication, and this door the girls were keeping wide open day and night. Instead of papered walls, there was shiny oak panelling, and the furniture was all old-fashioned, and doubtless very valuable.

Madge Minden, with most of her chums sitting about, talking in cheerful tones, had a refreshing wash after her journey, and ran a comb through her hair. She was just turning away from the dressing-table, when a tap came at the door, and Betty, being nearest, jumped up to answer the summons.

It was the maid, Esther Hone, who had knocked.

"If you please," she said, when the door was opened, "I've brought up the luggage that has come from the station."

"Oh, thanks!" cried Madge, crossing towards the sly-looking maid. "In this room—yes, please. I'm going to share this room with Betty Barton and Polly Linton, as there are already three girls in the other room."

Esther Hone took up the two pieces of luggage, giving a smirking sort of smile to Madge when that girl offered to help.

"I'd rather do it myself, thank you, miss!" she said, in a fawning tone, as if trying to ingratiate herself with the latest addition to the schoolgirl-party.

So Madge, having nothing else to do, took out her purse.

"That's for your trouble," she said, handing a silver coin unostentatiously to the maid.

"You are very good, miss, I'm sure!" said Esther Hone, smirking again.

She backed out of the room, closed the door after her, and went with her silent step along the dim corridor.

Then suddenly she halted, looked back towards the girls' bed-room, and then at the coin in her hand.

"How amusing!" she smiled to herself sneeringly. "A tip for the girl who may one day be mistress of Herons' Haunt! A shilling tip for the daughter of Julian Jenner! How father will laugh about it when I tell him!"

And she continued on her way through the great old house, looking as if she herself was on the verge of scornful laughter.

"It's cap and apron for me to-day!" she was musing. "But only let father get hold of that missing will, and I'll soon be wearing better clothes than any of you, my dears! Ay," he added, suddenly flinging the silver tip out of an open window, "what is a shilling to me, when all the fortune of Herons' Haunt is coming to me and father at last?"

CHAPTER 7.

Paula in a Plight.

"NOW, Madge dear, we've got something to show you that we know will give you another great thrill!"

"What's that, girls?"

"This way, and you will see!" said Betty Barton.

Tea was over. The happy band of chums had just come away from the dining-room, with hours of daylight still in front of them, to be spent just as they pleased.

"You see," said Betty, leading the way into one of the handsome public rooms, "this was the drawing-room, Madge. And

did you ever see such wonderful bits of furniture? They are all old and dusty now, and the carpets and curtains are terribly faded, aren't they? But——"

"What a gorgeous scene it must have made in the old days when the room was full of brilliant company!" exclaimed Madge. "Oh, and here's a harpsichord!"

"That's the thrill we have kept in store for you!" chuckled Polly. "Knowing how crazed you are on music, Madge, we guessed that you would rave about an old-fashioned instrument of that sort."

"A harpsichord—just fancy! They are awfully rare nowadays," Madge said, crossing to the antique musical instrument.

She put her hands to the piano-like keys, and struck a chord.

"What a quaint tone—just like a tinkling musical-box!"

"That's what we said," smiled Betty. "But play a piece for us, Madge! Nell is longing to hear you play."

"Yes, do!" pleaded Nell, as she sat down on one of the faded couches. "The girls have told me what a brilliant player you are!"

"Brilliant fiddleticks!" laughed Madge modestly.

But the harpsichord had a fascination for her, and she drew a chair to it, and sat down.

"I see that one leg of the instrument is a bit groggy!" he remarked. "I wonder how long that book has been used to keep the whole thing steady?"

For a moment she remained looking down at the age-old volume which someone, years ago, had placed under one leg of the harpsichord, to keep it from rocking about. For that leg was a short one, having lost some of its proper length by being mended at some time or other.

"Fire away!" urged Polly. "Let's have 'Swanee River'!"

"Catch Madge playing 'Swanee River'!" chuckled Tess. "It is going to be some wonderful sonata, more likely."

"Oh, no," answered Madge. "Only a nocturne!"

And then she started to play.

It was wonderful. No other word could have done justice to her playing. Sitting there at the ancient harpsichord, her deft fingers drew the most enchanting melody from the yellow keys.

On and on flowed the simple, exquisite piece of music, with Betty, Polly, Tess, Trixie and Nell, all listening enraptured.

Paula Creel was not here, having drifted off in quest of a book from the library; but, if she had been on hand to hear, there is not the least doubt that she, too, would have sat enthralled.

Suddenly, however, a thing happened that brought Madge's music to an abrupt finish.

Above the tinkle of the sweet notes there came a most alarming outburst of cries.

Madge Mindon took her hands from the notes, and jumped up. Her school chums did the same.

"Gracious!"

"Goodness!"

"Why——"

"Oh, it's Paula! It must be Paula!" two or three of the schoolgirls cried out together, as they listened to the yelps, and wails, and piercing cries that sounded so distressful.

"Geals—geals!" was the shriek that now cleared up any doubt as to who was making the outcry. "Gwacions, geals—heah, help! Bai Jove, this is dreadful!"

"Come on!" exclaimed Polly, darting away. "That duffer is in the library."

"But——"

"Geals—geals! Come to my wescue, quick!"

This was a dismal cry that fairly stamped the chums.

Out of the drawing-room they charged, and, streaking across the hall, charged into the library.

One step across the threshold of that room was all they took, however. Then they fetched up sharply, bunching together in the doorway, whilst Paula's cries and yells were suddenly lost in peals of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, dear——"

"He, he, he!"

"Don't laugh, geals! Help, help!" wailed Paula.

For there she was, in the most comical of plights.

The room contained hundreds of books, stacked in shelves that covered almost all four walls. Some of the shelves were high up, and the girls could only conclude that that was why a pair of ordinary kitchen steps stood handy. Those steps were at present in the centre of the room, and there, on the top of them, was poor Paula Creel, taking refuge from—rats!

The sudden appearance of the other girls seemed to fluster the rats, for they scurried off to the corners of the room.

But one rat remained—standing quite unconcerned a yard or so from the steps on which Paula was standing.

"Shoo! Go away, you horrid creature!" wailed Paula. "Shoo!"

In the doorway, the girls fairly yelled with laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha! It'll bite you, Paula! Look out!"

Paula cast another shuddering glance at the rodent. And then—

Then the steps fell over!

Crash, bang—flop!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Help! Oh, deah! Geals, I say—bai Jove—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Paula floundered about on the floor, her dainty figure all mixed up with the ladder.

"Weally, geals, you haven't a scwap of wegard for my safety!" she said.

By now, lame Nell had arrived upon the scene, and her laughter was as hearty as the rest of the girls', as she beheld the whole comical spectacle.

"Geals!" Paula began afresh; but now Polly Linton pranced forward, and started hauling the hapless Paula to her feet.

"Oh, you are not so bad as all that!" Polly declared, beating the dust out of Paula's clothes. "No bones broken, anyhow. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, geals, I have had a dweadful time!" said Paula dismally. "Gwacious! Look at my fwock! Wuined! Clean wuined!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And then the shock to my nerves, bai Jove!" Paula drew a deep breath. "I ask you, geals, how would you like to find yourselves attacked by hundweds of wats?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I only saw two!" said Tess Trelawney.

"There were not more than three, anyhow!" chuckled Polly Linton.

"Geals, I wegret to contwadiet you, but dere were hundweds! That was before you came in, howevah. I was going to use the ladder, to get a book from an upper shelf, and, bai Jove, the wats washed out, don't you know, like a wegular army! Yes, wather!"

But it was no use; Paula could win no sympathy from her chums!

They refused to treat it as anything but a joke, and for at least two minutes longer they remained chuckling.

If Paula had anything to console her, it was in seeing Nell just as amused as any of them—poor Nell, whose dull, lonely life, before the girls came to Herons' Haunt, had had little enough merriment in it, as they all knew.

"What surprises me," said Nell, of a sudden, "is that this pair of steps should have been ready to hand, Paula, for you to scramble up them!"

"Aren't they always in here, to enable anybody to reach the higher shelves?" asked Betty Barton.

"Oh, no," Nell answered, shaking her head. "They are not proper library-steps. Those are just steps brought from an out-house in the kitchen yard, and I'm still bothered to know how or why they come to be in this room!"

"Perhaps—" Betty began, but she broke off abruptly, suddenly aware of Esther Hone hovering by the doorway.

All the girls looked round at the slinking maid, who came forward, smirking.

"Were you talking about those kitchen-steps?" she said meekly. "I brought the ladder here; I thought I had better tell you."

"Oh!" said Nell. "But why?"

"Well, miss, I thought I would—thought I would dust some of the books, when I had time to spare!" was the smooth reply.

Nell was obviously surprised; but she only nodded, and Esther Hone withdrew, silent-footed as ever.

"Dust the books! Did you ever hear of such an idea?" Nell exclaimed, turning to her schoolgirl chums. "Mother has never given any hint about wanting the books to be dusted! As you know, we have had to give up attending to any of the rooms except the ones we use for living purposes."

"Esther Hone would have had a nice big job from her odd half-hours, dusting all these books!" smiled Betty, casting a glance at the crowded shelves. "There must be thousands of volumes!"

"Oh, yes, thousands—and some of them are prett' old, too," Nell said. "But—hark! Madge has gone back to the harpsichord!"

"Trust Madgo to do that!" chuckled Polly. "Well, come on, and we'll listen to the band! Tell you what, we might have a bit of a dance, if Madgo will rattle off a waltz!"

"Oui, oui!" cried Trixie delightedly.

"How I should love to see you all dancing!" Nell exclaimed, limping with them back to the drawing-room. "It's one of the things I do love—I suppose, because I shall never be able to dance myself!"

And then Betty Barton drew close to the lame girl.

"You and I, Nell, will sit out the dance, shall we?" said the captain of the Fourth Form at Morcove School, with all that tender sympathy which she possessed.

Nell did not answer; but the shining eyes she turned upon her schoolgirl friend told of that gratitude which filled her heart—a gratitude too deep for words.

Not an hour of the day but what the girls were all showing their kindly thought for her in her afflicted state; but somehow it was Betty Barton who seemed to give expression oftener to feelings of pity. And how tactfully, how gently that pity was always manifested!

"Now then, the band!" Polly was crying at Madge, as Betty and Nell came last into the room. "Play some nice bits of dance music, Madge!"

"Yes, wather!"

"I'll play a minuet," said Madge. "A minuet is just the thing for a harpsichord. So get ready, girls!"

The quaint, old-fashioned dance, so pretty and dainty in all its movements, was one that the girls had been taught at school. So, as soon as Madge began to fill the big room with the slow, lilting melody, Polly, Paula, and Trixie started the first graceful movements.

"Bai Jove, it's gweat!" exclaimed Paula, linking hands with Trixie. "So twuly gwaceful, bai Jove!"

"Not enough go in it for me!" said Polly, giving up in disgust. "I want a waltz, or anything else with some go in it!"

"Start away, then!" laughed Madge.

And all in a moment she changed from the slow, dignified minuet into a lively waltz.

"Hooray! That's better!" declared Polly, starting to whirl around.

"Yes, wather! Geals, this is gweat!"

Paula was still Trixie's partner, and now Polly and Tess formed into a couple for the waltz. Madge, looking over one shoulder as she played, rushed the music faster and faster, hoping to beat the dancers. But they were not to be beaten!

Round the big room they whirled, keeping time to the music.

They began to get a bit giddy, but there was no thought of giving up. Paula fell over a chair, yet she scrambled up and went on again without any cry of distress. As for Polly, she seemed to be keen on whisking Tess off her feet!

"Faster, Madge!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"All right!" cried Madge, accepting the challenge. "Is that fast enough? If not, I'll soon— Oh!"

Crash!

And down on the floor fell Polly and Tess, screaming with laughter, after colliding with the harpsichord.

"Ha, ha, ha!" they laughed breathlessly, scrambling to their feet. "Any damages to the band, Madge?"

"I'm all right," laughed Madge. "But you've fairly jiggered up the harpsichord! The game leg—look! We'll have to lift it on to that book again!"

Betty joined the group which gathered round the old-fashioned musical instrument, whilst Nell kept to her seat, hoping to see the dancing resumed. It was only a question of two or three of the girls lifting the harpsichord at one corner, so as to place the short leg in position again.

"What an ancient-looking volume!" laughed Betty, stooping down to pick up the book and look at it more intently. "Why, it has got quite stuck to the floor with damp!"

She pulled it away gently, and straightened herself up, twirling the thick pages which were enclosed between half-rotted loathern covers.

"I expect," said Polly Linton, "that book came out of the library, once upon a time. It's like all the rest in the library, and— Hallo! What's the matter, Betty?"

"Look!" gasped Betty, for she had come upon a folded sheet of parchment between the pages of the book. "A legal document, surely! Oh—"

"Gweat goodness, geals! I say, bai Jove, perhaps—"

"It is—it is!" Betty almost shouted, shaking the sheet of parchment open. "It is the missing will!"

Wild-eyed, and with mouths agape, the astounded girls echoed that excited cry.

"The will—we've found the missing will!"

CHAPTER 8.

Is the Danger Past?

BETTY BARTON looked round and across at Nell, who was sitting in a far corner of the room.

"Nell—Nell, darling! Oh, do look at what we've found!" panted Betty, rushing towards the lame girl. "See, it is a legal document, written on parchment! Surely it is the very will that nobody has ever been able to find!"

Nell Mannering was looking pale with excitement. She took the sensational find from Betty, and devoured a few lines of the faded writing.

"Yes!" she cried out then. "See for yourselves, girls! Oh, you really have found it! At last—at last, mother will get justice!"

Betty took back the document, and, holding it open, read the first long lines of the legal script.

"The last will and testament of John Mannering, Esq., of Herons' Haunt," she read aloud. "I give and bequeath—"

And there Betty broke off, for she and her chums were suddenly aware of Mrs. Mannering's presence in the room.

"Oh, my dears," cried the lady, coming towards them in great agitation, "did I hear some of you crying out about—"

"The missing will—yes! We've found it!"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove! Hooway!"

"We are so glad—oh, so delighted!" cried Madge and Tess.

"Let me see it," Mrs. Mannering pleaded, trembling from head to foot. "It seems so wonderful, so incredible that you should find it, after the fruitless searches I have made! But it really is the will—yes!"

She crushed the vital document to her chest, whilst all the tragedy seemed to pass from her looks in a single moment, leaving her face perfectly radiant with joy.

"Mother, darling—"

"Nell—oh, Nell, dear!" the good woman faltered, winding an arm about her loving daughter, who had slipped into a chair at her side. "I don't know what to say! I feel so overcome with joy! To think that at long last the will should have been found!"

Shaking with excitement, she sank into a chair, and for all in that room there followed a few moments whilst they steadied down, after experiencing such a big thrill.

"You found it between the pages of that book?" Mrs. Mannering broke out at last.

"Yes," said Betty; and between them the girls explained exactly how they had chanced to make the great discovery.

"It is marvellous!" was Mrs. Mannering's comment. "There has always been an idea that the will would be found in the library, amongst the books. More than once I have searched all the books in there. But, don't you see, the will has been all the time between the pages of the book that was keeping the old harpsichord steady on its legs!"

"So no wonder you never found it in the library!" Betty cried, with a catchy laugh betraying great excitement. "Oh, well, never mind! It's found now!"

"Yes, wather! Miss Mannering, pway let us geals be the vevy first to congratulate you!" cried Paula, who was always rather fond of speech-making. "It is a matter of gweat joy to all of us, Mrs. Mannering; a matter of—ah—extweme pleasure, bai Jove!"

"Hear, hear!" chimed in Polly. "Oh, my word, what a jolly holiday we shall all have now!"

"Yes, wather! Geals—"

"It means that you can prove your right to Herons' Haunt, doesn't it, Mrs. Mannering?" broke in Betty. "And you will have all the fortune that goes with the house?"

"Yes, my dears! Greatest joy of all to me, there will be no lack of money for Nell! Oh, Nell, darling, so brave and patient as you have always been during our time of trial," said the overjoyed mother, kissing her daughter, "now you are to have the reward you have earned! You shall have the greatest specialist in the kingdom to see your foot, and so, perhaps, you will be made well at last! Never mind how much money the treat-

ment may cost, we shall be able to afford it now!"

"Oh, what joy!" Betty cried.

As for Nell, she was almost overcome with the thought of being able to walk and dance someday, perhaps as well as any other girl, and she stood in a sort of trance.

The happy mother brandished the will before their eyes.

"Just think!" she cried. "I have only to go to London with this document, and then Nell and I step into all the property at once! This is the will that I always contended my father-in-law made, leaving everything to me, his son's widow."

There were tears in her eyes, but they were tears of joy.

None of the girls noticed that the door had opened silently and Esther Hone had peered into the room. Just as silently, Esther withdrew again. In the corridor outside her eyes flashed.

"Beaten!" she gasped. "All is lost. I had better hurry away!"

So, when the Morcovo girls looked around for Esther Hone, she was not to be found. She had gone—but they were to meet her again in circumstances even more dramatic!

CHAPTER 9.

An Adventurous Morning.

"PAULA!"

Polly Linton put her hands to her mouth and shouted. On Polly's pretty face there was a look of annoyance, for Polly was anxious to go out.

With Polly were the rest of the girls, including Mrs. Mannering's daughter. All the girls looked slightly impatient, but not nearly so excited as Polly.

It was the day following the discovery of the missing will, and the girls, in celebration of that event, had planned a little trip to Sealey, a seaside resort not far away.

"Hope she won't be long," said Betty Barton, captain of the Fourth Form at Morcovo School, the Form to which all these girls belonged.

"She really is a nuisance!" exclaimed Midge Midden. "Perhaps if we all shout together, she might take some notice."

"Yes, let's try that," nodded Tess Trelawney.

So, as the others seemed to think that the best plan, Betty Barton counted:

"One, two, three—now! Paula!"

"Depechez-vous!" shouted Trixie Hope.

From upstairs a response to these impatient cries, came a languid answer:

"All wight, geals! But you might give a geal a chance, bai Jove!"

It certainly did not seem as though Paula Creel was putting herself out at all. But then Paula was never a very energetic young lady, and it took her as long to dress as all the others put together.

"We shall never get to Sealey to-day," groaned Polly Linton. "What a nuisance Paula is, to be sure."

"I suppose," said Tess Trelawney, with a slight grin, "she's putting on her best clothes to surprise the villagers."

"And it is such a really topping day, too," said Betty Barton, glancing up at the sky. "If Sealey is as splendid a seaside-place as Mrs. Mannering says, we should have a good time. I suppose Mr. Topham won't take long to drive us there in the car, Nell?"

The girl thus addressed shook her head.

"Oh, no!" she answered, rather shyly.

Just as the girls were about to give another shout, Mrs. Mannering came down the stairs towards the girls.

"Dear me," she said. "I've heard you shouting. Is not Paula Creel down yet? You will not have much time, dears, if you do not start soon—"

"Here I am!"

All turned at the sound of that drawling, languid voice. Down the stairs, looking very spick and span in her newest school dress, came Paula Creel. In her hand she held a sunshade—a crotonne sunshade of simply startling hues. At sight of it, Tess Trelawney shielded her eyes, and pretended to faint.

But Polly, she was too angry to make jokes.

"Oh, Paula, it is too bad," she said, "keeping us waiting like this! You know we haven't much time—"

"Now, now!" said Mrs. Mannering smilingly. "You ought to be glad that she's ready at all, you know, Polly."

And Polly had to laugh. She was very fond of Mrs. Mannering, as indeed they all

were, and Polly always took Mrs. Mannering's decision as final. All the girls did, so when that morning their hostess had suggested that they should take a trip to Sealey, a seaside town not far away, there had been a regular chorus of approval.

"Since you're all ready," said Mrs. Mannering, "you'd better not wait about. Aren't you going to put your hats on, though?"

"Well," said Betty. "I don't think so, not until we're out of the car. Hats are such a nuisance in a car, aren't they?"

"Very well," smiled the hostess. "Just as you like, girls. I want you all to enjoy yourselves thoroughly." She turned to Betty Barton. "And, Betty, if you would look after Nell," she whispered. The woman was pressing Betty's hand, and the others, so as not to hear what they deemed might be a private conversation, walked on. "You have done much for us both, Betty," went on Mrs. Mannering—"all of you. "Now that the missing will has been found, and this house belongs to me, I hope I can make Nell happier—"

"And perhaps send her to Morcove?" asked Betty.

Mrs. Mannering smiled.

"We'll see," she said. "But you go on and enjoy yourself now, Betty. I would have come myself, but with Esther Hone gone, I have no servant, and must work harder. But run off now, dear; the others are waiting."

So off went Betty to her waiting friends. Mrs. Mannering's eyes shone happily as she gazed after the schoolgirl. She liked Betty, and she was glad that her daughter had found, in the Morcove girls, friends with whom she could be happy and at ease.

As the girls waved a good-bye from the gate and disappeared, Mrs. Mannering went back to her work.

"Now for the car!" said Tess Trelawney. "Oui, oui!" said Trixie Hope.

And Nell, knowing the way, took the place of leader, and soon was knocking on the door of the local garage, of which Mr. Topham, the car-hire man, was proprietor.

A woman came to the door and said that Mr. Topham was out.

"Can we hire the car, please?" asked Nell. "We want to go to Sealey."

"Well, now, that's a funny thing," said

the woman. "If two young ladies ain't been here and asked the same thing! They wanted to go to Sealey, but I told 'em that, Mr. Topham being out, the car couldn't go. One of the young ladies said she could drive. But I wouldn't let her take the car—not me!"

While the woman halted breathlessly, Betty took the opportunity to put in a question.

"And when will Mr. Topham be back again?" she asked.

"Oh, he won't be long, not more than a quarter of an hour?" replied the woman.

"Oh, then we'll wait—eh?" said Betty, turning to her chums. "A quarter of an hour isn't long."

"Oh, no!" said Polly. "We'll wait!"

"Yes, wather!"

"Oh, then, you'd better come into the parlour," said the woman; and she led them into a small room of the house, there to await the return of Mr. Topham.

The girls seated themselves—or some did. The little parlour did not contain seating accommodation for seven girls. Betty saw that Nell had a chair, and stood beside her.

Tess Trelawney took Paula on her knee, and Madge Minden and Trixie halved a chair.

They waited for what seemed to them hours, but which in reality was only ten minutes. At the end of that time a deep voice and heavy, clumping footsteps announced the approach of Mr. Topham.

Into the room he came, and Betty went forward.

"Oh, are you Mr. Topham?" she asked.

"I am, missy. And what can I do for you?"

"We want to hire your car, please," said Betty. "Could you take us to Sealey?"

The man nodded, and glanced at the seven girls.

"Rather a load," he murmured. "Still, the old car'll do it, I fancy."

At this the girls jumped up with murmurs of delight.

"Now we shan't be long!" said Polly. "Lead on, Macduff—I mean, Mr. Topham!"

In a chattering crowd they followed the man to the door of the small garage, where the car was kept, and waited while he opened it.

The lock was not fastened, and he had only to pull the door aside. When he had done so he gave an exclamation of amazement.

"The car!" he cried. "It's gone!"

"Gone!" ejaculated Betty. "But how?"

The girls looked at one another in surprise.

"Do you mean that it has been stolen, Mr. Topham?" asked Madge Minden.

"Stolen—something's happened!" said the man excitedly, and without another word dashed across the yard into the house to ask his wife if she knew anything about it.

Then in a moment he was back again.

"Those two girls," he shouted—"them's the ones!"

"Girls!" said Polly. "What girls?"

"Them girls as was staying here—Grandways their name was. Came and asked for the car—must 'a' taken it. Man said he saw them hovering about."

"Oh!" gasped Betty. "Then—then you can't take us to-day?"

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"You'll have to walk!" he grunted. "You're all right. But what about my car?"

"The trip to Sealey is off, then?" said Madge Minden dismally.

"Yes, we can't go," shrugged Betty hopelessly.

"Malheur!" sighed Trixie Hope. "What bad luck!"

And with feelings that were far from cheerful, the seven girls turned back to make their way home. The car was gone, and there was no other way of getting to Sealey, unless they walked.

"Is it very far to Sealey, Nell?" asked Betty. "I mean, could we walk, after all?"

Nell shook her head.

"You could," she said, "but I could not."

"Nor could I," said Paula Creel, fanning herself with a handkerchief. "But I have an idea. Suppose we all go back and lie in hammocks—"

At this there was a general roar of laughter.

"I for one, am not going back," said Polly Linton. "Why can't we walk part of the way? There's sure to be some other place where one can get a car on hire. Don't you know of any place, Nell?"

The little lame girl hesitated.

"There should be some more places," she said. "I'm sure there are, in fact, although I can't say for certain just where the next nearest one is. Wait, I'll ask Mr. Topham."

And she hobbled across to the irate innkeeper, who was still standing in the same helpless attitude, gazing at the blank space that had once been occupied by his car. He knew the Grandways girls would pay for hiring his car, but he did not know whether or not they might damage it.

"Nearest car-hire place?" he asked, as the girls followed Nell. "Why, yes—Bill Smith's place!"

"Oh," said Tess Trelawney, "but where is Mr. Smith's place?"

Then the man realised that he had not been explicit, taking it for granted, in the country way, that strangers know the name and address of every inhabitant.

When they had been told where to go, the girls marched off.

"Wait!" the man cried after them. "I'll come with you. I want to find that car of mine, so if you don't mind I'll sit beside the chauffeur."

"Phew!" gasped Paula. "What a squeeze, you know! Eight!"

And so it seemed. But when they reached the small town, a mile and a half away, they found that the car for hire there was larger, a six-cylinder car, that held them all easily.

Into it they packed, while Mr. Topham sat beside the chauffeur. Of course, it would be an expensive ride. But then, as Polly explained, they were on holiday.

The hood of the car was down, and Paula put up her sunshade. And very useful it was, too, for the hot sun was shining down upon them, and would have made their heads ache. Most of them put their hats on, for the broad-brimmed, comfortable school-hat afforded ample shade, and they could put up with the wind.

The car sped on, and the wind rushed into the girls' faces coolingly. But when they had gone a mile or two, Polly, who was facing the way they were going, gave a shout.

"Look, there's Cora!"

"Cora and Judith! Goodness, yes!"

In an instant they were on their feet, looking ahead. Sure enough, there was Mr. Topham's car some distance in front, by

the roadside. They could see a girl by the car, twisting about as though she were in pain, and in the car was Judith.

"What's wrong!" gasped Betty Barton. "Mr. Topham, look!"

But Mr. Topham had seen, and the car was slowing up.

As it stopped, Betty, Polly, and Madge jumped down, and ran forward to see what was the matter with Cora.

"Cora, what is the matter?" asked Betty, stopping a few yards from the car. "Are you hurt? Judith, what is wrong?"

CHAPTER 10.

By the Sea.

"O H, oh, oh!" sobbed Cora Grandways. "My poor wrist!"

Judith was jumping down from the car, for Judith had seen Mr. Topham, and was afraid of his wrath. She knew she had done wrong in taking the car without obtaining the owner's permission.

"Nice thing," snorted Mr. Topham, "taking a man's car!"

"My wrist—is—sprained!" panted Cora. "Bother your silly car! Why don't you have a decent car? It—it backfired when I started it up again, and—now—now I've sprained my wrist!"

Betty, in her kind-hearted way, was already binding up her old enemy's wrist, and Cora had stopped her moaning. Judith, with a sulky pout, was standing near-by.

Mr. Topham shook his fist indignantly. "Served you right if you'd ha' met with a worse accident," he said. "Takin' a man's car like that!"

"Well, you were out!" snapped Cora. "We had an important appointment, and now we can't keep it. You're a nuisance! Anyway, drive us on now"—her tone softened—"there's a good man!"

And after several minutes' discussion Mr. Topham agreed. The Grandways sisters were well supplied with money, and the payment they offered him was sufficient to soften his hardness.

But Betty & Co. did not wait to hear the end of the discussion. Already they were well on the road to the sea.

The country lanes were bumpy, but, in the

fine car in which they rode, the bumps passed unheeded and even had they not, it is possible that Betty and her chums would not have minded.

"What impudence!" said Betty, still thinking of the Grandways sisters.

"And she didn't say a word to us," said Polly Linton, with a scornful sniff. "I wouldn't have done her wrist—"

"Oh, yes, you would have, Polly!" said Betty gently. "Only I got there first."

"Anyway, what does that matter to us?" sighed Paula Creel. "Cowa makes me tired, even the thought of her. Let's forget her!"

So Cora and Judith were forgotten for that morning. And when in a few moments they got the first glimpse of the sea, there came a whole-hearted yell of delight.

"The sea!"

"Oh, isn't it splendid!" sighed Betty. "You like the sea, Nell?"

"I do," said the lame girl. "But I cannot enjoy it like other girls. You see," she said, with a sad grimace, "I cannot swim, and I cannot even row—at least, not much."

"No, of course not," sympathised Betty. "But we shan't swim. We can go out in boats, though; there are enough of us to row."

"I shall paddle," laughed Toss Trelawney. "I haven't a costume with me, so I can't swim."

The car drove up before an imposing building, and a uniformed man came to open the door.

"Goodness, what's this?" exclaimed Madge Minden. "What a fine building! I had no idea Scaley had such a splendid hotel."

"It is a very expensive place," said Nell. "You see, many motorists come here, and they pay large prices. But there are small hotels just as nice."

"Then this is where Cora and Judith will stop," said Polly.

"Well, we've got the hampers, so we don't want any hotels," said Betty.

They all crowded out of the car, and Betty turned to the chauffeur.

"Will you meet us here this evening, please," she said, "at about six o'clock?"

And the driver, having agreed to do so, put in the clutch. Off went the car, and

the girls watched till it had gone from sight.

"Now," said Polly Linton, "here we are at Sealey, with baggage all complete. What does the programme say?"

"I suggest a west," said Paula, fanning herself. "I feel tired. The weather is welaxin', you know."

"I'd like to know when you're not tired," said Polly.

"Jamais!" grinned Trixie. "Never!" She took in the whole scene gladly. "Why, it couldn't be better in France!" And that from Trixie was a high compliment.

"Not much good standing here," said Betty. "I vote we make for the beach."

So off they went, carrying the hampers, one between two.

Down some seaweedy steps they went to the sands. Paula Creel looked askance at the sand, for in places it was wet, and there was seaweed about. Paula was wearing a very dainty pair of shoes, which, though very pretty in appearance, were not adapted to seaside wear.

"There," laughed Polly. "Why couldn't you come simply dressed, Paula? You'll feel everything through those thin shoes, and they'll get shockingly dirty."

"Take them off, and the stockings, too," suggested Tess Trelawney, with a wink at the others. "Then you can paddle."

"No thanks," said Paula, glancing round at the other people on the beach. "Do you think I'm a Third Form kid?"

"Better than getting those shoes wet," said Tess.

Nell was taking no part in this banter, but was walking by Betty's side. Betty was looking after Nell, and had given her arm to the lame girl.

Nell's eyes were shining with joy, and the others could see how this outing gladdened her heart.

"Perhaps you'd like to go on the sea, Nell?" suggested Madge Minden. "It looks ripping out there, you know."

"I should like to go," admitted little Nell. "But, as I told you, I can't row."

"There's a fisherman-looking chap," said Tess Trelawney. "He's got a boat there. He'll row us out."

"We don't want a fisherman to row for us. We want a boat to ourselves," grumbled Polly. "They'll let us have one, I know."

"It's a bit choppy, though; there's an awful breeze blowing," said Betty doubtfully. "I—I don't want to take risks."

"That's all right!" laughed Polly. "Don't be a silly, Betty!"

So Betty went across to the fisherman, and in a few moments came racing back to her chums.

"What did he say?" asked Polly excitedly.

"It's all right," panted Betty. "We can have three boats."

"Hurrah!"

Polly Linton gave a delighted cheer, and little Nell—her usually thin face was happy and smiling.

"You won't be frightened, Nell?" asked Betty.

"Frightened!" exclaimed the little cripple. "Not with you, Betty. I know you will be careful."

And so when they went down to the boat they were all happy and cheerful.

Paula was the first to get into the boat—a dinghy it was—and took the front seat. She was going to make sure of an easy time! With Paula went Tess Trelawney.

Into another boat Betty put little Nell, then followed herself, with Polly Linton.

Betty somehow did not quite like the idea of taking the lame girl on the sea; it was such a tremendous responsibility. But she knew that if the boat did upset she could save Nell, for Betty was a very good swimmer. Moreover, she could row well and powerfully.

In the other boat were Madge Minden and Trixie Hope.

And they were the first to start. But Betty was taking time to make little Nell comfortable in the bottom of the boat.

The old salt who owned the boats stood watching them, but was soon reassured. He could tell at once that the girls were to be trusted with the boats.

So he went back to his little shanty with the girls' hampers, which had been left in his charge.

"Come back!" cried Polly to Trixie's boat. "Start level, and we'll race you easily."

"Peut-etre!" laughed Trixie. "And perhaps not!"

But all the same, she and Madge slowed up till Polly and Betty rowed level.

"Where shall we race to?" asked Madge Minden. "No good tearing along like anything, without a definite object."

Betty shielded her eyes with her hand, and scanned the horizon.

"I don't know," she said doubtfully.

Then she caught sight of something that bobbed up and down in the water, disappearing and reappearing in a tantalising manner.

"There!" cried Betty. "There's a bottle floating out there. We'll race you, Trixie. The ones to get the bottle first win. Neil will get the order to start."

"One, two, three—go!" cried Nell.

And off with one accord went the three boats, Trixie's leading by just a fraction.

Hard back on their oars lay the girls, and their bodies moved in rhythm.

"Pull!" cried Betty. "Pull, pull, pull!"

There was no "feathering" or dainty rowing here, but just plain, straightforward pulling, and the chances were even.

Betty and Trixie were rowing level now, but Tess Trelawney's boat hung behind. A gentle breeze twisted and twirled the bottle in Trixie's direction.

"Two more pulls!" cried Polly Linton.

"Now, Betty—quick, pick it up!"

By just the merest fraction of an inch Trixie was before Betty, and reaching over the side of the boat, Madge Minden had the bottle in her hand.

"Oh, what a race!" gasped Trixie, lying back on her oars.

"And what a prize!" grimaced Polly. "A dirty old ginger-beer bottle. Nothing in it, I suppose?"

She laughed.

Madge shook her head, then almost dropped the bottle in surprise.

"My word!" she cried. "There's something in it, girls!"

"A paper. A paper with something written on it!" said Trixie, as Madge unscrewed the stopper.

"A message!" exclaimed Polly. "I've heard of things like that before."

"Yes, so have I," nodded Tess Trelawney. "Open it, Madge. It's what they call a message from the sea. I've read about it heaps of times."

But Madge was as eager as any of them, and now she had the paper in her hand.

In silence the others waited for her to read aloud the message the wet scrap of paper contained. But Madge said nothing.

She sat in silence, her brows puckered, staring at the sheet of paper—sandy, dirty;

at the message, almost illegible, for it was written in pencil.

"Read it aloud, Madge," said Betty.

"What does it say?"

Madge shook her head.

"I can't say," she said, in puzzled tones.

"It's in French."

There came a perfect shout of amazement.

"French!"

"Then it's come wight across the channel," said Paula Creel, as Tess Trelawney rowed their boat level with the others.

Madge shook her head.

"No," she answered thoughtfully. "You see, it's in an English ginger-beer bottle."

"Bai Jove!" gasped Paula. "I nevah thought of that."

They all seemed to be talking at once, but Trixie Hope, to make herself heard, stood up in the boat.

"Oh, you silly, Madge!" she cried. "Why don't you give it to me? You know how good I am at French!"

And indeed she was, though in the excitement the others had forgotten it. Trixie was just the one to translate that message.

Madge Minden was just about to hand the paper across when Betty Barton gave a shout and pointed out to sea.

Coming towards them at a terrific pace was a fast motor-boat!

CHAPTER 11.

Betty Tries to Think Things Out.

"A MOTOR-BOAT!" Betty did not know why, but she somehow felt that there was danger ahead—that this motor-boat boded no good.

But the mission of the occupants of that boat did not remain a mystery long.

When the boat was within a few yards of them it veered round suddenly in a swirl of water, that rocked Betty's dinghy from side to side.

"Have you seen a bottle floating around?"

It was a woman's voice, and Betty started. She stared hard at the thin, angular face that peered at her from the motor-boat. There were two women in it, and neither impressed the girls favourably.

Not for some moments did the girls reply. This sudden query on top of their discovery was rather surprising, and they scented a mystery. Betty looked at Polly, and Polly shook her head.

Not even then did Betty reply, for she realised that there was more in this affair than might at first seem evident.

So, although the woman uttered an angry exclamation, Betty said nothing until she thought out her course.

"What sort of bottle?" she asked at length. "We have seen dozens of bottles to-day."

"Yes, wather! There's a cafe on the promenade simply awfully full of bottles, don't you know!" simpered Paula Creel.

"I do not ask that. I ask you have you seen ze bottle?" The woman gesticulated and shook her head. "A bottle zat float around in ze sea?"

Then it was as much as the girls could do to conceal their amazement. This woman was French—the message in the bottle had been written in French.

Polly Linton spoke quickly, lest one of the others should reveal the fact that they had seen the bottle.

"Do you want us to help you search for it?" asked Polly; and there was a slight trace of contempt in her tone.

"If you have not see it, zen it does not mattair," said the woman.

"Was it a full bottle?" asked Madge Mindon.

"No, empty; but—"

"Then, surely," said Madge, "it would sink without a stopper."

"It had a stopper. It—"

The French woman, seeing that she was being led into giving away information, clicked her teeth together, and without another word being exchanged, the motor-boat shot out to sea.

"Well," said Betty Barton, the first to speak after the women had disappeared on the horizon, "whatever can it mean?"

"Something jolly fishy!" said Polly Linton. "Those women knew there had been a bottle floating around. And why were they so eager?"

"That's the question," said Tess Trelawney. "But instead of wasting time talking, suppose we let Trixie translate the message."

And the wisdom of Tess's advice was quickly seen. The paper, still wet, was handed to Trixie, and that girl, with a very important air indeed, conned it.

"Well?" said the others expectantly.

"Ahem!" said Trixie, and stared closer. Then she gave an exclamation. "I see it!"

she said. "This is what it means: 'Help! I. Gabrielle Lefroy, am prisoner at—' And there," said Trixie, "the writing stops. She has tried to write more, but someone has interrupted her."

"My word!" gasped Polly. "A prisoner!" For a few moments there was silence amongst the girls.

"Well," said Betty at last, "what had we better do, girls? I think it's up to us to solve this mystery. Morcove will save Gabrielle Lefroy."

"Hear, hear!" chorused the girls excitedly.

Anything in the nature of adventure appealed to the girls, and there was no doubt at all about this being an adventure. The girls were all excitement at once, simply brimming over with eagerness to commence the search for Gabrielle Lefroy.

"Wait a bit!" said Betty, holding up her hand for silence. "We can't go rushing into this without thinking things out a bit to begin with. Now, the first thing to decide is—are we going to help search for Gabrielle, shall we keep it to ourselves, and do it on our own—?"

"Oh, rather!" cried Polly.

"You all say that?" asked Betty.

"Yes."

Even little Nell joined in this shout, and Betty smiled.

"Then we'd better work things out, you know, like the detectives do," she said; and the others gave a nod of approval.

"First," she added, "why did those women in the motor-boat ask about the bottle?"

"Because they wanted to know," grinned Tess Trelawney.

"Yes, silly," said Betty. "But why did they want to know? What did the bottle matter to them? And how did they know it was in the water?"

"My word!" breathed Polly. "You're like a cross-examining counsel, Betty! How should we know?"

"Well, guess! That's all we can do," laughed Betty. "I think that they must have seen the bottle thrown out. They must have known that it was in the sea, anyway."

"Then the prisoner is near here!" exclaimed Polly. "She must be, at any rate, else how could the women see and chase the bottle?"

"Yes," said Paula, "but, as I said before, it has drifted from Fwance—"

"Silly, it's an English bottle, and it would take weeks to come across from France, perhaps years," said Madge Minden. "Besides, that motor-boat would have caught it sooner."

"I say it came from Fwance," said Paula, with an obstinate sniff.

And the others shrugged their shoulders.

"Well, we've decided, then," said Betty, "that the women have something to do with the bottle—that the prisoner is somewhere near here."

"Yes, that's the idea," said Tess Trelawney. "And I wouldn't mind saying that those women are keeping Gabrielle Lefroy a prisoner."

"My word, perhaps you're right!" said Polly Linton. "Then suppose we chase them, and make them tell us where they have hidden her?"

That was just like one of Polly's hair-brained schemes. And the others laughed.

"No good doing that," smiled Betty. "We must search for the prisoner's hiding-place—or, rather, prison."

"And won't it be a job?" grimaced Tess Trelawney. "I don't see that we've anything to go upon. She might be anywhere."

"Not anywhere. As she threw the bottle into the sea, she must be on the coast somewhere."

It was Nell who had spoken, and Betty patted her on the shoulder.

"Splendid, Nell!" she cried. "How obvious that seems, now that you have pointed it out, and yet how much time we might have wasted otherwise!"

Which was perfectly true, for they had now some idea where to start their search.

"Then if Gabrielle Lefroy is hidden somewhere on the coast, and the women in the motor-boat have something to do with the affair, why not follow the women?" said Polly Linton.

"Yes; but— Goodness, they're following us!"

It was true, and the girls, turning their heads, saw that Betty was right. The motor-boat and the occupants were coming towards them.

"Have you that bottle?" demanded Polly Linton quickly to Madge.

Polly took the bottle, while the others watched in amazement.

"We'll soon prove what they know about the bottle," said Polly. "Give me that

paper, Trixie. We've learnt all we can from it."

So Trixie handed across the piece of paper, and Polly slid it into the bottle and screwed down the stopper.

"Now to put it into the water unobserved," she said.

She watched the approaching motor-boat, and saw that the two women were not keeping them under observation.

"I'll throw them off the scent first," said Betty; and, waving first to the women, she pointed out to sea, far away to the left.

The women, thinking that Betty had seen the bottle, wheeled round and made off in the direction Betty had indicated. And then Polly slipped the bottle into the water.

"That's right," said Madge. "Now hail them and tell them that the bottle is here."

So Polly, having the most powerful voice, sent a ringing shout across the water.

"Hi!"

The women looked round, and their boat slowed up.

"There's a bottle floating around here," said Polly. "It may be the one you are looking for."

"A bottle? Zank you!"

And once more the motor-boat turned. The girls did not go on, but waited until the two women drew level with the bottle.

The thin-faced one, who had spoken to them before, saw the bottle, and, reaching over, picked it up. So eager was she to examine its contents that she did not wait even till the girls were out of sight, but unscrewed the stopper and pulled forth the small piece of paper.

Then she uttered an exclamation, which made the Morocco girls smile.

"Bon!" cried the woman. "Zis is eet!"

To the girls in the dinghies the woman's remark conveyed much. It told them that the two women were interested in the strange message from the sea.

With a curt "Thanks!" to the girls for their aid, the women went off, and disappeared from view.

"No good trying to follow that whizzer," said Polly Linton, referring to the motor-boat.

"The point is," said Madge Minden, as she pulled at the oars, "what shall we do now?"

It certainly did seem a poser, and for once Betty Barton was puzzled. She had not really worked out their next move.

But Paula had a suggestion ready.

"What about lunch?" she said, and immediately there was a chorus of approval.

"Good old Paula!" cheered Polly. "See what the sea's done for her! She's actually had an idea worth the name!"

And there was a laugh.

"Then row for the shore," said Betty. "I suppose you all want lunch now?"

"Yes, rather!"

"Oui, certainement!"

"Then lunch it is," said Betty; and she lay back on her oars and pulled with all her might and main.

They did not have an actual race, but the three sets of rowers put their backs into it.

But from their first race, quite enough had transpired to make them satisfied for the present with adventure.

CHAPTER 12.

Met Again.

"PASS the ham, please!"

Lunch had started, and the girls were gathered round the white cloth that they had spread on the sandy beach. Mrs. Mannering had packed them some splendid hampers, and the girls were having a first-class meal.

There was chicken, ham, salad, lemonade, strawberries, cream, and a luscious fruit salad that made the girls' mouths water to look at.

And what a time they had! What jolly toasts were proposed and drunk with gusto in the thirst-quenching lemonade!

Never had the girls enjoyed a meal so much before. The sea stretched far away to a perfectly gorgeous, blue-tinted horizon.

"This is topping!" said Polly Linton, fanning herself. "I must say I like the sea. What can a girl want more than this? And isn't the sun lovely, too?"

"It is," nodded Betty. "I dare say after a few-days of this we shall all be as brown as berries."

"Brown," said Polly.

"Nothing to be proud of in that!" sniffed Paula Creel. "I don't think sunburn is lady-like. How can a girl look at all nice with a red nose and brown cheeks?"

At this there was a laugh. For the girls were always amused when Paula held forth on the subject of personal appearance.

"I suppose it's all wight," mused Paula. "for a geal liko Polly Linton. Her face —"

"You leave my face alone," said Polly. "We can't worry about our appearances like you do, Paula."

"Oh, weally! Well, anyway, I shall keep my sunshade up so as not to get a burnt neck. I still say a sunburnt girl looks perfectly howwid!"

"Never mind about the sunburnt girl," said Betty pacifically. "Have some ham, Paula. You'll be grey-haired soon if you go on worrying about what the sun's doing to your face!"

"Not only her face," laughed Madga Minden. "What about her head? Shouldn't be at all surprised if Paula gets sunstroke. Keep the sunshade up, Paula dear, and protect your head."

"Yes, rather!" agreed Tess Trelawney. "We don't want Paula to get a bronzed complexion or sunstroke."

Paula Creel's sunshade shielded her from the burning sun, although the gusts of wind that came across the sands proved most annoying when they caught the sunshade and endeavoured to tear it from the languid girl's grasp.

Polly Linton was watching that sunshade carefully; she knew that sooner or later it would blow right out to sea. But it was no use telling Paula.

And, sure enough, one gust, more powerful than its predecessors, caught the sunshade fairly and squarely, and lifted it through Paula's fingers.

Out to sea it sailed, and the languid girl waited in sheer surprise:

"Oh, my sunshade!"

"There, silly, why didn't you look after it more carefully?" rebuked Polly, laughing.

But it was useless to cry over spilt milk. Paula jumped to her feet and commenced to chase the parasol that bobbed about on the water.

"Take your shoes and stockings off and paddle," urged Tess Trelawney; and, really, if the sunshade was to be regained, it seemed the only course Paula could adopt.

So off came her shoes and her dainty stockings, and, with an "Ooh!" of unwarranted surprise as the water swamped her feet, the languid girl set off in chase of the bobbing parasol.

The others were laughing merrily, for

Paula certainly cut a queer figure, chasing a recalcitrant parasol.

She walked gingerly, as though on hot bricks, for the sand was dotted here and there with little stones that were not comfortable to the feet.

Suddenly as they watched, the other girls saw Paula leap into the air and commence to shout.

"My word!" gasped Polly. "What's happened?"

"It's the sun affecting Paula," said Toss Trelawney sadly.

"No, it's a crab."

Madgo Minden was right, and there was a perfect shriek of laughter as Paula came hopping back out of the shallow water with a small crab gripping tightly to one toe.

Betty rushed to her rescue and took hold of the crab. But Paula could not stand still, and before Betty could stop her, the elegant girl was again at the water's edge. Now Betty freed the crab, and then—

Splash!

Down into the water fell Paula, and rolled over. Shallow though it was, there was enough water to soak her clothes, and, looking indeed a sorry figure, she stood up, with the water dripping from her dress.

"Oh, deah!" she wailed. "Whatevah shall I do now?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Polly, holding her sides. "Oh, you great silly, Paula! Get the sunshade now; you can't get any wetter!"

And Paula retrieved the object of her quest, then returned to the hilarious lunch-party, looking a very sorry figure.

"Whatevah shall I do?" moaned Paula again.

Betty grasped her arm and turned to the others.

"You get the things packed quick," she said. "I'll find a house, and see if Paula can get a change."

The part of the beach where they had lunched was very quiet, and right away from the ordinary part of the town. So Betty anticipated quite a long walk before a house could be discovered.

Telling Paula to stay down on the beach in the sun until she could find a house, Betty commenced to climb the slanting cliffs.

The others, having packed the hampers, were following close behind, and were with Paula when Betty came down at last.

"There is a house," she said. "It is further along to the left." She looked round searchingly. "But you can't get those hampers up the cliffs," she added slowly. "Surely there are some steps we can get up."

Madgo Minden, who had walked on ahead, gave an exclamation.

"Here is a way up!" she cried.

In a moment the others were alongside her, and were clambering up the wooden, rough-hewn steps that led to the top.

"Shan't be long now," said Betty. "You're sure to get a change of clothes here, Paula."

And so they all thought. Though the hampers were heavy, all were as light-hearted as when the adventure had begun. Polly, indeed, was still chuckling at the memory of Paula and the crab.

But Paula—she, with her wet dress, was miserable and absolutely unhappy.

"Cheer up!" smiled Betty. "Not much further now, Paula."

But Paula did not cheer up, not even when at last the solitary house on the cliff, large and awesome, stood revealed.

Up to it went the little party, Nell, limping, held on either side by the strong arm of one of the others.

Betty, being leader, took it upon herself to make the request for a change of clothing, so she led the way.

The huge house seemed strangely deserted, and the girls glanced curiously at the high walls, covered at the top with broken glass, to prevent anyone scaling them.

The house itself was large, and reached up three stories. But yet, though there were curtains at the windows, everything seemed strangely uninhabited.

Clang, clang!

How eerily sounded that bell at the outer gates! It echoed throughout the whole place uncannily.

No one came. Betty rang again, and the other girls shifted impatiently from foot to foot, Paula shivering slightly, for the wind seemed to cut through her like a knife.

No one came to answer the ringing, and the girls began to get rather impatient.

But presently Polly was struck by a bright idea, and she pushed at the large door. To her joy and the others' amazement, the door swung back.

"There, Paula!" said Betty.

Paula, looking to right and left rather doubtfully, entered, and the others followed her in.

Inside, a drive led up to the house, and Paula commenced, rather nervously as it said, to walk up this. Hardly had she gone three paces, however, than a huge dog leaped out at her from behind a tree.

With a slight shriek Paula jumped back, and the others behind stopped quite still.

"It—it's inhabited, then," said Betty.

"As there's a dog, perhaps—"

She was interrupted by what was nearly a shriek from Tess Trelawney.

"My goodness! There's someone at the window!"

It was all so eerie that Tess's shout frightened them. But they looked up to where she pointed—to a small room at the top of the house.

There, framed in that dirty window, stood a girl, with long, dark hair hanging down over her shoulders.

"Shall we call?" whispered Betty.

But before the others could reply something startling happened.

The girl in the window above waved her arms, another figure appeared—a figure of which only a lean arm could be seen—then the girl disappeared.

Once more that cry came.

The Moreove girls looked at one another, and all had white faces. Betty, clearing her throat, was the first to speak.

"What—what can it mean?" she said.

For answer, the dog snarled savagely and bounded forward at them with wild eyes.

His chain pulled at the tree to which it was fastened.

Then from high above came another cry, even more unintelligible than the others. Had they listened more intently, they would have known that it was spoken in French.

But the girls were unnerved, and without another thought they turned and fled. Not till they were some hundred yards from the house did they slow up into a walk. Nell, as scared as any of them, had been half-carried along by the two who held her arms.

"That cry," gasped Betty Barton hoarsely—"what can it mean?"

But the others shook their heads. In silence they walked back to the hotel, Paula shivering through her wet clothes.

They reached the place where the car

should meet them, but they were early, far too early.

Outside the hotel, however, they saw a car they knew well.

"That's the Grandways' car," said Polly.

"I wonder why they took Mr. Topham's this morning?"

Just then, as they were staring at the car, two women came out and entered it. But they were not the Grandways girls, and to the best of Betty's knowledge they were not relations of them, for they were the two Frenchwomen, the occupants of the motor-boat.

But what surprised the girls more was when, a moment later, the Grandways girls themselves came out and spoke to the women. Of Betty Barton and the others, they took not the slightest notice.

Then Cora and Judith went back into the hotel, and one of the women started up the car.

As the car moved off, Polly ran forward, and, catching hold of the car's hood, perched herself in a rather precarious position behind the car.

"I'm going to see where they live," she whispered.

"Polly," cried Betty, "come back—come back!"

But Polly Linton waved her hands, and then the car disappeared round the corner, with Polly still hanging on behind.

CHAPTER 13.

What Polly Saw.

POLLY LINTON'S position was indeed a precarious one. But then Polly was always reckless, and the danger she was running did not occur to her.

But her position was far from being comfortable, and as the car slowed up at a corner, Polly raised herself on to the hood, cautiously though, so that she should not be seen.

As the corner was turned, and the car shot forward, Polly all but fell off. But, by a stroke of luck, she managed to hold on, and all danger was past. For now she was in the body of the car, lying low so that she should not be seen.

Suppose—the thought just occurred to her—suppose one of the women should turn round and see her? It was not impossible.

But as the car sped on, Polly became surer of herself, and less afraid that she would be discovered.

The car was a large one of modern design, and the body was low. Thus from her position on the floor she could see the tops of houses and hotels.

They were passing along the cliff-head. She could tell that. But as yet she had not the slightest idea of her destination.

Zeep!

There was a skidding sound as the brake was applied, and the car skidded a little. From an angry shout that quickly died away, she knew that the car had narrowly missed running down some hapless passer-by. And it was not surprising, for the woman at the wheel was driving with reckless disregard of everyone and everything.

But the car was slowing up now, and finally it stopped. Polly trembled with excitement. Now was the crucial moment. How her heart was beating! Would she be discovered? The taller of the two women in front alighted. Polly knew it was she—the one not driving.

There was a steady crunch of gravel as the woman walked forward, then the bark of a dog—a warning bark, angry and aggressive. Then she heard the woman's acid tones.

Polly could not understand what the woman said, for though Trixie had given Polly a hand at French, the light-hearted girl was always at a loss when French people were speaking.

From the fact that the barking ceased, she guessed the woman had ordered the animal to lie down.

Now the car moved forward, and the schoolgirl in the back waited—oh, how anxiously!—for some sight or sign of this place to which she had been brought unwittingly by the women she suspected.

What would she find, or would she herself be discovered? She must indeed be careful.

She could not help wondering what sort of place this could be; it all seemed so strange. If her suspicions regarding these women were correct, then there was the possibility that they might take her prisoner, and she did not want that.

By the noise of the slow-moving, steel-studded tyres she knew that they drove on gravel.

Now she could see the house, and Polly

caught her breath. Why, it was none other than the house on the cliff, the house they had approached less than an hour ago! And that dog, it must have been the same as frightened Paula.

"Goodness!" she could not help muttering. "The plot thickens!"

In another moment the car-engine stopped, and both women went up the steps to the house.

Cautiously, very cautiously, Polly peered through the centre wind-screen. It was made of glass that in appearance strangely resembled mica, and she could see without being seen.

Yes, it was the same house, no doubt about that. How high it seemed, and yet how bare! Right at the very top was an attic under a queer-pointed gable. The window of that attic was dirty; and so indeed, when she came to look at them, were the others.

Polly could not help a slight shiver. It was not exactly fear. No, she was not frightened. She was sure of that. Yet how uncanny it seemed.

One minute, two minutes passed. Still no sign of the women.

Then, very carefully, very cautiously, looking to right and to left, Polly stole out of the car even more surreptitiously than she had stolen into it.

As her feet touched the gravel she gave a glad little sigh. The women had not yet reappeared. Perhaps they were busy inside. She looked round. No, there was no garage that she could see, so perchance the car was left outside all night. That being so, the women might not return at all.

Polly plucked up courage, and she walked nearer to the house. Then she dashed forward quickly, breathlessly, and waited, fearing to hear an alarm; but no, she had not been seen.

How slowly the minutes passed! And Polly took to observing little things—the grass, unkept and straggly, the weedy paths, the dirty windows.

Creak! Ooooooh!

She started.

But it was only a great tree swaying in the wind. Polly began to feel nervous, and began to wish the other girls were with her.

"Quelle heure est-il?"

Polly drew back and clutched the wall, as the figure of a Frenchwoman appeared in the porchway. Had she been seen? The woman turned to someone behind her.

Quickly, and as silently as she could, though twigs seemed to break beneath her feet with a noise akin to thunder, Polly moved to the safety of a neighbouring bush. And as the two figures again emerged together, she was safely concealed.

The women could not see her; they did not even glance in her direction. She was safe—yes.

Then the small woman got into the car. The self-starter whizzed, and the engine purred.

Another noise, which Polly, through a slight acquaintance with cars, knew meant a changing of gears, and the car went backwards down the drive. It stopped, again the changing of gears, and then, with a slight jerk, it went forward by the side of the house.

There followed the slam of a shutting door. The women returned and went into the house. Then—silence!

Polly listened with burning ears and bated breath.

But the only noise, save that of her own rapidly beating heart, was of the sea.

The women were gone, and now she, too, must go. How glad, too, she was to take her departure! But she must pass that dog again.

So very softly, for fear of alarming him, she crept down the path.

How she began to wish that she had never come!

That dog—suppose he should suddenly bark and arouse the household!

Snap! Another twig! Polly halted with dismay, for she felt somehow that the dog had heard her.

Woof! Woof!

It was a fearful bark, and Polly shrank back, hand to mouth. The dog had seen or heard her, and now— She glanced back at the house. But now all was quiet there.

She could hear the dog snuffing, could hear the clink of his chain. So long as he remained fastened to the tree, all was well. But suppose the chain should break! It was not unlikely that it might do so.

As yet she could not see the dog, for he was attached to a tree by the entrance to the grounds, hidden from her by the intervening foliage.

Could she run, perhaps, thought the perplexed and rather frightened Polly; it

would be better to run right away, to escape, than risk the chance of being bitten by the dog!

As she stood there still hesitating, a light gleamed in the house, and then she heard the door open. Polly pressed her back hard against the wall.

There were voices now, she could hear them distinctly, though she could not gather their meaning. But it was obvious what had brought them on to the scene. Once or twice she heard the French word "chien," and that told her enough, for though Polly knew little of French, she knew that "chien" meant dog.

Now, as she parted some of the foliage of the bush where she had taken cover, Polly could see one of the women, the smaller one, framed in the doorway.

From inside the house came the sound of footsteps, echoing footsteps accompanied by steady creaks—someone was coming downstairs.

Now one of the women shouted angrily at the dog, who had started again to bark. The animal, with a growl, stopped.

The women came out of the house down the path.

In an agony of suspense, Polly glanced up at the wall, wondering, speculating if escape were possible. She did not mind if they saw her, so long as she escaped. But she did not want to be kept a prisoner in this place.

Woof, woof, woof!

Once again the dog commenced to bark, and then Polly almost stopped breathing. For one of the women was coming towards her, making, it seemed, right for that very bush which Polly thought provided such good cover.

But no, the woman turned off, and made for the gates, where the dog was, and Polly breathed again. But she knew that even now she was not out of danger. The woman had gone to fetch the dog—Polly had no doubt at all about that.

The other woman, tall and thin, stood in the doorway, still surveying the scene.

"Why doesn't she go?" muttered Polly. For, with the small woman out of sight now, she could have gone from her cover, and perhaps slipped out by the back of the house.

Whilst the woman in the doorway stood watching, that was impossible; probably the

keen eyes of the tall Frenchwoman were even now searching every bush, and any moment there might be an excited French exclamation—then denunciation, and imprisonment in this house.

But no. The moments passed slowly, and Polly still remained in the security of her bush.

Woof, woof, woof!

The barks were shorter now, and nearer.

As she realised that, Polly gave a frightened start. She had thought at last that she was safe. But the Frenchwoman was bringing the dog!

The other woman in the doorway came down the path now, and spoke rapidly.

How Polly wished that she could understand French! At that moment she could almost have kicked herself. She had been told so often at school that French would some day be useful, and she, in her happy, light-hearted way, had neglected her French for tennis!

The rapid words meant nothing to her, yet they might mean escape—or imprisonment. Why wasn't Trixie here? Trixie would know what they said.

Polly leaned forward and puzzled her anxious brain to know what those rapidly spoken words meant.

The sound of gravel crunched underfoot; the panting of a dog straining at the end of a chain—those sounds warned her of the searcher's approach.

Nearer now! And if she moved that dog might be released! That was what worried her.

She held her breath. And the two women and that eager, panting dog passed by the palpitating Polly. When they had gone, Polly glanced in their direction.

How to escape? She must think quickly. For the women, she knew, guessed that someone was about, and Polly was sure, moreover, that they would next search the opposite side. Then she would have no chance to escape.

With bated breath she watched the dog as it pulled up by a bush near the house—the bush where she had first of all taken cover. The women were excited now, and one of them searched in the foliage.

Polly Linton's brain worked rapidly, devising some scheme whereby she could put the women on a false scent and escape.

At last she clapped her hands in her excitement, forgetting that even such a slight

movement as that might reveal her presence. Her eyes shone now, for she had found the way out of her difficult position.

Stooping, she picked up a small stone, then watched the women, waiting for an opportunity to carry out her plan.

Whiz!

She had flung the stone hard and true over the women's heads into one of the bushes at the back side of the house, right back, but near enough to make the rattle of the stone in the foliage audible to the women.

"Ah!"

She heard the exclamation distinctly. Then, as she watched, the two women turned quickly, led by the dog, and made their way to the side of the house.

And as they went, Polly flew like the wind for the door at the bottom of the drive, and was through in a twinkling.

She was free. Through a crack in the door she watched the women return to the house, leaving the dog to wander about the grounds. The front door of the house was shut. Polly waited for a few minutes, but the women did not reappear, and at length the plucky schoolgirl turned away from the house.

In the fresh air on the cliffhead she stood for a moment, gazing out to sea.

How quiet it was here! To the right was a straggling fence that went down at a terrible slant to the beach far below, where she could hear the sea.

For a moment or so she paused. Then, as the dog barked again and she heard voices, Polly was off like lightning, rushing along the cliff-top. And she did not stop till the shops of the seaside town came in sight.

Then at the hotel she found Betty and the others waiting for her.

"Polly," exclaimed Betty Barton anxiously, "where have you been? We have been waiting——"

"Been?" cried the excited Polly. "Oh, Betty, we're on the track of a real mystery!"

The other girls gathered round her eagerly, and there were many excited questions. But Betty held up her hand. She saw that they were attracting attention, and Betty did not want a crowd of strangers gathered round to hear what Polly had discovered. So Betty gave an order to get into the car.

In the car they got, the seven of them, and the chauffeur started up the engine.

When at last they were on their journey Polly told them of her ride in the car and the visit to the house on the cliff.

"Gracious!" exclaimed Betty, when her chum had finished. "Then that house, it is where the Frenchwomen live, and perhaps—"

Betty did not finish the sentence, but the others understood well enough what Betty meant.

"Bai Jove, the geal Gabrielle Lefroy—you mean she may be a pwisonah at that house, Betty?" asked Paula Crel.

And Betty Barton nodded.

"Yes," she said, "I think she is. And to-morrow we are going to find out for sure if we are right—if Gabrielle Lefroy is really there, a prisoner!"

"Hurrah!" cried Polly. "That's the idea, Betty!"

"Yes, wather!"

And there was a wholehearted chorus of approval, in which Nell's voice was not the least enthusiastic.

CHAPTER 14.

The Plans are Made.

"IT is indeed a very peculiar affair."

Mrs. Mannering poured out the coffee, and handed Betty Barton her cup as she spoke.

"Yes, rather. I should say it jolly well is," agreed Polly Linton. "I don't trust these women at all."

And from the other girls round the table came a general murmur of assent.

It was the following morning, and the girls, who had returned to Herons' Haunt the previous night, were discussing the strange message they had found.

"What did you say that bottle contained?" asked Mrs. Mannering, the owner of Herons' Haunt, where the Morcovo girls were spending their holiday. "The one you found in the sea, with the strange message in it?"

"Trixie knows best," said Madge Minden, and she nudged her chum's arm.

Trixie Hope looked up, and flushed.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" she said. "I was thinking of my people—I didn't hear. Pardon, mille pardons."

The hostess smiled.

"I understand," said Mrs. Mannering. "I wanted to know, Trixie dear, what mes-

sage was contained in the bottle you found yesterday."

Trixie puckered her brows.

"I can't remember the exact French wording," she said thoughtfully, then shrugged her shoulders. "Cela ne fait rien," she said. "It means 'Help! I, Gabrielle Lefroy, am a prisoner!' There were some words after, but I could not read them."

"Perhaps they said where she was a prisoner," suggested Mrs. Mannering.

Trixie nodded.

"Peut-etre," she answered. "Perhaps so."

"And the women," said Betty Barton. "Don't forget them, Trixie. That was the most suspicious part, Mrs. Mannering."

Then, with interruptions from the others, Trixie told Mrs. Mannering the story of their adventures on the previous day. When she had finished Mrs. Mannering nodded.

"If—if you can find anything definite, then you had better tell the police," she said.

"Oh, Mrs. Mannering," protested Betty, "couldn't we solve the mystery? I am sure we could search the place and find the girl. It would be wonderful!"

And Betty's eyes shone at the prospect of the adventure.

"Oh, rather!" cried Polly Linton, clapping her hands.

But Mrs. Mannering, though she smiled, did not seem to like the idea at all, and the Morcovo girls looked glum. Mrs. Mannering was their hostess, and while they were on holiday she was in charge of them. But had she asked them not to do a certain thing, not one of those six girls would have disobeyed her.

"But those women," said Mrs. Mannering, with a shake of the head. "We know nothing about them. They may have nothing to do with that bottle, although I must confess I think they have. If they have, then they would take you prisoners if they caught you in the house."

"We should not all go inside," said Betty. "If one went in, and the others waited outside, then that would be all right."

"Yes, please," said Polly Linton pleadingly. "Mrs. Mannering, we would be careful; and if the one who went was gone too long we could go up to the house, and, if necessary, call the police."

And so they all pleaded, even little Nell. And at last Mrs. Mannering, rather against her better judgment, decided that they might go.

"Hurrah!" cried Polly, jumping up, when that decision was given. And she ran across to Mrs. Mannering and kissed her cheek. How the others laughed at Polly's excitement. But they were just as excited themselves, and hardly gave time for their breakfast to digest.

They dressed quickly in their hats and scarves; for to get to Sealey they had to hire a car. Mrs. Mannering insisted that, when riding in the car, they should have their necks wrapped up. Although to the Morcove girls it seemed rather like molly-coddling, they had not the heart to protest after their hostess' kindness in letting them go to the house.

Nell went with them, and when at last they were all ready to go, Mrs. Mannering stood on the step and waved them good-bye.

"Be careful," she called to them, "and look after little Nell. Don't forget to have lunch, you know. There are several nice little places at Sealey."

And with merry good-byes the girls walked excitedly down the drive to the gates.

"This is topping!" said Polly Linton, and skipped along the road. "Now for a real adventure."

"Yes, wather! But I hope the house won't be dirty," simpered Paula Creel. "It will make my dress look quite untidy!"

"You won't have to go into the house," said Polly. "Betty is the one to go!"

And there was a chorus of approval.

Betty smiled.

"I'd like to be the one," she said. "I suppose as Form captain I ought to take the lead."

"Yes, rather," said Tess Trelawney.

Betty was glad they had elected her to undertake the task; she knew that Polly—yes, and Trixie, and most of them, in fact, would like to have gone, but they had chosen her, for she was leader.

The car they got from Mr. Topham, who met them smilingly, was in splendid condition, and ran so well that they were in the seaside town in a surprisingly short space of time.

"Even if we find out nothing we can have

a splendid day here," said Betty, shielding her eyes, and looking out to where the sea spread out in a grey-green expanse.

"A jolly good time," said Polly Linton. "But don't you be so pessimistic, Betty. We're going to find out a lot to-day."

They ordered the car to return for them at the hotel in the evening, then proceeded along the beach.

"It won't be easy to get into the house," said Betty. "In the first place it is broad daylight, and we may be seen."

"Well, it's no good knocking at the door, and asking if we can see the prisoner," smiled Tess Trelawney. "It'll mean getting in secretly, of course."

"Naturally," said Polly. "It'll be a nice bit of work getting in that house without being seen."

For by now they had neared the house on the cliff. They walked along, Betty and Polly leading, with Nell between them, Madge Minden and Trixie Hope behind, then Tess Trelawney and Paula Creel.

When they were still some yards from the house Betty called a halt.

"It's no good rushing headlong into things without making plans, is it?" she said.

"Not a bit of good," assented Polly. "And, see here, Betty, we ought all to be prepared. We'll wait here until you return."

But Betty Barton shook her head firmly.

"Oh, no," she said. "That won't do at all." She looked at the house, then back along the beach. "You can't all hang round the house; it will look far too suspicious. If they see a whole crowd of girls here, they will suspect at once that we're following them. And that won't do."

Polly pulled a long face.

"Then we shall be out of it," she grimaced.

Betty smiled, and took Polly's arm.

"Don't be such a silly, Polly," she said. "You'll be near if I need help. But you don't know how long I may be gone, now that I have to search the place."

And Polly saw that Betty was right.

"Very well, then," she shrugged, "we'll wait down on the beach. At any rate we shall be fairly near at hand in case of an emergency."

"Good enough," said Tess Trelawney.

And when, ten minutes later, Betty made

her way stealthily towards the house on the cliff, Polly and the others went below to the sunny, sandy beach.

In preparation for a short stay there, several girls had brought their bathing costumes and towels. Further along there were bathing tents, that could be hired; and there Tess and Madge and Paula enjoyed themselves to the full in the luxurious coolness of the sea.

CHAPTER 15.

"So it is you!"

BETTY BARTON, in a thoughtful attitude, stood outside the house on the cliff. Until this moment she had not quite realised the enormity of the task that lay before her.

She was about to break into this house and search for a prisoner! After all, she had not proved that the girl, Gabrielle, who had sent the message, was there. It was only surmise. Yet Betty was sure—almost sure.

She looked at the high walls, and at the fragments of broken glass that had been placed on top to prevent the intrusion of strangers. That broken glass presented an unpleasant obstacle; one which Betty did not at all like.

Before deciding to make her entry, however, she took a walk round the outer walls of the house.

As she reached the back, she gave a glad cry, and her pretty face lit up. For leaning over the wall was a tree, and that would prove very useful to her.

Had she not been young and agile, however, Betty would never have accomplished that difficult climb.

As it was, in a single jump she had, with both hands, caught hold of the projecting and hanging bough. For a second she swung to and fro, testing her weight. Yes, it stood her weight.

She knew then that the rest would be comparatively easy. And it was. Holding tight to the bough with both hands, she placed her feet against the wall, and "walked up." What a strain it was, though! And Betty, when she reached the top, had to stand, panting, while her arms and legs trembled slightly from the exertion.

Then she jumped down into the grounds below.

For a moment she stood staring round her, rather awed. For it all seemed so quiet, so strangely quiet, and somewhat uncanny.

There was grass around, ragged and unkempt. And the paths were overgrown with weeds.

Betty sat down for a minute to plan out her entry to the house. She looked at that gaunt building for some time. The windows she saw were dirty still, and though at the windows there were curtains, yet habitation had not appeared to have wrought a noticeable improvement.

How to break in?—that was the question. But it did not worry Betty long. Keeping in the shade of the wall, she crept round the house, watching for any sign of the Frenchwomen.

At one point in the house's structure there were no windows, and here she sprang forward. She was beside the house now, and, as far as she knew, unobserved.

She looked everywhere now; and listened, too, lest her movement should have revealed to some inside the fact that an investigator was abroad.

What an adventure this was! Her heart thumped wildly with excitement, for every moment she expected some strange voice to hail her.

When at last she realised that her movements must have gone undetected, Betty crept round to the back of the house. Here there was a lawn, or what had once been a lawn, but which now, like its companion in front, looked for all the world like a ruffled Persian cat.

And the windows here seemed even more dirty than those at the front. Betty crept up to one of them, and, wiping aside some of the dirt, peered in.

The large room, which looked like a kitchen, was dirty. The floorboards were covered with dust of years, and the range, which stood in a far corner, was rusted and dirty.

Could anyone really be living here? To Betty it seemed absurd and uncanny; yet she had to get in, and make her search. What better place than this could be found for concealing a kidnapped girl?

This window—she felt sure it would squeak were she to open it. She looked at it, then passed on. Perhaps there was some place better for her purpose. Perhaps the occupants had left some window open.

So Betty went round farther, the gravel scrunching slightly under her feet, though she trod ever so lightly. It was the silence of it all that magnified every little scrunch or squeak.

At last! Here was an open window. Betty peered in. There was no one about. Looking to right and left, she raised herself on to the sill. Leaning a bit too far, she fell lightly against the window; but what a bang it seemed to make! And poor Betty, she thought that there would be cries and alarms inside immediately.

But though she listened intently, no sound came to her anxious ears. And at last, plucking up her courage, she crept through the open window. It was a struggle, but soon she was inside.

The room in which Betty found herself was small and dirty, yet she could tell from the colour of the floorboards that they had been recently scrubbed.

In this part of the house there was, then, someone—someone active enough to scrub the floors. She had best move carefully.

So it was on tiptoe that Betty, very carefully and with thumping heart, crept to the door, which stood ajar.

Then, as she reached it, she almost fell back. Somewhere in the house someone was singing "I Passed By Your Window." And the captain of the Fourth Form at Morcove School could almost have laughed. That song—how queer it seemed after what had just happened!

But this was not the time for laughter, and Betty, holding her courage in both hands, as it were, proceeded along the passage.

The face she remembered having seen was on the top floor. And to the top floor she must proceed. But what a difficult task, when there might be someone coming down the stairs!

The singing had stopped now. And Betty crept along the passage to one of the front rooms where she could hear voices. Yes, there were two women speaking there, and they were speaking French.

Unless the two women came suddenly from the room, she could go on safely. Betty decided to risk it. And with as little noise as possible she sped up the stairs. At every step she took the stairs seemed to groan and creak complainingly, so that at

every creak Betty expected to hear the click of a door-handle being turned, and an angry French exclamation.

But no! When she had reached the first landing there came still no sound. There was a window on this landing, and from it she peered. The sea could be seen distinctly. But this was not the window at which they had seen the figure. Betty was certain of that.

So, as there was still another flight of stairs, she went up and up.

And now she was near the prisoner; she felt certain of that. But where exactly was the prisoner? There were several rooms here. She would try them all in turn.

But first she looked through the small attic window, the one above the one on the other floor, out of which she had glanced at the sea.

Yes, this was the window from which they had seen the figure; it must have been.

She walked along the passage. Yes, it was all right—all— She stopped. From one of the rooms had come the sound of breathing. On the tips of her toes, and trembling violently with excitement, Betty approached one of the doors.

First looking round, she tapped upon it, and listened. Yes, the breathing came from within. She tapped again.

From inside came an eerie voice in a shrill, discordant tone that made poor Betty nearly jump out of her skin.

"A moi, moi! Ciel! A moi!"

She tried the handle—the door was locked. Again came the breathing.

Then a shriek!

Frantically Betty turned the handle.

So excited she was that she did not hear the stealthy footstep on the stair until, as she stopped, breathless, the creak of a stair-board came to her ear. Without a second's hesitation she tried the handle of the next room. Yes, hooray! It turned, and she was inside the room!

In a second she wished she were not. She wished that she were a thousand miles away. The window of this dirty room was open a few inches at the top, and the dark blind down. In the wind it tapped and tapped eerily.

She turned to run from the room, risking even capture to get out of the place.

But too late! With a click the key was

turned in the lock! And she, too, was a prisoner! She who had come to rescue a prisoner was a prisoner herself! How strange this turn of fortune—how galling!

"Let me out! Oh, let me out!"

Frantically Betty hammered at the panels. Bang! Bang! Bang!

"Let me out!"

But the only reply she received was a laugh, and the creak, creak of stair-boards growing fainter and fainter now as her captor went down the stairs.

A prisoner! Betty looked round the room. As she shifted her feet she sneezed, for a cloud of dust had risen. She went to the window and tugged at the blind. It resisted, and she knew that it had been tied at the bottom. But she must get air into the stuffy room, and she tugged and tugged till, with a ripping sound, the blind came in two pieces.

How the window squeaked as she pulled the top half down! She could not move the bottom, though. It was stuck fast.

This room looked out to the sea. By shielding her eyes from the glaring sun she could see the edge of the golden stretch of beach.

Could she attract attention? She stood on the window-ledge and poked her head through the open top half.

For some time she could not make out anything in the distance.

Far away some black specks bobbed in the foam, then something white approached the beach. What could they be? Why, how foolish of her not to have thought of it before! Those specks must be her friends, Polly and the others, bathing perhaps.

Betty almost shouted her relief. Now she could—

"So it is you!"

CHAPTER 16.

Betty Meets an Old Enemy.

BETTY BARTON almost dropped from the ledge, and wheeled round with a start of sheer surprise.

In the doorway of the small room, which she had entered quietly, stood the thin-faced Frenchwoman, staring at Betty with her small black eyes, which glittered with anger.

"Eet ees you! I might have guess so!"

said the woman. She advanced towards Betty and snatched at the Fourth-Former's arm. Her grip was cruel—crueller even than her glittering eyes.

"It is I, yes," said Betty bravely, though inwardly frightened. The grip on her arm was tightening, and she wanted to shriek. But she knew she must be brave if Gabrielle Lefroy were to be rescued. "What of it?" she said coolly.

"Moi!" said the woman in a shrill voice. "You come, chez moi, in my 'ouse—break in comme voleur, like a thief, and zen — she shook with rage—"zen you ask what ees it of me! Bah!"

She flung Betty away, and the girl fell back against the wall.

"You are inquisitif?" asked the French woman, with a green light in her eyes. "You want to know about zis 'ouse? What you want to steal?"

"I—I haven't come to steal," said Betty, through her teeth. "I came—" She stopped. Her mission, if it were ever to be a success, must be kept a secret.

"You do not steal?" asked the woman keenly. "Zen what?"

But Betty did not answer. She could hear other footsteps now, and the French-woman as she, too, heard them, turned her head and waited.

Presently her companion, the woman who had driven the motor-boat, entered. She was a smaller woman, and prettier.

She started when she saw Betty, and made an exclamation.

"You were one the girls in the boat?" she said in perfect English.

Betty nodded, but said nothing. The smaller of the two women turned to someone who was outside.

"Come in!" she said.

Betty, who had imagined there were only two in the house, looked amazed. She had taken too much for granted.

"Esther, it's all right," said the smaller woman rather imperiously. "Come in!"

Betty craned her neck forward. Then, as a girl in servant's dress appeared behind the two Frenchwomen, she fell back a pace with surprise and dismay.

"Esther Hone!" she cried. "You here!"

And Esther Hone, the servant who had plotted to prevent Mr. Mantering from inheriting Herons' Haunt, and had then run away when she discovered that the girls had beaten her, flushed.

"I—I had no idea—" she stammered. "You know this girl?" exclaimed the smaller of the two women.

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"And I know her!" exclaimed Betty. "She is like you both—crafty, unscrupulous—"

"Silence!"

"I will not be silent!" cried Betty. "You are all unscrupulous, you—"

Again she broke off, realising that once more she had all but given away her secret mission to this house.

"You are a thief, and you shall be arrested!" said one of the women. "You broke in here—that is called house-breaking."

"If I am arrested," said Betty, "I shall tell all I know—tell that in the next room there is someone kept a prisoner. Someone whom I can hear breathing, and—and—"

Both women laughed, and Esther Hone giggled.

But Betty, she saw nothing funny in it. Everything was very serious to her.

"You silly child! Had you not been so curious," said the small woman, "you might have had an enjoyable holiday here by the sea. Now"—she shrugged her shoulders—"you, too, shall be a prisoner! We cannot let you go!"

"I— But—"

Betty relapsed into grim silence. They thought they could keep her prisoner. A few hours more and her friends on the beach would get anxious. Then they would come to her rescue, and all would be well.

The small woman was eyeing her closely.

"You think you can escape," she said with a short laugh. "You are too hopeful, my child!" The woman came closer now, and Betty could feel her breath upon her cheek. "If you do not consent to silence—if you do not promise that you will never say a word about this house, then you shall become our prisoner!"

Betty kept her eyes upon those of the Frenchwoman.

"I will not promise," she said, though huskily. "I don't care if you do make me a prisoner. I know these are threats—empty threats!" she finished scornfully. "So do what you will!"

"That is your last word?" snapped the little Frenchwoman.

"It is," said Betty, and she drew herself erect. "You cannot frighten me!"

The women looked at one another. What their looks expressed Betty could not say, but she knew, with sinking heart, that she would not be allowed to go free. And her friends—they were even now splashing about in the sea, quite unaware of her predicament.

"Leave her here!" snapped the small woman. Then she turned upon Betty. "Here you shall remain," she said, "a prisoner. If you promise to keep silence, you shall go free. At present you shall live on bread and water." She turned to Esther Hone, who had been standing by the wall, eyeing Betty with cruel triumph. "Esther, you shall fetch water and bread for this girl!"

Then, without another word, the three went from the room, the door was locked, and Betty was left alone.

When she was assured that they had gone down the stairs, Betty crept to the opposite wall, and listened intently. At first she could hear nothing, but at length the sound of subdued, but regular, breathing came to her ear.

But there were no other noises.

She returned to the window, thinking, for a moment, of shouting for help. But she realised that her chums would never hear her, and perhaps the women would.

Then—

Creak!

What was that? She listened, then almost laughed at her fears. She was getting "nervy." It was only a footstep on the stairs.

Probably Esther returning. Yes, of course, with her bread and water. And Betty went silently to the door. Esther coming! Perhaps she could run out when the door was opened.

No, that would never do at all; Esther would cry out, the women would hear, and she would be recaptured. No, there must be some better way than that.

The footsteps were coming nearer. She had not much time to think.

Then, even as the key was turned in the lock, an idea occurred to her.

The door opened, and Betty stood behind it breathlessly, her hands twitching.

Into the room came Esther Hone; then, like a panther, Betty sprang forward.

CHAPTER 17.

Turning the Tables.

O H!"

That was all the servant-girl had time to exclaim before Betty Barton's hand was over her mouth.

The tray was a handicap to the servant. She had not dropped it when Betty gripped her.

Betty knew how difficult it was for anyone to purposely release a laden tray. For when holding such a tray one is filled with a peculiar desire to keep the articles on the tray intact.

Betty's hand was over the servant's mouth, but Esther was struggling.

Quickly Betty took the jug of water from the tray, also the glass. She flung the water first into Esther's face, and in the shock of that the servant ceased to struggle. It gave Betty time to place the jug and glass upon the floor. It was then Esther dropped the tray. But Betty, with great dexterity, put her foot beneath it, breaking its fall.

Three floors below they would never hear that sound.

Now came the most difficult part of her plan. She snatched off her scarf and wound it round Esther's face. How the servant struggled. But Betty had no sympathy to extend to her.

How fortunate that, unscrupulous though she was, Esther was not clever. Had she stamped on the floor the alarm would have been given. But Esther's thoughts were confined to freeing herself from the grasp of her captor.

Her hands and feet were free still, and she struggled.

"Keep quiet!" hissed Betty. "I shall not hurt you if you do not struggle. Remember, Esther Hone, that I can get you into very serious trouble—"

And Esther, realising perhaps that, struggle though she might, she stood no chance, subsided. Betty, slipping off her own girdle, tied the servant's ankles together.

Then Betty did something that showed how quickly she could think.

In a twinkling she had slipped off the servant's blue print dress and apron, while Esther's eyes glared and goggled at her, Betty donned that dress over her own.

Then, having used Esther's handkerchief

to bind that girl's hands together, she donned the small cap belonging to the servant-girl.

Now she was complete as a servant, although with her pretty face and flushed cheeks, not at all like Esther Hone.

"Good-bye, Esther!" smiled Betty, as she made for the door. "I think I've turned the tables rather well—eh?"

But Esther Hone could only glare with burning eyes at the girl who had so cleverly outwitted her.

Betty shut the door and locked it. She would have taken the key, but she thought of Esther lying there, and realised that it might be many hours before she would be rescued.

Now to get down. It would not be easy. Betty realised that, and went carefully. The stairs creaked, but she had no actual cause for fear. The women, at a glance, might mistake Betty for the servant—they might give the dress a casual glance, and that would be quite sufficient.

Betty almost laughed at her own fears, so safely was that journey down the stairs accomplished. But as she reached the bottom flight her heart gave a jump, for from upstairs came a steady thump, thump! And then—

Then there came that shriek Betty had heard before. She paused for a moment, and then ran—ran along the side of the staircase.

The door of the front room had opened, and the two women came hurrying out.

They spoke in French, but Betty followed their meaning.

"The parrot—what has alarmed it?" cried one.

"Has the prisoner got free?"

Betty, crouching against the wall, they did not see, but ran frantically up the stairs. The shrieking and thumping still went on, and Betty came to the foot of the stairs.

She waited no longer now, but opened the front door, and fled down the long drive in front of the house. At the bottom of the drive was the large dog. Asleep! Yes, he was asleep. How Betty could have laughed.

She crept past him, and opened the door let in the high wall.

But the sound of turning the dusty key awakened the animal.

Woof Woof!

The dog barked savagely, and flew the length of his rattling chain. But he was too late. Betty Barton was free, and racing along the cliff head.

But as yet the two French women knew not of her escape.

CHAPTER 15.

"Leave it to me!"

"ESTHER!"

The tall, thin-faced French woman shouted out the servant's name as she mounted the stairs.

"Where ces zat girl?" she cried. "Esther Hone!"

But no reply came.

The small woman was already at the head of the stairs, and in another moment she had flung open the door.

When she got inside she uttered a cry of amazement; then went back and called to the woman below.

"That girl—she has escaped!" she cried. "Look for her! We must search everywhere!"

And though she knew that Esther Hone lay there unable to move, she made no attempt to loosen her bonds. Frantically the two Frenchwomen together searched that large house for Betty.

How fortunate Betty had not stayed to resume her investigations! Had they caught her, the French woman would have made quite certain that she would get no second chance to escape.

"Gone!" exclaimed the tall woman. And her face was contorted with rage.

"Vanished!"

Helpless their rage was, but none the less savage.

"It is Esther's fault! She is lying above, tied up!" exclaimed the small woman through her teeth.

So now they went upstairs to where Esther lay, helpless, on the dusty floor of the small attic.

The tall woman untied the knots, and at last set Esther Hone free. The servant then stood up sulkily, and rubbed her wrists and ankles.

"Where has that girl gone?" cried the small woman.

"How should I know?" snapped Esther, her temper thoroughly out of control. "She sprang upon me from behind the door, and now she has escaped. It is you who should have seen her, not I!"

"No insolence!" said the smaller of the women. "You are responsible for this. Now the police will be told." She lifted her shoulders with a helpless shrug. "And we shall be caught!"

"Zere ces, no other hiding-place," exclaimed the other woman.

And the three remained in silence.

"Only another two days, and all would be well," muttered the little Frenchwoman. "Another two days. We must stay here. All would be well if we could only hide that interfering detective girl somewhere else. If she gets free we are lost. She knows our plans. Knows when the jewels will arrive." She stamped her small foot imperiously. "She must not get free at any cost!"

"But if zose girls go to ze police?" said her friend curiously.

"If we hide the detective girl elsewhere—what matters it?" said the other. "The police will think it a pack of lies—oh? A mere girls' story. Those girls must have seen the bottle. I said at the time that they had. And they know Gabrielle is here."

"Oui—yes; and what else do they know?" asked her friend.

"Nothing. What can they know? We must get Gabrielle removed to some other hiding-place. Then, if the police come—well, we can deny everything."

Esther Hone, who had been silent, spoke now.

"You want that French girl hidden?" asked Esther.

Both Frenchwomen turned to her.

"Yes," they answered together. "Why?"

Esther Hone's cruel eyes wore a cunning look.

"I know a place those girls would never search. I know them. They are the girls I have mentioned; they live at Herons' Haunt!"

"Ah!" said the small woman, with keen perception. "You have a grudge against them yourself?"

"I have," confessed Esther. "And they will be baffled this time. Mere schoolgirls

though they are, they nevertheless are keen. They will come here, and who knows what will happen if the prisoner remains—"

"She must not remain!" snapped the small woman irritably.

"Then leave it to me," said the servant girl. "I know the proper place. I shall find pleasure in outwitting them. I cannot get work without a reference—save such a place as this. And it is through them that I have no reference!"

"Well, well, it shall be left to you!"

Esther nodded.

"There are several things to work out," said Esther. "But you can help me there, mademoiselle."

She lowered her voice and pronounced her plan. The French woman started, then patted the flushed Esther on the back.

"Ma chérie!" exclaimed the tall one. "But you have brains!"

How much Betty and the others would have given to have heard those plans!

CHAPTER 19.

Betty's Decision!

"PAULA, you look perfectly untidy!" laughed Polly Linton.

And certainly the usually elegant and immaculate Paula did look rather bedraggled.

Her hair hung down her back in straight streams, wet, and completely out of curl. Her face had a slight shine, which, had Paula been near enough to a mirror, would have given that young lady a severe shock.

But somehow Paula paid no heed to Polly Linton's jesting remark. The fact that her hair was wet and straggly worried her not, nor was she concerned with the shine that must be upon her face.

Paula was staring fixedly along the beach, her eyes goggling with surprise.

"Tess, Polly, Madge—all of you!" she cried. "Come quickly, girls. Who evah is this coming along the beach?"

So excited did Paula seem that the others, who were bathing in the sea, ceased suddenly to splash, and turned their heads.

"Where?" asked Tess.

But Polly, who had been sitting near

Paula, had seen now the running figure Paula had indicated.

"Why," gasped Polly, "if it isn't a servant-girl!"

All the girls were staring now, and so were a number of other people on the beach. For, to see a servant-girl running like the wind, in which her cap streamers flew, it was certainly a strange sight.

It was not until the figure of the servant was within a few yards of them that the girls of Morcove were able to make out her face at all.

"Why," cried Polly, as the girl came near, "if it isn't Betty!"

"My gracious, geals—Betty Barton!"

And Betty it was, as the girls all realised now.

"Betty," cried Polly, "whatever—"

"What has happened?" came a chorus.

Betty stopped, her breath coming in short gasps.

"Toll—you—in—a minute!" she gasped. So hard had she run that she was too breathless to explain all to them for some time.

How Polly and the others stared at Betty's attire! They simply could not wait in patience, and at last Betty had to tell them the whole story in a panting, almost incoherent monologue, to which her friends listened almost as breathlessly.

"Then the prisoner is in the house!" exclaimed Polly, when Betty had finished.

"And the queer noise—how uncanny!" shuddered Tess Trelawney. "I don't think I should have liked that at all, you know."

"Well, it wasn't very cheerful," admitted Betty.

There was a slight pause. The girls were all looking at one another, not knowing what to say.

"Then—then what had we better do now?" asked Madge Minden.

"Yes, that's what we've got to decide," nodded Polly.

"The first thing Betty had bettah do," vouchsafed Paula Creel, "is to change that wetcher attwire! It is most unbecoming, weally!"

So Betty, with a laugh, took Paula's good advice, and retired to the bathing tent. How fortunate that she had slipped Esther Hone's dress over her own without taking off her gym dress!

When she emerged from the small striped tent she was dressed as she had been that morning, save, of course, that she had not her hat or scarf.

"After all, the best thing to do," said Betty, "is to go along to the police-station and report everything."

Polly Linton nodded.

"Hear, hear!" she said. "It's the only way."

So without further ado they all made their way to the local police-station. All were excited, and not without cause.

Betty asked the way, and in a very few minutes they were inside the station. Betty went in, while the others waited outside.

Quickly, but very concisely, Betty explained all she knew to the sergeant in charge. The sergeant grinned at first, but then listened intently.

"Well, missie," he said, when Betty had finished, "it's a very strange business!" He glanced through the window at his side. "A very strange business!" he repeated. "But, in case there's anything in it—but I don't mind telling you I think there isn't—I'll have the matter looked into. I know the house you mean, though; it has been empty for years." A smile lit up his otherwise dull face. "And the locals say it's haunted."

"But you'll send a man along?" asked Betty.

"In ten minutes' time; he'll be outside."

And with that the sergeant made a sign that the interview was over.

Betty returned to her chums, and impatiently they waited. At length a plain-clothes man, recognisable at once as such, came down to them.

"You the girls that want the haunted house investigated?" he grinned, with a rather grim look.

"Yes, please," said Betty, and the policeman, flushing rather at being a cynosure of so many eyes, got into the car.

Off they went, the girls and the plain-clothes policeman, till Betty, some yards from the house, stopped the car.

Then they all got out, and in a hushed crowd followed the guardian of the law.

The house looked the same as it had an hour before. Nothing seemed altered, and

Betty, looking up, could see the attic window from which she had leaned earlier that day.

The policeman pushed open the large door.

The dog inside leaped out, and the policeman drew back.

"Hallo!" he said. "There's someone here, then, after all."

And from that moment his interest seemed to deepen. He looked from right to left keenly, and when in answer to his tap the tall Frenchwoman opened the door, his eyes searched the place relentlessly.

How surprised the Frenchwoman looked, too! And no wonder! The Morcove girls looked triumphant.

"What you want?" asked the woman, rather nervously. "If you are a tradesman, I want nothing."

Her eyes roved nervously over the crowd till they alighted on Betty. Then she started.

"I want to look over the house," said the man sternly. "Have you any objection, madam?"

"Objection? Why, no, not a leetle bit."

And the policeman, with a nod, took off his cap and entered. Betty & Co. followed.

"It'm!" said the policeman, glancing round. "Not over-furnished!"

"We 'ave not 'ad ze time," said the woman, shrugging her shoulders.

"May as well begin here," said the policeman, and he opened the first door.

He went from room to room, and with bated breath the girls followed.

Only two rooms on the first floor were occupied, and they were but scantily furnished.

Then came the kitchen. But no one was hidden there.

The next floor was the same. Every room, though dusty and dirty with the collection of years, was nevertheless empty.

But Betty did not mind. She did not expect anything to be found on these floors. It was the third floor that counted. When they got to that she became really excited.

The policeman braced himself now, and kept behind the Frenchwoman, for now the smaller one had joined her companion.

First the room in which Betty had been a prisoner was searched. But that room

had been cleared. For now there was not the slightest sign to show whether or not anyone had been in the room, for even the dusty floor had been smoothed over.

Somewhat Betty's heart began to sink.

But there was still the next room, the room from which the noises had emanated.

What a silence there was as, with trembling hands but triumphant eyes, the Frenchwoman unlocked the last door! And how eagerly they all pressed into the room!

Then Betty gave a startled cry. The room was empty!

CHAPTER 20.

Tricked!

EMPTY!

The Frenchwomen could hardly conceal their smiles, but Betty, she hardly knew what to do.

"Oh," she cried, "we are tricked! They have moved the girl somewhere else. They must have guessed I'd bring the police, and so they've moved her."

She turned to the policeman, but he was solidly silent and grim.

"Nothing here!" he said gruffly. "Strikes me, this is a joke. If it is—"

"A joke!" cried Betty wildly. "Oh, it isn't—it isn't! I tell you, I heard noises up here—screches and screams."

She broke off and darted forward.

"There!" she cried.

In her extended hand Betty held a small strip of bandage.

"See," she cried, "this room has been used!"

The policeman took the bandage and examined it carefully.

Betty, who now watched the Frenchwoman, saw that they exchanged quick looks. Then one of them spoke, the smaller one.

"It is nothing," she said, with a careless shrug. "We have used this room. This inquisitive girl, she says she heard screches. It is true."

The man uttered a curt "Ah!" and the Morocco girls literally hung on the woman's next words.

"The screches!" laughed the French-

woman. "They were the noises of a parrot. See!"

In a stride she had crossed the room and uncovered something that hung on the wall—something that in the darkness of the room had not been noticed.

"A—a parrot!" stammered Betty.

Then, as evidence of the truth of the Frenchwoman's statement, the parrot let forth a screech that was eerie and unnering.

"Is that the noise?" asked the policeman sternly.

Poor Betty, she was nonplussed, and gulped assent at the policeman's query.

"But it is not true what these women say about the prisoner!" she burst out, when her voice was steady. "The girl was here. I am certain of that. They have moved her." She turned to the small Frenchwoman. "Why did you take me prisoner?" she demanded.

The woman laughed, and shrugged her shoulders.

"You break in our 'ouse," she said. "We naturally take you prisoner."

There was a silence then, an awkward silence, in which all stared at poor blushing Betty.

The policeman turned to her sternly.

"Look here, missy," he said. "In future you'd better mind your own business, and leave other people's alone. There's nothing wrong here—you heard the parrot, and made up the rest."

"I didn't!" cried Betty. "Polly, Paula, Madge—"

"Of course—" began Polly.

Then she stopped. She wanted to believe Betty, and yet how absurd her friend's story seemed! Perhaps Betty had been frightened, and let her imagination run loose. In such a house as this it would be easy.

Yet Polly herself did not trust the Frenchwoman.

"Yes, Betty," she said, "and I believe you are right."

"And I," added Madge Minden.

"Mon aussi!" chimed in Trixie Hope. Tess and Paula nodded assent, and last but not least, little Nell squeezed Betty's arm.

But the policeman, in a very huffy mood indeed, was already going downstairs, apologising to the women.

"You," said the small Frenchwomen, as Betty stood in the doorway, "we do not expect you to apologise!"

Her face wore an unpleasant sneer, and Betty clenched her hand firmly.

"It is well you do not," she answered, fixing the woman with a keen glance. "I have not finished yet. I shall not rest content till I have found Gabrielle Lefroy!"

The door was closed, and there was nothing for the girls to do but return home. Then, in very depressed moods indeed, they left the house.

And on the way back to the hotel the girls fell to discussing the affair.

"I am sure that Gabrielle is still in the house," said Betty. "Those women have tricked us, somehow."

Polly Linton nodded.

"Yes, I, too am sure of that now, Betty. Unless—" Polly halted. "They may have moved her!"

"Then they've done it quickly," smiled Madge Minden. "They could hardly carry the girl out. You know we didn't wait long before going to the police."

"There's the car, don't forget," reminded Tess Trelawney.

"The car," said Polly. "Yes, but that belongs to the Grandways. Have the women still got it—"

Polly Linton broke off.

"Goodness!" cried Betty. "Why, there it is, Betty—outside the hotel!"

And there, sure enough, was the blue, open four-seater touring-car which the Frenchwomen had used.

In an excited group, the seven girls hurried forward. Polly Linton stooped down and made a note of the car's number.

"That may be useful—"

She broke off sharply, for a voice, unpleasant and sneering, had interrupted her. It was the voice of Cora Grandways.

"Gracious, Polly Linton, what are you doing to the car?" exclaimed Cora.

"If you think we've stolen it?" said Cora's younger sister, Judith.

"Thought you'd lent it to those two Frenchwomen," said Polly. She was not, as a rule, inquisitive, but now she had given the Grandways sisters an opening for making some sneering comments.

"What business is it of yours?" cried Cora; and then, turning to her sister, she added: "Lucky we don't wear our school hats, Judith. People might think we were like these kids."

"There is not the least need to be insulting," said Betty, and she gave the Grandways sisters a very cold glance. "We knew that you had lent the car to those women, that is all."

"Well, they haven't got it now," said Cora rudely. "In fact, they were polite enough to return it last night. If there's anything else you'd like to know—"

"The car is forty horse-power," put in Judith, with a slight giggle.

"Oh, yes, and cost two thousand pounds!" grinned Cora. "That's all the information I can think of at present," she finished, with a thoughtful frown. "Ah, here's pater!"

Betty's eyes were glinting angrily. She knew that the two sisters had been only too glad to give that information about the car; it was typical of their usual "swanky" manner.

Mr. Grandways did not glance at them, nor did his wife.

And when the whole Grandways family was safely ensconced in the car behind the chauffeur, Cora turned round with a slight sneer, and made a disdainful wave of the hand at the group of girls.

"Well," said Betty, when at last the large car had vanished out of sight. "we've found out that those Frenchwomen have not got the use of the car now."

"Cora said they haven't had it to-day," said Polly. "So that proves they cannot have moved the girl from the house."

"They may have carried her somewhere," suggested Paula.

Betty shook her head.

"No," she replied, "I do not think that is possible. My theory is that Gabrielle is still hidden in the house."

"Then we must rescue her," said Polly.

And it was obvious from their nods of approval that the others agreed with that decision.

"But the women are on their guard now," said Betty, "and I don't think the police will do anything more. We'll go home now and investigate to-morrow."

They had only to wait another minute or two, then Mr. Topham arrived with the car.

Into it they all crowded. It was rather a squeeze for seven of them, but at last they were all inside, and Betty called out "Right away!"

They were off then, and racing along the main street.

"What a splendid place this is!" exclaimed Betty. "And how bracing! Just the place for invalids, I should think."

"Oh, rather!" said Polly. "Look at all the bathchairs about!"

And indeed there were a great number of them.

Suddenly Madge Minden gave an awed whisper.

"Oh, look! That poor girl, her head is simply covered in bandages!"

And Betty and Co. saw that Madge was right.

A nursemaid was pushing along a large, flat pram used for invalids. In it there lay a girl. Her head, save only her eyes, and hair was covered with bandages.

All the girls gave the figure a brief glance, but did not stare closely.

They were past in a flash, and in the casual glance that they gave not one of the girls took real heed of the nursemaid who wheeled the pram.

She was dressed in a long coat with the usual nurse's headgear, and she wore dark blue smoked glasses.

How unfortunate that Betty and Co did not look for one second longer. They could hardly have failed to note that walk—a walk they should have known well. For the girl who pushed the pram was none other than Esther Hone!

And the girl in the pram—she was the object of the Morcove girls' quest—Gabrielle Lefroy, who had been the prisoner of the two Frenchwomen in the house on the cliff.

But, as it was, Betty and Co. were soon many hundreds of yards past the pram, and had all but forgotten the bandaged figure.

And once in Herons' Haunt they described to their hosts all that had happened.

At supper that night Mrs. Mannering's brow was worried, and she was strangely silent as Betty, with an occasional querulous sideglance, could not help noticing. But Betty did not know what was worrying her hostess.

Could it be the house—the will? Was there some flaw even yet that prevented Mrs. Mannering and Nell from coming into the property? No; Betty dismissed the idea from her mind as quickly as it entered. It was not possible. There had been no flaw.

Then what was worrying the kind woman who'd they loved so much?

The others, not so observant as Betty, were keeping up a merry cross-talk about their doings that day. So lighthearted did they seem that Betty, with a slight frown, wondered whether or not they had forgotten the case of Gabrielle and the house on the cliff.

She had not forgotten, and nor had Polly Linton.

"Wonder what really is the mystery of that girl's imprisonment, Betty?" said Polly thoughtfully, between sips of cooling lemonade.

So sudden was Polly's interruption of her thoughts that Betty started.

"Mystery?" she said. "I—I was just thinking."

"And so was I!"

It was Mrs. Mannering who had spoken. She leant forward, and Betty now knew the reason of the troubled look she had noted in her hostess' eyes. Mrs. Mannering was thinking about the affair of that day.

The other girls ceased their chatter, and all eyes were turned upon Mrs. Mannering.

"I have been worrying rather, girls," said their hostess. "This affair—it is all so strange, that I cannot help wondering what lies at the back of it."

"That is just what I wondered," nodded Betty. "Why they are keeping the girl a prisoner, and who she is?"

"Yes, it is vewy funny," said Paula, with a shake of the head. "I am suah now that Gabrielle is still theah."

"Oh, I expect we shall find out!" said Tess Trelawney.

"Probably the girl is an heiress," said Madge Minden thoughtfully.

"Nous verrons," was Trixie's contribution. "We shall see."

"I am afraid," smiled Mrs. Mannering. "that we are no nearer the solution now than we—"

Of a sudden she stopped; her face went white. With nervous, shaking hands she pushed back her chair.

Blankly they looked at one another. For from somewhere without had come a scream. And now frantically they could hear shouting.

"Fire! Fire! Fire!"

Automatically the girls sniffed.

"My word!" cried Polly Linton ex-

citedly. "Can you smell it? It's a fire, right enough, girls!"

And Polly made a rush for the door. The others followed as quickly, leaving Betty, with Nell at her side, and Mrs. Mannering to bring up the rear.

When they reached the front door, which Polly excitedly flung open, they saw what was the matter. Out they rushed, then down the drive and into the road.

The road outside the house was narrow, and on the other side was bordered by gorse-bushes. One of these bushes was in flames, which leaped high.

"Is there anyone there?" cried Polly, rushing forward.

But there was no reply. Save for the small area lit by the fire, all was dark. No one was to be seen.

"It is nothing serious," said Mrs. Mannering; "but we had better extinguish it before it spreads. Betty—Polly, get some water!"

But others obeyed the order as well, and soon a whole crowd of them was streaking back to the house.

Then Madge Minden, the first to reach the porchway, gave a shout.

"Gracious, the door—it's locked!"

Polly pushed forward, but though she banged and thumped, and leaned her weight against it, the door would not budge.

"My word!" she exclaimed. "What's to be done now?"

Mrs. Mannering, who was coming up the path towards them, stared, and Polly explained what was the matter.

"Dear me, how terribly annoying!" exclaimed the woman. "You had better go round the back way, one of you. No, that, too, is locked. Oh, what a nuisance? Is there no window? Surely—"

And then began a search for a window through which entrance could be gained.

"It is no use waiting," said Mrs. Mannering. "Polly, Betty, all of you, run and get sticks or fern leaves. We must beat out the flames."

So the girls, nothing loth, gathered fern leaves, and laid about them with a will in an attempt to subdue the fire. And while this was going on, someone else was attempting to enter by the back door.

That someone was Esther Hone, the girl whom Betty and Co., unknowingly, had seen in Sealey. The cunning servant had wheeled that pram well out of the town,

and had waited until some minutes later the two Frenchwomen arrived with a car they had hired.

Very cleverly Esther had walked on when the car approached, and there had been some fine acting, too, between the Frenchwomen and Esther.

The servant girl had pretended not to know the women, and had said that the pram contained an invalid girl. This had been done for the benefit of the chauffeur.

Then the Frenchwomen had offered Esther a lift, and she had asked to be dropped just before Herons' Haunt.

But for the presence of the chauffeur things would have been easier for the women; but it was impossible to hire a car to drive oneself; that was why, hitherto, they had borrowed the Grandways' car, so that no driver of any sort should be witness of their actions.

"And if you could give me a lift back, I should be pleased," Esther said.

Naturally, the women agreed. And when at last Herons' Haunt was reached, Esther alighted, the invalid pram was handed out of the car, and the girl placed in it. Then the car and the women had gone off together.

Esther Hone's next actions were amazing. Quickly she had lit a small bush, having first sprinkled round it the contents of a small fire-extinguisher she had brought to prevent the fire from spreading.

How cunningly that scheme had been laid, thanks due to the small Frenchwoman.

And now, the bush afire, with Betty and the others trying to subdue it, Esther Hone wheeled the pram down the side entrance, and stopped at the back door.

That cunning ruse of the fire had brought out the whole household. Now Esther had but to get into the house. That was simplicity itself, for the servant knew the house well. With her she had a duplicate key to the back door, and something else, more useful, which the Frenchwoman had supplied—a pair of pincers.

Leaving her pram, the servant tried to insert her key in the back door keyhole. But the door was locked, and there was a key on the inside.

Then the pincers came into play. As is common with large keys, a portion of key stuck out on Esther's side of the door. She gripped this with the pincers. It was hard work, but she was eager, and soon she

heard the welcome click of the key turning in the lock.

The door was open now, and the cunning servant was in the house. A draught blowing down the main passage told her that the front door, too, was open.

Hastily she shut the door. She heard voices in the front of the house, and she almost laughed. The whole household of Herons' Haunt was attending to the fire!

Now to get the girl in the pram—Gabrielle Lefroy—inside the house. That was the most difficult part of all. But Esther, she knew the house like a book.

Gabrielle, bound and gagged, was a heavy burden, especially as Esther had to carry some of the girl's food with her. It would not do to leave the girl in the house without food!

She was going upstairs now, quickly. Her movements were without hesitation, and presently she stopped before a panel at the head of the stairs.

Click!

The panel was open, revealing a dark interior. Inside this, and along a small, dark passage, Esther led the girl. Another click, and a dark, musty-smelling side room was laid open.

This was to be the girl's hiding-place, and Esther laid her upon the floor, setting beside her a tin of compressed liquid food. Then she loosened the girl's arms slightly, so that she could move a little and reach the tin. Although Gabrielle could not open her jaws to speak, yet she could sip through her teeth from the tin.

There was no time to stop for more. Esther could do nothing further. Perhaps she could return during the night to complete the arrangements for the girl's feeding.

So Esther, rather frightened, for she had been what seemed to her a long time, hastened back, shutting the sliding panels behind her.

The Morocco girls were at the front door now, trying to get in.

But Esther was free! She whisked down the corridor to the back door, and locked that behind her, with the key that was in the lock. Her mission was accomplished; Gabrielle Lefroy was a prisoner in Herons' Haunt—in the very house where the girls who sought her were staying.

And as the returning car, bearing the Frenchwomen and Esther, swept through the night, there was much jubilation.

CHAPTER 21.

A New Development.

BETTY BARTON could not sleep that night.

Long after she went to bed her eyes remained open, and she turned sleeplessly from side to side. There was so much on her mind that her brain kept working, working ceaselessly.

Though she tried not to, she could not help her mind commencing to unravel the mysteries of the day.

Outside, the wind was rustling the high trees, and the branches went tap, tap! against the window-panes.

But it was not the wind that kept her awake. She looked round the small room in which she and two of her Morocco school friends were sleeping, hoping to see someone else awake.

"Polly!" she whispered to the girl who shared her bed.

But Polly Linton was fast asleep, and, though Betty would have liked to talk with her chum, she had not the heart to awake her.

In the next bed slept Trixie Hope and Madge Minden, and those girls were sleeping soundly.

On the other side, too, in the bed shared by Paula Creel and Tess Trelawney, all was quiet.

And Betty, with tired but sleepless eyes, still tossed and turned in her bed.

Tap! Tap!

It was only the tree branches tap-tapping against the window-pane, but it made Betty peer over her bedclothes nervously.

She was listening intently now, her thoughts centred on a noise she imagined came from below.

So now Betty sat up in bed, and, though it was quite a warm night, huddled the clothes around her.

Creak!

It was undoubtedly a noise downstairs. Betty's first impulse was to get out of bed and go downstairs with the idea of investigating the strange noise. But then it was probably nothing worth troubling about—a loose window or unfastened door, perhaps.

There had been noises at Herons' Haunt before, when Esther Hone had behaved so mysteriously whilst attempting to find and destroy a will; for with the will destroyed he could have gained possession of the house, which was then in Chancery.

But all that, Betty told herself, was now cleared up. The will had been found, the house had come into the permanent possession of Mrs. Mannering. With Esther Hone gone, there was surely nothing else to fear.

Esther Hone! Once again Betty fell to thinking of the mystery of Gabrielle and the Frenchwomen.

But suddenly she sat bolt upright again, for she had gradually sunk back on to her pillows, and this time listened more intently.

Yes, there was something going on downstairs! What it was she could not say. But she was sure that the noise was not due to the wind.

Moving carefully, so as not to disturb the sleeping Polly, Betty arose and slipped on her warm dressing-gown. Her slippers were near by, and she slid her feet into them.

Now, with an indrawn breath, she moved quietly and quickly to the door.

For a moment she stopped, then looked back at her sleeping cubs. Then she opened the door softly and went out on to the landing.

How gloomy it seemed when the moon hid itself behind a cloud! She glanced at the loaded lights that bordered the small passage, and shivered slightly.

To the head of the wide flight of stairs she went, then commenced to walk down them slowly and quietly. Every now and then she stopped to listen, trying to locate the mysterious sound.

But it had ceased now, and Betty stopped short, drawing her dressing-gown round her. Perhaps she had been mistaken, after all. Perhaps it had only been the wind.

Wind in the trees, she knew, was responsible for many of the "ghosts" people heard, or said they heard.

She would go on, though, now she had started, and make quite sure that all was well below.

Down the stairs she went, until the ground floor was reached. There she halted by a table, where she knew was a candle and some matches.

She felt over the table, and her heart seemed to miss a beat. She could not find the matches. They were gone! No, surely not; they should be there! She looked round her apprehensively.

Almost immediately she laughed at her fears. The matches might have been moved some time ago; they might be somewhere else.

She groped across to another small table, a kind of butler's table, and there, sure enough, were the candlestick and matches together.

How glad she was when a match was struck and gave forth a yellow gleam that lit up the passage! She applied the match to the candle, and, with that in her hand, Betty Barton moved along the corridor.

She tried the room doors; they were all locked.

She walked along the corridor to the kitchen, holding the candle high over her head, so that it did not dazzle her, but threw a better and more useful gleam in front.

Thinking that the sound she had heard might have been caused by a cat jumping on to the dresser, she glanced at that massive piece of furniture. But the rows of plates and dishes still remained intact; the cups hung steadily in their usual position.

As she stood there a sudden, cool breeze fanned Betty's cheek, and with a scarcely perceptible flutter the candle that she held in her hand went out, plunging the large kitchen in darkness.

Betty stood quite still.

The moon, coming suddenly from behind a cloud, made light once more the large kitchen, and showed Betty standing there, the candlestick still held aloft, an expression of wonderment on her face.

For that breeze—how could it have come save through some open window or door?

Lest she should be too late to see the cause of the open window or door—too late to see the midnight intruder, whom she felt must be now in the house, Betty hurried forward.

Flick! She had re-lit the candle.

Carefully she examined all the windows. The catches were still secure, untouched. Then only the door remained to be searched.

And Betty ran through the small scullery to the door, where tradesmen came during the day to get orders.

She grabbed the handle quickly and gave it a sharp turn. But it did not move.

The door was locked!

Betty groped for the key, but the key—the key was gone! She bent low and examined the lock with the candle. There was no key there—no doubting that!—yet the door was indeed locked.

Perhaps the key had been lost. Betty stood there not knowing quite what to do or

think. That breeze—where had it come from unless from window or door? And they were all fastened!

There was nothing for it now but back to bed, and Betty, her mind in a whirl, went upstairs slowly.

In the bed-room all was quiet; Polly Linton and the others still slept soundly. At first she thought of waking Polly, but she realised that until morning, when she would tell all, there was really nothing to be done.

Tired out now she fell to sleep almost at once, to dream of strange bottles, and candles, of Frenchwomen, and lonely houses.

CHAPTER 22.

The Mystery Deepens.

"RAIN! Oh, what a nuisance!"

Polly Linton, in her nightdress, pressed her jolly, pretty face against the leaded window-pane of the bed-room. Polly's expression was glum, and not unduly so, considering the weather conditions that reigned outside.

At last the glorious sunshine had given way to a drizzle of rain, and happy, light-hearted Polly Linton was downcast.

At her cry the others had awakened, and were turning drowsily to see what had worried Polly.

"What's the matter?" asked Madge Minden sleepily.

"Rain," said Polly, with a long face. "Not much good going out to-day. We shall have to stay indoors."

"Bai Jove—yes, wather! How wretched!" Languid Paula Creel rubbed her sleepy eyes.

But Betty, tired with her night escapade, had closed her eyes again the second after she opened them. Polly looked round at her.

"Hallo, Betty!" she asked. "Tired?" But Betty did not reply. Her breathing was regular, for she was fast asleep.

"Shush!" said Tess Trelawney. "Let her sleep, girls. Probably she's very tired."

And the others nodded. So while they all drowsed, Betty was allowed to sleep on.

Paula was usually the last down, for she was rather particular about her clothes. According to Polly Linton, it was a waste of time for Paula to go downstairs at all, since by the time she had finished dressing the others were all ready to go to bed. That

was a gross exaggeration on Polly's part, however.

But to-day Paula, very spick and span, her hair very neat and tidy, went down to breakfast. She was not the last one down. Betty Barton still remained in bed asleep.

Paula was greeted with a faint cheer when she entered the breakfast-room, for the others were at the table, waiting.

Mrs. Mannering gave the new entrant a gentle smile.

"Well, Paula" she greeted the languid girl, "and is Betty up yet?"

"No, Mrs. Mannering," answered Paula Creel: "she was still asleep when I came down."

So Mrs. Mannering took out Betty's breakfast and placed it in the oven to keep it warm.

"Wonder what's made Betty so tired?" said Tess Trelawney reflectively, sipping her coffee.

"Well, she had a hard day yesterday, you know," mumbled Polly. "Still, I dare say she'll be down soon. Betty is not one to lie in bed, as a rule."

Mrs. Mannering returned, and took her place at the table. There was a slight, puzzled frown on her usually serene brow, and the girls could not help wondering what could be the matter.

But Polly put it down to the fact that Mrs. Mannering was thinking of the affair of the Frenchwomen and Gabrielle Lefroy, the prisoner.

"I—I'm awfully sorry that I'm late for breakfast!" apologised Betty, when she came down some minutes later. "It's—it's not often that I get up late, but I think I must have overslept myself this morning, Mrs. Mannering."

Mrs. Mannering gave the girl a sweet smile.

"Why, Betty, dear," she said, "surely you did not think I was cross? Of course, I excuse you for being late! You had a very trying day yesterday, dear."

And Betty sat down.

"Bai Jove, Betty, dear gal, how white you look!" exclaimed Paula Creel.

"Am I?" laughed Betty. "It must be because of the adventure I had during the night."

"Adventure!"

The word came from every throat, and Betty became the cynosure of all eyes.

"Do tell us!" implored Polly. "What sort of adventure, Betty!"

Then Betty Barton told them all about the noise she had heard, about the candle which, despite the locked doors and windows, had been blown out.

"How strange!" murmured Mrs. Mannering, when the girl had finished.

Many suggestions were put forward, but they were most of them irrelevant and useless. It seemed a mystery even deeper than that of Gabrielle Lefroy and the French-women in the house on the cliff.

Breakfast progressed in silence and almost in gloom. From time to time Polly Linton glanced round at the windows, through which she could see the rain-swept drive and trees.

Mrs. Mannering noted those looks.

"I don't think the rain will stop for some time, Polly," she smiled. "Suppose you'll stay in to-day?"

Polly nodded glumly.

"There doesn't seem much else to do," she answered. "Stay in and read, that's all there is for it."

"Well, there's the mystery to solve," replied Mrs. Mannering. "And solving mysteries is what you would be doing out of doors. I suppose you would all go up to the house on the cliff?"

Paula Creel shuddered her contradiction of that surmise. But the others nodded.

"I, for one, should have gone to the house," agreed Betty, "because I don't like the idea of that poor girl being kept a prisoner. And, although the police say she is not there, I am sure they are mistaken."

"Well, it may clear up this afternoon," suggested Mrs. Mannering brightly. "Then you can go and search to your heart's content. But I should certainly advise you to stay in this morning. It's really very wet outside."

"We can have a game of hide-and-seek," said Nell.

Little Nell had not taken a great part in the conversation so far, but certainly hers was the best suggestion yet put forward.

"Hurrah!" cried Polly. "That's the idea! There must be thousands of places here where we can hide!"

"Places innumerable!" said Mrs. Mannering. "And even Nell doesn't know them all."

"Then hide-and-seek it is!" cried Polly.

The meal finished, they all helped Mrs. Mannering to clear away; for now there was

no servant in the house, and it was a lot of work for Mrs. Mannering to do single-handed.

Then Betty suggested that they should help wash-up, and naturally the suggestion was acceded to. Soon they were all busy, some washing, others wiping.

CHAPTER 23.

Shut In.

"HERE!" Little Nell caught Betty's arm and dragged her towards the wall.

The game in process was one of the oldest known to civilisation, and one of the most popular, too. Paula at first thought it too childish, but the others soon pooh-poohed that suggestion.

In Herons' Haunt there were many fine hiding-places, and a girl could hide herself there without any great fear of discovery.

Polly was the seeker, having elected herself to that position, and now Betty and Nell were together on the upstairs landing.

Nell knew many places where hiding would be a matter of ease and seeking one of the greatest difficulty, and she had found one now.

"We'll go to the secret passage," she suggested. "All the girls know of it, but it has never been properly explored."

She referred to a passage in the old house which she had shown the girls when they first came to Herons' Haunt. The existence of the passage had been known for years, but it was never explored because Mrs. Mannering was afraid that the flooring might be dangerous.

But the outer part of the passage was safe, and this was where Nell meant to hide.

Betty and Nell quickly made their way to the panel which gave access to the secret passage, and Nell pressed the button which caused the panel to slide back. Then she and Betty stepped through.

"How dark it seems!" whispered Betty. "Do you think you ought to close that panel Nell? Does it open from the inside?"

Little Nell was rather excited, for she was not used to having companions, and it was natural now that there were seven companions for her.

"It'll be all right, Betty," she answered; "we can get out. But I've always wanted

to explore these passages. There are sure to be little by-passages off them."

Betty was silent. She wondered whether or not she ought to allow Nell to search the passages. She knew that in such an old house as this it was probable that the flooring of the passages might be broken and rotted.

But she gave in to her companion. Nell, after all, was the daughter of the house, and Betty had no right to take the lead.

So Nell led now, and Betty followed. The lame girl was trembling with excitement, and Betty took hold of her arm.

"Not too fast, Nell," she whispered—"not too fast! These floorboards may be rotten; there may be a hole—anything. Do be careful!"

She did not mention the lame girl's infirmity, for fear of hurting her feelings, and Nell did not appear to see any danger ahead.

"This way!" cried Nell excitedly; and she hobbled on quickly.

The air was damp and clammy, and the musty smell hung round. Betty found no joy in this, although, as a rule, she had a venturesome spirit.

Had her companion been Polly Linton, Betty would not have minded so much. But she was anxious for Nell's safety now.

"I wish we had thought to bring a light of some sort," said Nell. "This is very dark."

And it certainly was.

"Shall I go and fetch a light?" said Betty, in worried tones, and she stopped.

But Nell clutched her arm.

"Not now," she whispered. "Can't you hear her—Polly? She's outside! Shush!"

Sure enough, outside there were footsteps, cautious footsteps, that told of a stealthy approach. The two hidden girls drew together: Would Polly come to the panel?

To Betty, it did not really matter whether Polly came near or whether she didn't. But Nell did not want to be caught; she was younger in most of her ways than her companions.

But Polly passed by, and Nell gave a merry laugh.

"She's gone!" she said. "Come on, Betty dear!"

The passage along which they ran was parallel to the wall, and Betty began to take more interest in the venture now, although she had not yet lost her fears for Nell's safety.

Close to the panelling Nell stopped, and put her ear to the wall.

"Listen!" she whispered. "Can you hear that? Footsteps!"

Betty listened intently. Yes, they were footsteps right enough. But strange footsteps! They were getting fainter, and now, sounded high or.

"Why," she exclaimed, "that is someone, going upstairs! Nell, we must be near the stairs here."

"Goodness—yes!"

Nell's eyes shone, and, although Betty could not see the lame girl, she sensed her excitement.

"And now," said Nell, "we are at the part of the house where there seems a wide, blank wall." Her tones positively thrilled with tense excitement. "And this place to the right—it must be a small, secret room."

But Betty pulled Nell's arm.

"I shouldn't try to search it," she said persuasively. "It can't have been used for years, you know, and it is sure to have rotted and sunk. It will be dangerous."

"I don't think so, Betty," said Nell. "Anyway, let's try it!"

Her tone was so gentle and pleading that Betty had not the heart to refuse.

"All—all right," she said, "if you like, Nell! But let's be quick!"

And much against her will, Betty waited there while Nell commenced to tap the opposite side of the passage, looking for an entrance.

Click!

It was so sharp and sudden, that noise, that Betty Barton jumped.

"Oh, Nell," she exclaimed, "you did frighten me! Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes," answered the other. "It's all right, Betty! Quick, here is another passage or room or something!"

Betty ran forward, and followed Nell into the other passage or room—they knew not which.

"Well, and what now?" asked Betty. She was through the opening, having felt her way in. "It was a fluke that you discovered the spring, Nell. I—"

She broke off, and wheeled about sharply, but too late! With a snap, the panel that Nell had accidentally opened swung to.

"Gracious!" gasped Betty. "Nell, Nell, we're shut in!"

The younger girl turned.

"What do you mean, Betty?" she asked,

a more nervous tone noticeable in her voice now. "How can we be shut in? We got in all right!"

"Don't you understand?" gasped poor Betty, her face white. "That door—the one which you opened just now—it is closed, and we cannot get back!"

Then, and only then, the true seriousness of the situation dawned upon Nell.

"But—but surely," she said, "there must be a way back? Betty, we—we found the catch to get in—"

Betty did not reply. She would not blame Nell, yet she could not help feeling that but for her companion's over-cagerness, they might now be free and in the open.

Closed in a secret passage—a passage so secret that no one else knew of its existence! They were trapped—trapped! And Betty Barton realised it only too clearly. Would they ever get out?

"Hammer on the panels!" said Nell, now thoroughly afraid. "Perhaps we can make them hear. Oh, Betty dear, shout—shout!"

And Nell clenched her hands helplessly. Betty was calm. They were in difficulty, perhaps in danger. But she did not lose her head. Shouting—it was not much use, for the panelling was thick. Between them and their friends there were two walls and a small passage. Even then would Polly & Co. effect an entrance?

"I'm going to explore," said Nell at last. "There may be a way out here." And, despite Betty's protests, the lame girl commenced to cross the room.

Creak!
"Mind!" cried Betty, in alarm. "I tell you, Nell, the floor may be rotten! Do—do be careful!"

"I shall be all right," said Nell confidently. "I shall— Oh!"

At that sharp cry Betty sprang forward, and clutched at where she expected her friend to be; then she heard a thud. Nell had fallen. Her foot had gone through a rotten floorboard.

"Oh!"
In that cry from her companion Betty recognised fear and pain.

"Nell," she whispered hoarsely, "you are hurt?"

Little Nell began to whimper. Now she was thoroughly afraid. As Betty had predicted, the flooring in parts had rotted, and Nell, by not placing her feet with due care, had trodden on a weak board and fallen.

"I—I'm not hurt," she answered proudly, but the pain in her arm told her that it was strained.

"We must shout!" cried Betty, in despair. "Shout together while I look for that secret catch, Nell."

"One, two, three—help!"

"Polly—Paula—Madge!"

Their cries rang out loudly, yet how feebly they must have sounded on the other side of the wall! Moreover, there may have not been anyone near to hand. Polly was upstairs, as they knew.

Betty commenced to hammer the panels. "Help! Help! Help!"

Again and again they shouted, until their throats ached. Betty's thumping fists were bruised, but she paid no heed to that. They could not stay here all night. They must be reached and rescued somehow.

"Help!"

The musty atmosphere of the room now seemed to choke them, and it seemed to the girls that they had been in the room for years and years.

Betty would have gone across the floor, but Nell's fall warned her that to do so was not safe. And Nell, she stood quite close to Betty, holding the girl's arm tightly.

"Shush!" As she heard a muffled sound on the other side of the panel, Betty held up her forefinger. "What was that?"

Both listened with ears that seemed painfully strained. For from somewhere on the opposite side of the wall had come an answering cry.

"Hallo! Where are you?"

"Here!" cried Betty, so excitedly that she forgot that her answer really conveyed no information.

"Who is it?" came a voice they recognised as Polly's.

The voice sounded nearer, and they guessed that Polly must have come right up to the outside wall. They could imagine her surprise, too.

Polly's voice had ceased now, and they could hear distant mutterings that told them there must be others arriving.

"Who is there?"

It was Mrs. Mannering's voice that shouted that question, and Betty, though her throat ached, raised her voice for another shout:

"It is Nell and I, Betty Barton. We are in a secret room, and cannot get out!"

Once more there was silence.

Outside, Mrs. Mannering, with very white face, was looking anxiously from one to the other of the girls.

"Gracious!" she gasped. "Those girls, they are imprisoned! What can we do? They must be released! This is terrible!"

"What can we do?" asked Polly, with a helpless gesture. "We know the secret panel, but they are far from that!"

It did not occur to them in their excitement that the passages might be connected.

"These passages," said the agitated Mrs. Mannering. "I have often said I would have them all blocked up! We must force a way in."

Madge Minden nodded.

"They probably got in all right, but the panel swung to, and now they can't get out," she surmised.

But Mrs. Mannering was not listening.

"How can we force a way in?" she cried, pressing her hands together. "Polly—Madge! Quick, get axes; there are two in the woodshed outside! It is the only way. We must chop through the panels." She raised her voice. "Betty—Nell!" she shouted. "Hold on, and don't get near the wall. We are going to use axes!"

At that, Betty and Nell cheered up. Betty pressed Nell's hand excitedly.

"Nell," she whispered, "it's all right, dear! They are coming, and soon we shall be free."

Polly and Madge did not take long in getting the axes, for they were eager to secure their chums' release.

"Oh, quick—quick!" Mrs. Mannering said.

And Polly and Madge began. They swung the axes high, and brought them against the woodwork. Tess Trelawney, Trixie Hope, and Paula Creel stood by silent, anxious, expectant, while Mrs. Mannering, by far the most agitated of them all, stood almost on tiptoe, so eager was she. Polly and Madge, though they swung their axes like professional woodcutters, could not work fast enough to please her.

there came a gap in the wall, and Polly and Madge ceased chopping to gaze through the opening, which represented their strenuous endeavour; but naturally they could not see either Nell or Betty.

"Let me take an axe!" cried Tess Trelawney.

"Moi aussi!" cried Trixie Hope.

"Yes, wather!"

But Trixie and Tess were first, and they relieved Polly and Madge.

"Phew!" said Polly, as she handed over her axe. "This is real work. My word, what a holiday we're having!"

While Madge and Polly eased their tired arms, Tess and Trixie swung their axes with vim and vigour. The opening became larger and larger, and now Tess and Trixie ceased work.

"Betty!" called Mrs. Mannering. "Nell! Where are you?"

Tap tap! came Betty's answer.

"We're just here!"

"They are near. Oh how glad I am!" sighed the worried Mrs. Mannering. "Girls, just a few more blows!"

"Wait!" cried Betty. "This is a secret panel that slides open. See, first, if you can find the catch."

But Mrs. Mannering shook her head.

"No, Betty," she answered. "The panel does not matter. You must be released—that is essential. Stand back from the panel, Betty dear. We will force the way."

So once more Tess and Trixie, almost enjoying this new exercise, plied their axes with a will. But it was hard work, and soon Paula relieved Tess, and Polly Trixie.

Only a few more blows, then Paula gave a glad cry.

"Theab, that's enough—what?"

A black, gaping opening showed in the inside panelling.

"Stop a minute," exclaimed Betty, "and I'll see if I can get through."

Then—and what a glad moment it was!—Betty's head appeared through the aperture.

Her face was covered with dust, and she looked so comical that Paula could not help laughing. The tense strain had relaxed, and the laugh did her good. The others joined in, and Betty smiled herself.

"I can't get through," she said. "Pass me in a candle and an axe, so that I can chop from this side. It will be easier, be-

• CHAPTER 24.

The Mysterious Prisoner.

CRASH! Crash! Crash!
The axes fell with rhythm and splintering force on the panelling of the wall.

Gradually, painfully slow, it seemed,

cause you have to reach across the passage now."

Trixie Hope ran off and fetched a candle; then an axe was passed through to Betty.

A moment elapsed, and she lit the candle, which Nell held for her. Then, by the candle's fitful gleam, Betty commenced slashing with the axe. She slashed with vigour, and soon had created an opening sufficient for her and Nell to get through.

"Phew! That was hot work!" she gasped, and rested her axe.

For the first time she glanced round the small apartment in which she and Nell were standing. Nell looked at her, and saw in her eyes something startled—something that alarmed her. Nell, too, looked round, wondering what Betty had seen.

"Oh!"

Nell almost dropped the candle with shock.

For in a far corner of that small, dark, musty apartment lay a figure of a girl.

"Good gracious!" gasped Betty.

She took the candle from Nell's now nerveless fingers, held it high, so that she could tread in safety, and crossed to that figure.

The girl she saw was bandaged about the head. Her feet were tied together, and so were her hands. But the hands were tied loosely, and could move a little. Of the head, only the eyes were to be seen, but they glittered brilliantly, though they blinked at the candle light.

Betty gave a soft exclamation. Even in that momentary glance she recognised the girl—the girl she and the other had seen in the pram wheeled by a nursemaid last night in Sealey.

From the girl's mouth there were tubes to a basin of beef-tea and a tin of milk. That was her food, then. Betty could not help waiting to take in those details, though it needed only a glance to tell her how this girl had been fed. But now she was on her knees.

"What is it?" cried Polly, from outside.

"A prisoner!" came Betty's answer, in hurried, excited tones. "A girl here, tied hand and foot!"

"What!"

"A girl!"

It was all so overwhelmingly surprising that the girls' faces were blank. Someone a prisoner in the house! Mrs. Mannering started forward.

"Stand back!" came Betty's voice from within. "I cannot undo the binding here. If you stand where you are, I will pass her through to you!"

Round the opening, in an amazed, anxious group, the five girls and Mrs. Mannering gathered, waiting for Betty to hand through to them the prisoner she had found under such extraordinary circumstances.

"Mind!" breathed Betty.

With a little aid from Nell, Betty raised the girl from the floor, and dragged her to the opening, through which in a moment that bound figure was being passed to safety.

Mrs. Mannering and those outside were full of wonderment, but they took the strange girl carefully and gently, and laid her on the floor.

Next through the opening came Nell and Betty.

"Phew!" said Betty. "Aren't I dusty?"

She turned then to the girl on the floor, and without another word to any of them, commenced to unfasten the bandages and bindings that kept the poor girl so secure a prisoner.

How quickly Betty's fingers worked. And now the others helped her.

In this, it was a case of many hands making light work, not too many cooks spoiling the broth, for in no time they had the bandages undone, and soon the French girl—for such she was—lay gasping but free on the floor.

Betty ran off and fetched her some water, and the girl drank it eagerly. When she had finished she put down the glass and rubbed her wrists and ankles where the bindings had chafed.

"Libre!" she exclaimed.

The girls opened their eyes and blinked, and Trixie Hope gave a little whoop.

"Vous êtes française?" she asked.

The former prisoner nodded dully.

"Je suis française," she nodded. "J'ai faim!"

"What does she mean, Trixie?" asked Polly.

Trixie, now in the proud position of interpreter, gave a nod of the head.

"She's hungry," she said briefly.

"Poor girl!" murmured Mrs. Mannering. "How she must have suffered! Pick her up, girls, and bring her to the dining-room. I will get her some food."

And off she went.

Of course, the Morcovo girls were all eagerness to hear this strange girl's story. They wanted to know why she was a prisoner, and, what interested them more, how she came to be in the house.

"Wonder who she can be?" mused Madge Minden excitedly, while they were getting food for the girl. "She speaks French. There seems to be a quantity of French prisoners—"

Before Madge could say another word, Betty interrupted her.

"My word!" she gasped. "Oh, why didn't I think of it before? This girl—she may be Gabrielle Lefroy!"

At this sudden new explanation of affairs, the girls were dumbfounded for a moment.

"But—but," stammered Polly. "how could they have got her in here without us knowing, and what do they know about this place?"

"Oh, it was easy!" said the now excited Betty. "Don't you see, this explains the mystery about last night. They knew of this place because of Esther Hone. Esther knows this house better than anyone, perhaps."

"My word!" gasped Tess Trelawney. "And she probably got the girl in last night!"

"Not last night," said Betty. "I should think during the evening, just when that call of fire came. It seemed strange at the time that there should have been such an alarm over a mere bush fire."

"Well, it is all very strange and worrying," sighed Mrs. Mannering. "Thank goodness, anyway, that you and Nell are free, Betty! Nell has strained her arm, though."

"Yes, Mrs. Mannering, I am afraid so," said Betty.

They went to the dining-room now, and the French girl, her meal finished, sat talking in French with Trixie Hope. They stood and listened, and Trixie—she almost swelled with pride at being the only one properly able to understand what the girl said. But even Trixie could not understand every word the French girl said; but she understood enough.

"What does she say?" asked Betty eagerly; and Trixie settled herself down to explain.

"Firstly," said Trixie, "she is the girl who was a prisoner in the house on the cliff—Gabrielle Lefroy her name is. She

is a French girl-detective, and on the track of jewel thieves, a gang of which those two women are members. The jewels are being brought to the shore in a boat to-night, and then the Frenchwomen will clear. Gabrielle got on their track in a boat, but the Frenchwomen suspected she was after them, and they captured her and made her their prisoner. Then, bandaging her as we saw, Esther Hone brought her here last night, returning during the night with food."

"My word!"

"Gracious!"

"Bai Jove!"

It was an astounding explanation, and one of the last Betty & Co. had expected to hear.

"Jewel thieves!" exclaimed Tess Trelawney. "How topping!"

The others laughed at this, but Mrs. Mannering did not even smile. She saw the seriousness of the whole affair. She guessed, too, that Betty & Co. would now want to go on the track of the Frenchwomen, but that was the last thing she herself wanted.

"Tell her, Trixie," she said, "that I will send for the police at once."

And in laboured sentences, Trixie conveyed the meaning of Mrs. Mannering's remarks to the French girl.

Then Gabrielle Lefroy shook her head excitedly and emphatically.

"Non!" she cried—"mais non!"

And she explained to Trixie her reasons for not wanting police intervention—yet.

"What does she say?" asked Mrs. Mannering.

Trixie frowned.

"She says that the police must not interfere yet; they can do nothing till she has proof and a warrant. She must get the jewels, though."

Mrs. Mannering's brow deepened. The girls noted the troubled look in her eyes, and all wondered the same thing—if she would let them go with the French girl on her chase.

But the French girl was talking and gesticulating to Trixie again. She was a dark girl, with fine, dark eyes, and long, black hair. Not tall, nor yet small, she was about the same height as Tess Trelawney, and not unlike that girl in colouring.

The French girl had stopped talking now, and Trixie, flushed and excited, turned round.

"Mrs. Mannering," she said, "I've told her of our adventures, and now she wants a disguise. She suggests that five of us go with her, and she borrows the dress of the sixth girl. She says she can alter her complexion and eyebrows so that the Frenchwomen won't recognise her."

For a moment or two Mrs. Mannering hesitated, but at last she gave way.

"Very well," she said.

Trixie turned to Gabrielle Lefroy and told her that the plan had met with approval. Now the French girl pointed to Tess Trelawney. Her eyes had been wandering over the faces of the schoolgirls, and, not understanding her meaning, Tess started now. But Trixie, when she turned again, explained what Gabrielle Lefroy meant.

"She wants to borrow your dress and hat, Tess," said Trixie. "And—and she wants you to stay behind. She says she's rather like you, and she can make-up to look more so."

"Oh!" said poor Tess.

Her mouth half-opened to refuse, for she badly wanted to take part in this further adventure. But her better spirit got the upper hand, and she nodded.

Betty clapped her hands.

"Hurrah!" she cried. "Then Gabrielle is coming with us as a Morcove girl, Trixie?"

Trixie Hopo, important now in the rôle of interpreter, nodded with solemnity due to her office.

And then Tess and Gabrielle, with the others, went upstairs to change their clothes.

What a transformation there was, too, when the French girl came down at last, full of vivacity despite her imprisonment, complete in garb as a Morcove schoolgirl! Her hat was pulled down over her eyes, and one could easily have mistaken her for Tess Trelawney, who stood by her side in a spare drill dress.

CHAPTER 25.

On the Track.

MADEMOISELLE GRANDWAYS!"

A short, smartly dressed woman entered the lounge of the large hotel at Sealey and went forward with hand outstretched to a dark-haired girl who sat in an armchair perusing the pages of a fashion book.

Cora Grandways, for it was she, looked up. and a smile of recognition lit up her face.

"Why, Mademoiselle Journee!" she said. "Oh, I am glad!"

And the schoolgirl, with a slight simper, took the outstretched hand of the smart Frenchwoman. Judith, her sister, who sat in the next chair, rose, too, and also shook hands with the Frenchwoman; but Judith affected an air of indifference.

Several other people in the lounge glanced curiously at the strangely assorted three.

"We're staying here now," said Cora lightly, by way of conversation. "Pater agreed to us moving at last. We told him we couldn't stay in that dead-and-alive place, Heronvale. Didn't we, Judith?"

Judith nodded casually.

"So here we are," went on Cora, "residents till the end of the—I mean, till our holiday is finished."

Judith coloured, for she had nearly revealed the fact that they were school-girls.

Had she been more observant, Judith would have seen the contemptuous twinkle in the woman's eyes. Yet when she spoke again, Mademoiselle Journee's tone was even and smooth.

"My car has not arrived," she said, flicking the carpeting with the end of her dainty parasol. She shrugged her shoulders in a way that Cora was simply dying to imitate. "Il n'y a pas de quoi." She gave the sisters a keen look. "If I can still rely upon your superb generosity to supply me with the felicity of a car."

This was said with a bow, a bow of camaraderie that made the sisters simply long to say: "Oh, certainly, take the car, do, mademoiselle!"

"What a pity your car has not arrived," said Cora, inwardly trembling with excitement, but outwardly calm. She glanced round to see that all the other people were listening. They were. "Still, no doubt we could let you have ours—the open touring-car, you know. The chauffeur can't come, though; he's out with the pater in the coupe. I think so—oh, Judith?"

"Yes, the coupe," said Judith, labouring to give the impression that Mr. Grandways had sixteen instead of two cars at his disposal.

The Frenchwoman looked round.

"That is good," she said; "I am in a

hurry! I have an appointment. My cousin, the baron, arrives by the next boat."

"Oh, well, better hurry!" said Cora Grandways, and she ran upstairs for the key.

In another moment she was down again, and, with Judith and the Frenchwoman, she went to the garage.

The tank was filled up, and Cora tipped the man who had cleaned the car for them.

Mademoiselle got in, closed the door, and pulled out the self-starter knob. The girls could not help noticing how pleased mademoiselle looked, but they thought that was because now she would be in time to meet the boat and her cousin, the baron.

It did not occur to either of them that the Frenchwoman might have an ulterior motive. When, some days ago, the Frenchwoman, with a companion, had first spoken to the two girls, they had been charmed and honoured. And what plausible tales the Frenchwomen had told Cora and her sister! The two Morcove girls fully believed that Mademoiselles Journee and Lefevre were well-known aristocratic French. They little guessed that they were jewel thieves—that they were the two women referred to by Gabrielle Lefroy.

Hardly had Cora and Judith returned to their armchairs than there came another interruption. More visitors, too, but visitors now that brought smiles to the faces of the women in the lounge.

For these new visitors—they were none other than Betty Barton & Co.

Betty, directly she got inside the hotel, ran to Cora Grandways. Betty was excited, and her eyes were gleaming.

"Cora!" she cried. "Cora, those two Frenchwomen, the ones you lent your car to the other day. Have you seen them lately?"

So surprised was Cora that she dropped her book. The others in the lounge pricked up their ears, and keen glances were cast at the girls over tops of books and papers.

"Seen them?" frowned Cora, annoyed at this sudden entry. "What the dickens do you mean?"

"Yes, Betty Barton," snapped Judith Grandways, "I think it's like your cheek to come thrusting yourself upon us like this! Please keep your bad manners to yourself!"

Betty suffered this gibe in patience. It was seldom that the Grandways sisters, who

ever since Betty had come to Morcove School had been down on her, could refrain from making stinging references to the fact that poor Betty's mother had, during hard times, done "charing" for a living.

But Betty suffered it in patience. She must have the information.

"I asked you, Cora," she said, as calmly as she could, "if you have seen those women lately. It is most important, please!"—and Betty's tone certainly sounded urgent. "Please, don't waste time."

Cora looked round and nodded curtly to Judith. She could see that Betty was not to be balked of the answer she required, and Cora did not want a scene inside.

So, tugging her sister's arm, she led the way outside. Betty, perforce, followed.

"Now, what is it?" snapped Cora.

Betty very patiently repeated her question. The other girls, who were sitting in Mr. Topham's car outside, listened.

"Well, if you must know, she has borrowed the car again," said Cora. "She's gone to meet her cousin by the next boat."

"Thanks!" said Betty.

Cora, with a toss of the head, went inside, and Judith followed her.

After the sisters had gone, there was a slight silence.

"Wolly?" said Polly Linton. "And where now? We've tried the house on the cliff—that was empty, and we've drawn a blank here."

But Betty shook her head.

"We've not drawn a blank," she answered slowly. "The car has gone, and we can find where. We've all seen the car; it's enamelled blue. Some of these people must know."

She ran across to a seat near by, where several people were sitting, and asked an old gentleman if he had seen a blue car go by.

The old gentleman nodded, and told Betty how Cora and Judith had gone to the garage. He said the car had gone off in the direction of the pier.

And Betty returned with that information. Trixie Hope waved her hand excitedly as Betty jumped into the car.

"One minute!" said Trixie excitedly. "Gabrielle Lefroy has a suggestion. I have told her what has happened."

So the girls listened, and Trixie went on: "Gabrielle says that the woman is prob-

ably going to meet the boat. She has gone to tell the person who sent the jewels over that it is all right."

"The jewels are here, then?" cried Betty.

Trixie Hope nodded vigorously.

"Gabrielle thinks so," she nodded. "She says that they were probably dropped from the boat and sent ashore by some means, so that the women could pick them up. Now they are going to tell their confederate that it is all right."

"Oh!"

That explanation seemed quite simple, and also obvious, now that it had been made.

"Then to the pier, Mr. Topham," said Betty. "And quick, please!"

The car shot forward and raced along the sea-front, pulling up at last when the pier entrance was reached.

Betty jumped out of the car and ran across to the pier entrance. There were several cars standing about, cars of varying sizes and makes. But there was no light-blue car that she could see.

She clutched at the arm of a pier-attendant, and looked up at his sunburnt face.

"Have you seen a car—a blue car?" she asked excitedly.

"Blue car, miss? Yes, several. One or two there now."

"No, no!" cried Betty. "I mean, a light-blue car—a big one, with red wheels. A four-seater!"

"Oh, that American car! A blue one, with a squarish radiator!"

"Yes, I think that's the one," said Betty; but she had no idea whether the car was English, French, or American.

"Well," said the pier-attendant, "that car, with two ladies and a rather stout gentleman, went up the road about a minute ago."

"Which way?"

The man pointed up the road, and Betty, with a word of thanks, ran quickly back to the car.

"Which way?" asked Trixie. "Straight on?"

Betty nodded. She got into the car, and Mr. Topham sent the car forward. They travelled fast, but not fast enough to please any of the girls.

Through the High Street they raced, until the houses and shops were passed and a straight road by the cliffside, with no houses at all, lay ahead of them.

Suddenly Gabrielle, who was looking ahead keenly, gave a shout.

"A cloud of dust!" cried Trixie, in translation. "Look, Betty—look!"

All the girls looked. Ahead was a dust-cloud, whirling and twirling, and the girls knew then that their quarry was in sight.

"We shall catch them yet! Oh, faster!" cried Polly Linton. "We shan't be long now, girls!"

The girls clutched one another and the side of the car, as it raced along, clearing the road as the bumps were passed. But now they could see the car ahead, through the cloud of dust which it left behind it.

On, on they went, with their quarry getting nearer and nearer.

Now they could clearly discern the car—could see the two women and the man behind. The man had turned his head, and was now waving frantically to the Frenchwoman who was driving.

The tall woman, seated beside the small one, who was driving, turned round, saw the Morcove girls, then spoke rapidly to her companion.

Without warning, the car in front slowed up, clouding up the dust behind. Then came the grinding of brakes, hurriedly applied.

The car in front was slowing down.

"What's the matter?" exclaimed Betty.

This change of their enemies' tactics was rather dumbfounding. For guilty, chased people, the Frenchwomen and their companion were taking risks.

Why had they halted now? Perhaps they thought they would be able to hoodwink the schoolgirls, and throw them completely off the track.

Mr. Topham had no room to pass the car in front, for the road was narrow here. He applied his brakes, and his face wore an angry look. This run had not done his car any good, and he was annoyed with the French people.

The small Frenchwoman leaned back and turned her head. She spoke in rapid French to her companion, thinking that the girls could not possibly get her meaning.

Nor would they have done, not even Trixie, for that girl, though excellent at French, could not understand it properly when spoken at such a rapid rate.

But Gabrielle was with them. The Frenchwoman did not know that. Her

casual glance at the pursuing car had told her that in it were schoolgirls, but she had made no close inspection of their faces.

Now Betty & Co. were springing to their feet, whilst Trixie asked Gabrielle what the Frenchwoman had said. Gabrielle spoke slowly, and Trixie nodded her head.

"Oui, oui!" she exclaimed. "Betty, they say they can hoodwink us, so that we shall return. That Frenchwoman said we can't find the jewels; they are too well hidden."

Betty Barton nodded, and went across to the Frenchwomen.

"Good-afternoon!" said the small Frenchwoman. "What may you want, little girl?"

"Want?" said Betty. "You think you can deceive us. Let me tell you that you cannot. You have those jewels with you—"

The stout Frenchman changed colour, and gave his companions a questioning look. But once again the smaller of the two women took the lead.

"What jewels?" she asked insolently. "I do not understand you, girl. Why are you so meddlesome? If I have any more of this persecution, I shall report the matter to the police."

"Yes," said the other woman. "First, you come to ze 'ouse; you are not satisfied." She shrugged her shoulders. "You bring ze police, and zey know zat nozing at all is wrong. Iz not zat enough?"

"It is not enough," said Betty. "We shall search the car. There are enough of us here to do it, mademoiselle. And we are determined. You shall not trick us this time."

The small Frenchwoman was looking rather perturbed now. How did these girls know about the jewels? That was a point she could not understand.

So now she turned to the man, and spoke in rapid French again. But suddenly she stopped, her jaw dropped, and then she gave a gasp of surprise.

For from the group of girls had stepped someone who spoke in perfect French. It was Gabrielle Lefroy—Gabrielle, who should have been a prisoner in Herons' Haunt!

And the French girl's eyes were flashing, as she faced the small, sharp-witted woman. In rapid French, Gabrielle spoke.

"Mademoiselle Journee, you have gone too far," she said. "I have been released, and your scheme is known. You spoke in

our language, thinking that no one could understand. You have the jewels with you; I know that now."

The man and the two women were speechless as they were suddenly confronted by this French girl-detective, who had heard their every word.

Betty & Co. looked triumphant.

For a moment the French people hesitated. Then the woman at the wheel made a motion, and they all got out of the car.

"Search the car," said the woman in French, making a contemptuous movement of the hand.

Betty and Trixie and Gabrielle Lefroy stepped forward. The French girl spoke to Trixie.

"You search," she said in French; "I will watch."

So Gabrielle stood back while Betty and the others rummaged in the car. The French girl was watching the man and the two women keenly, watching their faces lest any sign or movement should tell her that Betty & Co. were nearing the hiding-place.

Yet the French girl was sure that the jewels were not in the car, otherwise the women would hardly have allowed the search to proceed without interference.

"Your bag," said Gabrielle, in French, stepping forward to the tall Frenchwoman.

The woman scowled, but passed over the bag.

"Here is my parasol," said the smaller woman, with a slight laugh.

Gabrielle searched both in turn, and returned them. But as she did so she watched the women's faces. For an instant she glanced at the Frenchman out of the corner of her eye. She had felt his eyes upon her as she searched the parasol, and until then he had taken no interest in the proceedings.

The Frenchman, noting her looks, turned out the contents of his pockets with an angry exclamation.

But there was no sign of any jewels.

Betty & Co. looked puzzled.

"I can't find anything," said Polly.

"Nor I," said Betty.

Nor apparently had any of the others. For a moment there was silence, whilst the French girl's keen eyes wandered from one to the other of the French people.

"Do you think the jewels are concealed on them?" asked Betty. And Trixie translated for Gabrielle's benefit.

"No," answered the French girl. "They are too clever."

And Betty & Co. gathered her meaning without the aid of Trixie's translation.

"Then—then they can't have the jewels with them," said Madge Minden in dismay.

And, indeed, that was what the Morcove girls were beginning to think.

But Gabrielle Lefroy was not satisfied.

"Your handbag again," she said to the tall Frenchwoman, all the time keeping her own eyes upon those of the women.

The handbag was passed over, and searched by Gabrielle and all the Morcove girls.

"Now," she asked evenly, but very keenly, "that sunshade."

"Don't be a fool!" snapped the Frenchman. "You have searched that once!" He snatched it from his companion, opened it, and held it aloft angrily.

This conversation had been unintelligible to Betty & Co. The Frenchman's anger therefore surprised her. But Gabrielle Lefroy now took the parasol from the man.

That little show of anger, that reluctance to let her search the parasol, had given Gabrielle the clue she needed.

Betty and Polly nudged one another as the French girl examined the parasol with minute care.

"This is a thick handle," she said in French to the small woman.

"It is stronger when the wind blows," answered the woman.

Then Gabrielle laughed.

"How foolish of me!" she said. "This is a metal handle, cleverly disguised."

The Frenchman thrust out his arm to regain the parasol, but Gabrielle jumped back.

"So this is it!" she exclaimed. "The jewels are in here."

"What does she say, Trixie?" asked Betty.

Trixie translated, for she had understood all. And Betty's eyes shone with excitement.

"Open it!" she cried. "Open it, Gabrielle!"

The French girl gave an exclamation, then, noting a catch under the jewelled handle, twisted it. To the delight of the girls, and the absolute dismay of the Frenchwomen, Gabrielle Lefroy unscrewed the head, then upturned the parasol.

Down into her hands tumbled sparkling jewels. She upturned the parasol, and replaced the jewels, turning to the Frenchwomen with a smile.

"The case is over," she said. "You had better come quietly to the police-station. Escape for you is impossible!"

"My word!" gasped Betty as Trixie translated. "Then they are trapped now."

"Hawwah!" cried Paula Creel. "The jewels are found, and all ends happily."

"Not for the Frenchwomen!" said Madge Minden.

And she was right. At first the Frenchman was inclined to demur; then, with a resigned shrug of the shoulders, he realised the futility of attempting escape.

The French girl got into the driving seat of the Grandways' car, while the women sat behind. That she was accustomed to driving cars was obvious.

"Turn round!" she cried to the girls behind. "The police-station!"

And Trixie translated to Mr. Topham.

In two minutes time they were flying back to Scaley, Betty & Co. in front, the Frenchwomen behind, with the girl-detective driving. In a clearer part of the road she got ahead, so that the Morcove girls could watch her captives, and see that they did not escape.

"Well, that's over!" sighed Betty, when at last they were back at Herons' Haunt. "It has been an exciting adventure. And how glad we have all been that Trixie could speak French!"

Trixie Hope blushed, and said something about Gabrielle.

"Yes," nodded Polly Linton. "Without Gabrielle we should have let those women go."

Then Gabrielle, with Trixie as interpreter, thanked them all for their kindness, and for the fact that they had rescued her. Mrs. Mannering was there, and so was Nell, and they had a wonderful farewell feast in Gabrielle's honour, for the French girl had to go to London to attend to the case and see the French Consul.

When at last she went they were all sorry, and saw her off at the station.

"Perhaps we shall see you again, Gabrielle," said Betty.

"Peut-etre," laughed the French girl, as the train steamed out. "Au revoir!"

"Au revoir!" called the Morcove girls in chorus.

And then they all turned for home, and got into the car which had brought them all to the station.

Back to Herons' Haunt they went to spend the remainder of their holiday with Mrs. Mannering and Nell.

And those last days of their holiday were the happiest of all.

What became of Esther Hone they were unable to discover. Once they revisited the house on the cliff, but found it completely deserted, even the dog had gone. The servant had vanished as completely as it

the earth had opened up and swallowed her

And the Grandways girls, when they were questioned about her, knew nothing, professing total ignorance of the whole matter. They had had to explain to the police how and why they had lent the car to the woman; but they had convinced the authorities that they were in complete ignorance of the women's motives and movements. And so they were!

Esther Hone's whereabouts still remained a mystery, but whether or not they would ever meet her again the Morcove school-girls did not know.

THE END.

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"Have some toffee?"

"Thanks!" said Ada, taking a chunk of the almond rock Marion offered her. "It looks very tempting!"

"That's good!" Marion looked ever so pleased. "I made it myself. Jolly good fun. You must have a lesson!"

"Rather!" agreed Ada. "When are you making the next lot?"

"I was just going to do so when you called. Come on, you can give me a hand, and learn for yourself."

"We'll make walnut creams, Neapolitan ices, London rock—anything you like!"

And so they set about the job in business-like fashion.

Marion carefully measured out and poured into a scrupulously clean pan half a cupful of best golden syrup, then added an equal quantity of water, one and a half teaspoonful of vinegar, a spot or two of almond essence, two ounces of butter, and half a pound of the finest Demerara sugar.

"The art is in the boiling," Marion explained, as she put the pan on to the gas-stove. "You have to keep the sides of the pan perfectly clean, and boil slowly until the sugar is melted. Then, when that's done, we turn the gas up and let the toffee boil hard, taking the lid off occasionally to remove the scum from the mixture.

"This is caused by impurities, and if it is not removed your sweets will be spoilt. The quicker the mixture boils the better will be the result."

"How long does it take?" asked Ada interestedly.

"About a quarter for almond rock, but varying times for other sweets," her chum replied. "In time you learn to judge when its done by its appearance and by simple tests.

"When you think it is finished you should take a little and drop it into cold water. When it has hardened and cooled, try it and see if it is crisp enough. If it

is too soft or sticky it requires more boiling. If too crisp it is overboiled. So test it too soon rather than too late."

Marion applied the test, and found the toffee just right, so she quickly transferred the mixture into a flat, buttered tin which she had prepared, and immediately added a liberal quantity of blanched almonds.

The whole process had taken less than half an hour, and when the tin had been allowed to remain on a shelf in a cool corner for an hour, the sweet was cool and ready to be eased out with a knife, broken up, and eaten.

"And now what about making some coconut-ice?" asked Marion. "Here's a good recipe, from which I've got excellent results.

"We put a pound of loaf sugar into the pan, and keep stirring it until it comes to the boil and the sugar is dissolved. It should now be what is called 'candy high.' As a test, dip a spoon into the boiled sugar, and dip it into cold water. If it is just right, the mixture should stick to the spoon and be soft but tough to the touch.

"Take an ounce of desiccated coconut and add it to the sugar, keeping it stirred until it begins to candy. Then make a simple mould in the shape of a tablet, lining it with greased paper, and into this pour the candy. It will set, ready for coating, within quite a few minutes."

"But most coconut-ice tablets are red and white," said Ada. "How do you get the different colours?"

"Before you add the coconut separate the mixture into two basins, and in one add a little cochineal or raspberry essence, stirring it well afterwards. Then put them into the mould separately."

What could be simpler? And although Ada had to agree her friend's methods were simple enough, she had to acknowledge that nothing could be more delicious than the results!

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