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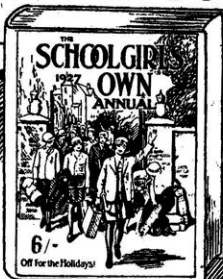


THE
CIRCUS GIRL
OF
MORCOVE
by
MARJORIE
STANTON

A STORY OF AN EARLY ADVENTURE
OF BETTY BARTON & Co
Introducing Bluebell the Little Fairy Dancer.

THE BIG THREE

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THE CIRCUS GIRL OF MORCOVE!



An Enthralling Story of the Early Adventures of
BETTY BARTON & Co., the Popular Fourth-
Formers of Morcove School, introducing BLUE-
BELL, the Girl from the Circus.



By MARJORIE STANTON.

Author of "THE HIDDEN SCHOOLGIRL," "MORECOVE
IN MOROCCO," "A DISGRACE TO MORCOVE," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

Paula Has an Idea.

"HOOORAY! Girls, such news!"
Polly Linton, the madcap of
the Fourth Form at Morcove
School, burst excitedly into
Study No. 12, the "den" she shared with
Betty Barton, captain of the Fourth.

"Goodness, Polly, what ever's the
matter?" asked Betty. "Has someone left
you a fortune?"

"No; better than that," said Polly joy-
ously as she capered round the study.
"Can't you guess?"

"Weally, Polly, deah geal, I do wish you
wouldn't womp wound the woom like that,"
sighed Paula Creel languidly from the arm-
chair. "It makes me feel howwibly tired
to look at you—"

"Oui, oui," said Trixie Hope, in the
peculiar French of her own that she was so
fond of airing. "Apaisez-vous, calm
down."

But Polly Linton showed no signs of abat-
ing her animation, and the girls in the room
had to smile at the excitement that was
written so plainly on her cheeky face.

It was just before breakfast, and there
was quite a number of girls in the room;
for Betty Barton was very popular, and
often the Fourth-Formers were to be found
chatting and whiling away the time in her
study.

"I've been to the sanatorium—" com-
menced Polly breathlessly, but at the word
sanatorium all the fooling and questioning
in the room ceased abruptly.

At once the thoughts of every girl present
were turned in the same direction.

A few weeks earlier a little circus girl had
met with an accident in the ring, whilst
the travelling circus in which she performed
was near Morcove. After the accident,
Bluebell—that was the little dancer's name
—had been brought to the school sana-
torium, for that had been the nearest
equipped hospital.

She was a frail, but lovable little girl,
and had at once captured the love of the
Fourth-Formers of Morcove, and Betty &
Co.'s delight had been great when a
stranger, who was interested in Bluebell,
suddenly wrote to Miss Somerfield, and
offered to pay all expenses if Bluebell
could be allowed to stay at Morcove School
as a pupil.

Miss Somerfield had acquiesced, and so
Morcove was waiting eagerly for the day
when the erstwhile circus girl could emerge
from the sanatorium and take her place at
classes.

Possibly only one girl at Morcove awaited
the invalid's recovery with greater interest
than the Fourth-Formers. That was Laura
Turner, a girl of the Sixth Form, for it
was Laura Turner who had rescued Blue-
bell when, in diving through, a blazing
hoop, the little circus girl's clothes had
caught fire.

"You've been to the sanatorium," Betty
Barton quickly prompted Polly.

"Oh, Polly, how is poor little Bluebell?"

"Yes, how is she?" echoed everyone;
and in their voices was a wealth of feeling.

"Oh, you sillies," said Polly. "Can't you guess?"

"You mean she is better?" asked Betty eagerly.

Polly nodded seriously.

"Oh, hooray!" said Betty Barton gladly.

"That is splendid news. Soon she will be able to come out—"

"Yes, wather," said Paula Creel. "That will be absolutely wippin', you know. How splendid that she is stayin' at the school!"

"Tres bon," said Trixie Hope. "And then she can be one of us."

"But when is she coming out?" asked Betty. "Did they tell you that, Polly?"

"They did," said Polly; "and you'll cheer when you know—to-day!"

"To-day!"

Everyone was surprised; for Bluebell was not expected to be up yet awhile.

"Nurse says that she was not so badly burned as was thought," explained Polly.

"And you know that the rest in the sanatorium has worked wonders."

"Bai Jove, how simply wippin'!" said Paula Creel, for once aroused from her lethargy. "Now she will teach me dancing, bai Jove!"

"Oh, steady on!" laughed Polly. "Give her a chance. No sense in her coming out of a sanatorium to go into an asylum—"

"Weally, Polly—"

The girls laughed, and then, as they one and all thought of the circumstances that had led to poor little Bluebell's accident, became serious.

"I little thought, when I saw her enveloped in flames at the circus, that she would ever live," mused Betty with a slight shudder.

"Perhaps she wouldn't have lived had it not been for Laura Turner's heroism," added Polly wisely. "Laura acted like a brick, and she cannot have been all bad, for, apart from her heroism, little Bluebell loved her."

"Poor girl, she needed a friend amongst all those circus people," sighed Betty.

"Yes, wather, bai Jove! I'm not at all sure that I should revel in a circus life," said Paula thoughtfully.

"I should think not!" grinned Polly. "And the circus wouldn't revel in you, old lazy-bones. Bluebell's anything but lazy. I'm glad she's going to have a chance at this school."

"How lucky Mr. Courtney took pity on her," Betty said slowly. "It is through his

kindness that she is being sent here—he is paying her fees."

Polly nodded.

"That author—yes," she agreed. "It is nice of him. And little Bluebell is so grateful. She is simply longing to come out of the sanatorium."

"At what time does she leave the place?"

"I don't know."

Paula Creel, who had been sitting plunged in thought, suddenly spoke.

"An idea, gals!" she exclaimed. "Bai Jove, I'm quite thwilled. Weally, it's a wippin' idea—"

Polly Linton staggered back in mock alarm.

"My diary, quick!" she said. "Betty, my diary!"

Paula's jaw dropped, and she stared at the madcap of the Fourth, wondering if she had suddenly taken leave of her senses.

"Paula's had an idea; chalk it up somewhere before it's forgotten," Polly went on eagerly.

"Weally," said Paula in her dignified drawl, "I fail to see any cause whatever for this wibald laughter. My suggestion is weally pwiceless—yes, wather, bai Jove!"

She paused, and the others looked at her impatiently.

"Don't say you've forgotten it," jested Polly.

"Wather not, deah gal. Weally, it's a wipper—simply a stunner, you know—yes, wather!"

And quite forgetful that she had not told them the great idea, Paula leaned back and fanned herself.

"It's made me quite pwostwate," she sighed, not noting the look on their faces.

"Wippin' idea—what?"

"I'll make you pwostwater, you silly!" said Polly Linton darkly. "What is the wippin' idea?"

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Paula, quite amazed. "I weally forgot to tell you. Ha, ha! Why, deah gals, a demonstration, bai Jove, to celebwater this gweat event. A bwass band—"

"A—a—what?" stuttered Polly.

"A bwass band, you know, playin' the conquiwin' hewoine, and a—a triumphal arch—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" pealed Polly. "Oh, you goose, Paula! Where should we get the triumphal arch or a brass band? But we might show Bluebell how glad we are to have her."

"Hear, hear!"

"Oui, oui! Tres bon idea. Good idea!" applauded Trixie.

"Yes, wather. That's my idea you know," Paula added proudly.

The door of the study opened, and Madge Minden smiled at them from the doorway.

"What's the excitement?" she said. "Now, Paula, what have you been doing?"

"Paula's had an idea," said Polly.

"Really—I'm not joking. All by herself she worked it out—in her head, too, without paper and pencil.

"Never!" said Madge fervently.

But when they told her the idea, she, too, was enthusiastic.

"Let's rake in all the Form!" said Polly enthusiastically. "I suppose we can't do it before breakfast; the bell will go any minute now—"

"We may as well tell all the girls," said Betty thoughtfully. "It's your idea, Paula, so you may go and tell them—"

"Oh, weally, I say!" protested Paula. "Don't be hard on a gal, you know. Don't put all the work on me. The awful twouble of gettin' the idea has quite pwoasted me."

"Oh, come along," said Polly, "for Bluebell's sake! One, two, three—"

She swung back a cushion, and Paula Creel looked at her tentatively out of the corner of her eyes.

"Weally, I— Oh, all wight!"

She sighed heavily, and arose. Betty Barton, smiling, took her arm and piloted her into the corridor, where there was quite a number of girls.

"Oyez! Oyez!" called Polly. "This is to announce that one, Paula Creel, lady of leisure, has had an idea! Oyez! Paula, the elegant, has had a brain-wave. She's going to lead a deputation, or procession, to celebrate the recovery of Bluebell—"

"Bluebell! Is she better?" asked several voices.

"Yes, and she's coming into the school to-day," Betty told them. "Do all rally round and give her a welcome. She must be feeling strange and shy."

"Why, of course!"

"Rather!"

Polly moved on with several additions to the procession that laughingly followed her.

They were out in the corridor now, and making for the breakfast-room, where, no doubt, many of the girls would be.

"Oyez!" called Polly, and then she sighted two girls who were walking with stately gait just a little ahead of them.

"Oyez! Oyez, ye Grandways!" she called.

Cora and Judith Grandways, the most unpopular girls in the Fourth Form, turned as they were addressed, and frowned upon the cheerful Polly.

"Good gracious, Judith, whatever is this horde?" exclaimed the elder of the two sisters.

"Can't think," said Judith, with a slight sneer.

"Oyez, this is to announce that Bluebell is better. Here, Cora—Judith, follow behind. We're having a demonstration to welcome Bluebell to the Fourth."

"Welcome Bluebell!" exclaimed Cora. "Whoever is Bluebell?"

She turned inquiringly and looked at her sister, who shook her head.

"Oh," said Polly, a trifle crossly, "you know Bluebell, the circus dancer, surely! You must know she's in the school sanatorium."

"Oh, goodness!" said Cora, with feigned horror. "You don't mean, surely, that we are going to have a circus dancer in the Fourth!"

"A common dancer!" echoed Judith. "Gracious!"

"Oh; don't be stupid!" said Polly, more crossly still. "She's no more common than you are, and a great deal nicer."

"Yes, I should imagine that is the class of girl you would admire," sneered Cora.

"Bai Jove, Cora, I weally think you are a fwrightful snob," broke in Paula. "Yes, wather!"

"Weally," mimicked Cora, in a caustic way. "How wegwetttable, bai Jove, wather! cherknow! Yes, wather!"

Paula Creel sniffed and raised her nose scornfully.

But it did not affect Cora! Oh, dear no! That girl was quite beyond the effect of scorn or contempt, and the Fourth-Formers wisely went on, leaving the Grandways sisters to stare after them, with looks of malice.

"What utter imbecility," said Cora, as they faded away down the passage. "It's a fine thing when Morcove shelters dancing girls. I suppose we shall have street arabs next!"

"Oh, it's unbearable!" snapped Judith.

"This place will become an institution. The girl ought to be told she isn't wanted."

"She's simple enough to go," said Cora, with a look of cunning in her eyes. "I wonder——"

She looked meaningly at her sister, and they both laughed in a manner that would undoubtedly have disturbed Betty Barton had she been there to hear it.

But Betty Barton & Co. were even then rallying the rest of the Fourth under their banner. They fully intended that Paula Creel's great idea should be carried out on a large scale.

As Polly Linton said, when Paula did have an idea, it was up to them to back her up; it was the sort of thing that only happened very rarely. To which remark Paula replied with more emphasis than gentility:

"Wats!"

Breakfast was a meal of much chatter and excitement, so much so that Miss Massingham, the strict mistress of the Fourth Form, had on more than one occasion to speak with sternness, and impositions flowed in consequence.

Cora and Judith Grandways, with enigmatical sneers upon their unpleasant faces, sat watching the others, and directly breakfast was over, and whilst Polly marshalled the procession, they crept silently away.

Had Betty Barton & Co. known the destination of the two, they would have been alarmed. For Cora and Judith went as quickly as they could to the sanatorium.

CHAPTER 2.

A Strange Reception.

"HERE she comes!"

Cora Grandways drew back and caught her sister's arm; and Judith looked up to where, round the curve in the staircase, a pretty, blue-eyed girl, with flaxen hair that hung in a silken cloud about her slim, graceful shoulders, was descending.

It was Bluebell, sweetly pretty her face pink with excitement and happiness, her blue eyes shining.

She saw the two Fourth-Formers and halted, her hands clasped rather nervously;

then, with attractive impetuosity, she ran down to them.

"Good-morning!" she said happily, though she did not know them.

Cora and Judith did not reply. Instead, they stared at the outstretched hand of the happy girl.

Bluebell's eyes rounded with wonderment; she was puzzled at these two. What did it mean? Why were they so cold? Her hand lowered, and her eyes lost their bright lustre of excitement. Her cheeks went a little pinker.

"We've come to see you off," said Cora. "The circus wants you back——"

"But I ain't goin' back!" laughed Bluebell, in her clear voice. "I'm going to be a scholar like you."

"You're not," said Cora harshly. "That's quite a mistake. You were allowed to think that while you were ill. But it's not true. You're going back to the circus."

"But the kind gen'leman—him wot writes tales—he said——"

"Listen!" snapped Judith, roughly breaking in on the trembling words. "You simpleton, do you think anyone could pay for a stranger's education? Besides, you're not our class. This is a school for ladies, not circus hands. I can tell you that there is a pretty fine rumpus about it. The Fourth Form are coming here to hustle you out."

"That's so," said Cora. "And we came to give you the tip. The sooner you go, the better. They won't be pleasant to meet. In a minute they'll be coming in a crowd——"

"I—but Betty Barton, an'—an' Polly! They ain't turnin' agen me?" pleaded little Bluebell.

"Don't be silly! Of course they are. What do they want with you," sneered Cora—"a circus dancer? Look at the way you talk!"

"It ain't right, it ain't!" said Bluebell, a little wildly. "I ain't done nothink——"

"Here they come," said Judith, from the doorway. "They'll rag you! Run, Bluebell! Back to the circus——"

Little Bluebell, her heart beating fast, tears in her eyes, stood in the doorway watching the crowd of girls that emerged from the schoolhouse over the way. They were being lined up, and Polly Linton was walking up and down in front of them.

"What did we tell you?" asked Judith.

"Oh, dear! Don't let 'em catch me! Stop them, 'cos I can't run! Oh!"

The girls were coming across the quadrangle waving and cheering as they saw Bluebell. But the little circus dancer saw them, and placed quite the wrong construction on that cheering.

One look she gave them, then fled, back down the corridor, round the path at the back, and through the gateway into the headmistress's garden.

Cor a and Judith backed away from the door and slipped into another part of the sanatorium.

"Hooray!" yelled Polly Linton, dashing into the doorway of the sanatorium some seconds later. "Bluebell, where art thou?"

The crowd of Fourth-Formers lined up outside and waited whilst Polly ran upstairs.

Polly Linton was quite excited, and dashed upstairs three at a time.

"Oh, oh!" she panted, out of breath. "Nurse, where's little Bluebell?"

"Bluebell? Why, isn't she in the school? She went down a few minutes ago."

Polly blinked at the nurse in surprise.

"We saw her in the doorway," she gasped, "but—but she came in; she—"

"Come back? Good gracious, where can the child have got?"

The nurse seemed quite agitated, and went down the stairs in front of Polly. Outside the girls, a trifle impatient, were breaking up into groups.

Betty came inside, and Polly told her what had happened. The captain of the Fourth did not waste a minute, and soon organised a search for the girl.

But the search only elicited one fact—Bluebell was not in the sanatorium. Where she had gone they could not tell. The back door had been closed by the Grand-ways, and there was no other indication of the flight.

It did not occur to one of them that Bluebell might have fled into the headmistress' garden.

Yet there she was, hiding beneath a bush, shivering with fright, as she remembered that crowd of girls.

Poor Bluebell; she was not used to school, she was awed by the immenseness of Morcove, and by the immenseness of the idea that she was to become a member of it.

How difficult it had been to believe Mr.

Courtney when he had told her that she was to become a scholar there, and—now her doubts were assured. They would not have her.

Tumbling to earth came her daydreams—her vision of Bluebell the scholar—the schoolgirl. Once more she was the circus dancer.

"Goodness, girl, what are you doing there?"

That voice, kindly, and one she knew well, interrupted her meditations as the bush was parted. She looked up, startled, into the face of Miss Somerfield, headmistress of Morcove.

"My dear child," went on the headmistress, "whatever made you come here and hide? Is—is—this some game?"

Thoroughly amazed, she looked at the scared, white face and frightened eyes of Bluebell.

"Oh, don't let them touch me! Let me go back agen. Why was I ever took away?" sobbed the girl, breaking down now that she was face to face with someone kindly. "I—I know I'm different to them, but it ain't my fault. Wot am I to do—"

"You poor girl, what are you crying for? What has happened?"

Tenderly the headmistress clasped the frail form to her and looked into the blue eyes that swam in a mist of tears.

A voice was heard on the other side of the fence—several voices—Polly Linton's jubilant shout, Paula Creel's lazy drawl.

"There she is, girls!" they heard Polly say. "Come on!"

"Let me go! Let me go! Don't let 'em touch me!"

In the girl's cry there was a frantic pleading that alarmed and surprised the headmistress.

"Hush, girl!" urged Miss Somerfield.

"Here she is!"

Polly Linton dashed through the small gateway into the garden, and pulled up short as she saw the headmistress. Behind her were many others, and in a hushed crowd they stood, amazed and anxious.

And Betty—only she kept her presence of mind. She hastened forward to the headmistress, and Bluebell, seeing her, hid her head in Miss Somerfield's arm.

"Bluebell," murmured Betty softly, "what is the matter?"

"Go 'way!" mumbled Bluebell brokenly. "I can't help it! It ain't my fault!"

"Someone has been frightening the girl," said Miss Somerfield. "Betty Barton, are you instrumental in this? What means this horde of girls?"

"Please, Miss Somerfield, we're a demonstration," said Polly Linton in tones far more subdued than was her wont. "We—we came to tell Bluebell how glad we are that she has recovered—"

"And that we want to welcome her into the Form," finished Betty.

"Yes, wather!" agreed Paula Creel. "It will be weally wippin' to have little Bluebell amongst us, Miss Somerfield."

Little Bluebell raised her tear-stained face and looked at them. Then could be no doubting the friendliness in the Fourth Former's faces. And yet those girls had said—

"You hear what they say, Bluebell?" asked Miss Somerfield kindly. "I knew you were mistaken when you said that they didn't want you."

"Didn't want her!" echoed Betty, amazed. "But who told her? Why, we're longing to have Bluebell in the Fourth!"

Little Bluebell stared at her with wide eyes, and Betty took her by the arm.

"Come, Bluebell," she said. "We want you, really we do. You know I'm your friend."

Bluebell's face brightened, and once more the sunny smile returned, and the blue eyes became brighter.

"I know," she said softly. "But—but they said I wasn't wanted 'cos—'cos I'm only a dancer."

"Who said that?" asked Betty indignantly. "Oh, Bluebell, you didn't think we had said that. We do want you."

Bluebell, with Betty Barton's arm around her, smiled at them all, and Miss Somerfield patted her head.

"It's all right, Bluebell," she said. "You are amongst friends. Betty, there goes the bell for morning lessons—take Bluebell with you. Miss Massingham knows about her."

So Bluebell, with a crowd around her, was led in triumph to the schoolhouse.

"Fancy thinking that we didn't want you!" laughed Polly. "Why, Bluebell, dear, we're simply longing to have you in the Form. We're all going to help you learn the silly things we learn."

Bluebell laughed happily.

"I'm so glad," she said. "I want ever so

much to be friends; I ain't never done nuthink to be ashamed of—"

"No, of course," said Betty, rather worriedly.

Betty, in her good-natured way, was wondering how it was possible to give Bluebell instruction in the art of speaking English without hurting the girl's sensibilities. It would be difficult, but it would be necessary.

They led her to the Form-room, where some of the girls already were, and two at least of those girls looked black with anger and dismay.

Cora and Judith Grandways exchanged frowning glances, and Bluebell, she saw them, but took no notice.

"There, sit next to me," Betty urged, as Paula took the girl's arm.

"Oh, weally, Betty, I say, you know. It was my idea, deah gee. Besides, I can—er—give her valuable wrinkles—"

"Ha, ha, ha! If poor Bluebell starts eating wrinkles Miss Massingham will be pleased," laughed Polly.

"Bai Jove, not those sort of wrinkles. I mean wrinkles, not winkles," explained Paula, her unfortunate lisp encumbering her.

But that lucid explanation sent the girls into further peals of laughter. And Bluebell looked quite at a loss, though she smiled and looked politely as though she did know.

Paula flushed and frowned alternately.

"She means she'll teach you a few wrinkles—give you a few tips," explained Betty kindly.

"Oh, I see! She'll tell me wot I'm ter do," nodded Bluebell. "Course, as I'm sort of new-like, everyfink will be strange—"

"Good gracious!" said Cora Grandways loudly. "Did you ever hear such talk? You don't know nuffink, Bluebell. You want learning-like—a teaching of suffink—"

Bluebell looked amazed as one or two girls laughed, and Polly Linton frowned.

"Next funny remark, Cora," she said, "and you'll get a rap on the knuckles from this ruler! Someone played a low-down trick, and it doesn't take a great deal of guessing to find who—"

More might have been said then, but the door of the Form-room opened, and Miss Massingham entered, followed by the head-mistress.

Hurriedly the girls took their places, and Bluebell sat next to Paula.

For several minutes there was shuffling, and Miss Somerfield waited.

"Before the lesson begins," said Miss Somerfield, when there was silence, "I should like to introduce your new school-fellow, Bluebell. She has no other name, and for the present it must suffice. Anyway, it's a pretty name. Now, please, girls, do your best to make her at home in her new surroundings—make her feel one of you, and I shall have good reason to be proud of my Fourth Form. She has a lot to learn, and though she's below the standard of the Form, I have placed her in it because she has friends here."

Cora and Judith Grandways muttered, and then, amidst dead silence Cora rose to her feet, her face sullen, and her eyes angry.

"Miss Somerfield," she said. "I want to say a few words, if I may——"

"Yes, Cora."

"Well, I don't think it's quite fair," blurted out the girl, with as much dignity as she could muster. "I'm sure my father for one would object to us having lessons with a circus hand. And the governors wouldn't like it——"

There was a buzz of astonishment in the Form at the utter, colossal cheek of the girl, and all turned to look at her.

"Cora Grandways," said Miss Somerfield, sternly, raising her voice, "how dare you question my judgment. I am headmistress of this school, and it is I who must decide who is fit and who is unfit to be a member of it. You—you are only a schoolgirl, and to impress that fact upon your mind you must write me out five hundred times: 'I must not be an objectionable snob.'"

"But my father——"

"Another word and I shall make it a thousand."

Cora Grandways sat down heavily, and scowled at Bluebell.

But Bluebell, even though she knew that the opinion just expressed was not that of the whole school, could not help feeling very uncomfortable. She was not wanted by one—and perhaps there might be others.

She was just a circus hand, not a lady—and she did so wish to be just like the others.

She stole an envious glance at Paula Creel beside her. Paula—she was so very much a lady. How well she spoke—how well she looked. If only she could be like Paula.

The girl sighed heavily, and looked at Miss Massingham, who gave her a kindly smile. The lesson started then, and with it started the life of the circus girl at Morcovo School.

CHAPTER 3.

Cora is Funny.

"MISS GRANDWAYS——"
Bluebell put her head shyly in at the door of Study No. 7 that afternoon, and Cora Grandways lowered her novel. Judith tore herself from a Paris fashion book, and both stared at the girl.

They exchanged looks, and Cora winked. It was truly a case of walking into the lion's den.

"Come in, Bluebell," smiled Judith. "Oh, do come in—make yourself at home."

"Oh, I can't stay," said the girl. "I— I just see this letter in the rack, and I knew it were for you, so I brought it."

"Oh!" said Cora, completely amazed that anyone should have gone out of their way to do anyone else a good turn. "Oh, thanks!"

"Don't go yet, Bluebell," she urged, as she slit the envelope. "No hurry——"

"Paula Creel——"

"Miss Creel," corrected Judith. "Always call your superiors miss, you know."

Cora glanced at the letter, and crumpled it up. Then she surveyed Bluebell's pretty slim figure thoughtfully. It was just Cora's way to plan deliberately some way of discomforting the girl.

"It's lucky you came," she said. "Miss Monk wants to see you."

"Miss Monk," stammered Bluebell. "Oh, I—I—ain't seen her. Is she a teacher?"

"A teacher, great goodness, no! We don't have teachers here," sneered Cora. "Miss Monk is in the Sixth Form. All new girls have to be servants to the older girls. I know Monkey—I mean Miss Monk—wants to see you."

Judith grinned. She knew Clarice Monk

well. Clarice was not a popular Sixth Former, for many good reasons, too. It was not at all likely that such a tyrant as she would be popular. But the Grandways girls liked her—because they found her useful, and she liked them for the same reason.

"You had better come with us," said Judith, "because Miss Monk really does want to see you, Bluebell. We've spoken to her about you, and recommended you."

"Oh, thank you," said Bluebell doubtfully. "I—I can't go now 'cos Betty—Miss Barton is going to learn me hockey, please."

"Oh, she's going to learn you, is she?" jeered Cora. "That will be nice. But I fancy Monkey—that is, Miss Monk—won't like being kept waiting. I'll explain to Betty." She winked at her sister. "Shall we take the little flower along?"

Judith sprang to her feet with alacrity, and Cora, more languid, rose, too.

Bluebell, with a feeling of doubt that she could not explain, hesitated.

"I think I'd rather go with Betty," she said shyly.

"Go on," grinned Cora. "But Miss Monk might have quite a deal to say. You wouldn't like to make a start in the punishment room."

"Ooooh, no! I—I'll come."

And, very meekly, she followed the two Grandways along the corridor. But Bluebell was not happy at heart. She did not like these two girls, and rather regretted the rather impulsive, good-natured action that had led her into their den.

Cora and Judith were in high fettle, very well-pleased with their little scheme, and Cora grinned as she tapped on the door of Study No. 8 in the Sixth Form passage.

"Come in," said a rather sharp voice, and Cora pushed Bluebell into the study.

The circus girl stared, bewildered, round the lavishly-furnished apartment, wondering what was going to happen. She stared, too, at the girl who lounged, or rather sprawled, in an arm chair in front of the fire.

"This is Bluebell, Clarice," said Cora, and winked.

Clarice Monk leisurely rose from the

chair, and stared at the girl with a smile upon her thin lips.

"So you are Bluebell?" she asked. "You are the sweet little fairy that danced in the circus. You haven't brought your hoops with you?"

"No, please," said Bluebell, wondering if she should smile.

"Never mind," said the senior, condescendingly. "You've brought your accent."

She laughed, and the Grandways joined her; but Bluebell was quite at a loss.

"She's come to clean your shoes," said Cora. "You've got a lot that want cleaning, haven't you, Clarice?"

"Goodness, yes; there's heaps the child can do. There, girl, open that cupboard, there's a nice array inside."

Bluebell, still rather at sea, opened the cupboard door, and blinked at the many pairs of shoes inside. There were many shoes of all kinds and descriptions—all of them good and expensive.

"You can clean all those," said Clarice. "That will be a nice start."

"Clean 'em all?" asked Bluebell, amazed. "But I ain't got no time. I promised Betty as I'd be on the hockey ground—"

"Promised what?"

Clarice jeered at her, and the Grandways sisters laughed. They meant to get some cruel fun at Bluebell's expense; and the little circus dancer, not unaturally, looked perturbed.

"Get on with it, girl!" commanded the senior. "Don't stand there staring. You'll find the shoe-cleaning things in the cupboard."

Clarice yawned and reached for her hat.

"I shall be back soon," she drawled. "And when I return, I shall expect to see all those cleaned. If not, there'll be trouble. I shall lock you in so that you can't slide away."

"Y-yes, Miss—Miss Monkey—I mean, Miss Monk."

Clarice frowned heavily, and Cora and Judith concealed grins. Then, with a swagger that was intended to be very stately indeed, the Sixth Form girl lounged from the room.

Cora and Judith stayed back awhile, and Cora turned to the circus dancer, who was standing amongst the shoes.

"Get on with it!" she said harshly. "And when you've finished there's plenty I can find you to do."

"Yes, Miss Grandways," answered Bluebell unhappily. "I—I will. But—"

The door slammed then, and Bluebell was left alone. The little dancer looked glumly at the shoes, and then out of the window where the playing-fields were visible. It was a half-holiday and they were crowded.

Why couldn't she go and play with the others? She didn't know that schoolgirls had to black shoes; but she glanced round the expensive apartment and sighed.

On the mantelpiece a clock ticked softly and solemnly, and little Bluebell, used to work, started resignedly upon her task.

Not for a second did she doubt that the senior had been justified in the task she had set her; not for a moment did she suspect the trickery, the deceit of the Grandways sisters—those sisters who even now were laughing at the trick played upon the unsuspecting girl.

"Seen Bluebell?" Cora was answering Polly Linton. "Good gracious, no; I'm not in the habit of looking after circus dancers! I suppose she's gone back to her pals."

And when Polly, her face worried, had wandered off, the two sisters chuckled delightedly to themselves.

"That letter?" asked Judith. "That was from dad, wasn't it?"

"Oh, yes; I'd quite forgotten," her sister answered. "Lucky I didn't quite, though. Uncle Cyril's coming."

"Uncle Cyril," echoed Judith. "How splendid! That means a big tip."

Cora winked knowingly. The two sisters had no real affection for any of their relations, but they had an eye to the main chance always, and Uncle Cyril, who had plenty of money, usually handed out a substantial tip.

That he did so with slight contempt did not worry the girls.

"We'd better get in a good supply of tuck, and give him a good study set-out," mused Cora. "He'll like that. And suppose we ask Paula. He was rather wild because we don't get on in school. He's sure to like it if we know anyone so classy as Paula."

"Gracious, yes; he might double his tip. You never know."

"Come on, then, and get in some food. I'll find Paula."

And the two sisters hurried off.

CHAPTER 4.

Paula to the Rescue.

"PAULA!"
Cora Grandways waved her hand to a girl who was sauntering along the Fourth Form corridor. Paula Creel was looking rather worried, and she seemed far more concerned than was her wont.

She turned as she was hailed by Cora, and nodded.

"I say, Cora," she said worriedly, "have you any ideah wheah my friend Bluebell is?"

"Oh, never mind the circus kid," said Cora. "Look here, will you come to tea with us this afternoon, Paula dear?"

Paula blinked at the girl in surprise. It was many a long day since Cora Grandways had called her "dear," and she was surprised. Had she been anyone else she would have been suspicious. But Paula's was an unsuspecting nature.

"Bai Jove!" she said thoughtfully. "Do you know, I can't say at all. I—I'm lookin' for my friend Bluebell—she's going to teach me to dance, you know. She said I'd make a wippin' dancer."

"Yes, of course," said Cora flatteringly. "No one would make a better dancer. But that will do some other time. We've an important guest to-day—"

"Yes. But you see, Cowa, deah geal, I have invited my friend Bluebell to tea. I weally cannot think, bai Jove, wheah Bluebell can have gone," murmured Paula worriedly. "I suppose you have seen nothin' of her this afternoon, Cowa?"

"Oh, don't ask me!" said Cora crossly, realising that it was vain to hope for Paula's company at tea. "Find out!"

And the deceitful Cora stalked off. Paula, a very thoughtful look on her face, watched the Fourth-Former, and shook her head doubtfully.

She walked out into the quadrangle, staring about her inquiringly. It was a

sunny day, ideal for a half-holiday, and ideal for hockey.

But Paula was not intent about that excellent winter game this afternoon. She wanted to learn to dance. But now Bluebell was missing.

She surveyed the school, and thought idly how beautiful and imposing it looked in the afternoon sunlight. She glanced up at the latticed windows, reflecting the sun.

As she glanced along them, one window caught her attention—for there at the window a figure stood. Transfixed for a moment, she stared at the face. A hand waved, and she knew that what she suspected was correct.

It was little Bluebell. How had she got there? What room was it?

But someone else had seen the figure, and was hurrying back to the school. Paula glanced round and looked into the face of Clarice Monk.

Immediately, in her mind, she connected the two, and a little calculation made her quite sure that Bluebell was in Clarice Monk's study.

Then, from her languid self, Paula became transformed into a being of energy and activity. She hurried after Clarice, her mind filled with doubts.

For Paula knew Clarice—knew her bullying propensities, and guessed at half what had happened.

Clarice Monk, hearing footsteps behind her, turned, and stopped.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I suppose I have a wight to walk across the quadwangle?" asked Paula. "I know of no new regulations, yes, wather. I mean, wather not."

"Well, don't follow me!" snapped the Sixth-Former, little realising how she was giving herself away.

As she walked on, Paula followed. How surprised Polly and Betty would have been if they could have seen their usually languid chum transformed into a slouth-bound—following Clarice!

The Sixth Form girl hurried on, and Paula followed still. When the Sixth Form corridor was reached, there were only a few yards separating them.

Clarice stopped.

"Why are you following me?" she asked angrily. "You have no right in this passage!"

"I have come here to see a fwiend," said Paula fearlessly. "I have a perfect wight to—"

Clarice strode on to her study, and turned the key in the lock. She attempted to shut the door after her quickly as she passed in, but Paula was following closer than she thought.

And before she had time to wheel round, the Fourth Form girl was in the study beside her.

It was too late then for concealment, for in the centre of the room, her hands marked by blacking, and her face stained where her hands had been, stood Bluebell.

"Bluebell," exclaimed Paula, "whatevah are you doin' heah?"

"Will you go?" snapped Clarice.

Bluebell looked from one to the other, puzzled.

"Miss Monk said I was to clean her shoes," she said.

"Gwoat Scott! What uttah check!" exclaimed Paula in great indignation. "Clawice, how dare you? You have no wight whatevah to fag my fwiend—"

"You mind your own business. Goodness—"

Clarice Monk broke off, as she stared at the shoes that Bluebell had cleaned. There was a very bright polish on most of them, but one or two pairs were dull.

"I—I couldn't shine them," said Bluebell nervously. "I did try—"

"You little idiot—oh, you stupid imbecile!" shouted the Sixth-Former wrathfully. "My best suede shoes—blackened—blackened with boot-polish—ruined!"

Open-mouthed, she stared at the once splendid pair of black suede shoes, which must have cost at least two guineas.

The suede was covered with blacking, which had been industriously rubbed in!

"Bai Jove!" murmured Paula, who quite appreciated the ruin and the damage done.

Bluebell looked on, wide-eyed, surprised, and not a little alarmed.

"I did try so hard to shine 'em," she said. "But I couldn't, 'cos the stuff was soft—"

Clarice Monk turned, her face livid with anger, and caught hold of the little dancer's arm.

"You little cat!" she shouted. "You did this purposely. Don't tell me you

didn't. You have ruined those shoes, and I shall report you—"

She raised her arm and brought it down twice, thrice, hard upon the circus girl's bare arm.

Slap! Slap! Slap!

Bluebell uttered a sharp cry, as much of surprise as of pain; and then Paula Creel flung herself straight at the enraged senior and tore her away.

"Great goodness! Paula, what are you doing?" exclaimed the Sixth-Former.

Paula Creel did not loosen her hold, but held the girl back. Her two eyes were blazing with quite unwonted anger, and her graceful arms seemed to Clarice to be made of steel.

"Bai Jove, you shan't hit her! I shan't prevent you; yes, wather, you spiteful geal!" Paula exclaimed indignantly.

She picked up a thick, round ebony ruler from the table, and held it aloft.

"Touch my fwiend, and you will feel this wuler wap your knuckles. I mean it—yes, wather!"

Clarice set her teeth, but she made no effort to move. Paula Creel looked dangerous, and already the Sixth-Former had realised that in that apparently muscleless figure there was a wealth of strength.

For a moment there was a tense silence, then Clarice broke in with a laugh.

"You can go," she said through her teeth. "But, if you think this is the end, let me tell you that you are mistaken, Paula Creel. As for that Cockney circus girl, I shan't forget the damage she has done."

"You deserved it," answered Paula calmly. "Nevah have I heard of such shockin' twatment."

"Oh, get out!"

Paula took Bluebell's arm, and together they beat a hurried retreat, hardly getting clear of the door before it slammed noisily.

"Did you black them purposely?" asked Paula, rather worriedly looking at her companion.

"I—I thought they had to be blacked. I know I didn't ought to ha' done it now—"

"I—I am glad, Bluebell. But pway do not say you didn't ought—say you oughtn't, you know."

"I oughtn't. I wish I could speak like you, Miss Creel—"

"Call me Paula, please, deah geal. I am weally glad you didn't play a twick upon Clarice. She acted vovy badly, but a lady does not descend to wotaliate. Wevengo is vovy low."

"I—I see," said Bluebell, greatly puzzled. She was only just getting used to Paula's lisp. "It was the fault of Cora—Miss Grandways."

"Weally, Bluebell," protested Paula, "you must not call anyone 'miss' but the mistwesses. And one should nevah tell fales about anyone else, you know. That's sneakin', yes, wather, and that's not nice."

"Oh, yes, Miss—Paula, I won't over again," mumbled Bluebell, wondering if she would ever be able to remember all these rules.

"I want you to teach me to dance, please," said Paula.

"Oh, I should love to!" said Bluebell joyfully. "Only I promised to play hockey."

"Bai Jove, weally! Then you must—yes, wather! A lady always keeps her pwomises. You must come and explain to Betty why you were detimed."

Bluebell looked up, her blue eyes admiring, as she followed Paula across the quadrangle. How nice, she thought, to be like this girl, and know all the rules.

Half-way across the quadrangle, Cora Grandways waved to the two.

"I say, Paula," she said, "do come to tea. You can bring the kid if you like. Only uncle will want to see some of our friends. After all, we can tell him she's not at the school—"

"Weally, Cowa, you unuttahable snob! You are without any weal feelings—yes, wather! I regard you with contempt—"

And Paula turned her nose up in scorn. Judith, in the gateway, waved to her sister.

"Here's uncle!" she called.

Almost as she spoke, an upright, smiling gentleman came in at the gates—not the sort of man one would expect the Grandways to have as an uncle.

But strangely enough, he only recognised Judith by raising his hat, and crossed the quadrangle to where Cora was still standing with the other two.

Paula would have gone, but little Bluebell clung on to her arm.

"Good-afternoon, uncle!" said Cora, with her most ingratiating smile.

"Good-afternoon!" said Uncle Cyril curtly, and raised his hat.

Past the amazed and outraged Cora he went, straight to little Bluebell; and she, with a fond cry, ran forward into his arms!

"Oh, oh!" she cried. "It's the kind gen'l'man!"

Paula Creel stared; and Cora—she was simply amazed. For Uncle Cyril, the man she was trying her hardest to impress, had picked up Bluebell in his arms, and was hugging her—hugging the "contemptible little dancer"!

"Dear little Bluebell!" said Mr. Courtney. "So you have started school?"

CHAPTER 5.

An Apology to Bluebell.

"MR. COURTNEY!"

With a shout of welcome, a half-dozen or so of hockey players, came from the field.

Betty Barton led the way, with Polly Linton, Madge Minden, and Trixie Hope only just behind.

Mr. Courtney turned and raised his hat to them.

"How are you all?" he smiled. "I have just come to see my little Bluebell—my adopted daughter—"

Cora and Judith Grandways, side by side, drew forward, amazement written darkly upon their faces.

Was Uncle Cyril this "contemptible little dancer's" guardian? Was it he who had adopted her? Yet what doubt could there be, as they saw the happy look in the child's face when he embraced her? And they had been passed by for her!

"We didn't know you were coming, sir," said Betty Barton. "We haven't got anything for tea."

"But I have, bai Jove!" smiled Paula Creel. "Bluebell was comin' to tea with me—yes, wather—and now Mr. Courtney can come and all—"

"Thanks, thanks!" cheered Polly. "Let's make a real high tea of it. We'll add to the stores."

Bluebell, her face radiant, stood in the centre of them all, proud and happy, looking admiringly at the fine gentleman who had adopted her.

"Come along," cried Polly Linton, "let's get the banquet ready—a banquet to celebrate Bluebell's first day. Come along, girls!"

"Ah, you high-spirited girls," said the novelist, "it makes me wish I were young again, to see you all so happy at the prospect of a banquet! But I am glad—glad that you are so fond of Bluebell—"

"Why, of course we are," said Betty. "Mr. Courtney, she will soon be one of the most popular girls in the school."

"I hope so," said he. "I judge people by their friends. There is something wrong with the girls who have no friends. It shows that they have some mean spirit."

Cora and Judith, in the background, scowled, for that thrust—what could it be but directed to them?

The excited Fourth-Formers gathered round the novelist, and when he protested that he had to see Miss Somerfield, they were very reluctant to let him go. But he went, and they rushed helter-skelter to get things for the banquet.

Bluebell Paula led to her study, and there the little circus girl, her eyes shining, helped to lay the meal. How splendid it was to have these friends, and such a fine adopted father as that kind gentleman!

Betty and Polly, Madge and Trixie, brought pastries and chicken and ham and many dainties with which to supplement the meal Paula had prepared. For with so many of them there would naturally be a great deal wanted.

"I want the whole Form to come—yes, wather!" drawled Paula; and she sank on to the couch. "Weally, I am pwo-twated with this awful exertion!"

"That's right, Paula, you lie down," laughed Polly. "You'll only be in the way." And she arranged half a dozen cushions under Paula's head, so that the elegant girl seemed miles above the couch.

What excitement there was when, the meal prepared, the whole Form turned up to enjoy it! Mr. Courtney was given the place of honour to share with his adopted daughter, and Paula sat at the opposite end.

"Are we all here?" asked Polly. "Call the roll, Betty."

"Oh, we're all here—all that matter!"

she laughed. "Cora and Judith Grandways—"

"Oh, we don't want them!" said Polly. "They would only sit and sneer. They've been against Bluebell often enough so far—"

She stopped short as she felt Mr. Courtney's eyes upon her.

"Cora and Judith Grandways," he said. "Why, they are my nieces! Surely they have not been aggressive towards Bluebell?"

There was an awkward silence then; for no one wished to tell tales against the girls, mean though they were. And Polly, she blushed as she realised her blunder.

Mr. Courtney smiled.

"I understand your code of honour," he said. "And I will press the matter no farther. Sometimes silence is more eloquent than words."

Then the spell seemed broken, and they all chatted. Bluebell, at the head of the table, smiled happily, and ate the dainty cakes they all pressed upon her.

It was a happy banquet, that. But a few doors away, in Study No. 7, there was another banquet—a banquet without guests. Cora and Judith Grandways, their brows black with anger, sat in opposite armchairs, regarding the tables they had been at such expence to make look attractive. There were meat patties, slices of ham and chicken, pastries—everything.

But no guests to eat it.

"Oh, bother it—bother it!" Cora was muttering. "Who would have dreamt this? To think that it is Uncle Cyril who has adopted that kid!"

"And now," wailed Judith, "what shall we do? We're hard up. We've spent practically all we had on this meal to get a tip—"

"Which we shan't get now," said Cora bitterly. "Thanks to Bluebell. My goodness, I'll make that kid sit up for this! She shan't come between us and uncle!"

"She will," fumed Judith. "What is the good of saying she won't? You know as well as I do how fond he is of her. She will have all the big tips in future, and we shall have none."

Judith kicked the fender viciously; and Cora, with her eyes narrowed thoughtfully, stared in the fire.

"She shan't have the big tips!" she vowed. "He doesn't know much about her

yet. Supposo she turns out a regular little cat—a thief, perhaps? Supposo she has no friends—"

"Oh, what's the use of supposing?" said her sister crossly.

Cora smiled cunningly.

"There are ways," she said quietly.

"Don't forget that Clarice Monk's dowry on her. But we mustn't show her our hands. We're going to be her best friends. We're going to kiss her, and say how we love her darling eyes!"

"I'm not," said Judith.

But when Cora had said a few words, Judith changed her mind. The banquet was left on the table, and together the sisters went along to Paula's study.

From behind the closed door came the sound of shouts and laughter. The feasters were evidently thoroughly happy, and the rattle of cups and saucers told how much all were enjoying themselves.

Cora Grandways tapped once at the door, then, as she received no answer, opened it.

At first their entrance was not noticed; but Betty, who was in a seat that faced the door, sprang up. Immediately everyone turned round, and Mr. Courtney stared at his nieces.

"Please—please, uncle, we've come to— to say how sorry we are," said Cora meekly.

"My goodness!"

Polly Linton almost dropped her cup, and one or two others seemed equally overcome by these unusual tactics on the part of the Grandways sisters.

"You—you've come to apologise?" asked their uncle.

Cora and Judith nodded, the latter keeping in the background to let the elder sister get on with the talking.

"Yes, we're sorry that we—we haven't been kind to Bluebell," said Cora. "And we'd like to apologise to her."

"Water! Water!" moaned Polly.

"Cora's sorry!"

"Wait!" said Mr. Courtney sternly. "Let us be fair. If you really wish to tender an apology, Cora, of course I am sure that Bluebell will accept it."

"Course I will," said Bluebell readily. "I want everyfink to be orl right. I ain't never wanted to quarrel with no one."

"Then there's my hand on it," said Cora theatrically. "And I will never say another unkind word to you again."

"Splendid—splendid!" said Mr. Courtney,

as the two girls shook hands, and Judith came forward. "I am more pleased than I can say to know that my nieces and my adopted daughter are friends. It grieved me to hear, Cora, that you did not like Bluebell."

"I—I suppose I was jealous, uncle," said the girl, hanging her head. "I'm sorry."

"Then all is well," said Betty Barton happily. "I am so glad."

Cora and Judith, looking very apologetic all the time, took their stand near the table, and accepted the tea and cakes that were passed them.

There was not seating accommodation for them all, and many were standing. But Cora and Judith did not mind. They were thinking how splendidly they had duped all these girls—even their uncle.

But had they duped them all? One girl, at least, was still giving them suspicious glances—and she was a girl who knew them well—one who had once been on friendly terms with them. That girl was Paula Creel, little Bluebell's best friend.

CHAPTER 6.

A Lady!

"BUT why?" asked Bluebell.

Paula Creel rubbed her nose thoughtfully. Paula was engaged in the somewhat difficult task of teaching her friend English.

"Why isn't 'singing' a verb?"

Bluebell's eyes were puzzled as she looked up at her wise companion for a solution of that question. Lessons were proving very trying indeed to the little circus dancer, who had only been taught to use her feet.

And Paula—she was flustered. Paula was not very good herself at lessons, and the questions Bluebell was asking proved troublesome.

"Weally, I suppose it's because it isn't," said Paula vaguely. "You see, the man in the book says it isn't—yes, wather; and he ought to know, you know."

And she sighed with relief at the solution. But Bluebell was not so well pleased.

"It says here," she read, "'the singing of the birds is beautiful.' Well, why isn't singing a verb? If I say, 'I am singing,' is that a verb?"

"Oh, yes, wather, absolutely," said Paula, glad to be able to answer so certainly.

"Bai Jove, yes; but—but there's a difference, you know——"

"Yes, but I can't see no difference."

"Ahem! Well, theah may be a mistake—yes, wather, that's it. They are frightfully careless, these w'riters——"

"My gentleman's a writer, and he isn't."

"Ahem! Nunno. But, you see—you see—well, this is a pwofessor, and they're fwightfully absent-minded, you know, bai Jove. And you see what it says underneath. 'Birds' is a noun."

Bluebell placed her hand to her head and frowned. She wanted badly to learn; she wanted to get on, and speak like Paula. But when the book made silly mistakes, progress was difficult.

"Are you sure it's a mistake?" she said at last.

"Well, weally—let us wead it again. P'owwaps——"

Paula picked up the book, and frowned at it, wishing that she had paid more attention herself to instructions in grammar. So intent was she that she did not hear the door open, nor did she hear a whispered remark.

The first she knew was an emphatic slap on the back, which made her drop the book, and a peal of laughter from Polly Linton.

"Good old thoughtful!" said Polly.

"Fancy Paula swotting!"

"What's wrong?" asked Betty, seeing Bluebell's worried looks.

And then the book was shown to her, and the difficulty explained.

"Why, of course it's a noun!" she said. "The suffix 'ing' doesn't make the word a verb, Bluebell, dear. If one says, 'The birds are singing,' then it is a verb. But if one says, 'I like singing birds,' it is an adjective, describing what kind of birds one likes. And here one is praising something about the birds. If one says, 'The feathers of the birds are beautiful,' 'feathers' would be a noun."

"So, you see, 'singing' is a noun. It is a name describing an action. This music of birds would be the same meaning, practically, and that would be a noun."

"Yes, wather," said Paula brightly. "Of course. That is what I meant. You see that, Bluebell? If it were, 'The birds were singing,' it would be an adjective——"

"Verb, silly," corrected Betty.

"Bai Jove, yes, wather. A verb, silly."

And—and if it were—well, the othah thing it would be something else—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You'll be the death of me if you go on teaching, Paula," pealed Polly. "We shall have you ousting Miss Somerfield yet."

"Bai Jove, I wathah fancy myself as a teacher, you know. It requires someone with a—er—lucid explanation of things—"

Even Bluebell smiled at that, although it was at her friend's expense. She could see that Paula was not a "lesson expert."

"Put the book away now," laughed Betty. "Come into the Common-room, and show us how to dance, will you, Bluebell?"

"Will I?" asked the girl. "I should just think so. Though—though I ain't got the right things on, like—"

"Oh, but you can dance in those!" protested Betty. "Do show us. We do so want to see you."

And Bluebell, really delighted to have an opportunity of showing them how she could dance, went with Betty into the Common-room.

Strangely enough, Laura Turner was there, although Bluebell would not have thought it so strange had she known that Laura had come at Betty's invitation. Laura was back in her old place as a Sixth-Former, and she welcomed Bluebell.

"It is not so long since we were together in Samways' Circus, Bluebell," said the senior. "But those days are past now. You are glad, of course?"

"Yes, I am glad, Miss Turner—"

"Laura, dear."

"Yes, Laura, I am glad, 'cos it's so much nicer here amongst friends. But they—they were kind to me at the circus—"

"That's the way to talk," said Polly. "It shows that you are grateful for what they did; though it couldn't have been an easy life."

Bluebell seated herself in a chair, but she was not allowed to stay there for long. The girls wanted to see their new Form-fellow dance.

The little circus dancer obliged them, and the applause she gave her was well merited. Although she was attired as they were, in a drill-dress, unpoetic and hard, yet she looked sweetly entrancing as she swirled and stepped rhythmically. And be-

cause there was no music to guide her, it was all the more wonderful.

"Bai Jove, wemarkable!" said Paula Creel. "I weally wish I could do that, you know."

"You can," smiled Bluebell. "It ain't—isn't very hard. See if you can."

Paula stepped out before them all, and bowed. Polly Linton gave a mocking cheer.

"Jolly good!" she said. "Know any more like that?"

"Weally," protested Paula, "I haven't begun, you know."

She twirled round on her toes, and her legs seemed to be tied together. Then, before anyone could stop her, she fell—
Crash!

A peal of laughter went up at that, and Paula, unhurt, rose to try again. Three steps she trotted across the floor, and raised her arm like a bird. Polly Linton, in a whisper, suggested that it was a scarecrow.

But Paula was not up to the exertion, and after a few more steps she finished.

"Weally," she panted, "I feel quite pwestwated—"

"I'm afraid you wouldn't do for a circus," said Laura Turner, amidst laughter. "It wouldn't do to get 'pwestwated' in the middle of your turn."

"Bai Jove, no—wather not! But I'm going to learn. It's only a knack, you know," said Paula, with a wise nod of the head. "Bluebell's going to teach me."

"Yes, I will teach you, Paula," said the girl. "You'll be a good dancer."

And for that evening, at least, Paula Creel gave up the idea of learning to dance. A little was enough at present, she explained, until she got over the feeling of "pwestvation."

It was a merry evening, and everyone was quite happy. But even the best times have an end, and soon the juniors were hurrying off to bed.

This was all new to Bluebell, and when she reached the dormitory she looked about her with interest. The rows of beds looked so neat and tidy, and although the room was not furnished lavishly, it looked comfortable.

There was a vacant bed that she found was hers, and she went to it. Paula Creel was on one side of her and Betty Barton

on the other, and for two finer companions she could not possibly have wished.

Very glad she was to get between the sheets to dream of the day that had gone.

She did not regret the circus—she was far too happy with all her friends. Lessons were lengthy, but to her they were new, and she did not object to them as some of the others did.

Soon she fell asleep, and not till rising-bell tolled out noisily did she wake.

When she learned what the summons meant, she was almost the first out of bed, and dressed quickly.

During lessons that morning she was naturally at sea, for she knew very little about anything, and the previous morning had been spent in arranging her books.

"I think," said Miss Massingham, the Form-mistress, "that you had better learn by yourself, Bluebell. I will give you books to read, then will question you about them. But you must learn, and read very carefully. I can trust you to do that?"

"Yes, teacher—I mean, Miss Massingham."

And she was given a book. It was a history book, and she found it deeply interesting. The whole of that day she spent in reading different books. And some of the time Miss Massingham was beside her, showing her how to do things.

Bluebell could write, and she knew simple addition and subtraction, but little else. Her quickness saved her, however, and Miss Massingham was quite well pleased with the progress she made.

"Now," said Miss Massingham during the last lesson, "take this history book, Bluebell; learn all you can, but don't overdo it."

The little dancer took the book and nodded.

"I will learn," she said.

"Yes, learn you must," said Miss Massingham. "Mr. Courtway will want to see you getting on, and to waste your time would be ungrateful."

But Bluebell's eager look assured her.

After lessons, Cora Grandways sidled up to the girl.

"Bluebell," she said, "would you like us to give you some instruction in Roman history? You have the book here, but it's rather dry reading. We can teach you if you come to our study. Come to tea with us."

"Thank you," said Bluebell gratefully, glad that these two were friends at last. "I should like to come. It is sort of difficult-like, reading a thing."

"Oh, quite," said Cora, scarcely able to conceal a sneer at the girl's way of expressing herself. "Come along in a few minutes."

CHAPTER 7.

The Victim.

AS Bluebell went into the Form-room next morning the mistress smiled at her.

"Did you study your history last night?" she asked the girl.

"Yes, Miss Massingham."

"Then let's see how much you remember. Here is some paper. And there is a desk where you will be quiet, away from the others."

Bluebell cheerfully took the paper, and went to the desk after a grateful look at Cora—a look that girl pretended not to see.

While the lesson proceeded, Bluebell wrote at a furious pace. Her circus training had cultivated her memory, and she remembered what Cora had told her, almost word for word. How happy she was that she remembered it, little dreaming of what she was laying in store for herself.

"Goodness," said Miss Massingham, when she had collected Bluebell's answers, "you must have studied hard! I hope this is all right. You seem to have written a great deal. I feared you might have been attracted by the pictures, and not have read much."

She took the papers, and then went back to her desk, leaving the Form to "swot" at their geography books, learning the mean annual rainfall of Africa.

Miss Massingham's brows became black as she read the first page, and she glanced at the girl, who was looking out of the window. The mistress opened her mouth as though to speak, then chaged her mind. When she had finished the whole composition, she rose and crossed to the girl.

"Bluebell," she said, "this is the worst composition of any sort that I have had the misfortune to see. It is badly written and badly spelled, which is not your fault. But it shows that you did no more than glance through the book I gave you. The

facts are jumbled and absurd. Either you are too stupid to learn, or too lazy to want to!"

"Oh, Miss Massingham!"

Poor Bluebell was nearly in tears, and the rest of the Form were staring at the mistress, amazed.

"It is disgraceful!" went on the mistress. "To think that Mr. Courtney is wasting his kindness upon you, when you don't even take the trouble to learn. Do you realise, ungrateful girl, that he is spending hundreds of pounds on your education?"

"I—I——" stammered Bluebell helplessly.

Her mind was in a turmoil. Surely she had not got those things mixed up. She hadn't looked at the book. Cora— She turned to look at the girl, and saw that Cora's face wore a sneer.

Bluebell's heart seemed to give a leap, as she realised that she had been tricked. Instantly she felt an overwhelming desire to tell Miss Massingham what had happened. Then she remembered what Paula had told her—a lady never tells tales.

She could not tell about them, then. So she sat there saying nothing, because there was nothing to say.

And so Cora and Judith Grandways escaped the punishment that was due to them. They had passed Bluebell in the passage, and she cut them dead. But that didn't trouble the Grandways.

"My goodness," said Cora, "we'll soon get rid of that kid, Judith. That plan worked well."

"Yes," agreed her sister. "Once uncle thinks she's not buckling to, he'll drop her. You know he always says there's nothing he hates more than ingratitude."

But the best laid plans are apt to go wrong, as Cora and Judith were destined to find out.

CHAPTER 8.

Borrowed Plumes.

"BAI JOVE!" Paula Creel staggered back as an excited girl came rushing into the doorway of the school house.

"Sorry!" laughed Polly Linton.

Betty Barton, who was following quite

close behind her chum, took Paula Creel by the arm.

"Not hurt?" she asked.

"Bai Jove, no, Betty!" the swell girl answered the captain. "But weally I am flustered—quite pwestwated."

Polly Linton picked up Paula's hockey-stick, which had fallen to the ground, and then with her other hand jestingly fanned her languid friend.

"Diddums huctums?" she murmured consolingly. "Poor ickle fing!"

"Pway don't be absurd!" pleaded Paula. "But I wish you wouldn't wush about in that wiculous manner, Polly."

"We are looking for Bluebell," Polly Linton explained. "We are going to teach her to play hockey."

"Bai Jove! That's a wippin' idea. I think she is in the study—swottin', you know."

"Good!" said Betty Barton. "I'm glad that she is taking an interest in her work. It is only right that she should try to repay Mr. Courtney for sending her to school."

"Yes, she didn't show up very well over that history affair," said Madge Minden, who had come up. "I hope she turns out well, now she is here."

"Oh, we must do all in our power to give her a chance and help her," said Betty, in her generous way. "It won't make her any better to let her feel she has done something wrong."

"That's so," agreed Polly. "Come along; let's make her give up lessons for a little while and forget them in hockey."

"Yes, wather, bai Jove!" agreed Paula.

"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy"—I should say 'goal.' Dwag her out to hockey."

So Betty, Polly, Paula and Madge hastened to the Fourth Form corridor.

"The door is shut," said Betty, as they reached Paula's study. "I suppose she is hard at work."

She tried the handle, but the door refused to budge.

"Hallo!" said Polly. "Locked! She doesn't mean to be interrupted."

Paula tapped gently on the study door, and Polly Linton "coo-ood."

"Bluebell, dear goal," said Paula softly, "pway let us in."

There was a shuffle from the inside of the study, and presently the key clicked in the lock.

"Hard at it?" asked Betty, entering the study, and then she stopped.

"Good gracious!"

Paula's exclamation was involuntary.

The others—they, too, stood still and stared at Bluebell.

The little circus dancer seemed a trifle confused as she met their glances. The sunlight, falling on her flaxen hair, made her look sweetly pretty, but what completed the charming picture was the dainty dress she was wearing.

Yet that dress—it was not Bluebell's. It was Paula Creel's, as they all recognised.

"Bai Jove, you—er—er—look awfully wippin', Bluebell, dear!" said Paula.

"I'm glad it suits me," said Bluebell. "I want to wear somethin' nice, 'cos I loves pretty clothes. I think this a bit of orl right."

The circus-girl apparently saw nothing wrong in borrowing the dress without the permission of the owner and wearing it, and the girls in the doorway—they quite realised that. While they were hesitating as to what to say, other voices became audible in the passage, and Dolly Delane, Ella Ellgood, and Grace Garfield came up.

Betty made as though to shut the door to prevent them from seeing into the study, for the captain of the Fourth, in a quick glance round the room, had noticed that on the chairs and table lay articles of attire belonging to various girls in the Fourth.

"My hat!" said Polly Linton suddenly, and looked at one of her own hats that lay on one of the chairs.

"What's the matter?" asked little Bluebell, her big blue eyes surprised at the girls' attitude. "Don't I look orl right?"

"You look topping," said Polly hastily; "but—but we thought you were working, Bluebell!"

Before Bluebell had a chance to answer, the other Fourth-Formers were standing in the doorway. Grace Garfield drew up in surprise.

"Oh, here you are, Betty!" she said. "We wondered where you had gone. Goodness! Is that Bluebell?"

"Doesn't she look smart?" chimed in Ella Ellgood. "But, surely—isn't that Paula's dress?"

"Yes, wather," said Paula. "Doesn't she—er—er—look toppin' in it?"

But Grace Garfield did not answer that question. She pointed to the shoes Bluebell

was wearing, and her eyes flashed indignantly.

"Why, they are my best shoes!" she said. "How dare you wear them, Bluebell—how dare you!"

"Great goodness, and that's my blouse!" interposed Ella. "Oh, what a cheek!"

Bluebell's big eyes widened, and Betty Barton bit her lip with vexation. She had hoped so much that the little dancer would make good progress at Morcove, but this—Bluebell was making herself unpopular!

Polly Linton, frowning heavily, took up her hat. It was a good hat, and one that Polly reserved especially for Sundays.

Ella Ellgood, her face angry, stepped forward and took her blouse. Grace Garfield looked down angrily at Bluebell's feet.

"If you don't very much mind," she said sarcastically, "I should like my shoes. This method of dressing may be popular in a circus, but we don't appreciate it at Morcove."

"No, we don't," agreed Ella.

Betty, Polly, Madge, and Paula, said nothing, and poor Bluebell—she was quite upset.

"I don't see that it is anything to get annoyed about," said Madge Minden pacifically; "the things aren't hurt." She crossed to the armchair. "Why, goodness, that's my best pair of gloves! Oh, Bluebell, how could you! And I was saving them!"

"But—but—" stammered Bluebell.

"You shouldn't have done it, dear," said Betty chidingly. "It wouldn't have been so bad if you had only taken old things to try on. But these are our best clothes."

"I—I didn't know—"

"But why didn't you ask?" said Polly. "We could have let you have the things that didn't matter, if you wanted to dress up."

Madge Minden picked up her gloves, and Grace Garfield was still standing waiting for her shoes.

"I didn't know I'd done nothin' wrong," stammered Bluebell, and she sat down heavily to take off the shoes. "I wouldn't a-done it, only—only—"

Tears were near her eyes, and Paula Creel, realising that fact, strove to pacify her.

"It doesn't matter about the dress," she said. "You can keep that on, if you like." Very lugubriously Bluebell handed back

the shoes, and Grace Garfield scowlingly inspected them.

"If they are injured," Paula said worriedly, "pway let me set the mattah wight."

"Oh, they're all right, as it happens," said Grace. "But if this sort of thing is going on, I shall lock up my clothes."

"I—I shan't never do it again," stammered the little circus dancer. "Honest, I won't! I didn't know that—that—"

"Oh, don't make excuses!" snapped Grace, whose temper had been thoroughly roused. "You've worn them, and there's an end to it. I dare say you have stretched them out of shape."

"Wreally, not unless she got both feet into one shoe, deah geal, which she could do quite easily, bai Jove! Yes, wather!"

"I don't want any insults!" snapped Grace. "And if you're going to stand up for her, she'll never be any different."

And Grace Garfield stamped out of the room.

Ella Elgood, her blouse held tenderly in her hand, followed her, after one last, angry look back at Bluebell.

"Well," said Betty, "I—I think you'd better change, Bluebell, and come down to hockey."

"Thank you," gulped Bluebell. "I—I want to learn."

"Right-oh!" said Betty. "Come down in a few minutes' time."

She spoke in as friendly a tone as she could muster, although she could not help feeling annoyed at the girl's conduct.

Paula would have stayed, but Betty caught her by the arm.

"Better leave her alone," she said, and Paula, nodding, followed the captain of the Fourth.

Bluebell, left alone, stared after them. The little circus-girl looked forlornly at her dress. It suited her so wonderfully. She did not know it would annoy them so, but it was no use crying over spilt milk. She had learnt that at the circus.

She changed quickly back into her drill dress, and took from a corner the hockey-stick which Mr. Courtney had brought for her. She went from the study along the Fourth Form passage, but presently she stopped as, ahead, she saw two figures she recognised.

Cora and Judith Grandways, hearing footsteps, turned.

"Hallo, Bluebell!" said Cora, half con-

cealing a sneer. "How did they think you looked in those clothes?"

Bluebell's eyes flashed, and her hands gripped tightly.

"I didn't know them clothes belonged to them," she said. "You told me they were yours."

Cora shook her head and laughed unpleasantly.

"You must be mistaken," she sneered; "I said no such thing. Did I, Judith?"

"Of course not," said Judith. "Just as if we should tell such an untruth. You must have misunderstood Cora."

Bluebell looked at them searchingly. She was sure—at least, almost sure—that Cora had admitted the ownership of the garments. But she had no proof.

"If I'd a-known," she said, "I'd never 'ave put on them clothes. They was cross with me. Even Paula was different, though she said she didn't mind."

Bluebell looked at them for a second longer, and then walked off down the passage. Cora and Judith glanced after her, and when she had rounded the corner, Cora gave a short laugh. She looked significantly at her sister.

"That's that!" she said. "We'll soon make that kid unpopular here. We'll make Morcove too hot to hold her. To think that Uncle Cyril should have adopted a circus-girl!"

"Yes, and at our expense, too!" snapped Judith. "No more big tips for us while she is here."

"Then she mustn't be here!" frowned Cora. "We are his only nieces, but goodness knows how we'll stand now this kid has come on the scene."

And the two sisters looked at one another vexedly.

CHAPTER 9.

Paula is Surprised.

"JOLLY good, deah geal!" Paula Creel, accompanied by the little dancer, opened the door, dropped her hockey-stick on to the expensive carpet in her "den," then lounged into the large, comfortable arm-chair.

Bluebell's face was flushed with the exertions of the afternoon.

"I'm glad," she said eagerly, "'cos I

wants to be able to play hockey like you do."

"Yes, wather," drawled Paula. "You soon will, you know. If I weren't feeling so howbibly pwestwated, I would give you a few tips."

"Thank you so much," said the little circus-girl gratefully, as she spread the cloth on the table. That was just like Bluebell, so willing, always willing to do her share, and a little bit more.

Paula looked up at her lazily from the armchair.

"I weally ought to assist you, Bluebell, deah," she said.

"I shall get it done dircokly; I ain't as tired as you," answered Bluebell.

"Thanks awfully!" drawled Paula; then added, with a slight shudder: "Please don't say 'ain't,' deah geal. Say 'I am not,' instead."

"I see," said Bluebell. "I am not as tired as what you are, and you ain't used to this kind—or—I mean you am not used to this 'ero kind of work."

"Weally, that's not cowwect," protested Paula, worried. "It isn't 'you am'; it's 'you are.' Yes, wather!"

"But you told me to say 'am not,' instead of 'ain't.' When is it 'are,' and when is it 'am'?"

"Well, you see," said Paula. "When you—er—well, there's a difference, you see. Yes, wather. You'll soon learn, you know; it's vewy easy."

Bluebell looked puzzled, and put the kettle on to boil. Paula was not very good at explaining things, and poor Bluebell was in far greater confusion than she had been before.

"I do wish I could talk like you," she said, after a pause. "You do talk so nice."

"Nicely," corrected Paula. "All adjectives—I mean, verbs—er—pwnouns, that is—anyway, whatever 'nicely' is—always end in 'ly'; such as 'stupidly'—not 'stupid.' You see, you wouldn't say 'Don't talk so stupid.'"

"Isn't that an adverb?" asked Bluebell, who had been diligently studying her grammar-book.

"Pwobably—ye-es, vewy pwobably. Don't let the kettle boil over, deah geal."

And Paula, to avoid subsequent awkward questions regarding English grammar, began to talk of hockey. But Bluebell was thoughtful, and after tea was finished the

little circus-girl took a sheet of exercise paper and a pen.

For several minutes she sat before the sheet of paper, seriously regarding it. At last she wrote upon it, slowly and in large capitals: "Things to remember."

Then on the line beneath she wrote:

"1. Never tell tales.

"2. Never say ain't; sometimes am and sometimes arnt.

"3. Never borrow other girls close.

"4. Dont hit with the back of the stik.

"5. Dont rase stik above the sholder."

She sat thoughtfully chewing her pen and looking from time to time at Paula Cxcel.

Paula, looking up, intercepted that glance.

"Anything the mattah, deah geal?"

"I was just wonderin' how to spell 'sholder.' Is there an 'a' in it?"

"Bai Jove, wather not! S-H-O-U-L-D-E-R. But what are you w'iting? Pwepawation, deah geal?"

"Nunno," said Bluebell; "nothin' much."

Paula glanced at her curiously, then sighed and rose. One look she gave at the sheet of paper, then smiled. Bluebell, watching her anxiously, seemed rather hurt, and Paula placod her hand on the girl's sholder.

"Wippin', deah Bluebell!" she said. "I am vewy pleased to see this. It is the wight spiwit."

"Yes, I want to be white," nodded Bluebell. "Mr. Samways said he liked a white man. Some men have yeller streaks, he used ter say."

"Pwobably; but I meant 'wight,' not 'white,' deah geal."

"Oh, y-y-yes," stammered Bluebell, looking at her idol; "I—I see."

"Weally, it's my lisp, you know," explained Paula. "Yes, wather, bai Jove! I say 'wight' instead of 'wight,' and 'wippin' instead of 'wippin'."

Bluebell smiled.

"You mean 'ripping,'" she said. "Of course, you say 'w' instead of 'r.'"

She remained thoughtful for a moment, then resumed her writing. Paula, with a sigh, started preparation, and Bluebell commenced, too.

She found lessons none too easy, but Paula Creel was there to assist her, though it must be admitted that elegant Paula was not herself very brilliant at lessons.

Still, the work was done, and satisfac-

torily, so that in quite good time Bluebell was able to lay down her pen and say that she had finished.

"I am going" to write to Mr. Courtney—the kind gentleman wot sent me here," she said, rather shyly.

"Splendid!" agreed Paula, lying down on the settee. "Give him my vewy kindest regards. Yes, wather!"

Bluebell chewed her pen, and stared thoughtfully at the blank sheet of paper before her; then she commenced the letter.

It took her a long time, and, before she had finished, Paula went out of the study to find Betty. Bluebell remained alone, writing slowly.

Then, very carefully, she sealed the envelope, and looked about her for a stamp. There was not one to be found. She would have searched, but imagined that it might be wrong to search Paula's desk.

Where could she get a stamp? She only really knew the study of the Grandways for certain; she was not sure which was Betty Barton's study. So to the Grandways' study—No. 7—she went.

Cora and Judith were there, and they seemed rather surprised when they saw their visitor.

"Have you got a stamp I could buy, please?" asked Bluebell, a little diffidently. Cora glanced at the letter the little circus dancer held, and nodded.

"Want that posted?" she asked. "I've got something that must go by the next post. I'll put a stamp on yours and send it, if you like."

"Oh, thank you!" said Bluebell. "The kind gentleman wants to know how I'm a-gettin' on."

"A-gettin' on—what's a-gettin'?" asked Judith.

"She means 'getting,'" explained her sister. "Bluebell will soon learn to speak English, won't you, Bluebell? At present you still retain an accent, but you'll drop that."

"I hope so," sighed Bluebell, not seeing that these two were "getting at her." "I do wish I could speak like Paula."

Cora looked at her keenly.

"Do you really?" she said. "Well, why not? Simply say 'w' instead of 'r,' and imitate her. She will like it, if you follow in her footsteps, you know. Paula's very keen on department. Why don't you try to walk like her, too?"

"I never thought of that," said Bluebell hesitatingly. "Do—do you really think that she would like it?"

"Sure of it," said Cora emphatically, and Judith nodded. "Just try," urged Cora. "Say 'Bai Jove, yes, wather, y'know.'"

"B-bai Jove, yes, wather, y'know!" repeated Bluebell, who, by her circus training was an excellent mimic. "Weally wippin'!"

"Splendid!" cried Cora enthusiastically. "Good gwacious," went on Bluebell, quite enthusiastically, "I weally feel pwotwated! But won't she think I'm making fun of her?"

"Gracious, no!" exclaimed Cora. "She'll be awfully flattered. You can walk like her, can't you?"

Bluebell, with a very good imitation of Paula's lounge, crossed the room, and Cora winked at her sister.

"You'll do," she said. "Go down to the Common-room and try it on them."

"I will," said Bluebell, after just a moment's hesitation, "if you are sure she will like it."

The letter she left with the Grandways, little dreaming that it would not be posted—that even at that moment they were reading it through, amidst giggles.

Very cautiously Bluebell opened the door of the Common-room and peered in. Her heart beat a little faster, as, imitating Paula's well-known walk, she went across the room.

"What have you been doing all this time, Bluebell?" asked Betty.

"Whiting," answered the little dancer.

"Whiting?" asked Polly. "White-washing, do you mean?"

"No, w'iting a letter, yes, wather, bai Jove!"

The effect of that was electrical, and there were gasps and a few laughs. Some took it as a joke, and some as a direct insult to Paula.

"W-what did you say?" asked Betty.

"W'itin' to Mr. Courtney. Yes, wather!" said Bluebell, now a little doubtful as to the course she was taking.

She looked round the Common-room in search of her friend, but Paula Creel was not there.

"Go it, Bluebell!" urged Grace Garfield, enjoying the fun. "That's the way to be grateful!"

"Weally, there ain't nothin' wemarkable,"

protested Bluebell. "You don't say nothin' when Paula speaks like this. Yes, wather—I mean, no, wather!"

The door of the Common-room opened, and Cora and Judith entered.

Betty Barton was frowning at Bluebell rather angrily, and Polly, too, was looking cross. Several of the girls were surprised, and the Grandways—they were just enjoying this.

Bluebell walked across the room in Paula's style. She was confused by their laughter, and still kept up the mimicry, although she meant not to.

Then the door opened in the midst of a burst of laughter to admit Paula.

"Gwacious! What's the joke?" she asked Cora.

"Only your little friend taking you off," sneered Cora. "Weally wippin'—ch, Bluebell?"

"Yes, wather!" stammered the girl, confused. "I—I mean—"

Paula Creel stood still, quite amazed, dumbfounded, and she cast a hurt look at the little circus dancer.

"Weally, Bluebell," she protested, "I think it is gwossly unfair to cawicature me in this way."

"I—I wasn't," denied Bluebell, her face crimson. "I weally—I mean, really—did it 'cos— Well, I want to speak like you."

"Ha, ha!" laughed Grace Garfield. "There's your friend, Paula. She wears your dresses when you're out, and then makes fun of you."

"Yes, Bluebell, it was mean," said Betty.

Bluebell was standing now, her face flushed, and her blue eyes half brimming with tears.

"It doesn't matter, weally," said Paula, with an effort.

"Oh, it's the circus humour!" sneered a voice only a few recognised as Judith's, for she had taken cover behind her sister.

And that remark was greeted with nods. Bluebell looked accusingly at Cora and Judith, but the sisters only laughed. Paula was talking to Madge Minden, and not one look did she give to the circus dancer.

Paula, her friend, was cross with her, and it was all Cora's fault. Very sensibly Bluebell made a vow never to believe them again. But Cora's trickery was not yet finished, as the little dancer was to find.

CHAPTER 10.

Laura to the Rescue.

"H A, ha, ha!"

There was quite a crowd of girls gathered round the notice-board in the corridor of Morcove School and that crowd was convulsed with laughter.

"Oh, do look!" chuckled Grace Garfield. "What spelling!"

Grace pointed to a sheet of notepaper that was on the board, and laughed again. "Goodness, isn't it awful!" echoed Ella Elgood.

Cora and Judith Grandways came up just then and joined the group.

"Funny, isn't it?" asked Cora. "And that is a letter from a Morcove schoolgirl."

"Did you pin it up there?" asked Clarice Monk, of the Sixth Form.

Cora Grandways shrugged her shoulders, but did not reply. Many girls, seeing the crowd round the board, came up, read the paper, and laughed.

Truly it was funny, and yet pathetic, and in placing that letter on the board Cora had done a most unkind and dishonourable thing, for that letter had been the one she had promised to post.

It was written in a large, round, girlish hand, rather cramped in places, and ran as follows:

"Dere kind gentleman,—May I call you daddy please cos you are my daddy ain't you I am gettin on ori right here now and Paula Creel is my frend but it ain't easy cos i didnt learn nothing like lessons at the circus teacher sos Im gettin on fine she ses I didn't oughter play games but learn but i likes hockey betty barton is a nice girl i like her and polly and your neaces are nice to me now hoppin this finds you as it leves me at present,

"Yor affechunate
"BLUEBELL."

"I don't see anything very funny in that," said Madge Minden. "I think it's a shame."

"Hear, hear!" said Paula Creel, who was just reading it.

She turned indignantly upon Cora Grandways, her eyes blazing and her hands clenched.

"I think you are weally the most

despicable creature I have ever seen! Take that down at once!"

"Oh, go away!" said Clarice Monk. "It's funny! You mind your own business!"

Paula stretched out her hand to reach the letter, but Cora thrust her back, catching the girl's arm so tightly that she winced. Time for more, however, she had not, for suddenly she received a stinging slap on the cheek.

Dead silence fell, and Cora wheeled about to find herself face to face with little Bluebell—Bluebell, no longer a child, but a girl fiercely angry.

"Leave my friend alone!" she said, through her teeth.

"You—you—" spluttered Cora. "Why, you little spitfire, I'll box your ears! Don't bring your circus manners here!"

The two stood facing one another, and as Cora moved aside, Bluebell, for the first time, got a glimpse of the letter that had been placed upon the board.

She gave a hoarse cry and sprang forward.

"That's mine!" she gasped. "Give it me! Who put it there?"

The Sixth Form girl thrust her aside. Clarice Monk was deservedly not popular.

"You want showing up," said Clarice. "Your sort is not wanted at this school, let me tell you! That letter shall stay there."

"Shame!" cried Madge Minden, and several echoed her words.

The noise had attracted other girls to the scene, and now Betty Barton and Polly Linton were there.

"If it isn't taken down," snapped Polly, "we'll take it by force! Whatever Bluebell has done, it is not decent to pin a private letter on the board."

It looked then as though there might be a turmoil, for Polly and Betty were angry, and Clarice was white with temper. Poor Bluebell! Her eyes were brimming with tears at her letter, written in all sincerity, being exposed to these girls' unfriendly gaze.

Just when things seemed to be at the crisis another voice was heard—a voice that caused them all to turn their heads.

Behind them stood Laura Turner—Laura, who had once been more unpopular than Clarice, but was now quite an idol of the school, by reason of the manner in which she had redeemed herself.

"What is the meaning of this?" she asked sternly.

No one spoke for a minute, and Laura pushed her way through the crowd to the notice-board, what time Clarice gave her an insolent look.

"Who pinned up that letter?" asked Laura indignantly, turning to them.

"Never you mind!" retorted Clarice. "No one asked you to interfere. I suppose you'll stick up for this circus kid."

"I shall stand up for fair play!" retorted Laura.

"Since when?" sneered Clarice.

Laura did not reply. Instead, she reached out, and with her long arm snatched the letter from the board. Clarice jumped forward as she did so, but too late.

"Give it to me!" shouted the bully.

Laura shrugged her shoulders.

"Who put this on the board?" she demanded, facing the crowd.

Cora and Judith vainly tried to make their escape, but Polly Linton prevented that very successfully, and the Grandways sisters, by their action, gave themselves away.

"You!" said Laura. "I might have guessed it. This is just the sort of trick that you might be expected to play, Cora. You put this up here?"

"Yes, I did. What's it to do with you?"

"This much—that if I find you interfering with Bluebell again, I shall report you to Miss Somersfield!"

"Look here—" began Cora angrily.

But Laura Turner, linking her arm through Bluebell's, had walked off, leaving Cora and Judith to the mercy of the Fourth.

"Never mind, dear," said Laura, to the little circus dancer. "Don't cry; they're not worth it!"

"I hate them—I hate them!" said Bluebell. "Why are they so unkind? I—I can't help my spelling, and—and they—"

"Poor Bluebell!" said Laura. "Come into my study, dear, and have tea. Let's talk about old times."

And, in Laura's study, Bluebell was soon helping to get the tea. They had much to talk about, for they had been in Samways' circus together, for Laura had recently run away from Morcove in disgrace,* to dance under an assumed name.

* See "The Schoolgirls' Own" Library No. 103—"A Disgrace to Morcove!"

"Cheer up, kiddy!" said the Sixth-Former. "You'll pull through. Never mind the Grandways—no one bothers about them!"

"But—but I wish I could be friends with them, 'cos Mr. Courtney—my daddy—is their uncle, and I know he wants us to be friends."

"Do you ever wish that you were back in the circus?"

"Sometimes," she said. "But I want to be a scholar. I want to be a lady like Paula Creel, only—only I've offended her."

And she told sympathetic Laura of the trick Cora had played.

"Paula is a good sort—one of the best," said Laura. "She will not mind, Bluebell. Do your best, learn all that you can, and act fairly and honestly—then everything will be well, have no fear of that. Don't give up hope."

And that little talk with Laura Turner gave her fresh hope. For Laura—she had been "down," she had known hard times, and now she was through all that—she was one of the most popular girls in the school.

"If only I can be popular!" thought Bluebell.

And she resolved that, come what may, she would fight her way through.

CHAPTER 11.

A Costly Mistake.

"CAN I help you?" Bluebell asked that question rather shyly as she looked at Paula across the study table.

Paula, with a very worried look on her aristocratic brow, was dressmaking. It was rather unusual to find Paula so engaged, but she had resolved to make a dress.

Paula had not said much to Bluebell that day, and the little circus dancer was rather worried. She was trying to act up to her resolve and become popular, because she knew that that was what Mr. Courtney wanted. Had he not said when he came that he judged a girl by the friends she had?

When he came again she must have plenty of friends.

"Do let me 'elp, please," she said.

"Weally, I don't think you could," said

Paula. "Dwessmakin' is fwightfully difficult, you know—vevy skilled. In fact, I'm not at all sure I can do it myself. It requires a great deal of judgment and thought."

"But can't I 'elp with the sewing? I used to sew a lot," said Bluebell, with a note of wistful pleading in her tone.

"Vovy well," said Paula guardedly. "But pway be vovy careful. You see, I have a pattern heah, and I have to cut this matewial to it."

She tilted her head on one side thoughtfully, while Bluebell watched her.

"I wondah—yes, wather—whether this is the wight way wound of the matewial? Do you think there is a wight and wong way?"

"I really don't know," confessed Bluebell. "But I should think so, really. Shall I ask Betty?"

"Weally, Bluebell, I am sure Betty cannot know any more about it than I do. I've always wather fancied I could dwessmake. This way looks wippin'."

And, very thoughtfully, Paula commenced to cut out the material from the pattern, slowly and very carefully, but unfortunately none too straight.

"Polly Linton said I couldn't do this. But I'll show her! Yes, wather!" she said. "I am goin' to get this finished."

"If you cut it out, I'll sew it for yer," said Bluebell. "I scw quickly. You won't want to sew."

"Bai Jove, no! I never thought of that. I forgot about sewing. You see, I'm an organiser, bai Jove. The true art of dwess-making is in the cutting and designing."

"Then let me sew it when you've cut it."

"Thank you, Bluebell. If you will be so kind. I am weally wather fatigued already. These scissors are wather heavy, don't you know."

And Paula, as she went on with her cutting, sighed again.

The dress was of the fussy, much draped type, with a bouffant effect over the hips, and if it were to hang well it had to be properly cut.

"Even Cowa is wather good at dwess-making, I think," said Paula thoughtfully. "So I know I shall be vovy good at it. Does this look all wight? You see, it is cut in four diffewent pieces and then sewn together."

"Hack, hack, clip went the scissors!

"I suppose that is wight," mused Paula.

"It looks wather funny, but that's the art, bai Jove! Yes, wather; things always look wough-and-weady, but when they're made up, they're simple."

The various bits did seem like a jigsaw puzzle, which was hardly surprising when one saw how Paula had cut them. But they were right in the main, and when sewn up the dress should have looked really splendid.

"I'll start to sew it up—eh?" asked Bluebell eagerly anxious to help Paula. "It'll look a bit of orl right—"

"Ahem! I think you'd better start sewing," Paula answered. "It's quite simple, y'know. Yes, wather! It will look wippin'. I'll go along and tell Polly. The picture is there and the pattern, but it looks wathah confusing. Pewwaps Polly knows which are which."

She hurried from the room in a very busy way, and Bluebell was left staring at the dress.

Paula had only been gone a few minutes when the door of the study opened and Cora Grandways looked in.

"I hear Paula's making a dress," she said.

Bluebell looked up and nodded, not wishing to have anything to do with the Grandways. But Cora was not to be put off like that.

"Good gracious!" she said. "She has cut it all wrong! My goodness, it will be in a mess!"

"All wrong?" asked Bluebell.

"Yes. That bit there, that wants to be cut to that pattern. See? There ought to be four bits like that. And this centre bit wants cutting up the middle."

Bluebell nodded as she watched, and picked up a piece of chalk which Paula had used for marking.

"This is the way," said Cora, taking the chalk, and she marked out the pattern.

Bluebell nodded, and stared at it as though she knew. But this manner of dressmaking was as Greek to her. Paula had said that Cora was a good dressmaker, and Paula herself seemed not to know much about it.

"I'll do that for her," said Cora cunningly.

"No, I will," pleaded Bluebell. "Let me. She'll be so pleased to have it right. You mark 'em, and I'll cut it."

Cora, with her eyes half-closed as though she were looking at a picture, marked out several other pieces, and handed Bluebell the scissors.

"That's better!" she said. "Hurry up; she has gone to find Polly in the gym. You've got time if you set about it quickly."

As she closed the door she gave a cruel grin, which Bluebell, being intent upon her cutting, did not see.

It was just like Cora to concoct such a scheme—a cruel scheme, a trap into which Bluebell went with her eyes open, but quite innocently.

Snip, snip, snip went her scissors busily, as she cut along the chalked lines! Snipi snip, snip!

"Paula won't be half-pleased!" she murmured to herself, and hurried to get the job finished before her chum should return. How she wished that she could get it all cut out and sewn up before Paula returned!

But that was scarcely possible. For hardly had the scissors closed for the last time when the door was thrown open and Polly Linton entered.

"Here, is this it?" she asked, as Paula, followed by Betty, came into the room.

"Yes, it is theah," Paula replied.

Then they all looked at Bluebell, who was standing by.

"It won't want altering now," said the circus dancer. "I've finished the job."

"You have?" ejaculated Polly. "What do you know about dressmaking? Why—" She broke off as she stared at the material.

"Goodness!" she cried. "What have you done? Bluebell—why, this is cut to ribbons—ruined!"

"Ruined?" Three voices repeated the word interrogatively, and Polly Linton nodded.

"Just look at it!" she said. "Look at these jigsaw bits. There are about six sleeves, and goodness knows what these little bits are for!"

Bluebell's face went white as they turned to her.

"Bluebell!" ejaculated Paula Croel. "What have you done? This—this material is wained!"

"But—but—" stammered Bluebell.

"That is the right way. I—"

"Right way!" echoed Polly Linton. "I should say it is! Look at it! How anyone

in their senses could think that was right, I don't know! It's a funny sort of accident."

Betty Barton looked severely at the girl of the circus.

"If this is what you think funny, Bluebell—" she began sternly.

"I don't," stammered Bluebell. "I never did it 'cos I thought it was funny. I meant to help."

"More harm than help," said Polly. "I think, in future, you'd better leave these things alone."

Bluebell did not reply. What could she say without giving away Cora? And that would be sneaking. They would look down on her for that.

There was only one thing—she must grin and bear it. She sighed heavily, for she found these rules very hard to keep.

Paula looked despondently at the ruined material and then at Polly.

"Bai Jove! Can nothin' be done?" she asked woefully.

Polly shook her head, and Betty shrugged her shoulders. They could see quite easily that the material was absolutely ruined.

"So now I can't have the dress? Oh, what a nuisance!" sighed Paula miserably. "I did so want to dressmake."

"Look at these chalk-marks, too," said Betty Barton. "Look, you can see how these have been cut by the marks. This must have been what Bluebell cut."

Bluebell looked tearfully at Paula's sad expression.

"Couldn't I sew it hup again?" she asked. Polly snapped at her then quite angrily.

"Don't be so stupid! How could Paula wear a dress that looked like a patchwork quilt, all sewn up?"

Bluebell bit her lip to keep back the tears. She had tried to help, and this was the result. It was so hard! But what wounded her more than Polly Linton's scorn was Paula's hurt look. Poor Paula would not have her dress now.

"I'll buy you some stuff," said the circus-girl. "Please let me. I'll buy it directly I get my money from Mr. Courtney."

"Don't bother, Bluebell. It's all wight, y'know," said Paula, with an effort. "It's not well as important as that."

"It would be a good thing if you did let her, to teach her a lesson!" said Polly. "I can't understand anyone making such a hash of material. And such expensive material, too! Of all the idiots!"

"Really, Bluebell," chimed in Betty, "you ought to leave things you don't understand alone."

Bluebell, her lip trembling, looked the picture of misery as she listened to their indignant comments. And then the three girls went from the study, leaving poor Bluebell alone with her thoughts.

CHAPTER 12.

The Escaped Mice.

"**C**AREFULLY!" whispered Polly Linton.

Betty Barton nodded as she very carefully raised the cage of white mice from the table in the pets' house.

Polly Linton was very fond of her white mice, and she did not at all like the idea of them being in the pets' house away from her.

Dusk had fallen, and, under cover of darkness, she intended carrying her pets into the warmth of the school house. True, it was against the rules, but then Polly was never one to bother her head about regulations.

"If Miss Massingham finds out," murmured Betty, "she'll be terribly cross."

"Oh, bless her!" said Polly disrespectfully. "Have you got Tiny? Go gently, because he's got a cold."

"I'll go gently," nodded Betty.

And for fear of jolting the mouse, she went very carefully indeed. A cloak had been thrown over the cages, so that no one should guess what they contained, and with luck the two would have been able to get them into the school undetected.

"Who's this?" asked Polly suddenly, as she heard footsteps.

A voice answered them, a soft voice, young and reassuring:

"Only me—Bluebell."

"Oh, good!" murmured Polly. "I thought for one awful, fearful moment that it might be a prefect or Miss Massingham."

"Can I 'elp?" asked Bluebell.

Betty went on, but Polly stopped to put the cage down in order to rest her arm and change over.

"No, thanks!" she said. "We've got everything. We— Oh, dear—"

Polly broke off and sighed heavily.

"Blessed if I haven't forgotten their food!" she said.

"I'll get it!" said Bluebell eagerly.

But Polly shook her head.

"You won't know where I keep it," she said. "I'll have to go back. You look after these mice—or, better still, catch up Betty. I'll run back for the food. Careful with them; they don't like being bumped."

Bluebell nodded, and very carefully picked up the cage. It was quite heavy enough for her to carry, and a few yards' walking made her arm ache. But she did not give up.

Polly Linton had spoken to her in quite a friendly manner, and perhaps Polly would like it if she helped her. Where was Betty—on ahead?

The mice squeaked, and the figure on ahead, which she thought to be Betty, turned. It was not Betty Barton, however.

"Hallo!" said Cora Grandways' voice. "What have you got there—white mice?"

"I don't want ter speak ter you," said Bluebell. "You're deceitful, you are."

"What!" gasped Cora angrily.

"You made me spoil Paula's material, and I ain't a-goin' to listen to a thing you say in future. Dare say you'd like me to upset Polly's mice."

"Don't be a little idiot!" retorted Cora; and then she added impressively: "It's likely I should do that when I know Miss Massingham's waiting to see them?"

"Miss Massingham?" asked Bluebell.

"Yes, Miss Massingham. Not deaf, are you? Really, I know what I say. You needn't pretend that you're not taking them to her, because I've seen Betty Barton with a lot. You'd better be careful with them, I can tell you. Miss Massingham's down on any cruelty. Take them up to Clarice Monk; she'd like to see them."

It was cunningly said, and Bluebell curled her lip in anger.

"I'm likely to take 'em to Clarice," she said. "I can see through your tricks now, Cora. You want me to get inter trouble with Miss Massingham. Well, I shan't. I shall take 'em straight to her."

And Bluebell hurried on. Betty by now was in the school house, cautiously making her way along the corridors so that no one should see her burden. She wondered what had happened to Polly, but she did not stop as delay might be risky.

Cora Grandways looked after Bluebell, and laughed softly to herself.

Meanwhile Bluebell was walking along the passage carrying the white mice very carefully. Several girls saw her and stared.

By the merest chance there were no prefects about, although it might have been better had there been someone to prevent her taking the white mice to the Fourth Form mistress' study.

But Bluebell, all unconscious of what she was really doing, went along to Miss Massingham's study, and, placing the white mice on the ground, opened the door in response to the "Come in!"

Miss Massingham did not at first look up, being busy correcting exercise-books, and Bluebell stood in the doorway with the white mice in her arms.

"Close the door; it is draughty!"

Even then Miss Massingham did not look up. At last, however, she leaned back and adjusted her spectacles.

At sight of Bluebell she stared, and craned her head forward.

Bluebell smiled and slipped the cover off the cage. In doing so she loosened the catch.

"I—I've brought the white mice of Polly Linton's," she said.

"You've brought what?" exclaimed Miss Massingham, for if there was one thing in the world Miss Massingham hated, it was mice.

But before Bluebell could answer the question, she became aware of the fact that somehow the cage door had become opened.

Out came the mice, five of them, slithering down her clothes to the ground.

"Catch them! Oh, you wicked girl! Catch them!" cried Miss Massingham.

Her voice rose to a shrill crescendo, and Bluebell, realising that something very greatly was wrong, sprang to life and chased the mice. But they were not to be caught. It was their freedom, and they meant to make the most of it. Round the floor they scampered, and up the very legs of the desk. One sat upon a pile of papers blinking at her, and in terror the Fourth Form mistress' spectacles fell off.

"Shoo, shoo! Help, help!"

Not unnaturally this commotion did not pass unnoticed, and in less than a minute the door was flung open wide. Girls of all

ages and Forms stood there, looking in amazement at the strange scene.

Then almost in chorus they burst into a yell of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Take them away—take them away," shrieked Miss Massingham.

One of the mice, scared at the sudden burst of laughter, ran amongst the girls, and one or two nervy girls rushed about in a panic.

What a pandemonium there was then! Some girls mischievously sent the escaping mice back into the room, and tried to alarm the Fourth Form mistress by telling her that they were near.

"Look out, Miss Massingham!" yelled someone. "There's one just behind you!"

Poor Miss Massingham went nearly off her head then, and was only saved by the arrival of Polly Linton.

Polly's face was white with alarm, for she knew that this affair would not go unpunished.

By name she called the scared mice, who had huddled together, and at last they were all gathered up. The laughing girls helped her, realising that for Polly this matter had no humour.

Bluebell vainly sought to undo the harm she had unwittingly done, but Polly brushed her roughly aside.

"And now," said Miss Massingham, her eyes glittering as she looked at the owner of the mice, "I want to know, Polly Linton, how it is that you bring white mice into the school? It is against the rules, as I have told you dozens and dozens and dozens of times!"

Miss Massingham thumped the desk, and poor Polly shivered in fearful anticipation.

"Your wretched mice shall be taken away!" she stormed. "And, as for you, you shall be detained! It is disgraceful!"

Polly, white-faced, bowed her head, and sympathetic glances were cast at her.

But all eyes turned from her as Bluebell went forward.

"Please, Miss Massingham," she said, "it isn't weren't Polly's fault. I—I brought 'em here."

"You stupid girl! Why did you do it? Did Polly sanction your bringing them into the school?"

"Yes," Polly broke in, in her impetuous manner. "I was bringing them in, because some of them are ill—"

"Such nonsense!" snapped the mistress.

"Do not talk such utter rubbish to me, Polly Linton! The mice shall be taken away, and you will stay in all Saturday afternoon as a punishment. And you, Bluebell, you will stay in as well for impertinence in bringing them to me. It seems almost as though you wished to give Polly away. But I am glad that your better feelings prompted you to speak up and tell the truth. Nevertheless, you will be punished."

"But—"

"There is no 'but.' Go!"

And Polly, her face very set, her cage and the panting mice under her arm, left the room, with Bluebell in close attendance.

Outside, with the door shut, Polly wheeled round.

"You little sneak!" she exclaimed. "You did that to get me into trouble. You mean thing!"

And then she strode on, leaving Bluebell, white-faced, her eyes wide, realising that once more she had been tricked.

CHAPTER 13.

Was She a Traitor?

"IT was mean of you, Bluebell!"

"Hear, hear! Jolly mean!"

"Shame!"

Bluebell, in the Common-room, looked round at their angry faces, unable to check that growing tirade with any excuse. And yet it had not been her own fault!

Why—oh, why had she believed Cora? And yet the girl had said it so naturally! Bluebell had thought the trickery of it was the suggestion that Clarice Monk would like to see the mice.

She could see Cora, and the look on that girl's face made her writhe. Judith, too, was grinning in her cruel way. How she disliked them, with their cunning and artifice! Why, they were far, far worse than anyone in the circus!

Yet they were her cousins—only adopted, it is true, but they should have been her friends.

"It's her idea of a joke," said Cora suddenly.

And, as Bluebell heard the words, she started and paled. What now was Cora going to do? What other plans for her

downfall had the cunning and unscrupulous girls made?

"What do you mean?" asked Polly, still angry. "I should just like to know where the fun is in having my white mice taken away and being gated!"

"Yes, gated, so that you cannot play in Saturday's match," added Betty. "There is nothing funny in that. You're talking stupidly, Cora."

Cora Grandways shrugged her shoulders.

"I know what I know," she said mysteriously. "You can believe me or not, just as you choose. But remember that Bluebell spent a great deal of her time with Duffy, the clown at Samways' circus."

"What of that?"

"What of it? Why, she's cultivated his peculiar sense of humour, that's all."

"Oh, that's mere guesswork!" said Polly irritably. "We know that you don't like Bluebell."

Cora sneered, and shrugged her shoulders.

"Just as you like," she said nastily. "I was trying to warn you for your own good. All these things Bluebell thinks are very funny in her own way. Of course, she's sorry when she sees that you don't like them."

But the girls were not ready to listen to what Cora supposed. They were angry; but even in their anger they were just, and not ready to listen to the insinuations of Cora.

"Perhaps this will convince you," said the girl. "You all remember Sheila Garrett, that girl who danced in the circus?"

"You mean Laura Turner's rival?" asked Betty. "Yes. What of her?"

Cora unfolded a letter that she took from her pocket.

"I had this from her," she said. "She writes about Bluebell, and asks how we like the jokes she plays—her funny, practical jokes. She says that she became very fed-up with them herself. Bluebell used to be at them day and night. Putting glue in their shoes, and tricks of that order."

There was a buzz in the Common-room, for the girls were very greatly surprised to be told that Bluebell, the girl they had so admired, the girl who had always seemed so quiet and reserved, was in reality a practical joker who caused much annoyance by her tricks.

"Let me see," said Betty.

Cora handed her the letter, while Bluebell, wondering, stood by, completely astounded by this surprising announcement.

It was untrue, and she knew it. But then it was just like Sheila to write such a letter. How had Cora got into touch with her, though? Bluebell did not think much about that, however; already she had come to the conclusion that Cora would always find ways and means to secure her ends.

"Yes, it is true," Betty nodded, and the others crowded round. "She says quite a lot about Bluebell, and about Laura, too. But she doesn't run Laura Turner down."

Cora Grandways, her lips curled, looked at them all.

"It's true, you see," she said. "All these things Bluebell has done have been jokes. First with Clarice Monk's shoes, then that history thing she wrote for Miss Massingham, then Paula's dress, and now Polly's mice. We shall have a lively time."

"I, for one, am not going to put up with it," said Judith, "and that's flat! If Bluebell wants to be funny, she had better choose some other time and place."

All eyes were turned upon the little circus dancer, and poor Bluebell, clenching her hands, realised her utter helplessness against this cunning.

At every turn Cora's hand seemed raised against her, and she could not be prepared for every trick and artifice of the girls.

"It's a jolly shame!" said Polly Linton heatedly. "To think that my poor old mice have got to go because of Bluebell's funniness."

"Funniness—I should say so!"

The hostile looks of the Fourth-Formers were turned upon Bluebell, and she stared hard at Cora.

It was not true—not a word of it! Had Cora lied, or—

What could she say to disprove that letter?

"It ain't true! Ask Duffy!" she said. "Ask any of 'em!"

Cora Grandways burst into mocking laughter.

"That's very clever," she said. "You know that we can't. The circus has moved on. It sounds very fine to speak like that—"

"Moved on?" asked Bluebell.

And then she felt suddenly sad, realising

acutely for the first time that her old friends, Duffy and others at the circus, who had been her companions, had gone. Gone! But where?

She was left alone with these girls, who had been friends of hers, but now, how they were against her! Not one of them to stand by her. All believed her at fault.

She looked at Paula Creel, who gave her a pleading glance that seemed to say: "I want to believe you, yet how can I?"

Then Bluebell, not waiting a minute longer, turned and fled from the Common-room.

Cora Grandways gave her sister a quick look and a wink that the others did not see. That wink said: "Things are going well."

And, from the anger of the Fourth-Formers, it was quite certain that Cora's cunningly laid schemes were working quite as well as she hoped.

"It means that we shall have to keep a keen eye on her," Madge Minden said. "She isn't a girl we can trust. She's quite liable to tell a mistress about the dorm. feed."

"She can't do that," said Betty; "she knows nothing about it."

"Then it's a good job," remarked Polly. "It's a pretty fine thing to have that kind of humorist in the Form. Goodness, we don't know what to expect next, with her about!"

Then as the subject had been raised, the conversation was on the dormitory feast that had been very quietly arranged. The Form sometimes had such feasts, and this one was because of a large hamper that Polly had received from home, and she, in her usual generous way, wanted to share it out.

"Mind, everyone," warned Betty, "not a word to Bluebell. Perhaps we ought to trust her, but we don't want to take any chances, do we?"

"No fear!" chanted everybody.

So Bluebell was not told of the arrangements. But the others might have noticed that Cora Grandways was smiling, and Judith's face wore a knowing look; but they were not concerned with the Grandways, and those significant expressions passed unobserved.

"If she knows that Betty is going to break bounds, she may think it funny to tell someone," said Polly.

"Bai Jove, I do not think that, Polly!" said Paula Creel. "I weally think it is wathah unjust to Bluebell."

But Polly thought otherwise, and they had all to agree not to tell Bluebell that Betty was going to break bounds.

"It's a pity she's got to do it," said Polly. "But it can't be helped. I thought that Madge had got the things—"

"And I thought that you had," grinned Madge. "It's been a frost all round, really. That's the worst of keeping things so much a secret. Couldn't we postpone the feast?"

"Not very well," said Polly. "Some things in my hamper won't keep much longer. Betty'll be all right. She can knock up old Parsons in the village shop. He's a good sort, and he'll let her have the things. They're all packed ready."

And as Betty did not mind breaking bounds, what could the others say?

Bluebell could not help noticing the air of mystery that hung over the others when she saw them, and, finding that Paula did not speak to her, she went from the study. It was miserable to stay there in silence.

She wandered along the corridor, and stood for some minutes in a recess, looking at the large moon that was rising. Presently she became aware of voices in the next recess, yet it had been empty a minute ago.

"We'll finish her now," Cora was saying. "It's quite simple. You get up—or we both can, Judith—and open the window of the box-room. Betty is going down to do her preparation, so we must wait until she has gone. We can creep back, and no one will be any the wiser. Or, better still, open it while the others are in the dorm. undressing. Then we shan't have to go out—"

"And in the morning," said Judith, "of course, we shall say Bluebell opened it. We can rouse them in the night directly she has gone. That will be better, won't it? And she'll be found by the window. It'll be easy to say she was going to let in one of the circus hands to steal the silver. We can make the evidence."

"That's it, of course," nodded Cora. "It will be easy. Window found open—Bluebell near it."

"No one is likely to shut it, I suppose?" asked her sister.

"No, of course not. They won't know it's

open. I'll do it just before we go into dorm."

Then the voices stopped, and Bluebell stood quite still, trembling.

So that was another plot against her! But what a wild plot! How could anyone believe that she would do such a thing? And yet they were all against her now, and Cora, with her cunning, might do anything—she might easily fake evidence that would make everyone believe that Bluebell was guilty.

Undecided what to do, the little circus dancer did not move. She was trying to work out some plan of action. But it was not easy. The only way would be to wait until Betty had gone down to do her preparation, and then to close the window.

The knowledge that all this cunning was being exerted against her worried the girl, and until bed-time she was morose. She went to the box-room, and thought of waiting there. But they would miss her from the dormitory.

No, that was the only way.

"Look after Bluebell," whispered Betty, as they went to bed, and Paula Creel took the little circus dancer by the arm.

As she undressed she turned to look at Cora and Judith, and saw the former nod and wink.

The window was unfastened, and perhaps all the other evidence had been arranged. Bluebell's heart beat faster, and she snuggled down between the sheets, longing for Betty to go out, so that she could carry out her plan.

The lights were turned out, and the Fourth-Formers got into bed. There was quite a lot of whispering at first, but it died away, and presently everyone seemed asleep. Then from Betty's bed came a rustle.

"Is anyone awake?" whispered Betty.

But Bluebell did not answer, and in a moment Betty got up. She dressed silently, and in almost magical time was out of the dormitory.

Bluebell, her heart beating faster, sat up in bed and waited a minute.

"Cora," she called softly—"Cora!"

But there was no answer. So very, very quietly she slipped from her warm bed, and, with her gym dress slipped over her nightdress, crept from the dormitory.

They would not catch her, she was sure of that. She ran as fast as she knew how, and shut the open window and latched it.

Now it did not matter if she were caught, the window was shut. It would be all right.

She wheeled round, and then, as she heard pattering footsteps, drew back.

Into the box-room came Polly Linton, and behind her Madge Minden.

"Bluebell," cried Polly, as she lit a match, "what are you doing? Goodness, she's shut the window!"

Paula Creel, half-asleep, came into the box-room, but she became very wide-awake as she heard that exclamation of Polly's.

"Goodness gracious!" she gasped. "Oh, Bluebell, you twaitor!"

"Traitor!" gasped Bluebell. "What d'yer mean? What have them Grandways been saying—"

"The Grandways have said nothing," Polly interrupted her. "It's no use trying to blame them. Something woke me up, just as the door shut after you—luckily, and I looked round to see who had gone out."

"Yes, wather, Bluebell," drawled Paula, in great distress. "Cowa had nothin' to do with this. Weally, it is unfair of you to blame them. You have shut the window to get Betty in disgrace. Yes, wather!"

"I have not. I—"

"Oh, what's the use of arguing?" said Madge Minden crossly. "You've done it, and we're all witnesses."

And Madge, with a very businesslike manner, opened the window. But she did it rather noisily.

It was not unnatural that the voices, which had not been too well guarded, should have aroused someone, and the girls realised that when they heard Miss Masingham's voice.

"Goodness, girls! What are you doing here?" she exclaimed.

She saw the open window, and nodded.

"Breaking bounds, I daro say," she murmured, with tightened lips. "I have come in time. Very well, I shall expect to see you in the morning. Now go back to your beds, all of you. Go along, now!"

Then she closed the window as they all went out; but Polly Linton dodged into a recess, and slipped back to re-open the window for her chum.

But no sooner was the news known than the dormitory was in an uproar.

"Sneak!"

"Traitor!"

Such were the epithets hurled at Bluebell as she covered in her bed and gazed round wide-eyed, completely at a loss for an explanation of it all.

Cora had not told them! No, but Cora had thrown a ball of paper at Polly Linton and awakened her in time to hear Bluebell leave the dormitory.

And when Polly had lit a match she had seen that Bluebell's bed was empty.

"She ought to be sent to Coventry!" snapped Grace Garfield.

"Hear, hear!"

"Wait till Betty returns," urged Madge Minden. "She is captain."

But that did not seem to abate the girls' anger.

And Betty, when she returned, was greatly surprised to find them all talking.

Then it was all told to her, and Betty turned to Bluebell.

"Is this true?" she asked, in pained tones.

Bluebell nodded. For the facts they had stated were true; but the motive they implied—that was grossly unfair!

"But what did Bluebell know about the matter?" asked Betty. "How did she know that I was going out?"

"I—I did it. It was my fault," said Cora Grandways. "I told her you were going out, because she asked why everyone was so secret. I told her not to say anything. She said she'd play a little joke, but I warned her not to."

"Then that's why she thought you'd told us," said Polly Linton.

Cora nodded, and Bluebell—she was far too amazed at Cora's duplicity to be able to make any protest. And now what was the use of the protest? How thin her story would sound!

"There is only one thing for it," went on Polly—"Coventry!"

"Is this the opinion of everybody?" asked Betty sadly.

"Ra—thor!" they cried.

Bluebell still blinked at them, not understanding the schoolgirl term.

"I don't want to go away," she said tearfully.

"You won't," said Betty pityingly. "The sentence that the Form calls on me to pronounce means that no one is to speak to you. You are sentenced to silence—shunned!"

"Shunned!" Bluebell repeated dully. "But—but——"

"That's the sentence," said Polly curtly, "and you jolly well deserve it, too! As a beginning you won't take part in this dormer feast!"

Paula Creol gave the girl a look of sympathy, but Bluebell, her pretty eyes blinded by tears, saw nothing, save a blur of hostile faces. She was shunned—sentenced to silence!

"But, please, I didn't do it!" she said tearfully. "Betty!" No reply. "Polly!" No reply.

Then Bluebell, crying, now turned pleadingly to Paula.

"You'll speak ter me, Paula?" she asked huskily.

But Paula, though she looked at the little circus dancer commiseratingly, made no response.

The sentence had fallen, and little Bluebell flung herself down on the bed and burst into a flood of scalding tears. Not tears of shame or remorse, but the bitterest tears of all—tears of self-pity.

And there she lay while the feast proceeded. But it was not a merry feast, and most were glad when it was over.

Even that brought no relief to the girl, and half the night she lay awake, unhappy, sleep impossible, and very far away. What prospect was there for her here? How shattered now were all her dreams! How far, far better off she had been in the circus! But that, too, was gone—she knew not where.

She was alone—in silence!

CHAPTER 14.

The Joker!

"THIS isn't my book!" Grace Garfield, of the Fourth Form at Morcove School made that remark, and almost immediately it was echoed by others.

The Fourth Form room was crowded, and the girls were waiting for Miss Massingham to arrive. Betty Barton, the captain of the Fourth, was standing by her desk at the head of the Form, holding an arithmetic book, and staring at it with a look that was extremely puzzled.

"This isn't mine. Here, Polly, this is yours!"

Polly Linton, her chum, deftly caught the book, and nodded as she noticed her own name scrawled across the cover. Polly was not careful, and the writing was easy to recognise, if only because of its untidiness.

"Wonder how this got in your desk?" she murmured. "Blest if I can understand it!"

"Someone's been fooling with the desks," said Madge Mindon. "My books have wandered somewhere. This one is Ella Elgood's."

"Here's one of yours, Madge."

Books exchanged hands, and it was not unnatural that in passage they got slightly damaged.

"Oh, dear, that's knocked the cover off!" laughed Polly, as she flung back one of Cora Grandways' books.

Cora, not being a pleasant-natured girl, scowled, but the others laughed. The Grandways could well afford that small repair. Cora and her sister Judith, however, always endeavoured to make themselves as unpleasant as possible.

Miss Massingham, the Form-mistress, should have been there, but apparently she had been detained. It was unusual for her to be late, and in the excitement of exchanging the mixed books the girls forgot that the mistress might appear at any moment.

Some of the smaller books made excellent missiles, and Judith Grandways emptied her desk of its contents by flinging them helter-skelter across the room. None of them belonged to her, it may be mentioned.

"Oh!" exclaimed Ella, as one caught her cheek.

She stooped and flung it back, but the book hit Grace Garfield. Grace, who was rather particular about her books, was angry that they should have been interfered with, and she snatched up the small book and flung it back.

That started it! Books were flung indiscriminately, and presently a battle royal of small books was raging. They were not flung hard, and could not hurt, but there was very soon a litter of torn pages.

"Stop!" exclaimed Betty Barton, jumping on to a form. "Girls! Miss Massingham will be here in a minute! Ella, mind—"

Just in time, Betty ducked, and a girl

sitting in front of her gave a sharp exclamation as the book hit her.

But the girl picked up the book, and placed it on the desk beside her. Her face was pale, and her large, blue eyes were rather sad, although they brightened once or twice at several amusing incidents in the battle.

"Hi, Bluebell!" shouted Grace Garfield. "Give me that book!"

Cora Grandways made a movement.

"Don't speak to her," she said. "She's in Coventry!"

"Oh, yes, I forgot!"

But Bluebell returned the book to Grace, who nodded, and then her eyes became sadder.

Sent to Coventry! Yes, that was her sentence—the sentence for something of which she had not been guilty. Sentenced to silence, and now they would not speak to her. She was with them, but not of them.

Judith, with deliberate aim, hurled a book at Bluebell, and caught the one-time circus dancer on the head.

Bravely Bluebell smiled, and passed back the book. She was taking no part in this contest, for a glance at the books in her desk had been sufficient to show her that they were her own—all brand new, for she was a new girl.

"Oh, do stop!" Betty Barton shouted for about the twentieth time. "You will all be detained! I know you will!"

"Oh, rubbish!" snapped Judith, and hurled a book at Dolly Delane.

The book went past Dolly, and on it sailed—right to the door.

And the door was opening. Some saw it, and regained their seats, hastily trying to gather the books from the floor.

Bill!

The book was arrested in its course—and so was Miss Massingham. She stopped short, with a gasp, as the book whizzed close to her head.

From the Fourth Form came a gasp, and Betty plumped back heavily into her seat. Then in the Form-room there was dead silence for a moment.

"Good gracious!" ejaculated the Form mistress, as she stared at the littered books and pages. "Whatever has happened?"

Her eyes flashed through her pince-nez, and she tightened her rather thin lips.

"Betty Barton," she exclaimed acidly,

"you are captain of the Form! What is the meaning of this horseplay?"

"I—I— We— The books have been changed somehow, Miss Massingham. We are trying to get them back."

"Changed? What do you mean, girl?"

"Well," said Betty awkwardly, "someone has been in here and shifted all the books round."

"But that is no reason why the books should be flung about. Come out in front all who were concerned in this!"

There was a slight hesitation, and then, almost en masse, the girls went out to the front. One or two, who were inclined to remain in their seats, followed the others' lead, for very few had not been concerned in it.

But one girl remained seated, and Miss Massingham stared at her. And the Fourth Form stared, too.

For Bluebell—she had not moved, and certainly she had not taken part in the flinging of the books.

"Snack!" hissed someone.

But they were silenced.

"I am very pleased to see, Bluebell," said Miss Massingham coldly, "that you have not taken part in this disgraceful scene!"

"My—my books was all right, please, Miss Massingham," stammered the girl.

Her way of speaking was still curious, although she was improving.

There was silence then, and Miss Massingham wheeled round, to face the others, who were lined up against the wall.

"So your books have been changed about?" she asked. "Was this some scheme to cause delay in the lesson, or has someone been playing a practical joke?"

"Please, Miss Massingham, I think it was a practical joke," said Betty. "I had some of Grace's, and she had some of someone else's. They have been muddled up completely."

For a moment Miss Massingham stood thoughtful and silent; then she turned to Bluebell.

"Yours," she said, "had not been changed?"

"No, Miss Massingham."

"Surely," said the Form mistress, "is it not strange that of all the Form your books alone should not have been touched? Is there anyone else whose books were

At that there was a general shaking of heads, and Miss Massingham nodded understandingly.

"I see," she said. "Then it looks very much, Bluebell, as though you have had something to do with this. I have heard of your taste for practical joking."

Little Bluebell simply stared at the mistress. She was completely amazed by that sudden accusation, and what could she reply?

They had accused her of this practical joking before, and it was so utterly false that there was nothing she could say in defence.

"That's so, Miss Massingham," said Cora Grandways. "I had a letter from one of the circus people. She said that Bluebell was a practical joker, and used to get them into all sorts of scrapes."

"I didn't!" denied the little circus dancer.

Miss Massingham turned to the other Fourth-Formers.

"You have had some experience of this girl's practical joking?" she asked.

At first there was a natural hesitation at giving Bluebell away, but Miss Massingham's angry frown meant that she wanted an answer.

"We think so," said Norah Nugent hesitatingly. "She has done one or two rather silly things in the way of practical joking."

"Yes, wather, bai Jove!" drawled Paula Creel seriously. "Howevah, I weally do not think she is weally despicable—not like Cowa. I mean she's not a bad sort—wather not."

"That is not what I am asking, Paula," retorted the mistress. "It is easy to see that you girls have seen some of Bluebell's practical joking, and I cannot help thinking that this is another example. If you remember, she stayed late in here last night to finish her work."

Betty Barton, who had been hoping that it was not true, looked glum, as Miss Massingham brought forward what was really convincing evidence, all else considered.

"What is more," said the Form-mistress, "Bluebell did not finish her work, and I came prepared to punish her for it. I wondered how she spent her time—and now I know!"

At that Bluebell opened her mouth, but

she shut it again immediately, without uttering a word. She would not tell the Form-mistress that, instead of working, she had been crying—that no thought of tampering with the books had occurred to her. For how stupid it would sound!

Yet it was true. She had been miserable, unhappy, and feeling so lonely that tears were the only outlet for her emotion.

Twenty accusing pairs of eyes were turned upon her, and the little circus dancer wished that the floor would open up and swallow her.

Miss Massingham was talking, but at first the girl did not hear her.

"You will be gated!" she heard the mistress say. "And if I hear of any more of these jokes, you will be taken to Miss Somerfield. She will know how to deal with you."

Then the mistress turned to the others.

"As for you," she said sternly, "I look upon you as being equally guilty. You will take fifty lines each. One does not expect circus tricks from you!"

Circus tricks!

Was Miss Massingham also taunting her? wondered Bluebell. Could they never forget that she had come from a circus? How she had tried to be a schoolgirl like the others!

What was the use of trying, when all these accusations were made—accusations that she could not disprove? Who had tampered with the books? Had it been done to get her into disgrace? It was strange that hers should not have been touched.

She looked at the Grandways sisters, and her surmise became a certainty as she saw Cora give her sister an elaborate wink.

What Cora whispered she did not hear, but she saw Judith grin.

"She won't stand in our light much longer," Cora had said. "Perhaps uncle won't be so fond of her if she's expelled."

And Judith's grin had said quite plainly to her sister:

"We'll soon get her expelled!"

What chance did the girl stand against two such plotters? Even now the whole Form was against her! No wonder, then, that Bluebell raised her book to hide two tears that glistened upon her cheeks.

Was this better than the circus? For answer, the two big tears splashed down on to the little dancer's desk

CHAPTER 15.

Her Friend.

"C WYIN'?"

Languid Paula Creel asked that question as she entered her study on the Fourth Form corridor.

Paula was still sharing her study with Bluebell, for Paula was still as keen to have the girl as her friend, and it was at her request that the arrangement had been made.

Bluebell made no response. She was sitting in the armchair, one arm crooked on the side, and her head rested in it. She was crying as though her heart would break.

There was a worried frown on Paula's face as she regarded the girl, for the position was rather difficult.

"I'm weally sowwy, deah gee!" she said, shutting the door softly. "Please don't cwy!"

She crossed the study, and placed her hand gently upon the little circus dancer's heaving shoulders. But still Bluebell did not look up.

"I—er—I know it's vewy hard," said Paula. "But, weally, it's—er—your own fault! I—"

At consoling people Paula was not an adept. Certainly it was not helping Bluebell to tell her it was her own fault, even were that the case.

"You—you shouldn't play such pwaetical jokes, deah!" went on Paula. "I don't want to lecture. Wather not! But, all the same, you would be happier if you didn't. Well, weally—"

She stared rather helplessly at the weeping girl, and shook her head. In Paula's heart there still lingered affection for the circus dancer, affection and pity. For Paula realised that Bluebell's training had not been conducive to well-mannered conduct.

She still kept her hand on the girl's shoulder, and slowly stroked the flaxen plaits that hung piteously about the shaking shoulders.

"Don't cwy!" she repeated, for lack of anything else to say.

Bluebell looked up, her eyes bright and slightly red-rimmed with crying.

"I—I can't help it!" she choked. "I ain't wanted 'ere. I might have known a circus-girl couldn't get on among ladies. Why don't they give me fair play?"

"Bai Jove!"

The suggestion that the girl was not getting fair play caused Paula to pause. She was a fair-minded girl, and believed in justice. Yet, so far as she could see, Bluebell's treatment had been only in keeping with her behaviour.

"I know it's vewy twyin' not to be spoken to," she said. "But Coventry's a usual punishment, y'know. You will win through, deah geal. You see, the geals think that if you are punished you won't play twicks."

"But I didn't! Oh, I didn't!" exclaimed Bluebell passionately. "It ain't fair to say that I did!"

"You shut the window after Betty, so that she couldn't get back when she bwoke bounds."

Bluebell, the tears trickling from her eyes, shook her head.

"Why should I?" she asked. "I like Betty. Why should I want to get 'er into trouble?"

"Yes, that's so," said Paula thoughtfully. "But, weally, why did you, y'know? Yes, wather, why? And you wuined my dwess!"

"I didn't! It—"

Bluebell was about to say that she had acted with the best possible motives when she had cut up Paula's material when that girl was dressmaking. It was Cora who had advised her to act as she had done. But she would not sneak!

"It's remarkable—yes, wather!" murmured Paula. "Vewy stwange!"

The two were silent a moment, Bluebell, sitting forward in the armchair, her elbows on her knees, her face in her hands, staring into the fire.

Suddenly the door of the study opened, and Cora Grandways looked in.

"I see," she said suceringly, "you are talking to Bluebell, Paula. I suppose you know that she is in Coventry?"

"Yes, wather, I know. But I fail to see what business it is of yours, deah geal!"

"Only this," said Cora. "That you know as well as I do that when a girl is sent to Coventry no one is allowed to speak to her. If they do, then they receive the same punishment. If you want to be sent to Coventry, speak to her!"

Paula's face became grave, and she hesitated. She knew quite well that the rule was as Cora had given it, and, unless that rule were maintained, it was useless to send

a girl to Coventry. It would be no punishment.

"I understand," she replied coldly. "But I am not afraid. It is not your business, but Betty's. I'm quite suah she would have spoken to Bluebell, if she found her crying."

"That remains to be seen!" retorted Cora. "I tell you, the girls are wild with Bluebell; they won't stand any more of her nonsense. She's been sent to Coventry, and you've got to keep the sentence as well as anyone else. That's all!"

And Cora slammed the door, Bluebell staring after her.

Paula stood still in the centre of the room for a minute. She did not speak, and her wrinkled brow told that she was endeavouring to puzzle out what line of action she should take.

If she spoke to Bluebell, she would be out. Cora was right when she said that the Fourth would stand no nonsense. Betty would have to send her to Coventry, even though it would be against her wish.

And was Bluebell worthy of it? If the girl were guilty—and Paula saw no reason to suppose otherwise—the sentence was fair.

"Cheer up!" she said gently, stroking Bluebell's hair. "The sentence will be dwopped when you wepent, deah geal, and pwomise not to do it again."

"But I shan't. I have never done it!"

At that Paula sighed heavily. What was the use of speaking to the girl when she took such an unreasonable view? They knew she was guilty. Everything pointed to her guilt, and Bluebell herself had practically admitted it.

Paula said no more, but walked from the room, giving the girl one last sympathetic look. Bluebell did not move, nor did she look up, and the sound of the closing door echoed but distantly in her ears.

Bluebell sat there for a few minutes, then rose to her feet, and looked at her face in the glass.

How sad she seemed! How different from Bluebell of the circus! She had been happy at times with Duffy, the good-natured clown, and even Mr. Samways, the rough-tongued proprietor of the circus, had not been unkind.

What a fool she had been to desert all that for this! And somehow she missed the dancing, somehow she missed the

audience and the handclaps that had always greeted her entrance.

There were no handclaps here, only sneers. She was just one of many, almost the least of them.

After all, what was education worth? Thus the girl, alone with her bitter thoughts, mused. What was it worth? She had earned her living before, and she could do no more. What would she ever be able to do but that?

But, with a sigh, she determined that she would not give up. Whatever it cost her to stay at the school, stay she must. For Mr. Courtney had been kind, and it would be unfair not to do her best.

She must win through—she would win through! She would show them all that, circus-girl though she was, she had grit and pluck. She would not go under. Never would she bow to Cora Grandways' trickery! Sooner or later they must be found out, and then all would be well.

Poor Bluebell! She little realised that those two girls were plotting for her complete downfall, for her disgrace and expulsion.

Their only ambition was to get her in their uncle's black looks. Mr. Courtney had always been very generous towards the Grandways sisters, and they did not want anyone to rob them of their uncle's gifts. If Bluebell remained at the school, she would receive most of the tips that he had to give. They had always been favourites of their uncle's, and could not bear the thought of somebody else supplanting them.

By a great effort, Bluebell pulled herself together, and made an attempt to tidy her hair.

She must fight her battle single-handed, without friends, without any sort of assistance.

Head high in air, with proud step, she walked along the Fourth Form passage. It was not yet dark, for most of the girls were only just returning from the hockey field.

For a while she stood in the quadrangle, looking a trifle wistfully towards the playing-fields, whence laughs and shouts of the hockey players floated on the evening air.

Betty Barton and Polly Linton, laughing and joking, were coming towards her. As yet they had not seen Bluebell, but presently Betty looked up; then quickly she looked away, and Bluebell flushed.

Two more Fourth-Formers passed, and

feigned not to notice her. The girl felt that she must rush after them and pull their sleeves until they simply had to recognise her presence.

But she restrained herself, and stood, with clenched hands, in the middle of the quadrangle. She did not want to stand there and be "cut" by everyone—she was far too proud for that—and in a minute she walked on.

The gates were just ahead, and idly she walked towards them.

Beyond the gates lay freedom. The circus was somewhere without the gates—the circus, with her pony and Duffy, the clown. How she wished that she could hear his laugh.

But Duffy was far away, for had not Cora said that the circus had moved on?

She saw some girls near the gates, and heard them laugh. Then she heard something that caused her to hurry forward, her face slight with a new eagerness.

For someone in that crowd had laughed. It was a man's laugh—a laugh that she knew well.

And as she drew nearer to the girls by the gates she knew that she had guessed right. For a short, jolly-faced man turned towards her.

"Why, Bluebell!" he cried.

And little Bluebell ran forward, with outstretched hands, to greet Duffy, the clown—her friend!

CHAPTER 16.

Faithful Duffy.

"DUFFY!"

Bluebell was hardly able to believe that it was really the clown standing there. Yet, how was it possible to mistake that laughing, merry face and those alert eyes?

"It's me, all right!" grinned the clown. "And it is really little Bluebell?"

The other girls who were there stood back as the clown embraced the girl, and the school porter stood back, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"I am so glad you came!" said Bluebell. "I—I wanted to see you—"

Duffy bowed deeply.

"At your service!" he said. "Never shall it be said that Duffy failed. Always the little gentleman, the gallant knight just in time—that's me!"

Bluebell smiled wanly at his grimaces, and several other girls grinned. The clown was well known, for when Samways' circus had been in the neighbourhood, most of them had paid it a visit.

"I—I thought the circus was far away," said Bluebell.

"It is," said the clown, for once serious. "It is far away from here."

"Then—then you'll be late for the performance," said the girl, frowning. "Mr. Samways will be cross."

Duffy sighed.

"There is no performance for Duffy," he said. "No longer will the handclaps thunder, and the roof cave in with the rattle of applause. Duffy the clown is no longer!"

Bluebell looked puzzled, and Duffy sighed again.

"No longer?" asked Bluebell.

"No—still five foot four in socks, alas! No longer!" He grinned widely; then once more his face became serious. "Farewell the conical cap—gone the merry motley! The jingle of bells is silenced. Duffy the clown gives way to Duffy the gardener!"

Most of the girls were grinning hugely, and some laughed. But little Bluebell, knowing the clown better than they, was serious.

"You mean you—you've been sacked?" she asked.

Duffy shook his head.

"Say not so, fair one!" he replied. "Who could sack Duffy? I threw the jester's cap aside, foreswore the greasepaint for the spade. And now I trow—or should I say 'I trowel'—for a-gardening I shall go! Tra-la! A-gardening I shall go!"

He saw the look of amazement still on Bluebell's face, and patted her cheek.

"Oh, frown, take wing—give place to sunny brow! I have come to answer an advertisement as gardener, so that I could be near my little Bluebell, and tend her!"

"Oh, my hat!" exclaimed Grace Garfield. "What a man!"

Duffy frowned at her disapprovingly.

"What is that in your hair?" he asked suddenly, and reached forward.

Grace was too late as she stepped back, and Duffy, with a triumphant grin, took a small white mouse from her hair.

"Oh!" exclaimed Grace, and went white.

"And a girl of your age smoking, too!" said the clown seriously. "Fancy!"

And he took a cigar apparently from Grace's hand.

Grace blinked at him, and the others stared.

"It's all right!" laughed Bluebell. "It's only conjuring!"

Then some laughed. But Grace Garfield, feeling that she had been made a figure of fun, frowned heavily.

"Then I can't say it amused me!" she said. "If that is your idea of a joke, Bluebell, it isn't mine. No wonder you've been playing such tricks, if this is your master!"

Bluebell bit her lip, and Duffy looked surprised.

"No offence, miss!" he said. "No offence! No harm in a little joke!"

But Grace wheeled on her heel, and stalked off to the house. The others looked after her, some sympathetic, others smiling.

There was quite a large crowd now, and Cora and Judith Grandways were there, looking on.

Cora glanced sideways at her sister, and drooped an eyelid. Their little story that Bluebell was a humorist had worked remarkably well, and Duffy's entrance, instead of giving their story the lie, only strengthened it.

"The headmistress, I must see her," said Duffy. "To-morrow I shall rise with the lark, and ply my spade right worthily."

"This way," said Bluebell, and took the clown by the hand.

They left the crowd laughing and staring after them.

"He'll make a funny sort of gardener," mused Ella Elgood. "Especially if he starts conjuring with Miss Somerfield's favourite tulips."

But Duffy was really quite a good gardener, and certainly fond of flowers.

"You remember, little Bluebell," he was saying to the circus girl, "how I tended my portable garden. True it was but a box—nothing but a box—yet the flowers

He shrugged his shoulders, as words failed to express the magnificence of that portable garden.

Bluebell smiled. As usual, she felt happy and cheerful in the clown's company.

"I am so glad you 'avo come to Morcove!" she murmured.

Duffy gave her a quick look, searching and keen.

"Aren't you happy, little girl?" he asked. "I thought you always wanted to come to school—to be a fine lady?"

"So I do," said Bluebell slowly, with a wistful note in her voice. "But it's so difficult! You see, I'm only a circus dancer really, Duffy. I'm not a lady. And—some of the girls don't like it."

"Then they shall be made to repent of that unworthy decision," said the clown. "Show me those creatures of scorn, and let me rend them asunder with biting words that sting. Let me tell them home truths. Why, it would take a round baker's dozen—round dozen, not a round baker, you understand—of them to equal you!"

Bluebell sighed.

"I wish that was what they thought," she said sadly. "But, never mind, Duffy, it will be much, much better with you here."

"If I get the job," said the clown doubtfully.

"But you must! I'm sure Mr. Courtney would help you, Duffy, if he knew. It isn't half good of you to want to be near me, and I want you!"

They were on the steps of the schoolhouse now, and Betty Barton and Polly Linton were in the doorway. Paula Creel was just behind them.

The girls stopped as they saw and recognised the clown, and Duffy bowed low.

"My goodness! It's Mr. Duffy, the clown!" exclaimed Polly. "Fancy meeting you!"

"Yes, we are the inseparables," said Duffy, linking arms with Bluebell. "My constant companion, little Bluebell!"

The three girls looked somewhat awkward then, for it was rather a difficult position. Bluebell was sentenced to silence, yet they did not wish to let the clown know that. To cut Bluebell while he was present would be difficult.

"How do?" said Polly jocularly. "This is a pleasure we did not expect!"

"Ah, no! But I am to be gardener now!"

He explained how he had seen the advertisement and come to answer it, to be near Bluebell.

The girls nodded, but made little comment, and then Duffy walked on, with Bluebell to show him the way to the headmistress' study.

"My goodness!" said Polly Linton.

"Fancy Duffy coming! How strange! I didn't know a gardener is wanted."

"Yes, temporarily," said Betty. "Old Stiggs has got the flu, and Miss Somerfield is sending him somewhere. So the matron told me. I suppose Duffy will be accepted. At any rate, he knows enough to carry on till Stiggs is better."

"I suppose so," agreed Polly.

"Wather fun, weally," murmured Paula Creel. "Bai Jove, I should like to be a conjuah—yes, wather!"

At that Betty and Polly laughed. They could not imagine Paula as a conjurer; everything would be liable to go wrong. And it was not improbable that the elegant girl would quickly become 'pwestwated,' to use her favourite expression.

Duffy's interview with the headmistress was very short, but to Bluebell, waiting outside the door, it seemed to last ages.

When he came out he was smiling, and Bluebell clapped her hands.

"Hooroo! Hooray!" chanted the clown, and did a little dance.

Bluebell happily joined in, and it was quite like old circus times. But it was not to last for long. The door of the headmistress' study opened, and Miss Somerfield stopped short with surprise.

"Good gracious!" she exclaimed. "Duff, what is the meaning of this? Bluebell, how dare you?"

The sight of a Fourth-Former executing a dance with the gardener—truly, it was amazing, and Miss Somerfield, for a moment, was at a loss.

For she had not recognised in Duff, gardener, the clown of Samways' Circus, and he had not enlightened her, for fear of jeopardising his chances of success.

"Duff, pray proceed to your duties," said Miss Somerfield. "And you, Bluebell, get along to your study, and let me have no more nonsense!"

The two parted, and the headmistress, shaking her head in a puzzled manner, stood regarding them.

She would have been still more puzzled could she have seen them shake hands on the steps of the schoolhouse.

"I shall see you again, my little Bluebell!" said the clown happily. "Cheer up! Every cloud has a silver lining—often gold. Keep your pecker up!"

And he patted her cheek. Bluebell, smiling happily, waved her hand to him

as he went, with jaunty step, across the quadrangle.

With her heart lighter than it had been for several days, Bluebell returned to her study.

But half way along the Fourth Form passage the Grandways sisters stopped her.

"I see your old circus pal has come!" sneered Cora, making certain that no one was about who might overhear. "The whole school will be turned into a circus soon, I suppose?"

Bluebell looked at her coldly.

"Anyway, it ain't no business of yours!" she retorted, and pushed past them.

She was firmly determined never to listen to Cora and Judith again. Already she had suffered too much at their expense.

Cora and Judith looked at one another, and Cora laughed.

"Little Fool!" she said. "Judith, she's played into our hands. It won't be very long before we see her back—and for the last time, too! Uncle won't be so keen on the circus-girl when she's been expelled."

And Cora rubbed her hands with satisfaction.

CHAPTER 17.

A Command Performance.

"**B**ETTY, deah geal!"

Paula Creel pushed open the door of Betty Barton's study, and looked in.

Betty was deeply engrossed in her preparation. A sheet of paper lay before her, but Betty's eyes were thoughtful, and her brow ruffled, as she leant forward, her hands supporting her chin.

Polly Linton, who was reading, looked up, and put a finger on her lips.

"Sh!" she hissed warningly, and indicated Betty with her hand.

"Yes, wather; I see, deah geal! But it's frightfully important, y'know! A Woyal command, bai Jove!"

"A Royal command?" asked Polly, staring, and Betty looked up.

Paula Creel came into the study, and closed the door behind her.

"Wippin' news!" she said. "A Woyal command, y'know! Do you think I'd better wear my woyal blue dress?"

Betty Barton turned round on her chair, and, with a very serious expression on her

face, shook her pen admonishingly at Paula.

"Now," she said, frowning portentously, "what are you talking about?"

"Sit down and cool off!" Polly said, very sternly. "You're rambling. Is this an effect of glorious spring?"

"Wather not, deah geal! But it's wather exciting—yes, wather!"

She seated herself in the chair, and panted slightly, her face aglow with excitement.

Polly rose, and, taking a large silk handkerchief, seriously fanned Paula with it.

"Thanks, deah geal! I feel weally pwotwated. You know Miss Somerfield has called a performance?"

"Well, I hope she got it," said Polly facetiously. "Did she whistle for it, like you do a cab?"

"You know what I mean. Some diwectors or somethin' are comin' to-morrow, or next week, or some time, and Miss Somerfield wants us to give a concert, or somethin' like that, y'know!"

"How thrilling, or somethin'!" murmured Polly sarcastically. "But what's it all about?"

"Weally, I don't know. You see—Oh, bai Jove, I had quite forgotten! She asked me to send Betty. Betty, deah geal, you'd better huwvy! Miss Somerfield doesn't like bein' kept waitin'. But don't be a moment, deah geal!"

Betty stared at the girl, and shook her fist in mock anger.

"You're a fine herald!" she said. "Why couldn't you tell me that before?"

And Betty hurried off to find Miss Somerfield. Almost out of breath she was when she tapped at the door marked "Headmistress," and her attempts to look self-composed were not very successful.

"Oh, here you are!" said Miss Somerfield. "You have been running. How many times have I told you girls not to run about the corridors? Never mind, though, now. Just sit down."

The headmistress took up a letter, and glanced through it.

"There are some school governors coming this week, and I should very much like you girls to give a performance. I had an idea that we might give a concert for charity, and the governors would like to see how the girls perform. As you have little Bluebell amongst you, it will be an excellent opportunity. She must be well to the fore, and perhaps she could instruct the others."

Betty was silent, for she could imagine how the Form would take that. It was extremely improbable that they would like to be instructed by the very girl they had all sent to Coventry.

But it was, as Paula had said, "a Royal command," and Betty could see that there was nothing for her to say but "Yes."

"You think it will be all right?" asked the Headmistress. "If you think your Form is not up to the performance, say so, and I will let some other Form perform—with Bluebell still as the centre, of course."

Betty was proud of her Form, and she naturally wanted them to have the honour of giving a performance.

"I'm sure that we can manage it, Miss Somerfield," she said. "Several girls can sing well, and you know Madge Minden is a wonderful pianist."

"I had thought of that," said Miss Somerfield; "and perhaps you might give a scene from Shakespeare. Your Formmistress will supervise that. I will speak to Miss Massingham about it. That is all now, I think. You have not much time, but the majority of the girls should be in practice."

"Yes, Miss Somerfield, thank you!" said Betty, as she rose from her chair. "I will see that it is all right."

And, as Miss Somerfield nodded, the captain of the Fourth took her departure. But once outside the study she became worried.

Miss Somerfield was right when she decided that Bluebell should have a leading part, for the girl knew more about staging than any of them, and certainly she would not have stage fright.

But it would be very difficult.

Betty returned to her study, and found it empty. She guessed that her chums had gone to the Common-room, and hastened there.

Practically the whole Form was gathered inside the not too large Common-room, for the news of the "Woyal performance" had been spread.

"Well?" said Polly eagerly, as her chum entered.

Betty told them of the command performance, and all the faces brightened. The Fourth-Formers were very keen on any kind of stage performance, and, quite naturally, they wished to show the governors how well they could sing, recite, and act.

"But there's one other thing," said Betty slowly. "Bluebell has got to take part."

"Bluebell!"

"We don't want her!"

"No, fear! We can get on without Bluebell!"

Betty shook her head.

"We've got to have her," she said. "It's Miss Somerfield's orders, and we can't very well say anything."

"I'm not going to act with her," said Cora Grandways virtuously.

"You're not!" grinned Polly. "Nor without her, for the matter of that! But, seriously, we don't want Bluebell. She'll probably do some of her practical joking."

There were angry faces all around, and no one seemed pleased that Bluebell should be taking part.

"She's weally a good dancer, y'know," said Paula. "P'robably she'll be all wight. And we want to make a good impression—yes, wather!"

"We can do it without her," said Grace Garfield curtly. "She'll do more harm than good."

"Yes, rather! It isn't as if we don't know the sort of jokes she plays," said Ella Elgood wisely. "I'd rather stand aside than be in the same show as she."

Betty, looking round at them, could see that Ella's was the general opinion. The girls looked angry and determined. They were not to be easily unsettled from that view, either—and yet Bluebell must take part.

"You won't need to act with her," she said. "After all, she will dance alone."

Ella Elgood shrugged her shoulders.

"I shouldn't dance with her," she said.

"But I thought you were keen on ballet dancing, Ella?"

"So I am. But, you see, I'm not keen on underhanded circus kids."

For a moment Betty did not speak, and Polly grimaced as she saw the troubled look in her chum's eyes.

"Then we cannot give the show. We must leave it to the Fifth," said Betty. "I'll tell Miss Somerfield."

But at that there were cries of dissent.

"We can't do that," said Madge Minden.

"We shall have to put up with it. If we tell Miss Somerfield why, she'll be angry."

"I think we'd better give it on our own," cut in Polly. "We can give Bluebell a part; it doesn't matter much. But we want

to make the show a success. I say, how about Duffy?"

"Duffy?"

"Yes; you know what a wonderful clown and juggler he is. He'll make the show go splendidly! It'll be all the better if Miss Somerfield lets us give a public performance."

"It's not a bad idea," said Betty slowly, "if Miss Somerfield doesn't mind."

"We'll put it to the vote before I ask her," said Betty. "Hands up for Duffy!"

There was some hesitation at first, but Betty, Polly, Paula, and Madge quickly took the lead, and the others followed. Soon there was quite a forest of hands for Duffy, and only a few remained down.

"Then I'll ask him," said Betty. "He may be able to suggest little things that will make the show go well."

She ran off to Miss Somerfield, leaving her companions discussing the suggestion. There were many opinions put forward, but no one appeared to like the idea of Bluebell being in the limelight.

"It can't be helped," said Madge Mindon pacifically. "There is no need for us to speak to her, even if she is in the cast."

But it was not going to be so easy as Madge thought.

In the middle of the ensuing discussion Betty returned with the news that Miss Somerfield would be very pleased if the new gardener took part in the performance.

"Then let's go and see him," suggested Ella Elgood. "He'll be in his lodge, I suppose?"

They all agreed to that, and in a minute there was a rush for hats and coats. As most of the garments were in the various studies, the Common-room was very quickly deserted.

It did not take them very long just to slip on their hats and coats, so in a very short while there was quite a crowd ready to pay a visit to the new gardener.

Probably it was the first time that the gardener's lodge had been honoured by a visit from the Fourth Form in force. At any rate, the school porter was greatly amazed, and simply blinked at them all.

A light was burning in the lodge as the girls approached it, and voices were audible.

Betty rapped on the door, and it was opened by Duffy. He stared at them won-

deringly, and there was a look of alarm on his face.

"It's all right, Mr. Duffy," smiled Betty. "We've only come to ask a favour."

"Then it's welcome you are to the 'old fireside!'" said the clown. "Enter!"

"We can't all come in," said Betty. "You come, Polly, and Paula."

So the three entered the small lodge. At first the other occupant of the room, who was sitting in a chair out of the light, was unnoticed.

"Make yourself at home!" urged Duffy. "There's your friend, Bluebell—"

Betty and Polly looked round at the girl, and smiled. There was nothing else for them to do. Really Betty and Polly were not feeling at all angry with Bluebell, save for the rather mean tricks of which they believed her guilty.

"Delighted!" said the clown, when Betty had made her request. "Then once more we shall face the footlights together, my little Bluebell; once more you will charm the thousands with your light fantastic frivols! Oh, for Neddy!"

"You want me to dance?" asked Bluebell, her face bright, as she went forward to Betty.

The door of the lodge was half open, but it was thrust wide apart by someone's foot.

"No!" came a shout, and Bluebell went white.

"It's all right, Bluebell," said Betty. "You are to dance—that is settled. And you will—er—clown, please, Mr. Duffy!"

But Duffy did not answer. His hand was on Bluebell's shoulders, and he was glaring, with unusual anger, at the crowd in the doorway.

Betty, ever quick to take action, bade him a hasty good-bye, and, going, closed the door behind her.

She knew that Duffy was angry, and she did not want to annoy the clown. But the others did not care.

"They don't want me," whispered Bluebell, inside the lodge. "Oh, can't you see that they don't, Duffy?"

"Never mind, my little Bluebell!" he said, stroking her hair. "We'll show them what's what! You shall dance till your toes ache and their hands ache with clapping. It will be the success of a lifetime!"

But had Duffy been able to overhear what Cora and Judith Grandways were saying, he might not have been so certain of that.

CHAPTER 18.

Not Wanted!

"HUSH! Here she comes!"
The girls in the music-room fell silent as Dolly Delane spoke. They were all gathered there waiting for the Form-mistress.

Some held music, and some books with a favourite piece of poetry inside. All were prepared to do something to show their prowess on the platform.

In a far corner sat Bluebell, in a dancing-frock that had faced the footlights many times in the circus, and by her side, in his clown's dress, was Duffy.

It was so obvious that the girls did not want Bluebell! No one was paying any heed to her, save, perhaps, Paula Creel, who, with a look of sympathy on her face, turned round to the girl. Paula wished she could speak, but the Fourth Form were even less pleased than ever with the circus dancer since the news of the forthcoming concert.

And Paula did not wish to be on bad terms with the Form. Cora and Judith always seemed to be near when the elegant Paula attempted to speak to Bluebell.

Miss Massingham entered the music-room, and smiled to the girls.

"All here, then!" she said, with her out-of-school manner. "That is good! I want this concert to be a great success, and I am sure it will be. We have talent in the Form, exclusive of Bluebell, but with her help and Duffy's we are sure of doing something really good."

"Yes, Miss Massingham," said everyone.

"Madge plays excellently, and her 'turn' hardly needs a rehearsal; nor does yours. Mr. Duff. I understand you will give conjuring tricks?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Very good! Now, girls," said the Form-mistress, looking at them with a smile. "I have struck on a really brilliant notion. Ballet dancing!"

"Good!" said several girls.

"Then stand out all those who can dance. You, Ella and Grace. And Madge and Judith. I think you dance. You have been practising under the dancing-mistress, I believe."

Very willingly, the girls came forward, for those mentioned had really shown an interest in the matter.

"Excellent! And now we can get on. Bluebell, we shall want you to take the

lead. You have had experience of stage work."

Bluebell, rather shyly, came forward, and the Fourth-Formers looked glum.

Judith Grandways, with a shrug of the shoulders, stepped back to her place, and the others followed suit. Miss Massingham did not notice that, for she was waiting for Bluebell, with her back turned to the girls.

"Now, girls," said the mistress, turning to them, "we will have the dance which you have all practised, and with which you are all conversant. It is an ordinary dance, and I am sure Bluebell can dance it."

Then, as she noted that they had fallen back to their original places, she stopped half-way across to the piano, and frowned.

"I want all the girls who wish to take part in the ballet to step forward," she said.

But from the ranks of the Fourth there came no movement, and the faces of the would-be dancers were set defiantly.

"Come, girls!" said Miss Massingham, realising that something was amiss. "You have all said you are keen on dancing. Grace, Ella, don't you want to dance?"

"No, Miss Massingham," said Grace after some hesitation.

"And you, Ella?"

"No—no, thank you, Miss Massingham!"

"Indeed!"

The Form-mistress set her lips, and glared at them.

"Am I to proceed, or shall the whole affair be handed over to the Fifth Form?" she asked.

The girls who had not intended to take part in the ballet looked at those who had. But Grace and the others shook their heads firmly.

There was a pause then, and the girls could see that the mistress was trying to make up her mind whether to go or stay.

Then Paula Creel stepped forward.

"Ahem! I am—er—perfectly willin' to dance with Bluebell, Miss Massingham," she said. "Yes, wather! Pewwaps we could dance on our own. I—I'm not vewy good, but Bluebell could do the most."

"We'll see," Miss Massingham said. "I am glad that one of the Form is taking an interest in the performance. But what is that about Bluebell? You say that you will dance with her. Am I to infer that the others will not?"

"Yes, Miss Massingham," replied Judith Grandways sulkily, and the others nodded their heads.

The Form-mistress raised her eyebrows. "So you refuse to dance with Bluebell?" she asked. "I will not ask for a reason. Perhaps you have had some petty quarrel with her. But Miss Somerfield wants Bluebell to dance, and I should like to see this ballet. Who will dance with her, please?"

Bluebell went rather white as no one stepped forward.

"I—I don't mind," she said. "If they don't—"

"It is not for them to decide in that way," interrupted the mistress. "Perhaps they will refuse to have lessons with you, in the extraordinary hope that they will be excused them!"

There was an angry light in Miss Massingham's eye, and Betty, who was not one of the dancers, gave them a meaning glance.

Madge Minden stepped forward, but she did not look at Bluebell. And Madge's lead was followed immediately by the others. Only Judith Grandways remained behind. But no one minded that, and least of all Bluebell.

Duffy, from his corner, was watching all this with serious face. It was quite new to him for anyone to refuse to dance with Bluebell, and the clown felt it as a personal slight.

But all the girls were there now, Bluebell in the centre, receiving their instructions from the mistress.

"You will all report to the dancing-mistress to-morrow afternoon," she said. "I will excuse you the last lesson, in order that you will have plenty of time. Just show Bluebell what you have done, girls."

The mistress turned from them, and in a minute there was a proper rehearsal of the songs that were to be sung and the recitations.

Bluebell and Duffy worked up the conjuring tricks, and Bluebell found that it wiled away the time wonderfully. She hated being with the others when they cut her, although one or two girls had said a few words to her.

She was hoping against hope that if she led the ballet really well they would all be friendly with her again.

They tried their tricks upon an audience of girls, and everyone applauded, for they were both amusing and clever.

"Jolly good!" exclaimed Polly enthusiastically. "It's a mystery to me how

he does the things! That pound-note trick is clever."

"Puts it up his sleeve," said Cora, who had been standing very close to the clown.

But that suggestion was laughed aside, because it was simply absurd. That Cora knew, but she was ever ready to pick to pieces anything that Bluebell did or helped to do.

"Must be expensive if they're really pound notes!" said Dolly Delane.

"Well, they're not burned really, and I don't suppose they're real!" smiled Betty.

But the fact that the mysteries still remained mysteries was proof that the tricks were good, and Bluebell was pleased and proud of her friend the clown.

"Never fear, Bluebell!" he said. "We shall be a success, and so will the ballet. The others aren't extremely good, but my little Bluebell will show them all how to dance."

"I'll do my best," said Bluebell, smiling up at him. "What a friend you are, Duffy! I couldn't a-bear to lose you again!"

And she squeezed the clown's hand. Duffy looked away, but his eyes glistened strangely, and when he broke into the refrain of a comic song his voice was husky.

CHAPTER 19.

A Friend's Part.

"I'M so happy!" Bluebell, perched on the table of a small ante-room that led off the Hall, swung her legs and smiled. "To-night is going to be wonderful!"

Paula Creel, the only girl in the room, nodded her head.

"It will be a great night—yes, wather—bai Jove!" she agreed. "They were awfully pleased with Polly's song, and with her recitation. And Madge's playin', too. Your conjurin' turn was wippin'! They all liked Duffy, bai Jove! But he's a professional, and we're only amateurs—yes, wather!"

"Everything has gone well," said Bluebell. "Hallo, who's bag is this? Ain't it pretty?"

She picked up a bag that lay on the table, and looked at it.

"Bai Jove, I don't know! Looks like Cowa's, but I can't be sure."

Paula took it, and pressed the clip, to see

if the name were inside. For it was a rule at Morcove that all the girls' possessions should be properly indicated.

"Yes, Cowa Gwandways," she said. "Bai Jove!"

"What's the matter?"

"Gwacious! Theah are pound notes in it. How stupid to leave it lyin' about!"

"No one's likely to steal it," said Bluebell easily. "What's the next?"

"A song by Gwace," replied Paula, looking at her programme.

She would have said more, but at that moment Polly Linton came into the room.

The madcap of the Fourth was flushed and excited.

"Oh, it's going fine!" she said. "I hope the ballet will be a success. Do your best, Bluebell. This is your trial. The sentence has been suspended for the evening, and if you carry the ballet through, we'll take it off altogether and give you a fresh chance."

"I know!" said the little dancer happily. "Betty Barton told me. It will be a success, I'm a-goin' ter see to that!"

She frowned as she saw a figure in the doorway. It was Judith Grandways. The sight of either of the sisters always caused Bluebell's heart to beat faster, for she never felt safe when they were near. She was afraid of their trickery and cunning.

"Quick, Paula—Polly!" said Judith. "Do come and see the audience!"

Paula and Polly rose and followed the girl. For they were both excited, and wanted to be sure that things were going well.

Grace Garfield was singing. She had a very pretty voice, well-trained, and it was obvious that the audience was pleased. Quite a number of the girls were in the wings, and Polly and Paula joined them.

Of course, they should not have been there, and Miss Massingham would not have approved of it, for it was possible that it might make the girl on the stage nervous.

In the middle of Grace's song, Cora Grandways coughed, and the girl stopped and was momentarily nonplussed. Then she went on.

Miss Massingham, standing at the side of the Hall, guessed the reason, and quickly went round to the side.

She beckoned to the girls who were in the wings, and they went to her.

"Don't stand there!" she said crossly. "You ought to know better. Go back to the room quietly!"

With long faces at the rebuke, the six or seven girls went to the side room, where Bluebell was still sitting. As they came in she put down Cora's handbag, the neat work upon which she had been admiring.

Cora was the first to enter, and she went forward.

"What are you doing with my bag?" she demanded.

Bluebell stared at her, and her heart beat faster.

"Only looking at the embroidery," she stammered.

She looked at Cora nervously. She never knew when to trust the girl, and she was frightened now of what Cora might do next.

Cora snatched the bag, and opened it. "Oh, they're all right!" she said, in relief, as she opened the bag and took out the notes.

"Gwecat Scott, Cowa! You didn't mean to accuse Bluebell of stealing them?" said Paula aghast.

Cora sneered, and shrugged her shoulders.

"I—"

She broke off as her sister advanced. "They're not all right!" said Judith. "Look!"

And, taking the notes from her sister, she held them up.

Bluebell's face went dead white, and her heart thumped. What were they going to do now, these enemies of hers?

"See what they are?" demanded Judith. "Dummy notes—sham notes—"

She turned to Bluebell.

"Look at her, girls!" she shouted. "Does she look innocent? These are the notes Duffy used in the conjuring trick—see?"

The girls craned forward, and there was a buzz as the printing on the imitation notes was read. The back of them looked quite real, but the front, save for the colouring, was an imitation, plain to see.

Bluebell sat as though she had been turned to stone. She, too, recognised those notes. But how had they got into Cora Grandways' bag.

"I—I can't believe it!" said Paula. "Well, you were with her," said Polly. "When could she have done it?"

"She was left alone when you two came to the wings!" sneered Judith. "It is long enough for an assistant conjurer. I dare say she knew the bag had money in it."

Bluebell clenched her hands tightly, and looked at Paula.

"I knew," said Bluebell, "but I didn't take the money. 'Course I didn't!"

"Well, how did these get in? You were alone with the bag. You knew the money was there," went on Cora. "And now we find these dummy notes of yours!"

"Girls!"

They turned to find Miss Massingham and several girls in the doorway.

"What does all this commotion mean?" demanded the mistress. "It can be heard from the Hall!"

Cora, only too glad at the opportunity to explain, told the mistress what she had found.

Miss Massingham looked sternly at the little circus dancer.

"It seems very clear," she said. "But where are the other notes—Cora's money?"

"Bluebell has got them—she must have!" said Cora.

"That remains to be seen. Where are they, Bluebell?"

Bluebell's head was in a whirl at all this. She knew that she had not stolen the notes; she knew that it was all a trick. But she could not disprove it. Where had the Grandways put the notes?

She glanced towards the heap of things in the corner. They were the paraphernalia used in the conjuring turn.

Every eye was upon the girl, and all saw that quick look. Immediately Cora went forward and picked up the baize-covered bag that contained the oddments.

"They must be in here. This is where the gardener put the trick things," she said.

Miss Massingham took the bag, and opened it. She plunged in her hand, and brought out a few notes.

"They are dummies," she said. "No! Here are a few real ones in the middle. Gracious! Then—then—Bluebell——"

She stared at the girl, half angry, half sorrowful that she should be a thief. And from the girls around came an angry murmur.

"She's a thief—a thief!" said Cora scornfully, and the words stung the circus dancer like a lash.

Then came an interruption. Grace Garfield burst through the girls.

"It's time for the ballet!" she cried.

"Goodness, it's late, and the audience is getting impatient!"

Miss Massingham started.

"This must be settled later," she said. "I will take charge of the notes. On to the stage, ballet girls, quick! Go along, Bluebell!"

Almost in a daze, the little dancer got down from the table and followed the others from the room. She felt every eye upon her. But she was numbed, confused at the suddenness of the accusation, and her legs seemed leaden weights.

How could she dance with the awful knowledge that she was deemed a thief? How the word stuck in her throat. Yet they had proved her a thief, and she had been able to say nothing in self-defence.

She went on to the stage listlessly, and the other girls stared at her.

"Pull yourselves together!" said the dancing-mistress, who was flushed with excitement. "Bluebell will lead you. Now, Bluebell—all depends on you! Ring up the curtain, Betty!"

All depended on her—and her legs were like lead! She felt as though she were rooted to the stage. Yet she must dance—dance as though she were some sylvan nymph!

Up went the curtain slowly, and the white discs that represented the audience's faces became noticeable. The footlights glared at her, and idly she counted them.

But she did not move.

The orchestra played the prelude. There was no movement, and it was played again.

Someone in the room coughed, and the back row of the ballet whispered. Madge Minden essayed to dance. Grace Garfield stopped.

Bluebell tried to move her legs. She half raised her arms, but they dropped back to her sides.

The orchestra was playing the prelude again, and whispering was going on "in front." Everywhere was dark, and through the brain of the little circus dancer sang the word:

"Thief, thief, thief!"

She essayed a step, then stopped, hanging her head on her chest.

"I can't—I can't!" she moaned, and dropped on her knees to the wooden boards of the stage.

The audience was in a buzz, and Bluebell's sobs were hardly heard. Faintly, as from a great distance, there came to the girl's ears:

"Ring down the curtain! Ring down the curtain!"

Down came the curtain, swishing, cutting to the white-faced audience.

Pandemonium broke loose then. Someone raised Bluebell to her feet. The ballet was broken up, and the dancing-mistress, almost in tears herself, was repeating again and again:

"Ruined—the whole thing's ruined! Foolish, foolish girl!"

"What's the matter?"

The ballet girls were standing together, talking and expostulating.

"Off the stage, girls!" cried Miss Massingham. "Quick, Polly—a song. Run on, girl! We must save them all from rushing out!"

Polly went on, and the concert was saved. Under Miss Massingham's guidance, things calmed down. Bluebell was led, crying, to the ante-room, where a crowd of girls were discussing the unexpected end of the ballet.

"I ain't a thief—oh, I ain't!" said Bluebell.

Someone pushed through the girls, and Miss Massingham stared at the grease-painted visage of Duffy, the clown.

"What's wrong?" he asked hoarsely. "Who's been upsetting the girl? Who says she's a thief?"

Half a dozen girls willingly explained what had happened, and Duffy opened his eyes wide.

"You say that Bluebell's a thief!" he exclaimed.

"Silence!" said Miss Massingham sharply. "We do not want another scene. Be good enough to hold your tongue, Duff. The notes were found in the baize bag—"

Duffy half opened his mouth, and stared at the mistress. Then he looked at Bluebell, who had raised her tear-stained face.

"I—I stole them," he said, with an effort, and his husky voice was almost inaudible.

The hush on the room was electrical. Cora and Judith speechlessly stared at him.

"You did!"

The clown nodded.

"I stole 'em!" he said, with an effort. "I'm good at conjurin'!"

He opened his mouth again, but no words came, and he shrugged his shoulders.

Bluebell opened the door of the gardener's lodge very gently, and peered in.

The clown, in ordinary attire, sat before the table, his head resting in his arms.

"Duffy!" whispered Bluebell, and placed her hand upon her friend's shoulder.

A tear trickled down her hand, and she shook the clown. He moved, and wiped his hand across his eyes.

"Hallo, Bluebell!" he said, trying to grin.

"Duffy, you didn't steal that money?" "Course I didn't, Bluebell! Nor did you!"

The girl looked at him, and stroked his hair.

"Why did you say you did, Duffy, dear?"

"'Cos it was a plant, Bluebell—on you. I can stand it. I've been sacked. But I can go back to Samways. The lady said, as I'd owned up, she wouldn't send me to—to prison."

"Poor old Duffy—dear old Duffy!" said Bluebell huskily. "But you shan't say you stole it! It was those Grandways—"

She looked up as a shadow fell across the room, and saw the school porter in the doorway.

"Come along!" said the porter. "Time you was going. We don't want thieves round here."

Duffy grinned at him, rose, and took up his bag.

Bluebell clenched her hands, and looked angrily at the porter. She would have said something, but the clown laid a hand upon her sleeve.

"Good-bye, little Bluebell!" he said. "You'll pull through. But I'm keeping an eye upon you, mind. Trust Duffy!"

He took her hand, and shook it; then turned his head away, and walked heavily from the lodge.

CHAPTER 20.

Back to the Fold.

"CHEAH up, Bluebell!"

Paula Creel put down her pen, and frowned thoughtfully at her study companion. Paula's face was worried as she looked at little Bluebell.

"It's all wight," went on the elegant girl, in her soft, drawling tone. "They won't accuse you of theft now, deah geal—"

"I know," said the circus dancer. "But—but Duffy—"

"Yaas, it is wather wuff on Duffy, I know," Paula nodded thoughtfully. "Still, he stole the notes, bai Jove! An' I suppose he deserved—ah—what he got, yes, wather!"

"But he didn't steal the notes," denied Bluebell. "I am sure that he didn't."

"Then pway why did he say he did?" asked Paula, greatly puzzled.

"To save me," answered the one-time circus dancer huskily. "He'd do anything for my sake, Duffy would. He was fond of me when we was—I mean, were—in the circus together, and—and he practically admitted that he said he stole the silly notes to save me."

"Bai Jove! But they were stolen. Who stole them? It's fwrightfully decent of the clown, bai Jove! You know, I suppose, theah's a lot of good in some of those circus people, weally. I nevah thought much about them before."

"There is a lot of good in them," said Bluebell. "Some of the girls there were better than—than some of the girls I've met here."

"Yes, wather! I suppose you mean Cowa and Judith Gwandways. Theah must be dozens better than they; still, they are your adopted cousins."

"Sometimes," the little dancer went on. "I wish that Mr. Courtney had not adopted me, and taken me from the circus to come to school here—"

"But you were vewy pleased at first—"

"Yes, until the girls were unkind to me."

Paula Creel rubbed her nose reflectively. It was certainly a fact that Bluebell's life at the school so far had been by no means a bed of roses; but, then, as Paula looked at it, Bluebell had not acted in an exemplary manner.

"I know what you're thinking," the little circus dancer said. "You're thinking of the jokes I'm supposed to have played—when they said I'd ruined your dress, and shut Betty Barton out of the dormitory—"

Paula nodded, rather awkwardly.

"Well, as a mattah of fact, that is just what I was thinking," she agreed. "Howevah, pewwaps that will be forgotten—"

"But I didn't do the things they say I

did," protested Bluebell. "It ain't fai!—"

"Still, they've given you another chance, deah girl," Paula replied. "You will be able to pwove your worth, yes, wather—"

Paula broke off as the door of the study was flung open, to admit Polly Linton, the madeap of the Fourth Form, followed by Betty Barton.

"Hallo!" said Polly cheerfully. "We've just come to tell you, Bluebell, that you will be given another chance—a chance to prove your worth. You let down the concert—"

"But that can be excused," put in Betty Barton. "Poor Bluebell had been accused of theft, and considering that she was under a cloud, it wasn't fair to expect her to be at her best."

"We sentenced you to silence, but now you can speak and be spoken to, Bluebell," said Polly dramatically, as she wagged her forefinger. "Henceforth what is past is past, and unless you demonstrate with some more of your jokes all will be well."

"You see," explained Betty, "we've just had a meeting, and decided that Bluebell's conduct could be put down to her circus training, which by now she may have lived down."

"And now come into the Common-room, Bluebell, and say how-do," laughed Polly.

And, in the friendliest way possible, she linked arms with the circus dancer. Bluebell, her face shining, and her eyes bright and happy, went with them to the junior Common-room.

Four abreast they went down the passage. Polly Linton, in her boisterous way, kicked open the door of the Common-room, and they entered.

"Here we aro, ladies—here we are!" called out Polly. "Allow me to introduce you. Bluebell—the Fourth Form. The Fourth Form—Bluebell. This is to declare and certify that Bluebell, hereafter known as the reprieved, is to be a member of the Fourth Form, hitherbefore known as the aggrieved—"

"As decided by a meeting of the Form."

"Any complaints?" asked Polly jestingly.

The question was not asked seriously, and what was Polly Linton's amazement when, from a group of girls, two came forward.

"Yes, I object!" said Cora Grandways. "It was not a proper Form meeting."

"No," agreed her sister Judith. "It was not representative."

"I don't understand," said Betty Barton coldly. "The majority of the Form were present when the voting was taken. Besides, as Form captain, I have a certain voice in the matter."

"So have we," exclaimed Cora Grandways. "Let me tell you we're not at all keen on having circus girls amongst us. Bluebell was accused of stealing my money. The clown said he was guilty—"

"Well, he was," said Polly angrily. "I can't understand what you mean, Cora. We know that you're down on Bluebell."

"Hear, hear!"

"And with reason," went on Cora. "I say that it was a put-up thing, that theft. Those two circus hands worked it between them. Remember Bluebell's face when we accused her—"

"Oh, for goodness' sake don't go on talking!" said Polly Linton deprecatingly. "If you wanted to make a fuss about this, why didn't you do it at the time?"

"Because I thought you would all see it. I didn't think you'd make a heroine of this kid—"

"We're not. But we are being fair, which you are not. You have a personal grudge against Bluebell, Cora, and you've no right to bring it into this."

"Well, if you want a thief and circus hand for a friend, I don't!" snapped Cora. "I shall cut her—"

"You can please yourself," said little Bluebell, her face flushed, and her eyes angry. "Perhaps I shouldn't speak to you if you wanted me to. I don't trust you, Cora Grandways, nor your sister!"

Cora Grandways bit her lip at that piece of plain talking, and some of the Fourth Formers laughed.

It was easy to see that the majority of the girls bore the little circus dancer no malice, and Cora Grandways ground her teeth in anger.

Then she strode across the Common-room, with her sister Judith just behind her.

"Perhaps you'll change your minds, later," she hurled at them from the door.

But the Fourth Formers only laughed. They did not take Cora Grandways at all seriously.

Little Bluebell, however, had a sad look in her eyes as Paula Creel linked arms and led her across to the chairs the Grandways sisters had vacated.

"I—I wish they weren't like that about

me," said the little circus dancer miserably. "I would like to be friends with everyone. 'Cos Mr. Courtney says he judges a girl by the friends she has at school."

"Bai Jove, that's vewy twue; but who could be fwends with them, y'know," said Paula.

But little Bluebell, ever forgiving, wished that she could make friends with the Grandways sisters. She sat thinking about them, while the other girls talked.

Perhaps if she went to them they might be different. Perhaps they were jealous—perhaps they thought she was an enemy.

She looked round the Common-room, but no one was looking at her; an argument was in progress, and even those who were not taking part in it were listening, and smiling at the various speeches.

Paula Creel was well to the fore, holding forth upon hockey, and Bluebell, seeing that she was not noticed, slipped out of the room.

She hurried along the passage to the corridor where the Fourth Form studies were.

Study No. 7—that was the Grandways' study. She tapped lightly on the door, and the voices within stopped immediately.

Bluebell opened the door and walked in. Cora Grandways, who was seated in an armchair, sprang to her feet.

"What do you want?" she exclaimed angrily. "Goodness, I should have thought that by this time you'd understand that we don't want you!"

"I've come 'cos I want to be friends," said Bluebell. "I don't know why you always try to—to plot against me; I want to be friends. It would please Mr. Courtney."

"Oh, would it?" asked Cora. "Perhaps Mr. Courtney will see that he's made a mistake in adopting a circus kid. Let me tell you this, Bluebell. We don't want you at Morcove, and we don't want you as a cousin. We were quite happy till you came. I know what you want—Mr. Courtney's money—"

"Mr. Courtney's money?" asked the circus dancer, round-eyed with surprise.

"Oh, you needn't pretend you don't know he's well off!" sneered Judith. "We know quite well what your game is!"

"I don't want any money from Mr. Courtney—"

"Bah!" snapped Cora. "Don't tell us

that. You may think you're very clever, Miss Bluebell, but you can't trick us. The sooner you're out of Morcove the better we shall like it."

Bluebell frowned, and bit her lip. She had not expected this reception. She knew now why the Grandways hated her—because they had fallen from their throne of importance with regard to their uncle—and they were jealous.

Without a word, Bluebell turned on her heel and left them, closing the door quietly behind her.

They were her enemies, and they would never be her friends. She could see that clearly enough. It was quite useless to attempt to be friends with them; the only thing to do was to keep an eye upon them in future. She knew they could not be trusted—they had tricked her before.

CHAPTER 21.

A Letter for Bluebell.

"**B**LUEBELL, deah geal, a lettah!" Paula Creel lounged into the study, and handed Bluebell a registered package.

Little Bluebell looked up and smiled. She was seated in the armchair, glancing at an atlas.

"I wonder who this is from?" she mused, turning it over.

"Don't know," answered Paula. "I can't wait for you, weally, I must get down. I pwomised Betty I would dwop into her study, and I'm late already."

She went out of the room, closing the door, and Bluebell, with a thoughtful frown upon her brow, stood turning the package over and over.

At last she cut the string and tore apart the seals. When she had opened it, however, she paid no attention to the small article that rolled out. Instead, she took up the letter which lay folded inside.

"Duffy!" she ejaculated, as she recognised the writing.

And she wondered what her old friend had to say.

Duffy, the clown, was her friend, they had been at Samways' Circus together, and so fond of her had he been that he had sought and found employment at the school.

Now, as she glanced at the letter, her eyes became sad. Through her mind passed

the thought of Duffy, the clown, happy and joking as she had seen him on the occasion of the Form concert—the concert that would have meant so much, but which had ended disastrously.

How utterly her dreams had been shattered that night when she had been accused of theft—accused of stealing the Grandways' money—and then Duffy had taken the blame.

He was not guilty, she was sure of it, but Miss Somerfield, the headmistress, had taken him at his word. And Duffy had been "sacked," dismissed from his temporary position.

She unfolded the letter, and smiled at the large characters and words which she now knew were mis-spelled. But what did that matter, when she knew the faithful heart that had prompted them?

"Dear Bluebell," she read, and then her eyes followed every word glotingly.

It was quite a long letter about the circus; how glad Mr. Samways had been to take him back; for never could he have found another clown so able at pleasing an audience.

Then Bluebell's eyes widened, and her hand reached out for the small article wrapped in tissue paper.

For in the letter was a paragraph couched in Duffy's own language, saying it was something he had found in his green braize bag of tricks. Did she know whose it was?

Quickly her nimble fingers unfolded the thin paper, and a ring was exposed.

She stared at it thoughtfully. Whose was it? And how had it got into Duffy's bag? Then she started. Was it something that had been stolen together with the notes? The notes belonging to Cora had been found in the green baize bag. Was this her ring? It was possible.

Bluebell stared at the ring, trying to remember if she had seen it on Cora's hand, but she could not.

The morning sunlight was streaming through the window, and Bluebell let the small diamond in the ring flash in the rays. It was a pretty ring, she told herself.

For a moment she remained with the ring in her hand, pondering on how it had got into the bag Duffy used.

It was still a mystery to her. Who had stolen the notes? How had they got into Duffy's bag? She had not stolen them, and she was sure that Duffy had not. If so, if he were a thief, why had he sent back this

ring? He could easily have kept it. Cora had not missed it.

No, Duffy was not the thief. A sudden thought entered her head, and she started. Could it be possible—was the theft a fake to get her accused? Had Cora put the money in the bag somehow?

Perhaps the ring had slipped off, or perhaps that, too, had been placed in the bag. Could this be evidence against the Grandways?

Bluebell hesitated, and her heart beat faster as that idea occurred to her.

Clang, clang!

The bell for the commencement of morning classes rang through the school, and the little circus dancer put down the ring. What should she do? There was little time for action. If her surmise were correct and she gave back the ring now, her evidence would be gone. She must have time to think.

Wrapping the ring in the paper, she slipped it into the drawer of the table which contained her things and Paula Creel's, and stuffed the letter from Duffy down the neck of her drill slip.

Then she hurried off to classes, her mind full of her new discovery.

The rest of the Form were in their places when she entered, and most of them gave her kindly smiles, but Cora and Judith merely scowled.

"I shouldn't be surprised," Cora was saying. "I'll ask her—"

"No, you won't!" said Polly Linton.

"Why not?" sneered Cora.

"Because we won't let you," answered Betty Barton quickly. "You've no ground for saying it, Cora."

Betty was angry, and so was Polly; but she could see that their anger was directed towards Cora Grandways. What was it Cora had been going to ask her—for there was no doubt in Bluebell's mind that they had intended to question her.

"Bluebell—" began Cora.

Polly Linton leaned over and twitched the end of Cora's plait, and Madge Linden, who sat next to her, nudged her heavily with her elbow.

Cora turned on Polly, her face furious.

"You idiot!" she snapped. "Why did you do that?"

"Because you needed it," returned Polly with a grin. "Every time you try to ask silly questions your plait will be pulled—like that!"

And Polly pulled the plait slightly again, and Madge nudged at the same time. Polly had not pulled hard, but Cora yelled—just as the door opened, too, and Miss Massingham entered.

It was just one of Cora's tricks, for the sneering smile upon her face showed that she knew the mistress was coming.

Miss Massingham stared at Cora.

"Good gracious, cannot you girls be left even for a minute without some commotion taking place?" she exclaimed. "What is the matter, Cora?"

"Nun-nothing, Miss Massingham," said Cora, rubbing her head tenderly at the back.

Clearly would Cora have liked to "sneak," but she dare not, in actual words. With her usual cunning she succeeded.

"You are rubbing your head," said the mistress. "Someone has been pulling your hair. Who was it?"

She glared accusingly at the girls behind Cora, and Polly Linton reluctantly rose to her feet.

"I—I did, Miss Massingham," Polly said boldly.

"Oh, did you, Polly? And why, pray?"

Polly did not answer.

"Very well, then!" snapped the mistress. "Sit down. You will write me out a hundred times, 'I must not create disturbances.'"

Polly sat down, and glared at the back of Cora's head. But that girl did not turn round; and her face wore a smile of triumph.

Morning lessons seemed to Bluebell interminably long, but they were finished at last, and the Form rose to go. Then it was that Bluebell became aware that Cora Grandways was talking to the Form-mistress.

As the girls were about to leave the room, Miss Massingham held up her hand.

"One moment, girls!" she said.

The girls stopped, and, after a moment's hesitation, returned in an orderly manner to their desks.

"Cora has just informed me that she has lost a valuable ring," the Form-mistress announced. "Have any of you seen such a ring? Describe it to them all, Cora."

"A gold ring," said Cora, "with a small diamond, a snaky kind of ring. It was a bit large, and could have slipped off."

No one answered the query, and Miss Massingham frowned.

"Are you sure that it is lost, Cora? When do you remember wearing it?"

"On the night of the concert," said Cora. "I didn't miss it, because I don't often wear it. I'm sure it was lost then. Someone may have picked it up."

"But surely they would have returned it," said the mistress. "There are no thieves at this school. Ah!" She paused. "That clown. Is it possible that he had it?"

"Why, of course," nodded Cora, "it's quite possible. I hadn't thought of that. What shall I do, Miss Massingham?"

"Before making a definite accusation of so serious a nature, Cora, I should be perfectly certain, if I were you, that it is not somewhere in the school. Girls, dismiss!"

The girls went out chattering, and Cora Grandways was left with the mistress.

Bluebell went out slowly, not knowing what she could do. She would give back the ring to Cora, somehow; but how unfair it was to accuse Duffy of theft.

Cora had said the ring slipped off easily. Where had it slipped off? Hardly in Duffy's green baize bag; and, if not, how had it got into the bag? Who had placed it there? Obviously the thief. And it would not be Duffy; for if he had been a thief he would not have sent the ring back.

He had not done it. And why should any other thief place the stolen notes in Duffy's bag?

There was only one reason—to accuse Duffy or herself of the theft. Who would be base enough for such an action? One name jumped into the girl's mind, and one only—Cora Grandways. Was it she who placed the notes there? Was it one of her tricks?

Then that explained the mystery of the ring; she had lost it in the bag; it had dropped off there. Bluebell's heart beat faster as she felt certain of that fact. No one was a thief—the notes had never been stolen; Cora had placed them there!

Bluebell hurried along to her study, to get the ring and produce it as evidence of Duffy's innocence; for poor Duffy was still under a cloud.

She burst open the study door, then pulled up in surprise, for in the centre of the room was Paula Creel, surrounded by half a dozen or so of the Fourth Form.

Something in Paula's hand glittered in the sunlight. Paula, all unknown, had been to the drawer of the table and discovered the ring Duffy had sent.

"Oh!" exclaimed the little circus dancer, and darted forward. "The ring!"

CHAPTER 22.

Conclusive Evidence.

"THE ring—yes!"

Betty Barton nodded her head. "But how comes it in your possession, Bluebell? Where did you get it?"

The little circus dancer smiled.

"Duffy sent it," she said. "It was found in his green baize bag where the notes were—"

"Goodness, then Duffy stole it?" asked Madge Minden. "Why didn't he give it back with the notes, then?"

Bluebell, still smiling, shook her head.

"Because he didn't steal the ring, or the notes," she said. "They weren't stolen—"

"Who says that?"

Cora and Judith Grandways spoke together, and Bluebell wheeled to find them just behind her in the doorway. The look in Cora's eyes rather unnerved the girl, and she hesitated.

"That's my ring," snapped Cora, stepping forward and snatching it from Paula Creel. "So it was you, after all, Bluebell, who took it?"

"It wasn't—nor was it Duffy."

Bluebell threw back her head proudly, and Cora Grandways stared at her in uncontrolled amazement.

"That's undoubtedly very clever," she sneered. "And who did steal it? Are you going to accuse Paula, or Betty, or Polly?"

"No. I'm not," retorted Bluebell heatedly, stung by the sneering tone of the other's remark. "Duffy is innocent. He returned the ring with this letter."

She handed it to Betty, who read it and nodded.

"Yes," agreed Betty. "Duffy returned the ring. He would hardly have done that if he had stolen it, I suppose."

Bluebell pointed accusingly at Cora.

"The notes were not stolen," she cried. "You put them in Duffy's bag!"

For a second Cora, surprised rather, flinched. Then, laughing, she recovered.

"Indeed," she asked, "is that so? You amaze me. And how do you work that out? It isn't very likely that I should put my own money into that clown's bag for him to walk off with?"

There was a rather high-strung effect in that speech, but it passed unobserved by the girls who witnessed the scene.

"I say you did," retorted Bluebell. "That's how you lost your ring. How else did it get into Duffy's bag?"

"Several ways," said Cora, after a pause. "I lost it, and Duffy may have picked it up, or you may have, for all I know. I don't suppose either of you is very particular. When, pray, could I have put the notes into the clown's bag? You were left alone with my hand-bag, after Paula saw the notes in it. Only you could have changed them—"

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Paula Creel. "I never thought of that. You are wight, Cowa. Bluebell was alone with the bag after I saw the notes."

"Of course," went on Cora triumphantly, "that is what I'm trying to prove. As I wasn't alone with the hand-bag after Cora saw the notes in it, how could I possibly have done as Bluebell suggests?"

Cora looked round pleadingly, and there was silence.

"Then it amounts to this," said Betty Barton, "either Duffy stole the notes or Bluebell did. But how could Duffy steal them? I didn't think of it at the time. But what chance had he to steal them unless he went into the room while Bluebell was there. And if he did—why return the ring?"

"That's so," said Madge Minden.

And the others nodded their heads.

"Yes, yes; that's right," said Bluebell. "If Duffy stole them, why did he send the ring back—"

"He didn't steal them," said Judith with a sneer. "You've cleared him, but at your own expense, my little, clever circus hand. You stole them, and you know it. You were keeping the ring, too. Why didn't you tell Miss Massingham you had it?"

"Because," Bluebell answered, "I didn't want to get Cora into trouble with Miss Massingham. I intended to say what I

thought of you all, to Betty and Polly and Paula. That's why!"

"Likely," sneered Cora. "You were going to stick to it, more probably."

"Well, I can only say I am surprised," said Betty. "To think that you let your friend take the blame and be dismissed for your theft. Oh, Bluebell!"

"But I didn't. It's not true," protested the girl wildly. "Oh, can't you see how Cora has been against me all along? I tell you she placed the notes in my bag."

Betty Barton shook her head sadly.

"We can't believe it, Bluebell," she said. "You've got no proof for saying that. We know that Cora did not have an opportunity for doing as you suggest."

"Yes, of course," said Cora indignantly. "I'm ashamed of you, Bluebell. What ever will poor uncle say? To think that you should have stooped to theft after the way he's treated you."

"I didn't! I haven't!"

Bluebell stamped her foot, and tears glistened in her eyes. But she knew that they would not believe her; knew that she was looked upon as a thief!

"It's no good, Bluebell," said Betty Barton heavily. "We've done our best for you, but—"

"Yes, wathah, Bluebell. I weally considah you have acted in a most we-pwehensible mannah; your conduct is not that of a lady, wathah not, bai Jove!"

"Moreover, you owe Cora an apology," said Madge Minden.

"Oh, don't bother about that!" said Cora airily. "I'm only too sorry to think that Bluebell has acted so disgracefully. Goodness knows what uncle will say."

"He need not know anything about it," Betty interjected. "There is no need to tell everyone."

"Then someone ought to write to the clown," Cora said thoughtfully. "He's under a cloud, remember. Say that someone has owned up—or that the real thief is found."

"He ought to be told, I suppose," nodded Betty. "But mind, girls"—and she looked round at them all—"not a word to the mistresses. I will write to Duffy, since he must be told."

Bluebell, her head upright, did not speak.

"You have nothing to say?" Betty asked her. "Won't you confess?"

But Bluebell walked from the study.

Betty Barton sighed heavily.

"What a strange girl," she said. "And yet I am sure that there is a great deal of good in her. Her training was against her. Don't let's cut her, girls—help her. If we cut her, she will become bitter."

Cora Grandways looked at her sister, smiled, and left the study, Judith following just behind.

"Goodness! I never thought we'd pull it off!" whispered Cora. "Did you notice my look when she said about the ring? It must have been true, Judith; it slipped off when I put the notes in the clown's bag."

"You got out of it all right," her sister assured her. "They really think that she did it. But why did you let them think it was the clown who took them, when he owned up at the concert?"

"Because," said her sister grimly, "he was dangerous. I thought I could clear her out some other way. But, just my luck, I've got rid of them both."

"But not of Bluebell," pointed out Judith. "She's still here. You won't be able to get rid of her without telling the mistresses, and perhaps uncle wouldn't like that."

"I shouldn't be at all surprised," said Cora solemnly, "if Miss Somerfield did find out. Something tells me that she will. It must be some sort of premonition."

Judith grinned.

How fortunate for Bluebell if they could have been overheard! But the Grandways were far too careful for that to happen.

And little Bluebell was sitting in her study, her eyes tearless, and her face white. All the others had left the study, and she had found it empty when she crept back to it.

In the next study were three girls putting their heads together to send the clown a letter.

"Tell him," said Polly, "that the real thief has been found, and that he is now cleared. No use telling him it's Bluebell; he'll only maintain that he did it."

"Yes, I shall say nothing about Bluebell," nodded Betty, as she wrote on; "it would only upset him. What is his address?"

"Liversca," said Paula Creel quickly.

"That registered packet Bluebell had must have come from Duffy, y'know."

But that letter was to have a dramatic effect that the girls were not expecting.

CHAPTER 23.

The Last Straw!

"MISS MASSINGHAM!"

The mistress of the Fourth Form stopped in surprise as Miss Somerfield called her.

The headmistress was frowning, and Miss Massingham wondered what could be the matter; it was unusual for the headmistress of Morcove to be in the corridor at lesson time.

"I have just had a peculiar letter from the man who was here as gardener. The man named Duffy.

"It appears," went on the headmistress, still frowning, "that someone has written and informed him that he is not guilty of the theft of those notes on the night of the concert. I had hoped that that unfortunate affair was finished."

She handed the letter to Miss Massingham.

"This is very strange!" she agreed. "He admits that he did not do it; his idea was to shield Bluebell. Apparently, then, my Form have discovered the guilty party. They have said nothing to me about the affair."

"He writes because he wants to resume his position here," mused the headmistress. "I cannot decide about that now, of course. Whom do you think they have accused?"

"I cannot say," said the mistress. "We cannot let the affair drop—"

"No, no," agreed Miss Somerfield. "I could not possibly rest, knowing that Morcove sheltered a thief. It is impossible. We must find out. Come, we will interview your Form."

The Fourth-Formers looked surprised at the headmistress' sudden appearance, and one or two of them looked down at their desk, wondering what escapade of theirs had been brought to light.

"Girls," said Miss Somerfield severely, "on the night of the concert you recently gave, there was an unfortunate incident. Notes were stolen, and the gardener who was here

confessed to stealing them. He has now written denying that, and stating that he has heard from someone at Morcove that the name of the real thief is known. I must know that name, girls.

"I cannot allow a thief to remain in this school," went on Miss Somerfield. "If the thief is in this Form, I command her to step forward."

Unconsciously, all eyes turned upon Bluebell. But that girl did not move.

Miss Somerfield frowned.

"I see that you are all looking at Bluebell," she said. "What does that mean?"

No one spoke. Then Bluebell, trembling slightly, rose to her feet.

"Please, Miss Somerfield," she said, "they say I did it. But I didn't!"

"Very well, Bluebell. Who makes this accusation? And on what grounds? Betty Barton, you are captain of the Form. What do you know of this matter?"

Betty rose, and then, very reluctantly, she told the headmistress exactly all they knew, of the ring that Duffy had returned, and of the notes.

Miss Somerfield was determined to thrash the matter out, and she called upon girl after girl to speak.

Cora and Judith told of how they had seen Bluebell with the handbag of Cora's in her hand, and others bore testimony to it. Paula unwillingly told how she had noticed the notes in the bag before Bluebell was left alone.

Miss Somerfield's face grew more and more serious.

"I am afraid," she said slowly, "that the evidence is far too convincing to allow of any doubt. And I am surprised that Bluebell should have allowed the clown, apparently an honest man, and loyal, to take the blame she deserved."

"But I didn't," protested Bluebell tearfully.

"Silence!" thundered the headmistress. "I am convinced. You shall only stay here until your guardian can take you away. I shall write to Mr. Courtney to-night—"

"Oh, don't, don't—please, don't!" pleaded the little circus dancer. "He will believe it, and it isn't true! Oh, Miss Somerfield!"

"I am glad that at least you have the grace to be ashamed," said the headmistress. "But it is rather late in the day for remorse now, Bluebell. You should have

thought of Mr. Courtney's feelings before you stooped to steal—"

"But I didn't steal the notes! Oh, it's a trick!" protested the girl. "And the ring—"

"That is enough! You will follow me, Bluebell. You have acted disgracefully, and betrayed the trust placed in you by Mr. Courtney."

Those words stung Bluebell as none other could have. To be told that she was ungrateful to the kind gentleman who had befriended her—that reproach she could not bear.

"And I shall tell him that you will be better off where you were before. It is a waste of money and kindness to take an interest in you, when there are others needing help for which they would really be grateful!

"Follow me. You will stay in your study under lock and key, and I will telephone Mr. Courtney, or write him to take you away."

Bluebell walked down between the desks, her head still proudly erect, and before she reached the door she turned and looked at Cora Grandways.

But that girl was smiling, as Bluebell could plainly see, though Cora was vainly endeavouring to conceal the fact.

Bluebell followed the headmistress from the room. No sooner were they gone than a buzz of talk broke out, which Miss Massingham found it difficult to control.

"Silence, girls!" she said. "I want no further conversation on the matter this afternoon. Get on with your work, all of you. Turn to page four hundred and fifty-eight in your history books."

And the lesson began.

But Betty Barton & Co. were worried. Betty realised that it was her letter that had brought the matter to Miss Somerfield's knowledge.

And now Bluebell was to leave Morcove for good. She was going in disgrace. What would Mr. Courtney say? Poor Bluebell!

Much as she would like to believe that there had been a mistake, Betty could not. The evidence was too conclusive.

"I must apologise. I didn't realise— Can't we console her somehow?" she whispered to Polly.

And Polly nodded her head.

"After lessons," she replied.

So Betty waited patiently until morning lessons were over, and then hurried along to the Fourth Form passage. Polly went with her, and Paula Creel.

Paula was genuinely sorry that Bluebell was to go, although Paula, like the rest, had been forced to the conclusion that the girl was guilty.

"I weally am sowwy," said Paula. "I didn't think she would be expelled."

"Well, she isn't, really. Mr. Courtney is going to be asked to take her away, but that isn't really expulsion."

"Wather not, and yet—it's a disgwace, bai Jove!"

They drew up outside the door of Paula's study and tapped on the door.

"Pewwaps she's cwyin'," suggested Paula. "Whisper through the keyhole."

"Bluebell, it's only us—Paula, Polly, and Betty! Bluebell!"

But there was no reply, and Betty tried the door.

"It's locked," she said in puzzled tones. "I wonder why she doesn't reply?"

"P'waps she fainted, y'know," mused Paula, frowning.

Just then other footsteps sounded in the passage, and a new voice spoke.

"What are you doing there, girls?"

It was Miss Massingham, and, at her words, they stepped away from the door. They knew that they had no business there. It was against all rules to have converse with a girl who was detained for punishment.

"You should not speak to her," said the Form-mistress severely. "You, Betty, should be aware of that."

She took the key and put it in the keyhole, while the three girls watched her breathlessly.

Miss Massingham threw open the door and entered. Betty, Paula, and Polly looked over her shoulder at the open window of the study.

Then together, they exclaimed:

"She's gone!"

CHAPTER 24.

"To the old home."

HATLESS and coatless, Bluebell wandered along the leafless lane that ran in front of the school.

But she was not cold. The sun's rays were warm; the bursting buds told of

spring; and she could almost imagine that Morcove and all that had happened there was but a dream—a nightmare.

As her eyes wandered down to glance at her drill dress, they became sad. She looked over her shoulder fearfully, expecting shouts, or perhaps the sound of a car.

Miss Somerfield had a car—how many minutes would it be before they set out in chase of her?

Escape had been easy, for life in the circus had taught her to master fear of height. Down the ivy-clad wall she had climbed without a tremor, and, thanks to the hour, when all were at lessons, she had not been seen.

She knew that as soon as her escape was discovered they would be in pursuit, but they must never catch her. She would not go back, just to be turned out of the school in disgrace.

Back to the circus she would go, where she had friends—where Duffy was now, and her pony.

Some of those old circus days had not been happy, yet some had been very happy. Now she was stronger, her health was better, and she would not notice the roughness of the hard life.

Once again she looked round fearfully, and this time she realised that if she kept to the road she would have little chance of escape; however fast she walked the car would move ten times faster with ease.

She looked up and her heart sank, for drifting overhead were dark, ominous clouds that spoke of rain.

Where was she to go? Across the fields?

That way might mean escape, but she did not know in which direction Liversea lay, and it would be hopeless, plodding aimlessly across fields.

So she walked straight ahead until she reached a signpost.

Which way lay Liversea? There was nothing on the signpost that could tell her.

For a moment she stood there completely at a loss, till a noise in the distance behind her caused her to turn. It was the sound of an electric motor-horn, and she darted to the roadside.

Without waiting to ascertain what car it was, she dodged behind a hedge and crouched there, trembling.

But the car was not Miss Somerfield's, as she realised after just one casual glance.

Sighing with relief, she went out on to the road, only to dart back again into cover at the sound of a noisy car-exhaust.

But it was coming from the wrong direction, and, laughing at her own nervousness, she rose to set forth upon her journey again.

As she did so a sporting car raced by, and one glimpse of the driver caused her to dodge back, so quickly that she fell.

For that glimpse had told her that the occupant of the car was her guardian—Mr. Courtney. He, too, would be in chaise of her; but he must never catch her.

Her mind worked quickly, and she decided unhesitatingly to cut along the edge of the field until she could find another road, or some place where she could ask the way.

Mr. Courtney must not catch her. She was determined that he should not. She was not ungrateful for what he had done, but she dared not face his scorn. She would write to him when she got to the circus, and some day, from her earnings, repay all that he had spent on her.

How she longed to prove that she was worth his kindness! But how could she do that with enemies like Cora and Judith Grandways always plotting for her downfall?

They had succeeded now; they ought to be satisfied. She hoped devoutly that she would never see them again. Perhaps they would be happy now that she was out of the way. No longer could they accuse her of wanting Mr. Courtney's money.

She wiped her hand across her face and looked up as she felt a drip of rain.

The heavy, black clouds were overhead, and presently she walked into a perfect wall of rain. But she did not turn back.

On, on, she plodded, her feet slipping often in the mud. She was wet through to the skin, and her clothes were clinging tightly to her. But what mattered that now? Soon she would be in the warm, amongst friends.

She broke through the hedgeway and out on to the road. Presently she came to a level crossing. A van was waiting by the gate, and she went up to the driver.

"Can you give me a lift to Liversea, or part of the way there, please?" she asked.

"Liversea. I can land you within half a mile of it. What are you—lost?"

"Yes; I didn't know the way."

"Right-oh! Better get into the back. It's empty. Here, slip over the seat here!"

Gladly Bluebell got into the van, where it was dry. She could see through the wind-screen, and anxiously she searched for Miss Somerfield's car.

But there was only a cyclist on the other side of the gate, and an errand-boy, with a sack over his head, stood dejectedly holding a hand-barrow.

Then, like a flash, round the corner on the other side, several cyclists appeared. One glance was sufficient to realise that they were Betty Barton, Polly Linton, and Paula Creol.

Would they see her?

She crouched down fearfully, and did not see the train that thundered by. She raised her head and peered carefully by the driver's side.

The gates were opening. The engine of the car on the other side was started. Then the van in which she was lying jerked forward.

Bump!

The van's off front wheel had bumped the hand-barrow, and the driver wheeled the car round to the left and sent it suddenly forward with his foot on the accelerator.

She was saved, and well she knew it, as she peered through the half-open doors at the back, and saw one of the girl's looking back; but they kept their direction straight ahead.

Down to the other end of the empty van she crept, and peered through the doors. The hedges were flying past and disappearing. She was making for freedom; and her pursuers were going in the entirely wrong direction.

Through a village went the van, then through another, and at last the driver slowed up, and pushed aside the curtain.

"Now, missy," he said, "if you want Liversea, it's straight up this road on the right. Past the fair. Not a bad fair that, I hear."

"No," said Bluebell. "Thank you very much for the lift. Past the fair, is it?"

"That's right. 'Afternoon!"

He set off again with a jerk, and was soon lost to sight.

Bluebell, shivering with the cold and dampness of her clothes, hurried down the lane.

Past the fair, he had said. But she was not going past it—not likely!

What a dear, homely place it looked! See, there was Sheila. She had not liked Sheila before, but now she was pleased to see the girl.

Where was Duffy?

How she scampered across the mud and wet grass to the caravans, with their cosy-looking interiors:

Then half-way across she stopped, her face beaming. For she had heard a voice hail her.

"Bluebell! My little fairy!"

It was Duffy—in his clown's garb. She raced to him, and he lifted her high in the air.

"Here we are again, then!" he chortled. "Back to the old nest, Bluebell!"

But he stopped laughing as he placed her on her feet.

"You're wet," he said, frowning.

He turned and waved to Sheila, who was wandering about with a shawl over her head.

"Sheila!" he called. "We've got our fairy back!"

Sheila frowned as she saw Bluebell.

"Bluebell here!" she exclaimed. "But how—"

"Don't know," said Duffy. "Don't care! Shall hear all about it later. Meanwhile, she's wet. Get her dry and give her some clean things, Sheila. We shall have her dancing to-night. And when you're dry, little fairy, come and tell us all about it."

Sheila was kept too busy replying to Bluebell's questions to find time for questions of her own; but Bluebell knew that the time would come when she would have to say something.

But first she would tell Duffy; and presently, dry and in warm clothes, she stopped across the intervening mud and puddles to the caravan of the clown.

CHAPTER 25.

The Grandways Disagree.

"RUN away!"

Mr. Courtney raised his brows, and stood silent for a moment.

He had just arrived at the school, and Miss Somerfield, rather agitatedly, had told him what had happened.

"But I should like to know the reason for this, Miss Somerfield," said Mr. Courtney, leaning forward in his chair. "Why was the girl placed in her study under lock and key? And your telegram—what was the reason for that?"

Miss Somerfield frowned.

"It is something that you will be distressed to hear," she began, with obvious hesitation. "You are fond of the girl, and, as you know, I was, too. But since she has been at the school we have learnt something of her true nature. She is not popular with the girls."

"But that is not the reason why she is being asked to leave the school," suggested Mr. Courtney patiently. "I should like to know everything, if you do not mind."

"She has been accused of stealing, and the case is proved against her," said Miss Somerfield. "You will understand, of course, that before expelling a girl I make quite sure that she is guilty of the charges made against her. A grave injustice has been done. A gardener we had was dismissed for theft—a theft of which Bluebell is now proved guilty!"

"Indeed! What did she steal, Miss Somerfield? She should not be in want of money. I have given her enough to spend."

"Possibly; but she must have stolen the money. However, I will tell you all that happened."

The author's face was set grimly when the headmistress had finished her recital, and his eyes were narrowed thoughtfully.

"It is most extraordinary!" he exclaimed. "The dummy notes were found in Cora's bag, and the real ones in the clown's?"

"That is so. And Bluebell was left alone in the room where both the bags were, and she knew then that Cora had money in her bag. Paula had rather foolishly opened it and displayed them."

"Paula had?" He paused. "Bluebell is certainly condemned by circumstantial evidence—if that can be relied upon," he said slowly.

"If that can be relied upon!" repeated Miss Somerfield, in annoyed tones. "But surely, Mr. Courtney, is not the evidence convincing?"

"Hardly convincing," he smiled. "Were I a magistrate it would not be sufficiently conclusive to imprison a man. Either Bluebell is innocent—or a fool. The gardener

said that he had done it—and his word was accepted?"

"Well—yes. We did not imagine he would accuse himself of a crime he had not committed; and the notes were in his bag, really, although Bluebell, as his assistant, had a share of the bag. For all we know to the contrary they might be accomplices and equally guilty. You see, he was the clown, Duffy, who was at the circus with her."

"Duffy! I understand. Now, the only evidence against Bluebell is that she was left alone with the two bags—and that the notes were found in Duffy's bag? That being so, the fact that Duffy's confession was accepted shows that the evidence against Bluebell was not conclusive—for another opportunity of stealing the notes was allowed."

"Of course, that is so," agreed the head-mistress slowly. "The clown had no chance of stealing them, as he was not alone with the notes."

"But suppose," mused the author, "that the theft was committed at some other time there is no reason to presume that it was committed while Bluebell was alone—"

"Except that the notes were in Cora's handbag before that time, and after it were replaced by dummy notes."

"Is that known? If the dummy notes were a fair imitation, would Paula Creel have noticed the difference? You see my point? The notes might have been exchanged beforehand, and the notes Paula looked at have been imitation."

"That—that is so," nodded the head-mistress. "But Paula was not mistaken; we might question her. But why should anyone else have put the notes in Duffy's bag? Surely they would have kept them?"

"It is strange. But why should either Duffy or Bluebell, were they guilty, have accused themselves by substituting dummy notes, which everyone would recognise as theirs?"

"They might not have thought of that."

"No, perhaps not. But we had better see Paula Creel."

Miss Somerfield rang the bell and sent the maid for Paula. That girl was some minutes in arriving, and seemed greatly surprised when she saw Mr. Courtney.

"I wish to see you about the accusation against Bluebell," said Mr. Courtney.

Paula's face fell. She had no wish to bring further accusation against the girl.

"I'd wather not, please," she said. "Bluebell was my friend—"

"But it is in the hope of proving her innocence," said Mr. Courtney. "Now, can you be quite sure that the notes you saw in my niece Cora's bag were real notes, and not dummies?"

"Well—bai Jove, no!—they were very much like wale notes, and—"

"You thought they were real, because it didn't enter your head to think that they were dummies. Have you seen the dummy notes? Are they like real notes?"

"Not fwom the fwont," said Paula positively. "But wather like fwom the back. You see, he used them in a twick wheah people had to think they were pound-notes fwom the back of them, though the fwont was quite diffewent."

"And what did you see of the notes in the bag—back or front?"

"Er—back."

Mr. Courtney smiled and looked at Miss Somerfield.

"The case breaks down," he said. "This witness cannot prove that there were real notes in the bag when she left it with Bluebell. They may have been changed before."

"But, surely," said Miss Massingham, "only Duffy or Bluebell could have stolen them—or rather, made the exchange? Duffy is not guilty, as he sent the ring back, which he need not have done, and would not have done if he were a thief. Bluebell may have made the exchange earlier in the evening."

"Had she the opportunity? Was she alone with the bag?"

"Wather not!" exclaimed Paula excitedly. "The woom was empty, but Bluebell was with us for the gweater part of the time, bai Jove!"

Miss Somerfield tapped her pencil rather impatiently.

"It must have been either Duffy or Bluebell," she said. "Duffy we are practically certain is not guilty, and that leaves Bluebell. Why should anyone else put the real notes in Duffy's bag?"

"Only to get him or Bluebell accused," nodded Mr. Courtney. "When we exclude the possibility of either Bluebell or Duffy being guilty, it only leaves the chance that

someone executed the theft to get Bluebell or Duffy accused. Some enemy."

"That is what Bluebell herself suggested," said Miss Massingham rather uneasily. "But surely no Morcove girl would do such a thing?"

"Bluebell accused Cowa," said Paula doubtfully. "But—"

"Cora!" ejaculated Mr. Courtney. Then he smiled. "She is certainly connected in the affair, since it was her handbag. Thank you for your evidence"—he smiled at Paula—"it has been of great importance."

"If you do not mind, Miss Somerfield," said the author. "I would like to have a few words with Cora—alone. Perhaps in her study?"

"Certainly," agreed the headmistress. "I will call the maid, who will show you to the study. Miss Massingham is returning to her room, and will send Cora to you there."

When the maid came Mr. Courtney went with her to the Fourth Form corridor. He stood in his nieces' study until the door opened and Cora entered.

"Oh, uncle!" exclaimed Cora. "I didn't know you had come!"

"Bluebell has disgraced us, then?" he asked.

"Yes, uncle," said Cora, with mock concern. "She's a thief. Of course, Judith and I are upset—"

"Naturally," said her uncle gravely. "It is a serious charge, but apparently well founded. The Form is glad to be rid of her, perhaps? It was difficult for me to assess her character at first."

"Yes, uncle. The Form is glad—and Judith and I are really, though we did try to like her, for your sake. Still, it wouldn't do for a thief to remain in the school."

"Of course not. But how foolish of Bluebell to have put the dummy notes in your bag! But perhaps she hoped that Duffy would be accused."

"That was it," agreed Cora eagerly. "You see, he admitted it for her sake."

"Were the dummy notes very like the real, so that you thought at first your notes were intact?"

"Yes; hardly any difference," said Cora, feeling that she was safe. "They were very much alike, uncle."

"Then when Paula is not sure whether they were real or dummies she saw, no one

can say that Bluebell was alone with the real notes?"

Cora started, and bit her lip. Mr. Courtney, watching her, did not fail to notice that brief show of alarm.

"The exchange may have taken place before that time. Duffy perhaps may have been guilty."

"Yes, of course," said Cora. "But the bag was not left there until Paula and Bluebell were there. He had no chance. We were all in the room before that, and I went back to leave my bag, as I didn't want to carry it about. So, you see, it must have been Bluebell."

"I see," nodded Mr. Courtney. "Then, indeed, it does seem that Bluebell must be guilty, if you had your bag with you before Bluebell was left alone with it. Bluebell suggests the possibility that someone may have put the notes there to get her accused. It does not seem likely, does it? You know the Form well—has she any enemies likely to do that?"

Peeling those searching eyes upon her, Cora looked away.

"No," she answered, with an effort. "I know of no one. It is ridiculous! As if any one would do such a thing! Besides, what opportunity had they?"

"Very well. If you are satisfied that it is impossible, we had better let the matter drop," said her uncle. "I think you'd better return to your Form, the mistress may be anxious. Thank you for your answers to my questions."

"Not at all, uncle," said Cora, glad that the interview was over. "But you see that it was impossible for anyone to do as she suggests?"

The eagerness in her tone was hardly disguised, and Mr. Courtney nodded his head.

"It looks black against Bluebell," he agreed.

Cora hurried back to the Form, but hardly was she settled in her place than there came a knock at the door.

It was the maid, with a request that Judith should see Mr. Courtney in her own study.

Judith, wondering why she should be called, entered Study No. 7 with many qualms.

Mr. Courtney gave her a reassuring smile. "Hallo, uncle!" exclaimed Judith. "You want me?"

"Yes. I want to know what happened in this Bluebell affair?"

"I have just interviewed Cora," Mr. Courtney went on. "She has confessed——"

"Confessed?" said Judith hoarsely. "But——"

The expression on her face was extraordinary.

"Yes, she has confessed that she has never really liked Bluebell, and that the Form did not like her either."

Judith sighed with quite obvious relief, and smiled.

"Yes, yes, uncle," she said. "We don't like her. Nor do the others."

"H'm! At first I was doubtful about her guilt," went on Mr. Courtney. "Paula Creel is not certain that she saw real notes in the bag! So Bluebell probably took them before she was alone. She had opportunity to, I suppose? For, if she didn't, Duffy must have been guilty, and Bluebell innocent."

"Oh, yes!" cried Judith eagerly. "She had plenty of opportunity. The bag was there before. Cora left it there, I remember. Bluebell is guilty."

Judith might not have been so satisfied with this statement had she known that her sister had said precisely the opposite. But she was so keen to prove that Bluebell was guilty that she did not pause to consider her answers.

"That is very strange," remarked Mr. Courtney drily. "Your sister said that the contrary was the case. Perhaps you are getting muddled. You should have arranged more carefully what you were to say. What I want to know is—did Cora put the notes there, or you? You, I suppose, will accuse Cora?"

"Did Cora accuse me?" asked Judith in great agitation.

Mr. Courtney shrugged his shoulders.

"Neither of you have very high principles," he said. "I should not take Cora's word for it—but by weighing up what you both say perhaps I can decide who was guilty, and act accordingly."

"Oh!" Judith trembled, and she seemed momentarily lost for words. "It isn't true," she protested. "I didn't do it—it was Cora. She suggested it. I—I told her it was silly. I said it wasn't fair to Bluebell——"

"I can imagine you saying that," remarked her uncle, with quiet sarcasm. "So

it was Cora. She put the false notes in her own bag, and you put the real ones in the clown's bag?"

"No, no; I had nothing to do with it; she put them both in the bags. I—I asked her not to," She paused, then went on excitedly: "I can prove it. Her ring was found in the bag—it slipped off!"

"Then you had better explain that to Miss Somerfield. Come with me."

Judith, in great fear, followed the author to the headmistress's study. Miss Somerfield looked up in surprise as she saw the expression on the girl's face.

Mr. Courtney, standing behind the girl, made a sign to the headmistress not to speak.

"It appears, Miss Somerfield," he said, "that it was not Judith who put the notes in the bag, but Cora."

"Yes, Miss Somerfield, please," cried the girl, white with fear. "It was Cora, not me. Cora suggested it; I—I tried to stop her. But she put the dummy notes in her bag, and the real ones in Duffy's while the room was empty. It was Cora who did it. That's where she lost the ring—it slipped off!"

Miss Somerfield stared at the girl in absolute amazement.

"Gracious!" she exclaimed. "And—and you mean that this was a trick—that you did this to get Bluebell blamed?"

"Cora did it," cried the wretched girl.

Miss Somerfield thumped the bell, and in a few minutes Cora Grandways, defiant but inwardly fearful, entered the dread apartment.

"Your sister has confessed for you," said Miss Somerfield. "We know all."

"You will be expelled!" thundered the headmistress. "Never have I heard of such conduct—of such cunning and deceit! This will be your last night at Morcove——"

Mr. Courtney turned to Miss Somerfield. "May I have a word with you alone, Miss Somerfield?" he asked. "If you will send these girls back to their Form——"

Miss Somerfield very curtly ordered the girls to return, and when they had gone faced Mr. Courtney.

"As a special favour, Miss Somerfield," he asked, "will you spare these girls expulsion? Their mother—my sister—is ill, and if they were sent home the effect might

be severe. I should not like to think that I was the cause of my sister--- You understand; for but for my intervention their guilt might have remained undiscovered."

"Very well, Mr. Courtney."

"Thank you. And now--Bluebell. Where is the circus? Miss Creel gave the name. Perhaps you will be so good as to send for her."

So for the second time Paula entered the study, and willingly gave the information required. But Paula wanted to accompany them, and Miss Somerfield, after a look from the author, agreed.

"A friend will be of assistance," he pointed out.

Paula, all excitement at hearing the news of Bluebell's innocence and Cora's guilt, was soon sitting beside Miss Somerfield's chauffeur.

And how cheered they were when they came in sight of the tents and caravans!

Paula hardly waited for the car to stop before she alighted.

Then, forgetful of her elegant shoes, she ran through the mud. Several circus hands stared at her blankly, and Duffy, coming from his caravan, stood still with surprise.

"Duffy! Duffy!" cried Paula. "Pway take me to Bluebell."

Duffy did not answer; he was looking keenly at the headmistress and Mr. Courtney.

"Bluebell?" he asked. "What's happened to her?"

"You mean she is not here?" asked Mr. Courtney.

The clown grinned.

"I didn't say anything like that, sir," he said. "But I shouldn't think you'd be interested in a thief."

Mr. Courtney stepped forward, and the clown, with his jaw set, put his back to the caravan door.

"I promised 'er I wouldn't let you take her back," he said. "Nor will I. She's back in the circus, and here she stays."

Mr. Courtney stopped and laughed.

"Well said, Duffy," he exclaimed. "I agree with every word you say. They didn't value her, but they will now; she's been proved innocent, and so have you. Now be a good sort, and let her choose."

"Let her choose---" Duffy paused. "I will," he said. "That's only fair. If she wants to go--well, it's hers to choose."

He opened the caravan door, and called the girl by name.

A second later, and Bluebell, in her dancer's dress, stood in the doorway.

"You've been proved innocent," said Mr. Courtney. "Bluebell, dear, give school another chance."

Bluebell hesitated and turned to the clown, who was standing by with a very downcast face.

"What shall I do, Duffy dear?" she asked.

The clown drew himself up, and placed a hand upon her shoulder.

"It's your life, Bluebell," he said. "I want you here--but perhaps you'll be better there with a new start. I only wish I could come, too."

"You can," said Miss Somerfield quickly. "I feel that I owe you as much. The position of gardener is still vacant, and I think I will have to pension off the regular man."

"Then it's us for the school, Bluebell, my fairy," exclaimed the clown, "when I've finished up with Samways. I must see the month out, and then good-bye to the grease-paint, cap and bells. Hooray!"

And he hugged Bluebell.

"I'll come--thank you," she said to Mr. Courtney.

And that was the last the circus saw of Bluebell.

"You'll remain at Morcove," said Miss Somerfield sternly.

Cora Grandways hung her head, and Bluebell smiled happily.

"Remember," said the headmistress, "that it is only on account of your mother's illness that I take this course. In future I shall keep my eye upon you, so you had better be careful!"

"Thank you, Miss Somerfield."

"I--I'm sorry, Bluebell," she said.

Little Bluebell ran forward and clasped the girl's hand.

"Oh, Cora," she said, "let's forget what's past--let's be friends."

She took her adopted cousin's arm, and led her from the headmistress's study.

Outside Cora drew back as she was surrounded by a crowd of hostile girls.

"No, no," cried Bluebell. "Let's forget."

And the crowd, leaving Cora by herself, shouldered little Bluebell excitedly.

"Along to the feast!" cried Polly Linton. And they rushed along to Paula Croel's study, where the table groaned and creaked as though it were in pain; and well it might be, judging by the load of dainties it had to bear.

Mr. Courtney was there, taking part in it all; and what a merry feast it was. Somehow the whole of the Fourth Form managed to be present.

Further down the corridor two girls sat in their study, their faces downcast. Cora and Judith Grandways had not been invited, and the laughter and cheers coming through chinks in the door made them even more miserable.

Cora Grandways gritted her teeth.

"I haven't finished yet," she said. "She's their heroine now, but—"

That sentence was not finished, for from the feasters came wild cheering.

"Three cheers for Bluebell! Hip! Hip! Hip!"

Those lusty cheers told that Bluebell was once more in the good books of the Form.

"With all our best apologies," toasted Polly Linton. "We're sorry we believed wrong of you—but we shan't again in a hurry."

And Bluebell laughed merrily as that toast was drunk. At last she was going to be happy at school. She felt now as she looked round the study that she loved them all; that they were all her friends.

They were too, as they showed her, and when Mr. Courtney said good-bye later that evening he patted her on the back.

"You've pulled through, Bluebell," he said. "Never fear. Never mind what is said about you, keep straight ahead. I'm proud of you—and so is the Form. You've had a rough time so far. But now for the silver lining."

And Bluebell, standing on the steps watching his figure catch up in the darkness stretched out her arms as though she would embrace the happy future.



Three more splendid numbers of "The Schoolgirls' Own" Library will be on sale on Friday, Dec. 3rd. See page iii of cover for further particulars.

FOR WINTER PARTIES.

"Hallo, Helen! Why, you are a stranger! I haven't seen you for a whole twelvemonths!"

The casual meeting between Clara and Helen kept two tongues busy for half an hour. They had always been quite good friends, but when Helen had moved farther away from Clara's home they had not seen or heard much of each other.

"It's lovely to see you, Clara," said Helen. "I have often been going to write."

"Well, why not come round and see us again?" was the answer. "Come round on Wednesday evening, and you'll have a great time. We've a dozen or so friends coming, and we're going to have a tennis tournament."

"Tennis?" queried Helen. "I didn't know you'd had a hard court laid down in the garden. It's hardly big en—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Clara. "No, it's not laid down in the garden, but in the dining-room. A fine hard court, too?"

Helen looked puzzled, so her friend went on to explain.

"Of course, I mean a table-tennis court. And it's the greatest fun imaginable. You really must come and join in our tournaments. They have become such a success in the neighbourhood that we hold them every week—each Wednesday."

"But I can't play!" objected Helen.

"That doesn't matter," rejoined her friend. "When we started playing tennis, or ping-pong, last winter, we used to do so on a tiny little ordinary dining-table, with home-made net and bats, and three celluloid balls—total cost threepence. We used to drag these out when various friends came, and it became so popular that everyone clamoured for ping-pong and came to us specially to get it. Soon we started having regular parties of eight or more."

"But your father and mother, didn't they object?"

"No fear! They very soon became as keen as anybody on the game. Besides, the tournaments were not always held at our house. Our tennis guests became so keen that they'd buy sets for themselves to get in a little practice in-between tournaments. And then, of course, they started to hold ping-pong parties of their own. I can tell you, we soon became frightfully adept. Surprised ourselves at the way in which we improved. And surprised ourselves, too, to find out what a lot of real skill there is in the game."

"But don't you get fed-up with eternal ping-pong at your parties?" Helen asked.

"No!" came the answer. "For the reason

that ping-pong is just optional for visitors. We reserve the dining-room for that. The drawing-room is kept going for those who like a little music or dancing. The gramophone is put on, and players amuse themselves how they like whilst they are waiting for their turn to play ping-pong. But generally there is so much excitement in the tournaments that people prefer to stay and watch, even if they have been knocked out themselves and have no further interest in the game."

"What kind of tournaments do you run?" asked Helen, getting quite interested in the notion.

"Oh, either American or knock-out tournaments. Whichever the guests prefer. Sometimes both, if we have a long evening to do it in. In American tournaments, where everyone plays everybody else, generally we arrange that the first player to reach fifteen points wins. In the knock-out game, of course, the player has to reach twenty-one points to win."

"In these games we give handicaps, which are altered frequently as the players improve. And then at the end of the season we arrange a big tournament, raking in everybody, to decide the championship of our little circle. There were thirty-two last year. And I hope you'll be there this year."

Clara was a bit dubious about that. She had never handled a ping-pong bat. But she soon changed her mind after her first evening at one of Clara's ping-pong parties. Starting with a generous handicap of ten points, and playing better than she ever imagined she would, she was only beaten in the final round.

"That brings your handicap down to five," said Clara, with a laugh. "I reckon it'll be minus five before long."

And Helen intended that she would do her best to win the coveted championship. She bought a set of her own for a shilling, and soon had the rest of the family enthusiastic over the game. Ere long she had started her own circle of players.

Her brother Jim, as keen as any of them, quickly decided that the short dining-room table wasn't good enough to test their ability, so, being a handy lad as a carpenter, he made a board nine feet by five, and linged in the middle, so that it could be taken out on ping-pong nights and rested on the dining-room table.

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With a little practice, Helen will win this year's tournament. She's getting on fine!

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