

FROM DESERT TO MORCOVE!



BY
MARJORIE
STANTON

4^d

A STORY OF THE
EARLY ADVENTURES
OF BETTY BARTON & CO
INTRODUCING
'ROSE OF THE DESERT'

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FROM DESERT TO MORCOVE!



An Enthralling Story of the Early Adventures of BETTY BARTON & Co., the Popular Fourth-Formers of Morcove School, and Introducing a Favourite Character—Rose of the Desert.

By MARJORIE STANTON.

Author of "THE CIRCUS GIRL OF MORCOVE," "A DISGRACE TO MORCOVE,"
"MORCOVE IN MOROCCO," etc., etc.

CHAPTER 1.

The Girl from—Where?

BETTY BARTON stepped out of Barncombe High Street into the Creamery Tea-rooms, and spoke gaily to the lady in charge.

"Am I the last?" asked Betty.

"On the contrary," said the manageress, who knew all the scholars of Morcove School almost by name, "you are the first!"

"Oh!" Betty laughed. "All right, I'll go up, anyhow."

And, passing amongst the little round tables that were dofted about the shop, she mounted some dingy stairs to a tea-room on the first floor.

This was the usual spot favoured by Betty Barton and Co. for tea and cakes at the end of an afternoon's jaunt into the town. The pretty waitress, recognising the girl who, as captain of the Fourth Form at Morcove School, had often presided over the teapot, smiled a very genial welcome. "You are early, miss."

"The others are late!" was Betty's laughing answer, whilst she stood in front of a mirror to tidy her hair. Very pretty hair it was, too, clustering about a very pretty face.

"But they won't be a minute now," said Betty, turning away from the mirror, "and so," she continued, walking to the

window, "perhaps you will bring in the tea, please?"

The waitress seemed to think this an admirable suggestion. She flitted away, whilst Betty, peering down into the narrow High Street of the ancient Devonshire town, suddenly rapped the window to attract attention.

"Coo-ee!" she called down softly, to some chum of hers who was just crossing the road.

The girl looked up, waved, and then hastened into the shop, joining Betty in a few moments in the upper room.

"Where are the others, Betty? I thought I should be late."

"You are late, Madge dear," said Betty. "I myself was late, and I was the first to get here. Oh, these shops on a Thursday afternoon! One simply can't get served!"

Madge Minden had laid aside a rolled-up piece of music, and Betty now took it up and scanned the title.

"Um! Another awful-looking rhapsody thing, Madge? But it is bound to be wonderful—as you play it."

"That remains to be seen," smiled Madge, taking a seat in her own sedate manner. "If you hear the most awful din coming from the music-room before brekker to-morrow, you'll know that's me learning another rhapsody! Hallo, here are Tess and Trixie!"

"Hurry up, slow coaches!" Betty Barton

chided the two newcomers, as they romped into the room. "What a time you have been getting away from that drapery counter!"

"And where is Paula Creel now?" asked Madge.

"Paula—oh, we left her still at it!" chuckled Tess Trelawney. "Paula is buying the shop!"

"Oui—yes," agreed Trixie Hope, who always spoke French when she could, and tried to when she could not. "Some day I mean to count up how many pairs of gloves Paula Creel always has in stock! As for me, I have only the one pair, and cela me suffit—that's enough for me!"

Two other girls came upstairs and into the room, full of high spirits. They were Dolly Delane—popularly known as "the Doormat"—and Etta Hargrove.

"We are late," said Etta, flopping into a chair.

"You are," agreed Betty.

"That makes us all the thirstier," added Etta, unpinning her hat.

"Here is the tea, so cheer up!" cried the Form captain, as the waitress entered with the tray, "Shall we make a start, girls, and then—"

Betty broke off abruptly, turning swiftly to answer a remark that had been addressed to her by a young lady who had followed the waitress up the stairs and into the room.

"I beg your pardon," said Betty, "you were asking me—"

"Do you mind my having tea up here, at this side-table?" the young lady said, very graciously. "The shop below is very crowded."

The chums answered in chorus:

"Oh, not at all!"

"Thank you so much!" said the stranger; and with that she sat down at the side-table, which was in a dim corner at the far end of the room.

Betty found herself taking an interested look at this girl, for she was certainly not more than eighteen years of age. She was extraordinarily pretty.

Perhaps she had been staying long enough in this holiday district to feel the effects of sea and sun upon her face and hands, for her skin was nicely tanned.

It certainly could not be that she owed such a nut-brown complexion to any foreign blood. Her refined features were purely British, as were all her manners and her speech.

Betty looked at her more than once, not because there had been anything unusual in the request to be allowed to sit at that small table. This upper room was not reserved for Morcove scholars. No; Betty's only reason, at present, for feeling so interested, was that the girl was so strikingly beautiful.

"Hark! That's Paula!" cried out Tess Trelawney, as a girl was heard climbing the narrow stairs in a very languid fashion, whilst she complained wearily of the heat. "Hurry up, Paula!"

"Bai Jove, how wiculous you are, expecting a geal to huwvy this hot weathah!" exclaimed Paula, floating into the room with her usual air of prostration. "Geals, I am gwieved to have kept you waiting. The twouble I have had buying a few twifles at the dwaper's—it would be wiculous if it were not so downwight aggwawating!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Betty. "Poor Paula! Draw up and have a cup of tea, dear. You'll soon feel better, then."

But Paula, having found a seat on a velvet couch, preferred to recline there.

"Pwostwate—thowoughly pwostwate!" she said, fanning herself. "The heat is tewwific—what!"

Just as her chums were about to make some consoling remark to the swell girl of the Fourth Form, they heard a tell-tale scampering of feet on the stairs.

"That's Polly!"

And Polly it was—boisterous Polly Linton, the madcap of the Form, bursting in upon the tea-party at this moment, just as she always burst in upon her chums in their various studies up at the school.

"Tea-ho!" sang out Polly, shying a small parcel into a corner. "Hallo, Paula! Go room for me on that sofa?"

"Polly, deah, how fwivolous you are Pway—"

"Don't disturb yourself; I'll find room!" said Polly.

And down she sat on the swell girl's lap, causing that spick-and-span young lady to send up a wail of distress.

"Weally, Polly! Bai Jove, you know, I'm extwemely fond of you and all that, but—Help! Get off me, Polly!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Pway wewwain, Polly! You are cwushing me!"

"Piffle!" scoffed Polly, teasingly bouncing up and down. "I'm as light as a feather, Paula!"

"As light as a— Gweat goodness,

Polly! I shall be a w'eck! This hot weathah, too, bai Jove! Betty, Madge—all of you! Pway dislodge this tiresome cweature fwom my lap!"

"Here, sit in this chair and behave, Polly!" Betty Barton said, whilst she grinned as much as the others at Polly's teasing of the swell girl. "What made you so late, Polly?"

"Oh, I suddenly thought I would send off a picture postcard to the people at home," shrugged Polly, helping herself to a cream-bun.

Then, as her teeth met in the squashy pastry, she suddenly thought of something worth telling.

"And what do you think, girls?" she cried, with all the cream frothing round her pretty lips.

"I think you will choke, bai Jove!" said Paula softly. "Weally, Polly——"

"I'll tell you!" rushed on the madcap of the Form gaily. "They have included the dad's own old home in the series of picture postcards of historic Devonshire houses!"

"Bai Jove!" Paula said, whilst the others murmured their delight. "How extwemely gwatifying!"

"What-oh!" said Polly proudly. "You Creels will have to sing small now, Paula dear. I'm going to put on no end of dignity, now that I can boast that Linton Hall is on the picture postcards!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
All the girls were laughing merrily. They knew just how impossible it was for Polly Linton to fulfil any threat about being on her "dignity."

Madge was looking across at Betty Barton.

"Penny for your thoughts, Betty!"

Then the Form captain gave a little start, and smiled again, after looking serious for a moment.

During that serious moment she had been looking at the girl who was a stranger to them all.

For Betty had noticed that when Polly Linton mentioned Linton Hall, the young lady at the small table turned her head quickly, as if her interest had been aroused.

"I must get a picture postcard of Linton Hall," said Etta Hargrove. "I'm not like some of your other chums, Polly! I have never been invited to your home."

"Cheer up! You shall come home with me, some time or other," Polly answered

lightly. "Meanwhile, for goodness' sake don't get a postcard. The photo of the place doesn't do a bit of justice to it."

"I am not surprised," said Betty. "We girls who were at Linton Hall for Christmas remember what a gorgeous place it is!"

"Yes, wathah!" agreed Paula Creel, sipping her tea. "Ah, talking of Chwistmas, geals, now I know what this stowing weathah weminds me of."

"Not of Christmas, surely?" teased Polly.

"How fwivolous you are!" protested Paula. "Howevah, you are not far from being wight. This hot weathah, bai Jove, it does wemind me of the Chwistmas holidays!"

"Oh, now we catch your meaning!" chuckled Tess. "You mean those days when we were out in North Africa, after Christmas!"

"Yes, wather!"

"My word, what a time that was!" exclaimed Polly vivaciously. "Do you remember the glare of the sun, Paula dear, and how it took you all your time to keep your face from getting freckled?"

Paula looked indignant.

"I have no wecollection, Polly deah, of twying not to get fwreckled! I have a wecollection of thinking of nothing but how we were going to wescue Madge and Tess fwom the howwid wascals in that City of Susahlah."

"Quite right, and it is a shame to tease you!" said Betty. "Paula, you were a brick from first to last during that never-to-be-forgotten adventure."

"One we never want to have the like of again," said Madge, in her sober tone. "It is all very well to look back upon: but at the time, when Tess and I were in the hands of the Susahlah—kept in that strange house in the city wall by Rose of the Desert and her womenfolk——"

"And never knowing whether we should ever see England again!" struck in Tess. "Yes, those were trying times, and no mistake!"

The girl who was a stranger shifted her chair a little, as if to sit in a more easy attitude.

Betty noticed, however, that the altered position would enable the young lady to pay more attention to the talk going on at the big table if she wanted to.

"Howwid cweatures!" Paula Creel exclaimed again, alluding to the native

population of the mysterious City of Susahlah, where she and several of her chums had been involved in such strange adventures. "Without wishing to use a strong expression, geals, I wather fancy it is time those Susahlah people became a little bit civilised. Yes, wather!"

"Wait a bit, though, when you pass judgement on the Susahlah people," said Madge. "Some of them had their good points, hadn't they? That big fellow, El Valiante, who was sent to England by the Sultan to recover the Lamp of Susahlah—he was a gentleman at heart."

"One of Nature's gentlemen—yes," said Tess. "And how about Rose of the Desert?"

"Ah, Rose of the Desert!" several of the girls echoed, in tones of pure admiration. "She was a darling!"

"I agwee!" Paula Creec hastened to say. "I quite agwee, geals, about Wose of the Desert. The whole time she had charge of Madge and Tess, when they were prisoners, she was a bwick—a pwoper bwick!"

"I think," said Betty pensively—"in fact, I am sure Rose of the Desert ended up by being awfully fond of her school-girl captives!"

"And I think that Rose of the Desert wished we could all have brought her away with us from Susahlah when we escaped from that awful city," said Madge. "Poor Rose of the Desert! She was so young and beautiful, it did seem a shame that she should spend all her life in that strange, wild land!"

"But she was a native of the place," said Etta.

And there all the talk was suddenly interrupted by a long, low rumble out-of-doors.

"Hark—thunder! Is that thunder?" exclaimed Betty, jumping up to dart to the window. "Oh, see how the clouds have come up all of a sudden!"

"Bai Jove," said Paula, "we might have known it, geals! This distwessing heat was bound to bring on a sudden thunder-storm."

"Malheur—bad luck!" grimaced Trixie Hope, as they all looked at one another in dismay. "How are we going to get back to the school without a drenching?"

Again the thunder rolled above the little Devonshire town, whilst the light faded as

the inky clouds closed together, thicker than ever.

The young lady sitting at the side-table got up from her chair, as if to make a speedy departure.

She gave a half-smile to all the school-girls who stood grouped by the darkening window, and then spoke.

"Are you far from the school?" she asked.

"Only a few miles," said Betty. "We'll manage! We have our bicycles, and I expect we can make a sprint for home in between the showers."

"It may all be over in a few minutes," the young lady said cheerfully. "Well, I hope you get back all right! I think I hear my father's car!"

A fine limousine was, in fact, just then drawing up at the kerb outside the shop. The girl bestowed another friendly smile upon the Morcove party, making Polly Linton the recipient of her very last glance. Then she passed to the stairs and went down them, her every movement full of grace.

"What a beautiful girl!" exclaimed Polly. "And so friendly, too!"

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove, geals, I envied her that pretty frock—and the hat!" said the swell girl of the Form. "Howevah, my own clothes are not such wags, don't you know, that I want to get them drenched! Betty deah—"

"Yes, we had better get on quickly," Betty said, taking another glance at the inky sky. "If the rain starts, we must take cover, that's all."

"That's the idea!" Polly said lightly, as they all moved towards the stairs. "Why worry? Think of the good it will do the crops!"

"Think of my fwock!" Paula almost groaned. "It is bound to shwink with a drenching, even if it isn't uttally wuined!"

The swell girl's chums refused to share Paula's panicky alarm, however. They never were girls to meet trouble half-way, and, as Betty cheerily remarked, when they had paid the tea-bill and got their bicycles from the store, even the first drops of rain had not yet fallen.

With a bit of luck, they might yet speed home to the school before the thunderstorm broke.

So away they went, pedalling as swiftly as possible through the quaint old High Street, and so out into the open country.

There the undulating road was clear of all other traffic, and so the girls could ride abreast of one another in a nice companionable way, although Paula Creel was more often than not lagging several yards behind, her wails of distress causing the others great amusement.

After the first mile Paula's hat was all awry, and her pretty face looked red-hot with her exertion. For once, however, she was less concerned about her appearance than the threatening look of the cloud.

"Gwacious!" she palpitated, plugging along as hard as she could. "Bai Jove, geals, it will be a miwacle if we don't get dwenched! Betty—"

"Come on, Paula!"

"Polly!"

"Hurry up, slowcoach!"

"How fwivolous you are!" wailed the breathless swell girl. "Are you aweah, geals, that the clouds are— Theah! It's waining now!"

"Oh, dear!" chuckled the others, as they saw the first heat drops splash down into the dust.

"Geals, pway be sewious!" entreated Paula. "It is pouwing—simply pouwing!"

"I can't feel it yet!" cried Betty. "All the same, perhaps we had better— Oh!"

And "Oh!" echoed all her chums, as a brilliant streak of lightning suddenly zig-zagged all down the inky sky.

"Here, out of this—quick!" Betty now sang out, for it was time to take cover, that was evident. "Never mind the bikes! Dump them anywhere!"

"Yes, wather!" Paula palpitated.

And, almost falling out of her saddle, she ran the machine to the side of the road and simply heaved it on to the bank.

The others followed suit, and then, whilst an appalling clap of thunder burst right above their heads, they looked wildly around in search of a refuge from the storm.

CHAPTER 2.

What Betty Saw.

"**H**URRAH! Look, girls, look!" It was madcap Polly who sang out so joyfully.

She was pointing eagerly towards a low-built country house of the Georgian type, which chanced to be situated, amidst lovely grounds, just at this

part of the road where the girls had been caught by the storm.

"Can't we find shelter there?" Polly cried above the rumble of the thunder. A needless suggestion that! For where else could they all find shelter if not in the porch of the house? Not another habitation of any sort was to be seen.

The mansion was just a fine residence, standing quite isolated at one of the prettiest points on the road between Barncombe and Morcove.

"Oh, gwacious, what a welief!" Paula cried; and this was one of those rare moments when the swell girl became as nimble as any of her chums.

Forgetting her "fswail" disposition, Paula footed it through the main gateway of the garden and up the curving drive as fast as Betty, Polly, and the rest.

In fact, it was Paula who first reached the shelter of the porch, thereby escaping the heavy spattering which her less panicky chums came in for.

Even as they all scampered under cover, and huddled there, panting for breath, the rain streamed down in torrents.

Flash, flash went the lightning, and time after time the thunder crackled and rumbled, whilst the heavy deluge hissed upon the gravel, washing it clean.

"Our poor bikes!" said Polly.

"Oh, bother bikes!" shrugged Tess. "They can't catch cold; but if we had been a minute later—"

"Pway don't talk about it!" plicated Paula. She had taken out a little pocket-mirror and comb, and was having a tidy up. "We might have been dwnowed, geals! Even as it is, my hat is wuined!"

"Ha, ha, ha! You and your hat!" teased Polly. "I say, though, girls! Whose house is this? Rather a fine one—eh?"

"A bit of a has-been," said Madge Minden. "I fancy it is one the agents in Barncombe let furnished—when they can! But it isn't everybody who wants to rent such a big place for a mere holiday."

"Well, it is let to somebody now," said Betty. "I hope they won't mind our taking shelter here!"

"Hallo! I say, girls, someone is coming to the door!" Polly suddenly interrupted, as she put her face to the old-fashioned coloured-glass panels.

"Gwacious, is my hat on stwaight?" Paula inquired anxiously.

There was no time for any of her chums

to relieve her mind on that point. Click! went the latch of the ponderous front door, and then—

Then Betty & Co. gaped with surprise. "Oh!" they said at last, in a sort of chorus.

For the person who had opened the door was the same beautiful girl who had been with them in the upper room of the Creamery!

"What a drenching!" she exclaimed, laughing musically. "You got here only just in time!"

"Only just!" agreed Betty emphatically. "I am sure you don't mind our—"

"Just as if!" the girl hastened to say. "Come in—yes, do! I couldn't dream of letting you stand there!"

"You are awfully kind!" murmured the girls, gladly accepting the invitation. "We are not a bit wet. Still—"

"Will you sit down?" the girl broke in, airily waving them to the various chairs, which were ready to hand in the well-furnished lounge hall.

Then she made one of her quick, graceful turns to speak to someone who had come to a door opening on to the hall.

"It is all right, father!" she said. "I have asked these girls to wait inside until the storm is over."

"Quite right—quite right, Pearl!" the father answered.

This should have been good enough, yet all the Morcove girls had a feeling that this gentleman who stood revealed to them was not really as nice as he was trying to make himself out to be.

He was a very tall, lean, clean-shaven man, with scanty hair well-brushed back from his high forehead. Dark, piercing eyes, set in a face that was so very bony, gave him a sinister appearance. Like his daughter, whose name seemed to be Pearl, he was very sunburnt.

"Scholars from the school—eh?" he remarked, with what was meant to be an engaging smile. "Morcove School—eh?"

"Yes, sir," Betty answered. "We ran into Barncombe to get a few things at the shops and have a cup of tea, and the storm has caught us by surprise."

"Exactly," he nodded, still lingering in the doorway. "You are a well-grown girl. What age would you be—and your name?"

"Betty Barton sir; Fourth Form. And

these are all my best chums. Polly Linton—"

"What! Polly Linton?"

The gentleman had given a very surprised echo of the name, as if its utterance had startled him. But in a moment he was smiling in the most nonchalant manner.

"Polly—a good old English name, yes!" he remarked. "It was the surname that surprised me, however, Linton! Do they call the town of Lynton, Devonshire, after your family, Polly Linton?"

"Oh, no, sir!" laughed Polly. "My people do, however, live in Devonshire—at Linton Hall, a good many miles across country."

"Ah, indeed!" commented the gentleman, nodding. "Well, young ladies, you may feel quite at ease. I and my daughter are renting this place, furnished, for a little time. She has no mother now, so it is for her to do the honours. Pearl, my dear, you will make the girls feel quite at home."

"Yes, father," said Pearl, in that low, sweet tone that was so in keeping with her dainty figure.

Then the father withdrew into his room and closed the door, and Betty & Co. thought it only right to put a few friendly questions to the daughter.

"So you are new to this neighbourhood?" said Betty. "How do you like Devonshire?"

"I think it is charming," said Pearl. "After living so long in—"

She checked herself, and then said quickly:

"You had some tea at the Creamery. I know. But would you like another cup?"

"Oh, no, thank you!" chorused Betty & Co. And Tess pursued:

"Were you going to say you lived a long time abroad?"

The question produced a pause—an awkward pause.

The girl Pearl was hesitating over her reply. Why, Betty & Co. could not understand. And suddenly they all felt a deeper interest in her and her father.

They felt that they were on the fringe of a strange mystery.

Now it was Polly who tried her hand at a question. Polly, the madcap, was just the sort to step in where angels fear to tread. No shyness about Polly!

"What place abroad do you come from?" she asked, with a breeziness which crossed her inquisitiveness. "India?"

"Oh, no!" said Pearl, quite readily.

"I guess it was some hot country," rattled on Polly, "because that's why you are so brown! We know how brown we got last January, out in Africa."

"I—I heard you saying in the teashop that you were out in North Africa," Pearl remarked. "What an exciting time you must have had!"

"Yes, wather!" exclaimed Paula Creel. "Howevah—"

What Paula was going to say was that Pearl had yet to tell them where she came from. But at this moment Paula stood mute and open-mouthed, as she noticed the extraordinary expression of Betty Barton's face.

Betty was not attending to the talk at all. She had chanced to glance up the dim staircase as far as the half-landing, and her eyes were now fixed in that direction, as if fascinated by something she saw there.

And yet—what was there, up there on the first landing, to leave one spellbound?

"Nothing, Paula decided, as she herself glanced in that direction.

"Gweat goodness, Betty deah!" the swell girl managed to exclaim at last. "Whatevah is the mattah?"

"With me?" Betty returned, pulling herself together. "Oh—er—nothing, nothing!"

"I wathah fancied you had seen a ghost, bai Jove!"

Betty forced a laugh at this playful remark of Paula's, and then the girl Pearl turned to the pair of them.

"A ghost! I hope not," she said, with a light laugh. "The house seems old and dingy enough, without any need for ghosts!"

It was Betty's turn to laugh.

"One doesn't see ghosts at five o'clock in the afternoon, I fancy," was her jesting remark. "I wonder if the rain is showing signs of giving over?"

Then Pearl opened the front door, and, to the girl's relief, they saw that the storm had already spent itself.

So torrential had been the deluge from the moment it started, already the rain was slackening. Peering out at the sky, they saw that here and there the clouds were beginning to break.

"Hurrah!" exclaimed Polly, and the breezy expression seemed to amuse Pearl. She smiled upon the schoolgirl madcap, as if to encourage her to be quite herself in this house.

And—ah, how well Betty Barton, for one, remembered it afterwards!—the ten minutes or so during which they stood beneath the shelter of that roof, waiting for the rain to cease. Pearl's interest in Polly Linton was a very friendly one.

Polly had even been led into talking about her own people and her home at Linton Hall, when the cry suddenly went up that the rain was all over and the sun was actually coming out again.

"Oh, that's splendid!" Pearl said, heading the advance into the open air. "Yes, you will have it fine now, and I suppose you will soon be indoors, since you each have a bicycle."

"Twenty minutes will see us back at the school," Madge Minden answered. "And what do you say, girls? Don't you think this young lady should honour us with a visit, one fine day?"

"Yes, wather!"

"Topping notion!" cried Polly. "Perhaps you never went to school in England, and so you would like to see over a place like Morcove."

"I would indeed!" was Pearl's eager answer. "Yes, if I may come and see you—"

"Any day after half-past three!" they clamoured. "We are finished with classes then. And we can give you tea, and—"

"I know what," Polly shouted, above all the others, causing Pearl to smile again at the madcap's boisterous manner. "Betty Barton and I will arrange a tea for you in our study. We share a den, you know, and Betty is captain of the Form. Betty—I say, Betty!"

Polly started to look about her in surprise. Betty was not out here. She had lingered behind in the house.

"Betty! Oh, there you are! I wondered what had become of you," said the Form captain's chum, as Betty came hurrying out. "I say, this young lady is coming over to Morcove to have tea with us, one afternoon!"

"Your friends have all been kind enough to ask me," Pearl smiled. "Does it meet with the captain's approval?"

"Why, of course!" Betty said heartily. "Good-bye for the present—and thank you!"

And two minutes later the girls had all picked up their bicycles, wiped them more or less dry, and were pedalling along the

sodden road, with the sun breaking out hotly upon them.

"Hurrah!" cheered Polly, purposely lunging towards the shaky Paula as if to upset that long suffering chum. "This is gorgeous! Cheer up, Betty! What's the matter?"

"Nothing—nothing!" Betty declared promptly.

But something was the matter, as all Betty's chums were soon convinced.

Something had affected her spirits. To look at her now, as she pedalled along the open country road, was to feel that all the freshness of sunshine after rain was lost upon her, and that she had brought away with her some of the gloom of that dim old house where Pearl and her father lived.

Reaching the school, the girls soon dispersed to their various studies. It was the hour for "prep." to be done. In Study No. 12, Polly Linton slung out her books upon the table, whistling the while, and plumped down to attack a bit of French. But Betty—

Betty, with a book lying open in front of her, sat mute and still, even now under the strange spell which had seemed to fall upon her in that old house on the Barncombe road.

"Hi, wake up, Betty!" her high-spirited chum suddenly sang out. "I shall begin to think soon you really did see a ghost at that house!"

"If I did," Betty answered, forcing a mirthless smile, "shall I tell you whose ghost it was?"

"What-ho!" chuckled Polly. "I'm listening!"

"Polly dear you will think me clean crazy," Betty said gravely. "It was the ghost of Rose of the Desert!"

CHAPTER 3.

Real or Unreal?

POLLY stared for a few moments at her chum, as if this really did seem nothing but sheer craziness.

"Betty! How can you talk such nonsense—such sheer piffle?"

Before Betty could make any reply to this scoffing remark there was a tap at the door. Paula Creel and Madge Minden came in, and Polly Linton turned to them, grinning.

"I say, here's a go! Betty has been seeing visions!"

"Oh, weally?" exclaimed Paula. "How remarkable?"

"Betty has been seeing Rose of the Desert, so she tells me."

"Wh-a-a-at?" cried Madge and Paula.

"I knew you would scoff," Betty said. "That is why I didn't like telling you. But we are all such good chums. I never feel I can keep anything from you."

"But, weally, don't you know," protested Paula, dropping into her favourite arm-chair, "this is too widdlecious!"

"I'll explain," the Form captain went on gravely. "When you were all standing in the hall of that house on the Barncombe road, did you happen to look about you?"

"Oh, yes—"

"Yes, wather!"

"Did you happen to see that on the first half-landing of the staircase there was a large mirror?"

"Er—no, I didn't pwecisely see a miw-wor," confessed Paula. "Did you, Madge deah?"

Madge shook her head.

"There was a mirror on that landing wall," said Betty. "One of those big ones that they often have on a staircase in old-fashioned houses to relieve the gloom. Well, I was glancing up the staircase whilst you were all talking to that girl Pearl—"

"And you saw—" struck in Madge eagerly.

"I saw the reflection of a person who was evidently coming down to the ground where we were all standing together. But she suddenly stopped, and then must have turned back."

"She?" echoed Madge and Polly.

"I told you the person was a female," Betty said. "She was dressed in white, flowing garments. Her face was half-veiled. In every respect, the figure I saw was that of—"

"Rose of the Desert!" cried Betty's listeners incredulously. "No, Betty—no!"

"But—"

"The whole thing is perfectly simple," Polly said. "Your imagination has been running away with you, Betty. Don't forget we were all talking about Rose of the Desert in the tea-shop. That was not long before we took shelter at the house. Your mind was still running on Rose of the Desert, and so—"

"You just fancied everything! Polly is right, Betty," said Madge. "It is the only explanation."

But Betty still looked unconvinced.

"Bai Jove, geals, I tell you what!" chimed in Paula, with an air of being inspired. "I wather fancy the person Betty saw must have been some geal in a dweessing-gown, or something of that sort, bai Jove!" She may have been having a bath, don't you know, after a long journey."

"And was coming away from the bathroom all wrapped up in some towelling. Good for you, Paula!" cried Polly. "Quite an easy thing for any young lady to look a bit Eastern, under those circs. Betty, you duffer, don't you ever talk again about Rose of the Desert being over here in England! If you do——"

"All right. I suppose you are right and I am wrong," Betty said, with a rueful laugh. "I'm bound to say that I could hardly believe my own senses. That a native girl whom we last saw in the heart of the African desert should have come to England—it is too wonderful almost to believe!"

And there the subject was dropped.

That night, however, Betty Barton had to put up with a good deal of banter in the Fourth Form dormitory before lights-out.

All the Form had got to know about the "vision" she had seen in the house on the Barncombe road, and twenty times over Betty was asked if she felt better now, or was she still "seeing ghosts"?

Nor was this all

At the last minute before lights-out the dormitory door swung open very slowly, and into the room glided a ghostly figure, arrayed in flowing robes.

Then all the girls who were "in the know" pretended to be struck all of a heap. Transfixed they stood, whilst the mysterious figure paused just inside the doorway.

At last Tess Trelawney and a few others whispered excitedly to Betty:

"Do you see, Betty? Who is it—who is it?"

"It is Polly!" said Betty, refusing to look the least bit startled. "Come off it, Polly! The joke is getting stale!"

"Peace be on you, O captain of the Fourth Form!" said the mysterious figure solemnly. "I am Rose of the Desert——"

"I'll give you Rose of the Desert!" Betty cried, suddenly making a rush at the draped figure. "Hop it!"

Then the "vision" became very much alive indeed.

As Betty made a rush for "it," it took to its heels in a very sprightly manner.

All down one side of the dormitory "it" rushed, and then up the other side, with Betty in hot pursuit.

Over one bed after another "it" bounded, drawing mock groans of terror from the beds' occupants, whilst those girls who were still standing about the room simply doubled up with laughter.

At last Betty seized the "apparition" by a trailing end of its white sheet. Betty pulled hard, and down went the figure plump on top of Paula Creel, who had just got into bed.

"Help!" yelled the swe'l girl of the Form.

"My gwacious!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Heah, bai Jove, get off me, Polly! You are cwushing me!"

"I am Rose of the Desert!" moaned the "apparition," still refusing to own to the name of Polly Linton. "For many moons, O daughter of idleness——"

"Pway stop it, Polly! Weally, don't you know this is no joke; it is most distwessing!" wailed poor Paula, trying to dislodge her unwelcome visitor. "Betty deah

"All right, Paula; I've got her!" Betty laughed. "Now, Polly, just you—— Ha, ha, ha!"

And "Ha, ha, ha!" pealed all the girls who were looking on, as they saw Betty and Polly start a real mix-up on Paula's bed, with Paula all the time trying to escape from the fray and unable to do so.

The end of it was Polly Linton got so wound up in the white sheets which she had put on for the jape, she could not see what she was doing.

She mistook Paula Creel for Betty Barton, with results that set the onlookers laughing louder than ever.

Betty slipped away, and there was the muffled Polly, struggling with Paula Creel in the belief that that luckless girl was Betty.

By the time Polly had got her head clear of the sheet, and could see what was doing, Paula Creel was just about as "pwestwate" as she had ever been.

"Hallo!" panted Polly. "Oh, it's you!"

"Yes, wather! And, bai Jove, Polly

"Where is Betty, then? Who—how——"

"Look heah, bai Jove!" raved Paula,

bounding about in a state of great indignation. "Once and for all, I will not be dragged into these wiculous japes of yours I—I——"

"But you were so keen on it!" Polly protested demurely. "Really, Paula, how unreasonable you are!"

"Unreasonable!" cried Paula. "Just because I protest against being treated like a punch-ball! I—I—— Howevah, I am too pwestate to argue the mattah! Pway, go away!"

"My dear Paula——"

"Pway go to bed, Polly! I am gwieved—gwieved that everybody seems to think it funny that you have wuined my bed for the night!"

"But——"

"I wefuse to discuss the mattah! I am fed-up!" said Paula, punching her pillow to rights.

And down went her head upon the pillow a moment later, just as Miss Massingham came in to see what all the noise was about.

The talk and laughter that went on after lights out was mostly at Paula's expense, she having proved mot. of a victim to the jape than Betty Barton.

All the same, Betty could not help feeling rather foolish in the eyes of her chums.

It seemed as if they were never going to forget her folly in imagining that she had seen Rose of the Desert—and no wonder! As she had frankly owned, it could only have been some trick of the fancy.

And yet——

And yet that very night Betty Barton dreamed that it was all quite true—Rose of the Desert really was back in England!

CHAPTER 4.

The Substance of the Vision.

MORNING had come again to the romantic world of North Devon, and a hot sun was shining down upon a countryside beautifully refreshed by the thunderstorm of yesterday afternoon.

It was close upon nine o'clock—an hour at which all the scholars of Morcove School were ready to go into their various classes. Yet here, in the old house on the Barncombe road, the girl whose name was Pearl had only just finished her toilette.

Turning away from the mirror of her dressing-table, she stood for several minutes

looking out of the window, her lovely eyes dwelling with obvious delight upon the green fields and the distant sea.

Then suddenly she faced about and gave two claps of the hand as if to summon someone from another part of the house.

Instantly there was a light footfall at the door, which opened quickly. And there, on the threshold, stood a very strange figure to be found in an English country house!

For it was the figure of a tall, queenly-looking girl in Eastern garb.

She wore the white robes of a maiden, and from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet, nothing was lacking from her appearance to proclaim her a true daughter of the desert.

Of her dark-skinned face, only the upper half was visible, her dark eyes peering out over the edge of the white cloth that masked her mouth and chin. Gold bracelets jangled at her wrists, whilst her small feet were encased in richly-decorated shoes.

Thus she stood—the living explanation of Betty Barton's puzzling "vision" of yesterday! She was the quaintly garbed being whose reflection Betty had seen for just one instant in that mirror on the stairs.

"Good-morning!" Pearl said, just as if she were addressing some English girl. "Will you pay close attention to what I have to say, Rose of the Desert?"

Rose of the Desert!

The name had been voiced by one who seemed to have authority over the daughter of a barbaric race. So this was no foreign girl merely resembling Rose of the Desert in her style of dress. It was the Rose herself.

She made a sweeping bow that was the very essence of gracefulness.

"I am the servant of the young English lady," Rose of the Desert murmured, in her musical voice. "It is the Sultan's own decree that I serve thee as a slave, O daughter of the one white man whom the Sultan calls his friend. Say on, then, and I listen."

The British-born girl smiled, as if amused by Rose of the Desert's poetic style of speaking.

"I like the way you describe my father, Rose of the Desert. It is quite true, too. Mr. Hartry is the only white man, I believe, who has ever been able to win your Sultan's friendship and protection."

"Yea, it is even as thou sayest!" answered Rose of the Desert. "In the City

of Susahlah, all know that our master, the Sultan, has no love for any people from other countries. Thy father has verily been luckier than one other traveller I could name, who came from this land of England."

"Ah, yes! You mean the man * Jack Somerfield," nodded Pearl. "He travelled through the land of Susahlah a few years before my father came that way, I know—"

"He was the first, the man Somerfield," Rose of the Desert said, with a sudden rise and fall of the breast, as if talking of the man Somerfield made her excited. "And you have heard how he found—indeed, anything but friendship and protection at my master the Sultan's hands. He was kept in prison in chains, and would have languished there to this day, but he escaped."

"Lucky man!" Pearl said, a trifle flip-pantly. "Well, well, Rose of the Desert, I don't wish to hear all the story of the man Somerfield over again. Now, listen!"

"I listen," murmured Rose of the Desert submissively.

Pearl Hartry took a slow turn about the room.

"When my father came away with us from the City of Susahlah, after making friends with your Sultan, you were ordered to come with us, to be my companion across the desert."

"Your companion until such time as you no longer desired me," Rose of the Desert assented. "It was my master, the Sultan's own decree. Thy father and he are now sworn friends, and if I fail thee, then do I also fail the Sultan himself!"

"That is the exact position," nodded Pearl Hartry, "and I am glad you remember it. Now I want you to remember one thing more. It is what I called you in to tell you."

Rose of the Desert stood as submissive and attentive as ever. And yet there was that in her mein which suggested how hard she found it to be a mere vassal in the hands of this British girl. Now and then her eyes seemed to say, resentfully:

"Am I not your equal, and more than your equal—I, Rose of the Desert, sister to Hussuf Ben Nazar, daughter of a family that has served the Sultan and the Sultan's ancestors for how many years? Who art thou, girl, that I should bend to thee?"

What, indeed, was Pearl Hartry in the eyes of Rose of the Desert? Not the splen-

did type of British girlhood which Rose of the Desert had already met with, and learned to admire so greatly, in the person of Betty Barton and other Morcove scholars! No!

Rose of the Desert knew a little about Pearl Hartry and her father, and that little was nothing to inspire very great respect.

She knew that only a short time ago the man Hartry had turned up in the City of Susahlah in a camel-caravan party, which also included his daughter.

By conduct of the most cunning kind, Hartry had won favour with the Sultan, and it was common talk all over the City of Susahlah that such favour had been granted by Hartry's extravagant promises of being able to swell the Sultan's vast wealth.

The Sultan was a covetous man, and he had listened greedily to Hartry's talk of vast gold resources—a veritable El Dorado—which he, Hartry, was on the track of.

Hartry, of course, needed the Sultan's protection, and so, like the shrewd fellow he was, he had purchased that protection by promising to "go halves" over whatever wealth was finally discovered.

In all this, fully known as it was to Rose of the Desert, there was something that had aroused her contempt for Stephen Hartry.

He was not like the other British explorer she had known years ago—the man Somerfield. No greed for gold about him!

Somerfield was a young man who had explored for adventure's sake, and for the sake of studying a then unknown race of people. Somerfield was a white man in more senses than one. Stephen Hartry was not!

"It is possible," said Pearl Hartry, after a pause, "that I shall be making friends with certain girls at Morcove School. I do not wish them to know that I and my father have ever been in the land of Susahlah. You understand?"

"She whom I am bound to serve is saying a strange thing," Rose of the Desert answered. "But the wish shall be obeyed."

"More than that," Pearl Hartry went on, with increased sternness, "you are to do your best to avoid being seen at any time by the girls of Morcove School."

Rose of the Desert bent her head and was silent.

"If you should encounter any of those girls by a sudden accident, then you must be dumb," Pearl said. "That is my express command to you, Rose of the Desert. If it

is disobeyed, and if you ever speak a word to any of those girls, my father will report it to the Sultan, and then you will be punished."

Again the daughter of the desert gestured submissively.

"Remember, for it is a thing on which much may turn," Pearl impressed upon her listener. "Be dumb, if ever you happen to meet those girls, and then, although they may think that you resemble Rose of the Desert, they will say it is not she, but only an African girl who is dressed like her."

Rose of the Desert dropped her head lower still. Her small hands were tightly clenched. Perhaps no one would ever know how she was feeling the humiliation of Pearl Hartry's every word.

She, Rose of the Desert, was to sink the identity of which she was so proud, and was to become a mere nonentity—"only an African girl"—being the dumb slave of this white girl who, with her rascally father, was surely a menace to the welfare of those English schoolgirls for whom she, Rose of the Desert, had nothing but the deepest regard!

"Go, then, and pay heed to your ways!" Pearl said, pointing haughtily to the door. "Nothing is easier than to be dumb when you are spoken to. Not one word from your lips, Rose of the Desert, if ever you should chance to stand face to face with the English schoolgirls, or—"

The daughter of Stephen Hartry had bent forward a little to say the rest, letting her beautiful eyes fill with a stern, cold look.

"I obey your orders, even as I would obey the Sultan's," Rose of the Desert said. "I have heard all your commands, O daughter of the man who is the Sultan's sworn friend. I shall not forget!"

Then she was gone, and after a minute or so Pearl also quitted the room, passing down to the spacious hall in which Betty Barton and her chums had received shelter from the storm yesterday.

Throwing open one of the sitting-room doors, the handsome girl sauntered gracefully into a well-furnished apartment that her father appeared to be using as a sort of study.

He was here at this moment, sitting at a roll-top desk, on which a few maps and other papers were spread out.

"Morning, Pearl!" he greeted her, smil-

ing whilst he still kept a long, ivory cigarette-holder between his teeth. Nor did he remove the cigarette from his mouth when his daughter came across and kissed him carelessly on one cheek.

"I didn't wait breakfast, my dear."

"That was right, father. I had all the breakfast I wanted in my room."

Pearl glanced at the littered desk.

"I see you have already started in for another hard day at the maps, father. Still as puzzled at ever?"

"Ay! It is a problem, Pearl," he answered, with a hissing breath. "More than ever I am being made to realise we shall never find the exact locality of that El Dorado out there in Susahlah unless—unless we get hold of that one other document!"

"But we shall get it, father! You have said—"

"Shall we, Pearl? Shall we get that other document?" He looked at her excitedly. "It is going to depend upon you, Pearl. We know where it is. To-day we are only a few miles from the house where it has been placed for safe custody. But it—"

He made a sudden, uneasy pause, and crossed to the door. Opening it a few inches, he peered out—the action of a man who fears eavesdroppers.

No one was there, however, to be caught in the act of listening at the keyhole. So he closed the door again, and came back to his daughter.

"I don't know," he muttered, shaking his sleek head dubiously. "I don't feel altogether easy in my mind about that native girl."

"Rose of the Desert?" His daughter shrugged. "It is all right, father. She is under strict command from the Sultan to give us absolute obedience, and that is everything. Anyway, she can't be got rid of now."

"No," Stephen Hartry assented, rather gloomily. "Impossible to send her away."

"Besides," Pearl went on, "I have warned her that she is not to show herself to those girls at the school. By some mischance they may get a glimpse of her; but that will not matter. We can easily lead them to think that she is any ordinary girl."

"But if they speak to her?"

"She will be dumb. My orders to her

are—not a word from her lips to any of those girls," Pearl said. "So that's that!"

For a moment Hartry surveyed this beautiful daughter of his with fatherly pride, mingled with admiration for the way she was acting as his confederate over the nefarious scheme that was his.

"Something tells me," he said gravely, "Rose of the Desert is going to be our stumbling block! When the Sultan suggested that she should accompany us all the way to England, I thought it a capital thing for us. We were told that she actually knew this district of North Devon—that she was one of the emissaries the Sultan previously sent to England to recover the lost lamp of Susahlah. Now I see that her very knowledge of the place and the people may be a disaster."

"You mean——"

"The trouble for us is, Pearl, that Rose of the Desert grew to like those English schoolgirls. They won her regard, and you know what that means. Once you win the trust and loyalty of a girl like Rose of the Desert, she is with you to the death! Still worse, from our point of view, she——"

He made another pause.

"Hang it, what's wrong with me this morning that I feel so uneasy? Things are not shaping so badly."

"They are going well, father, if you ask me," Pearl said. "Already I have scraped an acquaintance with the girls at that school. To-morrow—Saturday—I am going to tea at the school. I shall take care to sit down next to Polly Linton."

"And you think you may get so friendly with her that she will invite you to Linton Hall?"

Stephen Hartry suddenly held his daughter by one wrist, whilst his eagle eyes flashed into hers. He looked wrought-up, fierce, but Pearl remained as cool as ever.

"Yes," she said slowly, "I shall get that invitation to Linton Hall! And if I do not get hold of that paper which we stand in need of whilst I am there, it will not be for lack of trying."

"Clever girl!" Hartry exclaimed, smiling in a foxy way. "What a help you are to me, Pearl! Perhaps sometimes you think the whole thing is too risky—too daring——"

"No, father."

"If ever such a thought does cross your

mind," he rushed on, in a low, impressive tone, "remember the prize we are striving for! Out there, in the land of Susahlah, there is certainly a wonderful gold area that has yet to be exploited. Jack Somerfield—that young doct of a wanderer—he has had a native plan of the country in his possession for years, without troubling to turn it to his advantage. But we, Pearl—we will not be long in improving our fortune, once we have got hold of that plan."

"We shall be pretty rich, then, father—eh?" smiled Pearl, glancing at the mirror, as if she was a girl who loved fine raiment and rich jewels.

"Rich!"

He chuckled exultantly, whilst he patted her again.

"We shall be rich," he said, "beyond the dreams of avarice!"

CHAPTER 5.

Whilst Morcove Slept.

THAT night a strange thing happened just outside the bounds of Morcove School.

Under cover of the darkness, a silent-footed person, cloaked from head to heel in some dark raiment so as to avoid being seen, crept close to a wall that formed part of the school's boundary line.

The figure was that of a girl or woman, and in a moment her purpose was disclosed.

Taking something from the folds of her dark cloak, she judged the height of the wall very carefully, and then made an upward cast with the object.

Over the brickwork it sailed, falling exactly in the middle of a shrubbery path on the inner side of the wall.

And there it lay all through the night, so that morning found it saturated with dew for the sun to soak up.

But ere Old Sol had had quite sufficient time to change the dew-soddened object back into a dry, crinkling state, it had been found.

A couple of girls belonging to the Fourth Form chanced to be sauntering through the shrubbery a few minutes before morning school began, and suddenly one of them pounced.

"Hallo, what's this?" she exclaimed excitedly. "My word, Judy, a note—a note

for one of the girls, flung over the wall in the night!"

Then, before her sister Judith could make any comment, Cora Grandways scanned the writing on the envelope.

"Oh-o! This is interesting!" Cora said, her eyes lighting up with all her old animosity against Betty Barton & Co. "It is a note for our precious captain!"

Judith Grandways made a snatch at the missive. And then she also smiled maliciously as she read these words, done in hand-printed letters for the obvious purpose of concealing the sender's identity:

"GIVE THIS TO THE CAPTAIN OF THE FOURTH FORM."

"Give it to the Form captain—not likely!" muttered Cora, taking back the letter from her equally malicious sister. "I say, Judy, isn't there a chance in this for us to score off Betty?"

"Question is, who is it from?" Judith said. "Open it, Cora. Do!"

"No, I don't like to go as far as that," said Cora, turning the note over and about. "But—but I tell you what, Judy dear—we'll destroy it—eh?"

Cora tore the letter—envelope and all—to little pieces and flung them away. Then, with a repetition of that malicious laugh of hers, she sauntered on, with Judith at her side.

"What a lark if Betty gets into a row for tearing up papers and making a litter with them!" tittered Judith.

"Better still if someone finds the bits of paper and puts them together," added Cora. "Then they'll see it's a letter belonging to Betty, and they'll think she threw them about."

And so the spiteful pair, still as eager as ever to involve Betty Barton in trouble, went into school that morning feeling that they had had quite a bit of luck.

This was Saturday, and Cora and Judith had great hopes of the litter of paper attracting somebody's attention before the day was out; for, after dinner, the whole school would be out-of-doors, and quite likely some of the girls would take a saunter through the shrubbery.

In the hope of witnessing Betty's sudden discomfiture, Cora and Judith even put in an appearance at the hard tennis-courts that afternoon.

Betty and some of her chums were having an hour or so with the racquets, and the sisters hung around, longing to see somebody—preferably a mistress or a senior scholar—suddenly turn up with the scraps of paper and demand an explanation.

And suddenly Cora and Judith nudged each other excitedly.

To their malicious delight, they saw one of the maids come from the schoolhouse with some verbal message for Betty Barton. In a flash the sisters jumped to the conclusion that the affair of the letter over the wall had become known to the headmistress herself. She had sent at once for Betty, and now—hurrah! A nice peck of trouble was Betty in for!

Only to see how abruptly Betty had to stop her game of tennis was enough to convince the spiteful sisters that she was under orders to report at once to the headmistress over a very serious matter.

Polly Linton, Paula Creel, and Madge Minden had been playing this particular set with the Form captain. They picked up the balls at once, and went with her in haste towards the schoolhouse.

"Come on, this is great!" Cora whispered gleefully to her sister. "Betty is in the soup this time, for a cert."

Only a minute later, however, what a blow did the sisters receive!

Instead of finding that Betty had been called away from the tennis to to the line in front of Miss Somerfield, they found that a most pleasant surprise had been awaiting the Form captain and her chums.

The maid from the house had merely fetched Betty & Co. from the hard courts because a young lady had called to take tea with them.

"How nice of you, Miss Hartry! We were so hoping you would turn up!"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove!"

"Do sit down!"

Such were a few of the delighted cries that Cora and Judith Grandways overheard as they stood in the Fourth Form corridor.

Whoever Betty & Co.'s visitor was, she was most welcome—that was evident! And so, feeling mad with disappointment, Cora and Judith could only stalk into their own study and shut the door against all the happy laughter and talk with a violent slam.

At that instant, Betty was also closing a

study door, but with anything but angry violence.

She and her delighted chums had persuaded Pearl Hartry to take the best chair in Study No. 12, and now there was to be just a little pleasant talk before the tea-things were rattled out of the corner cupboard on to the table.

"Haven't I spoilt your afternoon, though?" Pearl asked, glancing at the sunny window. "You were playing out-of-doors?"

"Only a game or two of tennis on the hard courts," Betty broke in lightly. "And we can get tennis any day, not a treat like this!"

Pearl bent her beautiful head and smiled to show her appreciation of the compliment. She was quite at her ease amongst these girls, who had given her such a glad welcome. Not a word could she say, not a movement could she make, but what it seemed to express good breeding. And yet, all the time, how terribly deceiving was such conduct!

How utterly mistaken were trustful Betty & Co. over this new friend of theirs! And how bitterly were they likely to rue their misplaced confidence before many days were out!

Whilst the talk flowed on, Betty often caught herself lost in admiration of the visitor. She was so exceedingly pretty, so faultlessly dressed, and so lacking in "airs and graces."

Small blame to Betty, or any of the other girls, if they felt that Pearl Hartry was going to be a most delightful friend to have during her stay at the old house on the Barncombe road!

"You used to play all our games when you were at school, of course?" said Madge, to save the talk from languishing. "Tennis, hockey—cricket, too? Which did you like best?"

"Oh, for a sunny day—tennis, even out of the season, on a hard court!" Pearl answered keenly. "Still, I used to love hockey. And I have often been bowled for a 'duck.'"

Whilst tea was being laid, a few other members of the Form trickled into the room, and, of course, they were all pressed to stay.

Then, at the very moment when tea was being poured out, someone came scampering along the corridor and whirled into the room, which was already so closely packed.

This last arrival was Norah Nugent, with letters—one for Betty and another for Polly.

"Hurrah!" shouted the excitable Polly, brandishing her letter. "Pip, pip, hurrah! Here's the mater writing to me, girls, asking me to get as many of you as possible to come and stay at Linton Hall for the Easter holidays!"

"Splendid!"

"You must all come!"

"Thanks, Polly!" sang out all the girls. "It is really awfully good of your mater. But—"

"Then that's settled. Hurrah, and likewise—pip-pip!" said Polly, causing Pearl to laugh as much as any of them. "We will have a time girls!"

"Linton Hall," said Pearl, now that she could get a hearing. "That is the beautiful country house you were talking about in the teasop, last Thursday? What a jolly time you will have, spending Easter there!"

"Would you like to join us there?" Polly sang out gaily. "Only say the word!"

"You—you don't mean that," Pearl said, with a tremulous laugh.

"But I do mean it—of course!" cried Polly boisterously. "If it would be anything of a pleasure to you—a change from the dull time in that old house—"

"It would be glorious!" Pearl said, standing up as if quite carried away by the joy of this impulsive invitation. "You see, I have been out of England for a long time. I mean—"

"You will come; that's settled!" broke in Polly decisively. "I've only to mention you in my letter home, saying what a nice friend we have all found in you, and the mater will be ever so pleased to have you."

"You will like Mrs. Linton," said Betty. "She is a dear!"

"And Mr. Linton; he's a darling!" said Tess.

"And Jack Linton," said Trixie; "he is such a nice boy. I mustn't say more than that, or Madge will be jealous. Ha, ha, ha!"

The laughter spread, resulting in Madge, suddenly clawing hold of a cushion and threatening to hurl it at the next girl to say a teasing word. At that moment in Study No. 12 there was so much goodwill and gaiety, who could ever have believed that events of a most thrilling kind would be the sequel to such a scene?

They did not know—how should they?—how false was the friendship Pearl Hartry was displaying, how false her joy.

The joy that filled Pearl Hartry's heart was the joy of knowing that things were still shaping well—the schemer's delight in knowing that, bit by bit, all was being made ready for the final coup!

She was to go to Linton Hall! In a few days from now she would be in the very house where that priceless document had been deposited by Jack Somerfield before he went abroad.

In a few days, if the luck still held, she would have got hold of that paper for her father, and then—

Then all the gold of that El Dorado away yonder in North Africa would be theirs!

They would be as rich as anybody in the whole wide world—rich, as her father had said, beyond the dreams of avarice!

CHAPTER 6.

"Beware!"

EVENING had come. It was a full hour since Pearl Hartry had made her departure from the school. Polly Linton, Tess, Paula, and two or three others had offered to walk a little way back with their friend. Now Betty Barton was walking alone in the grounds, waiting for her chums' return.

The sun had been down half an hour now. In the shrubbery, birds had begun the evening carol that would go on until twilight had almost given place to dark night.

A most unusual depression was upon the captain of the Form. That was why she had excused herself from going with the other girls to see Pearl Hartry upon her way home.

Betty emerged from one of the shrubbery paths and thought she had better go indoors and "light up" in Study 12, so as to get rid of her moodiness ere madeap Polly and the rest came back. But the grass of the lawns was drenched with dew, and her feet were only shod with canvas slippers, so she wisely decided to retrace her steps through the shrubbery, keeping dry gravel underfoot all the time.

And so, as Fate must have ordained, the eyes of this solitary girl suddenly took note of some scraps of paper which had been cast down just beside the path.

Fate again had surely decreed that she

should not only see the scraps of paper, but should observe some of the hand-printed letters that had formed the superscription on the envelope.

"THE CAPT"—those were the few letters Betty saw on one scrap of the destroyed envelope. On another there was the complete word, "FORM."

She halted, and stooped to scan some of the other scraps.

Then she saw the word "FOURTH," and all in an instant she realised that here was something concerning the captain of the Fourth Form!

"Queer!" she exclaimed, below her breath. "It looks as if it had been a note to me, and yet I have never had it. I wonder—I wonder what on earth it all means!"

Even as she said the words she started to gather up every scrap of paper.

Some of the scraps formed portions of the envelope, and she saw that this had not been opened before it was torn up.

There, in the half light, Betty sorted through the pieces of paper in a very excited manner. The conviction had seized her that this was a most strange discovery—one on which much might turn.

Here, clearly enough, was a letter which should have come into her hands—and she had never had it! Instead, someone must have intercepted it—torn it up, so that it should never reach its rightful recipient!

But the climax of the whole mystery was yet to come.

During her hurried examination of the scraps of paper, Betty was astounded to find that they were mostly blank.

In other words, whatever the purport of the letter had been, the message itself could only have been one of a very few words.

Feeling more and more mystified, Betty suddenly set off at top speed to the school-house. Up the stairs she raced, along the Fourth Form corridor, and so into her own study.

In a moment she got a light, so as to dispel the gloom of evening, and then, closing the door, she spread all the pieces of paper upon the blotting-pad.

Trembling with excitement, she first of all sorted out the scraps belonging to the envelope and fitted them together.

It was an easy task. In a minute—no longer—she had the envelope all put together, and these were the words that met her dilating eyes:

"TAKE THIS TO THE CAPTAIN OF
THE FOURTH FORM."

Then she turned her attention to the remaining scraps of paper.

By discarding all those that were perfectly blank, she reduced the number to a mere six or seven. But these were as difficult to put together as any jig-saw puzzle. For, instead of being covered with ordinary handwriting, they each contained only a portion of some wording printed in very large letters.

At last the excited girl got a start. She made up the first two letters:

BE

Then she guessed that she was going to find that her own name, Betty, had been printed in these large, clumsy capitals. But she was wrong there.

Bit by bit she fitted the scraps together in their proper order, and at last she had the word—the one and only word which had ever been placed inside that envelope.

It was the word

• BEWARE!

"Beware!" Betty exclaimed aloud to herself, in great excitement. "Beware of what? Beware of whom?"

The answer was not to be found by staring at the scraps of paper. There was that one word, and one word only—BEWARE!

The moments passed and grew to minutes. Still Betty Barton stood staring in amazement at the message, wondering—what did it mean?

Who had penned this warning word?

When had the message been brought to the school?

Why had it been intercepted?

In the name of mystery, what did the whole thing mean?

Betty could not tell.

Desperately she wracked her brains for a possible solution. Not one could she find.

All she could feel certain of at last was that it was a warning not to be made light of.

Some strange danger menaced her, and that, surely, was why she had been so troubled in her spirit this evening!

The sudden sadness that had come upon her—the feeling of nervous apprehension—

it had been one of those strange forebodings by which people are so often given a hint of impending trouble. And now here was the definite word of warning, done with plain pen and ink, the one warning word:

BEWARE!

A door downstairs banged noisily, and then a rush of feet was heard upon the stairs.

Polly and the rest were back at last.

Betty suddenly swept all the pieces of paper together and put them out of sight.

"Beware of what?" she was asking herself for the twentieth time, whilst she heard her chums coming along the passage, chatting gaily. "Beware of whom?"

"Pearl Hartry!" came a cry from the corridor.

It was only Polly mentioning the name of her new friend in the course of some high-spirited remark. Only Polly, saying what a ripping sort she was—Pearl Hartry.

But that name fell clearly upon Betty Barton's hearing, and suddenly, whilst she was still alone in the study, she made an excited exclamation, like one who has at last guessed the answer to a great riddle.

"Pearl Hartry!" she whispered to herself. "I am to beware of Pearl Hartry!"

CHAPTER 7.

Face to Face.

"WHAT a party we shall be!" said Tess Trelawney.

"Yes, wather!" came in the familiar drawl of Paula Creel, the swell girl of the Fourth Form at Morcove School.

"Well, the more the merrier!" cried Polly Linton gaily. "As a matter of fact, Linton Hall won't be as full as I hoped it was going to be this Easter. What with Etta Hargrove being unable to join us, and several other girls having to cry 'Sorry!' at the last moment, we shall only be—let me see—how many?"

And Polly began to count, dabbing her raised finger at one girl after another who

was helping to crowd out Study 12 at the moment.

"Betty Barton, to begin with," counted Polly. "Tess Trelawney; Trixie Hope; Dolly Delane; Madge Minden. Oh, and I was nearly forgetting you, Paula dear!"

"Bai Jove, you had bettah not forget me!" warned Paula, lolling at ease upon the couch. "When I have had two wipping new frocks sent down from London on purpose to look pwesentable!"

"Only two frocks? Dear me, what a wonder!" chuckled Tess.

Betty Barton laughed.

"We were counting up the number of girls who are bound for Linton Hall, not the number of Paula's frocks," said Betty. "I make it seven."

"Not half enough," grimaced Polly. "Still—"

"I know one thing," smiled Betty. "Seven girls are a jolly lot to squeeze into one motor-car!"

"Bai Jove, yes, wather!" agreed Paula. "To say nothing of one's luggage. I shall be twavelling with a mere twifle myself. Howevah—"

"Why go by car?" interrupted Tess.

"There's one very good reason," said Polly, swinging herself on the edge of the study table, where she sat dangling her legs in free-and-easy fashion. "Linton Hall is not many miles from here, as the crow flies; but the train service—unspeakable!"

"Pwecisely," drawled Paula. "And, not being a crow, I do not pwopose to fly, bai Jove! The car for me—yes, wather!"

"Sevens into one, Paula?" Betty asked.

"Did you speak, Betty dear?"

"Seven girls into one car—how many times do they go?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"How fwivolous you are, you geals! Howevah," smile Paula, "what else can one expect when to-morrow is breaking-up day? As someone has remarked, it will be a squeeze. But so long as we all get theah, don't you know—"

"Oh, but, of course," said Polly Linton, becoming serious for once, "the dad and mater don't want any of you to arrive at Linton Hall like a lot of tinned sardines! Now listen. It has just occurred to me that one car is coming over from Linton Hall, with the mater and my brother, to fetch as many of us as it will hold—say

five, at the most. Five girls will be a good load."

"Yes, wather!"

"So put down five and carry two," said Polly, in her flippant way. "But how are you going to carry these other two? Now for the answer!"

"Lights down! Slow music!" chuckled Tess. "This is thrilling!"

"It is as simple as A B C!" retorted Polly. "You all know I have asked Pearl Hartry to spend a few days with us at Linton Hall. Well, her father has a car, and that car is to take her to the Hall!"

"Oho!" exclaimed Betty, nodding. "Your idea is, Polly, that a couple of us might travel with Pearl Hartry when she makes the journey?"

"Bai Jove!" Paula said. "How extremely good! Polly dear, I congwatuulate you! With only five geals in the Linton Hall car, I can pewhaps take a trifle more luggage than I intended!"

"Let three girls go in the car with Pearl Hartry," grinned Dolly Delane. "Then Paula can take still more luggage!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Half a sec.!" cried Trixie soberly. "I propose that five girls travel with Pearl Hartry in her father's car. Then Paula Creel can take her whole jolly wardrobe—he, he, he!"

Paula took up a cushion to hurl it. But she thought better of the action.

Hurling a cushion would mean the beginning of a "dust-up," in which she was bound to come off badly.

"Two of us will travel with Pearl Hartry," decided Polly—"myself and Betty. And, as time is getting pretty close," she added, glancing at the study clock, "I've another brilliant idea. Betty, do you feel like a run out to Pearl Hartry's house on the Barcombe road, by bike?"

"At once?" said Betty. "Oh, rather! We ought to find out immediately if she can take us to-morrow. If she can't—"

"She will," said Polly, with conviction. "Still, we two will pop along on the bikes. It is only fair to see her beforehand."

Betty agreed, and next moment she was making a mock-serious speech to the chums who were crowding the study.

"Dear friends," said Betty, "much as it grieves me and Polly to tear ourselves away, there are times when—er—that is to

say, you know, you can stay and make yourselves comfy, if you want to. Don't get up, Paula; you do look so restful on that couch!"

"I feel extremely westful," said the languid Paula. "Howevah—"

And she rose to her feet, passing a caressing hand over her hair.

"I wather think I will go and do some more packing," she said, gliding to the door.

And she drifted away, Tess, Trixie, and Dolly following her out of the room in a most boisterous fashion.

Madge Minden lingered behind to have a last word with Polly.

"What a shame you should be talking of going to your own home in Pearl Hartry's car to-morrow!" Madge said. "Let me be the one to go with Betty, Polly!"

"What!" cried Polly. "When it has been fixed up, from the first, that you are to sit next to Jack all the way, whilst he drives!"

"Don't be silly!" Madge laughed. "I don't mind a bit!"

"Jack might!" retorted Polly. "And I have to study Jack—the best brother in all the world! No, Madge; you'll go with Jack, and the mater, and I'll travel in the Hartry car."

Five minutes later she and Betty were on their way to Pearl Hartry's house, to arrange matters with that young lady.

They sprinted along the level stretches, and skimmed gaily down any sloping bit of road they came to, and so they very soon came in sight of Pearl Hartry's home.

It was a rambling, old country mansion, which her father, Stephen Hartry, was renting furnished.

Like most places of this kind, it was in anything but spick-and-span condition. The two schoolgirls found Pearl Hartry wandering about a large garden that had long since gone to rack and ruin.

"Hallo!" she greeted them, with a truly ravishing smile of welcome. And she ran from the untidy lawn to the weedy path, to shake hands eagerly.

She was a very beautiful girl. The chums of the Fourth Form had already agreed amongst themselves that Pearl Hartry had that type of beauty which can only be called "adorable."

They knew that she was but eighteen

years of age; but there were times when her looks and manners gave her the appearance of being almost twenty-one—perhaps because she was her widowed father's only child, and her travels abroad with him had helped to make her older than her actual years.

"How are you, Betty Barton? How are you, dear?" she said to the two chums. "I have been feeling so excited all day about my visit to Linton Hall!"

"That's what we have come to see you about," said Polly.

Pearl looked startled then—suddenly dismayed.

"Oh! You have come to tell me that I can't join you at Linton Hall, after all?"

"Not a bit of it!" Polly laughed. "Betty and I just want to know if you can stow us in your car to-morrow, for the journey?"

And then both girls explained the fix they and their chums were in, owing to the fact that a party of seven schoolgirls was more than the Linton Hall car could possibly manage.

Pearl's uneasy look gave place at once to an expression of delight.

"Run you two over in the car? Why, of course!" she cried eagerly. "By the way, though, you won't be nervous of my driving the car? Dad can't very well come, and we don't keep a chauffeur."

"I don't suppose you are a bit more reckless than my brother Jack!" chuckled Polly. "We'll trust you, Pearl—won't we, Betty dear?"

"Er—er—" And that, strange to say, was all that Betty Barton seemed capable of answering.

Pearl gave a sudden keen look at the captain of the Fourth Form.

"Perhaps Betty Barton doesn't feel she can trust me, after all?" she said.

"Oh, I—I can trust you to drive the car all right!" Betty said, still looking strangely embarrassed.

"Of course!" cried Polly, in her light-hearted manner. "You have travelled a lot with your father, Pearl; driving a car is surely nothing to you! You must be ready to do far more daring things than driving a car!"

"Yes," Pearl said, looking away as she spoke, "when there is any need to do a daring thing I'm generally ready."

She added quickly:

"What time shall I pick you up to-morrow? After a mid-day dinner?"

"Two o'clock," said Betty. "The whole school will be scattering by then, and we shall be quite ready, thanks awfully!"

"I'll just run in and ask father," Pearl said, glancing towards the old-fashioned house. "Will you come indoors for a minute, or—"

"Oh, we'll wait here, thanks," said Polly.

But Betty, strange to say, seemed to favour the idea of entering the house.

"I think we might go in and sit down for a few minutes, Polly, as Pearl is kind enough to ask us," she said. "You—you really don't mind, Pearl?"

The girl's answer to that was to lead the way to the main porch. Preceding her schoolgirl friends into the hall, she waved them to a room on the right.

Betty and Polly entered, to find themselves in the faded drawing-room of the house, with French-windows that opened out on to a veranda.

The windows were wide-open, and Polly was going to take her stand close to them, to gaze out upon the wilderness of neglected garden, when she noticed that her chum now looked very agitated.

"Why, Betty!" Polly exclaimed chaffingly. "Whatever has come over you all of a sudden? You seem to be flustered—nervous—"

"No," Betty broke out; but her very tone belied the denial. "At least, Polly, I am trying not to be flustered! But—"

"There is some mystery, Polly—and I am asking myself all day what it is! Polly, listen to me! If I had known we were to have this chance of being in this house—left to ourselves for a while, like this—I would have confided in you sooner. Can we trust Pearl Hartry?"

"Trust her? To drive the car to-morrow, do you mean?"

"Bother driving cars!" Betty whispered back excitedly. "I am not thinking about to-morrow's journey at all, Polly. Can we trust Pearl—as a friend?"

"Oh, Betty! What—why—"

"Hush! Listen a moment!" Betty rushed on. "It is less than a week ago that we got friendly with this girl, and you took it into your head to invite her to spend Easter with us all at your people's

home. Since then, Polly, a strange thing has happened."

Polly's expression was one of stupefaction.

"Well?" she panted.

"A message has come into my hands, Polly, by a very mysterious means. It was a letter containing the one word, 'BEWARE!' And I want to know—does that warning apply to Pearl Hartry?"

"Why ever should it?" gasped Polly.

"What is there about Pearl Hartry to make one feel uneasy? She is so friendly and—"

"I know, Polly; she seems an awfully nice girl. But—oh, I would have told you before, but I felt sure you would think me crazy," was Betty's answer. "There are certain things that have set me thinking. Pearl and her father have come from North Africa—from the same strange land where we had such wonderful adventures last January. And, Polly—"

"Yes—what?" Polly was getting quite wrought-up now.

"You remember," Betty went on, in a still softer whisper, "that first time we were at this house, how I saw—or thought I saw—a girl like Rose of the Desert on the staircase? Polly, my belief is that Rose of the Desert has actually come to England with Pearl and her father, and that the warning I had was from Rose of the Desert, and no other!"

"Impossible!" exclaimed Polly excitedly. "Oh, Betty, even if Rose of the Desert were in England, for what reason should she warn us against Pearl? Besides, I cannot believe that—"

And there the speaker broke off abruptly, whilst her eyes grew round with utter amazement.

Someone silent of foot had mounted from the garden on to the veranda.

Betty and Polly had both turned towards the window, expecting to see Pearl Hartry re-enter the room by that means.

Instead, they saw a girlish figure in the native dress of a Susahlah woman—the white, flowing robes that Betty & Co. always associated with Rose of the Desert!

The same sort of white veil screened the lower half of the dusky face; the same slender brown hands had golden bangles at the wrists; on the woman's feet there were the same quaint shoes that Rose of the Desert always wore.

"Rose of the Desert!" Betty gasped aloud at last. "Then I was right, and it really is she, Polly! It is Rose of the Desert—here in England again!"

CHAPTER 8. The Plotters.

THE excited exclamation was followed by a deep, dramatic silence.

Both Betty and Polly quite expected the white-robed figure to make answer. But—mystery upon mystery—no answer came!

"Rose of the Desert, speak—speak!" jerked out Polly, when a few moments had slipped away.

"You know us?" said Betty eagerly. "You remember us, Rose of the Desert? We are two of the Morcovo girls who were in Africa when Madge Minden and Tess Trelawney were prisoners. You befriended them—you became friendly to all of us before we left that country. Speak, then!"

And still the native girl at the open window was dumb.

Was it Rose of the Desert after all?

Some such doubt had suddenly taken possession of the two schoolgirls.

If it was Rose of the Desert, who, they knew, could speak English, then why should she remain silent like this?

"Hark!" gestured Polly.

Even as she whisked a hand for silence, a step was audible outside the room door.

In a flash the white-robed figure vanished.

Neither sight nor sound of her was to be detected as the room door swung open and Pearl Hartry came in.

"Yes, it is quite all right about to-morrow," Pearl said lightly. "So I will pick you up at the school, round about two o'clock."

"Er—thank you, yes!" Betty stammered.

She and Polly were making desperate efforts to conceal all their agitation; but they each had a feeling that Pearl was conscious of something having happened, whilst she was out of the room, to leave them very disturbed.

But as she went with the two girls out of the house and down the weedy drive to where they had left their bikes she talked in the most light-hearted manner. Her good-bye to the schoolgirls was the very essence of girlish charm.

Afterwards—

When Betty and Polly were pedalling back to the school, and when Pearl herself had returned to the drawing-room, how swiftly all the pleasant, unconcerned air forsook her!

She gave two sharp claps of the hand, as if to summon a servant into her presence, and almost instantly the same white-robed figure that had been mute in the presence of Betty and Polly was standing before Pearl.

"Rose of the Desert," Pearl said, frowning her disapproval, "you have shown yourself to those two girls!"

"It is true," she said, in a low voice that was full of regret. "I was wandering in the garden, and I came to the window, not knowing that those girls were here."

"Are you sure you did not know?" Pearl said, still frowning.

The lovely dark eyes that were set in that half-veiled face flashed with wounded pride.

"It is true!" the native girl said, drawing herself up. "I do not tell a lie, ever! I am thy servant, O daughter of him who is the Sultan's sworn friend. But also I am one to whom all pay respect in my own country. I am Rose of the Desert, brother to Hussuf Ben Nazar, and are not he and I children of a family ever at the Sultan's right hand?"

Pearl Hartry walked to another part of the room, shrugging.

"I have told you," she said, with a quiet scorn that must have been very humiliating to her listener, "for the present you are to be, not Rose of the Desert, but any ordinary native of Susahlah! Did you speak with those girls?"

Again there was a gesture from Rose of the Desert.

"How could I speak," she flashed back, "when I, who am bound to be thy servant, have been commanded to be dumb?"

"Well," muttered Pearl, with another shrug, "it is a thousand pities that you blundered up against those girls! I shall have to tell them that—Hallo, father! Come in!"

The door had opened softly, and Pearl's father stood revealed—a tall, lithe man, with a thin face and sharp eyes that gave him a ferrety look.

He could see that there was some trouble between his daughter and the native girl. With sudden uneasiness he glanced from one to the other.

"You may go," Pearl said haughtily to Rose of the Desert; and, with all her usual submissiveness, that strange girl effaced herself without a sound.

"Huh!" exclaimed Stephen Hartry then, taking out a cigarette. "Some upset—eh?"

"Oh, bother her!" shrugged Pearl. "Of course, she goes and blunders up against those two schoolgirls when they were here just now!"

Stephen Hartry had struck a match. He let it burn away without setting light to his cigarette.

"Um!" he ejaculated at last, drawing his brows together. "That's a nice thing—the very thing we didn't want to happen!"

"Well, it can't be helped," said Pearl sullenly. "And I will make things all right, father, somehow. Trust me! I will tell the girls that one Susahlah woman is as like another as are nine peas in a pod."

"Will they believe it?" he muttered, lighting his cigarette from another match.

"Rose of the Desert did not answer them. She declared she was dumb, and Rose of the Desert is no liar," said Pearl. "So her failure to answer them will help them to believe that it must have been some other native—one who doesn't know a word of English."

Stephen Hartry inhaled some smoke and expelled it through his nostrils.

"So long as that girl is not going behind our backs to warn them, it doesn't matter if they see her," he said. "But—you know my fear, Pearl! She happens to be the same native girl who had charge of two of those scholars. She got fond of them all. She may wish them well, and may be suspecting that we—mean mischief."

Pearl nodded.

"Sometimes, father, I myself think Rose of the Desert is suspicious. But there it is; I have bound her to silence. My order to her was, not one word from her lips to those girls! She will not disobey—she dare not! For the Sultan is with us in all this!"

"Yes," Stephen Hartry said, with a gleam of exultation in his eyes. "If we do not get hold of that priceless paper which is being kept for safe custody at Linton Hall, it will be only Rose of the Desert's fault. And if we tell the Sultan that she has betrayed us, she had better look out!"

"We shall get the paper, sure enough, father," Pearl rejoined calmly. "We may

even get it without its ever being missed! We know that it is only being taken care of by Mr. Linton for Jack Somerfield, whilst that fellow is abroad. Mr. Linton is not likely to go to the safe every day to see that the paper is still there!"

"And yet—" Stephen Hartry said, then paused.

He suddenly flung away his cigarette and strode close to his beautiful daughter—the girl who, young as she was, had become his confederate in the desperate bid for a great prize.

"Pearl, I cannot forget the risks you are running," he said shakily. "From the moment you enter Linton Hall you will have to be on the look-out for a chance to get that paper! When the moment comes, it will require firm courage to do the deed. But you—you will not fail me?"

"No, father," she answered. "How could I fail, when I know what that paper means to us? The key to the riddle of the Susahlah desert! The native map that shows where that wonderful El Dorado is to be found!"

"Ay!" he muttered, patting her slender shoulders. "Let that thought spur you on, Pearl! All we need is the native map which Jack Somerfield entrusted to Mr. Linton for safe custody. Once that is in our hands, we have untold wealth at our command."

CHAPTER 9.

Hurrah for Linton Hall!

SUCH a bustle and commotion at Morcove School after dinner next day!

All morning numbers of girl scholars, full of the holiday spirit, had been going off to the railway-station; but there still remained a good few whose arrangements entailed a later departure. And among these were Betty Barton & Co. The waiting made them impatient.

But at last a carrier's cart arrived, to take to the railway-station all the luggage belonging to the Linton Hall party that could be sent on by train; and then—hurrah! Here came the powerful six-seater that was to take most of the girls on their glorious cross-country journey by road.

Mrs. Linton and her son Jack were with the car, Jack being at the wheel, as Polly had predicted would be the case.

Mrs. Linton had sat with her son all

the way to the school, but it was just like her to want to settle down amongst the happy girls who now had to squeeze into the body of the car.

So behold her, in a few minutes chatting vivaciously with Tess, Trixie, Paula, and Dolly, whilst Madge Minden had her seat at Jack Linton's side, after all!

"Ta-ta for the present!" Betty and Polly cried gaily, when the car was ready to glide away. "We shan't be long after you."

And then, as the six-seater with its seven passengers and lots of luggage moved off, Polly ran beside it a little way, to cry a last teasing remark to the long-suffering Paula.

"Paula, your hat isn't straight!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Now for Linton Hall, ladies! Now for the trip!" Jack Linton bellowed, as if he were the driver of a seaside charabanc.

"Half-price, children!"

"How frivolous he is!" sighed Paula, lolling back upon the cushioned seat, and trying to get her hat to rights.

Jack was more than frivolous to-day. He was given up completely to the holiday spirit—to the joyous task of ensuring for his sister's chums a glorious revel, from this very moment, when they were taking their last sight of Moreove School, until the day should come for their return to class-room and study.

All the same, no one could have been more careful than was Jack over the task of driving the powerful car.

"Hallo! Look!" cried Tess, as another car went by. "That is Pearl Hartry, going to pick up Betty and Polly. Coo-ee, Pearl, Coo-ee!"

Pearl, without looking round, waved a hand, and next moment she was turning the car very carefully through the school gateway.

Up the drive the motor hummed, to be received at the porch with waves of the hand and cries of delight from Betty and Polly.

What luggage had not been sent on in the carrier's cart, to go by train, was soon stowed on board. The Form-captain and her bosom chum said a few last affectionate good-byes to those friends who happened to be standing around, and away they went.

Only then did Betty and Polly realise the genuine delight they had shown when Pearl turned up with the car.

Considering the many sinister happenings which had given the two girls cause for feeling ill-at-ease about this friend of theirs, they had been rather dreading to-day's meeting with her. Far into the night had they lain awake, puzzling over the mystery of the warning message that had come to Betty, and the added mystery of that girl in native dress seen yesterday at the house on the Barncombe road.

The fact was, however, all the excitement and gaiety of breaking-up day had banished, for the time being, Betty and Polly's misgivings about Pearl Hartry.

But now that they themselves had begun their journey—a journey they were to make with only Pearl for a companion—their spirits soon gave out.

Sitting together at the back of the open four-seater, with Pearl always before their eyes as she sat in the front seat, handling the steering-wheel, both Betty and Polly fell a prey to all their former misgivings.

It was a chance to study Pearl very closely, and study her they did!

To see her now, as she was reclining gracefully in the driver's seat, was to think how exceedingly nice she looked—just a charming specimen of British girlhood, fond of the open road and of all those pleasures which appeal to young people.

How nicely, too, was she dressed—not grandly, but in just that manner which suggests ample means of indulging good taste. She and her father must be well off, Betty and Polly were thinking. They were surely people of good standing.

Suddenly, as the car was bowling along at a comfortable eighteen miles an hour, Betty chanced to meet Polly's eye.

That eye of Polly's was usually a roguish one. At this moment its glance was grave enough.

"What do you make of it all, Betty?" the madcap of the Fourth Form was plainly asking by her sober expression; and for the moment Betty could only shake her head.

"I know one thing," the Form-captain spoke into Polly's ear presently. "At the first opportunity I am going to ask Pearl about that Susahlah girl who was at the house yesterday!"

"You'll ask her if she is Rose of the Desert?"

"Yes."

The answer met with Polly's full approval. She nodded.

"It's a puzzler, and no mistake, Betty!"

whispered the madcap, a minute later. "Every time I look at Pearl I feel we must be doing her a cruel injustice. How can a face so innocent go hand-in-hand with deception?"

"Notice one thing, though," Betty answered uneasily. "She is not driving quite as coolly as one might have expected her to. She is not at ease, Polly, any more than we are!"

Then Polly took another long look at the girl sitting in the front seat of the car.

Yes! Betty, shrewd girl, was right! Now that Polly's attention had been drawn to the fact, she noticed that Pearl Hartry was just a little flustered.

And yet yesterday she had spoken as if the driving of this car was a mere matter of habit to her!

Polly began to reason things out in the same way that her chum had already done.

It was not the handling of the car that was troubling Pearl Hartry. If she was a trifle flustered now and then it was because she was worried—because something was on her mind!

She knew that the moment was to come, at Linton Hall—at the end of the journey, most likely—when Betty and Polly would want to know who that mute figure was on the veranda at her father's house. And she was puzzling, worrying over the answer she was to make to her schoolgirl friends.

Schoolgirl friends?

The thought running in the minds of Betty and Polly by now was this: Were they not, perhaps, only Pearl Hartry's schoolgirl dupes?

On and on sped the car, following a main road so well sign-posted that Pearl, a stranger to the district, never had need to stop for a moment to ask advice from her fellow-passengers.

Then came a stage of the journey that Betty and Polly knew was going to be most enchanting.

They had to turn off the main road that wound its way through the valleys, and follow a byway that would take them over one huge Devonshire hill after another.

At the summit of the first hill the school-girls' expectations were fully realised.

A most magnificent view suddenly opened out before them.

Whichever way they looked, they saw miles of undulating country spread below, all dressed in the glory of springtime.

Suddenly the car jolted to a standstill,

and the schoolgirls thought that Pearl had pulled up on purpose to take a look at the wonderful scene. But they were wrong.

"Sorry!" she looked round to say, with a forced smile and a flustered look. "I wasn't thinking what I was doing!"

Before Betty or Polly could speak, the girl motorist had sent the car speeding forward again, thus showing no desire to pause there to admire the scenery.

The car gave a violent bound forward, and Betty and Polly bounced in their seats, flopping back almost heart in mouth as they found the motor dashing on like a runaway.

"Steady, Pearl—steady!" cried out Betty, with execrable dismay. For the road was very narrow, and it now ran steeply down hill.

"My goodness!" was Polly's still more excited cry of alarm. "She'll have us over, Betty! She—Oh, look out!"

There was a scream of sheer terror from Polly.

The car really had got out of control, and now it was running swiftly downhill.

For a few moments the headlong rush was accompanied by the mad roaring of the engines. Then Pearl managed to throttle them down. But she needed to do more than that if the downhill race was to be checked.

"The brakes—the brakes!" Betty implored her.

Even as that wild cry followed the silencing of the engines, one of the front wheels of the swerving car struck an obstacle just beside the road.

The entire vehicle gave a leap, then dropped back on to the roadway, and as it did this Pearl Hartry was flung out.

How they managed to keep their wits about them during such awful moments as these neither Betty nor Polly ever knew.

Before their horror-stricken eyes they saw the girl motorist jolted clean out of her seat by that violent impact; and then—

There she was, hanging on to the car's side by only one hand, whilst the vehicle still rushed on downhill, swaying this way and that!

The poor girl's feet were trailing in the dust; her position was fraught with direst peril.

If she still held on without receiving help she was bound to be maimed and broken. If she let go she might either be run over by the rear wheels or might be sent spinning down the rocky bank beside the road.

But keep their wits the schoolgirls did—and well for Pearl Hartry that this was so.

In a flash Betty, for one, was reaching over and trying to apply the brakes of the runaway car, whilst Polly, who was nearer to the dangling girl, reached out and over to clutch at her.

Not a moment too soon!

Already the strain of holding on had been too much for Pearl.

Her hand relaxed its grasp, and she must have fallen—perhaps to her very death—but Polly had her, and held on to her desperately.

There followed a moment or two whilst Pearl, only saved from such dreadful danger by Polly's resolute courage, looked up into that girl's white face with agonised yet grateful eyes.

Pearl must have known just then that her own weight was enough to pull Polly out of the car also, and that Polly was without a single thought for anything that might happen to herself.

Then Betty, with her slight understanding of the car's mechanism, managed to jam on the brakes.

With a prolonged screech of the wheels, the runaway car was brought to a standstill, all askew on the narrow roadway, its front wheels within only a foot or so of the precipitous edge of the track.

All three girls remained for a few seconds quite still, simply gasping for breath. Then Betty pulled herself together and hastened to help her chum pull Pearl to safety.

Shaking from head to foot, that white-faced girl clambered back at last.

She sank into the seat she had previously occupied, and looked like swooning away. But in a little while just a spot of colour crept back into her ashen cheeks. She drew a few more unsteady breaths, and spoke.

"Thank you!" she panted feebly. "Thank you ever so much! I think—if it had not been for your presence of mind—the bravery you showed—I would have been killed!"

"How did it happen?" Polly exclaimed in her agitation.

"You mean my losing control of the car?" Pearl returned. She became as white as ever again. "I—I have not been quite myself ever since we started," she confessed. "When one is driving, one needs to think about nothing else; and I—I—"

"You have something on your mind?"

Betty said, with one of her direct looks. "What is it?"

Pearl's eyes wavered and fell away.

"That is what I cannot tell you," she answered at last. "Let us go on again—if we can. After this, I promise you I shall go very slowly, and will not think about anything else but the driving."

After some fiddling with the mechanism of the brakes, which could not have been quite in order at the start, the three girls resumed the journey, and Pearl certainly drove very slowly.

Watching her, however, Betty and Polly could not help believing that she was as much flustered in her mind as ever.

Up to the moment of the mishap she had been thinking about the desperate deed which was to be committed during her stay at Linton Hall. And now—now she was wondering whether she would ever have the nerve, the heartlessness to do it!

These schoolgirl dupes of hers—they had as good as saved her life just now.

No question about that. If it had not been for their presence of mind, their unselfish thought for her own safety at a time when they themselves were imperilled, she might easily have been killed.

And in all this there was something that had suddenly appealed to Pearl Hartry's better nature.

These girls—they had saved her life. Was she, then, to repay them in such a fashion as that? Not only go on sailing under false colours, pretending she was a friend when all the time she was merely her father's confederate, but—

There, at Linton Hall, in the very home of one of these girls who had been so brave just now, she, Pearl Hartry, was to commit a theft!

But could she do it—now?

So, as the car throbbled smoothly on its way, bringing her and her fellow-travellers mile upon mile nearer to the journey's end, these distracting thoughts still beset her.

How could she be so mean, so ungrateful, so contemptible, as to carry out the shameful deed, after what had happened to-day?

Her father—would he still want her to do it, if she told him?

Yes, he would!

She was sure that he would be deeply thankful that she had escaped unharmed, for he was passionately fond of her. At the same time, she could not help realising

that these scruples which were suddenly troubling her would never trouble him.

To him, Betty and Polly were no more than mere pawns in the game he was playing. To her, now, they were girls whom she admired—girls whose friendship she longed to deserve from this moment onwards!

Their friendship! If only she could so right herself in her own eyes, as to feel no shame in being with the girls! Their friendship—oh, what a priceless possession it would surely be, if only she could win it honestly! A thing far, far better than all the gold of that wonderful El Dorado, which was the prize she and her father were out to win.

She brought her mind back to the management of the car, as it swung on along the quiet road. But in a few moments the train of thought had started again.

And what was it that a voice within her seemed to be whispering now?

"You will be rich if you do the deed that has been contemplated. But—will you ever be happy?"

CHAPTER 10.

The Unknown Guest.

LINTON HALL, Polly Linton's spacious Devonshire home, was in a state of riotous revelry this evening.

Ever since dinner the houseful of Easter guests had hardly allowed a moment's lull in all the laughing and chatter. There had been the most merciless teasing of Paula Creel; there had been piano-playing of the most brilliant kind by Madge Minden; and how the girls had joined in the choruses of those swinging songs started by Mr. Linton and Polly's brother Jack.

It was Jack Linton who returned to the boisterous scene, watch in hand, just as ten o'clock was being chimed out in the hall.

"Here, do you young ladies know the giddy time?" cried Jack. "It's time all good little girls should go to by-byes!"

A sort of howl of derision greeted this remark.

"I wouldn't mind your staying up, if only you would make less row," Jack complained jestingly. "But all this chatter and singing and larking about—

I'm not used to it! My nerves won't stand it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You to complain!" retorted Polly, making an affectionate lunge at Jack with a billiard cue. The cue was one Polly had been using to beat time with during the singing!

"What about our nerves, girls?" laughed Polly, appealing to her chums. "Haven't we suffered the most awful agony, listening to Jack trying to struggle through 'Annie Laurie'?"

"My hat, I like that!" protested Jack. "Why, I was doing famously—only, of course, if a lot of girls start trying to sing a chorus, what can a fellow do?"

"Weal, theah," interposed Paula Creel soothingly, as she reclined in the most comfortable easy-chair. "All I can say is, geals, we have had a wipping start to our holiday—yes, wather!"

"Hear, hear!" agreed the rest; and there was no flippancy in their voices this time.

Their first evening at Linton Hall really had been most delightful, and they meant Mr. and Mrs. Linton to know it.

"Well, of course, I was only kidding," said Jack, getting up from the armchair into which he had squeezed, along with Polly.

He crossed to the piano.

"Ten o'clock—it's early yet! I wonder if Madge feels like giving us another bit of music?"

"Oh, gracious!" dissented Madge. "No, Jack, I simply refuse!"

"I might give you a tune on the joanner myself," he said. "I can play quite nicely, one finger—listen!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Of course," said Jack, still beating out the tune with one finger, "if you all laugh, you won't get the full beauty of it. You don't like it—eh?"

"Help—stop!" appealed the girls, hands at ears.

"Then I know what," he said. "Let us see if we can get Miss Hartry to play. Miss Hartry—"

Pearl seemed to come to herself with a start as the high-spirited lad crossed the room to where she was sitting in a remote corner.

"I wonder if you would give the company a sample of your playing?" Jack

said, seating himself beside her for the moment.

"Oh, no, I can't play—at least, not to-night!" Pearl said.

It was the sort of phrase girls often use when they really only want to be pressed still more to play. But Jack, for all his nonsensical mood, had his keen wits about him. He divined that this young lady really was in no "company" mood.

"I say, I hope you are enjoying yourself," he said earnestly. "I do hope you feel quite at home amongst us all?"

She looked a little flustered then.

"You think I am a wet blanket?"

"Oh, no! But—forgive me!—I've been watching you now and then," he said, with engaging frankness. "And I've caught you looking just a bit grave."

"I can tell you this," she answered, after lowering her eyes for a moment, "everybody's friendliness and kindness is so wonderful, I just feel—overwhelmed. I—I—"

She stood up, and of course he immediately rose.

"There, don't bother about me, please!" she entreated, with one of her adorable smiles. "Yours is the same holiday mood that all the girls are in, and it is a shame for me to put a damper on the fun."

"So long as you are really enjoying yourself, in a quiet way—"

"Oh, yes, yes!" she assured him hastily; and so Jack drifted away, to make himself agreeable to his sister's chums.

But during the moment or so he had been talking with Pearl, Betty and Co. had suddenly decided that it really was time they all went to bed.

Their journey by car from Morcove School to Linton Hall had made them pleasantly tired, and they all wanted to be in great form to-morrow. So the fun and merriment suddenly gave place to a round of "good-nights" Mrs. Linton bestowing a loving kiss upon each girl who came up to her, looking bright-eyed and rosy-checked after the evening's gaiety.

"Where's dad?" cried Polly. "I must say good-night to dad!"

"Yes, wather!" agreed Paula, whilst Betty and the rest murmured to the same effect.

They all loved Mr. Linton, who had helped as much as his own light-hearted son to make the first evening such a suc-

cess. But he had been called away from the room a few minutes since, and now the girls discovered that he must be hunted out of his study.

"I'll show you!" Polly cried, whirling across the hall to the closed door of her father's snuggery. She gave the panel a hefty thump, crying:

"We are going up, dad! And we want to say good-night!"

"Right-ho! Walk in!" was the genial shout from inside the room; and next moment all the girls—Pearl Hartry included—were creeping into the study.

"Half a sec.!" requested Mr. Linton, busy at his desk putting some books together. "I must just put these things away for the night, and close the safe. Then I'm done. Any of you young ladies got anything for safe custody?" he jested, preparing to close the safe-door. "Pearl necklaces, Kohinoor diamonds, or what-not? If so, dump them in the safe."

"What about Paula's frocks?" grinned Jack. "Paula, you had better deposit them for safe custody, you know!"

"I'm afraid there wouldn't be room!" laughed Mr. Linton. "The safe is pretty full up, isn't it? I get such lots of odds and ends people ask me to mind for them, knowing I have a safe."

Pearl Hartry spoke from the back-ground.

"I suppose it is a very good safe, Mr. Linton—quite fireproof?"

"Yes—and burglar proof," Mr. Linton said, closing the massive door.

It did not clang, but closed with a soft "whoo-oo!" and not a sound came as Mr. Linton turned the big brass knob.

"Now," he looked round upon the girls to say, with a chuckle, "I have not locked it, have I? One of you try to open it!"

Pess tried, but the door was just as if it had been locked fast with a key.

"How extraordinary!" murmured the girls.

"How is it done?" Pearl Hartry asked, in an off-hand way.

"Aha, that's the secret!" said Mr. Linton. "But as you are all so interested, I'll tell you. The safe has a word lock. That is to say, the lock is set to work only when a certain word of four letters is put together on the dial. Here is the dial." He went on drawing their attention to it.

"You girls can see four letters that mean nothing."

"O-R-S-A," read out Madge Linton. "whilst the letters are in that order the safe will not open?"

Mr. Linton nodded.

"Now look!" he went on, enjoying the girls' amazement. "I change the dial so that the letters run in this order—R-O-S-A—"

"Rosa!" exclaimed Pearl Hartry. "A girl's name—and that is the word the lock is set to?"

"Quite right," Mr. Linton answered. "Try the knob this time."

Madge did so, and the safe opened easily.

"Wonderful!" was the girls' comment. "Yes, wather!"

"I suppose I ought to change the word, after telling you what it was, but I can't be bothered to-night," laughed Mr. Linton. "It is hardly likely that any of you want to play burglar with your host!"

"So that ends the entertainment, thanking you one and all for your kind attention!" Jack said flippantly. "The next item on the holiday programme will be a cricket-match to-morrow—Morcove versus dad, Miss Hartry, and myself!"

"Done!" accepted Polly and Co. promptly; and they went up to their rooms talking of the smashing defeat they would give their opponents in the morning.

Cheery Jack followed a few minutes later, whistling blithely as he slammed his bedroom door for the night. Mr. and Mrs. Linton also retired, having seen the servants go up a minute previously, and then all was silence and darkness down below.

Audible enough now was the ponderous tick-tock of the old grandfather clock in the hall. The house stood in its own spacious grounds, out in the heart of the lonely country, and not a sound came from the outside world. Within doors a listener might have hearkened for an hour or more without hearing anything save the tick-tock of the clock, unless it was the faint scamper of a mouse in the wainscot now and then.

But, towards midnight, what must such a listener have surely heard, down here in the book-crammed room which was Mr. Linton's snuggery—the very room where he had amused the girls, a while ago, by explaining the working of the safe's lock?

A subdued scuffling sound inside a corner

cupboard—such was the first noise that was audible.

Followed the creak-creak of little-used hinges, as the door of that cupboard was suddenly pushed outwards.

By now a little moonlight was flooding into the room. It suddenly shimmered upon the figure that was stealing forth from the cupboard, where it had been in hiding—how long?

And that figure—once again, what a strange one it was to be lurking in secret in an ordinary country mansion, in the heart of civilised England!

The mystic-looking form of Rose of the Desert!

Like a thief in the night she moved out into the centre of the room, and then stood very still, listening.

Who, indeed, suddenly surprising the native girl in such a place as this, would have doubted that robbery was the motive for her being here?

She was even looking towards the safe, as if her purpose was to open it and rifle it.

And yet—

No greater injustice could Rose of the Desert have suffered than to have been suspected of wanting to steal. Nothing would have grieved her more than to find herself so suspected—she, Rose of the Desert, with her great sense of honour, her loathing for all that was mercenary and base!

With a hand to her ear, she listened yet a few moments longer.

Not a sound in the great house, save the steady tick-tock of the clock.

Suddenly nodding to herself, as if she was thinking "It is safe to venture!" she crept nearer to the safe. Another moment, and the moonlight showed her examining the dial of the word-lock.

Then she put out one hand, surely intending to set the four jumbled letters into the right order for causing the lock to work.

As she did so, something happened to make her start violently, as if stung.

There was a sound at last—the creaking of a board on the staircase leading down into the hall!

In a flash Rose of the Desert was across the room and back inside the cupboard.

Her small hands clawed the door shut, and after that she stood as still as a statue inside the cupboard, waiting, listening, wondering—whose was the footfall that she had heard just now?

CHAPTER 11.

Outwitted.

AT that moment, out on the moonlit staircase leading down into the hall, Pearl Hartry was also standing quite still—listening.

She had heard a sound—or, at least, she thought there had come a faint sound just then from Mr. Linton's snuggery.

Was it a false alarm? Or had Polly's father come down to the study at this late hour?

She could not be sure, and whilst there was this uncertainty she felt it would be madness to go a step further. So, treading as softly as possible with her slippers on feet, and taking care to avoid the board that had creaked, she returned upstairs.

She closed the door without a sound, then sat down on the edge of her bed.

Presently, she was saying to herself, she would try again.

For she was going to get that paper from the safe—the native plan of the Susahlah goldfield, which Jack Somerfield had entrusted to Mr. Linton for safe keeping.

Gone were the scruples that had suddenly troubled her after that thrilling adventure with Betty and Polly in the runaway car.

Only for a little while had she felt conscience stricken over the plot to get hold of the paper.

This evening, as a guest at Linton Hall, she had found herself surrounded with the luxury and refinement which wealth commands. And so all the old longing for personal wealth had been aroused in her.

She, and dad—they could be as rich as these Lintons; they could be—oh, far, far richer, simply by getting hold of that document now lying in Mr. Linton's safe!

So she said to herself—and was it a wonder if the greed for gold had so soon conquered the scruples that troubled her?

She was the daughter of a cynical, self-seeking man. She had grown up under his influence, had been taught by him to dread poverty and desire riches.

Poor Pearl Hartry—for indeed she was to be pitied! What a tragedy for her that her mother had been taken when she herself was but a little child!

Slowly the minutes crept by, with Pearl still sitting there on the edge of her bed, a hard look in her gleaming eyes. She heard the clock downstairs strike half-past twelve, and still she waited.

She neither heard Polly's father come upstairs, nor heard such sounds as would have warned her that he was still busy in the study.

In the moonlight she glanced at her wrist-watch. The illuminated dial told her that the time was now one o'clock.

Opening the bed-room door cautiously, she crept along to the staircase, and once again she was careful to avoid the stair that had creaked on her first stealthy venture.

So, step by step, she came to the study door. No; not a sound to be heard, even now!

She turned the handle of the lock, and opened the door an inch or two.

Brighter than ever was the moonlight, and it showed her a deserted room.

All of a tremble with nervous excitement, she stepped inside, shut the door swiftly, then crossed to the safe.

Swiftly her fingers juggled with the letters of the lock, forming the word "ROSA."

Then she turned the knob, and the safe-door swung open with that soft, sighing sound.

Two minutes later she was closing the safe and altering the four letters back to their previous formula.

When this was done, she switched on the electric torch which had been brought into play once or twice during her search for the coveted paper. Holding this torch in her right hand, she shone its beam of light upon a large, unsealed envelope which she was clutching with her other hand.

There was an endorsement in very bold handwriting upon the envelope, and this was it:

"Native Plan of the Susahlah Goldfield, handed to me for safe custody by Jack Somerfield."

This memorandum had been written by Mr. Linton on the envelope at the time he placed the strange document in the envelope, so that, in going through the contents of the safe on any future occasion, he would not need to take out the document to see which one it was.

Pearl's covetous hand toyed with the stout envelope. But she held her curiosity in check. Let her first of all get back safely to her own room, and then—How she would gloat over it, thinking of what it meant to her and her father!

Fabulous wealth! Riches beyond the dreams of avarice!

One last look round the study, then she switched out the torch and stole from the room. Still not a sound as she mounted the staircase. Every soul in the house but she was sound asleep. Mr. and Mrs. Linton, the son, those girls from Morcove School—fast asleep, all of them, and little dreaming of what she had been up to since she wished them all good-night!

Safely back in her bed-room at last, and with the door locked for caution's sake, she lit a candle and set it on her dressing-table.

Then, whilst her handsome face betrayed her sense of triumph, she opened the un-gummed flap of the envelope and drew out what was inside.

She had expected to find a parchment document, and was surprised when she drew forth a sheet of ordinary foolscap.

"It must be a copy," she thought to herself, starting to unfold the sheet of paper. "Jack Somerfield must have made a copy of the original document, in case——"

And there her thoughts were thrown into sudden utter chaos, whilst her jaw dropped in bewilderment and dismay.

She was not looking at any plan at all. She was staring, staring at a perfectly blank sheet of paper!

CHAPTER 12.

Where is the Plan?

BAULKED!

She knew that somebody, by some means or other, had outwitted her to-night. And that meant that somebody had known what she intended to do!

There in her candle-lit bed-room, this girl who never had the chance to become anything better than her father's accomplice looked about her wild-eyed, like a hunted felon.

Someone knew!

She had felt sure that not a soul suspected her of any nefarious intention in getting herself invited to this house for Easter; but she had been mistaken.

All along there must have been someone who knew exactly what her motive was in becoming friendly with the schoolgirls and

thereby winning the invitation to Linton Hall.

Not Mr. Linton himself—no! Not Mrs. Linton, either, or Jack Linton. So Pearl decided at once. It must be one or more of the schoolgirls, was her swift deduction. Betty and Polly, most likely, had found out the whole plot between them. Polly very likely knew that her father was taking care of the paper for Jack Somerfield, and Betty's suspicions had been aroused in many ways.

She passed a hand across her forehead.

"Oh, how mad father will be about this!" her crazy thoughts ran on. "Knowing that I meant to get hold of the paper, those girls must have slipped down to the safe in advance of me, and substituted a mere blank sheet of paper for the native plan. They have beaten us! Mere schoolgirls, and yet they have baulked us!"

And now—what was she to do now?

It was a question that had only one answer.

She must flee the house at once!

Vividly her panic-stricken mind pictured what the morning had in store for her if she remained beneath the roof of Linton Hall. She would be denounced!

A trap had been set for her, and she had fallen into it.

No use trying to deny everything! It could be proved that she had visited the safe and taken away an envelope from which the vital document had been removed. Unless she fled the house before morning came she would be given into custody!

With these terrifying thoughts to spur her on, she set about her preparations for flight.

Hurriedly she put on her outdoor things and gathered together the few personal articles that were of value. The rest of her belongings she decided to leave behind.

In a few minutes she was again creeping down the stairs—this time to make for a back way out of the house.

The car in which she had travelled to Linton Hall with Betty and Polly—Pearl called it her father's car, but it was only a hired one—had been garaged for the night in an open coach-house. Once out of the house, she could easily find her way to the car and drive off, making for a certain village five miles away.

There she knew she would find her father. For, although Betty and Polly

knew nothing of this, Pearl's father had left the house on the Barncombe road at the same time that she drove away in the car to pick up the schoolgirls.

He had travelled by train to a village that was only five miles from Linton Hall, so as to be within easy reach of Pearl if she should want to get in touch with him.

The back door at last! With a sharp breath of relief Pearl let herself out into the grounds, drew the door shut behind her, and then started to change out of her felt slippers into the boots she had been carrying.

Suddenly her heart gave a violent leap of alarm.

The knob of the door behind her had rattled faintly, as if it were being turned on the inner side by someone who intended to steal out into the grounds, just as she herself had done only a few moments since!

No time for flight!

In between a couple of tall firs she darted, and crouched down. She was wearing dark things. With a bit of luck she might be unobserved.

Then—slowly, silently—the back door of the house was opened, and a figure stole out into the open.

There was a moment or so whilst Pearl's sudden change from wild alarm to utter bewilderment left her with reeling senses.

Then complete understanding came to her.

She was no longer the terror-stricken culprit evading observation.

She straightened up and stepped boldly from her hiding-place.

"You!" she hissed fiercely. "You!"

For it was Rose of the Desert.

CHAPTER 13.

A Girl to Reckon With.

PEARL HARRY had been encouraged by her father always to speak to this native as if she were a mere slave. But never yet had Pearl assumed such a domineering manner as she did at this moment.

"How dare you, Rose of the Desert?" Pearl said fiercely. "You have disobeyed me in the grossest manner! Who told you to come to Linton Hall, even as my personal attendant? And you have come in secret—in secret!"

Rose of the Desert did not answer. She drew herself up, as if conscious of having done what she had for a worthy motive, be the consequences what they might.

"You must have left the house on the Barncombe road as soon as my father and I turned our backs!" Pearl went on fiercely. "The moment we were gone you took train to the nearest railway-station for this house—and why—why?"

This time there was no opportunity for Rose of the Desert to reply, even if she were disposed to.

"I know—oh, I see what it all means!" Pearl rushed on passionately. "It is you who have baulked me to-night! You pried and spied until you found out why I was coming to Linton Hall—and then you made up your mind to thwart me!"

The look of baffled rage in Pearl's handsome face was terrible to see.

"Very well, Rose of the Desert!" she said, in a tense whisper that quivered with the anger raging in her. "Now, pay heed to what I tell you. To-night you have been to that safe and substituted a plain sheet of paper for a certain document. Where is that original document?"

"I shall not tell you," Rose of the Desert said calmly.

"You shall—you shall tell me! I'll make you give it up to me!" Pearl stormed at her, almost forgetting to keep her voice low enough to avoid awakening any of the inmates of the house. "I am not to be trifled with, Rose of the Desert! You will let me have that paper, and promise never to say a word about what you know, or—"

"Your threats, O daughter of cunning and deceit, are nothing to me," Rose of the Desert broke in, with that sublime courage which was one of the fine qualities the Morcove girls had learned to respect her for.

"Oh, is that so?" Pearl retorted, sneering. "You mean to say you don't care a scrap if I tell my father, and he in turn reports all this to the Sultan of Susahlah? Rose of the Desert, be careful! Remember, the Sultan himself is bent on my father getting possession of that paper! It means wealth for him, as well as wealth for us!"

"That I cannot help," Rose of the Desert answered sadly. "Well I know what it is for any member of my race to incur the Sultan's own displeasure. Have I not seen

with my own eyes the dungeon of Susahlah, in which prisoners moan their lives away in chains?"

"Well, then, beware lest you yourself meet with such a fate!"

"Such a fate I am ready to risk—yes, gladly," Rose of the Desert answered spiritedly, "over this matter. For—hearken to me, O fair one with the false heart! The paper that you covet is one that belongs to the man Somerfield—"

"What difference does that make?" Pearl flashed impatiently.

"Little difference to you," was the cold retort; "but to me, whose life was saved, long years ago, by that very man, when he was exploring the secret lands of Susahlah in disguise—to me it means everything! The man Somerfield is one I will not see robbed! He is a man for whom I would give my own life—yes, gladly would I give it—if by so doing I could serve him."

"Bah!" Pearl snapped, stamping a foot. "What romantic nonsense it all is! But I am going to have that paper, anyhow! You must have it on you now, Rose of the Desert, meaning to send it to Somerfield when you find out where he is. Give it to me—"

"Nay—"

"This instant!"

"Nay!" Rose of the Desert repeated firmly. "Never, never shall that chart of the desert fall into your hands or your father's! I have saved it from thy thieving grasp to-night; I will guard it somehow until—"

The rest was never said.

In a sudden paroxysm of rage, Pearl made a rush at the girl, meaning to overpower her and thus get possession of the paper. They struggled for a few moments, fiercely, yet silently, and then the strength and adroitness of the native girl proved too much for Pearl.

Pearl was almost thrown off her balance by a violent push, whilst Rose of the Desert turned and sped away—a ghostly figure, in her native raiment, vanishing swiftly and silently into the darkness!

Pearl steadied up, and for a full minute after that she stood with a clenched hand at her forehead, breathing fast and furiously. The girl was gone, and only too well Pearl knew that any attempt to pursue such an agile fugitive would be futile.

What, then, was to be done now?

Was it all over with the hope of getting that paper, and was there nothing else for her to do but to carry out her intended flight from Linton Hall?

She saw at once that there was no need for flight at all. It was Rose of the Desert who had balked her. As for the inmates of Linton Hall—they still knew nothing. Nor would Mr. Linton miss the envelope from the safe in the morning, for she, Pearl, had found it tied up with some other documents which apparently he hardly ever consulted.

In other words, there was no apparent reason whatever why she should not continue her stay at Linton Hall as an Easter guest.

"And it may be," she said to herself, with returning hope, "it may be that, by still keeping my eye on the schoolgirls, I shall beat Rose of the Desert in the end! She will never return to me. From this moment she is going to be all alone and helpless in a land that is strange to her. Loneliness and the need for help will make her turn to those girls for aid!"

It was a bit of cute reasoning that left Pearl nodding to herself confidently. Replacing the felt slippers on her feet, she went warily to the house door, opened it, and crept into the dark passage.

All went well with her on her way up the thickly-carpeted stairs. She had said good-bye to every fear of being caught moving about the house, fully dressed as for a journey, at this time of night, when—

Without an instant's warning, she found herself face to face with a girl in a dressing-gown.

It was Betty Barton.

"Oh!" Betty exclaimed, falling back a step as the two confronted each other. "What a surprise you gave me! Pearl Hartry, isn't it? But—"

"What's the matter?" Pearl jerked out in a suppressed tone. "Why are you out of your bed, Betty?"

"Why are you?" was the blunt retort. "I woke up suddenly just now, feeling sure that something was happening downstairs. And at last I made up my mind to have a look round. But it was only you, Pearl—"

"Only me, yes," Pearl Hartry said, as calmly as she could. "I had to go downstairs—"

"But you are fully dressed!"

"If you would please let me explain," Pearl exclaimed, rather icily. "I haven't been to sleep yet—I am always a bad hand at getting to sleep in a strange house. And I suddenly remembered I had left the water in the radiator of the motor-car."

"Well?"

"It should have been drained off," Pearl continued. "Even as late as Easter you get sharp frosts towards morning in this country—so I was told, anyhow. If the water should freeze any time it would burst the radiator."

"And so you have been out to the car to drain the water off?" said Betty. "I see! Well, I am glad to find it was only you, Pearl, and not a thief."

"Good-night once again," Pearl said softly, turning into her own room.

"Good-night," responded Betty, gliding off down the corridor. "I hope you will get to sleep all right now."

"I think I shall," said Pearl.

But, far from getting to sleep as soon as she was alone in her bed-room, Pearl Hartry never even laid herself down to seek repose.

She was peering down into the vast garden, with its patches of moonlight and shadows, as if she hoped that her glinting eyes might by chance detect some ghostly figure loitering there.

"Gone—she is really gone!" Pearl had to conclude at last ruefully. "And what will her next step be?"

Pondering that problem, it seemed to the baffled schemer that the native girl was not a bit likely to bring the chart to Mr. Linton and tell him how she had come by it.

"Fearless though she is in so many ways," Pearl reflected darkly, "Rose of the Desert is yet as timid as a wild creature when it comes to approaching white people who are total strangers to her. No; what she is far more likely to do is to get into touch with the schoolgirls. For they are the only people she knows in this country, where all is so strange to her. And those girls—"

Pearl's handsome face suddenly lost its expression of despair.

"Yes!" she exclaimed to herself, whilst a faint smile even flickered at her lips. "I have that thought to comfort me! Those simple schoolgirls are as much my dupes as ever!"

CHAPTER 14.

Surprise on Surprise.

BETTY BARTON came swiftly into the breakfast-room at Linton Hall, crying:

"Good-morning, Mrs. Linton! Morning, everybody!"

"You are late, young lady!" said Jack Linton, with mock severity. "Tuppence in the hospital-box, Betty!"

The captain of the Fourth Form at Morcove School laughed, whilst Jack jumped up to get the hospital-box from an odd corner and dump it in the middle of the long table, around which sat quite a big gathering of guests for Easter.

"Oh, we'll let Betty off this time, Jack!" said sister Polly. "It was my fault for not waking her."

But Betty slipped a sixpence in the hospital-box, then took her seat at the happy table.

"Well," Mrs. Linton smiled at her, passing the girl's cup, "what does it all mean, Betty? Didn't you get to sleep properly last night?"

"Oh, like a top!" Betty answered gaily. "Only I woke up once, and—and— Thanks, Jack!" as that attentive young man passed the mustard.

And that was all Betty had to say just then.

"Look at it! Look at the jolly sunshine!" exclaimed Polly exuberantly. "Let's see— to-day is Thursday. And what is the programme? Oh, of course—"

"Cricket!" struck in Madge Minton, darting a roguish glance at Jack. "Morcove versus Mr. and Mrs. Linton, Jack, and Pearl Hartry!"

"You think you'll beat us, do you?" said Jack patronisingly.

"Beat you!" said his sister Polly, scathingly. "We'll beat you to a frazzle. Only wait until we put Paula Creel on to bowl and then—"

"Oh, weally, Polly!" protested Paula. "Howevah can you suggest such a thing, when you know that I am the gweatest duffer at cwicket! I don't mind scowwing for you, howevah, if you'll kindly explain the intwicacies of the scowwing-book! At what time pwecisely does this gweat match commence? I pwesumg one must dwess for it?"

Then poor Paula found another ripple of laughter going round the table. So like

the swell girl of the Fourth Form, to think she must be "just so" for the match!

The game, of course, was only going to be a bit of fun—a mere out-of-season farce with bat and ball, on the Linton Hall lawns, and with only a couple of gardeners for possible onlookers. But it was fairly certain Paula would have to "change" for the event—and so it proved!

Breakfast over, Jack Linton went off, whistling, to rout out the cricketing tackle. Mr. and Mrs. Linton had various matters to attend to for an hour or so, and thus the girls were left to themselves.

It was almost inevitable that Madge should drift to the piano, just to keep her hand in at a few of her beloved rhapsodies and sonatas. Paula vanished, and was probably to be found upstairs, searching for sportive-looking flannels amongst her pile of frocks.

Tess Trelawney had brought her water-colours with her from the school. In a few minutes she was settled on the terrace, making a very fine sketch of the scene that lay before her; whilst Trixie Hope sat perched on the stone balustrade, making exclamations in bad French about the beauty of the day and the glorious surroundings.

"We never had a better holiday, jamais, jamais—never, never!" she exclaimed rapturously for nearly the twentieth time.

"Jammy, jammy!" agreed Polly Linton flippantly, coming along the terrace with Betty and Dolly. "Exercise three-nine-one! Have you seen the gardener's penknife?"

"Have you seen Pearl Hartry? That's more to the point," said Betty, looking about her with a gravity which seemed rather ill-timed. "She slipped away directly we got up from breakfast, and I haven't seen her since."

"How quiet she was at breakfast, too!" commented Dolly Delane, standing behind Tess to watch the progress of the water-colour sketch.

"Yes," said Polly, "I noticed that. She tells the mater she is really enjoying the visit; but—"

"Sh! There is Pearl! Take care she doesn't hear you!" cautioned Betty suddenly.

For Pearl Hartry, having emerged from the open French windows, was crossing the terrace to pass down the steps, only a dozen paces from where the girls were grouped.

She looked towards them, and waved; but

somehow Betty and Polly had the feeling that she did not want them to join her.

At first there was a directness in her steps, as if she intended to go straight to a certain part of the spacious grounds. In a few moments, however, she dropped to a loiter, and finally drifted in the most aimless fashion towards one of the shrubby walks.

Then Tess, getting rather excited with her work of art, upset the jar of water.

"Malheur!—hard luck!" was Trixie's laughing comment.

"But what else can you expect," sighed Tess, "when you've got girls all round you, talking, and one of them talking—or trying to talk—French?"

"Come away," Polly said to Betty, laughing. "I wouldn't spoil a work of art for worlds!"

"Nor I! Besides," Betty added with another sudden touch of gravity, as she walked off with Polly, "I rather want to go round to the coach-house. Pearl's car is there."

The way Betty said this caused Polly to give her a sudden curious glance.

"You are very mysterious, Betty, showing a sudden desire to go and look at the car! Pearl Hartry brought you and me to Linton Hall in yesterday! Now, if there is anything to confide—"

"I have been wanting to tell you," Betty broke in, "only I felt it best to wait for a moment when we were alone. You and I, Polly, dear, have been uneasy about Pearl Hartry; but the other girls have no—no suspicions. And it doesn't seem right, at this stage, to discuss things. It may only spoil their lovely holiday, all for nothing."

"Yes, but—"

"It is like this," Betty went on, checking her chum for a moment on the terrace steps. "In the middle of the night, I got up because I felt sure a noise had awakened me. I slipped on my dressing-gown, and ventured out to the corridor, meaning to investigate. And then I came face to face with—Pearl Hartry!"

"She, too, had been awakened?"

"Not at all," said Betty. "She was fully dressed—just as she might be for going away in the car!"

"What?"

"It's a fact, Polly! And her only explanation was that she had been out into the open air, to see to the car."

"See to the car—at that time of night?"

"She told me that the water should have been drained away from the radiator, and that this had not been done. She said that if there should be a cold snap in the early morning, the water might freeze and burst the radiator."

"That's all very well," said Polly, knitting her brows "but—"

"It sounds feeble, eh? So I thought," nodded Betty, gravely. "And now I want to go and look at that car for a certain reason."

Polly was impressed. Even her talkative tongue had a sudden check upon it as she walked on with the Form captain.

The two girls did not go direct to the coach-house, in which the car in question had had to be garaged, because the proper garage was already occupied with the Lintons' car. Instead, they wandered on in a very roundabout manner until they came at last to the end of a path, from which they had a full view of the mansion's out-buildings.

And there suddenly they stood transfixed. For what did they see?

Over at the coach-house, the doors of which were flung wide, stood Pearl Hartry, close to the front of the motor-car. And she could only have set the water running from the radiator a minute ago, for it was still coursing to the ground from a tiny brass tap!

Betty Barton plucked her chum by the sleeve, and next instant both girls had backed along the shrubby path, still unseen by Pearl.

Then, safe from observation, the two stood and looked at each other, breathing fast with excitement.

"It means," said Betty softly, "she never came down in the night to let that water out of the radiator! She has set it running only in the last minute or two!"

"She told you a fib," Polly frowned, "just to set your mind at rest, when you met her face to face on the stairs in the middle of the night."

"Yes," nodded Betty. "And since it is evident that she did not come down to see to the radiator, what really was her motive? I have told you she was fully dressed, like anybody ready for a journey!"

"Was she, then, meaning to go away from the Hall?"

Betty's answer to that question of Polly's was a hopeless shrug.

"Ask me another, Polly! All I can say is

that I feel more and more distrustful of this girl.

Polly made a half-comical grimace.

"Let us stroll somewhere for a few minutes, where we shall not meet her," she proposed. "I don't feel like having anything to say to her until this mystery has been fathomed. How I wish now, Betty, I had never asked her to Linton Hall! She and her father—after all, who are they? We don't know anything about them!"

"Except that they came from North Africa only a little while ago," said Betty. "And even that's all part of the mystery, too. I mean, why is Pearl so silent about their life in Africa? And that native attendant of hers—the girl who is the very image of Rose of the Desert—why is that girl so kept in the background?"

The chums' mystified questionings were checked for a moment, because the couple had now reached the rickety gateway, which wanted a good deal of fiddling with before it would open.

At last, however, Betty and Polly were free to saunter out into the open country, and they did so, stepping thoughtfully together across a large meadow which was bordered on one side by a big larch-wood.

"You were talking about that native girl whom we have seen at the house where Pearl and her father live," said Polly. "Of course, when Pearl Hartry laughed at our thinking the girl was actually Rose of the Desert, we could say no more. But—"

"Same here," said Betty. "Although it is quite true that the style of dress makes one native girl look very much like another—especially with the face always half-hidden by a linen fold—yet I shall always have an uncanny fancy that Pearl's attendant is—"

And there Betty suddenly paused, giving a sharp thrust of the head, like one peering with sudden keen interest at a strange object some distance off.

Next moment she caught her chum excitedly by one arm.

"Look—look! Over there, Polly—amongst the larches!"

Polly gave one sharp glance in the direction indicated; then she and her chum together went simply pelting across the field towards the larch-wood.

Never in their lives, perhaps, had the

athletic couple made such a sudden breathless race as now.

In a few seconds they had streaked across the meadow, spurred on to such a sudden, violent rush by what they had seen—a figure in white, flowing raiment, beckoning them on!

Yes, there had been a distinct beckoning gesture of one arm. Yet now, as the girls drew close, the mysterious figure backed away amongst the thickly-growing trees, as if intending to elude the girls.

What did it all mean?

Was there ever such piling of mystery upon mystery, Betty and Polly were thinking, as they raced up to the spot where the figure had first attracted their attention.

For, apart from the strangeness of such conduct, there was this astounding fact to take into account.

Here, once again, was that native girl in her Oriental dress, whom they both firmly believed was Rose of the Desert!

So swiftly had the mysterious girl withdrawn into the recesses of the wood, Betty and Polly were quite at a loss where to look for her when they themselves were beneath the trees.

She had vanished, and—

No! There she was again, but only partially disclosing herself to the girls, ten paces from where they stood.

"Rose of the Desert!" panted Betty excitedly. "What is it then—what would you tell us? Oh, why will you never speak, although you are letting us see you again and again?"

There was no answer. Polly's voice it was that followed Betty's.

"Let Pearl Hartry say what she likes, Betty," said Polly tensely; "that is Rose of the Desert, and no other!"

"Then she can speak to us—she knows the English tongue!" Betty exclaimed. "She must—she must end all this mystery!"

"You hear, Rose of the Desert?" Polly called softly. "Speak, then—speak!"

Then a strange thing happened.

Rose of the Desert raised one hand and laid a finger to her muffled lips.

It was an action that said, as plain as speech itself:

"Keep silent about having seen me! Keep silent about everything! You will

see me again, and then you will understand!"

So Betty and Polly interpreted that finger-to-lip movement, and the entreating look in Rose of the Desert's eyes which went with it.

Amazed, bewildered, the two schoolgirls stood rooted to the spot; and then there came another gesture from the girl of mystery—a sign that meant:

"Don't follow!"

Instantly afterwards the strangely garbed figure had turned and flitted away, and Betty and Polly slowly pulled themselves together.

The bright spring sunshine was sending its lances of light down through the green-tinged branches of the spruces. All the common birds of our English countryside were singing here and there. Only a few hundred yards off was Polly Linton's own English home.

And yet—

"Pinch me!" Polly said at last, moaningly.

"That's how I feel!" nodded Betty. "As if I must have dreamed it all!"

CHAPTER 15.

The Intercepted Letter.

JACK LINTON pulled some cricket stumps out of the dawn-grass, and began to juggle with them, whilst Mr. Linton "skied" the ball for one of his schoolgirl guests to catch.

"Hurrah!" Polly led off the cheering, breathlessly. "We won!"

"Yes, wather!" panted Paula Creol, setting her hair to rights. "Bai Jove—"

"Bravo, Morcove!" struck in Betty, with equal elation. "Twenty-nine runs to their twenty-two!"

Madge Minden caught the ball as it came down from the skies, and slipped it to Jack, just as he was balancing a cricket stump on the tip of his chin.

"Catch!" cried Madge.

And Jack caught it!

He held the ball just as if he had been keeping an eye on Madge all the time—and perhaps he had!

"You are very clever, Jack!" his sister said mockingly. "But you can't play cricket for toffee!"

"Now, I don't want any of your impudence!" said Jack, menacing Polly's head with the cricket stump. "Didn't I go in to bat left-handed? Didn't I purposely miff the catch that Madgo knocked up when she was batting?"

"Oh, story!" chorussed the girls. "You've had a thorough beating, after trying your very hardest against us!"

"Catch me ever playing cricket with a lot of kids again!"

"Kids!" yelled the Morcove element. "Are we going to stand that from a boy who can't even keep his wicket up against under-arm bowling?"

There were six stumps in all. Of one accord, six schoolgirls snatched up a stump apiece, Paula being the only Morcove scholar to "wetwain" from such "fivolity."

"After him!" yelled Polly, as her brother set off as if in fear of his life. "Tally-ho! Yoicks! Gone away!"

And Mr. and Mrs. Linton, as they strolled towards the house, had to look round again and again to enjoy the spectacle.

Paula Creel sauntered after her host and hostess. It was close upon lunch-time, and Paula wanted to put her hair quite to rights before sitting down to table!

Pearl Hartry had also taken part in the farcical game of cricket, on the side of Mr. and Mrs. Linton and Jack. It was hardly to be supposed, however, that she felt like taking part in the pursuit of Jack Linton with brandished cricket stumps. Besides, there was no stump for her to brandish!

So, suddenly bereft of companions, she strolled away, going in the opposite direction to that taken by the yelling fugitive and his pursuers.

In secret, Pearl Hartry now heaved a sigh of relief, like one who is glad to have got away at last from trying company.

Not a moment of the day but that her mind was running upon far more serious things than cricket!

For this morning, she might very easily have been "caught out" over the explanation she had given as to why she left her bed-room in the night and was found stealing about the house by Betty.

She—Pearl—had said at the time that the radiator of the motor-car had needed draining off, and that she had slipped out of doors to attend to the matter. But, if

Betty had been at all inclined to doubt that explanation, and had gone to the car first thing in the morning to see if the water had been drained off—what would she have found?

The girl would have found the radiator still full of water—proof that she—Pearl—had not visited the car in the night!

However, that little matter was all right now! She had emptied the tank soon after breakfast, and the next time the car was going to be used, she would fill up with water again, remarking to the girl that:

"Of course, I drained it empty, you remember, on our first night at the Hall!"

But, although it was all very well to feel confident that she was still unsuspected, how much else she had to worry her!

The grim fact stared her in the face. She had not achieved what she had come to Linton Hall to accomplish.

She had tried to get hold of that priceless paper, only to be outwitted by Rose of the Desert!

And where—where was Rose of the Desert to-day? So Pearl was wondering desperately, as she spent these few minutes before lunch in wandering about the garden. What was that native girl going to do about the paper?

Beyond all doubt, it was in Rose of the Desert's possession. That girl—bother her!—she had secretly travelled to Linton Hall, had secretly entered the house, and had removed the paper from the place where it was being kept for safe custody.

"She is such a strange creature," Pearl was thinking, with knitted brows; "and perhaps it is just as well for me that she is! If it were an ordinary English person in Rose of the Desert's place, she would surely come to Mr. Linton and hand over the chart, telling him why she—"

A shambling footstep suddenly startled Pearl, warning her that someone was coming after her along the gravel pathway which she was traversing so thoughtfully.

Turning about, she saw that it was only the village postman—an aged, bearded fellow, with a satchel slung at his hip.

"Marning, miss!" he greeted her, knocking his battered peaked-cap. "I've a good few for the house, miss—not surprising, I dessay, seeing what a party it is for Easter!"

"I'll take them," Pearl offered. "It will save your legs, postman."

"Why, thank'ee, miss; that be very kind of you, I'm sure," he responded gratefully, whilst he shuffled through the pack. "Ay, there we are then—an' all good news, let's hope! 'Marning, miss—'marning!"

And away he shuffled again, leaving Pearl alone on the path, with at least a dozen letters in her grasp.

No nefarious intention was in her mind as she looked at one superscription after another. She was only idly looking through the mail for one for herself whilst she walked on with it towards the house.

Suddenly, however, she checked for a moment, whilst her breath came and went quickly.

Amongst so many letters that were obviously from the parents of the school-girl guests, there was one letter that had seized Pearl's interest.

"What's this!" Pearl gasped aloud to herself. "Rose of the Desert writing to Betty Barton!"

The letter in question had come through the post unstamped. It should have been surcharged on delivery, but the old postman—easy-going fellow—had forgotten all about that when he handed the batch of letters to Pearl.

Altogether it was a most quaint missive that she was now staring at. She recognised the envelope as one forming part of a packet of stationery which she had given to Rose of the Desert some weeks back.

Pearl had made it her task to teach the native girl how to spell and write a little English—and here was the outcome of that teaching!

In awkward, sprawling characters, far more grotesque than the most childish writing, the envelope bore this superscription:

"Betty Barton,
Linton Hal,
Devnshur."

It was doubtful whether the letter would ever have reached the address if it had not been posted locally. Pearl examined the postmark.

Then she suddenly shot a glance around her. She was well in the open; but no one was watching her.

On an impulse prompted by cunning, she swiftly put the letter in her pocket, then walked on to the house with the rest of the missives, handing them to Mr. Linton just outside the dining-room doorway.

The gong had gone for lunch, and most of the girls had assembled.

"Post in!" Mr. Linton sang out gaily. "Yes, I think you all have letters from home," he hastened to add, as Betty & Co. came rushing about him eagerly. "Catch, Betty! Catch, Madge! And you, Dolly!"

They all had one apiece, as it turned out, and, whilst they were tearing open envelopes, Mr. Linton scanned a letter for himself, bearing a foreign postmark.

"Hallo, this is good!" he exclaimed. "From Jack Somerfield—I recognise the writing I wonder——"

Pearl was on her way upstairs, ostensibly to run a comb through her hair before sitting down to lunch, but really to open the letter from Rose of the Desert and read it.

She paused six stairs up, as she heard Mr. Linton's exclamation.

"I say, this is news you'll all delight in!" he cried out a moment later. "Jack Somerfield's letter tells me he is on his way home!"

"What? Oh, hooray!" cried Polly. "We all love Jack Somerfield. Will he come to Linton Hall, dad?"

"Not in time for the Easter holidays; you'll all be back at school several days before he lands at Liverpool," was the answer.

"Then we shall see him at the school!" said Betty. "He is bound to come down and stay a few days with his sister, our headmistress."

"Quite right," nodded Mr. Linton; "and perhaps you'll find me running over to Morcove, when our friend is there. For I have been taking care of a valuable document that he will want me to return to him."

Pearl was still pausing half-way up the stairs.

At the mention of "a valuable document," her heart seemed to miss a beat.

What if Mr. Linton should suddenly take it into his head to go to the safe, to see that the document was still there!

But what Mr. Linton did was to cry, "Lunch!" And Pearl, breathing freely again, made a spurt up to her bed-room, to

snatch one moment to herself before joining the high-spirited party.

Taking out the quaintly inscribed letter, she tore open the envelope, and the next moment her handsome face was proclaiming the sense of triumph that filled her, at having intercepted this message from Rose of the Desert to Betty:

"At set of sun, on the hill where men can see the sea."

That was all. But for Pearl it was quite sufficient. Only once had she scanned the cryptic line of writing before she knew its meaning.

At sunset this evening, Rose of the Desert would be waiting on a certain hill-top not far from Linton Hall—a hill so high that from its summit, on a clear day, the blue sea could be made out many miles away.

"She will be waiting for Betty and Polly," Pearl Hartry said to herself. "But I—I shall be there! Oh, it is splendid, this! It is my chance to get possession of that paper, after all."

CHAPTER 16.

The Sun Goes Down.

ALL day the mammoth hill, known as Lin Tor, had been without a visitor to its conical peak, where the scantiest vegetation struggled for life amongst masses of granite and boggy patches of black peat.

Now the sun was setting, and it might have been supposed that the desolation of daytime would surely be continued through the evening and on until another morning had dawned.

Even if strangers to the district were in the neighbourhood, full of holiday daring, they would surely be warned by local folk that Lin Tor was best left to itself, unless one started to tackle it in broad daylight!

Yet now, at set of sun, someone was making bold to ascend the tortuous, and often dangerous, path that zig-zagged to the summit of the hill.

Nor was the hard climb proving a tax upon this person's energies.

Rose of the Desert—for she it was—hailed from a wild land whose little-known country was not all barren wilderness.

There were mountains in the land of

Susahlah compared with which this Devonshire tor was but a molehill; and those mountains had Rose of the Desert often passed amongst in days gone by, acquiring all the agility and fearlessness of a practised climber.

Her Oriental figure made the place seem a thousand miles away from rural England. An artist might have sketched her there, and the picture would have passed for a scene drawn from the rose-flushed mountains of North Africa.

Within a few yards of the summit she sat down to wait. She was not tired, but the half of her dusky face that was visible, above the folded cloth which swathed her neck and chin, betrayed a distressed state of mind.

Her lovely, dark eyes seemed full of trouble, and her brows were drawn together in an anxious frown. As the sun finally dipped below the far horizon, causing a sudden chill gloom to settle upon even this upland world, whilst below the very darkness of night seemed to be blanketing woods and meadows, she sighed fretfully, as if with impatience.

Presently she thrust a hand into the folds of her garments, and drew forth something that looked like a parchment document.

It was folded in four, and she did not open it out to scrutinise any writing that it bore. Eyeing the document as it was, with eyes that were half-sad and half-exultant, she murmured a few words to herself in her own native language, then returned the parchment to its hiding-place.

Next, her hand drew out something of quite a different nature.

It was a crust of bread—part of the small store of food that this strange girl was carrying about with her, in a sort of ration-bag, thinking it no hardship to be reduced to such poor means of support.

She ate the hard, dry crust; then, going to a tiny rill of water that trickled amongst the rocks, she cupped her hands and drank from them.

Dry bread, and water from the hillside—they were sufficient for the needs of Rose of the Desert!

Suddenly, as she was replacing the white cloth about her beautiful face, her quick hearing detected the sound made by someone's ascent of the rugged hillside.

She stepped behind a huge boulder and crouched there; yet her eyes were not betraying alarm. Rather, they suggested that she had been greatly relieved by that tell-tale sound.

In another minute or so she expected to be standing face to face with Betty Barton. For this was the rendezvous mentioned in the cryptic letter she had addressed to Betty.

But in case the climber of the hill should be someone else—a most unlikely thing, Rose of the Desert was sure—she thought it best to shelter here. Peering out, she could watch the one path which visitors to the hilltop surely always used, and so she would see the climber before that person saw her.

That was Rose of the Desert's idea; but it was brought to nought by a very simple mischance.

In her agitated haste to make the ascent, the girl, who was now so near the summit, rashly tried a short cut. So, instead of coming up the zig-zag path, and thus falling under the eye of Rose of the Desert, she lost herself for a minute or so amongst ugly boulders and nasty boggy places.

Rose of the Desert, suddenly fearing that she had been the means of drawing a mere schoolgirl into danger, decided to show herself in the open—and all in a moment she was face to face with Pearl Hartry!

In a flash the native girl could have darted away with the agility of a mountain creature, and Pearl could never have caught up with her. For Pearl was dead beat after the hard climb.

But there was, in the heart of the desert girl, a stern pride of race that made her scorn the idea of flight, just because she had been tricked. Her eyes flashed challengingly, defiantly, banishing the smile of triumph which Pearl had begun to display.

"Yes, Rose of the Desert," Pearl Hartry said, when she had taken a moment or two for breath, "it is I, not Betty Barton, who has come to this spot at set of sun!"

"At set of sun!" echoed Rose of the Desert. "They are the very words I used in my message to the schoolgirl! That mes sage, then—"

"I intercepted it—yes. You know what that means?" Pearl said, with another attempt at a mocking smile. "I opened the letter myself, and Betty knows nothing about it!"

"Thou cunning creature!" Rose of the

Desert said, with fierce scorn. "Thou, to be of the same race which gives the world men and women so full of courage and honour! Yet must I feel more pity than anger for thee. In all the deceit and cunning to which thou hast stooped, thou art but following another's teaching."

Retreating a step or so, she drew herself up

"Thou are here, instead of the schoolgirl—for what purpose?" she demanded spirit-edly.

"You can guess," shrugged Pearl. "You have in your possession that native chart, which was given to Mr. Linton for safe custody by the man Somerfield."

"Yea, I have the chart!"

"I want it, Rose of the Desert; I am going to have it!" Pearl insisted, trying to daunt the native girl by the old domineering tone. "Hand it over to me, this instant!"

"Nay!"

"Don't forget," said Pearl insinuatingly, "if the chart is missed and you are caught with it, people will call you the thief—you yourself!"

It was a shot that went home. Rose of the Desert went pale under her dusky skin.

She, so sensitive to any charge against her own rectitude, was filled with horror at the idea of being deemed a thief.

"And the chart may be missed at any moment now," Pearl went on, trying to strike terror to the heart of the native girl. "Mr. Linton may go to the safe to look out the parchment, because he has had a letter from the man Somerfield to say he is coming home!"

Rose of the Desert started violently, but not with alarm.

"He is coming home, thou sayest! How soon—how soon?"

Pearl bit her lip. She had made a mistake at hinting at Jack Somerfield's return to England. She had overshot the mark, and now, instead of seeing dismay and trouble in Rose of the Desert's face there was a sudden great joy.

"Ah, thou daughter of cunning!" Rose of the Desert exclaimed exultantly. "Thy lips have served thee ill for once! They have told me the one thing I yearned to know—"

"Between now and the time he comes," Pearl struck in desperately, "you may be clapped into prison as a thief! You took

that chart from the safe, not I! Keep it, and you will be caught with it upon you! Send it back to Mr. Linton, and he will only think you are a thief who was afraid of keeping what you had stolen!"

Rose of the Desert laughed softly.

"These things you say to me, seeking to frighten me into giving the chart into thy hands," she said. "But that I will never do, never! Now I know that the man Somerfield is on his way to England; and so I can tell thee this. Harken, O sly one, for it is my last word to thee!"

And, standing away from Pearl, the native girl stretched forth one hand at her, to give dramatic expression to what was coming.

"The man Somerfield is the rightful owner of that chart!" Rose of the Desert cried. "Into his hands, and his alone, will I give it!"

"So you say," Pearl burst out angrily; "but you will never get the chance to do it! It will be days—weeks, perhaps—before he lands in England. Long before then, the chart will have been missed. The English police will be hunting for the thief——"

"They shall not find me!"

"Bah! Another boast!" cried Pearl. "Who are you, to think you can hold out until Mr. Somerfield returns to Morcove School, where his sister lives? You wear the native dress; you are a stranger in a strange country; you dare not go to a shop to buy food——"

"Even so——"

"Now that you have left my service," Pearl rushed on, "you have no roof to shelter you! Rose of the Desert, the wise thing for you to do is to hand me that chart now—now, this minute—and I will overlook all the trouble you have caused me!"

"Give you the chart, so that it may lead thy cunning father to where the gold of Susahlah can be found? Nay," Rose of the Desert cried again, with eyes ablaze, "you forget, but I have not forgotten, how the man Somerfield saved my life when I was but a child! I owe him gratitude, loyalty. I owe you nothing, false one, save scorn for having sought to rob him! Go—go thy way! As for me——"

She swept the darkening world about her with those magnificent eyes of hers.

"Night is upon me, and I am as ye say—truly a stranger in a strange land! Yet

will I not be afraid—I, Rose of the Desert, who am of a house that never yet bred a coward!"

Pearl, too, had suddenly looked about her, noting with dismay how swiftly the evening was closing in.

It would take her a full hour to make the most rapid descent of the hill and reach Linton Hall.

There was clearly no time for further words, even if they could serve any purpose.

But could she—dared she—make another desperate effort to get hold of the coveted chart by sheer force?

She and Rose of the Desert—they were alone together in this remote spot. It was now or never!

Cunningly she turned as if to begin the descent, and then she flashed round and made a spring at the native girl.

Even as Pearl made her lightning spring, the agile native girl darted aside with a flutter of her white raiment.

Pearl's clutching hands closed upon nothing more substantial than the empty air. She tumbled headlong, and fell all asprawl upon the rough ground, whilst Rose of the Desert sprang away like a hart amongst the rocks, and in another moment was gone!

CHAPTER 17.

The Wanderer in the Night.

LATE that night a lonely figure passed unseen along a Devonshire highway, going north to Morcove and the coast.

By chance, it was a road that skirted the grounds of Linton Hall, and when the lonely pedestrian drew level with the handsome iron gates at the entrance to the drive, she turned aside to go close up to them.

And there she lingered for a minute or more—surely glad of the rest it meant for her, merely to stand with both hands holding fast to the ironwork, whilst it was evident that the moonlit house at the top of the drive held some personal interest for her.

For, very wistfully, she gazed towards the mansion, now without a light in any of its windows.

She, Rose of the Desert, the stranger in a strange land, knew who was sleeping beneath that roof to night.

Would that she could have pushed past these iron gates, and gone on up to the house, claiming the friendly pity of those young English girls whom she had met in former times! Such, perhaps, was the poignant thought running in her mind. But, ah!—

It was a longing she must not gratify, this longing to end all her furtive existence here and now, by disclosing herself to the inmates of the Hall.

To do any such thing meant telling the master of the house that she held a valuable paper which she had taken from his safe like a thief in the night. And was it certain that he would accept her explanation as to why she had removed the document?

Would he not, rather, be very angry with her, and have her cast into some English prison as a thief?

She believed he must be a kind man, if only because he was the father of one of those fine English schoolgirls. But he would not be given the chance to believe her story—a story that involved such serious charges against one who was a guest beneath his roof.

Pearl Hartry—she would use that false tongue of hers in self-defence, denying everything! The unscrupulous girl had even hinted that she would do this, if ever the chart was brought back to the house.

“Truly,” Rose of the Desert was thinking bitterly, as she lingered at the gates, “it is in the power of that wicked girl to say I stole the chart, meaning to return with it to my own country! She can say that I found I could not get out of this country with it, and so repented of my deed. And then—”

Her hands relaxed their grip of the iron bars, and dropped limply to her side. With a hard intake of breath she walked on again, shaking her head sorrowfully over the thoughts that distressed her.

No; she must adhere to her decision. The master of that great house was a stranger to her, and of all strangers in this strange country she felt distrustful.

She must keep the chart until the man Somerfield had returned to this country, and into his hands would she give it then—the hands that had once saved her life, far away in the desert land of her fathers.

The man Somerfield—that brave, splendid Englishman—he would know which story to believe, hers or Pearl Hartry's!

When she, Rose of the Desert, his friend of long ago brought the chart to him and told him all her story, he would see how she had had but one thought from first to last—to frustrate a wicked plot to rob him. And then she would hear his “Well done, faithful friend!” and the words would remain as music in her heart, yea, as long as life should last!

But, until he came, what was her life to be?

Poor Rose of the Desert! In decreeing for herself this fugitive life until she could stand before the valiant explorer whom her youthful nature idolised, was she not making an impossible demand upon physical resources?

There was, in the vicinity of Morcove School, many a spot she knew of where one could remain in hiding; but food—how to obtain food, when she dared not visit any shop, lest people should talk of the strangely-dressed being who had been seen!

Vaguely, at the back of her simple, half-tutored mind, the idea had formed itself that she might get into touch with the English schoolgirls.

In all that she had done up to now, she had, perhaps, offended against she-knew-not-what laws of this country. She must be very careful, then, not to do anything that would bring trouble upon the schoolgirls.

And even the task of getting to Morcove—how hard it was going to be!

All her life she had been accustomed to journeys demanding physical endurance. But she was no longer beneath her own desert skies, and somehow a nomad life in this civilised country was not as easy to endure as it was in her own native land.

Pathetically she made a pause on the night-bound highway, and looked about her half helplessly.

Then, drawing another long breath, she wandered on again, still pursuing the long, long road that would bring her to Morcove and the coast.

CHAPTER 18.

Morcove Once More.

HOLIDAYS were over. At Morcove, as in hundreds of other famous schools up and down the land, Summer Term had commenced—the best term of all, in the opinion of most girls and boys!

So, once again, the vast buildings that formed Morcove School were no longer so many silent shells of brick and stone. They teemed with life once more.

There was the usual hurry-scurry of boisterous scholars to and fro in the corridors. The old, happy peals of laughter were heard. Doors were banged, and banged again, with as much youthful violence as ever. Down in the music-room, the freshly-tuned piano was proving its usual attraction to musical spirits, not least of whom was our own musical Madge.

For, of course, all our chums of the Fourth Form were back, this opening day, along with the rest of the Morcove scholars.

Only Polly had come direct from Linton Hall. The chums who had spent a few days with her at Easter had afterwards gone on to their respective homes in various parts of the kingdom, to be amongst their own devoted people. So, like any other reopening day, Betty & Co. had arrived in dribbets to-day, and greetings between one friend and another were just as joyful as ever.

As usual, too, it was Study No. 12—the Form-captain's study—which formed the favourite spot for the happy re-unions.

Betty herself only arrived late in the afternoon, for she had to come all the way from Lancashire. She found Study No. 12 crowded out with her old chums of the Form, a few of whom were at that moment "helping" Polly Linton to get tea.

They called it "helping" Polly, although so much activity was really only resulting in everybody getting in everybody else's way. The girls were much too excited and talkative to give their minds to the correct laying of a tea-table.

"Hurrah! Here's Betty!" went up the gleeful cry, as the captain strolled into the room in that quiet unassuming way of hers. "At last!"

"Bai Jove, how are you, Betty deah?"

And Paula Creel was so infected with the others' jubilation at seeing Betty, she almost—but not quite—sprang up from her favourite armchair!

"How's everybody?" returned Betty, as the affectionate exchange of kisses went on.

"Paula, that's another lovely frock!"

"Yes, wather! And a lovely pwice it was, bai Jove!"

"Have you sent that water-colour drawing of Linton Hall to the Academy, Tess?"

rattled on Betty. "Trixie dear, you haven't forgotten your French, I hope?"

"Mais non! Jamais, jamais—never, never!"

"Jammy, jammy!" cried Polly, still darting to and fro, between the table and the corner cupboard. "I've found a jammy jam-pot, but no jam in it! Exercise five-three-two! Have you seen the gardener's milk-jug? Betty dear!"

"Yes—well?"

"Where did we put everything breaking-up day? We are two cups short, and four knives are missing. And how are we going to give tea to all this lot, I don't know!"

"We'll manage!" said Betty, taking off her hat.

"Best for some of us to clear out," suggested Dolly, the obliging.

"You won't!" said Betty flatly. "Sit down, everybody——"

"Yes, wathah!" agreed Paula, resuming her comfy chair with the greatest goodwill. "Bai Jove, geals, this is going to be a stwenuous term, I wather imagine. However, it is nice to be back again—what?"

"Oui, oui!" said Trixie.

And the others chorused:

"Rather!"

Then Madge Minden came in, snapping a bracelet about her wrist, after an hour at the piano downstairs.

"Hallo, Betty!"

"Madge, darling, how are you?"

And Madge's pretty lips dropped a kiss upon Betty's rosy cheeks, to have it returned straightaway.

Dolly sped away for hot water; tea was made. They all sat down at last, tongues going nineteen to the dozen.

"Summer Term!" remarked Betty, when at last the talk about holiday doings was languishing. "A busy time for us, girls!"

"Especially out of doors!" added Tess

"Tennis—cricket—country rambles——"

"Sea-bathing——"

"Yes, wather! And——"

"I wonder what sort of a showing the Form is going to make this term?" Betty mused aloud. "Are we going to keep our end up on the sports field, girls?"

There was a chorus of assent, above which rose Paula's familiar:

"Yes, wather!"

"The Grandways girls are back," Betty

went on. "They travelled by the same train that brought me from Lancashire."

"Oh, indeed!" remarked Polly grimly. "And I suppose Cora and Judith were not exactly friendly, Betty?"

"Not exactly!" laughed Betty. "It was rather funny. I was going along the corridor of the train, on the way to the luncheon-car, and they were coming away from their meal. We had to squeeze past each other—"

"And I can guess the look Cora and Judith gave you—ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Polly.

Betty, too, laughed, in a way that showed she had no intention of letting the undying animosity of the sisters Grandways trouble her.

And so the talk flowed on, to the accompanying clatter of the tea-cups; whilst how often did Betty glance round the crowded table, and think what a joy it was to see all the old, familiar faces here once more!

Another lengthy term confronting all the girls; but what an augury for the way they meant to hang together, like the good chums they were, was this first little tea-party in Study No. 12!

Come what might, when another breaking-up day arrived, it would surely find them all as loyal and true as ever to their bond of friendship!

But the tea-party, happy as it was, could not be prolonged. Only a few minutes after the last cups had been drained, and the last plate of pastries cleared, the girls had to disperse.

Unpacking in the various studies and the dormitory was a business to be seen to at once, and so away they all drifted, causing a fresh stir in the famous Fourth Form quarters.

"Well, Polly, dear," broke out Betty Barton, as soon as she was alone with her bosom chum, "I haven't asked you yet—did you leave everybody Al at home?"

"Absolutely," said Polly, sitting on a portmanteau so as to be able to get the strap undone. "And the mater and dad sent their love to you, Betty, as they did to all the rest."

"Thanks!" said the Form-captain, with feeling. "We had a jolly time at Linton Hall during those five days! Really, holidays are almost a torture. You want to be with your chums, and yet you long to be with your own people, too!"

"I missed you awfully after you had all

gone," grimaced Polly. "The Hall seemed quite empty, although Jack—dear old Jack! he was as good a pal to me as ever."

"Pearl Hartry—she went the day after we left?" Betty asked.

"Yes; Pearl only stayed until the next day."

The two chums had been busy unpacking whilst they were chatting away.

The mention of Pearl Hartry's name had set them thinking about many things which the excitement of reopening day had temporarily banished from their minds.

"What about Peary Hartry?" Betty asked at last.

"Well, Betty dear, what about her?" was the bland reply.

"You never found out—"

"No, Betty. I'm just as much in the dark as ever. Watching that girl closely after you had left the Hall did no more good than our watching her, as we did, all through Easter! She just behaved like any ordinary friend on a visit to one's home!"

"And yet—" said Betty.

"It is strange, yes!" nodded Polly.

She swung herself on to the edge of the table in the old, free-and-easy manner. But something was suppressing the madcap nature just at present. And that something was the mystery of Pearl Hartry.

"Just an ordinary girl friend," Polly repeated slowly; "that is how one may fairly describe her, judging her by her conduct as a guest. But—oh, Betty, I do hope we were not doing her an injustice in being so suspicious!"

"I hope so, too," nodded Betty gravely. "Really, though, I think we were to be excused. There were so many queer things that happened to make us wonder if Pearl Hartry really was the simple friend she made herself out to be."

"Quite right," agreed Polly. "Yet the fact remains, Betty, nothing has ever happened to prove that she had some underhand reason for getting friendly with all of us, and getting me to invite her to Linton Hall. It was a queer business, your finding her that night at the Hall, stealing about the house, fully dressed, as if she meant to go away whilst we all slept. But she—"

Polly broke off abruptly.

A tap at the door sounded.

"Come in!" sang out Betty.

And there entered—Pearl Hartry!

CHAPTER 19.

A Strange Discovery.

SURPRISE would be a mild word for Betty and Polly's expression as they recognised their visitor.

The two schoolgirls looked simply astounded.

They were quite aware, too, that round eyes and mouths forming a round "O!" of amazement must have given Pearl Hartry more than a hint as to how her surprise visit was taking each of them. Yet she advanced into the room with a smile that never faded as it might have been expected to do.

"You don't mind?" she exclaimed sweetly, holding out her gloved hand to each in turn. "I know it is a rush time with you, reopening day. Still——"

"Er—oh, no! Sit down, won't you?" Betty managed to say.

"Thanks; but ought I to stop?" Pearl said, whilst she merely perched herself on one arm-rest of a chair. "I'm sure you are busy!"

Both schoolgirls felt like saying, "Then why did you call to-day?" But they could not be as blunt as that.

Once again, indeed, all their uneasiness about this beautiful girl was more than a little dispelled by her present appearance.

Once again Betty and Polly had a chance to study her closely—and what could they think of her, judging from outward appearances, except that she really was a girl of sterling character, full of charm, and only wanting to improve her friendship with them?

She was exquisitely dressed; she had such an air of good breeding. Above all, her every word and look seemed to proclaim a wistful longing to strengthen friendship's ties.

"Father and I are back at the house on the Barncombe road—you needn't be told that, of course," she said, still smiling. "I've been moping alone there ever since I left Linton Hall."

She added, with a pretty sigh:

"What a glorious holiday that was at Linton Hall!"

"You enjoyed it?" said Polly. "My chum and I had an idea, now and then, that—that——"

"That what?" Pearl asked mildly, raising her brows.

"Er—er——" Polly floundered, and so Betty came to the rescue.

"Frankly, Pearl," said Betty, "Polly and I had a feeling, now and then, that you had something on your mind all the time!"

Then Pearl, meeting their gaze quite steadily, laughed.

"Why, so I had, to tell you the truth. And I am going to tell you what it was presently. First of all, though, I've come to thank you, Polly, for having me to your place at Easter."

"Oh——"

"You'll never know what a treat it was for me," Pearl gushed on.

Yet it did not seem gush to her listeners, but real sincerity, so earnest was the tone.

"You see, it is a dull life for me at that lonely house on the Barncombe road. Father and I have not had time to make any friends. People don't call on folk who are only renting a furnished house from week to week! So Linton Hall was a great treat!"

"Well, about the trouble that was secretly bothering you?" Polly asked coolly.

"Oh, that!"

Pearl stood up, giving another little sigh that was in keeping with a sudden air of pathos.

"It is a great nuisance," she said. "You know that native girl whom I had with me as an attendant?"

"The one we——"

"Yes, the one you girls mistook for somebody called Rose of the Desert—ha, ha, ha!" laughed Pearl. "That always amuses me. For that girl of mine, she was——"

"What about her?" Betty could not help breaking in, rather brusquely.

"She was always giving me trouble, and that was what was worrying me and father," Pearl answered blandly. "That was the trouble on my mind at Easter. You see——"

She stroked the fur necklet that was hanging over her arm.

"The girl was rather a responsibility. When father and I were coming away from Africa, she came with us as my companion, and we promised her people to look after her in England. But she became very unruly—self-willed—and now——"

"Yes, what?" jerked out the schoolgirls. "Now she has run away!"

Pearl brought out the words with a suitable look of distress in her lovely eyes.

"Run away?" echoed the chums.

"It is an awful nuisance, isn't it?" their visitor went on. "She cleared out from the house in the Barncombe Road whilst I was away at Linton Hall. Father was away at the same time. When we both got back the girl was gone!"

"Strange!" exclaimed Betty, turning to meet Polly's frowning eyes. "What are you doing about it, Pearl?"

"I'm worrying a good deal, I know that," shrugged Pearl ruefully. "Father and I—"

"Have you spoken to the police?"

"Not yet—no. We don't like to set the police after her. Poor girl, she is only an uncivilised thing, and I think she would be frightened to death if a man in uniform took her up and hauled her off to the police-station!"

"But—" Betty paused. "Something ought to be done about it! A girl like that, wandering at large in a country where she hasn't a friend, and cannot speak the language—"

"Yes, but I am hoping she will come to her senses and creep home at last, a sadder and a wiser girl," struck in Pearl. "Meanwhile, this was partly my reason for calling as soon as the school reopened. I don't want you to spread the news all over the place; but if you, who are my friends, would keep your eyes open—"

"On the chance of seeing the girl?"

"Yes," nodded Pearl. "Now the days are so fine you are out and about quite a lot, of course? So I thought you might chance to see her. If you do, you'll let me know at once, won't you?"

The questioner did not wait for an answer. If she had waited, perhaps she would have found Betty and Polly hesitating before pledging themselves to comply with that wish!

She turned back to the door, bowing and smiling her good-bye.

"So now I mustn't detain you any longer," she said, glancing at the half-unpacked luggage. "But I may give you a look-in now and then, may I not?"

"Oh, yes, do!" cried the schoolgirls. And they meant it.

Whether Pearl Hartry was the honest friend she outwardly seemed to be, or whether there really was something shady

about her, it made no difference to the chums; they certainly wanted to keep in touch with her!

The door closed behind the departing visitor, and then the chums of Study 12 stood and looked at each other, with all the old uneasiness.

"No, it is not good enough—I mean," Betty exclaimed, turning to their luggage, "we simply mustn't settle down to another pow-wow about that girl, with the place still in this state! Look at the time, Polly!"

"Half-past five!"

"And there's a muster in hall at six! Come on! But let's begin the right way—clear the tea-things first!"

Then they bustled about, Polly gathering all the used china on to a large tray, ready for washing-up at the corridor-sink, whilst Betty dodged backwards and forwards, returning things to the study "larder."

"Polly!" Betty suddenly shouted excitedly. "Oh, look!"

Polly was going out of the room with the loaded tray. She nearly dropped the clattering tea-things, such was the start that shout gave her.

"Goodness, Betty, what a turn you gave me!"

"Something has given me a turn!" answered Betty. "This, Polly—this!"

Then the china crashed! Polly had not dropped the tray; but she had dumped it back on the table violently enough.

For, as her eager eyes fastened upon what Betty was displaying, Polly had seen that "this"—the cause of her chum's excitement—was an Oriental shoe!

"Why, that—that is the sort of sandal-thing Rose of the Desert always wears!" gasped Polly.

"Yes," said Betty, in a queer whisper. "She has been here, then! Rose of the Desert has been to this very study of ours whilst we were away on holiday!"

CHAPTER 20.

Paid For!

POLLY crossed the room and took the sandal-like shoe from her chum's hand.

"Where did you find it, Betty?"

"Under the table," was the prompt

reply. "I wouldn't have noticed it, only I was arranging the table-cover, because it was all one-sided and liable to trip anybody up. Then I saw the sandal, and—and, Polly, you could have knocked me down with a feather!"

"Her sandal—one of hers, beyond all possible doubt!" Polly muttered, staring at the strange find. "Whether she is Rose of the Desert, or only an ordinary native girl as Pearl would have us believe, that girl is the owner of this shoe! But why—"

"Yes, why," struck in Betty—"why has she visited the school in secret—visited our own study—and left the sandal behind?"

"It was an accident, her leaving the sandal here," Polly hazarded. "It slipped from her foot—"

"Ah, yes; at a moment when she had to rush away, because she was in danger of being found here," Betty broke in, nodding. "And she has never had the chance to recover the lost shoe."

"But again, why has she been visiting this study?" Polly asked desperately. "Betty, that girl is Rose of the Desert! This makes it certain! Only Rose of the Desert would keep on getting into touch with us like this. Remember—"

"I remember," Betty nodded again; "she certainly made friendly signs to us that day at Linton Hall, in the larch-wood, although she would not speak a word when we ran to her. In the same way she has been to this study of ours, just as if we were friends to whom she knew she could turn for help. But she is as mysterious as ever! She comes when we are not here!"

Polly sat down flop on a portmanteau, and folded her hands in her lap.

"It's a puzzler!" she said, retaining that thoughtful pose. "The girl must have some motive for such strange conduct. Never a word from her lips when we have stood facing her, and now—this!"

"Rose of the Desert, it is, anyhow!" Betty declared with emphasis. "And that means, Pearl Hartry really is hoodwinking us! Pearl Hartry's trouble has been that she wanted to be friends with us, but didn't want us to have anything to do with Rose of the Desert! So—"

"She just tried to deceive us with the story that the girl was not Rose of the Desert," struck in Polly. "Well, why? Oh, I begin to see!"

And the madcap's hands came together with a sharp clap.

"So do I!" exclaimed Betty, her face lighting up. "Pearl Hartry and her father have some scheme in hand, and they have feared that Rose of the Desert might warn us. And that is why Rose of the Desert has run away from Pearl!"

"To try and frustrate the scheme, and to—"

At this instant the door flew open, and Tess Trelawney came in breathlessly.

"Have you two heard?" she cried. "Miss Somerfield's brother—the man Somerfield," as Rose of the Desert used to call him—"

"What about him?" asked Betty and Polly, exchanging glances at that reference to Rose of the Desert.

"Jack Somerfield has sent a wireless from mid-Atlantic. He lands at Liverpool in a couple of days' time, and will come on at once to Morocco!"

"Hooray!" cheered Polly, whilst Betty was just as elated, if in a more sedate manner.

Then other girls came drifting back to the Form-captain's den, and the talk was all of school topics.

Betty and Polly, in fact, had hardly another moment alone together all that evening, and so the subject uppermost in their minds—the mystery of Rose of the Desert—could not be further debated.

The two chums thought it wisest to say nothing to others at present; and this meant keeping the sandal out of sight. But, last thing of all, that night, Betty slipped into Study 12, and returned the sandal to the exact spot where she had found it—well under the table.

She had an idea that a certain development might result from this—and so it did!

When she and Polly came down to their den next morning the slipper was gone!

Whilst they were still getting their breath back, after this astounding discovery, they noticed that the door of the corner cupboard was slightly ajar, although they had closed it fast overnight.

Then they made another tell-tale discovery.

A small quantity of food had vanished in the night, and in its place—what did

the two girls find, set upon a clean china plate, on one of the cupboard shelves?

Three tiny pearls!

Betty and Polly took them to the window and examined them closely.

They were pearls of rare beauty, worth at least several pounds apiece. They were pearls that she must have detached from a necklace the girls could remember her wearing.

And Rose of the Desert had left them here, as payment for a few mouthfuls of bread which she had taken from the study larder!

It was a thing that somehow touched the schoolgirls very deeply—that Rose of the Desert, for all she was but the daughter of a barbaric race, should be as scrupulous as this!

Rather than come under suspicion of abusing others goodwill—rather than take a few mouthfuls of food without payment, she had left behind her that which paid a hundred times over for it all!

And why had she taken that food from the cupboard, if not because she was in dire need of it?

Poor Rose of the Desert!

Greater still would the chums' admiration and pity for her have been could they have seen her at this moment, all alone in her place of refuge, enduring so much hardship and cruel solitude, and all for the sake of winning the man Somerfield's "Well done!"

But the hour was at hand when Betty and Polly were to know the full extent of the desert girl's devotion to those who had won her loyalty in the past.

Soon now were the schoolgirls to know the meaning of all the mystery that had baffled them so completely. Nor were they themselves to have any minor part in the final conflict between right and wrong!

For such was Fate's decree. When that moment should come for the final struggle between good and evil—between Rose of the Desert, steadfast in her heroic resolve to save the chart from falling into thieving hands, and Pearl Hartry and her father, in their final, desperate effort to possess that chart—then the chums of Study 12 would be there!

CHAPTER 21.

"Music hath charms!"

"STOP—that—row!"

A moment's pause, then the ill-tempered cry rang out, once again, along the Fourth Form corridor at Morcove School.

"Stop—that—ROW!"

Cora Grandways turned back into her study, and closed the door with a slam!

"I'm sick of it!" she blazed out, addressing her sister Judith. "They don't take a bit of notice!"

"They are only doing it, I believe, to annoy us," was the sullen rejoinder.

Judith, the younger sister, was already sitting down. Cora dropped into her usual chair, and sat champing her coral necklace—always a sign with her that she was in a towering rage.

On the study table were several exercise lesson books—all closed for the night. It was only seven o'clock in the evening, but Cora and Judith had finished "prep" half an hour ago. So it could not be said that the "row"—to wit, the melody made by a gramophone—was interfering with their studies.

The record that was being reeled off, at this particular moment, was a comic one.

The singer's voice had a far-reaching twang, and now and again he strolled off into roars of laughter at his own jokes. Then the audience round the table, in the neighbouring study, roared too!

Cora and Judith both made a rush into the passage. Their feet pounded furiously as they strode along to the scene of the offending concert.

Crash went the door of that study, as Cora flung it open.

"How many more times are you going to—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrilled half a dozen mirthful girls, listening to the comic singer.

"Do you hear me—you? How often am I too—"

The comic singer reached one of his own fits of laughter.

"Will you stop that row?" screamed Cora, stamping a foot.

Then the girl who was playing the gramophone looked round as she sat upon the edge of the table.

"Oh, were you speaking, Cora?"

"I tell you to stop that!"

"Wooow-wow-wow!" went the record, as the needle went off the track. And then, with Polly Linton hurriedly stopping the instrument, the rest of the audience gave another explosion of laughter.

Waiting for comparative silence, Cora at last burst out passionately:

"I call it disgraceful! For a pack of girls to get together and make themselves a nuisance to others who want to be quiet! If I chose to complain to the head-mistress, Betty Barton——"

"Would you get much sympathy? I don't think so," struck in Betty Barton, the Form captain. "I know of no rule against the playing of gramophones at this time of the evening. Everybody has finished prep."

"I object to the noise!"

"Oh, dear!" laughed the girls, whilst their Form captain smiled at Cora in a way that was more exasperating to that spitfire than any amount of laughter.

"You object to the noise, Cora? On what grounds? Have you a headache? Only say, and we'll knock off at once."

"It is not a question of headaches. I've no headache. I simply refuse to sit in my study and endure that din!"

"I'm afraid that reason is hardly good enough," Betty said blandly. "You call it a din. We call it good fun—and we mean to have some more!"

"Yes, wather!" came in her familiar drawl from Paula Creel, as she lolled in her favourite armchair. "I wegard that last wecord as being most amooising!"

"Just because the gramophone is a bit of a novelty to us, and we all enjoy listening to it," Betty went on spiritedly, "you and your sister are going to try and get it stopped! Well, you won't!"

"Won't I?" flashed back Cora. "I always thought a Form captain was appointed to keep order, not to create disorder! All right, play the gramophone! Go on playing it as much as you like!"

"We certainly shall!" said Betty.

"Yes wather! Bai Jove——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The fresh burst of laughter only partially

swamped the bang of the door, as Cora and Judith stormed away.

"Those two girls," Betty commented serenely, "they simply hate to hear us enjoying ourselves. That is all it means."

"Quite true, Betty," nodded Polly Linton, looking over the records. "Every time we girls get together for a bit of fun and amusement, that couple are reminded of their own isolation."

"Yes, wather! Howevah, geals——"

The study door was tapped, and then it opened softly to admit a number of other girls.

They did not need to account for their visit. They had heard the gramophone, and they had come along to swell the audience.

Polly set the gramophone going once more, and now the crowded room filled with the music of a wonderfully tender song, with the piano and violin accompaniment.

Enraptured, the girl's listened, until the short song was finished. Then came a burst of applause, just as if they were actually at a concert.

When that burst of applause broke out, Cora and Judith again issued forth from their study, a few doors off.

This time they stormed along the corridor, whirled down the stairs, and sought out the assistant Form-mistress.

Five minutes later, Cora and Judith came marching back, with triumphant expressions—for in front of them walked Miss Redgrave.

The youthful under-mistress heard the gramophone going in Study 12. By now, the audience had got back to "comics," and all the former merriment was in full swing.

"You hear?" Cora exclaimed, catching up with the mistress. "That's the sort of din the whole Form has to endure for the sake of Betty Barton and her own particular set!"

Miss Redgrave bestowed a soothing nod upon the complainant, and went to the open door of Study 12.

At that instant the record came to an end, and the room buzzed with the chums' mirthful comments on the song.

"Girls!"

"Oh! Miss Redgrave, do come in!"

"Yes, wather! P-way have my cheah, Miss Wedgwave—"

"It is very kind of you to welcome me," said the popular under-mistress. "My reason for the visit is hardly a happy one, however! There are complaints that this gramophone playing is a nuisance to most of the girls!"

"Indeed?" said Betty Barton. "Where are most of the girls?"

Miss Redgrave cast a glance about her, and then she smiled.

Most of the girls—all the Form, in fact, with the exception of Cora and Judith—had made the audience as large as it was!

"Cora—Judith!"

"Yes, Miss Redgrave?"

"This hardly agrees with what you told me," Miss Redgrave said. "You gave me to understand—"

"How can we possibly do anything with this row going on?"

"You gave me to understand," pursued Miss Redgrave, frowning at the ill-tempered interruption, "that a few girls were enjoying themselves at the expense of the majority. But I find all the Form enjoying the gramophone."

"We are not—"

"If you are not enjoying it you are a minority of two," said Miss Redgrave sweetly. "Why you are not enjoying it, when everybody else finds it so delightful, might puzzle some people! But it doesn't puzzle me!"

"Miss Redgrave, you have no right to think—"

"Cora Grandways, be careful what you say! I will not have any impudence! This is a time of the evening intended for amusement and companionship. The girls are fully entitled to play the gramophone, and if—"

"The usual thing!" flared up Cora passionately. "Favouritism! Nothing but favouritism for Betty Barton! All right! Come away Judith! Hang their gramophone! Hang everything and everybody!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Only that burst of laughter from the girls prevented Miss Redgrave from calling the ill-tempered sisters back. When she saw how Betty & Co. ridiculed the display of

malice, she thought it was perhaps best for her to treat it with contempt.

It was all a trifling incident, perhaps, judged from one point of view. But it was important for this reason.

Cora and Judith felt the ill-success of their attempt to get the music stopped as another humiliation.

And now—on this third evening of the school's summer term—they sat brooding over their malicious enmity against the captain and her chums, feeling that enmity as strong within them as it had ever been, and puzzling, savagely, how to give Betty & Co. a taste of humble pie!

CHAPTER 22.

Where is Rose of the Desert?

WHEN Betty Barton and Polly Linton awoke next morning, along with the rest of the inmates of the Fourth Form dormitory, they did not proceed at once with their toilettes.

Instead, they each slipped on a dressing-gown, and made a whirling rush down to Study 12.

None of the other girls noticed the couple's unusual action, or, if they did, they gave it no thought. Betty and Polly got down to their study without being followed, and in a moment they had shut the door behind them.

With equal alacrity, both girls then darted to the corner cupboard, which served as their study pantry.

Whipping open the cupboard door, they cast a pouncing glance inside.

"No!" Betty exclaimed at once, rather disappointedly. "She has not been here again! Nothing has been touched!"

Polly nodded.

"I'm sorry, that's all," she murmured. "I only wish Rose of the Desert had paid another secret visit to the study, in the night, and taken more food."

"So do I," agreed Betty. "It is sad—dressing—to think of that girl remaining in hiding, day after day, and perhaps living on a starvation allowance of food."

"She came to this larder of ours, some time before we got back to school for the reopening—just that once," Polly went on reflectively. "But she does not come any

more, although we are pretty sure she is still living that lie in hiding!"

"If we only knew where she is in hiding—and why!" sighed Betty. "It is a trying business, Polly, knowing that some mystery is going on, and never being able to get to the bottom of it!"

Polly reached a hand into the cupboard and picked up an envelope that was lying on a clean slate, in a noticeable place.

The envelope was not gummed down, and Polly took out the folded sheet of paper which was inside, and scanned it.

"This message of ours to Rose of the Desert—I did hope we should find it gone, Betty!"

"Yes, dear. But we must be patient," said Betty. "We will put it here again this evening, before we go up to bed. We'll leave it night after night, until something happens!"

Then the talk languished for a moment, whilst both girls read through their well-meaning message to the mysterious personage whose extraordinary conduct was still unexplained.

"To Rose of the Desert," so ran the message, in very bold, clear writing,—“we hope you will be able to read this, as we want you to know that we are still your friends.

“We found that you had been to this room for food, and we know that the three pearls you left behind, on a plate, were meant to pay us for what you took.

“Dear Rose of the Desert, you need not have troubled to pay us. Take all the food you want, and let us help you in any other way that we can.

“We do not know what all the mystery means, but we feel sure that you had a good reason for hiding away from Miss Hartry, who brought you from Africa. So we are not going to tell her about your secret visit to this room for food.—Your true friends,

“BETTY BARTON,
“POLLY LINTON.”

“I don't know what more we could say to her,” muttered Betty. “It would be no use, I am sure, writing a long, involved letter to a native girl who, at the best, can only read the very simplest English.”

“No,” said Polly ruefully. “That is the bother of it! We are not sure that she

can even read it all. We only know that she was taught to speak English, years ago, when the headmistress's brother, Jack Somerfield, was a prisoner in the Sultan of Susahlah's hands.”

They returned the simple message to its unsealed envelope, then put it away in a table drawer.

“Well, I suppose we must hop back upstairs and get dressed,” Polly exclaimed. “But I simply couldn't have waited until after breakfast, before nipping down to the study.”

“You were mentioning Jack Somerfield,” remarked Betty, as they withdrew from the study. “We shall soon be seeing him now. His boat gets to Liverpool to-day, and we know he will come on at once to Morocco.”

“And how strange it is,” rejoined Polly, “that Jack Somerfield should be coming back to England just at a time when Rose of the Desert is over here again from Africa! Betty dear—”

“I know what you are going to say,” broke in Betty softly. “It almost seems as if the mystery of Rose of the Desert's conduct has something to do with Jack Somerfield's return.”

There the girl's talk had to cease again, for they were coming to the dormitory landing, where chums of theirs were flitting about in various stages of dress and undress.

Betty and Polly were soon dressed, and, noticing what a glorious morning it was, felt they must have a scamper around before the breakfast gong rang.

Rain had fallen in the night, leaving the air deliciously sweet and soft. From the now cloudless heavens the sun shone with almost the heat of a summer morning, drawing the sparkle of raindrops from a million blades of grass on the emerald lawns.

Keeping to the rain-washed gravel drive, Betty and Polly raced each other down to the lodge whilst they gazed across the headland and marvelled at the blue of the sea beyond it.

Suddenly, a girl on a cycle came purring along the main road.

She was riding slowly and gracefully—in no hurry to reach any destination, that was evident, but simply out for an early morning spin. It was a joyous fling of the head, as the soft wind came at her, that

caused the girl cyclist to see Betty and Polly.

"Hallo!" she cried, and sprang from the machine, wheeling it towards the school-girls.

"Good-morning, Pearl!" said the chums, for Pearl Hartry it was.

Betty added, because she and Polly were going to give no hint of the suspicions which troubled them, about this excessively friendly girl:

"You are out early, Pearl!"

"Just for a spin round the countryside, yes," Pearl answered. "By the way, do you care for cycling? If so, we might get a run together sometimes!"

"We'll see," said Betty non-committally. "Any news of—that girl yet, Pearl?"

"You mean the native girl who came with me and dad from Africa? No," answered Pearl ruefully. "I was going to ask you, whether—"

"We have not seen her," the chums hastened to say, with perfect truth.

Pearl bit her lip for a few moments; then she looked as serene and fascinating as ever.

"Well, you won't forget to let me know if you do see her—your Rose of the Desert, as you called her. Ha, ha, ha! Even now I have to laugh at your mistaking my silly, ignorant, half-savage brown girl for your wonderful Rose of the Desert! Good-bye!"

And next moment she was in the saddle again, pedalling gaily along the quiet road that would bring her to the house where she lived with her father.

Stephen Hartry was also out of doors early this morning. His daughter found him pacing to and fro on the weedy gravel of the neglected garden, his thin face very expressive of tense anxiety.

"Father!" Pearl went up to him to say, softly, after she had stalled her cycle in an old shed. "I have seen those schoolgirls this morning."

"What, already—as early as this?" he exclaimed.

"They happened to be at the school-gates as I rode past. I got off for a moment's talk. Father, they have not seen her!"

He scowled.

"No one has seen her, or will see her!"

was his irritable outburst. "That Rose of the Desert—a fine game she has played us! A witch couldn't have vanished more completely than that girl vanished, after she got possession of the chart!"

He seemed to regret voicing such indiscreet words in the open air. The moment they were spoken he shot an uneasy glance around the lonely, neglected garden, then he went into the house, Pearl accompanying him.

"You know, Pearl," he broke out then, as his daughter followed him into his study and closed the door, "matters are getting desperate. It is simply fatal to our whole scheme, Rose of the Desert eluding us like this!"

"Well, father, what more can I do?"

"You are splendid, Pearl," he exclaimed, those hard eyes of his softening as he let them rest upon this motherless girl of his. "Never think for a moment that I am reproaching you. I only say that we seem to be fated never to get possession of that chart! And without it—"

He suddenly clenched his fists.

"Without it, Pearl, we shall never find that El Dorado, which it tells of, out there in North Africa! I have promised you that we would be rich—rich beyond the dreams of avarice! So we would be, within a few months of our locating the goldfield by means of that chart! But Rose of the Desert has it, and that is what worries me; makes me so desperate! We know that Somerfield lands at Liverpool to-day."

Pearl nodded. She could make no rejoinder of a soothing nature. Full well she knew that the hope of gaining the coveted chart was sinking fast to zero.

"For this is what it all means," her father went on, after a turn about the room. "That native girl is retaining the chart pending Somerfield's return. She knows that it is his property, and he happens to be a fellow who won her esteem and loyalty, years ago. I believe, Pearl, she would rather die than yield up the chart to you or me!"

"That may be true enough, father," Pearl said heavily. "But if only we could get on her track—take her by surprise—"

"Ay, if only we could do that!" he exclaimed fiercely. "I would soon have the chart then, let her fight me like a tigress—as she would! But there is no getting a clue to her whereabouts—not a clue!"

"We surely have another four-and-twenty hours before Somerfield turns up at the school," Pearl reflected aloud. "He will not be here before to-morrow morning, so we have all to-day—all to-night, father. And perhaps, at the last moment, our luck will turn!"

There came a rap at the closed door—the aged domestic's way of announcing that breakfast was served.

"Come, father," Pearl said, taking his arm. "Let us go in and make a good meal, and then afterwards——"

"What puzzles me," he broke out irritably, "is how Rose of the Desert is managing for food, all this time! If she had visited any shops, we must have heard about it, for she is in the native dress. Besides, she had no English money."

"Shall I tell you what I think?" Pearl said, with a curious smile. "My belief is, Rose of the Desert is living at the expense of those schoolgirls——"

"They have befriended her, then, without telling us!"

"No, father; she is getting into the school, by some means or other, unbeknown to them. All the girls have their own little study larders. Rose of the Desert is filching food from them, without the loss of it being noticed."

The father stood mute and rigid for a moment, pondering this.

"Well, then," he suddenly exclaimed, in an excited whisper, "if she is making secret visits to the school, there is our chance. We have only to wait and watch——"

"After dark, yes. And that is my idea for to-night, father," Pearl went on, in a lowered voice. "To-night—the last night we have before Somerfield returns!"

Stephen Hartry patted his daughter's hand as she rested it upon his sleeve.

"Splendid, Pearl—splendid! There is our chance, to-night—and perhaps the luck will turn!"

CHAPTER 23.

Cora & Co. Mean Mischiefs.

THAT afternoon the chums of the Fourth Form were down on the seashore, revelling in the summer-like splendour of these sunny hours of spring.

Tess Trelawney was sitting in the cool shade cast by a part of the towering cliffs, and on this account Tess felt she was sacrificing comfort for art.

For Tess had come back to school, this term, meaning to "go at" her water colours with a vengeance. At the moment, she had to sit in the shade, so that she could do a marine "study" for the mater's birthday present.

As for the rest of the girls—Betty, Polly, Madge, Trixie, and Dolly—they were just basking deliciously in the hot sunshine, talking lazily the while.

There was another girl—Paula Creel. But Paula was not talking, and so she has to be mentioned separately. Paula was enjoying the seashore equivalent of a sofa. In a nice dry bed of sand, with a hanky spread over the sandy pillow behind her head, Paula was fast asleep!

"Heigh-ho!" Polly Linton suddenly exclaimed, tiring of this listless existence. "Who'll come for a paddle?"

"Yes," said Tess Trelawney dreamily, and Polly turned at once to her.

"You'll paddle, Tess? Come on, then!"

"What?" said Tess, the artist, coming out of her dream. "Oh go away and play! I was not talking to you; I was thinking about this sketch. What colour is that patch of sea over there, where the weed bank is?"

"Green," said Polly. "The sea is always green."

Tess looked at her, more in sorrow than anger.

Each of the others hazarded an answer, only to be told that they were wrong.

Then Polly had one of her brilliant notions.

"We'll ask Paula," she said brightly. "Paula——"

A placid sigh came from the sleeping beauty.

Polly went away to a pool of sea-water, and came back with a nice frisky crab.

She held it humanely, but precariously, over Paula's face.

"Paula, dear! Are you really asleep?"

"Yes, wather!" sighed Paula, opening her eyes. "Howevah—— Healp! Gweat—hai Jove—Polly, you idiot!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Take the silly cweature off my hair! Haow fwivolous you are!" wailed Paula, throwing herself about to avoid the dangling crab. "Stop it, will you? Healp!"

"Sorry," Polly apologised teasingly. "We had to wako you up, because Tess wants to know what colour the sea is!"

Paula had been lying with her eyes shut in the sun. At this moment, the whole seascape had a very strange colour.

"Bai Jove," she said, "it's wed!"

"Red!" pealed all the girls. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"So it is wed, bai Jove!" insisted Paula hotly. "I say, this is most wemarkable, geals! A most extwaordinary——"

"Duffer! Who ever heard of a red sea?"

"The only bit of red I can see," said Polly, "is your nose, Paula! That's been toasting in the sun, and——"

"Wha-a-a-at!" yelled the swell girl of the Fourth Form, as she pulled out her pocket a vanity mirror.

Her eyes were still dazzled by her lying in the sun, and she still saw everything in the wrong colour.

"Gweat goodness!" she gasped, as she looked at her nose. "It's gween!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It weally is, bai Jove! A bwight gween!"

Then Betty Barton took pity on the horror stricken beauty, and explained the cause of the "phenomena."

"I wish," sighed Tess, niggling away at the sketch, "you would all sheer off and let me have a bit of peace. I'm making a most awful mess of things!"

"You are doing a very charming sketch, Tess dear," said Betty, whilst the others, gathering round, murmured to the same effect with great sincerity.

"Only," said Polly, "it wants a figure—a girl in the foreground."

No one was more surprised than Polly herself, when Tess hailed this suggestion with approval.

"My word, Polly, you've got it! Paula, just stand over there, for me to get you, in the picture!"

"Oh, wather!" Paula assented, beaming delightedly. "But, geals, is my hat on stwaight?"

"Your hat is crooked and your hair is straight," teased Polly.

"No, weally——"

"Stand—over—there!" Tess shouted, full of the fire of genius. "Just as if your hat matters, duffer! Not there, Paula—more to the left!"

Paula skipped to the left obediently, quite frightened by Tess's fierce expression.

"A little further back, duffer!"

Then Paula stepped back, and——

Plop! Splosh!

She was up to her knees in a pool of water!

"Oh, healp!" yelled Paula, whilst a perfectly delirious peal of laughter went up.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"How can you stand theah when you see me dwooning!" wailed the dressy girl, splashing about in a panic. "Healp, healp!"

"If you think I'm going to sketch you like that——" said Tess.

"I don't want to be sketched!" wailed Paula. "I want to be wescued! I am sinking through the earth. Healp!"

She evidently thought she had stepped into a quicksand; but the girls knew better, and again and again their shrieks of merriment went up, frightening all the birds along the cliff.

"I thought you had a strong objection to frisking about in the water?" Polly cried.

"How can a geal healp fwisking about?" was the wailing answer. "How extwemely fwivolous you are! My guinea stockings are wuined! I am dwenched—dwooned! I shall have to pwoceed home at once!"

Which Paula did, looking the picture of woe as she minced along the dry sands with a very wet skirt flapping about her knees.

Dolly and Madge went with her, for company's sake, and soon Tess the industrious was enjoying real freedom from "fwivolity." Trixie Hope "bagged" the sandy couch recently vacated by the sweet girl, yawned, and closed her eyes, whilst Betty and Polly set off for a ramble along the shore.

"I wonder if we really could get a jackdaw's egg?" Polly broke out light-heartedly, when they had trudged a good half-mile from where Tess was still executing the

work of art. "My brother Jack will be running over to the school, for a cert., whilst Mr. Somerfield is here. I've a great idea of collecting eggs and selling them to Jack!"

"Does he want them?" asked Betty.

She had a strong notion that Jack Linton had collected every species of bird's egg when he was still in knickers!

"Never mind whether he wants them or not, if I want to sell them, Jack must buy them!" was Polly's breezy declaration. "Sixpence each——"

"That will be profiteering, Polly!"

"Not with one's own brother. He has as much pocket-money as I have! Oh, look!" And madcap Polly suddenly pointed excitedly. "There are a couple of choughs, Betty—rare birds!"

"Never heard of them," confessed Betty.

"I'm not surprised; they are only found in Cornwall as a rule. People sometimes call them Cornish ravens, but they are really a sort of crow with reddish legs."

Polly volunteered all this information in an absent manner. She was watching the two birds—a pair that had evidently made a nest in some inaccessible niche of the cliff.

They came dashing back, in a flustered manner, towards the face of the cliff, only to flap off again, crying harshly.

"See?" Polly cried out, with growing excitement. "There is their nest, I do believe, Betty! And I'm going to get one of their eggs! Only one, mind you, to take more would be wrong."

"You will never——"

"Won't I?" laughed Polly. "Come on! Half-a-crown from Jack for a chough's egg, and cheap at the price!"

The nest was not more than twenty-five feet up from the foot of the cliff. And both girls saw at once that, if they could only scale the first fourteen feet or so, the rest would be easy.

That first fourteen feet of rock, however—it looked like baffling them. Every high tide the waters lapped the foot of the cliff, and in the course of years the base had become perfectly smooth with the action of the waves.

"Bother it!" exclaimed Polly ruefully. "It would be so easy once we got to that

ledge up there. But—I say, Betty, you couldn't give me a bunk up?"

"Not that distance, I'm afraid," doubted Betty, treating the proposal quite seriously. "If you really want the chough's egg, you'll have to bring a ladder, some other day."

"Fag a ladder all the way from the school—even if it were allowed?" grimaced Polly. "Not much!"

Then, with the next breath, she gave a "whoop" of delight.

"Why, talking of ladders—look!" she cried gaily, pointing.

Stretched along the sand, where it had been washed up and left by the tide, was a fine baulk of timber—part of a ship's deck cargo, no doubt, during a gale.

"Eureka!" agreed Betty, getting just as excited as her chum. "That's the thing!"

Nor did they waste a moment in carrying out the idea which had occurred to both of them.

Dragging the piece of timber towards the smooth base of the cliff, they raised it like a ladder, rearing it against the wall of the rock.

It was a very long plank, and so the angle at which it sloped, when it had been got into position, was not more than forty-five degrees.

"Me, first, Betty!"

"No, me——"

"Me, I say!" insisted Polly, bursting with eagerness; and so Betty took charge, down below, ready to steady the plank, if necessary, whilst her daring chum swarmed up it on hands and knees.

Betty found that the plank kept quite steady of its own accord, thanks to its lower end being embedded in the sand. Up and up went Polly, and suddenly there was a gay "Hoorah!" as she scrambled off the sloping plank on to the edge of rock.

"I'm coming!" shouted Betty.

"Right-ho! It's great—spiffing!"

The next few moments saw Betty scrambling up the sagging plank, tittering at the risk there seemed to be of getting thrown off, whilst Polly was already standing erect on the ledge, measuring the rest of the distance up the cliff to the chough's nest.

Thus, neither of the adventure-loving schoolgirls was aware of newcomers upon

the scene below. Neither Betty nor Polly was aware that Cora and Judith Grandways were skulking behind some rocks, planning mischief!

The sisters had just turned back, after a saunter along the seashore, when they beheld the Form-captain and her chum performing that acrobatic feat with the plank.

In a flash the same idea had occurred to both mischief-makers.

Here was a chance for them to land Betty and Polly in trouble!

A chance to get the Form-captain herself in disgrace up at the school—a chance to make the inseparables eat that overdue slice of humble pie!

"Down—down!" Cora Grandways had whispered excitedly to her sister.

A needless injunction! Judith had already seen the need for keeping out of sight.

So, now, the pair of them were crouching low behind a mass of rock, seeing yet unseen.

They waited there, grinning up to their ears with malicious delight over what they intended to do as soon as the right moment came.

The ledge of rock to which the chums had ascended ran for several yards along the cliff-face. As soon as the couple advanced along it, as they were certain to do, their backs would be turned to the plank below.

All this came about as Cora and Judith had foreseen; and suddenly they decided that the moment had arrived.

Still unseen by the couple up above, they darted noiselessly to the base of the plank, and pulled swiftly and violently.

The moment it commenced to slide from position, the cunning pair fled back to cover. Then:

Flop! went the great plank as it fell full length to the sands.

Cora, pressing close to the wall of rock, gestured to her sister:

"Come on! Come away, Judy!"

At that instant Betty Barton was giving a sudden exclamation of surprise, as she followed her chum along the narrow ledge of rock.

"Hallo! I say, Polly, did you hear that?"

"My goodness!" gasped out Polly, facing about with a scared look. "I heard—yes! But you don't mean to say——"

"It was the plank, right enough!" Betty struck in grimly, darting back to peer down. "Just look here!"

Polly crept close to her chum and also peered down—gazed down a very, very long way, it seemed to her, to where the plank was lying flat upon the beach.

"Can we jump?" she questioned at last.

"Out of the question," Betty declared emphatically. "There is only a thin coating of sand, most likely, down there, covering hard rock. We would most likely break our ankles."

"It really is too risky," Polly admitted, with a slight shiver. "Even the mere shock might upset one for life. But, Betty——"

She suddenly clutched her chum by one shoulder, as if stricken with dismay.

"This is serious, Betty!"

"It is—jolly serious!"

"The tide is running in. If we don't get away from here at once——"

Polly left the rest unsaid, following the excited words with a gasp of helpless desperation.

Betty, too, was silent now.

Stranded there together on that lonely ledge of rock, with the waves fast tumbling nearer, nearer to the base of the cliff, they could only gaze at each other with looks of blank dismay.

CHAPTER 24.

Missing from School.

WHEN the sun set that evening, there were anxious minds and heavy hearts among the inmates of Morcove School.

The approach of darkness increased the alarm with which the girls and mistresses alike were wondering—what had become of Betty Barton and Polly Linton?

They had not been into tea. Nothing whatever had been heard of them since they roamed off together along the seashore, round about three o'clock.

The evening had been well advanced be-

fore Miss Somerfield was notified of the girls' unaccountable absence.

Up to that time, the couple's chums had quite naturally held their tongues, feeling it no duty of theirs to create alarm when, at any moment, Betty and Polly might come strolling in, with some very simple excuse for their absence.

For a time, indeed, Madge and others took it for granted that Betty and Polly had simply made their way along the shore to a point where they could ascend to the coast road, and had then rambled on in quest of a cottage where tea could be obtained.

But at last the hour had come when the continued absence of the inseparables could no longer be hushed up. The headmistress had no blame to bestow upon the girls for having been so slow to come to her. But she was seriously alarmed.

Madge, Paula, Tess, and a few others, returning dead beat to the school, after a fruitless search along the cliffs, had nothing to report; and they now learned that inquiries by 'phone as far as Barncombe had been just as futile.

The searchers would have gone along the shore, only that was an impossibility, the tide being right up. Forced to confine their ramble to the cliff tops, they had often hallo-ed, without getting any response.

One comforting theory only could be formed. It was, that the two absentees had been caught by the rising tide in one of the numerous caves along the cliff. In that case, they would be in no danger, for in all the caves one could seek a remote part which was beyond the reach of the waves, except in very stormy weather.

But if this were Betty and Polly's plight, it meant that hours must elapse before the tide would have gone down far enough for them to return home.

So, although the anxiety still preyed upon the minds of all, there was a cheery effort to take this hopeful view of the scare.

Betty and Polly would turn up, long before night-fall, quite unharmed, and only very tired and hungry. Miss Somerfield had been heard to say that she could hardly believe the girls would deserve punishment; but, as to that, Cora and Judith were cherishing their own secret opinion!

For the spiteful sisters were sure that the

only story Betty and Polly could tell, when they got back safely—as they were certain to do—would not exonerate them from severe blame.

They would have to say that they had made a tricky climb to a ledge of rock, and had been stranded there because the plank they had used "must have slipped away"!

Such a madcap business as this would anger the headmistress, and so—oh, joy!—Cora and Judith were saying to themselves, for once, Betty Barton and her chum would be in deep disgrace!

As darkness fell, the gleam of lantern-light might have been seen down in that deep coombe which debauched upon the shore, and which was Morcove's nearest means of getting to the sands.

Miss Redgrave and two or three of the girls were there, waiting and watching for the tide to fall far enough to free the couple whom they hoped were only imprisoned, under safe conditions, in one of those sea-locked caves less than a mile away.

And soon as the dark waters had ebbed away from the foot of the precipitous cliffs, the watchers could hope to see Betty and Polly scrambling along the sodden sands. Meanwhile, they refused to acknowledge the fear that real danger had menaced the absentees.

Yet that fear, as they were afterwards to learn, was only too well justified.

The two girls were indeed in great peril—had been ever since the tide first lapped the base of the cliff.

And so, far from being helpless but secure prisoners at the remote end of a cavern, the girls had remained upon that exposed ledge of rock.

Long before the tide was at its height, the spray had hissed again and again upon most of the flat ledge, pouring back into the churning waters with a great, roaring sound.

The two girls must have been continually drenched with sea water, even if they had not been swept away and drowned, only they had edged back to one of the parts of the ledge where they were safe from the hissing spray.

But the tide had fallen at last. Fountains of spray no longer came leaping up to the ledge, although every wave was still swirling right up to the base of the cliff.

"Another hour, and we could venture—if only we could risk the jump!" Polly exclaimed at length. "Betty, we shall simply have to jump! If not, we shall be here all night, and the tide will be up again in the morning—a rougher tide, perhaps!"

"We will get away, Polly," answered the other girl, "and without risking the jump, either. I've got a sudden idea——"

"Oh, Betty, what is it? Tell me!" Polly cried joyfully.

"I was a duffer not to think of it before the tide rose," Betty blamed herself. As a matter of fact, however, the idea was not one that would have occurred to anybody very speedily.

For it was a most ingenious one, as Polly Linton was quickly to declare, when it had been made clear to her.

Betty's suggestion was that they should both take off their stockings, and twist all four of them into a "rope."

She—Betty—would remain on the ledge, holding the "rope" fast by one end, whilst Polly slipped over the side, lowered herself as far as possible, then dropped the rest of the distance to the wet shore.

But that was by no means the whole of the idea.

Betty herself would still be perched aloft, with no one to hold the "rope" for her! She had thought of this, however, and her idea was that Polly, having reached the shore, should make as big a mound of sand as possible for Betty to alight on, when she made the daring jump.

"Spiffing!" declared Polly elatedly. "What a brainy one you are, Betty! Come on!"

And there and then the two whipped off their shoes and stockings, forming the latter into their four-stranded "rope." It stretched a good deal; but there was no question about its being strong enough.

After that there was a trying wait for the tide to go down far enough.

Fuming with impatience, they watched the everlasting waves, exclaiming joyfully every time one visibly failed to lap the base of the cliff.

"Now!" Polly burst out at last. "It may be an awful slop down there, Betty; I don't care! I'm going!"

With the word, she got upon all fours,

backing towards the edge of the shelf of rock.

Then she took a good hold of one end of the "rope" and slid over the brink, Betty meanwhile holding on to her end of the stockings like grim death.

There was a fearful jerk upon Betty as Polly suddenly dropped and then swung with all her weight upon the "rope." But Betty sat firm, and the pull only lasted a moment.

In the next, Polly had let go, falling at least eight feet to the water-logged sands.

"All right?" panted Betty anxiously.

"All serene!" Polly shouted back.

Then she sat about making as big mound of sand as possible just below the ledge, so as to lessen the distance for Betty to jump.

At last it was a good five feet high.

"Look out!" cried Betty. And down she came, with a soft plop! full on top of the sodden heap of sand.

"Hooray!"

It was Polly's delighted cheer as she saw her chum scramble up, none the worse for the jump.

Eagerly they set off along the base of the towering cliffs, anxious to save every moment over the rest of the journey.

Here and there they came to a spot where the tide was still covering the sands shallowly at every wave burst; but they simply paddled on through the frothy waters on their bare feet.

In a quarter of an hour they reached the lonely coombe, similar to the one close to Morcove School, with a path leading to and from the shore. Here they put on their shoes and stockings, and then plodded up the rough path, with bright starlight to help them on their way.

"My word, a nice lecture we'll get from Miss Somerfield when we get indoors!" Betty remarked, when they were going straight across country towards the school.

"All my fault," said Polly, "and I shall take the blame!"

"You won't!"

"I shall! It was my mad idea to use that plank to reach the shelf of rock. I shall——"

"We are going to share any blame, Polly, as we share everything else," declared

Betty, causing her chum to catch at her hand and hold it. "And what trouble we do get into, we shall not have deserved, any how!"

"You mean, it's hard to understand how that plank fell away of its own accord?" returned Polly. "I'm with you there, Betty! We can't do anything that seems like telling tales; but for our own satisfaction it may pay us to find out whether Cora and Judith were down on the seashore round about that time!"

"Yes," Betty pursued, and was going to say more, but suddenly she stopped dead, laying a meaning grip upon her chum's shoulder.

"Sh! Down, Polly—down!" Betty whispered excitedly, at the same time crouching low.

Polly also sank to her knees upon the grass, although she was plainly at a loss to understand this sudden need for caution.

"What is it?" she asked, in a whisper. "What's the reason?"

"You didn't see?" Betty whispered back. "Take a cautious peep, Polly—straight ahead! Don't let them see you!"

"Them?" echoed Polly, lifting her head a few inches to peer across the nightbound waste of grass.

A man and a girl—Pearl and her chum! Betty added, still in a suppressed tone of great excitement. "At this time they are making for Morcove!"

"What did it mean?"

That question was instantly absorbing the girls' minds, to the exclusion of all thoughts about their recent adventures.

They forgot the ordeal of their imprisonment on the ledge above the sands—forgot the need for hastening on to the school, to relieve others' anxieties.

Suddenly, however, a thing happened that alarmed the chums. They had the sharp fear that they must have been seen.

For now, after one or two backward glances, the mysterious couple stood still on the roadway, as if they had become suspicious.

Betty and Polly simply "froze," like a couple of bunnies that dared not bolt. They could hear their hearts pounding heavily

at the moments dragged by, and still Pearl and her father did not go on again.

Were they even going to turn back, to make sure that they were not being followed? If so—

No!

But they were suddenly doing a thing that hardly relieved the chums' dismay.

Father and daughter turned off the road, snuggling down into the same dry ditch in which the girls were crouching.

"That's to see if anybody comes along," Betty conjectured, whispering the words. "In a few minutes, you'll see, they will go on again."

But the minutes passed, and yet Pearl and her father were still hiding in the dry ditch.

"I know!" Polly exclaimed softly, of a sudden. "It is the light in those windows at the school that has checked them!"

"In that case," returned Betty, "they really must be intending to get into the school! But what for? Are they nothing else but a couple of—"

"Look!" Polly suddenly gasped, gripping her chum's hand. "Over there, Betty!"

Then Betty also gasped.

Advancing slowly across the nightbound grasslands, towards the road, came a white, silent figure.

An eerie, ghostly form it looked, and yet it had no terrors for the chums.

In a flash they knew who it was.

"Rose of the Desert!" they exclaimed together, thrilling with excitement. "There she is—Rose of the Desert!"

Polly added in the next breath:

"She mustn't elude us this time, Betty! Now, let us run out to her, now!"

"No; wait," cautioned Betty softly. "Watch for a moment! Pearl and her father must have come this way to meet her. Has she an appointment with them, then? Has she never really fallen out with them, after all?"

"Pearl said—"

"Pearl has been fibbing all along," Betty muttered. "Perhaps Rose of the Desert never fell out with the girl. And yet—No! I can't believe that Rose of the Desert is their confederate over some shady bit of business!"

"All I know is, I wouldn't be missing this for anything!" Polly whispered, trembling all over with excitement.

As silently as ever that spectral figure came gliding across the level ground, making for a part of the road just beyond the spot where Pearl and her father were lurking.

Was Rose of the Desert, then, also making for the school?

Even as that question suddenly flashed upon the girls, the opportunity for mental puzzling ended, and the need for action began.

For, to their sudden alarm, they saw Pearl and her father spring up from their hiding place and rush at the native girl.

There was an instant whilst Rose of the Desert seemed to be petrified with fright. Then she flashed about, and ran—ran as for her very life.

After her they dashed—and that was the signal for Betty and Polly to rush from their hiding place.

Now they knew what purpose Pearl and her father had had in skulking about the neighbourhood at this time of night.

The couple must have known that Rose of the Desert would be coming this way—stealing across country on one of her secret but harmless visits to the school.

They had sought to ambush her; but just a moment too soon had they dashed out to seize her!

Once again, Rose of the Desert's fleetness of foot looked like saving her.

Whilst Betty and Polly tore after Pearl and her father, they—the girls—could see that the villainous pair were not overtaking Rose of the Desert.

Then, suddenly, the figure in white seemed to collapse. It was up again in an instant; but Rose of the Desert must have stumbled badly just then, hurting an ankle. She could not go on as swiftly as before.

"They'll catch her!" panted Betty fiercely. "But let them do her the least harm, and they'll soon regret it. Hi, you!" she shouted, and Polly also voiced a cry, in the hope of throwing the couple into a panic.

"Hi! Stop, there! Let her alone!"

IT was a shout that must have been the first hint Pearl and her father had of the chums' presence close at hand. They checked abruptly, looked round, but in an instant they were rushing on again in pursuit of the native girl.

Then did Betty and Polly make one of the fastest sprints they had ever accomplished.

Madly they tore on across the night-bound field, fast overtaking Pearl and her father, who, in turn, were swiftly catching up with Rose of the Desert.

Twenty paces—ten! But now Stephen Hartry had caught the fugitive girl and had her fast by one arm. He was panting some fierce injunction at her. Betty and Polly could even hear the words, the second time they were uttered.

"That paper! Give me that paper, girl!"

"No—don't!" Betty and Polly sang out together, although they had not the least idea what the paper could be. "We are here! Hold out, Rose of the Desert! We'll help you!"

"Will you, you busybodies!" came Pearl Hartry's savage cry; and suddenly she was dashing at both girls, in a desperate effort to prevent their reaching Rose of the Desert.

Polly Linton went down with a thud that was to leave its mark on her shoulder for a week; but a similar attempt to seize Betty was adroitly dodged.

And then Betty and Pearl closed in a fierce struggle, whilst Polly, scrambling up, rushed on to help Rose of the Desert in her stand against Stephen Hartry.

Darting close to the scuffling pair, Polly made a grab at the man's ankles and pulled his feet from under him.

Crash! he went to earth, leaving Rose of the Desert free to speed on again. But she was still feeling the effects of her stumble, and Polly's urgent cry of "Run—run!" could not be obeyed.

"Nay!" Rose of the Desert answered. "Take this, and then I shall care not what happens! Take it, brave girl! Guard it!"

She was thrusting a folded document into Polly's hands; but Stephen Hartry

was already scrambling up after his heavy fall. He made a sudden grab to snatch the paper, and only just in time Rose of the Desert staggered back, still holding it.

The scoundrel did not make another dash to try and seize the coveted paper.

Instead, he turned upon Polly, and the glimpse she had of his face told her with what a fury he meant to settle with her!

Betty Barton was still struggling with Pearl, and only just holding her own in the conflict. Polly wondered what was going to happen to her.

And then something surprising happened!

Stephen Hart's arms fell suddenly to his sides, whilst he cried out in wild dismay to his daughter:

"Pearl! That's enough, Pearl! Come away! Quick—quick!"

The girl instantly shared his fright. She tore herself from Betty, and darted away, and thus the chums were left free to run to Rose of the Desert's side.

But they were confused and exhausted—all the more so as they were suddenly aware of a strong light flashing upon them. Giddily they turned about, and their eyes were quite dazzled by the glare of a motor-car's lamps.

When they understood.

noticed by them, during the desperate struggle, a powerful car had come along the road.

Swerving lights must have shown the driver that a scrimmage was going on out of the field, and he had pulled up sharply to learn the meaning of the affray.

The strong glare of the lamps was behind him as he came rushing up, and, even when he was within a pace or two of the chums, they were still too dazzled to be able to scan his features. Only when he cried out excitedly to them did they know him in an instant, by his voice.

"Jack Somerfield!" the girls almost screamed with joy. "Oh, it's Mr. Somerfield—it's Jack!"

"Yes, well?" their hero of a thousand adventures jerked out. "What about it? You girls—Morcove scholars—out here at this time of night! And those people—who were they? What does it all mean?"

Both girls went closer to him, whilst they pointed to Rose of the Desert. The lamplight showed her lying all in a heap upon the ground.

"We were trying to save her from being robbed of something by those people," Betty panted. "We chanced to be out here when they were lying in wait for her. They set upon her, to rob her—"

"Of what?" cried Somerfield, advancing towards the fallen girl with his schoolgirl chums.

"Of a paper," answered Polly. "I have never seen people so desperately eager to get hold of anything! They—"

"Never mind, girls, so long as you beat them off, as you certainly did," struck in Somerfield, swiftly regaining his fine composure. "But you tell me that this poor girl is Rose of the Desert—my Rose of the Desert!"

He was sinking to his knees as he said the words, and in a moment the native girl was raising herself on one elbow weakly.

"The man Somerfield!" she exclaimed, with a joy that conquered all exhaustion. "Then my task is finished! Kismet! How wonderful are the ways of Fate! You are here, my friend—"

"Yes, Rose of the Desert; and oh, how sorry I am—how grieved," Jack exclaimed, with sudden great emotion, "to find you in such distress! You are hurt, my poor girl?"

"Nay, it is nothing," she assured him courageously. "O friend of mine since I was but a child! See what I have saved from thieving hands! It is yours, I know, and rather would I have died than yield it into any other hands but thine!"

Her hand held up the folded document, and Jack took it. "By the light from the distant lamps he unfolded it and gave it one swift glance.

"The chart!" he gasped. "The chart of the Susahlah goldfield, that I left in Mr. Linton's hands for safe keeping! And you—you—"

"I took it, yer, so that those cunning thieves should not steal it and so find the goldfield of Susahlah!" Rose of the Desert broke in huskily. "Say, then, O friend of mine, thou art not displeased? I am

but a child of the desert land; I know not the laws of thy country. But in all that I have done, I have had but one thought—to serve thee well!”

There was a silence. Somerfield was too touched for words.

“We think we ought to tell you at once,” Betty broke out softly. “To defeat those would-be thieves, who have been hoodwinking all of us, Rose of the Desert has had to suffer great hardships. She has lived the life of a fugitive; she has gone short of food—”

“’Twas naught,” the desert girl broke in gently. “One thing only could have given me suffering; to have failed of my purpose!”

Jack Somerfield, on one knee beside the noble girl, raised her hand to his lips and kissed it.

“You succeeded, Rose of the Desert—you succeeded!”

And there followed, in the same tone of heartfelt gratitude and admiration, two words which the daughter of the desert would treasure as long as life should last—those two words which were all she had ever wanted to receive as her reward for such devotion; Jack Somerfield’s:

“Well done!”

.

And so the strange romance surrounding the return of Rose of the Desert to England, and that part played in it by the chums of Morcove School, was ended at last.

Morning found the desert girl receiving every care and attention in the school san., where she was likely to remain for several days at least, suffering from a slight sprain to her ankle.

Nor, Betty and Co. were quite sure, would they have to say another good-bye to her, when her recovery was complete.

Return to her native land she dare not, since it was now known that the Sultan of Susahlah had been concerned with Stephen Hartry in the quest of the native chart, and would be greatly angered at his failure to get it.

Jack Somerfield hoped in time to get into touch with Rose of the Desert’s brother. Meanwhile, Miss Somerfield was emphatic that the poor, forlorn girl should remain under her protection at the school.

Of the whereabouts of Stephen Hartry and his daughter, on the day following that last desperate attempt of theirs to possess the chart, not a trace could be found.

With the sudden appearance of Jack Somerfield upon the scene, in the car which he had hired in Liverpool to get him to Morcove with all speed, the couple must have realised that it was time to show a clean pair of heels.

They had fled from the house on the Barncombe Road, and Jack Somerfield did not deem it wise to set the police searching for them.

In this grand long story of the great conspiracy and its utter defeat, the life of our chums at Morcove School has been closely interwoven with the doings of Pearl Hartry and her father. And so, in closing, we must not forget to touch upon the sequel to that little scheme of the Grandways sisters to get Betty and Polly into “hot water”!

When the chums of Study 12 stood before the headmistress, they had nothing to say about their suspicion as to exactly how they came to be stranded on that shelf of rock.

Their explanation was, simply, that the plank must have fallen away of its own accord, and they quite expected to be punished for the plight they had got into by their own reckless daring.

But Miss Somerfield did not deprive Betty of the captaincy, nor was Polly in any way penalised.

Why? We cannot say. We only know that Betty and Polly came away from that grave interview with smiling countenances, causing their anxious chums to greet them, in the Fourth Form corridor, with a cheer of relief.

"Hurrah! Hooray! We knew it would be all right!" the girls declared exuberantly. "It was not your fault that you got into such a scrape!"

"Perhaps Miss Somerfield has a private notion as to whose fault it was!" said Madge Minden, casting a shrewd glance at Cora and Judith Grandways, who were standing in their study doorway.

"If Miss Somerfield can't guess, we can!" said Tess.

"Yes, wather!"

Then Cora and Judith backed into their den, and the door closed violently, with a meaning:

SLAM!



Three more splendid numbers of "The Schoolgirls' Own" Library will be on sale on Friday, Feb. 4th. See page iii of cover for further particulars.

THE IDEAL HOCKEY CAPTAIN.

The most important member of a girls' hockey team is without doubt the captain. To what extent she can be responsible for the winning or losing of matches is not generally recognised, for to a large extent, the success of the girl who leads the team is achieved by quiet and not very obvious methods.

To control a team of good players is a job requiring tact and cleverness, but to manage a weak team and get the best out of everyone so as to hide their many defects calls for the greatest gifts of leadership.

Have you ever played with or played against an eleven of which the spectators say enthusiastically: "How well they played together; what splendid team-work! Every girl seemed to be in her right place?"

If you have, then the captain of that team is worth watching, for the credit is very largely hers. And if you have ambitions to become a captain yourself, then make a friend of her, and you'll find she has a lot to teach you.

In the first place, you will probably find that she is liked by the rest of the players; if she is not actually liked she will certainly be respected. She has gained this liking or respect by showing a keen interest in the work of every member of the team, by being quick to spot their weaknesses on the field, and also their strength.

Weaknesses are more easily spotted than remedied. A girl who has played on the left wing for week after week and still fails, say, in centring the ball quickly enough to the centre, is probably trying her very best to eradicate the fault; she may be the hardest worker on the field and the speediest of foot, and she may also be the most sensitive girl in the team.

For the captain to tell her that she must change over to inside-right is, in these circumstances, an occasion for tact, especially if the substitute be a doubtful quantity. It would be the easiest thing in the world to offend the outside-left, but the ideal captain just tackles the question with smiling confidence, chooses just the right words, praising the displaced girl for her zeal, and giving her the impression the move is in the nature of promotion.

Of course, the same treatment would not work with every player. The girl who is apt to be selfish, and also self-assertive, is usually to be found in every team. With her the

captain has to be tactful first and firm all the time.

A case in point was that of a centre-forward, who, on her day, did brilliant work, and found the net frequently. In fact, she won the game on her own. But to level matters up, she had her off-days, when she not only slacked but by her selfishness in not distributing the ball prevented her wingers from doing their best. She made the whole forward line look hopeless.

Her captain should have put her out on the wing where she would have had less room for spoiling other people's efforts, and dropped her for the next match or two after telling her plainly that she was letting the rest of the team down.

The first thing a hockey captain must do is to know how to handle eleven different temperaments. The next thing she must do is to set them an example on the field.

Nothing encourages a team so much as the sight of a leader who is putting her back into it. Better a hard-working, conscientious, planning captain than one who is brilliant occasionally and merely ordinary most times.

The best position on the field for a captain to work is at centre-half. Here she is the very hub of the team, in touch with forwards, backs, and wings, able to send an encouraging word or a word of criticism to any part of the field, able to plan and put into operation her own methods of attack.

If the opposing forwards are on the attack it is the half-back line who first feel the brunt of it, and it is the centre-half who should control that line and endeavour by breaking up the attack to get her own forwards at work once more.

The centre-half is certainly the most important and the hardest-worked player on the field, so it is only fitting that the captain should elect to fill this position herself and to show an example to the rest of the team.

The ideal captain's duties do not end here. She has, of course, to decide the choice of ends after the coin has been tossed, and make up her mind quickly upon other small matters, but they are unimportant details compared with the first essentials of getting the best out of every member of the team by tactful ruling and by example.

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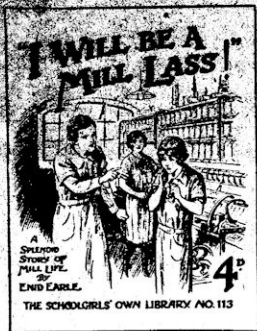
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A tale of the adventures and
perils which surrounded a
lodge-keeper's daughter
when a strange millionaire
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