

THE SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN LIBRARY - No. 139. - PAULA CREEL'S COUSIN!

# PAULA CREEL'S COUSIN

AN EARLY  
ADVENTURE  
OF  
BETTY BARTON  
& Co

BY  
MARJORIE  
STANTON



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The Schoolgirls' Own Library N° 139

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# PAULA CREEL'S COUSIN!

A Magnificent Early Adventure of the Girls of Morcove School, introducing BRENDA RAVEL, and featuring Paula Creel.

By MARJORIE STANTON.

Author of "MORCOVE IN TURANIA," "MORCOVE'S RECKLESS TWO," "THE MORCOVE TUCK-SHOP KEEPERS," etc., etc.

## CHAPTER 1.

### The Beginning of Term.

"NO larking about, Polly deah! I must weally wequest you not to—"

"But, Paula, this is the first day of the new term!"

"Yes, wather! Howevah, I do not wish to awvive at the school looking an uttah weck. So pway, Polly deah—"

Paula Creel had no chance to finish her entreaty.

It probably had something to do with the bottle of lemonade which Polly Linton was opening. Polly was short of elbow-room, for the compartment of the afternoon train from Exeter to Barncombe was simply packed with schoolgirls. And Polly's cramped position meant that she had to hold the lemonade bottle with its stoppered mouth pointing at Paula.

Shee-ish!

"Theah you go, bai Jove!" screeched Paula, as the first fizz came off. "Naow, Polly deah, pway wealise! If you—"

Sheeish! Wizz-oo!

"Healp! Stop it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" pealed all the rest of the girls, Polly included.

"I am trying to stop it, Paula!" asserted the madeap of the Form. "But the more I try the more it seems to—"

"Oh, bai Jove!" wailed Paula, as the lemonade sprayed all over her face again. "Betty deah, you are Form captain! Pway keep this geal in order!"

But Betty, being in convulsions of laughter, as were Madge Minden, Tess

Trelawney, Trixie Hope, and others, was simply helpless to put an end to Polly's antics, even if she had wanted to.

"Hooray!" yelled Polly, suddenly holding aloft the foaming bottle. "You have this one, Paula, and I'll open another!"

"Thanks, bai Jove; but I would much wather you kept that one, and I'll open one myself!" Paula pleaded—with great shrewdness, as she imagined. "I do not wish to get dwenched again!"

Quite a large stock of lemonade had been taken on board at Exeter, along with cakes and buns. With a quiet wink, Tess handed Paula an unopened bottle.

"You know how to do it, Paula?"

"Yes, wather!"

"You just pwess the ball with one finger—"

"Bai Jove, wass! Wather hard to pwess, howevah—what? I will give it one more twy, and then—"

Zec-oo! Shh-zurr!

"Gwacious—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Poor Paula! Once again her pretty face had been sprayed by a fountain of foam, and his time it was all her own doing!

No wonder she fairly collapsed, whilst her chums' shrieks of merriment must have been heard by all the dozens of other scholars who were on the train, going back to Morcove for another term of school life.

Paula hastily dumped the fizzing bottle into Bluebell Courtney's lap, and then plied a handkerchief. Not content with drying her cheeks, she took out a pocket vanity-case and busied herself with a comb.

"Understand, geals, under no circumstances whatevah will I evah twavel with you again!" she announced tragically. "I am a week!"

"Have some lemonade?" mischievously suggested Tess, offering another bottle.

"Yes, do!" implored Betty, holding out yet another.

"Have a bath-bun, Paula?" urged Madge Minden. "Or some of my choocs?"

Paula's disdainful toss of the head was delicious to see. She was on her dignity now, and Paula was never so amusing as when she tried to look haughty.

"You do not seem to wealise," she remarked presently, when all her chums were quite busy with the refreshments. "I have a special weason for looking respectable when when we get to Barncombe, and change theah for Morecove!"

"Oh, to be sure!" cried Betty, rolling a finished lemonade bottle under the seat. "You are meeting that cousin of yours at Barncombe Station."

"Yes, wather! And so, Betty deah—for you are not as fwivolous as Polly, theah—perhaps you will tell me. Does my hat stwike you as being quite stwaight?"

"Perfectly straight!" said Betty, laughing.

But before Paula, the swell girl of the Form, could heave a sigh of relief, Polly Linton burst out:

"Straight! Turn the other way, Paula—right round!"

Paula turned her pretty head obediently.

"Further round than that, duffer!"

"Weally, my head won't go wight wound, you know!"

"Of course not! It never was screwed on the right way!" teased Polly. "But keep looking at the wall like that, and then—Yes, now I'll put your hat quite straight for you!"

So saying, Polly stood up in the jolting train, and began to manipulate that hat of Paula's.

The train gave an extra violent jolt, and Polly swerved, pulling the hat over Paula's left ear.

"Heah! Bai Jove—"

"Sorry! Half a sec., and then—Whoo-er!" Polly chuckled, as the train flung her the other way.

This time, the hat was jerked over Paula's right ear.

Next moment, it was crushed right over

her eyes—then dragged right to the back of her head—then round to her left ear again, Paula all the time protesting:

"Polly, stop it! Healp! Hsow fwivolous you are, weally! Naow look at me, geals!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wouldn't look at you for a sovereign!" said Polly, just as if she had had no hand whatever in the disarray. "Of all the sights—"

"Yes, wather! But—"

"How you can go about looking so untidy, Paula, I don't know!" Polly lectured the swell girl, who was fast getting speechless with indignation. "Your hair—your hat—awful!"

"You should remember, Paula," chimed in Tess soberly, "one is supposed to look a bit presentable on the first day of term!"

Paula tried to speak, but simply groaned.

"Besides which," said Betty, "you distinctly told us you are to meet a cousin of yours—this girl you speak of as being so wonderful! If she sees you looking like that—"

"And we are running into Barncombe Station now!" put in Madge.

Paula yelled:

"What-a-at?"

"Oui, oui—yes, yes!" sang out Trixie Hope, fond as ever of airing her alleged French. "Viola, le ville—behold, the town! Vite, vite—quick, quick, Paula!"

Out came Paula's tiny vanity-case again. Off came her hat, and like lightning she swept the comb through her hair.

"Look heah, geals!" she complained sadly. "If I am going to be the victim of your fwivolity all this term, then I—I shall go on stwike!"

"What have I done?" asked Polly, opening her eyes.

"Without wishing to use a stwong expression," Paula said severely. "I wegard you as downwight aggrwvating! Heah we are, at Barncombe, bai Jove!"

"Yes, here we are—hooray!" Polly cheered, putting her head out of the open window as the train ran alongside the platform. "Dear old Barncombe! And so all change, please!"

Paula clapped on her hat. And then, as she took a final glimpse in the pocket-mirror, her vexed expression vanished.

"Bai Jove! Why, I look quite improved!"

"You are absolutely A 1, Paula dear, about the best girl in the world!" Betty said, giving her a caressing pat on the shoulder. "And it's too bad of us to tease you so!"

"No, no, goals! Weally, bai Jove, you know vewy weal I like it! Opening day, too; we must be mewwy, of course! Howevah—"

And Paula broke off her good-humoured cries to join in the rush to get down light articles of luggage from the racks.

A few seconds more, and the station platform was teeming with girl scholars, all bound for the famous school whose fine pile of buildings crowned a certain great headland on the rugged coast of North Devon.

The fussy little train for Morcove Road Station was waiting, and straight to it surged most of the girls, carrying attaché-cases, hockey-sticks, and other paraphernalia of school life. But there was really no need to hurry, and the chums of the Fourth Form hung back on the main platform.

"Well, where is she—that wonderful cousin of yours?" Betty asked Paula. "I thought you said—"

"Yes, wather! Howevah, geals, I fail to see her, don't you know!" was the swell girl's rather agitated answer. "And that's a nice thing!"

Betty and the rest dumped their things for the moment, and took a scurry round.

The much-talked-of cousin of Paula Creel was coming to the school for the first time to-day, and they all wanted to do the chummy thing by taking her under their wing at once. But—where was she?

"Stwange!" exclaimed Paula flusteredly. "Weally remarkable! It was awwanged that I should meet her heat. She is quite a stwanger to me; but I know the sort of geal to look for."

"Your age, Paula, I think you said?" remarked Madge. "Dark hair—"

"Yes, wather! And altogether a wipper in appeawance! Bwenda Wavel is a stwikingly pwetty geal, I understand, and a pwoper bwick! But—"

No, there was no youthful stranger hanging about the platform of that description.

Apart from all the Morcove scholars, distinguishable by their dress, there seemed to be only local people—Barncombe folk, a farmer or two, and a few farmers' wives, going home from market.

The porter swung the bell, and now Betty and Co. had to snatch up their belongings, and streak for the local train.

"This compartment!" cried Bluchell Courtney, who had been keeping by an open door whilst the others were scouring the station for the missing Brenda. "Somebody else is coming in, but—"

"That's all right; we can't expect to have it quite to ourselves," panted Polly. "In with you, Polly! Madge—Tess! Hurry up, Paula!"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove! Howevah," wailed Paula, dropping her hockey-stick with a clatter, and picking up the stick only to let other bits of luggage fall, "this is a twife twying!"

The whistle was blowing. Betty flung her own things into the compartment, and darted to Paula's aid. At the same instant a late passenger came whirling past the ticket-inspector at the barrier.

She was a town girl, apparently; at any rate, there was nothing about her to associate her with Morcove School. Up the platform she tore, with nothing in her hands save her gloves. Panting for breath, she pulled up at the door of Betty and Co.'s compartment, and blundered in—almost pushing Betty and Paula out of the way to do so!

Then she stepped between the two rows of seated girls in the same unmannerly way, to get to the corner seat that she had reserved by dumping luggage there.

This luggage she swung off on to the floor—incidentally letting it fall on Polly's feet.

Not a word of apology—no! The girl simply ignored all her companions until the train was on the move and she herself was settled. Then:

"I say!" she broke out, in a tone that somehow jarred upon her listeners. "Do you know a girl called Paula Creel?"

"Yes, wather!" shrilled Paula, from the other side of the carriage. "I'm Paula, bai Jove!"

"Oh, arc you?" exclaimed the other. "Well, I'm your cousin Brenda! So shall I come and sit beside you?"

The shock of it all, to Paula!

She looked like fainting right away. And her chums, as they also stared aghast at the last speaker, could only think:

"No wonder!"

## CHAPTER 2.

## Not Paula's Sort at All!

**R**OUND about seven o'clock that evening, Paula Creel was in her old study at Morcove School—the one which she had made to look so nice, and which she had been so pleased to share with Bluebell Courtney, when that girl first came to the school.

Paula had a companion at this moment; but that companion was not Bluebell.

There, on the other side of the table, sat Brenda Ravel, and Paula, as she gazed at this girl, was evidently thinking:

"Whatever shall I do with her?"

Brenda was to have a share in this study. She had even asked the headmistress if she could be put with her cousin, and, in any case, it was probable that those who arranged these matters at the school would have thought it only right, that cousins would want to be together.

So here was Brenda, sitting at the table, and Brenda's belongings were all over the floor, and occupying various chairs, and crowding one or two corners.

Not that the girl had brought a vast amount of luggage to school. The trouble was that she had no idea about being tidy; no thought at all for others' convenience.

It was not a case of this being a girl who had been spoiled by being waited on hand and foot at home. Brenda was untidy by nature. One knows the type, for one meets with it in every degree of life.

And so it can be imagined how Paula Creel was feeling just at present, faced as she was with the prospect of being saddled with Brenda Ravel throughout the term!

Paula was no snob—far from it. If this cousin of hers had seemed to be just a "rough diamond"—a nice girl at heart, but one who had suffered through the poverty of her people—then Paula would have been only too happy to welcome her into a sphere where she would have a better chance. But Paula had never heard her people talk as if Brenda's mother—her father was dead—were a poor relation.

Paula, the dainty, band-boxy aristocrat of the Fourth Form, took another look at the girl.

Brenda's coarse hair was tousled, and she didn't seem to want to put it to rights. Her clothes must have cost a good deal of money; but she was wearing them all any-

how. The way she sat at the table; every movement she made—ugh! How it all jarred on Paula!

And the worst of it was, she certainly meant to make a most intimate companion of Paula!

In the train to Morcove Road Station, she had said at once, "I shall come and sit beside you!" And she had been with Paula every moment almost since that first dramatic encounter.

"Where's that other girl—Bluebell, don't you call her?" Brenda suddenly asked. "I hope she isn't keeping out of the way just because I'm 'ere!"

Paula shuddered. It was not the first time Brenda had dropped an aitch.

"Pway do not take offence, Bwenda, because Bluebell is not heah. She has a gweat number of fwriends, don't you know; and it is usual, at this time of the evening, for geals to dwift into one another's studios—yes, wather!"

Just like Paula to make a genial, good-natured response of this sort! She quite well realised that, much as she was going to dislike this girl, she would never be able to be anything but polite to her!

"If I wasn't here," said Brenda, with a smirk, "I suppose you'd be mouching around to see friends?"

"Yes, wather! I mean— Howevah, pway don't let that distwess you! I—I am bettah here, Bwenda, in my own sudy."

"It's not a bad old show," the cousin said, looking round the walls. "Still, if you want to be sociable, you just say. I'll come along too, if you like."

"Oh, no!" Paula said affably, whilst she thought of the number of girls who were certainly gathered together, on this first evening of the new term, in the Form captain's popular study.

Betty and Polly, Madge and Tess, Trixie and Dolly—they at least were there, for a certainty. And Paula could remember the particularly comfy armchair, which she was always allowed to appropriate.

Suddenly her own study door was rapped, and then it flashed open. Trixie Hope came in.

"You know my errand, Paula?" she said, smiling. "Subs for the Literary and Dramatic Society, winter term."

"Yes, wather! If you will look in my purse, Twixio deah—it is on the mantel-

piece theah—you will find a half-crown. Er—Bwenda, you will want to join, of course?"

"What? Some club? Oh, yes, o' course! But I don't know as I've got the money now."

"Pway do not let that distwoss you!" said Paula. "Twixie, will you please take for Bwenda, too?"

"Thanks, Paula, dear," said Trixie, helping herself to a couple of half-crowns. "Merci beaucoup—thanks very much!"

"My! Do you go in for talking French amongst yourselves?" commented Brenda.

"Oh, no!" Trixie laughed, on the way out of the room. "I'm the only one who has the habit, and it is only alleged French."

She went out, passing another girl who had just halted to look into the room.

This other girl now stepped inside—a very beautiful young lady, so to speak; faultless as Paula in her appearance.

"Hallo, Paula!" she said sweetly. "I've turned up for another term, you see!"

"Yes, wather!"

Paula stood up to greet the visitor, but did not look particularly charmed. Nor was this surprising. Audrey Blain, the girl who had just entered, had got herself disliked last term by trying to sow discord and form a "set" of her own.

The whole ambitious scheme had been nicely nipped in the bud, though whether or not it was to be forgotten would depend upon Audrey's behaviour during the coming term.

As if she quite realised all this, she suddenly said, with an engaging smile:

"Paula, I am going to play the game, this term! I am, really!"

"I am welieved to know it, Audrey! And naow, pway let me intwoduce a new scholar, bai Jove!"

Audrey had already shot a critical glance at Brenda. She now looked at her again, and then at Paula, as if to ask:

"Who is this awful person?"

Brenda was not standing up. She simply nodded and smirked as Paula made the amazing announcement:

"Er—my cousin, Audwey; my cousin, don't you know—Bwenda Wavel!"

"Indeed!"

Audrey gave the sweetest smile and the most graceful inclination of her lovely head.

"Well," she said, swinging round to the door, "I am going along to Study 12, to

make my peace with Betty Barton, and all the rest, who are most likely there."

Then Audrey was gone, and Paula was feeling she must resign herself to another awful spell with this uncouth cousin of hers, when relief came.

Oh, joy! The matron sent for Brenda, for the usual interview that a new girl always came in for on her first evening at the school.

The girl had not been gone half a minute before Paula was also out of the study. She went along to Study 12, and was within a step or two of that door when it flashed open, and Betty Barton came forth.

"I was just coming to rout you out, Paula. It's not like old times without a look-in from you!"

"My deah Betty," sighed Paula, "pway wealise haow I am placed! It is most distwessing! I cannot leave my cousin alone. I cannot be wude to her, don't you know!"

"But you should bring her along."

"To your den? No, Betty!" said Paula tragically. "I—weally, don't you know, I have a wreater wegard for the general company!"

"Oh, come, come!" Betty said cheerfully, for she saw that poor Paula looked absolutely miserable. "If your cousin isn't quite what you expected her to be, we must all put up with her, the same as you will have to."

"That is extwemely bwickish of you, Betty! Howevah, I— No, weally—"

"Come along in now, anyhow!"

"But, wपालy—"

"Your old chair is waiting for you!"

That settled it.

Paula gave in, and next minute she was sinking, with a sigh of profound satisfaction, into that favourite easy-chair.

"Bai Jove, what a welief!" she murmured.

The den was crowded. Half the Form seemed to have drifted in here this evening, to join in the talk about the new term. In her languid way, Paula noticed that Audrey was making herself very nice to everybody, but was not sigling out certain girls for special winning overtures, as she had been too fond of doing last term.

One or two remarks were made about Brenda Ravel's appearance as a new scholar, and it was mentioned that Cora and Judith Grandways had not come back to-day, but were expected to be a full week late in

returning from the holidays. Then the gossip switched to hockey, the clubs, and the winter programme in general.

The chatter was at its very height, when all at once Polly cried:

"Hark!"

Silence fell at once, and in that silence they all heard a long, shrill whistle from somewhere out of doors.

"Queer!" muttered some of the girls.

It certainly was a most unusual thing for them to hear a sound of any sort from outside the school after nightfall, save the noise of the sea and the elements.

The school stood absolutely alone on the cliffs, and, when darkness fell, one could rely upon the seashore and the moorlands being bereft of human beings.

"That was not a policeman's whistle, I suppose?" Tess remarked.

"Too shrill," said Betty. "No, it was more like— Hark!"

"Bai Jove—"

"There it is again!"

Mute and still they all remained, whilst that prolonged, faint whistle shrilled upon their hearing.

Then Betty, Polly, and several others darted to the window—crowded there, with the blind held aside, to peer out.

The night was moonless and gropingly dark. After a moment, Betty raised the lower sash, and then they were able to put their heads out.

"Now, listen again!" whispered the Form captain. "Sh! Next time, we shall be able to tell the direction from which it comes."

And, even as they held their breath to listen, for a third time they heard that mysterious sound:

Phce-ee-cep, peep, eep!

"It is a signal!" panted Polly. "But, how strange!"

"A signal," agreed Betty softly, "from somebody just outside the school bounds!"

### CHAPTER 3.

#### What is Brenda Ravel Up To?

WHAT did it mean?

Why should anybody come lurking around outside the school grounds after nightfall, to send that signal-like whistle shrilling through the darkness?

Who could it be—and for whom was the signal intended?

The girls were puzzled, mystified.

After a lengthy interval, during which they had waited in vain for a repetition of the sound, they drew in their heads, and closed the window. But the strange incident still occupied all their minds.

"We have no poachers round here, for there is nothing to poach!" said Betty.

"Burglars, waiting to break in? No, that's absurd!" Etta Hargrove answered herself. "The last thing burglars do, I imagine, is to give signals to one another that anybody can hear!"

"Yes, wather!"

"Hark!"

Polly raised a silencing hand; but her ears must have played her a trick.

"I thought I heard some sound again; but I was mistaken," she owned.

"Oh, well, I suppose it is nothing to do with us!" Betty said at last, shrugging.

And so, as the whistle was certainly not heard again, they fell to talking about the topics that had been engaging their minds before the uncanny disturbance occurred.

For another half-hour at least the Form captain's study remained as crowded out as ever. Then, however, the girls began to drift away by twos and threes.

"Going, Paula?" remarked Polly, as the swell girl got up from that easy-chair with every sign of reluctance.

She and Bluebell were two of the last girls who still remained.

"Weal, yes," sighed Paula. "I suppose I must go back, bai Jove! Howevah— Pway understand this, geals," she went on quickly. "I don't feel ashamed of my cousin just because she doesn't know how to dweess, and how to keep her hair to wights! I wouldn't mind a sewap, either, if she was a poor geal, only needing a helping hand. There is no snobbewy about me, these days! But—"

She passed on to the door, sighing heavily.

"To be quite fwank, geals, Bwenda is wather impossible. Theah, I had to say it!"

Then she made a rather hasty exit, alone, leaving those who were still with Betty and Polly in the study, to exchange looks that said:

"Poor Paula! It is rough on her, and no mistake!"



Yet Paula had one scrap of comfort. When she re-entered her own den, her disagreeable cousin was not there to greet her with that unpleasant smirk.

Paula stepped about the room with a comical expression of relief at the girl's absence, followed by one of chronic dismay over the sight of all her untidy belongings.

There was going to be no forgetting her, even when she was not here! That was Paula's rueful thought. And when she was here—well, she was going to be always reminding Paula about the cousinship!

That was the most alarming part of the whole business. The girl evidently meant to hang on to the skirts, as it were, of her popular cousin.

"Dweadful!" Paula commiserated herself. "It requires someone who can be downright wude to her now and then; and I—no, I weally haven't the stwength of chawacter!"

In a few minutes she heard some piano music coming from the music-room downstairs, and she knew that that was Madge Minden, who often slipped down late in the evening for a practice. Paula was still alone, and so she drifted off downstairs, meaning to sit and listen to her chum's brilliant playing.

On one of the half-landings the swell girl paused to peer out through the window, whilst she thought again of that strange whistle which had sounded so like a signal.

The action was an almost idle one; but, the very instant Paula put her face close to the dark glass, she was fully alert.

"Bai Jove!" she breathed excitedly.

For down below in the grounds at the rear of the great schoolhouse a figure was lurking!

One of the girls!

From windows here and there a little light was filtering out into the garden—just sufficient to enable Paula to detect that slinking figure; sufficient, also, to make the girl, whoever she was, extra careful in her creeping towards some back door below.

Paula drew away from the window sharply. She felt quite upset. In any case, it was a startling thing to find a scholar making secret trips out of doors after nightfall. And only half an hour ago there had been that shrill whistle!

Had the one thing anything to do with the other? Surely not! And yet—

Paula pulled herself together, then went swiftly, silently down the remaining stairs. She was no sneak; this was simply a case of doing one's duty—finding out who the errant girl was, and giving her a friendly warning to "drop that sort of thing."

Even as Paula was creeping round to a back passage, she heard the brass knob of the garden door rattle faintly. Then the hasp of a lock squeaked.

She held back, allowing the unknown girl time to slip into the house. Then she stepped from cover, and peered along the dim-lit passage.

There stood the girl who had been stealing out of doors for some mysterious reason. And that girl was—Brenda Ravel!

"Bwenda!" Paula exclaimed, in a surprised tone.

The new scholar went to pieces utterly. She turned pale—clenched her hands—tried to stammer an explanation that was obviously not the truth.

"Will you kindly wepeat that wemark?" Paula asked, going closer to her.

"I—I've only been across to—to the gymnasium, Paula."

"Oh, weally! Did you find it?"

"Yes. I left one or two things there—after I'd finished with the matron. I—it is a fine building!"

"Yes, wather! Did you notice, how-eh, that is all made of timber?"

"Yes, Paula—"

"Oh, weally? Haow wemarkable!" Paula said coldly. "For the gymnasium happens to be built of bwick!"

Brenda went very red.

"You know a bwick when you see one, don't you, Bwenda?" asked Paula.

"Ye-ye-yes, of course!"

"So do I!" answered the swell girl of Morcovo School. "I am vevy partial to bwicks—especially the human sort! And I gweatly wegwet, Bwenda, that you are not one!"

With which telling remark Paula Creel turned on her heel and walked away.

Brenda stood in the dim passage, clenching and unclenching her hands, whilst her face worked excitedly.

"What a blunder at the very part!" she was saying to herself fiercely. "How am I ever going to escape being found out? But I must go on with it—I must! For, as mother says, it is a game worth the winning!"

## CHAPTER 4.

## The Face at the Window.

WHY, Betty—look!" It was Polly Linton who spoke. In a most startled way, she had suddenly pulled up in the narrow country lane down which she and her chums were sauntering.

Her excited exclamation interrupted the general talk, the girls turning puzzled eyes upon her.

"Gwacious, Polly deah!" Paula Creel remarked. "Whatevah is the mattah naow, pway?"

"Am I the only one of us with eyes?" was Polly's half-impatient retort. "Can't you see that this old farmhouse we are passing—"

"To be sure," struck in Betty Barton, "it is just an ordinary house like any other house in the neighbourhood."

"That's not the point for the moment!" rushed on Polly. "Look at that upper window—you see the one I mean? To the right, there—"

"Why—"

"Gwacious—"

"How stwange!"

Almost every one of the half-dozen school-girls had an excited word to voice. And no wonder.

"Who is she, then—that girl at the barred window?" panted Polly, who had been the first to notice the white face which was visible there. "It is just as if she were pleading for help!"

"Queer!" was Betty Barton's uneasy comment.

"Yes, bai Jove!"

"She's gone now," remarked Tess Tre-lawney. "No—there she is again! Oh, what a pale face! What a strange look she is giving us!"

"I tell you," said Polly, with increasing excitement, "I don't like the look of things! That's a barred window, and—"

"Oh, what rubbish you do talk!" burst out one girl who had been silent up to now.

It was Brenda Ravel.

"Madge Minden is the only one amongst you with a scrap of sense!" Brenda went on derisively. "That girl at the window—she is one of the household, of course!"

"She doesn't look the part, that's all I

know!" declared Betty. "She looks frightened—anxious—"

"Well, she is a delicate girl, I suppose!" Brenda argued. "You see how easy it is to account for trifles that seem to you to mean a mystery! Some town girl, down here for a change—that is why she looks so queer!"

With which remark Brenda turned to her cousin.

"Coming, Paula?"

That girl did not respond in any way whatever.

There she stood, sharing all her chums' unabated curiosity—looking, indeed, as uneasy as any of them. This was rather odd, for Paula Creel, the amiable aristocrat of the Fourth Form, did not usually allow herself to be perturbed. If Paula's frock fitted her, and her hair was quite tidy, then that was generally sufficient to keep her mind quite at rest.

Not that she was a self-centred girl; far from it. She was merely blessed with one of those easy-going, amiable dispositions which make it impossible for their owners to take life too seriously.

Suddenly that appealing face was withdrawn from the window again, and it did not reappear. So, after waiting and watching a few moments longer, the whole party of girls sauntered on—obviously to Brenda Ravel's relief.

The school clock was chiming five when the ramblers turned in at the wide gateway. This almost made the idea of tea in study out of the question, and, in any case, they were not disposed to bother about getting their own spread at such a late hour. Tea was on the tables in the dining-room, and they turned in there.

It was, as usual, a very informal meal. Miss Redgrave was "presiding" in a very indulgent manner, and there was no attempt to quell the high-spirited uproar of talk which Betty & Co.'s entry created.

Whilst the late-comers were still getting their tea, the under-mistress stood up to go, telling the girls that any who cared to do so might also dismiss. And so up jumped most of them, to scamper away, whilst one girl rose from the table with noticeable dignity.

It was Audrey Blain, the girl with all Paula Creel's daintiness and grace, but without Paula's charming amiability.

When Audrey was nice, she was "sweet." In other words, she put on her moods—and changed them, too, as often as she changed her frocks.

At this moment, her mood was one of great dignity.

"Brenda Ravel," she said, in a hurt tone, stopping close to that seated girl, "did you borrow a novel of mine, without asking permission?"

"I took it—yes. I thought you had done with it," said Brenda roughly.

"Well, I had not done with it; and so you will kindly return it," said Audrey; and she walked away, chin in air.

There were smiles over the manner of her exit. All the same, Betty & Co. could feel some sympathy for her. For was there one of them who had not been "riled" by Brenda's liberties with other people's belongings?

"Her silly old book!" exclaimed Brenda, grabbing bread-and-butter from a centre plate. "She can have it back, and welcome! Pass the jam, somebody!"

Paula Creel sighed softly, and rose from her seat. She made her way towards the school grounds. She felt she wished to be alone for a while.

It was half an hour before Paula felt like returning to the Fourth Form corridor.

There she met Audrey Blain, on the point of entering her—Audrey's—study.

"Hallo, Paula!" Audrey threw out, with a sort of pitying smile. "I really must condole with you over the possession of such an outlandish cousin! If you should see a novel kicking about the floor in your study, you might remember it is the one Brenda borrowed—without asking!"

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove, I will!" said Paula feebly.

And she did.

Sure enough, the moment she entered the study which she now shared with Brenda and Bluebell Courtney, the swell girl saw a brand new book lying upon the floor, just outside the fender.

Bluebell was away from the room just at present, and Paula found herself alone with her cousin.

That girl had got hold of Paula's work-basket, and was turning it upside down to find a needle.

All in a moment, Brenda found what she wanted, and then she bundled the tumbled

articles back into the basket, flinging it aside.

Paula made no remark about this; but she looked at the book as she sat down.

"Bai Jove," she remarked quietly, "is that the wonnance, Bwenda, that you had frown Audwey to wead?"

"Yes—why?"

"Oh, I wather imagined you would have returned it by now! Audwey Blain—"

"She has been making a fuss about it again, has she?" cried Brenda. "Bother her! Sho shall have the book back this very minute!"

Snatching it up, she fairly stormed out of the study, flustered along the corridor, and flung open Audrey's door without the polite tap-tap that girls usually gave.

Audrey had seated herself, taking another book on her lap, when the door crashed open like that and Brenda whirled across the threshold.

"There's your precious book!" Brenda shouted, violently flinging the volume on to the table.

It rucked up the table-cloth and knocked over a vase of flowers much prized by Audrey.

That girl sprang up, suddenly angered. It was like her to strike just the right attitude of indignation that would show off her elegant figure.

"You ill-mannered clown!" she fiercely said. "Where were you dragged up, that you haven't any idea how to behave? Look at that vase—the water all running down the cloth on to my carpet?"

"Well, you shouldn't make a fuss about nothing—a trumpery book!"

Brenda was swinging back to the door. In a flash, Audrey was beside her, holding her still.

"Stop! Clear up the muddle you have made! Go on—clear it up!"

"Do it yourself!" Brenda shouted coarsely. "Let go my arm!"

For an instant, Audrey the beautiful stood quite still, her handsome eyes full of contempt for the other girl. Then she pushed her from her—so violently that Brenda crashed against the wall.

That girl's crude nature displayed itself fully now.

With a sort of yell, she simply "went for" Audrey!

A scuffle began, the refined, lightly built Audrey quickly getting the worst of it. A

chair was overturned, and altogether there was such a commotion as speedily brought the whole Form rushing to the open door.

"If you can push, so can I!" Brenda was shouting, just as Betty, Polly, and at least a dozen others thronged the doorway. "Take that!"

And the push was violent enough to send Audrey sprawling headlong on the carpet, amongst the fallen flowers, the vase, and the spilled water.

"Brenda," said Betty, taking a step inside the room, "look here——"

"Oh, hold your tongue, you!" Brenda snapped. At that moment she looked coarsely repellent. The girls who were there simply gasped as she pushed past them.

"My dear Brenda," palpitated Paula, looking quite ill with the upset, "weally, you know, this is most distwessing!"

"She'll get some more, if she gives me a word!" Brenda choked out, glaring back at Audrey, who was now picking herself up from the floor. "Her and her precious swank—bah!"

"Bwenda, I vewy much wegwet——"

"It's nothing to do with you!" cried Brenda, walking off. "So shut up!"

"Sweet creature!" said Polly; and the girl heard that remark as she re-entered her study.

#### CHAPTER 5.

"Her name is Brenda!"

It was an early hour of Saturday morning—so early that the before-breakfast postman was still making his big round of the rural district lying between Morcove School and Barncombe town.

A good halfmile extra he had to tramp this morning, merely to deliver a letter at the house in the lane where the chums had seen the face at the window.

That letter was shot through the slot in the door just as a surly woman, who was tenant of the old farm house, was preparing breakfast for herself. As the missive came with a sharp flick through the slot, she gave a nervous start.

Another moment, and she had the letter in her hands and was slashing open the envelope.

Then, as she scanned the contents, her uneasy expression changed to one of absolute savagery.

Her clenching fist suddenly crumpled up

the sheet, and she fell to bestriding the low-ceiled kitchen in great agitation.

"I should have had a word before about all this!" she fumed to herself. "But there, I suppose it was her first opportunity for writing!"

A kettle on the fire suddenly boiled over. The woman snatched it off and dumped it into the fender with ill-tempered violence; then she went from the stuffy kitchen and climbed the dim staircase to the bedroom floor.

The old house was commodious enough. From the upper landing, one passage went to the right; and another to the left, giving admittance to the various chambers. But the place was not now furnished to meet the needs of a full household. Only one of the two passages had a floor covering; the other was so forlorn-looking as to suggest that any rooms in that direction were absolutely bare.

So, with every appearance of being the mere caretaker of a decaying property, rather than a woman who was renting it on a so-called "furnished" scale, the ill-favoured person mounted another flight of stairs to the attics.

Here, at the very top of the house, accommodation was still ample, as it often is in dwellings of the old-fashioned type. In addition to the attic doors at the top of the stairs, there was a passage round the landing corner, leading to at least one more bedroom. The woman went along this passage, and thus reached what must have been the remotest part of the whole rambling building.

She opened a door, and then called into the dingy room:

"Come here—I want you!"

The girl who was here, suddenly arrested in her task of making the bed she had slept in, came forward.

"Now, my girl," the woman broke out viciously. "I've got a bone to pick with you! I hear that you were seen at a window the other afternoon—seen by some of the schoolgirls as they went past in the lane!"

"Yes——"

"Then what do you mean by it?" cried the woman furiously. "How dared you! Haven't I warned you not to show yourself to a living soul? Haven't I told you that for two pins I would make an absolute prisoner of you?"

The girl looked at the woman in a sudden fearless way.

"You would never keep me under lock and key!" she said, with calm defiance. "I would have been out of this house days ago, only——"

She shrugged as she paused.

"I have my own reason for giving in to you, at present."

Then the woman laughed.

"Just so. And I know—oh, I'm quite aware what your reason is! It put a nice check upon you, didn't it, when I warned you? One step on your part, outside this house, until the tenth of next month, and I shall destroy that paper—the document without which you can do nothing—nothing! And I shall destroy it, mind, the moment I find you trying to go behind my back!"

She smiled with such malicious delight at the girl's powerlessness, and the smile made her look so repellent, it was not surprising that the girl seemed to shrink.

But in a moment she had recovered her nerve.

"You know I can do nothing without that document; why, then, are you so hard on me as all this? I would promise not to breathe a word to anyone as to who I really am, if you would let me——"

"Go out for walks, eh? And make friends with those schoolgirls? Not likely, my dear!" sneered the woman. "You won't come to any harm by being cooped up for a bit!"

The girl took a step forward, her hands clenched. For an instant she looked like making a wild rush past the woman, and so out of the house.

But the woman was aware of the desperate impulse that had seized the girl, and she stood squarely in the doorway, obviously ready to use forcible restraint if necessary. But now the girl suddenly unclenched her hands and turned back, with a hard breath of resignation.

"Oh, go away! Leave me!" she cried out distractedly. "Perhaps you only taunt me so as to keep me always in mind of my helplessness without that document! How awful it is to think that my dear father was so deceived in you! But you were a different woman in those days! It is only since his death you have shown what a ruthless, cruel, unscrupulous person you are!"

"I'm hard on you," the woman answered from the doorway, "because you have forced me to be hard! If you had been sensible——"

"Sensible? You mean, if I had been content to stand by and keep silent!"

"You would have done far more good for yourself that way," was the reproachful answer. "You know what I was ready to promise you quite enough money to give you a comfortable life, on condition that you held your tongue. You would not agree to that, however—and see the position you have got yourself into! Now you'll get nothing—nothing! And serve you right!"

The speaker waited a moment to hear any rejoinder. Not for the first time, however, the futility of discussing the exasperating situation had impressed itself upon the poor girl.

She turned her back and resumed her work about the meanly furnished bed-room.

The woman moved away, shutting the door behind her with a significant slam.

A great sigh came from the girl as soon as she was alone. She straightened up from her task, and swept a hand across her forehead.

"Is it really any use going on like this?" she said to herself despairingly. "Oh, I do hope I am acting for the best; but sometimes—I don't know; I feel I am taking too big a chance!"

She moved about the tiny room distractedly.

"And yet," her desperate thoughts went on, "nothing would be easier than for her to destroy that document the moment I took action—and where would I be then? No, no, I must be patient; I must go on from day to day, hoping to get a chance to find it!"

Folded neatly upon the dressing-table was a newspaper. It was one which, doubtless, she had brought up to this room of hers to beguile away an hour or so of her strange existence. Now she took it up and looked at the date line.

"Only a fortnight!" was her agitated whisper. "Only fourteen days now to the tenth of next month!"

## CHAPTER 6.

"Defy me if you dare!"

**D**ARK night fell upon the lonely world of Morcove once again.

It was ten o'clock, and by now, no doubt, lights were going out one by one at Morcove School. At the old house in

the lane, however, the light in a ground-floor window still shone forth as steadily as ever.

Evidently, therefore, the ill-favoured woman who was the tenant of the lonely house in the lane was in no hurry to seek her night's repose.

Suddenly a step was audible in the farmhouse hall, and the woman crossed the room quickly and flung open the door.

"Now, my girl, what were you up to then?" she asked suspiciously, as she saw a girl moving towards the front door.

"Cannot I take just a turn in the garden at a time like this?" the girl exclaimed spiritedly then. "How you do watch me!"

"No closer than you have given me cause for watching you!" was the grim retort. "Don't I know what your game would be, my girl, if you had half a chance?"

The woman added viciously:

"And it is no time for me to be careless, either, when there are those prying schoolgirls getting all sorts of notions in their heads. I'm not sure, even now, but what they believe that you are a prisoner against your will."

"You need have no fear that the schoolgirls will come around the house at any time like this," the girl remarked. "They are in bed by this time every night."

"Yes, that's one blessing. As Brenda tells me—" The woman paused to give a strange smile that seemed full of mockery.

"As Brenda at the school, tells me, there are all sorts of rules and regulations; so it is hardly likely they will be able to make much headway with their clever detective work. Still, you go to bed now, my girl. And another night no slipping into the garden without my permission!"

That there was a bitter enmity between this woman and the girl was perfectly obvious not only from the nature of the talk, but the looks that passed.

In the light from the parlour lamp, the girl's handsome face was pale and tense with the loathing which she felt for the woman. And all the while that woman was scowling or leering in a way that seemed to say, "Defy me, if you dare!"

The mysterious girl was too spirited, however, to let indignation or anger make her graceless. So now she offered a quiet "Good-night, Mrs. Ravel!" as she took up a candle and passed aloft to a remote attic.

There she had her sleeping quarters—the beautiful girl whose presence in the lonely house was, for some mysterious reason that was only known to herself and the woman, a thing to be kept secret.

Shutting the attic door, she set down the candle, then sank very dejectedly into the only chair that the room boasted.

Her lovely face was as troubled-looking as ever when at last she began disrobing for the night. She had heard Mrs. Ravel come up to her room, and she knew it was inadvisable to keep a light going in this attic bed-room too late. It might be the means of putting that woman on the watch for hours.

So, mastering the desire to stay up, pondering the strange and desperate plight that was hers, she completed her undressing, and then placed her dressing-gown ready to hand at the bedside.

Last thing of all, before blowing out the light, she looked at a calendar which stood upon her dressing-table.

"The tenth of next month," she whispered to herself, in sudden great agitation. "How the days and nights are passing, and I am still helpless! Another day gone! Less than a fortnight now—and that document she holds, where is it? Oh, if only I had the slightest clue!"

Extinguishing the light, she got into bed and curled down, as if to seek repose as quickly as her disturbed mind would allow her to.

But either she could not sleep, or else she was really keeping awake for a set purpose, for, quite two hours later, she suddenly sat up in bed without a sound and listened.

Dead silence prevailed everywhere, and presently she crept from her bed and put on the dressing-gown and her slippers.

Then she stole across to the door, and listened again.

Not a sound, unless it was the measured breathing of Mrs. Ravel, asleep in her room on the floor below.

The girl took up the candle and a box of matches, but did not make a light at once.

Leaving herself in groping darkness, she stealthily opened the attic door and passed along the narrow passage to the stairs.

Wildly her heart was beating with apprehension as she crept down the stairs, dreading to set the old woodwork creaking. She adopted the precaution of treading close to

the wall, and probably that saved her from making the least bit of noise.

And so at last she was in the dark parlour of the old house—that room where, as likely as not, the document she needed to set hands upon was hidden away. But where—where should she begin her midnight search?

Cautiously she scraped a match along the box, and then lit the candle.

This parlour, it was the one room properly furnished in the whole house. There was a bookcase, with a bureau—just the sort of place where an important document should be kept. But the trouble was that Mrs. Ravel knew how this girl was bent upon getting hold of the document, if possible. In such circumstances, it was being stored, perhaps, in the most cunning of hiding-places—behind a bit of furniture, under a floorboard, not in this room at all, maybe, but hidden in one of the empty rooms of the old house. There was no telling, alas!

The girl only knew that she had a woman to deal with who was as cunning as she was covetous.

"But I will search this room to-night, anyhow!" she was thinking desperately. "I have frequent chances of searching the empty rooms on the quiet, but this parlour, where she lives—"

Hark!

What was that sound outside the closed door? A soft footfall—Mrs. Ravel's own step!

A sort of palsy of dismay seized the girl. Even before she had decided whether to blow out the light or not, the door flew open, and into the room burst her enemy, looking flushed with anger.

"Aha, my girl, so I've caught you at the game, have I!" the woman cried furiously. "Oh, you sly young minx! For two pins I would—"

"You have caught me—yes," the girl broke in hoarsely, "but that doesn't give you the right to abuse me! I have nothing to be ashamed of—nothing! I tell you again, Mrs. Ravel, I regard it as my duty to get that document from you."

"No doubt you do," was the vicious retort. "And I tell you, my girl, you are not going to get it—no! It would have been torn up or burnt weeks ago, only I knew it meant keeping a sort of hold over you, to keep it for the present. Until the tenth of next month. Ay, my dear, that's

the day I'm waiting for, just as you are, I know!"

With a harsh laugh the woman stopped swiftly nearer and violently seized the candle from the girl.

"There, get back to your room, you young hussy!" she ordered her snappishly. "I ought to box your ears for this! I ought to put you under lock and key, and that's a fact! But I can afford to laugh at you—ha, ha, yes!"

Once again the poor girl's eyes gleamed with bitter hatred and contempt for this gloating creature.

Mrs. Ravel seemed quite ready to have a battle of words, but the girl simply scorned to be drawn into any verbal conflict.

With a slight lift and fall of the shoulders, betraying the inaudible sigh of despair she had given, she passed from the room and up the stairs, Mrs. Ravel attending her as far as the attic passage.

"Yes, you get back to your bed and get to sleep!" was the woman's last mocking cry. "Whether it's needful or not, if I catch you at this little game again I'll have you under lock and key in the cellar—so I will!"

The girl had entered her tiny bed-room, and now she shut the door upon that hateful figure and the snarling voice.

For a few seconds she stood mute and still, except for the hard sighs that came with every breath. And then suddenly, completely overwhelmed with anguish and despair—she threw herself upon the bed and burst into tears.

## CHAPTER 7.

### "Marching Orders"

JUST before the Fourth Form team moved out on to the field for a scratch game against the Fifth at half-past two on the following Wednesday afternoon, Paula Creel got a quiet word with Betty.

"Betty deah," murmured the swell girl of the Form, "I wealise that you have made a bold expewiment in playing Bwenda to-day."

"Oh, that's all right, dear!" Betty said lightly. "I give every new girl a chance."

"I wealise, Betty, that it is pwobably for my sake you have sacwificed your feelings, for I am awah"—Paula sighed mournfully

--"it is far from being a pleasure to have Bwenda-round about one. Howevah--"

"Yes, dear; cheer up! After all, she may play quite a good game to-day."

"I know this, Betty, dear. At heart the goal weally is keen on being in the team," Paula declared. "It has quite turned her head, bai Jove! And if only she gets through all wight, Betty, and pwoves a ewedit for once, what a relief it will be!"

Betty could say "Hear, hear!" to that with all sincerity.

The Fifth Form had got together a very strong team this afternoon. There was, however, no need for Betty & Co. to feel "jumpy." Except for Brenda Ravel, who was an unknown quantity so far as hockey was concerned, Betty was leading a well-tried batch of girls on to the ground.

With a goodly crowd of keen onlookers in evidence play began sharp on time, and from the very moment of the bully-off it was as fine a contest as had been fought for many a day.

Betty was a believer in getting "one up" on your rival side as soon as possible, and her chums, sharing the same theory, went all out for a goal right away. They got it, too, thanks to a full display of energy from the very start.

This, of course, touched up the spirit of the Fifth Form team, and for the next two or three minutes there was a breathless effort by both sides, whilst the onlookers warmed up to the work of cheering and counter-cheering.

Then, with a sudden thrilling tussle, the Fifth Form got its first goal, and now it was the level scoring that spurred each side to play up and play hard.

Goal again ere another minute was out! And now the Fifth were leading. Buck up, Fourth! This won't do!

But although some such thoughts as that was no doubt passing through the minds of Betty & Co., those girls were all smiling good-humouredly as the game went on. All save Brenda, that is.

She, as anybody could see, was getting rather wild with the excitement of the game.

When the opposing team scored that second goal she committed the unpardonable offence of shouting a derisive "Yah!" Such things were not done at Morcove School; nor, indeed, are they done anywhere

amongst sporting girls. Paula squirmed, the others felt ashamed, and the Fifth-Formers certainly looked surprised.

But worse was now to come.

The game, as it warmed up, was bringing out every bit of spirit on both sides without causing any loss of temper--except in the case of Brenda. She, to the horror of Betty, Polly, Paula, and the rest, was indulging in rough play.

"Steady, Brenda!" Betty felt she must appeal to the girl. "That sort of thing isn't hockey!"

"I'm only giving as good as I get!" panted Brenda, suggesting that some member of the rival team had accidentally hurt her.

But Betty knew there had not been a scrap of rough play on the part of the rivals.

"Keep your temper," she advised the wild girl gently. "There will be complaints if you don't."

The captain's quiet words were spoken all the while play was in progress, and Betty herself was next moment doing all she could to help save the home goal.

In vain!

Up went the sudden cry again:

"Goal! Three--one! Bravo, Fifth, bravo! Buck up, Fourth!"

"Yah!" jeered Brenda once more. "They're cheats!"

This was awful!

Poor Paula looked as if she wanted the earth to open and swallow her up. Grace Garfield and Ella Elgood shrugged, as if to say:

"We knew it! What else could you expect from that girl! Blame Betty for this!"

As for Betty herself, she could only look across at the Fifth Form captain with a pained expression that was a mute apology for the insult.

At half-time the score was still three--one, but in the first minute of the next half or so the Fourth just managed to get its second goal. That was better! But it was awful to hear Brenda yelling:

"Yah! What about it now!"

Then suddenly a really dreadful thing happened.

One of the opposing team took the ball from Brenda with a skill and swiftness that enraged the unsporting girl. She made a wild swipe at the ball to get it back, missed



it, and then had her revenge—ono could call it nothing else—by hitting the Fifth Form girl about the ankles.

Play stopped instantly. It was as if the whole field of hockeyites had been turned into statues.

Then the spell broke, and there was a general rush for the spot where Brenda, her face aflame, was trying to look as if she didn't care, whilst the victim of her ill-temper nursed a bruised ankle.

"Brenda," Betty said sternly, "leave the field!"

"What do you mean? She began it! She—"

"Leave the field this instant!" insisted the Fourth Form captain, waving the miscreant away. "You have disgraced yourself, and have disgraced the whole school!"

"What else did you expect her to do?" put in Grace Garfield bitterly. "We blame you for this, Betty!"

"Yes!"

"No," contradicted Polly hotly. "Betty knew what she was about!"

"I think I did know," Betty rejoined calmly. "I had every right to include her as a new girl in the team. All the same, if I had known she could do a thing as bad as this— Oh, go away, Brenda!"

Then Brenda, breaking clear of the disgusted girls who had crowded around, simply hurled her hockey-stick across the grass and marched away.

Her ugly smirk was evidently an attempt at a "Don't care—so there!" sort of smile.

The Fifth Form girl who had been lamed had to retire from the game, and so the side remained equal in point of numbers, although the greater skill was now with Betty & Co. They had merely lost a poor player; the Fifth had lost a skilful one.

But, as a set-off to this, there was the sudden collapse of Paula Creel.

She was looking very upset when play restarted, and all at once she had to give up.

Half tearfully she protested that she had tried to keep going, and Betty & Co. were quite aware of that without being told. But now—

"I'm awfully sowwy," she wailed sadly, "but I—I feel wather too dweadful! Yes, wather! No, geals, if you will excuse me—"

"Of course, dear," Betty said. "We

really ought to lose two girls against the Fifth's one; she was such a brilliant player."

So Paula retired from the game and went straight across to the schoolhouse and up to her den. Brenda was not there, and Paula, alone in the study, crashed into the first chair that came to hand.

There, too, Polly Linton found her half an hour later, when the never-to-be-forgotten game had ended in a hard-won victory for the Fourth, the winning goal being brilliantly taken just on the stroke of time.

Polly came whirling into the study, like the madcap she was, ready to shout the glorious news of the victory. But the happy cry died upon her lips, and in a moment she was on her knees beside Paula, who was weeping piteously.

"Paula darling—oh, Paula!" Polly murmured soothingly. "Don't dear—don't!"

"Weally, Polly, I'm twying not to," was the sobbing answer. "But it is too dweadful; I can't stand it, don't you know! Bwenda's wuffianism—"

"Paula!"

"I—I'm sowwy to use such a stwong expwession," Paula went on, wiping her eyes. "Howevah, theah is no othah word for it. That geal will be the wuin of me!"

"No, dear," Polly comforted her lovingly. "It is trying, of course, but you mustn't let it distress you so."

"I twy not to; ovah and ovah again I am twying!" was the wailing response. "But she's my cousin, and ewevybody knows it. And then for the geal to behave like that! I shall have a bwekdown, Polly. I—Im not stwong, you know."

"It is a shame—a jolly shame!" Polly burst out at last, her real feelings coming to the surface. "Oh, Paula, I really don't wonder at your being so upset!"

"Thank you, Polly deah. You are a twue fwend. I wealise only too well haow you and Betty wegard me. You won't thwow me ovah, I know, because I am that geal's cousin!"

"The idea, Paula!"

"Howevah, there are geals in the Form—they are weady to call after me, so angewy they are. And what wonder, bai Jove! I— Howevah, Polly deah, nevah mind my twoubles!" Paula wound up, putting

away her handkerchief at last. "Did you win the match, that's the point?"

"We did, Paula, by a thrilling goal at the last moment! So cheer up, dear!" Polly cried, catching the still rather tearful girl by both hands. "The Fourth for ever, you know!"

"Yes, wather! Only I wish, Polly—oh, how I wish Bwenda had nevah entered the school!"

At that very instant, as it happened, Brenda entered the study. She saw that her cousin had been weeping, and she scowled scornfully.

"Huh, what are you howling about?" she snapped. "If you were me, there might be some excuse!"

"Bwenda," Paula said tremblingly, "I wouldn't be you for worlds!"

"Through being ordered off the field," Brenda rushed on, her speech coarsening as it always did when she was excited, "Miss Redgrave has got me gated for a week. And that's what Betty wanted, no doubt, the sneak!"

"Bwenda," said Paula as tremulously as before, "I wegwet having to use a stwong expression, but if the twuth must be told, it serves you wight. Yes, wather!"

"Wha-a-at!" screeched Brenda. "You are my cousin——"

"And well she knows it," interposed Polly. "I don't want to use any strong expression either, but I think you are a nasty, detestable girl! A—a-a——"

"You hear what she calls me?" yelled Brenda, appealing to Paula. "Me, your own cousin!"

"And," cried Polly, after taking a deep breath, "the sooner you clear out of Morcove the better!"

Then the madcap was gone, and the door closed behind her—slam!

"Huh!" snorted Brenda. "Perhaps that's what you say, too, Paula?"

"Yo—yes, Bwenda, yes, wather!" Paula had confessed before she knew what she was saying.

"Well, I'm not gone yet!" Brenda stared out, turning back to the door. "And until I am gone you've got to put up with me whether you like it or not!"

Her hand whirled the door open. She stormed from the room, and then the four walls shook as she shut that same door with

even twice the violence that Polly had used.

Bang! went the door, and poor Paula collapsed again with a hand at her heart.

"Dweadful—dweadful!" she moaned to herself. "Gwacious goodness, watevah shall I do if this goes on much longer?"

## CHAPTER 8.

### The Meeting in the Dark.

**B**UT would this state of things, so disturbing to the whole life of the Form, have to go on much longer?

Girls even as undesirable as Brenda Ravel sometimes have to be tolerated, in the hope that by degrees they will be "licked into shape," and it is not for their school-fellows to scheme to get them expelled. Nor were Betty and Polly, needless to say, bent upon getting rid of Brenda just because of her objectionable ways.

They were willing, as Betty had shown by including Brenda in the hockey team, to give the unpleasant girl every chance.

They had finished their prep, and were sitting quietly in the study discussing how best they could help Paula and her difficult cousin, when suddenly that very signal came to their ears which they had heard on the first night of the term.

A faint, shrill whistle!

Polly bounded up, whilst Betty rose to her feet in a less excitable manner.

"Wait a bit," Betty pleaded softly. "What part of the grounds did that sound come from?"

In a few moments a repetition of the shrill whistle gave the answer.

The person who was sending that faint call through the darkness was stationed somewhere on the outskirts of the spacious grounds behind the school buildings.

"Perhaps along the side lane," conjectured Betty, "and I guess I know the exact spot where the person could have got through the boundary hedge."

"Do you think it has any connection with Brenda?" asked Polly.

Betty nodded. Paula had told her how Brenda had left the building in answer to that whistle.

"I think it has," replied Betty. "And I think we ought to find out who Brenda's visitor is."

"Well, then, come along!" urged Polly, fuming to be off.

The girls very seldom went downstairs at this time of the evening, so, as a pretext for leaving the study, Betty had already written out some notice for the Form-board. She picked this up, and had it in her hand as she went along the corridor with Polly.

Just as well, too! For as they were going by Paula's door it opened and Brenda stood revealed. She was coming away from the study, but hesitated, and her eyes flashed suspicion for an instant, as if she associated Betty and Polly's movement towards the stairs with that mysterious signal. Then she saw the paper that Betty held, and her face cleared.

But she turned back into the study and closed the door, having changed her mind evidently about going downstairs as the coast was not clear.

A minute later the chums were at a back door of the schoolhouse. It was not locked until the time for call-over. Full of joy at having encountered no one, they slipped out into the deep darkness and silently closed the door behind them.

At that moment they heard the whistle again.

"Good!" was Polly's gleeful whisper. "Don't mind how often the signal comes now; it will guide us to the spot where the signal is lurking."

But, as Betty had said, there was really no need for guidance. All they had to do was to work forward very cautiously under cover of the darkness to the back boundary hedge.

This they began to do, although something happened before they had gone fifty paces to make them stop dead with beating hearts.

The faintest sound had come to their ears from the back porch which had been their starting point.

Someone coming after them? Yes, surely the back door had been opened and closed again as softly as possible!

Then a thought flashed upon the girl's minds, and alarm gave place to renewed delight.

That, of course, was Brenda—Brenda creeping out to answer the signal, little dreaming that two of her schoolfellows were going to be unseen auditors, listening to every word that passed!

"Down—down!" Betty gestured to her chum, and in a twinkling both girls were crouching low, with a surround of bushes to screen them.

Lurking there, they actually saw Brenda's vague figure go stealthily by in the darkness. She was in a nervous state. At every other step she cast a frightened glance behind or looked this way and that. But she never saw the schoolgirl detectives!

A few seconds of tense suspense and she was gone—had vanished into the darkness, making for the boundary hedge. And now Betty and Polly felt that it was safe for them to go on again in the same direction.

Never in their lives had they trod with such caution. How great was the need for care, however, when one clumsy step might spoil everything!

But if Betty and Polly were treading softly, so was the girl they were stealing after. And in this way extreme caution nearly frustrated the very purpose of the girls.

For suddenly they found they had almost overtaken Brenda. Two or three more steps in the darkness, and the chums would surely have been discovered.

Heart in mouth, they came to a dead stop, still unnoticed, luckily. A woman was close at hand. She had picked up the sound of Brenda's approach somehow, and was whispering:

"Is that you? This way—quick!"

"Sh!" Brenda could be heard whispering back. "I am not sure it was safe to come. I must not stay—"

"There is no need," broke in the woman. "Here, take this—take this paper quick, and guard it! It is the document—you know!"

Woman and girl were close together now. The paper, whatever it was, passed from hand to hand; then Betty and Polly were aware of Brenda's whipping about and darting back to the schoolhouse.

There had been no conversation after all—only the handing over of that document for the schoolgirl to guard. But surely that in itself was very mysterious?

Betty and Polly crouched down, for Brenda was going by very close to their ambush. She did not see them, but a few seconds after she had slipped away some faint sound made by the girls startled the lurking woman.

They saw her shoot a frightened, peering glance towards the spot where they were hiding; then she flashed about, and sped away.

The bushes rustled for a moment; then she was through the hedge, and Betty and Polly were all alone in the nightbound grounds, with nothing else to do but creep back to the schoolhouse and slip indoors without being seen.

This they did, and five minutes later they were back in their study, telling Madge.

"Poor Paula, too!" Betty suddenly exclaimed, after they had talked things over in hushed voices. "You know why I say that?"

"Because——"

"The girl is her cousin, and yet that girl is clearly leagued with a woman over some bit of villainy!" muttered Betty tensely.

Polly Linton nodded.

"Yes, but who is the woman?" Polly asked.

Betty was silent for a moment.

"I am not sure," she replied at length, "but I think she lives in the house in the lane."

Polly whistled.

"What—where we saw the girl's face at the window?" she asked.

Betty nodded.

"Then does that mean Brenda is connected with the cottage?" queried Polly.

"Obviously," returned Betty.

"Poor Paula!" ejaculated Polly. "And Brenda is her cousin!"

## CHAPTER 9.

### Not a Nice Girl.

"QUICK, girls! Now is our chance—she's alone!"

"Oh, good!"

"Spiffing!"

The words passed in excited whispers, suggesting a conspiracy.

Four girls in all were parties to the mischief that was afoot.

One—the girl who had suddenly returned into this Fourth Form study at Morcove with that gleeful cry: "She's alone!"—was Grace Garfield, and Grace was evidently the ringleader.

"Where's the placard, then?" she pouted eagerly. "Ella——"

"Here you are," was Ella Elgood's ready response, as she whisked a large sheet of cardboard from under one corner of the study carpet. "I thought it best to change the hiding-place. The cupboard was not exactly——"

"No, just as well," approved Grace. "Brenda Ravel is just the sort to stalk in here when nobody is on hand and poke about."

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Eva Merrick, looking over Grace's shoulder at certain words hand-printed upon the cardboard. "I can't help laughing!"

"It is rather good," agreed Mabel Rivers, with a titter. "Well, then——"

"Yes, come on!" whispered the ringleader. "We have twenty minutes before afternoon school begins. 'Sh! Quiet!'"

But all four were tittering still as they stole out into the corridor and tip-toed along to one of the other studies.

Next moment the door of that study was flung open by Grace, and she headed a rush into the room.

Eva Merrick, coming last, flashed about and shut the door, then stood with her back to it.

Altogether, the girl who had been alone in the study a moment since had some excuse for jumping up in surprise. But was there any real reason why she should glare so furiously at the intruders? Their broad grins showed that this was only a bit of schoolgirl fun.

"Here, what do you want?" Brenda Ravel snapped. "Get out of here! Go on—sheer off!"

"Brenda——"

"Clear out, I tell you!"

"There, you are!" exclaimed Grace Garfield, appealing to her cronies. "She hasn't got it in her to behave nicely, even when we do pay her a visit. Let her alone, and she as good as yells after you: 'Yah, stuck-up snob!' Pay her a visit, and she tells you to clear out."

"Oh, she's a horrid girl!" said Eva. "Do you hear, Brenda? You really are——"

"A tiresome creature!" said Ella.

"Anything but a nice girl, really!" said Mabel.

"I don't care if I am, so see!" Brenda

flared out again. It was a great mistake on her part, but she always did the clumsy thing. "Nice or nasty, I am Paula's cousin!"

The moment she said this, all four girls went off into peals of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha! He, he, he! Oh, dear! Ha, ha, ha!"

"You silly lot of idiots!" snapped Brenda.

"But it is too funny," Grace explained to her chucklingly. "Not a nice girl, but Paula Creel's cousin! Just what we are so sick and tired of being given to understand. Your slogan, Brenda—'I'm Paula's cousin!'—we almost hear it in our sleep!"

"In fact," said Ella, who had possession of the cardboard, "we thought we would do you a kindness, Brenda. We thought we would get the words printed for you, so you could wear them round your neck."

"That's the idea," tittered Mabel. "Save you the trouble of saying them so often. Show her, Ella."

Then Ella turned the big card face-wise to this girl, who, truth to tell, deserved every bit of the dislike she had incurred amongst her schoolfellows.

Brenda Ravel glared at the words, and then her ugly temper revealed itself to the full.

She snatched up a ruler—would have hurled it at one or another of the teasing four, but they were too quick for her.

With a combined swoop they fell upon her—not roughly, but very effectively, all the same. The ruler was whipped from that clenched hand of Brenda's, and, struggling madly, she was bundled down into a chair.

There Mabel and Eva held her fast, whilst Grace and Ella set to work to tie her securely to the chair with some lengths of strong cord that had been brought along for the purpose.

Again there was no roughness about the way the jaspers did their work; but, again, that work was most successfully accomplished.

Two minutes—no longer—and Brenda Ravel was a squirming, helpless captive in the chair, with a placard hanging about her neck.

"All right, you cats!" she hissed, as the mirthful four prepared to depart. "You wait—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'll get you into trouble over this, I will! I'll get the whole pack of you—"

"Ta-ta, Paula's cousin!" mocked Grace. She blew the infuriated captive a kiss. "Mind you let Paula see the card! Ha, ha, ha!"

And they went out, slamming the door behind them, and could be heard laughing all the way along the corridor.

"He, he, he!"

## CHAPTER 10.

### "So distressing!"

A FEW minutes earlier Paula Creel had been turning into the Fourth Form corridor. She had been upstairs to comb her hair. Paula therefore was looking exceedingly dainty when she had encountered Grace Garfield and Co. These young ladies bore the swell girl of the Form no real illwill. But they loved teasing her.

"Yes, quite nice," remarked Grace, looking Paula up and down.

"Weally, you think so, do you?" Paula responded, with a pleased smile. "Thank you, Gwacie deah! A compliment is always gwatifying."

"The pity of it is," sighed Grace, "that cousin of yours doesn't know how to dress nicely."

"Er—er—yes, wather!" smiled Paula.

The smile was fading. That cousin of hers—when, when would she hear the last of her?

"Your cousin, Paula—"

"Er—pweicisely, geals! Howevah, if you would kindly wefwain for once—"

"Oh, you don't like us to talk about her! But you always remind us that she is your cousin, Paula, don't you?" said Grace.

"I—er—yes, wather! Wealising, geals, that Bwenda has wather a way of aggwavating some of you, I do feel constwained to wemark, now and then, that she weally is my cousin. I wegard it as a duty," said Paula, "to wemind myself fwequently that Bwenda is my cousin."

"Brenda doesn't allow you to forget it, does she?" twittered Mabel.

"Hark!" said Eva. "Surely that is Brenda now, calling for dear Cousin Paula! Can't you hear her?"

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Paula, giving ear to the very distinct screech that was coming

from her study. "Yes, wather! A most distwessing cwyl! A twuly howwible scweech! I wondah what it means?"

"Better go and see!" all four mischief-workers advised her, scampering off.

"Yes, wather—yes, bai Jove!" Paula sighed heavily to herself, as she went on alone to her study. "Weally, life is twuly twying these days! Howevah, I must twy to forget, when I can, that I have a geal like Bwenda for my cousin. I— Oh, gwreat Scott! Bwenda!"

For Paula, pushing open the study door, beheld that girl writhing in the chair to which she was tied—beheld, too, the label round her neck.

Another reminder! Ugh!

"I'm not a nice girl," shrieked the placard, "but I'M PAULA CREEL'S COUSIN!"

"Bwenda!"

"Cousin Paula! Here, set me free, Cousin Paula!" yelled Brenda.

"Yes, wather! Pwecisely! Howevah, pway, Bwenda—"

"Don't stand gaping! Don't stand simpering, you idiot!" fumed Brenda. "Do something!"

"My dear Bwenda, I—I am supwised! Pway remove that placard! It is a weminder that you are my cousin, and—"

"How can I take the thing off when I am tied up?"

"Bai Jove, no! Howevah—"

"Scissors—get the scissors! Cut the cords!" cried Brenda shrilly. "Oh, those girls! Oh, won't I pay them out somehow!"

Paula, in a sort of dazed way, started to hunt for the scissors. But before she could find them there came a sudden rush of girls about the open doorway.

"Hallo! Oh!"

"Goodness!"

"How funny! Paula, is she going into school wearing that label?"

"Scissors!" shrieked Brenda. "Paula, how can you let your cousin be tormented like this? Come on—quick!"

But Paula, being unable to find the scissors, though she was doing the next best thing by going to the door and appealing to the mirthful crowd.

Paula did not slam the door in their faces; she was far too amiable and polite. If she had slammed the door Brenda would have been satisfied. What Paula simply

did, however, was to make the most affable appeal to the crowd, with Brenda all the time writhing in the chair and coming out with savage cries.

"Deah fwiends," simpered Paula, "I wegwet that you should have awwived at this extwemely awkward moment. Howevah—"

"Paula, scissors—a knife—a—"

"Howevah, geals, you will wealiso that Bwenda is in an unfortunat pwedicament. Yes, wather! Some wascally geals have —"

"Get me out of this, you idiot! Come away—"

"Perpetuwated a cwuel jape. It is extwemely impwobable that they wealised how cwuel it was, geals. Howevah—"

Crash! came a sudden interruption to Paula's amiable meanderings, as Cousin Brenda, in an effort to burst the cords, fell over, taking the chair with her.

"Half a sec.—don't move!" Grace Garfield now pleaded quite gravely, stepping into the room. "Let me read that placard! Oh, but this is nothing new! We all know she is your cousin, Paula!"

"Yes, wather! Howevah—"

"We all know, too, she is not a nice girl."

"Pwecisely—I mean—"

"Then why the placard?" asked the very girl who had helped to concoct it.

"Ah, why indeed?" asked the mild Paula. "That is what supwises me. So—so twuly superfluous—what! Yes, wather! Howevah—"

However, at that moment Brenda burst the cords, and up she sprang like a tigress. With a sort of howl, she launched herself at Grace, starting to scratch and claw.

Nor would Grace have come off lightly, perhaps, if it had not been for one hindrance to Brenda's fury.

The large sheet of cardboard was still flapping at her chest, and she had to pause and fall back a step to get rid of the thing.

Grace, amidst yells of delight, made a laughing flight from the study. She withdrew to the far end of the corridor, then fetched up to go off into fresh peals of laughter. Ella, Eva, and Mabel ran to rejoin her, and that was the signal for the rest of the crowd to disperse.

In a few moments two girls only were left at the doorway. They had turned up just as Grace scampered away, so they had

missed the cream of the business. For which reason Paula Croel now embarked upon what promised to be a very graceful but most boring explanation.

"My deah Betty—my deah Polly," Paula began; but Betty Barton, the Form captain, made a sign that she could draw her own conclusions.

"I wegwet to say, geals—"  
"Oh, turn them out, those two!" hissed Brenda. "They are as bad as the rest. Get away, the pair of you!"

Then Betty and Polly, shrugging, passed on, causing Paula to heave a sigh as she closed the study door.

"Theah again, Bwenda," she said regretfully, "you made a gweat mistake, don't you know. Pwobably Betty Barton was extremly disposed to sympathise with you for once."

"Piffle!" sneered Brenda, flouncing herself to rights. "I know Betty Barton! I know Polly, too! I hate the lot of 'em!"

"Oh, weal—"  
"And how you, my own cousin, can be so pally with them, I don't know!" stormed on the unpopular girl. "You don't care a scrap how they treat me!"

"Bwenda, I must pwoteet!" Paula said gently. "I do care a gweat deal how they treat you. It gwieves me—yes, wather! Howevah, I also care how you treat them, don't you know."

"Oh, shut up!"  
"I should be extremly glad to wefwain from all wemarks, Bwenda. Howevah, I weally am—er—constwained to wemind you that you are a most pwovoking geal."

"I'm your cousin!"  
"Yes, Bwenda, I do not forget it," sighed Paula. "It is my own cousin who is always aggwavating the geals. It is my own cousin who was dismissed from the hockey field the other afternoon, for wough play. There have been other disagweeable mattahs, bai Jove. Howevah, I wefwain—"

"You'd better!" snapped Brenda. "There's the bell for classes, so the best thing you can do is to get away downstairs. Mch good you are to me! Oh, a fine friend I have in my own cousin!"

This was almost too much for Paula—the unfairness of that reproach! She was a girl of keen sensibilities, and any rough, unkind words hurt her cruelly. If there

was an interval of two minutes or so between the time Paula left that study and the time she got down to the class-room, and if Paula did look rather red about the eyes when she was ready to go into the class-room—well, it is not to her disgrace.

Brenda found her cousin mooning about outside the class-room, although the other girls had all gone in by now.

"What, haven't you gone in yet?" snapped the rough girl.

"I wather thought it was my duty to wait for you, Bwenda," was the gentle answer.

"Huh! Well, come on, then! And if we get rowed for being late, I'm going to tell, so sec!"

A look of horror came into Paula's face. If there had been time to do so, she would have implored her cousin not to be so mean as to make any complaint; but Brenda was already entering the class-room.

Work was to begin this afternoon under Miss Massingham. And there stood that lady—quite the sternest mistress an unpunctual scholar could have to reckon with—waiting to receive the two with a cold:

"What does this mean, pray? You heard the bell!"

Then Brenda did the dreadful thing. To Paula's increased horror, she pointed out Grace Garfield, who was sitting at her desk with the other girls.

"I'm late, Miss Massingham, because that girl tied me to a chair," shrieked Brenda. "And she's got to be punished!"

"Oh! Oooo!" came from the whole class. They were sharing Paula's horror to the full—horror that one girl should "blab" against another.

Miss Massingham herself looked disgusted. "What are you saying, Brenda?"

"I'm saying that Grace Garfield—"  
"Do you think it right to say it?" cut in the mistress sharply. "Whatever silly joke has been played upon you, don't you know better—haven't you a better sense of ordinary schoolgirl honour—than to tell tales?"

Then the mistress turned to poor Paula. "Paula, this girl—she is your cousin?"  
"Er—yes, wather! I wegwet—that is to say, Miss Massingham, she is my cousin, Pwecisely."

"Then I think it is a pity," exclaimed Miss Massingham witheringly, "that you do not try to instil a little spirit into your cousin."

"I do twy!" protested poor Paula sadly. "Weally, don't you know, I twy most fwightfully! Howeveh——"

"You had better keep on trying," said Miss Massingham dryly.

And on that understanding, as it were, she waved both girls to their places.

Brenda went to her seat with a swing of the shoulders at every step. She wanted to show how little she cared what Miss Massingham thought of her, or what the girls thought of her, and she certainly succeeded.

And Paula?

"You had better keep on trying," she seemed to hear Miss Massingham saying over and over again all that afternoon. Just as if she, unhappy cousin to that graceless girl, had not tried enough.

It was an hour later, and Miss Redgrave had taken over the class from her superior, when Polly Linton suddenly whispered behind her hand to Betty, sitting next to her: "Look at Paula, Betty! Is she crying?"

No, it was not as bad as that. But Betty, seizing her chance when Miss Redgrave was busy at a cupboard, slipped close to the swell girl.

"What's the matter, Paula dear? Can't you do the work? You do look so troubled."

"The work's all wight, Betty," was Paula's sighing whisper. "You know—oh, you know what's wong."

Then there was a quick nod from Betty, and a soothing word:

"Come to Study 12 after school, Paula!"

Yes, Betty knew!

## CHAPTER 11.

### To Solve a Mystery.

**T**HERE was a most inviting look about Study 12 when Paula Creel drifted in at half-past four.

A white cloth was setting off dainty tea-things. The aroma of freshly brewed tea was in the air.

"Now, you just take the old easy chair, Paula dear," counselled Betty, "and cheer up!"

"Yes, wather!" assented the aristocrat of the Form. "Geals, this is extremewly decent of you, bai Jove! What with one thing and another, I have been feeling weady to dwop!"

Paula dropped there and then into the low chair.

"You shall have tea on your lap," suggested Polly gaily. "And then for a talk about—Hallo, Madge! So you remembered the invitation, instead of going off to play the joanner in the music-room?"

"Yes, of course I remembered," said Madge. "I thought of the hard life Paula is having at present. I condole with you, Paula."

"Thank you, Madge deah!" exclaimed that young lady taking her teacup upon her lap. "This is weally a welcome wespite, bai Jove, to be with you geals, away from my howwid cousin for a few minutes."

"Madge knows we want to have a serious talk about Brenda presently," Betty remarked gravely. "But have your tea first, Paula."

Thus, for a few minutes, the talk was of a general kind, although it was not as mirthful as usual.

"You see, geals," Paula exclaimed suddenly harking back to that trouble which was proving the bane of her life, "there is no knowing how long it is going to last, bai Jove! This cousin of mine may even return to school next term."

"Oh, no!" said Betty, with conviction. "Somehow, I don't think this state of things will go on much longer."

Paula was sitting very erect in her easy chair—a most unusual thing for that languid girl to do. Seldom, indeed, did she let herself get as agitated as she was at this moment.

"What have you found out, then?" she added tensely. "Tell me——"

"We think the time has come for us to tell you, Paula," Betty said gravely. "And we must warn you that it is going to give you a nasty turn. We have found that Brenda's mother is living within a mile or so of this school in that lonely house. She visited the schoolgrounds one evening to see Brenda, and I made inquiries and learnt her name was Mrs. Ravel. She is supposed to be living alone, but we think she is not alone."

"We saw someone else!" Polly took up the impressive talk. "There is a girl in that lonely house——"

"What a prisoner?" gasped Paula. "You mean to say——"

"Not a prisoner—no; but she is under



some restraint or other," Betty said quickly. "Why we have yet to find out."

"Bai Jove—y-s wather!" Paula exclaimed, standing up out of sheer agitation. "My gwacious geals if it is like this it wather begins to look as if Bwenda and her mother are—are— Weally I don't like to use a stwong expression but are they w'ong 'uns, geals? Are they?"

"Sit down, dear; keep calm," Betty soothed the agitated girl. "As I said just now, it was bound to be a shock to you. There is really some ugly business behind it all. If not, why should your cousin Brenda have to hide the fact from you and all of us that her mother is at that house?"

"And why do the two have to meet in secret?" asked Polly grimly.

"The mother came to the school grounds after dark the other night, Paula. That is a thing we did not tell you at the time," Betty said. "Polly and I were on watch, and we saw Bronda slip out and speak to Mrs. Ravel."

"Good gwacious. I—I— Weally—" "And we saw," put in Polly impressively—"we saw Mrs. Ravel hand a paper—some mysterious document—to her stepdaughter. Brenda has that paper now, and wouldn't I just like to know what it is!"

Paula sat down as if quite overcome. Then she stood up again, fanning her face with her handkerchief.

"Geals, weally, I— Bai Jove!" was all she could stammer. "It is getting dreadful, don't you know! Who is that geal at the lonely house, then? Who is she?"

"Ah!" exclaimed Polly, exchanging another glance with Betty and Madge. "That is what we have to find out, the sooner the better!"

"Yes," was Betty's sober rejoinder, whilst Madge gave a nod of agreement. "And to find out who that girl is, I, for one, am ready to do a rather desperate thing."

"Ditto me!" said Polly exuberantly.

"I am in this, too, but not you, Paula," Madge added, with that calm smile of hers. "Your part is simply to go on putting up with Cousin Bwenda."

Paula gave a grimace. "You wish me to wotire to my own den presently, and spend the evening with Bwenda? Ugh! Howewah—"

"No need to stick too close to her," Betty

said comfortingly "Just do as you would do any other evening. Only, for goodness' sake, be careful not to let a word that will put her on her guard! You will be very careful, won't you?"

Paula's answer to that was about the most emphatic "Yes, wather!" that she had ever voiced. She showed a readiness to quit Study 12 at once, but the chums would not let her hurry away.

Nor, when two or three other girls dropped in, did Betty and Polly give any hint that company, for once, was not desired.

Only it somehow came about that, by six o'clock, Paula had gone at last, and so had all other callers. Madge, too, was heard running off some of her brilliant pieces.

And now did Betty and Polly set about doing that desperate thing at which they had hinted during their after-tea talk with Paula.

Something far more thrilling this evening than a trip out into the nightbound grounds to lie in wait for a chance visit by Mrs. Ravel.

They were going to slip along to the house in the lane although that house was more than a mile from the school.

Or rather that was what they hoped to do if only they could manage it.

Seizing their chance when the corridor was deserted the Study 12 couple slipped away from that room. Swiftly and silently they sped downstairs, bearing, amongst other sounds, Madge's brilliant piano playing.

That particular sound seemed to amuse Polly. She was almost chuckling as she and Betty crept round into a certain passage leading to a back way out of the house.

"Madge is going it at the joanna as hard as usual," whispered the madcap. "Who would ever think she had promised to join us outside before another five minutes is up?"

Betty gestured with one finger: "Sh!" She peered back along the dim passage, then shot a questioning look at her chum.

"Now, shall we venture?"

"Yes, cut along!"  
So without a sound, the handle of the unbolted door was turned, and next moment the Form captain and her chum were in the open air!

## CHAPTER 12.

## The House in the Lane.

THE scene changes. We see the interior of that old house in the lane which has become the centre of so much interest to Betty & Co.

This lamp-lit parlour on which the curtain has risen is one of the very few rooms which are habitable. Many are quite unfurnished, their floors laden with the dust of years.

But here, sitting in a brooding attitude by the small fire is the mysterious woman whom the chums of Morocco have come to speak of as Brenda Ravel's mother.

An ill-favoured woman truly. Tall and angular, with a hard face that looks as if it was easily contorted by flashes of temper—that is Mrs. Ravel.

That beautiful young girl whose presence in the old house is a secret that Mrs. Ravel is guarding—why is she not sharing the warmth and brightness of this cosy room this evening?

Has she been banished to some other part of the house—to some room that is really no better than a prison cell? Do they really stand in that relationship to each other—gaoleress and girl prisoner?

If so, then surely it is time indeed that Betty & Co. cleared up the whole strange mystery, even at the cost of a month's gating for breaking bounds!

In a moment that a loud-ticking clock struck the half-hour after six, Mrs. Ravel got up from her seat by the fire. It was as if she had been waiting for what, she had decided, should be the time for certain actions.

Having made up the fire, she went to the window and took a look at the night.

Then, picking a dark cloak from the back of a chair, she put it about her shoulders, thus equipping herself for a journey out-of-doors.

But only a moment afterwards she was seized with hesitation, and off came the cloak, to be laid upon the chair again.

"I had better be sure first!" she muttered to herself.

Very stealthily after that she opened the room door, and stole forth into the passage.

Just as stealthily she made her way up

one flight of stairs after another, until she was right at the top of the house, amongst what were once the servants' attics.

Going silently round a corner and along a short passage, she stopped at a door at the end. A glimmer of candle-light came through the keyhole, but this was soon blotted out as Mrs. Ravel stooped and put one eye to the tiny aperture.

What she had seen by secretly peeping into the room evidently gratified her. She was giving a leer of satisfaction as she stole away from the door and round the corner as quietly as she had come.

Less than a minute later she made the same errand to that attic door again, only this time her step was perfectly audible.

This time, too, she tapped at the door, then swept into the room.

The light of the candle showed a young girl lying in bed—not asleep, however.

"Huh!" exclaimed Mrs. Ravel, after eyeing her very distrustfully for a moment. "Early to go to bed, my girl!"

"Yes, I know it is," was the answer; "but I felt it was the best thing I could do."

"Why?"

The girl lying there, on what was little better than a pallet bed, shrugged.

"Starting to sail, are you?" Mrs. Ravel threw out uneasily. "But how am I to know you are not shamming? Just to make me have the doctor in to you, and then—"

"No, I am neither ill nor pretending to be ill," the girl struck in coldly. "Is it likely I want to make you fetch a doctor, when you have warned me that anything I do to reveal my existence to others will force you to destroy that paper."

"Ah, yes—that paper!" leered the woman. "I am running risks by not destroying it at once, but its existence certainly does serve that useful purpose. Whilst you know it is still about the house somewhere, there is a strong inducement for you to keep in with me—eh?"

This time the girl did not answer. She twitched about in her bed as if she wanted to cry out: "Oh, go away! I hate you!"

"Well, there, to get to bed is about the best thing you can do, my girl, these long, dull, lonely evenings," Mrs. Ravel remarked, her suspicions allayed. "Do you want the candle to read by?"

"Oh, no!"

"Then I'll take it away, shall I?"

Mrs. Ravel made that remark as carelessly as the girl had made hers. At heart, however, the woman was quite excited. The candle's not being wanted was proof, she felt, that the girl really meant to try to get to sleep.

"Good-night, then, though I shall most likely look in again last thing," Mrs. Ravel said, backing into the passage and taking the candle with her.

"Good-night!" the girl responded curtly.

The door clicked shut, and in the darkness she at once watched the keyhole intently.

By the way the light from the other side slowly faded from that tiny hole, she could tell for certain that Mrs. Ravel really had gone away.

Left in this deep darkness, and with the whole house so utterly silent, there was every inducement for a girl, full of lassitude through being cooped within doors day after day, to seek sleep at once. But sleep was the very last thing this girl desired, as her actions now showed.

For a little while she sat up in her bed listening intently. Then she threw back the coverings, stepped to the floor, and put on a dressing-gown.

Without a sound she passed from the dark attic and round to one at the front of the house. It was perfectly bare. Crossing the dirty floor in her stockinged feet, she took her station at the curtainless window and watched.

A young moon was shining on this side of the house, and a silvery radiance was upon the outer world. So presently it was an easy thing for the watching girl to detect a cloaked figure going away from the house with quick, silent steps.

Mrs. Ravel!

It was not hard to understand the meaning of that triumphant smile which now flickered at the girl's lips.

Her ruse had succeeded!

She had only gone to bed early this evening in the hope that her retirement would induce Mrs. Ravel to make a journey out of doors.

From that front attic window the girl saw Mrs. Ravel pass out through the wicket-gate and hasten away down the moonlit lane. That was good enough. Another moment, and the back attic had its youthful occupant again, although the bed was to remain empty.

Swiftly the girl dressed herself in her day things. Then she went downstairs, straight to the front door.

Opening it just wide enough for the purpose, she slipped out into the trellised porch, and listened awhile.

"She is not returning," she said, in a whisper to herself, and then sighed heavily. "I'll be able to search the house once more!"

Hark!

What was that sound—a sound as if of someone's stealthy movements not far off in the darkness?

Mrs. Ravel! With a leaping heart the girl stood wondering. Was it Mrs. Ravel, stealing back to take her by surprise?

It might be—yes, it might be so! Life was nothing but a battle of wits between them these days. Time after time each had resorted to a ruse, a trick, and it was not at all unlikely that Mrs. Ravel had been resorting to a trick this evening when she left the house just now!

Once again the faintest of sounds, the stealthy movement of someone, just beyond the limits of the garden. Someone was there, and who else could it be but Mrs. Ravel?

Whoever came this way after dark, to go past the lonely house, much less to start prowling around it?

She waited. For ten, fifteen, twenty seconds she waited and watched. Then to her relief she suddenly made out three girlish figures, lurking cautiously in the shadows which the moonlight cast amongst a clump of evergreens.

The daring trio had actually entered the garden—not by the wicket-gate, but by scrambling through the hedge which partly bounded the rank lawn.

The excited girl could no longer restrain herself.

Through the silence she sent the faintest of encouraging signals:

"Coo-ee! Come here—quick!"

She heard the girls' startled gasps, and then she saw them streaking towards her.

"In here—it is safest!" she whispered, stepping back into the dark house. "Mrs. Ravel is away. You must think it's strange my calling you like this, but since I saw you in the lane— Do you remember? I—"

"Who—who are you?" They were all speaking at once. "That is what we are

dying to know. Who are you? Why are you here? What is all the mystery?"

And then—amazing answer—the girl said in great distress:

"I cannot tell you—no, I cannot tell you yet!"

### CHAPTER 13.

#### Hide and Seek.

THE three schoolgirls were Betty, Polly, and Madge, for Madge's piano-playing had not lasted long.

She, too, had suddenly slipped down to a certain back door of the school-house, reaching it just after the Study 12 couple had made a dart for the open air.

In speechless amazement for a moment or so, these three chums stared at the girl whose identity was so puzzling, and she, in return, peered back at each of them, the eager scrutiny evidently confirming all her expectations of the type of schoolgirl they were. The best!

"But look here!" broke out Betty breathlessly. "This is altogether too queer. You have been living here with Mrs. Ravel all this time—"

"Yes."

"And she has kept your presence a secret?"

"Yes."

"Not only that!" put in Polly excitedly. "You have been compelled, for some reason or other, to keep to the house as if it were your prison. I mean, although you were free to run away, you did not dare."

"No."

"Then why—what—"

"And yet you are glad that we have come to see you. Yes, we were on the way to see you when you called us in," Madge Minden interposed. "Do you need help? You are glad we have turned up this evening—your looks tell us how glad you are."

"Glad! Oh, if you only knew how glad I feel!" the mystery girl exclaimed. "I want to talk with you—tell you many things before you go away. Only I cannot tell you my name for the present. I feel it best not to."

"This is the question!" Polly burst out, interrupting the calmer Betty. "How can we help you? Will you come away with us—now, this minute? Do—do!"

They were still standing together in the

unlighted hall. But the parlour door was open, and a gleam of flame from the fire gave sufficient illumination to show the chums what a wistful look came into the girl's face as that entreaty was voiced. No doubt about it, she longed to come away with them—at once!

"Daren't you, then?" whispered Madge.

"I—I— Oh, it is not so much that I dare not! I have to consider whether it is wise—the best thing for myself in the long run; the best thing for others, too." was the mystery girl's answer.

"You puzzle us!" exclaimed Polly. "Oh, why—why—"

"I will tell you in a few words," the girl broke out, and eagerly the trio listened. "I ought not to leave this house—I really dare not run away from Mrs. Ravel, much as I dislike her and hate the dreadful life—until I have found a certain paper."

"A paper!" echoed Betty sharply.

"A— Do you mean a document?" jerked out Polly. "Oh, then—"

"Yes; a certain document."

"Then that is the document, surely, that Mrs. Ravel handed to Brenda a few evenings ago!" Polly exclaimed, turning to Betty and Madge.

Those two nodded quickly.

"Of course, you are quite aware that Mrs. Ravel has a daughter at the school?" Betty said to the girl. "Well, there have been secret meetings between the two. Mrs. Ravel has been stealing into the school grounds after dark to talk with her daughter."

"Yes, she has gone to the school this evening."

"Phew!" was Polly's whistled comment. "Then that was the woman we dodged aside to avoid on the way here. But to get back to that paper. A few evenings ago a couple of us saw Mrs. Ravel hand Brenda Ravel a document. It was done in a great hurry, but— Why, what a turn this seems to be giving you!"

"A document—handed to Brenda!" she whispered hoarsely. "Oh, then, you are right—you must be! That is the document I have been longing to get hold of. It was hidden about the house, somewhere, up to a few days ago. I know that, because Mrs. Ravel made a point of letting me see it now and then."

"So as to induce you to be patient and stay on here?"

"Yes, that's it! But if she has since handed it over to the girl who is at school—"

"Why, it simply means," struck in Polly exuberantly, "you have no need to stay here any longer! You can come away with us, as we want you to."

"I have need to get hold of that paper. Oh, that is my desperate need!" the girl answered, beating her hands together. "It is awfully good of you to be so friendly and helpful, and you must think me very unfair not to tell you everything. But I—I still feel bound to silence until that paper is in my hands."

"Very well," said Betty quickly; "you know best. But the paper is at the school now. Brenda Ravel has it. So why not come along to the school with us?"

"And force her to give it up?" The girl drew her brows together. "It might be impossible to force her. She might destroy it at a moment's warning, just as Mrs. Ravel threatened to do."

"Then I know what!" burst out Polly. "We will catch Brenda napping. We'll get hold of the paper before she even knows we are after it."

"Polly's got the idea! Bravo, Polly!" exclaimed Madge. "Only, does that mean we are to leave you here?" she added earnestly, addressing the mystery girl. "Can't you come back with us, in case— Oh, perhaps it is a needless fear, but we girls think you may come to harm if you stay on much longer in this house!"

"And so, perhaps, I may," was the girl's thrilling answer. "That woman—she is a ruthless creature! I do believe she would stop at nothing if—"

"Then that settles it. You are to come with us—you must!" insisted Betty, taking her by the arms. "Even if you cannot go to our headmistress, as we would like you to, but must hide for the present, that will be better than to—"

"Hark!" interjected Madge, suddenly rearing her head to listen.

The wicket-gate outside had clicked—only in the wind?

No!

Now a quick step was audible, coming along the flagged path towards the porch.

"My goodness!" Betty gasped faintly.

"That must be—"

"Mrs. Ravel! We are caught!"

"Hush! She mustn't catch you—she shan't!" the mystery girl said in a fierce whisper. "Quick—quick! Up there! The back door is locked, and she has the key. Up there—quick!"

And she waved them towards the stairs.

Not an instant did the chums hesitate. Since the back door was locked, it was a case of darting out of sight up the stairs or being found by Mrs. Ravel. In lightning fashion, they fled to "cover," and after them sped the girl they were befriending.

How all four of them managed to rush up the first flight of steps without stumbling in the dark they could never understand. It seemed a sheer miracle of luck. But there they were, anyhow, by the time Mrs. Ravel lifted the latch of the front door and re-entered the dark hall, safely out of sight round the first landing, and standing dead still.

Mrs. Ravel emitted a peevish exclamation as she slammed the door shut.

She must have come back for some reason or other before her mission was accomplished, and was accordingly in a bad temper. Going into the parlour, she took up the poker and rattled at the bars, to stir the fire into a cheerier blaze.

Another bit of luck for the girls! Whilst the woman was making such a stir down there, she was not likely to hear their movements.

And so they stole on up another flight of stairs, and another after that, until they were in the attic passage.

"How long, though, will she be down there?" Betty asked, in the faintest of whispers. "She has only come back for something, surely?"

"I cannot say," was the mystery girl's whispered answer. "She may not go out again."

"Goodness!" breathed Polly. "Then what are we to do? Supposing she—"

"Sh!"

The woman was coming up the stairs.

## CHAPTER 14.

### The Escape.

YES, they could hear her footfall on the first flight of stairs, and was it a wonder if, for a moment, all four girls looked simply panic-stricken? Mrs. Ravel, it was certain, was coming

up to the attic floor to make sure that the girl she had last seen lying in bed, as if ready for sleep, was up to no tricks. And she would find—a nice state of things!

But after that one moment of helpless dismay, the chums found their nameless friend gesturing them to dart inside one of the other attics.

They understood, and in a flash the three school-girls were round the passage corner and tip-toeing into a front attic. They could hear Mrs. Ravel's steps plainer than ever. Had she heard theirs—the tell-tale creak of a board, perhaps? That was the question.

Without a sound Betty shut the attic door the moment they were across the threshold. Then they stood as still as possible, suppressing their quick breathing.

Meanwhile, the mystery girl had flitted into her own furnished attic and closed the door. Off came her dressing-gown. Into the bed she scrambled, and drew the coverings up to her neck.

Next moment she was like one lying fast asleep.

Creak, creak sounded a floorboard, as Mrs. Ravel came along the attic passage. She carried no light, nor did she strike a match when she had reached the girl's door and softly opened it.

She morely peered inside, saw the occupied bed, and gave heed for a moment or two to the measured breathing of the girl, then withdrew.

On her way down the stairs again she began to talk to herself out of sheer relief.

"So it was all right, and I needn't have turned back, after all. What a jumpy person I am becoming! But there, what wonder, when there is so much at stake! Besides, I could swear that three girls dodged past me, coming in this direction, back there on the high road. Three school-girls they must have been, and they might have been coming here. Yes, they might have been."

Regarding the sitting-room, she set about getting herself an evening meal, and little she dreamed what was happening the while, up there at the top of the house!

The pallet-bed no longer held its "sleeping" occupant of a few moments ago. That girl had silently risen up once more and was dressing quickly. Now she was out on the landing, and the chums were with her.

In a perplexed way those three were asking with their round eyes: "Whatever shall we do?" But she was ready with a plan.

First, she pointed to a skylight immediately above their heads. Then, signing to them to follow her, she crept back to the furnished attic.

Tip-toeing after her, they saw her rummage out a coil of rope from a corner cupboard.

"I have kept this ready," she whispered to them, "in case I might want to get away at any time when the woman was keeping me here by force. The skylight and this rope—I have had them in mind always."

"Quite right," Betty whispered back, whilst Madge and Polly nodded, "And now—"

"You must get away through the skylight."

"But you—you will come, too?"

"Yes. The paper is no longer here. I am coming with you to the school. 'Sh! Don't make a sound! No more talking! Now!"

And with that hushed word, she tip-toed out to the landing again, taking a bedroom chair with her.

Down below, Mrs. Ravel had begun upon the meal which she had been laying for herself. They could hear the faint clatter of a knife and fork.

Hastily the girls set the chair beneath the skylight, and then the chums' nameless friend, being familiar with the working of the roof window, set about opening it.

Mounting on to the chair, she reached up and raised the skylight a couple of feet or so at one end, after silently undoing its fastenings. Then, with the rope coiled about her shoulders, she took hold of the skylight's framework and hauled herself through the opening.

The chums had wondered what sort of a figure she would cut from an athletic point of view. They need not have been uneasy. They themselves, when their turn came to make the desperate exit on to the roof, showed no greater agility than the mystery girl had displayed.

Madge, indeed, almost came to grief, and there were some heart-in-mouth moments as her companions just saved her from a slip that would have sent her crashing back to the landing floor.

Except for that scare, however, all went

well. In silence they emerged upon a flat portion of the roof, and now an even riskier task lay before them.

They had to get to earth by means of that rope!

The nameless girl took it from about her shoulders and started to pay it out—a very thin rope, all too thin, it seemed to the girls. But they had to have faith in its being stronger than it looked.

Between them they made this end of it fast about some secure ironwork, and then it was for each girl in turn to let herself down, hand under hand.

Again the mystery girl went first; by her own desire, and the chums had to agree that this was advisable, for she knew the ground below better than they. Anxiously they listened as she began to slither down, but her descent was made in silence and with marvellous rapidity.

In a few seconds the rope was being jerked from below, as a signal that another girl might follow.

So Madge took her turn, and after her presently went Polly.

Suddenly, and before Betty had got the signal that she could follow, that girl was horrified by hearing very significant sounds from inside the house.

Mrs. Ravel had somehow divined that all was not as it should be up on the attic floor. She had jumped up from her supper—was racing up the stairs.

With a thrill of alarm running through her, Betty crawled to the edge of the roof and took hold of the rope.

The signal did not come, and Polly's weight was still straining the line. Would it bear Betty's added weight?

In any case, perhaps, Betty would have taken her chance; but in the very nick of time she got the signal "all right." Over the edge she went, and hung by both hands to the rope.

Then down—down, as fast as ever she could slither, with the rope burning her hands like a red-hot bar, whilst at every instant she almost expected to find Mrs. Ravel coming after her.

The woman certainly reached the sky-light before Betty landed amongst her chums in the garden. They all heard her cry of rage, but she did not venture down the rope.

Instead, the girls heard such sounds as told them that the enraged woman was

dashing down through the house, with the intention of reaching the garden by the front door and then giving chase.

"Come on!" they all four panted to one another. "Quick!"

And away they sped, helter-skelter, out of the wilderness of a garden, straight across a ploughed field, and so on to the main road.

"Well, you've done it now," chuckled Polly softly, putting herself close to the fugitive girl. "Morcovre for you to-night!"

"Yes," was the breathless answer, "but I must not go to your headmistress. No, no, I dare not! Remember what I told you—I am tongue-tied—I cannot say a word—until that document is in my hands."

"But—"

"If you like, I will part from you here," the girl offered, whilst they still all ran on together. "I can fend for myself somehow. The country is wild and lonely, and I—"

"No; if that is the case, and you must go into hiding until that paper is in your hands," panted Betty, "then the only thing is for us to smuggle you into the school."

"Yes, yes," agreed Polly eagerly. "Smuggle her up to the attics at the school, and—"

"Sh! Look out—someone coming!" interjected Madge. "Hide!"

They stopped dead on the instant. At first they only heard the thumping of their hearts; then there were sounds which told that Madge was not mistaken. Someone was coming along the road from the direction of the school.

Off the roadway nipped the girls, to find cover behind a solitary bush—the only bit of shelter for them in the moonlight! Would it screen them?

That anxious moment was intensified when, in the next few moments, they saw who it was coming towards them. A schoolgirl—Brenda Ravel.

That girl—the very last person belonging to the school whom they could afford to be seen by!

How the girls held themselves breathless and still behind that miserable bit of shelter as the girl came hurrying towards them along the road!

Would she see them—would she? What a disaster if she did!

## CHAPTER 15.

## Five More Days.

**B**UT Brenda Ravel, at the moment when her hurrying steps brought her level with the others' hiding-place, had her own anxious thought—a thought that kept her hastening on without a glance to right or left.

She had broken bounds this evening. Could she reach the lonely house and have a few urgent words with her mother there, and then get back to the school before her absence had been discovered?

She had been running every yard of the way since she got clear of the school bounds, and by now she was almost exhausted. Still, she struggled on, however, encouraged by the thought that it was not far now.

And then suddenly, as the agitated girl was rounding a bend in the roadway, she almost ran into the arms of the very woman she was longing to speak to.

"You!" panted Mrs. Ravel, whilst the girl jerked out exhaustedly:

"Oh, I was coming to the house to warn you! I had to! Three girls from the school—they have slipped out this evening, and I am sure——"

"Yes, they have been to the house," struck in Mrs. Ravel. "Your warning—it has come to late! They have been, and gone!"

"Ah!"

"And they have taken the girl with them."

"What!" gasped Brenda Ravel. "Surely——"

"Yes, I tell you! That's why I am rushing about like this. They have got away with her through the skylight," panted the agitated woman. "That paper—you have it still, haven't you?"

"Yes. Up at the school, safely hidden."

"Guard it, then, more carefully than ever," urged the woman. "If the girl is taken by the others to tell her story to your headmistress, destroy the paper at once. But if she does not do anything like that—I don't know; she may go into hiding."

"Yes, I understand. And perhaps I had better get back at once."

"You should—at once," agreed the woman. "And I—I must trust entirely to you now. Be careful—oh, be very careful! Remember what depends upon that girl never getting hold of the paper. At any

rate, until after the tenth of this month."

"And to-day is the fifth," muttered Brenda. "Five more days! All right; I'll do my best. Before I go," she added, turning to start back, "is there anything else to tell me?"

"No, no! Only be careful! Don't get caught slipping into the school."

"Not me!" was Brenda Ravel's ungrammatical rejoinder, as she dashed off again.

But all the way along that dark road she was a prey to the greatest alarm as to whether, after all, she would be able to get into the school-house undetected.

Evidently the three girls and the fugitive from the house were ahead of her. They might slip into the house and then bolt the back door, so as to shut her out!

And that, it presently appeared, was exactly what they had done.

At half-past eight—only half an hour short of call-over—Brenda got to that back door, to find it locked against her. Badly suppressed gasps of exasperation escaped her. She felt crazy with despair.

Impossible to enter the school now, until—ah, unless she could slip back the fastening of some ground-floor window. Could she do that?

Almost frantic with suspense, she hunted about at the back of the house, and then along one side of it. There were many dark, deserted rooms, but the windows were all fastened.

"No, no, I can't get in anywhere!" was her despairing thought at last. "They are patent fastenings, and in any case—Ah!"

Another idea had flashed upon her—one suggested by the sight of an iron ladder permanently fixed to the side wall of the house.

It was a fire escape, running all the way up the wall to the top of the building.

In an instant the desperate girl was clambering up, feeling sure that, even if she could not gain an entry at any of the windows which the ladder ran close to, she could get to the flat roof and there find a skylight. She was certain that, in readiness for an alarm of fire at any time, all exits on to the roof would be kept unfastened.

Up and up she climbed, therefore, more often than not keeping her eyes shut, to avoid the dizzying effect of being at such a height from the ground. The iron ladder



projected fully six feet above the parapet of the roof, and so at last she stepped on to the stonework without any thrilling scramble.

Then, having taken a moment for breath, she trod cautiously towards a skylight not ten paces away.

To her intense relief, yet only as she had expected, it was open.

She little dreamed that, if it had not been the custom to keep that skylight open night and day, it would have been fastened against her now. Fastened by four girls who had preceded her up the ladder and down through the skylight only a few minutes since!

For the chums and their nameless friend had been compelled to enter the school by this means. It was not their doing that the back door was locked against Brenda. They had found it locked against themselves.

Someone—a mistress or a senior scholar—finding the back door unlocked after dark, had simply turned the key; no doubt thinking it was best to make it fast.

And now where were the three chums and the mystery girl at this moment when Brenda Ravel was descending from the skylight by a wooden ladder to the top landing?

Not so far away, had she but known! At the foot of the ladder she stood quite still and listened. Not a sound up here. It was all right. When she got her breath she would go down to her study, and nobody would ever be any the wiser.

She took a little turn along a narrow passage to compose herself, and then it was that the chums, just inside a certain empty attic at the end of that passage, heard a footfall that alarmed them.

"Sh! Who's that!"

Whether it was a mistress, a prowling senior, or Brenda herself, the four knew that they could not be too cautious now. Whilst that reason existed, as the mystery girl said it did, for her remaining in obscurity, discovery would be disastrous.

The attic was faintly illuminated by the moonlight, and, as the girls peered around, they saw some old sacking lying in a corner. At the self-same instant Betty and Madge saw the fugitive girl towards that corner, whilst Polly remained by the door.

There was a key, but it was too late to turn it in the lock. The hasp was bound to give a tell-tale squeak.

And so all Polly could do was to stand there, ready to keep the door shut fast against anybody who might come to try it, whilst Betty and Madge hastily threw the sacking over their nameless chum, who was now crouching in the corner.

But Brenda Ravel, out there in the passage, all unsuspecting as she was, did not think of prying into any of the attics. Now that she had calmed down, she stole back to the stairs, and passed below to her study.

Paula Creel and Bluebell Courtney were there but they did not seem to be inclined to question where she had been during the evening. Nor, indeed, did she give them much time to ask questions.

In a minute she was out in the corridor again, going to Study 12 on some pretext or other. She wanted to see if Betty and Polly were there, and if they were, what they would have to say.

That study, however, was empty, and not until the bell was going for call-over, and all the girls were starting to troop down to the muster, did she suddenly come face to face with the Study 12 couple and Madge Minden.

The three were looking absolutely calm, and Brenda made one of her bad blunders when she blurted out:

"Hallo! Where have you been all the evening?"

"Where have you been?" retorted Betty, retaining all her self-possession.

"And in any case, what have our movements got to do with you?" Polly asked warmly.

"As a matter of fact," Madge said, turning to make the remark to Paula, as that girl suddenly came along, "we have had a most successful evening."

"Eai Jove, have you?" exclaimed the aristocrat of the Form. "Then, geals, pway permit me to say congwats."

They passed on together down the stairs, and many another girl went by in the same direction, whilst Brenda stood in a sort of stricken attitude.

She had seen those clever three joined by Paula, and she could guess how they were quietly telling Paula a nice exciting story. Telling her, most likely, how they had fetched that girl away from the lonely house, and where that same girl was now in hiding!

The call-over bell stopped ringing, and

now all the school must have been lining up in the great hall. But Brenda, when at last she pulled herself together, could not go down at once.

Instead, she darted back to the study, shut herself in alone there, and hunted about until she had got a parchment-like paper in her hand.

"They will be after this now, those clever three," she said to herself in a tense whisper. "Five more days before the time-limit expires—five days for them to try as hard as they can to get hold of it. But even if they had until the rest of the term, they should never get it—no!"

And she added as she returned the coveted document to its hiding-place:

"We will beat them yet—my mother and I!"

But would she beat them? The nameless girl was not alone now; she had Betty and Co. to help her.

#### CHAPTER 16.

##### Before Brekker.

"I WONDER what sort of a night she spent, Polly?"

"I wonder, Betty!"

It was a very early hour for two girls to be talking together in their study at Moreove School. But this morning Betty Barton and Polly Linton had had an urgent reason for getting away from the dormitory as soon as possible.

All night the roof of Moreove School had sheltered a guest known only to the chums of Study 12 and two other girls, and this morning, somehow, that guest had got to be provided with breakfast!

A bit of a poser for Betty and Polly, when it is remembered that they, two of the most popular girls in the Fourth Form, were hardly ever able to get a minute to themselves.

At this instant Betty showed what was in her mind by darting to the corner cupboard.

"Here is our larder, Polly. Question is, what sort of a brekker can we scrape together. There's cake and—"

"Sh! Who's this coming?" Polly whispered across from the door.

A false alarm, as it happened, but Betty did not deride her chum for being over-cautious. The girl, whoever she was, who

had gone past in the corridor just then might have been looking in for a chat.

"Cake, and some milk left over from yesterday still sweet," the Form captain resumed in a whisper, "a round of scones. Oh, I think she will be able to manage, Polly!"

"If only we can get the food up to her—yes," agreed Polly Linton, with a grim smile. "But it is jolly awkward!"

"It is, Jolly. Just the very worst time of day to dodge around upstairs, when the girls are in and out of the dormitories."

Now, however, Polly Linton had one of her inspirations.

"Half a sec! Here's a way," she chuckled.

On top of the corner cupboard was an old cardboard box that had brought a hat by post at some time or other. Polly mounted a chair and whisked the box from its resting-place.

"Now!"

It was still lined with clean tissue paper. She seized the cake and placed it in the box, added the round of scones and some other eatables, including a pot of jam and some butter, and finally fitted the jug of sweet milk in a secure position.

Then she put the lid on.

"Half a sec!" was still her cry. "Give me that old hat down from that hook, if you will, Betty, please."

Betty understood by this time. She not only reached down the hat, but took a summer sports coat of her own from its peg, and slung it over one arm.

"And this other old hat," she added, taking it in her hands. "I see the idea, Polly."

"Hark, then! In a minute, perhaps, we can make a move."

They listened. By twos and threes the girls were coming down from the dormitories. Many were scampering away to the ground floor, but a few turned into the corridor to go to their various studies, there to read pending the call to breakfast.

Polly, still listening, made whispered comments on the voices she could hear.

"There's Paula, with that horrid cousin of hers, Brenda Ravel, hanging about her, of course! Do you hear Grace Garfield and Ella Elgood twitting Paula about her cousin? But they have gone into their study now, thank goodness!"

"Hallo, there's Madge playing the piano already in the music-room!" commented Betty. "How good!"

"That's the stuff to give 'em!" quoth Polly. "Who could ever dream that Madge shares our secret! I say, the coast is getting clear, I believe, Betty."

"Must be. Anyhow, we shall have to chance it. Ready?"

"All serene, if you are."

And so, after another brief wait, during which the stairs and corridor became as quiet as the chums could hope them to be at this scurrying first hour of the school's day, they opened the door and marched forth.

Polly carried the hat box and the old hat which she had asked Betty to hand her. Betty carried the sports jacket and another hat.

All along the corridor they went in safety, and then—

"Hallo!" a certain girl greeted them very sweetly, as she came sailing round the corner looking in great good humour.

"Are you moving?" Audrey asked the laden girls mirthfully. "Before breakfast, too!"

"All this stuff, it is no use in our study," Betty said, quite truthfully. "So we had a clear-out. It's going upstairs."

"Oh, I see!"

And Audrey passed on.

"That's the wheeze!" was Polly's whispered comment on their successful disposal of the girl. "At this rate, I don't mind meeting half a dozen girls."

Lucky for the pair of them, however, that not one other scholar did meet them, let alone half a dozen!

They had got to the dormitory landing, and were going on again, making for the attic, when a gasp of dismay came from Betty.

"Goodness, Polly! Hold still! No, keep on! Oh!"

"Why, what—"

"Look—look at you!"

Polly did not look at herself. But she looked down at the cardboard box, and then her face made a comical grimace.

Drip, drip, drip! Some milk was spilling to the floor.

"Oh, dear! Now, how did that—"

"Sh! Hurry on! You must have tipped the jug about when we fetched up sharply

just now at the corner where Audrey met us," whispered Betty. "Gracious, what a trail!"

It was a most tell-tale trail, indeed! All along the floor were little blobs of milk, their whiteness showing boldly against the dark oak.

In her desperate alarm, Betty did a reckless thing.

Whirling the sports jacket into a bundle, she used it as a mop.

With a hasty sweep here and there, she wiped up all the milk, whilst Polly scuttled on to the attic stairs and simply whirled up them noiselessly.

"It's all right—yes, but what a frightful thing to have happened!" panted Betty, overtaking her a few moments later.

"Hark!"

No one. Here they were, in the attic landing, and not a soul was any the wiser.

"Pip, pip!" breathed Polly, living up to her madcap reputation. "Come on!"

And next minute they were inside a half-dark, unfurnished attic, and the door was shut fast behind them.

Not a word passed for the moment. On tip-toe the two schoolgirls crossed the dusty floor to a certain corner, the dingiest of all. And there, on a pile of old sacking, with a bit of blanketing drawn about her, lay the secret guest of Moreove School, fast asleep!

"Poor thing!" Betty exclaimed, in a compassionate whisper. "Shall we wake her, or—"

"No, let's leave the stuff, Betty, and she will know that we— Hallo, though!" broke off Polly softly. "She is rousing up now."

But the girl's measured breathing had changed to a series of deep sighs, whilst she stirred upon her makeshift bed. Another moment, and her eyes opened, and beautiful eyes they were, befitting her very beautiful face.

She exclaimed faintly, "Oh!" as she saw Betty and Polly standing there.

"Fancy my being asleep at this hour!" she broke out with the next breath. "But—"

"You were a long time getting to sleep last night?" conjectured Betty. "Not surprising. Well, dear, are you all right?"

"Yes, yes."

"You look it," said Polly. "But how long you will be all right, living under

such conditions as this, I would not like to say. Such a wretched place, this attic!"

"No—at least, to me it seems a thousand times better than my hateful bed-room back at that lonely house in the lane," the girl hastened to assure them. "Oh, how thankful I am that you came to that house last evening, and persuaded me to come away! How grateful I feel! You can never know how grateful!"

"Piffle!" was Polly's light-hearted rejoinder to this. "We've got you some brekker, anyhow—not the hats and the jacket, no! They are only a bit of—"

"Camouflage," grinned Betty. "In that box of Polly's you'll find plenty to eat."  
"And some milk, unless it is all spilt," said Polly. "We shall come again, of course. We shall keep you going with all you want."

"Only," broke in Betty, ever the more cautious of the two, "we ought not to stay now. One question, though. Are you still convinced that it would not be advisable to go to our headmistress and tell her everything?"

"Absolutely!"

"She is a good sort."

"Yes, I can quite believe that," said the secret guest, "but it would never do. It would perhaps be the worst possible thing for others, as well as for myself."

She had risen from her bed by now, and was looking very agitated.

"You know what I told you last night," she went on, in a guarded tone. "So long as that document was in Mrs. Ravel's possession at the old house in the lane, I had to stay there in the hope of getting hold of it. But you have told me that—"

"Brenda Ravel has got the document now," nodded Betty. "We know it for certain."

"Then it is for me to remain in hiding, either here or elsewhere," the mystery girl rejoined decisively. "I do not want to be a bother to you, or get you into trouble. Oh, I wouldn't for worlds get you—"

"That is all right. We are doing a lot that seems very extraordinary, to say the least, for schoolgirls to do," Betty said, "but we have a good reason. Or, at least, we shall have when everything is explained."

"Ah, yes! But will it ever be, I wonder? Will the truth ever be revealed?" exclaimed the mystery girl, striking her hands to-

gether. "Unless I get hold of that paper, how can I ever end this dreadful business successfully? To-day is—what? The sixth of the month, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Then I have only four more days," was her agitated rejoinder. "Only four days in which to get hold of that paper in time!"

"That is how you talked last night," Betty murmured, "and it does puzzle us so! Can't you—oh, can't you confide in us fully? Can't you even tell us your name?"

But even that earnest entreaty, backed as it was by so much goodwill towards the almost distraught girl, drew a shake of the head from her.

"No, I cannot," she sighed heavily. "Much as I long to, I feel certain that it might prove a great mis—"

"Hark!" interjected Betty sharply. "The bell for our brekker. We must go!"

The girl in hiding nodded a ready, "Very well; I shall be quite all right!" and next instant the chums were tip-toeing back to the attic door.

"Make a good brekker yourself," Polly whispered to her.

"Above all," was Betty's last word, "remember we are going to help you all we can. That document which Brenda Ravel is keeping—we will get it if possible."

Once again the girl in hiding gave the chums an eager, grateful glance. Then the door opened quickly, and they were gone—gone without a sound.

In the cardboard box was food for which the mystery girl must have been hungry enough. Yet for at least a minute after she had been left to herself again, she gave no thought to it.

Motionless she stood, just where the chums had left her in the centre of that dingy, cheerless attic, gazing towards the closed door—gazing as if she could still see them standing there.

"What a thing it is to fall in with friends like that," she was saying to herself fervently. "What chance did I stand of getting justice for myself and others before I had the help of those two girls? But with their valuable aid—"

Her anxious, half-despairing look suddenly gave place to a brighter one—a look of revived hopefulness.

"With their aid, I may yet get the document—and get it, too, in time!"

## CHAPTER 17.

## The Baiting of Paula Creel.

AT the close of school that afternoon, Paula Creel was suddenly accosted on her way to the study corridor by Grace Garfield.

"Oh, Paula, I wish you'd come to my den for a moment," Grace said, with a niceness that disarmed suspicion. "Ella Elgood and I want a word with you. Do you mind?"

"Quite all wight! Yes, wather!" Paula instantly beamed.

None so ready as this amiable aristocrat of the Fourth Form to credit other girls with nice intentions!

Grace and Ella had, in fact, been conducting quite a campaign of persecution against Paula during the last week or so, all on account of Paula's ill-mannered cousin.

Mercilessly the girls had teased and twitted poor Paula about her cousin, until—in Paula's own words—life had become "downwight distwacting, bai Jove!"

The only comfort she could derive was from the thought that all the teasing was, perhaps, free from any real malice. All the same, it was rather wearying. "Yes, wather!"

But now, in a moment, the amiable aristocrat felt certain that all the baiting was to cease.

Grace and Ella were going to make the amende honorable, that was obvious. They might even be going to ask her to take tea with them!

Sure enough, Ella Elgood's manner was just as nice as Grace's had been when Paula got to the couple's study. Tea was not laid, nor was there a word, at present, about any happy function of that sort. But perhaps that would come in a few minutes.

"Paula, dear," said Grace, in the same sugary tone as before, "the fact is we girls feel you have been having a rather trying time just lately."

"Yes, wather! Howevah, that is quite all wight, don't you know."

"How do you mean—quite all right?" asked Ella. "Is your cousin going to leave the school, then?"

"Er—no."

"Oh! We thought perhaps—"

"Not pwecisely—no," said Paula, rather

regretfully. "It is extremely impwobable, geals, that Bwenda will weturn next term. Howevah—"

"Next term! Let's get through this one first," said Grace. "She leads you an awful life, surely?"

"Er—without wishing to use a stwong expression, bai Jove, sho—"

"She is the limit—eh? For bad manners, for coarse speech, and—"

"Weally, geals, pway wemember," broke in Paula gently, "with all her faults she is still my cousin. I—I vewy much wewget many of her ways. Howevah, you will wrealise—"

"Yes, Paula, we realise that you are more to be pitied than blamed," Ella said, giving the amiable aristocrat a soothing pat. "And so Grace and I have clubbed together, and have made a little purchase—a present for you."

"A pwesent, bai Jove! Oh, geals, how extremely—"

"This!" said Grace, suddenly clapping a small paper package into the amazed aristocrat's hands. "You will find it useful, we are surc."

"Yes, wather! Howevah—"

"It's British make."

"Bai Jove! How extremely—"

"And you ought not to have any trouble with her after this, if you follow the directions, Paula."

"The—er—the diwrections, did you wemark? Weally, geals—"

Grace and Ella, it was obvious, could hardly bottle up their laughter any longer. They turned their faces away for a moment.

"Weal, theah, to be sure!" simpered Paula, gazing at the package. "A pwesent, bai Jove—Bwewish make, and diwrections, you say. Er—geals—"

"The directions are inside, Paula, dear."

"Weally? By Jove, then, pewhaps I had wather bettah open the package—what!"

"Yes, do!"

So Paula did, and out fell a large leather muzzle and a steel chain!

"Oh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" exploded Grace and Ella at last. "He, he, he! Oh, dear!"

"Geals—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"This fwivolous nonsense, geals—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove, you widiculous cweature, how—what—pway tell me, now! What is the pweciso use of this thing to me?"

"Why, don't you see? He, he, he!" pealed Grace. "It is for you to—ha, ha, ha!—for you to—he, he, he!"

"Pway stop your widiculous mewwiment, geals! Pway—"

"The muzzle and chain is for you to—Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Ella, doubled up with laughter. "Tell her, Grace, because she doesn't see it even now. He, he, he!"

"I wegwet," said Paula gravely, "I do not see the joke. Howevah—"

Then Grace dried her tears of laughter, and panted for breath.

"It is for you to keep your horrid cousin in order with, Paula. See?"

"Oh!"

"Give her the muzzle, dear—keep her on the chain!"

"Yes, wather! At least— Oh, you downwight wascals at dewiding me!" Paula suddenly wailed, losing her patience. "Geals, I will not submit to it. Pway understand! I—I—I wefuse, do you heah me, bai Jove? Without wishing to use a stwong expwession, if you laugh at me again—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Geals, if you utter another laugh—if you dare to gwin—"

"Ho, he, he!"

This was too much for the long-suffering aristocrat.

She took a step to the door, carrying the muzzle and chain with her. Grace and Ella were still in convulsions of mirth. With what was meant to be a withering look of contempt, Paula returned the muzzle and chain to its brown-paper wrappings, and hurled it—yes, Paula hurled it!—at her tormentors.

Of course, they ducked aside in time, and of course the missile took a fatal course!

It whizzed across the room and smashed an ornament on the mantelpiece.

"Oh, there, now you've done it!" cried Ella.

"Yes, wather!" agreed Paula, looking apologetic at once. "Howevah—"

"That's your bad temper—the sort of thing you have caught from your horrid cousin!" cried Grace, pretending to be very indignant.

"Geals, pway accept my apologies!"

entreated Paula, who was quite horrified at what she had done. "Weally, don't you know, I— Weal, theah, I nevah meant to be so wough—no, weally!"

"Smashed! You'll have to pay—"

"With pleasure—yes, wather! Pway, geals, twy to forget that I evah did such a thing!" implored the penitent Paula desperately. "I, weally—"

"That's a frightfully valuable vase—"

"Yes, wather! I mean, is it, bai Jove? I should not have thought myself that it was not extwemely valuable. It looks wather like a weceptacle for pweserves, bai Jove! In othah words, like a jampot. Howevah—"

"Ha, ha, ha! Oh, go along—"

"Weally, though, if you wish me to pay—"

"Duffer! Get out!" pealed the mirthful Grace, almost bundling the aristocrat into the corridor. "When will you see a joke? But, as you won't take the muzzle and use it, we shall have to present it to Bronda direct. Ha, ha, ha!"

And even when Grace and Ella had shut themselves in behind the slammed door, their laughter could still be heard.

Paula went in a dazed sort of way to Study 12, always her harbour of refuge in times of distress.

Betty and Polly were there, getting tea for themselves and any chums who might chance to drop in.

"Geals, I wegwet to intwude," apologized Paula. "Howevah, a dwcadful thing has happened!"

"Oh! What?"

"Gwace and Ella have been aggwavating me," sighed Paula. "Only their nonsense, of course, but I—I wegwet I lost my temper."

"Dear, dear!" grinned Polly.

"Yes, wather! Howevah, I— Weally, I am extwemely sowwy now. I bwoke a vase, too!"

"Broke a vase—you?"

"Pwactically weduced it to smitheweens, bai Jove!" said Paula tragically. She flopped into her favourite armchair. "And you wealise what it all means, don't you, geals?"

"We realise that for once you have asserted your spirit, Paula," said the Form captain, with admiration. "Bravo!"

But Paula shook her head.

"It means, geals, the pwesence of my

cousin, Bwenda Wavel, is having a dis-  
tracting effect upon my temperament, bai  
Jove!"

"Would you kindly say that again, dear?"  
pleaded Polly.

"Oh, pway don't be fwivolous!" entreated  
the aristocrat. "I wegard it as a down-  
wight twagedy that that geal evah came to  
the school. I have not known a moment's  
fweedom fwom pwestwation since her first  
day here."

With which remark, Paula sank a little  
lower in the armchair.

"Tea up!" suggested Polly, turning to  
Betty. "That's the remedy for Paula's  
hump!"

"I must confess to a feeling of de-  
pression," said the swell girl sadly. "Pway  
forgive me, geals. I—"

"Cheer up, Paula, dear!" Betty said in  
a graver and more guarded tone. "You  
know what we are hoping. Only let us get  
hold of that document which your mys-  
terious cousin is hiding somewhere in the  
school, and lots of things will happen.  
Amongst others, your cousin Brenda will  
surely be cleared out."

"Yes—yes, wather, bai Jove! It is  
pwactically certain, I wealise, that she and  
her stepmothah are a pair of downwight  
schemers," Paula assented. "And that, bai  
Jove, is a nice thing for me, Brenda's  
cousin, to wealise! Ugh, how howwid I  
feel!"

Polly dropped the lid upon the teapot,  
after pouring in boiling water from the jug.

"There! There we are, and so now—  
Hallo, Madge! Just in time!" she broke off  
to cry, as Madge Minden suddenly put her  
head in at the door. "Come on, and if  
there are any more, I hope they will stay  
outside for once!"

"I rather hope so, too," murmured  
Betty. "We four could do with a quiet  
five minutes, to talk about the whole  
strange business that is going on."

Just as it chanced, no other girls did look  
in for tea and gossip this afternoon, and so  
the four were soon carrying on a very  
grave debate, whilst they sipped their tea  
and ate sparingly of what was on the table.

Study 12 was famous for its unstinted  
living, but just at present these four girls  
had to think of the secret guest up yonder  
in the attic, and so they went short for the  
sake of ensuring an unlimited supply of  
food for her.

"I have not seen her to-day," Madge  
whispered. "You know my feelings—that  
it is best for not too many of us to meddle.  
If you, Betty, and you, Polly—"

"Yes, wather!" put in Paula. "I, too,  
have wefwained fwom intwuding in the  
attic. Howevah, that is not to say the geal  
has been out of my thoughts. Bai Jove, I  
do wondah who she is!"

"It is a puzzle," said Polly, shrugging.  
"There she was, up to last evening, living  
with that mother of Brenda Ravel's in  
the lonely house in the lane, and all the  
time the mother was keeping the girl's  
existence a secret."

"Amazing!" was Betty's opinion. "And  
what are we to make of all this about the  
hidden document? Brenda has it now, and  
unless it is got from her before the tenth of  
this month, it seems as if some great wrong  
will be done to—"

"Sh!"

The handle of the door had rattled.

"Come in!" sang out Betty, with normal  
heartiness.

Next moment it was all Paula could do to  
suppress a groan.

Her cousin had entered—Brenda, the  
hoysen—with a smirk that was supposed to  
be an ingratiating smile.

"Any tea going for me?" she asked. "I  
see you're having a cup, Paula, so p'r'aps  
there's one for your cousin."

She added, still leering:

"I don't often have tea with the Form  
cap, do I?"

Betty would have been perfectly justified  
in returning a curt retort. But she had her  
wits about her.

In a flash, the thought had come to her—  
as it had to her chums as well, perhaps:  
"This girl has come to spy. She is longing  
to find out what has become of the mystery  
girl. Well, we are longing to find out where  
that document is hidden, and so a little talk  
may prove useful!"

"No, we have not done much in the way  
of entertaining you," Betty agreed affably.  
"By all means, have a cup!"

"You're very kind, I'm sure," simpered  
Brenda. "I want to be friends, seeing as  
how—"

"Ugh!" Paula shuddered.

Brenda looked at her; then resumed:

"Seeing as how I'm Paula's cousin, and  
you're such friends of hers!"

"Er—yes, wather!" Paula said, half automatically, to cover her distress.

Breerda's speech was awful!

Betty poured out for the newcomer, and the others plied her with bread-and-butter and cake, and she began upon a very hearty tea indeed.

"I say," she exclaimed, after some general talk, "I'm thinking o' having a look round some of them caves along the shore one of these days. They must be interestin'."

She spoke in a casual way, yet all four chums were aware of her being on watch with those shifty eyes of hers to see how they took the remark.

Yes, she was undoubtedly spying! If any of them had given a start or had changed colour when she mentioned the caves, she would have known that the runaway from the house in the lane was in hiding down in the caves.

Why not, then, let her get the idea that that was precisely where the girl was hiding?

The brilliant notion must have occurred to all four girls, for in the next moment they were purposely looking confused. Polly, holding her breath, even managed to get a bit red in the face.

"The—the caves, did you say?" Betty stammered. "Oh, you had better not! At least—that is to say—"

"I wouldn't go near any of the caves, Brenda," Polly said, as if coming to a flustered chum's rescue. "Not at this time of the year. In the summer—"

"Er—yes, wather! Er—quite all wight in the summer, Bwenda. Howevah—"

"You'd advise me to give 'em a miss just now—eh?" Brenda said. Her shifty eyes were dodging from one flustered girl to the other. "Oh, well, you know best, o' course!"

"Yes, wather—yes! Bai Jovv, those caves—"

"What say?" leered Brenda, for Paula had paused. "Not safe, p'raps?"

"Keep away from them—that is our advice," Betty said.

And then she turned the talk on to other subjects—the very thing any girl would have wanted to do had she been embarrassed by Brenda's reference to the caves.

Perhaps Brenda was satisfied that the four had a secret reason for not wanting her to go near the caves, or perhaps she was wondering whether, after all, the girls were not throwing dust in her eyes. There was

no time to tell, for all at once another tap at the door was heard, and then Grace Garfield entered, with Ella Elgood and two or three other cronies at her back.

"Sorry to intrude," Grace said, "but—I say," she exclaimed, addressing Brenda quite excitedly, "is your name Brenda?"

The strange question produced a strange effect.

Brenda suddenly turned pale.

"Yes—why?" she jerked out, half starting up from her chair.

"Really Brenda? B—R—E—N—D—A?" spelt Grace.

"Yes," Paula's cousin said again huskily. And again, turning paler than ever, she asked in great agitation: "Why?"

## CHAPTER 18.

### Can This Be True?

GRACE GARFIELD allowed an amused smile to play about her lips.

"Thank goodness!" she exclaimed.

"Then we now know to whom it belongs. Where is it, Ella?"

"Here we are!" answered that young lady.

And next moment she had handed over that big muzzle and chain!

"Oh, there you are! Catch!" chuckled Grace, tossing the thing to Brenda. "It is engraved with your name, you will see, so—wear it! Ha, ha, ha!"

Then the door slammed, and Grace and her cronies were whirling off down the corridor, yelling with laughter.

As for Brenda Ravel, she looked furious. There was a moment whilst she stared at the muzzle and chain, realising that it was a jibe at her untamed nature. Then she turned upon Paula, and started to storm at her.

"Look here, Paula; you are my cousin! Wot d'yer think of this? Why don't you take 'em in hand? Why not stick up for me a bit? Call yourself a cousin!"

"Bwenda," Paula answered then, with some difficulty, "I do not regard myself as a cousin of yours at all."

"Wha-a-at!" gasped Brenda. She changed colour again, just as she had done when Grace, although only in fun, had asked her: "Is your name Brenda?"



"What on earth do you mean?" she panted at Paula.

"You must wealise what I mean," Paula said frigidly. "I wefuse—yes, wather! I absolutely wefuse any longer to wegard you as any cousin of mine, bai Jove!"

"But I am your cousin!" insisted Brenda agitatedly. "I—I— It's stupid of you—this!"

"I wegwet," Paula said, "I cannot argue with you."

"Oh, all right! But—" Brenda was stepping back to the door. "Not my cousin—bah!" she cried scornfully, and flung out of the room.

Silence followed her departure, as tense a spell of silence as Study 12 had ever known.

"Bai Jove!" whispered Paula at last, flopping down into her easy-chair. "Geals

"Yes," nodded Betty, whilst she exchanged looks with Polly and Madge, "it's queer! It is—very queer!"

"Is she—is she really Paula's cousin, after all? That's the question!" Polly exclaimed, going straight to the point in her downright way. "I doubt it! Sho has given herself away as an impostor."

"She has," said Madge gravely, "or else we all four are utterly deceived by what our eyes saw."

"Bai Jove, geals! A—a downright impostor—yes, wather! The way she changed colour when Gwace asked her if her name was weally Bwenda! And then when I said I wefused to wegard her as my cousin!"

"It all pointed in that direction, certainly," murmured Betty thoughtfully. "And if she is not your cousin, after all, but only an impostor, then—then—"

"Betty!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Who is the girl upstairs in the attic?" finished Betty excitedly. "Or, rather, is she—"

"Yes, she is!" Polly burst out, in a guarded tone. "She is Paula's cousin—that girl we are hiding!"

Paula tried to sit up, but she was too overcome. She took out a handkerchief and fanned herself.

"Gwacious, geals! Weally, you know, I

"But, Paula—think!" exclaimed Betty softly. "Think of the relief it means to you if this horrible girl really is no relation

of yours, but only an impostor! And if that nice girl who is in hiding—"

"Yes, wather! Oh, bai Jove, pweicisely! And you wemember, geals, the cousin I was told would be coming to the school this term, she was weckoned to be such a nice geal. That was where the howwid suppwise came in when that dweadful cweature turned up instead!"

"But why—why did that nasty girl turn up, then?" Madge asked soberly. "Why is she here in another girl's name, pretending to be your cousin, whilst the real cousin is forced to behave so mysteriously?"

"I tell you, it's a puzzle!" said Polly, swinging in to the edge of the table. "About the biggest mystery we have ever handled yet."

"Well," Betty said, after a turn about the room, "remember this, girls. We must not let that impostor imagine that we have found her out, as I am sure we have. Paula, you must still treat her as your cousin."

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove!"

"And, whatever you do," added Polly, "don't let her find out that that other girl is in hiding upstairs!"

The amiable aristocrat was not, as a rule, capable of acting with any great amount of diplomacy. But this mystery attaching to "Cousin Brenda" was, for once, to bring out Paula in quite a novel light.

As for Betty, Polly, and Madge, they not only took good care to see after their hidden friend in the attic without giving the alert Brenda a chance to catch them at that business, but at the same time they were ready at any instant to pounce on any clue that would lead to the whereabouts of the hidden document.

Was it hidden in Study No. 5? That was what they wondered and tried to find out.

During the next two or three days it was a sheer battle of wits that went on below the surface of the ordinary life of the Form.

Brenda Ravel, as we must still call her, all the time trying to find out where the runaway girl was in hiding, and whether the chums were helping her with food and other comforts; the chums all the time trying to find out where that vital document was hidden!

It was a situation that might have been amusing if only the issue at stake had not been so grave a one.

How grave it was, however, Betty & Co. were bound to realise more and more as time went by.

Never once did they steal up to the mystery girl in the school attic without observing her tragic dismay at the way time was running out, and still the document was in Brenda Ravel's keeping.

The tenth of the month! Unless that document was wrested from Brenda by that date, she and Mrs. Ravel would have succeeded in whatever cunning scheme it was that they had been carrying out, and the mystery girl, as she was saying to her friends of the Fourth Form so often, would have striven in vain—suffered and striven in vain to frustrate that wicked plot, and to prevent a great wrong being committed!

And so at least the very evening of the ninth came round, and still the document was undiscovered.

When Betty and Polly went up to the attic, in secret that last evening before the fateful tenth of the month, they found their mystery friend in a very wrought-up state.

The last night!

Only a few more hours now, and all hope of averting that frightful wrong—an injustice which, even now, she could not be persuaded to specify—would be at an end!

No wonder the poor girl was in a sad state of mind. No wonder the chums felt more sorry for her than ever.

"You cannot imagine how we feel the failure," Betty said earnestly. "It doesn't seem good enough to assure you that we have done our utmost to try and find that document. We should have succeeded, and we have failed!"

"Ah, don't talk like that!" the mystery girl entreated softly. "I know only too well, from my own experience when Mrs. Ravel had the paper, how one's most desperate efforts are baffled. You have done your best—you have been wonderful in your efforts to help me, and I am grateful to you. How grateful, I can never hope to prove."

She added after a pause:

"The last night! Is there still a chance? If I told you what it is in my mind to do, it might alarm you. So I shall say nothing about that, and you must leave me now—"

"But—"

"You have been up here long enough,"

she whispered. "Better stick to the rule that has served us so well all along, and not stay too long." And to-morrow, the tenth of the month, I suppose I must disclose myself to your headmistress, and tell her all my story. Unless—"

But she would not tell them, and so they left her at last, taking away with them the impression that on this, the very last night that was left to her, she meant to carry out some final desperate effort to possess that paper.

When they got down to Study 12 Paula was there, and that girl reported that Brenda Ravel was in a very strung-up state this evening.

Evidently it was a cause of feverish excitement to Brenda to realise that this was the last evening, and that after to-morrow—only one more day!—she and Mrs. Ravel would be able to snap their fingers at the victim of their scheming.

The effect of such tense excitement upon a nature as crude as Brenda's was to put her in a hoydenish mood. And so when bedtime came, she was "jarring" pretty badly upon the girls in general.

"Here, out of the way!" she said roughly to Grace Garfield, at the same time pushing that girl aside from one of the washstands. "You are always in my way, you are!"

This to Grace of all girls in the dormitory—Grace, one of the first to retaliate!

"Don't you push me," said Grace, "or I shall push you!"

"Oh, shut up!"

"Brenda Ravel—"

"Get away, I tell you!" the hoyden said, quite beside herself with the clation which was upon her. "I want to wash my hands."

The rest of the dormitory paused to watch developments.

They came!

Grace did not make a rush at the insolent girl to recover the lost position at the washstand. Instead, she resorted to that teasing tongue of hers.

"She wants to wash her hands. For once! Look, Brenda is actually going to have an extra handshake with the soap!"

A titter went up.

"Why this thbusness?" Grace pursued sweetly, addressing Brenda. "Such politeness, all of a sudden! Such a scrubbing and a lathering!"

"Oh, held your row!" was Brenda's

coarse retort to this. "You are very funny, ain't you?"

"Have my manicure set—do!" pleaded Grace. "If you really have made up your mind to get those nails of yours to look nice—about time, too, I must say!"

"If you say any more—" burst out Brenda truculently.

"I shall just say this," said Grace, as sweetly as ever. "I don't know where you were dragged up, but—"

"Oh, look out!" came in a sort of chorus from the onlookers. "Grace!"

For all in an instant, Brenda Ravel had snatched up the water-jug.

"Take that!" she snapped, at the same time slopping half the contents of the jug at her playful tormentor.

But Grace was quick enough to avoid the deluge. She darted aside with a little shriek of laughter, and all the water did was to splash Audrey Blain from head to foot.

"Oh—oh!" gasped the girls.

Audrey had not started undressing. She looked down at herself, biting a lip, then at the savage Brenda.

"You absurd creature!" Audrey said witheringly. "Just look at what you have done!"

"I don't care!"

"I care, anyhow!" flashed Audrey, firing up. "This dress of mine, you have ruined it!"

"Oh, shut up!" was Brenda's almost inevitable retort. "Get to bed!"

"Steady, there!" Betty said, coming forward. "Brenda, that's not the way to talk. You had better apologise to Audrey, or I'll—"

"I shan't apologise!" exclaimed Brenda. "You can report me if you like, tell-tale! I don't care!"

"Er—Audrey," interposed Paula in great distress, "er—pway accept my apologies!"

"Your apologies!" cried Audrey.

"Weal, yes," sighed Paula. "I realise that your clothes are spoiled, don't you know."

"Pay for them, Paula," Ella suggested, with a titter. "You are Brenda's cousin."

"Yes, wather—I mean— Weal, yes, Audrey," said Paula, partly out of sheer good nature, and partly to appear as if she still believed herself to be Brenda's

cousin, "I will pay for the damage, don't you know."

"Oh!"

"Theah you are, let me make myself responsible for the damage. Weally, Audrey, I shall wegard it as a—a pleasure, bai Jove!"

"Thank you, Paula," Audrey said, very quietly, "but I cannot think of letting you suffer to that extent for your cousin's pleasant ways."

"But, Audrey—"

"No, Paula. I will have an apology from Brenda herself—if not to-night, then in the morning," Audrey finished, in that deadly quiet way of hers.

And then, to show that the incident was closed—for the time being, at any rate—she moved to another part of the big dormitory, rid herself of all damp attire, and was soon curled between her bedclothes.

Brenda went on with her disrobing with a smirk upon her face. As the chums were aware, to all her secret elation over the business of the hidden document there was added a sense of glee at having "scored" a small triumph just now.

Audrey had talked of getting satisfaction in the morning, but no doubt Brenda thought that that was a mere feeble threat. She did not know Audrey!

But Betty & Co. knew that girl, and they could feel sure that the morning would bring its sequel to the affair of that water-throwing. What they did not know was that that sequel, strangely enough, would have the most vital bearing upon far graver matters.

If only the chums could have been aware of this—ah, then how much sooner would they have dropped to sleep that night, instead of laying awake and thinking, despairingly, that to-morrow was the tenth of the month, and the paper still beyond their reach!

## CHAPTER 9.

### Face to Face.

THE night had worn on to the small hours.

Over the hushed world of Morocco the school chimes had dinged longed two o'clock.

An hour, surely, when every scholar in the school should have been asleep—even

such anxious-minded scholars as the chums of the Fourth Form. And asleep those girls were, at last.

But in that particular dormitory one girl there who had either been lying awake all this time, or else she awoke from a very light sleep at the faint sound which now broke the dead silence of night-time.

The merest creak-creak of a floorboard somewhere round by the stairs or passage and yet it served to fetch this girl erect in her bed, listening keenly.

That girl was Brenda Ravel.

Moonlight was flooding into the dormitory, and the silver gleam was strong enough to reveal the sudden excitement in her eyes.

Why that sound? she must have been asking herself, with a special reason for feeling so curious. Somebody moving about the house at this late hour of the night? If so, who is it?

And perhaps the excited girl was thinking—the runaway from the cottage! That girl, she had been in hiding in the school all the time. That was her stealthy step which had set a board creaking just then—her cautious tread, as she crept from her hiding-place—for what purpose?

To hunt for the hidden document, perhaps? To make a last desperate search for it on this last night that was left to her!

Brenda Ravel suddenly whisked aside the bed coverings and stepped out upon the dormitory floor.

Silently, swiftly, she put on her dressing-gown and slippers, then stole between the beds with all their sleeping inmates to the door.

It was standing ajar. She slipped past it into the passage, and went on again. Without a sound she gained the landing; without a sound she passed down the stairs and so reached the Fourth Form corridor.

Before venturing into that passage she took a cautious peep along it.

No one!

But how about Study No. 6, the study which she shared with Paula and another girl? Was someone in there at this moment? The door was closed, as were the doors of all the other studies. But how if the runaway from the house in the lane was inside Study No. 6, searching for the paper!

With a sudden swift, silent rush, Brenda

Ravel got to the study door and whirled it open.

The room was bright with moonlight. And there stood a girl, fully dressed, but not in school attire, surprised in the act of searching the study!

Mute and still she remained, whilst from the lips of Brenda Ravel there came a gasping "Ah!"

"You, at last!" Brenda whispered across to her, after a moment or so. "I was right, then! You have never been far away from here; you have been in the school all along, hoping for a chance to find that paper."

The other girl made no response, only stood very still, like some figure in a tableau, staring back at the one who had taken her by surprise.

"Well, you never will find that paper!" Brenda went on in a malicious whisper. "This is the last night; to-morrow is the tenth of the month, and you know as well as I do what that means. So what are you going to do now—now that I have caught you and put a stop to this midnight hunt?"

Still there was no response from that white-faced figure whose large eyes were gazing at Brenda fiercely.

"I know what I, for my part, am going to do," Brenda resumed, with a gloating smile. "I'm going to follow you when you go from this room—as you must. And, remember, if you try to make any trouble for me, I have only to— Ah, would you?"

For, in a flash, the girl she was mocking had made a rush at her as if to strike her. The action was only a feint, and as a feint it achieved its purpose.

Brenda recoiled a little, putting herself on the defensive, and next instant the other girl, instead of rushing at her, had darted from the room.

Away she fled, along the corridor and round to the stairs.

The whole thing left Brenda for the moment startled out of her wits. As quickly as possible she pulled herself together and ran out silently to give chase, but she was too late.

Already the other girl had whirled out of sight, and now not a sound came to tell where she could be sought.

What, then, was Brenda to do now?

How carry on a hunt for the elusive girl through the whole schoolhouse at a time like this? And yet to go back to one's bed and

go to sleep again, leaving that girl to creep back to Study No. 6, perhaps—no, it was out of the question!

The mind of the cunning girl was soon made up. She would return to the dormitory and wait—yes, lie down upon her bed and let half an hour go by, in the hope that her victim would be tempted to creep back to the study to resume the search.

As quietly as ever, she stole up the stairs and regained the dormitory. She was back at the bedside when suddenly a thing happened that held her rigid with surprise.

From somewhere outside the school there came a sound she knew to be a summons for herself.

A faint, shrill whistle!

That whistle, it was the agreed signal which Mrs. Ravel always gave when she wished to hold communion with this girl under cover of night.

But why—why was Mrs. Ravel lurking in the school grounds at such an hour as this? Brenda herself could think of only one explanation.

On this, the very last night before the fateful tenth of the month, suspense had proved too much for her confederate. She had come along to the school to make sure, if possible, that all was still going well, and had sounded the whistle in the hope that it would be answered.

"Yes, mother has guessed that I would be lying awake on a night like this," was the thought that passed through Brenda's mind. "Can I go down to her, though? Dare I?"

Even whilst she was standing in such uncertainty the signal came again, and that decided her. Yes, she would go down. But first of all she must put on her day clothes.

And now, whilst she stealthily donned her ordinary attire, her active brain suggested a second visit to the study. It would take her no more than a dozen steps out of her way down to the back door of the house. And by this time, perhaps, the girl she had confronted just now would have returned to the study and could be caught in the act again.

It must not be supposed that Brenda got through her dressing without many a heart-in-the-mouth pause, fearing that some sleeper was rousing up. Again and again the guilty girl had a scare of that sort, but it never came to anything.

Betty, Polly—all of them, they slumbered on, never even dreaming as they slept of

what thrilling things were taking place in the schoolhouse to-night.

At last Brenda was ready, and again she tip-toed across the room and went stealthily downstairs.

At every step she was on the look-out for any glimpse of the girl who had eluded her a few minutes ago. There was no sign of her, however, nor did a sound come to tell of her presence anywhere.

Was she, though, back in Study No. 6 by this time?

No.

Brenda crept along to that den, only to find it deserted.

So now she turned away and made for the ground floor.

In a couple of minutes she was at the back door, and here a surprise awaited her.

The bolts were already drawn back; the door was unlocked!

What did this mean?

She guessed in an instant.

That other girl had quitted the schoolhouse within the last few minutes. She had left by this door, and, of course, had been unable to make it fast behind her.

Brenda turned the knob, softly opened the door, and slipped out into the grounds. Less than three minutes later, she was stealing up to the woman who was lurking there.

"Mother!" was the cautious whisper with which the girl proclaimed her presence to Mrs. Ravel. "I'm here, mother!"

"Oh, good! I had to come, because—"

"Sh!"

"Why, what's up?" the woman questioned sharply. "'Isn't it safe, then, Rachel?"

That was the name she voiced—not Brenda, but Rachel!

"Yes, we are all right, I hope," the girl answered, whilst the pair of them glanced around uneasily in the moonlight. "But Brenda is not far off, mother. She has been in hiding in the school—"

"Ah, just as we thought!"

"And to-night—to-night! I caught her—caught her in my study hunting for the paper."

"Did she get it? Don't tell me that she—"

"No; she— Why, look!" the girl broke off with an excited gasp. "There she goes—see her? Over there!"

Mrs. Ravel flashed about to follow with her eyes the direction in which her daughter was pointing.

Distinctly in the bright moonlight the woman saw a girlish figure flitting towards the boundary hedge. There was a moment whilst Mrs. Ravel stood nonplussed; then she turred and whispered excitedly to her daughter:

"Back to your bed, Rachel—quick, go back! As for the girl, I will deal with her!" And with that significant word she rushed away, giving chase to the fugitive figure.

#### CHAPTER 20.

##### The Fateful Day.

**T**HE night had passed. Morning had come again, and with it the tenth of the month!

Day of bitter regret and sorrow to the chums of the Fourth Form—so they felt it was going to be, as they roused up at the usual time and made their toilettes.

Regret that this day should have come round at last and found them still at a loss as to where the coveted document was hidden. Sorrow that their failure to get hold of that paper was to mean the triumph of wrong over right!

During all the bustle of dressing in the dormitory there was a good deal of talk about the drenching of Audrey by Brenda, and a possible sequel in the course of the next few hours. But Betty and her confidantes took no part in the more or less flippant gossip.

Their thoughts were with their nameless friend, the girl whom they had been aiding so loyally during her enforced period of hiding in the attic.

Once again—and, alas! it was for the last time—the chums must see about some breakfast for her at the first possible moment.

So, although Paula dallied in front of a bed-room mirror, and whilst Madge went below to the music-room to get her usual ten minutes' practice before brekker, Betty and Polly slipped away to their study, meaning to scrape together a meal for the secret guest of Morcove School.

Hardly a minute had they been alone together in Study 12, however, before they heard a great disturbance coming from some other den farther down the corridor.

"Hark!" each exclaimed to the other. "That's Brenda Ravel, surely!"

And Polly added in the next breath: "Audrey is there. Oh, there's a row on! It's Audrey making a to-do about that business last night!"

Polly was right.

At that instant Audrey Blain was confronting the girl whom all Morcove School knew as Brenda Ravel in the latter's study.

Audrey had already demanded an apology from the girl hooligan, thereby drawing a loud, impudent refusal from her.

Now Audrey was waiting for the vulgar voice to die down a little, while at the open doorway gathered a whole crowd of girls.

Grace Garfield was there, so was Ella Elgood. So were half a dozen other girls who had been looking forward to a "good old rumpus."

"Brenda Ravel, once again, will you apologise!"

"No, I won't! And if you don't clear out, I'll spoil your looks for you, just as you say I spoiled your dress!" the violent girl shouted.

"Oh, isn't she a beauty?" commented Grace Garfield in the doorway. "What can we do with a girl like this?"

Audrey was in a pale, dangerous state of anger. Her tone of voice was icy as she said:

"I know quite well what to do with her. If she won't apologise, I must make her—on her knees!"

"You just try—you!" Brenda defied her.

By this time Betty and Polly had got to the doorway. Paula also had come from upstairs, and was an agitated onlooker.

With a lightning spring Audrey leapt at Brenda. Nothing but white-hot anger could ever have given Audrey's slim, elegant form strength enough for her to grapple with the hoyden. But she had that strength now.

In spite of Brenda's heavier build and her naturally violent disposition, she was suddenly held by the shoulders and shaken furiously.

"Now!" Audrey said fiercely. "You shall say you are sorry—on your knees! Get down, you ill-bred young monkey! Down, I say!"

Then a violent struggle began. Several girls—including Betty and Polly—moved forward to try and stop it, but those two combatants still wrestled on furiously.

All over the room they battled together, knocking over chairs, pushing the table

awry, sweeping odds and ends to the floor.

"Stop! That's enough!" pleaded Betty.

"Now, Audrey—"

"No, she asked for this, and she shall have it!" was Audrey's passionate answer.

"We have put up with her too long!"

"Hear, hear!" chuckled Grace and Ella.

But now Brenda tore herself free of Audrey and sent her reeling. That girl charged back at her, and again they wrestled madly. Audrey, however, was losing strength at last, whilst Brenda was as full as ever of animal energy.

Crash! The violent girl sent Audrey against the wall, and with the shock of the impact Audrey swept a hand up wildly as if to find support.

There followed another crash as that sweeping hand fetched a picture from the wall and sent it smash to the floor, the string broken, the glass in smithereens.

"Now stop!" insisted Betty, striding between the furious pair. "This has gone too far already. Brenda—"

"Get out, the lot of you!" that girl shouted hoarsely. "If you don't— Here, leave that picture alone, you!"

This was to Polly, who had suddenly pounced forward to snatch up the ruined picture. She did not heed the furious injunction.

A sudden wild shout came from her, leaving every other inmate of the room stricken mute and still with amazement.

"Betty—Paula!" yelled Polly. "Look—look!"

"Let it alone—give it to me!" came in a sort of frenzied shriek from Brenda.

She hurled herself at Polly, who, however, dodged aside adroitly.

And now the others saw that the madcap was waving aloft a sheet of paper—some paper that she had snatched from the back of the fallen picture.

Study No. 6 had yielded up its secret!

"It's the document!" Polly cried exultantly. "Look—look! Oh, Betty, Betty!"

"Hold it, Polly!" panted Betty, for Brenda was ready to rush at her again.

"Take care—"

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove—"

"Give it to me!" stormed Brenda crazily.

"I will have it—I will! You—you—"

"Girls, what is all this dreadful commotion?" was the sudden stern, shocked cry that someone voiced in the doorway.

"Stand still, all of you! Whatever does this mean?"

And there was Miss Massingham, the Form-mistress, towering so impressively in the doorway that even Brenda was suddenly bereft of all power to move or speak!

"Explain! You, Betty, as captain of the Form—"

"I will explain readily enough, Miss Massingham," answered that girl. "There has been an upset between this girl Brenda Ravel and Audrey Blain. But what I most want to explain is—this."

And with the word she took the document from Polly's hand and held it out.

Miss Massingham simply stared.

"This document," said Betty, "has just come to light. It has been kept behind that smashed picture. Brenda Ravel put it there, and we would never have found it if there had not been this rumpus. But it has been found, and now— Oh, Miss Massingham, there are some of us who know that it is a document of vital importance!"

"You say it is, Brenda's? Well, then—"

"Yes, it is mine, so make her give it back to me!" panted Brenda wildly. "Oh, do—do order her to give it up!"

"Miss Massingham, if you did order me to do that I could not obey," was the answer with which Betty amazed most of her auditors. "Now that Polly has found the paper we must keep it. We must take it to the girl upstairs!"

"The—girl—upstairs!" echoed Miss Massingham with pardonable astonishment.

"Yes. Upstairs a girl has been hiding for several days," Betty's amazing story went on. "Polly and I have been giving her food and seeing after her. She did not dare disclose herself—did not dare present herself to Miss Somerfield and confide in her. We don't know why she is, but she had to stay in hiding and try to get hold of this paper by the tenth of the month."

"And to-day is the tenth!" cried out Polly. "So—oh, don't let's waste a moment!"

"But I must—I must hear more about this!" was the Form-mistress' exclamation. "Tell me, Betty—"

"The paper is of vital importance to the girl we have kept in hiding," Betty rushed on. "We don't know who she is, only that she was forced to live with Brenda Ravel's

mother at the old house in the lane. We

But now Miss Massingham held up a hand. She had come to a wise decision.

"The Headmistress must hear about all this at once. It is a matter outside my authority. Betty and Polly, you will come with me—"

"Paula should come, too."

"Yes, wather!"

"Very well, if you think so. As for you, Brenda Ravel," the Form-mistress added, looking across at that pallid, agitated girl, "you will remain alone in this study and hold yourself in readiness for an interview with the headmistress. The rest of you will please disperse at once. To breakfast—yes."

The injunction was not one to be set at naught, and so, very reluctantly, the bewildered girls moved off, falling into twos and threes to discuss the day's sensation as they trooped downstairs.

"Now!" Miss Massingham said in her commanding way to Betty, Polly, and Paula, and away they went, Betty keeping a tight hold of the priceless document.

The moment they were gone, leaving Brenda to herself in the study, that girl slammed the door, then took several distraught turns about the room.

She was like one crazy with despair.

"On' the very day—the tenth of the month!" she panted, beating her hands together. "Oh, what will mother say about all this? How can I ever face her? On the very day when we were to— But is it all up with us even now—is it?" she suddenly stopped dead to ask herself excitedly.

Another moment and she was talking on again in an agitated whisper, whilst her eyes began to gleam with all the old cunning.

"It is the day, but we have a few hours yet to get a start of them. That document— After all, they can do nothing with it without the girl's help. And she— Yes, there is a chance—still a chance if I get away at once."

Below the whole school was sitting down to breakfast in the great dining-room.

She could do it?

Pulling the study door shut very softly, she stole off downstairs, and five minutes later she had got clear of the school without being observed by anyone.

## CHAPTER 21.

### The Empty Attic.

"WELL, girls! This is altogether a most astounding story you have told me!"

Thus Miss Somerfield, the headmistress of the school, when at last the chums of the Fourth Form had unfolded all they knew about the great mystery.

The four girls—for Madge Minden was here; they had picked her up on the way to this private room of the headmistress—were lined up in front of this handsome, white-haired lady who was so good at handling any critical situation.

"You know what this document is, of course?" she pursued, casting a glance at it as it lay upon her desk.

"Why, the fact is," Betty owned for herself and friends, "we have been so excited and have had such a little time—"

"Quite!" Miss Somerfield nodded with a faint smile. "I may tell you, then. It appears to be a will, disposing of a great deal of wealth."

"Bai Jove!" breathed Paula.

"Yes, and I see your own name here, Paula."

"Gwacious! Do you weally mean that I am—"

"You certainly appear to be entitled to inherit some money under this will. Another share—a larger one—goes to Brenda Ravel. And that girl is—not the girl we have had at the school, if what you have told me is the case, but—"

"The girl we have helped!" cried out Polly excitedly. "Yes, she is the real Brenda Ravel! The other girl—the one who has been in the school all along—she is an impostor, as we have felt she must be."

"There is much to be proved yet," murmured Miss Somerfield, "and time is short."

"Yes!" exclaimed Betty. "That is what I am thinking all the time. The tenth of the month—that was to be the vital day. Oh, Miss Somerfield, may we go at once to the girl in the attic and let her know?"

"By all means. Run away. One moment! You will bring her back to me as quickly as possible, of course?"

"Yes."

"Yes, wather!"

And away sped the four, whilst Miss Somerfield exchanged a smile with the



Form-mistress, who had been standing by all this while.

"I thought we would let the girls run up to this poor friend without our going with them," the taciturn headmistress said. "I expect we would have found it hard to keep pace with them, so eager they are. And no wonder!"

She returned her gaze to the document in her hands.

"Time—it is all a question of time, indeed!" she muttered with sudden extreme gravity. "Unless this document is produced in the right quarter by five o'clock this very afternoon, certain moneys left by Brenda Ravel's father—the real Brenda Ravel's father—will go to his undeserving stepdaughter and her mother!"

"That scheming woman who has been living at the house the girls spoke about?"

"Yes."

"And where," asked Miss Massingham after a pause, "where is the rightful quarter for this document to be produced by five o'clock?"

"That we do not know," was Miss Somerfield's solemn answer.

She set the paper down.

"Unless the real Brenda Ravel can tell us exactly where to take the document, it will be worthless in our hands."

And at that very instant what was the alarming discovery which the four chums were making?

"Brenda Ravel—Brenda Ravel!" they had called aloud to the girl in hiding as they gained the topmost floor of the great school-house. "It is all right!"

"Quite all right, Bwenda! Bai Jove!"

"We have found it—got it—the paper!"

So they had all been crying jubilantly as they got to the attic door. Now they flung it open and surged together into the dingy room. And the real Brenda—where was she?

Not here!

Not here in the only place they knew where to look for her!

Gone—vanished! Gone from the hiding-place, leaving no message behind, no clue at all as to where she could be sought.

Gone like this, and to-day was the tenth of the month, and in a few minutes the dismayed chums would be hearing the same solemn words that Miss Somerfield had voiced just now to the Form-mistress:

"Unless the real Brenda Ravel can be found and can tell us where to take this document, it is worthless in our hands."

What, then, could the chums do now? Where could they seek the strangely missing girl? And even if they had the luck to find her, would they be in time?

That was the question with which the chums of Moreove were to be faced. Could they yet be in time?

"We must find her—we must!" was the declaration Betty made when she heard the news from Miss Somerfield.

"It will be a most awful thing if we don't!"

And they raced away from Miss Somerfield's study again.

"Yes, wather, goals! Howevah——"

"Half a sec., all! Let's ask these girls if they have seen anything of her."

Betty made a rush at the small party of scholars who had just come up the stairs.

"Grace Garfield, have you seen anything of a girl—not one belonging to the school at all, but a girl in rather plain, shabby clothes?"

"Is it a catch?" returned Grace flippantly.

"Don't be silly!" cried headstrong Polly Linton, the Form captain's chum. "It's serious."

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove!" Paula Creel exclaimed in her amiable way. "It's pwetty thwilling, I weckon."

"Listen, Grace," pleaded Betty. "You had better be told—the sooner the whole school knows, the better. We are desperately anxious to find a girl who is suddenly missing this morning. She doesn't belong to the school, but we——"

"Helped her to keep in hiding up in the attics," put in Polly, who could not be silent. "And when we went up to her just now——"

"Bai Jove, you know!"

"She was gone!"

Grace and her companions looked suitably amazed. So did the half-dozen other girls who were now gathering around.

"What—what?" exclaimed Grace. "Nice sort of sensation to spring upon us all, just as we are getting ready to go into morning school."

"School! I don't think there will be much school for any of us this morning," said Betty. "We have simply got to find

that girl! It's a question of time—only a few hours."

"But who is the girl, then?" came in a bewildered chorus from the gathering throng, for now that something was amiss was spreading rapidly.

"Paula's cousin!" said Betty, causing a great "Oh!" to go up.

"Oh, Paula's cousin! But, stop a bit! How do you make that out?" several girls said all together. "Paula's cousin—Brenda Ravel—has been at the school all along!"

"She has not!" was Betty's startling announcement. "That girl was a sheer impostor! She came to the school personating the real Brenda Ravel, and the real Brenda is the girl we were hiding."

Betty fetched a hard breath. She looked like bolting off to pursue the desperate search.

"But there is really no time to explain," she wailed. "We can only say that if the real Brenda is not at a certain place by five o'clock, she loses an inheritance. Paula herself will lose one, too! Oh, come on!"

"Yes, geals."

"All join in the hunt," the Form captain appealed to her schoolfellows. "And whoever picks up a clue, or finds the girl, let Miss Somerfield know."

She raced off at last, and with her went certain of her closest friends—girls who had been concerned with Betty in this mysterious business from the very start.

There was Polly Linton, of course, and there was Paula Creel. Madge Minden was another member of the party, which thus included four girls of absolutely different characters.

But this morning all four scholars were alike in one thing—their tense excitement over the quest of the missing Brenda Ravel, the desperate longing to find her in time for her to take that document to the appointed place which only she could name!

"I tell you what," panted Betty. "I, for one, mean to get along to that old house in the lane. She may not be there, but—"

"Then won't it be wasting time?" demurred Polly.

"I think not," was the captain's prompt reply. "We found out, ten minutes ago, that the sham Brenda Ravel has bolted from the school. And supposing that little impostor has cut off to her mother at the old house, to warn her that the document is in

our hands? Supposing they mean to rush off—"

"Before they are caught!" exclaimed Madge. "There is something in that. If we can't find the real Brenda, we can at least get hold of the false one, perhaps! And from her we might force an admission as to where the real Brenda is."

"Bai Jove, that's the ideah, geals! A bwilliant notion!" was Paula's delighted comment. "Howovah—"

"Don't forget this," muttered Betty gravely: "that horrid woman, the false Brenda's mother, has been at the bottom of the whole business all along. She may have been the cause of the real Brenda suddenly vanishing like this. So there may be something in getting after her, too."

"Yes, wather!"

"Then hurry up!" was Polly Linton's hearty rejoinder, although one would have thought that they were tearing along as fast as they possibly could. "Up, Morcove! Hurry!"

They were at the great school gateway by now. Through it they sprinted, emerging upon the open highway.

"Now, see who can give the lead!" was Betty's rousing cry.

And just as if, indeed, each girl's very life depended upon her never falling behind, they pelted on—on, along that country road, like the spirited lot they were.

Ding-dong! they heard the school chimes suddenly dinning out as they raced along, and they counted the solemn strokes of the bell.

Nine o'clock!

Only eight hours to go between now and five o'clock this afternoon, and the missing Brenda Ravel had yet to be found!

## CHAPTER 22.

### The Flight of Two Schemers.

AT the moment when those school chimes were ringing out from Morcove School a girl was crashing open the wicket-gate of the old house in the lane.

Darting along the garden path, all breathless with running, she dashed past the trellised porch into the house, crying:

"Mother! Are you there, mother? Quick!"

Somewhere upstairs a door slammed, and

then a hasty footfall sounded along a passage. The woman who was this excited girl's mother came hurrying down.

"Why, Rachel—"

"I had to come, mother!" the schoolgirl panted. "Whatever shall we do? That document has been found—seized by the very girls who were longing to get hold of it!"

"Found! And where is it now—where is it?" was what the woman wanted to know, looking panic-stricken.

"The headmistress has it, I suppose. Oh, mother, don't blame me! You know I hid it carefully in my study at the school. But this morning those girls got hold of it. There was a most frightful scene. One of the mistresses took them all to the Head, and I was told to stay behind until I was sent for."

"And instead—"

"I bolted—yes. I felt it was the best thing—that perhaps there would yet be a chance for us if only I could get to you in time."

The mother of Rachel Ravel, who was the girl who had personated Brenda Ravel, ran into the parlour to look at the clock.

"It is nine now," she muttered tensely. "Get some things on, Rachel! We must get away from here. We must clear out, in any case, whether we can win or not."

Rachel Ravel had a small bundle under one arm. She unrolled it upon the table, and as the contents rolled out they proved to be an outdoor jacket and a soft hat.

"Oh, what a thing to have happened on the very day!" Mrs. Ravel went on, beating her hands together. "The very tenth of the month to-day, and this has happened!"

"I couldn't help it, mother!"

"Well, I suppose not. You certainly had good reason for being careful enough," the woman exclaimed. "You knew that if only we could get over to-day—the tenth of the month—the time limit for the production of that document would be run out. And then your stepsister and your cousin would have been unable to inherit. But if they get to the lawyer's with the paper in time—"

"Mother, they can't do that—unless they find Brenda," the girl struck in excitedly. "How can they know where to find the paper? The address is not given. You remember—"

Mrs. Ravel started.

"And Brenda is safely out of the way," she said softly, yet exultantly. "Yes, there may be a chance for us, after all. Only eight hours left before the time limit expires. We can beat them yet!"

And she added, as she whipped some outdoor things of her own from behind the door:

"One minute, Rachel, and we'll be off. We must get to Barncombe on foot and catch the first possible train."

Rachel nodded eagerly. Then, breaking the pause which was attending her mother's hasty preparations for the journey, she asked in a tense whisper:

"Where is Brenda, then? You caught her last night, did you?"

"Yes, I caught her, and well she knows it!" was the grim reply. "That girl—"

"Where is she now, mother? Tell me!" pleaded Rachel.

"Never your mind!" was the snappish reply. "I will just tell you this; I have done her no harm, and I can easily send an anonymous message to the school when it is safe to do so, telling them where to find the girl and release her. Now I'm ready, so come on!"

A repellent woman she looked, taking her last hurried look round the old farmhouse, this place which she had rented, partly furnished, at the time when she sent her daughter to the school to impersonate the real Brenda.

"That Brenda!" she fumed below her breath. "There would never have been anything of this sort if she hadn't been sharper than I thought she was. But there, it is no use talking!"

She made a sign to her daughter to precede her out of the house, and then followed the girl into the open.

Slam! went the door as she pulled it shut, and having turned the key, she drew it out and threw it away.

"I shall never want that any more," was her ill-tempered comment on the action. "The back of the house is all locked up, and so—"

"Hark!" jerked out Rachel Ravel, in sudden alarm.

She said in a whisper next moment:

"I thought I heard people coming along the road from the school! Mother, suppose they do come, will they—"

"Let them come!" exclaimed Mrs. Ravel fiercely. "We shan't be here, anyhow. Come on, my girl, and let's see if we can't get to Barncombe in half an hour. There's a train from there, I believe, at nine-forty."

She led on to the garden gate, whilst the girl followed, shaking visibly with nervous excitement.

A minute since the daughter had put on some gloves which she had taken from the jacket pocket, now she as distractedly tugged them off, wondering, perhaps, why she had put them on. They would only make her hotter than ever during the rush to Barncombe.

In a flustered way she thrust them into her coat pocket—or thought she did, anyhow. But one of the gloves fell unhindered to the ground, and there it lay, whilst its panicky owner and the equally excited woman set off upon the flight.

On they went, and all the while each was keeping a wary look-out; and suddenly a gasp of dismay burst from Rachel.

"There! See, mother!" she whispered, checking sharply to peer through the almost leafless hedge. "Down on the main road! See them?"

Mrs. Ravel came to a standstill, panting for breath, and gazed in the direction indicated.

"Girls from the school, of course?" she muttered.

"Yes, the very ones, I am certain, who have been on my track all along!" Rachel answered fiercely. "They are going to turn into the lane; they are going to the farmhouse, mother!"

Mrs. Ravel went very white in the face. "Well, come on!" she panted desperately. "I tell you, Rachel, we may beat them yet!"

And reaching a point where the narrow by-lane suddenly went steeply downhill, they tore on at a faster pace than ever.

#### CHAPTER 23.

##### At the House in the Lane.

RAT-TAT-TAT!

"They are gone, Betty."

"Rat-tat! Rat-tat-tat!"

"It is not a bit of use knocking,

Betty. The birds have flown!"

"I am afraid they have!" sighed the Form captain, as she gave up plying the brass knocker of the farmhouse door. "And now the question is—"

"Bai Jove, geals! Look heah!"

That was Paula Creel, calling from the gateway.

Poor Paula! She had dropped behind towards the end of the race from the school. When she reached the wicket-gate a few moments ago—by which time Betty was thundering at the closed door—she had leant against the gatepost, utterly exhausted.

Now, however, some discovery had braced her up again.

"Heah, bai Jove, theah's a geal's glove!" she cried, pouncing to pick up the tell-tale find. "And it is one of Bwenda's, bai Jove—the sham Bwenda, I should say!"

"Of course," was Polly Linton's rather slighting comment on the find. "That girl has bolted here this morning, and the point is that she has bolted off again with her mother."

"Yes, wather! Howevah—"

"There is something in the find, Polly," remarked Betty Barton, taking the glove from the drawer. "It is still warm."

"Bai Jove! Betty deah, it would nevah have stwuck me there was anything to deduce from that!"

"Still warm, is it?" cried Polly. "Hurrah, then! And bravo you, Paula, for spotting it! Now we know they can't have been gone more than a few minutes."

"Gone where—that's the question?" broke out Madge Minden. "To Barncombe. do you think? To the railway station?"

"Why, yes!" exclaimed Betty. "Oh, why—why didn't we come along on our bikes! The hunt is going to take us farther afield than we expected. Barncombe—"

"Yes, bai Jove! When we have already won a mile or more! Howevah, geals, I'm weady to win another, bai Jove!"

"No, wait! Hip, hip!" sang out Polly again, darting into the lane to look along it. "Here is one of our girls riding a bike."

"Oh, bai Jove, what a welief! Geals

—"

"It is Bluebell Courtney! Come on, Bluebell!" Polly fairly yelled. "We want someone with a bike—quick!"

Bluebell put on speed when she heard this cry, and in a few seconds she was springing down from the saddle, to stand with the bike held ready for re-mounting.

"Bluebell," Betty proceeded to explain quickly, "the sham Brenda and her mother have bolted from this place within the last few minutes. Do you think you can run into Barncombe? You'll recognise the sham Brenda if you see her, won't you?"

"In a flash, I will!" exclaimed Bluebell. "And I'll be off now, like a shot! What do I do, though, if I see them?" she paused to ask eagerly. "Give them into custody?"

"Bai Jove, yes, wather!" said Paula.

But Betty said:

"No, hardly that, dear!"—with a laugh.

"Follow them, Bluebell, and if they go to the station, then find out where they are booking to. Then back to the school—"

"Or telephone," suggested Madge.

"Right! ho! Ta-ta!"

And Bluebell was off.

"Good!" commented Polly. "I felt half inclined to borrow the bike and do the journey myself. But perhaps there is useful work to do around the farmhouse. What say, Betty?"

What Betty had to say did not transpire for the moment. Before she and her chums had taken their eyes off the departing Bluebell, they heard a sharp ping! and they knew what that meant.

"I have no puncture outfit!" sang back the crestfallen Bluebell.

"Oh, dear!" sighed Betty.

"Then ride on the flat!" was Polly Linton's advice to the solitary cyclist. "I will, if you can't!" she offered again.

Bluebell was not going to shy at doing a thing which others were ready to do. Into the saddle she vaulted again, and away she went, making quite a good speed in spite of the flat tyre.

Betty glanced at her wristwatch.

"Twenty-five past nine. How time is flying!"

"Yes, wather! Howevah— Bai Jove, geals," Paula broke off, turning in a startled way to stare at the farmhouse. "Did you heah that?"

The girls hushed themselves on the instant. All four girls had, in fact, come in for the same sharp shock. They had heard

a sound from within the old house, and now they were listening to its repetition.

It was not a cry for help, or they would never have held still like this, full of hesitation. It was just a faint commotion, such as anybody might make by a blundering step, and so they were forced to wonder—were the mother and daughter in the house, after all?

In spite of the locked doors and the fastened windows, and the dropped glove at the wicket-gate, had it been an utter mistake to think that the guilty couple had fled the place?

That was what the girls were asking themselves in perplexity when they heard another sound. This time it was more clearly defined. They all felt sure it was the noise made by someone hammering upon a door in the heart of the house, and how significant was a thing of that sort when they were hunting for a missing girl!

Without a word Betty suddenly nipped towards the house porch. Just as silently her chums ran after her, and the next few moments found them listening again, close to the front door.

Thud, thud—bang—thud! the hammering was continuing, growing louder and louder.

And then, to set all doubts at rest, they heard a hoarse voice calling—calling pitifully:

"Help—help! Let me out! Help!"

## CHAPTER 24.

### Found at Last.

"HERE, come on!" Betty broke out in a determined tone. "We've got to end this!"

"Yes, wather!" quavered Paula, whilst Polly showed her approval by whisking about to hunt the garden for something. Her chums knew what!

Polly meant to find a battering ram to make short work of the stout old oaken door.

"I know—a clothes-post!" she suddenly exclaimed, and would have sped round to the back garden only Betty called:

"No, Polly! Why not the window? Here goes!"

And with the word *Moreove's Fourth*

Form captain simply smashed a pane of glass to smithereens with a heavy stone.

Whipping out her handkerchief, she swiftly brushed away the splinters lying upon the sill; then she was scrambling through the smashed window into the room.

After her went Polly, whilst Madge followed next. By the time Paula was taking her turn to scramble over the low sill, the old house was ringing with the other girls' cries.

They were answering the faint shouts that had again fallen upon their hearing.

"All right; we are here to help you! Brenda Reval, it is all right! But where are you?"

"Oh, help—help!" the poor girl still called, as if she were past being comforted by any reassuring cries. "Let me out—let me out!"

Betty made a grim comment as she dashed with her equally agitated companions out into the dingy hall.

For they were suddenly realising that the imprisoned girl was beating upon the underside of a trapdoor.

The worst they had expected to find was that she was locked in a room, but the distressing sounds drew them to a stone-flagged kitchen; and there was the trapdoor beneath which she was imprisoned!

The massive square of oak planking was made fast to its framework by rusty bolts that had been shot home on the upper side, thus denying the hapless captive any chance of escape by her own exertions.

In a flash Betty and Polly were on their knees, working back the countersunk bolts. Then, jumping up, the two girls were helped by Madge and Paula to heave back the heavy lid.

It rose on end, and they let it fall back against the stone flags with a deafening thud. Then, bending over, they peered down.

For a moment the darkness baffled even their searching eyes.

"Brenda!" they shouted anxiously. "Here we are!"

The response that came up from the dark cellar was one of such exhaustion that it left them heart in mouth with renewed alarm. There were steps all the way down, and Betty lost no time in descending, whilst

one of her chums—it was Madge Minden—seized a box of matches from the oil-stove that stood over by one wall, and held a tiny flame into the opening.

So, when they got to the foot of the steep stairs, she had just enough light coming down to her to see where Brenda was.

That poor girl, suddenly abandoning her fruitless hammering at the trapdoor when she knew that rescue was at hand, had tottered to the foot of the steps. Now she was huddled there, half swooning.

With a rush, down came Polly Linton, guessing that it would take two of them to help their mystery friend out of her prison.

Nor were Madge and Paula slow to offer help. They were ready to lend their gentle aid when at last poor Brenda Ravel was on the topmost step, and they took her from Betty and Polly and almost carried her to a chair.

She seemed, for the next minute or so, too dazed to speak, but when they had given her a sip of cold water and had maintained a tactful silence, she began to talk in a feeble, gasping manner.

It appeared that, during the previous night, she had left her hiding-place in the school to make a last desperate search for the vital document.

The sham Brenda Ravel, her stepsister, had surprised her in the act, and then Brenda herself had slipped away from the schoolhouse, because she feared that her being found there by some mistress or other would get her schoolgirl chums into trouble.

And then in the nightbound school grounds she had been surprised again, this time by her stepmother, Mrs. Ravel.

That cunning woman appeared to have been lurking there to gain a secret meeting with her daughter Rachel. Brenda had tried to give Mrs. Ravel the slip, but had failed. A fierce struggle had ended in her being hustled part of the way to the lonely house. Then she had swooned, and when she came round she found herself in the dark cellar.

Mrs. Ravel had called down to her that she, Brenda, would be set free without suffering any harm in a little while. But the poor girl's desperate anxiety to get out may be imagined.

"All the time," she told her awed lis-

teners, in great agitation, "I was thinking how the coming day was the tenth of the month, and that I was to be kept prisoner until the time-limit had expired. Mrs. Ravel would have set me free then—oh, yes! She would have let me go where I liked then."

"But now—what?" broke out Betty, as Brenda's gasping story came to an end at last. "The time-limit has not expired, and we have the document!"

As those words left the Form captain's lips they wrought a great change in Brenda Ravel.

All the exhaustion and despair seemed to pass from her in a moment. She staggered up unaided.

"You have the document?" was her joyful cry.

"Yes."

"Bai Jove, wather!"

"At least," rushed on Betty, "the headmistress has it. But she has told us that unless the paper is produced at a certain place by five o'clock to-day, it will be worthless."

"That is so," Brenda answered, with a hard breath. "The time now is—"

"Ten o'clock," exclaimed Polly. "Seven hours yet! Oh, Brenda, isn't there time, after all?"

"Surely!" was the word with which she set all their hearts bounding. "It is a great distance from here, but perhaps a car—or there may be a train—"

"No, a car is the thing! Miss Somerfield's car!" Paula cried, clapping her hands. "Betty—Midge—Paula! The thing is for us to get Brenda back to the school with us."

"That's it!"

"Bai Jove, wather! Howevah, see how pwostwate the poor gal is!" was Paula's compassionate remark.

Brenda's response to that was another effort at pulling herself together. She took another draught of the reviving cold water, laved her face and hands at the kitchen sink, and then turned to her excited chums, looking quite restored.

"I am ready," she exclaimed. "Perhaps I shall lag a little on the way to the school, but if I do you can run on in advance."

"Seven hours!" Polly said, in her bois-

terous way, as she led the rush to the door. "We'll do it yet! Come on!"

And next minute the old house in the lane was utterly deserted.

## CHAPTER 25.

### Again Great Odds.

**I**N her private room at Morcove School, the headmistress was pacing too and fro.

How anxiously she was waiting for possible news of the missing girl was evident from the eagerness with which she ran to the telephone when the bell suddenly tr-r-ringed sharply.

"Yes, who is it?" she called into the instrument. "Morcove School—yes. Miss Somerfield speaking. Who are you, please?"

Her face seemed to light up as a familiar name came in answer to that question.

"Bluebell Courtney, did you say? Oh, then, you have been joining in the search, Bluebell? Where are you now?"

Bluebell's message was to the effect that she was at Barncombe, but that she had seen nothing of the fugitives.

The sound of several girls storming across the hall and along the wide corridor that led to this room helped to dispel Miss Somerfield's disappointment.

News—more news surely!

Miss Somerfield took a few quick steps towards the door, then checked as it burst open and four girls surged in upon her.

"Found!" was the first word that came from their lips breathlessly. "We have found her! Miss Somerfield, she is found—found!"

"She is here at the school—coming into the house by now," Betty panted, glancing back at the wideflung door. "We left her a little behind at the finish, but—"

"Here she is!" was one of Polly's jubilant shouts. "Hurrah! This way, Brenda! Here is our headmistress—in here!"

It was one of those moments when Miss Somerfield's fine nature revealed itself to the full.

She had never seen this girl before—this pale, agitated girl who now stood in the doorway, seized with sudden shyness. But to know that here was the innocent victim

of scheming and villainy was enough for Miss Somerfield.

She went up to Brenda Ravel and simply put loving arms about her.

"My dear," murmured the headmistress, with such tenderness that tears suddenly rushed to the poor girl's eyes, "if there is anything I can do—anything—only tell me!"

Brenda tried to voice some word of gratitude, but she was too overcome. Mutely she showed, by her ardent eyes, what her feelings were, whilst she took a few moments to steady up.

"That document which has been at the bottom of all the trouble—it is here," Miss Somerfield said at last, taking it from her desk. "I know the position, Brenda Ravel. The paper should be lodged with someone—a lawyer, presumably—by five o'clock this afternoon. Well, it is now a quarter to eleven."

"Six and a quarter hours yet!" Polly interjected softly.

She seemed to be keeping count of every minute as it passed.

"Is there still time, then?" Miss Somerfield asked Brenda with growing calmness. "We can surely get to the lawyer in good time? Besides, I might be able to telephone."

"Bai Jove!"

"Why, of course!" Betty and Polly and Madge chorused.

They had clean forgotten the possibilities of the telephone.

Brenda's eyes went to the instrument, but her schoolgirl chums were suddenly dismayed to see a look of despair coming back into her white face.

"I do not even know his name," she said tragically.

It was an admission that staggered those who heard it.

"What!"

"My gwacious! Bwenda deah, you mean to say, bai Jove, that you weally don't know the lawyer's name!"

And Brenda's rueful shake of the head confirmed the alarming admission.

"I have never had a chance to discover the name," she said huskily. "But I know

the town, and I think I could guide you to the office."

"Ah!" exclaimed Miss Somerfield.

"Years ago, when I was quite a child, my father took me with him to see someone who, he said, was a lawyer. But I never picked up the gentleman's name, and I would not be able to remember the town to-day, only we stayed there a few days. It was a country town—Lowhampton—"

"Lowhampton?" echoed Miss Somerfield. "A hundred miles from here."

"Only a hundred miles!" Polly said excitedly to her chums. "A mere nothing, in a car!"

"Bai Jove!"

"The car—yes," Miss Somerfield said, nodding eager approval. "We will be off at once, taking the paper with us. Betty!"

The Form captain stood forward.

"Make it known at once, Betty, that there is no need for any further searching," the headmistress instructed her quickly. "Then all of you get ready as quickly as possible for the journey. Brenda shall stay here—have something to eat and a rest—whilst I am arranging for the car."

"Oh, good—spiffing!" Polly chuckled, and did one of her capers. "Six hours and ten minutes! We'll do it easy!"

"Yes, wather!"

"We've ages of time!"

"Bai Jove, and what a welief that is!" Paula remarked, darting after her chums out of the room.

Just as the school chimes were striking eleven, Betty, Polly, and Madge returned to Miss Somerfield and Brenda Ravel. The girl was looking much better already after the restful interlude and the coffee and sandwiches which her wise, kind friend had prescribed. Starting up from her chair as the three schoolgirls entered, she exclaimed that she was ready to be off.

But where was Paula?

"I know!" Betty let out with a laugh. "Half a sec.!"

Twenty seconds later she was bursting into Study No. 6, to find just what she had expected.

There was Paula Creel, taking the last of many "last" glances at herself in the mirror!



"Paula, hurry up—hurry!" panted Betty.  
 "Bai Jove, Betty deah! Are you weady?"

"Ready? Come on, do! Don't you understand that every minute is precious, even now? Supposing we have a hitch during the journey?"

"Quite all wight," said Paula affably, whilst she gave a last caressing touch to her tidy hair. "I only wanted to make myself respectable, don't you know!"

"You are the limit, Paula!"

"I am weady—quite weady," was the amiable retort to this. "Howevah, if you will just let me wun upstairs for a diffent pair of gloves, Betty—"

"Come on!"

"Weally, though—"

Betty ended all argument by taking her dressy chum by the arm and fairly dragging her to the stairs.

In the hall below they found the others, waiting to be off. The car was at the porch—the larger of two cars which the school always kept in use. It was a roomy six-seater.

Betty and Polly volunteered for places next to the quiet, business-like driver, and thus there was ample room for Miss Somerfield and the other three in the body of the car.

They could, indeed, have easily found room for either Betty or Polly, but that couple preferred to bunch together, like the inseparables they were!

There had been a cancelling of all class-work this morning, so that all who chose to do so could join in the search for Brenda. Now the news had spread that she was found, and already a great number of the scholars had come careering back to the school.

They were teeming around the car as it started away, and many a spirited cheer went up from girls who were waving their good wishes.

"Hurrah! Good luck, Brenda Ravel—good luck to you all! Safe journey! And let's hope you are in time!"

"Yes, wather!" screamed back Paula Creel, above the general uproar. "How-evah— What a stwong bwceze, bai Jove!" she broke off, as the car licked

towards the main gateway. "My hair is wuffed alweady!"

"Five-past!" sang out Polly, still keeping count of the minutes. "Hurrah—hooray! We are going to do it easy!"

CHAPTER 26.

On the Road.

HUM, hum, hum-m-m-m!  
 A warning blare of the horn, and then again:

Hum, hum-m-m-m-m! sounded the car's powerful engine as it swung the six-seater, with its seven occupants, at a smooth thirty miles an hour along the undulating Devonshire roads.

Miss Somerfield was sitting perfectly quiet now, and so were Madge and Brenda. Now and then, however, Paula had to give a little yelp of alarm as the wind caught her an extra hard buffet, to the sad dis-ordering of her hair.

As for Betty and Polly, they talked all the time. Right beneath their eyes, as part of the driver's accessories, there was a small clock, so Polly could keep count of the minutes now better than ever!

Both girls, too, could watch the speed-meter—how the hand flickered this way and that with the car's varying speed. Twenty miles—thirty—a sudden drop to ten, then a bound to thirty-five! On and on—on and on!

Signpost after signpost, village after village, town after town! Still the car boomed along, handled by the quiet, steady-eyed driver, with a skill that excited the girls' boundless admiration.

They had passed through the beautiful city of Exeter before the town they sought began to figure on the signposts. But there was the name at last; now they were speeding in an easterly direction—Low-hampton, so many miles!

What a great number of miles, too, judged by the standard of former days! But with this wonderful car to remind the girls how modern inventions had simply annihilated space and distance, they could glance at the mileages marked on the posts without any feeling of dismay.

They would do well! As Polly was persistently shouting at Paula, they

would do it "easy"! The car was a "licker"!

"Yes, wather!" squealed back Paula again and again, above the hum of the engines. "And we'll all have time to put our hair to wights—what!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" the others always exploded then. "What a girl you are, Paula!"

By two o'clock the signposts were telling them that Lowhampton was only thirty odd miles away. And those last thirty miles they could hope to cover in a trifle over the hour. The road looked like being very quiet the rest of the way—quiet and easy. Unlike some of the Devonshire highways which they had had to negotiate round about Exeter!

So, with an increasing certainty of getting to the town in time for a frantic search to be made for the unknown lawyer's office, the spirits of the whole party rose higher and higher.

And then suddenly, at a moment when anything of that sort seemed least likely to happen, disaster befell.

They were purring along a nice level bit of road, bordered on either side with trim hedgerows. A straight mile lay ahead of them, and absolutely nothing was in sight to put the driver into an extra-alert state. But suddenly Betty and Polly yelled together:

"Oh, look out!"

Just in front of the onrushing car some bullocks had come charging out of a concealed gateway that opened from a meadow into the road.

Even then the skilful driver might have merely pulled up smartly without any accident. But at the selfsame instant a farm-boy came bursting through the small opening in the hedge, and made a rush into the roadway, his one thought being, apparently, to turn the bullocks back.

The chauffeur saw this boy whirling about in wild confusion when the car was but a few feet from him. On went the brakes, and then the big car swerved. It was the only thing the driver could do to avoid knocking down the lad.

Next instant—crash! went the front of the car into a telegraph-post beside the road. There were shrieks as if every girl occupant of the six-seater was injured by the violent smash, but the shrieks were

Paula's. And Paula was not a bit hurt, after all!

The car, though—the car was done for, so far as the present journey was concerned.

One front wheel was all awry on its axle. The bonnet was shapeless, and underneath were engines knocked all out of order.

Miss Somerfield and the girls scrambled out. Pale with the shock of this violent upset, they turned paler still as they stood in the roadway staring at the broken-down car.

Its clock was still ticking away valiantly. Polly went closer and looked tragically at the hands.

Half-past two!

Here they were, stranded at a distance of eighteen miles from a town which they had not only to reach, but to search from end to end, perhaps, before five o'clock!

What were they to do?

Betty rushed after the boy, who had now turned the troublesome bullocks back into the field.

"The nearest village—how far?" panted Betty.

"Four miles," he said.

Any garage there? No. Any chance of getting hold of a car—even a tradesman's car? No. No one kept a motor there.

"My goodness, then!" the Form captain said below her breath. "We are done!"

And she heard Paula saying, with a heavy sigh:

"Bai Jove—yes, wather!"

## CHAPTER 27.

### When the Clock Strikes.

AT that very moment when the motorists were standing nonplussed on the lonely country road, Mrs.

Ravel and her daughter were entering a certain lawyer's office in Lowhampton!

"Good-afternoon!" Mrs. Ravel said with affected graciousness to the clerk who got off his stool in the outer office to attend to the callers. "Is Mr. Carmichael in?"

"Yes, ma'am. What name, please?"

The scheming woman could hardly keep a triumphant note out of her voice as she answered:

"Mrs. Ravel. And if Mr. Carmichael is puzzled, as to why I have called, you can remind him that it is—the tenth of the month!"

The clerk seemed to become infected with sudden excitement. He was, in fact, disposed to betray far more nervous tension than old Mr. Carmichael himself revealed, when that sober-natured gentleman had received the callers.

"Mrs. Ravel? And your daughter, I presume? Ah, yes—yes!" Mr. Carmichael murmured calmly as he shook hands with each. "And you have come—yes, of course; quite so! The tenth of the month!"

Mrs. Ravel's covetous eyes were gleaming.

"The last day for the production of any later will than the one which you have held all along," she exclaimed, breathing quickly. "The time-limit has expired, Mr. Carmichael. Your advertisements in the personal columns of the papers have had no effect. I told you it would be so."

"Yes, ma'am; quite so!"

"There never was a later will!" Mrs. Ravel asserted with needless vehemence. "All this delay is simply humbug—the usual thing with lawyers. But now—now that the time is up—"

"One moment, I beg!" Mr. Carmichael put in gently. "I must remind you that the time-limit does not expire until—ahem!—five o'clock. The office's closing time, you understand."

"Rubbish!" was Mrs. Ravel's impatient cry. "Just as if anybody is going to come bursting in upon us at the last moment! Mr. Carmichael, it is your duty to act at once! You—"

But he held up a hand, calling at the same time to his clerk:

"Hudson, let me have the bundle of papers dealing with the estate of the late John Ravel."

Whilst the clerk was ferreting out this bundle from its pigeon-hole in an old-fashioned cabinet, the lawyer repeated his request that Mrs. Ravel and her daughter would be seated.

Rachel obeyed, looking very strung-up; but Mrs. Ravel remained standing, taking frequent turns about the room.

"Ah, yes! Here we are!" Mr. Car-

michael said presently, having opened out some of the papers. "Of course, Mrs. Ravel, you are quite right about the date. It is perfectly true that, no later will having been produced, in spite of official warnings in the papers, both at home and in Australia—"

He paused, looking over his glasses at the woman.

"We advertised in Australia, as you know, because the late John Ravel—"

"Of course I know why you advertised out there!" snapped Mrs. Ravel. "John Ravel married me, his second wife, out there, and died out there. Well?"

"Quite so. Well, then, it really looks as if, acting under powers conferred by the Courts, I shall be able to congratulate you on inheriting the whole fortune. I have always regretted the delay, Mrs. Ravel, but the High Court, you know—"

"The whole thing has been sheer nonsense, just to pile up the costs, that is my belief!" cried Mrs. Ravel. "Delay! I should think there has been delay! And that is why I think you should hand over the securities representing the fortune without any further dilly-dallying!"

"At five o'clock, ma'am," bowed Mr. Carmichael, with a composure which left Mrs. Ravel speechless. "If you would not mind going away and coming back then? At five o'clock, ma'am, the securities shall all be handed over. I will have them ready for you."

Mrs. Ravel made a sharp clucking sound with her tongue.

By a glance of the eye she invited Rachel to follow her out of the room and out of the building, and together they emerged upon the High Street.

A few doors off there was a teashop. They turned in there and sought a corner table to themselves. Except that she snapped "Tea!" at the waitress' head, not a word did Mrs. Ravel voice. There she sat, with nothing to say to her daughter, nor had that girl any comforting remark to make.

Mother and child—schemers both—they sat in that shadowy corner, fagged out after a tiresome railway journey involving many changes, yet finding no relish in the refreshing tea. Moody, ill at ease, full of the wildest suspense, the pair of them!

For they were thinking, whilst the minutes crept by, how if Brenda Ravel had been found, perhaps, several hours ago, and how if she and her friends were even now on the way here!

On the way with the paper, to flourish it before the eyes of that stubborn old lawyer, before the clock struck five!

"Drink your tea, Rachel!" the mother snapped at last.

"I can't, mother! I—I feel——"

"Yes, I know. But is it likely, after all?" Mrs. Ravel exclaimed, with a desperate effort at composure. "They can't telegraph, anyhow—that's one comfort. Brenda never knew the lawyer's name—only the town where he lived."

And yet——

There was that terrible feeling—the paper might be produced in time!

They stayed as long as they decently could in the tea-shop, then went out and roamed the town. All the time they were in momentary dread of something happening. It chanced that they went by a police-sergeant and an inspector in the High Street, and Rachel felt herself turning pale as both officers gave her and her mother a steady glance.

Supposing Brenda and her friends, unable to get here in time, had telegraphed to the police!

It was a thought that sent a shudder through mother and daughter alike.

When the time came for them to return to the office, they felt afraid to go back, in case the police should be there.

But they took a grip on their failing courage, and re-entered the office just as the town hall chimes were beating out half-past four.

Mrs. Ravel made the insinuation to the clerk that perhaps Mr. Carmichael would see them now and get the business over, but no! The implacable lawyer sent out the bland message—would they please make themselves comfortable in the waiting-room?

It was a bare, dingy room, adjoining the outer office. On the wall hung a large clock, and with eyes alight with feverish excitement the guilty schemers watched the big hand creeping on slowly—oh, so slowly!

Twenty to five a quarter to, ten to—still no cause for alarm.

Five to five, at last; actually only another five minutes to wait, and still no disaster to the daring plan which greed of gold had prompted!

Five to five!

What could happen now? What could possibly happen in these last few minutes?

And yet——

Until the clock struck, how could they be certain?

## CHAPTER 23.

Hurry! Hurry!

MEANWHILE, where were the stranded motorists?

Not still in that lonely spot where the car had come to grief? They were making for Lowhampton, after all, but would they be in time—oh, would they? was the frantic thought in each anxious mind.

Could they still hope to be in time when there would be only a few minutes left for Brenda Ravel to let the most vague memories guide her to the office?

"Four o'clock!" muttered Polly Linton, still keeping count of the minutes. "Oh, what an age we had to wait for this train at that wayside station!"

"And then it was late!" grimaced Betty.

"Bai Jove—yes, wather!" said Paula.

There was a panel of looking-glass in this first-class compartment of the train which they had joined half an hour ago. Paula stood up for the third time in five minutes to put her hair to rights.

"Howevah," she remarked cheerfully gazing into the mirror, "one pwesumes——"

"Oh, Paula, don't fidget!" fumed Polly.

"Give your hair a rest!"

"Quite all right——"

"Then if it is quite all right, why not leave it alone?"

"Bai Jove!"

"Sit still, duffer!" Polly said, pulling the aristocrat of the Fourth Form back into her seat. "You——"

"Hallo, another station—and another stop! Um!" put in Madge Minden, turning down the corners of her mouth.

"What a train! What place is this?"

"Knockham," read out Brenda, scanning the platform notice.

"Knockham! I'd like to kick 'em," said Polly, "for having trains that stop here!"

Whereupon Paula grinned feebly.

"How frivolous you are, Polly dear!"

"I don't feel frivolous!" fumed that young lady; and she certainly did not look it.

She, the headstrong Polly, was suffering dreadfully during this exasperating journey by a crawling train that stopped for several minutes at every little station.

There should have been a ten-mile run for Polly, instead of an hour's cooping-up in this railway carriage. Then she would have been happy!

"No one gets in, and no one gets out," was her withering comment, as the train crawled on again. "But we stop, and when we stop, we stick there—ages and ages!"

"Yes, wathah! Howevah—"

"Paula, if you dare touch your hair again!" the madcap warned her dressy chum—so grimly that Miss Somerfield burst out laughing.

For, in spite of Polly's irritable remarks, that girl was next moment smiling in the most affectionate manner at Paula.

Dear old Paula! Neither Polly nor any of them would have had her be one whit different from her usual character to-day.

What a thing it was to Paula's credit, indeed, that she could still be just her old amiable self at a time when she was personally concerned in a very great crisis.

If they got to the lawyer's office in time, then Paula herself would inherit certain money under the will. But money—Paula never was one to bother about money. So long as her Cousin Brenda—the real Brenda, this nice, well-bred girl, with whom she was quite in love—got justice for herself, that would be "quite all right."

Twenty past four, and they were still crawling along in the fussy little train, and Polly at the window could see no sign of Lowhampton in the distance, or any other town. Yet they were supposed to be in by half-past.

At this rate they looked like getting to Lowhampton just in time to hear the town hall clock striking five!

More than once Miss Somerfield looked

across at Brenda Ravel, ready to murmur a comforting word if the girl showed any sign of being overcome by despair. But Brenda still sat there perfectly composed, and the headmistress, like her scholars, only admired the girl all the more for her fine spirit.

Suddenly the train slowed round a curve, and Polly, even whilst she was nearly thrown off her balance and nearly sitting down on Paula's lap, fairly yelled:

"We are there! Hurrah, we're there!"

It was not quite the case, of course, but the train's rounding that sharp curve had suddenly given them a glimpse of the old provincial town of Lowhampton.

And now, as if to make up for all tardiness at the very last moment, the train took quite a sudden rush!

With a scream of the engine's whistle, and a great blowing off of steam, they clattered into the great junction, and in another minute Miss Somerfield and the girls were tearing across a wide platform to the exit.

"Quarter to five!" panted Polly. "Oh, I say, it's awful!"

But that was not a cry of despair. Rather was it a sort of excited chuckle, expressing the madcap's delight over the thrill of a close finish.

Just like Polly! And how like Betty it was, too, when she said gravely:

"We'll manage!"

Out into the station yard they ran, and there were some cabmen and motor-drivers offering conveyances.

"Cab, ma'am? Taxi, ma'am?"

"Thank you, no; we have to walk," said Miss Somerfield. "Now, Brenda dear! Oh, I wonder if you will find the way in time?"

The girl did not answer. She saw the main street, running to the right and also to the left, and already she was at a loss which way to go!

Polly almost groaned. Madge and Betty exchanged uneasy glances. Paula put her hat straighter than ever.

"I think—I think it is to the right," Brenda hazarded at last.

And she was wrong!

After going a couple of hundred yards in that direction she suddenly checked, with a shake of the head and a hard sigh.

No, the lawyer's office was not in this part of the town.

Five minutes wasted!

That must have been the rueful thought in the minds of all as they rushed back to the station to make a fresh start.

Ten to five now! Only another ten minutes, and then the lawyer himself would say:

"No, you are too late!"

"It's frightful!" Polly whispered, tearing along with the rest of them.

"Yes, wather! Howevah," said Paula, half checking to look in a dress-maker's window, "what a wipping fwock, bai Jove! Heah, goals—"

"You silly duffer, come on!" Polly almost yelled at the aristocrat of the Form. "I never did see such a juggins!"

"How now, Brenda dear?" Miss Somerfield asked that girl. "Is this better?"

"I think I seem to remember coming this way—yes," was the half-hesitant answer. "But the place is changed. Have they widened this street, I wonder? Oh, it's round here, I'm sure!" she added, with sudden conviction.

So they tore round that corner, and along a street of business premises; and then—

"No, I'm wrong again!"

"Bai Jove!"

"It was nearer the town hall," Brenda said excitedly. "We are getting away from the town hall this time."

"Yes, wather! Howevah—"

"Six minutes to five," breathed Polly. "Oh, Betty—Madge!"

"We'll manage!" said Betty desperately.

They got back to the main street after a breathless rush, and then tore on again, a public clock now in full view.

"Look, five to five!" gasped Polly, pointing tragically. "Only another five minutes, and then we are done!"

"But this is the way—it must be!" said Brenda, scanning one building after another. "Yes, this old-fashioned tea-room; I remember father taking me in there to have an ice. It's further on—only a little further!"

"Oh, then, hurry! Faster!" urged Polly. "Come on, Paula! Quick!"

"One moment!" Brenda suddenly checked again. "I'm wrong!"

"Oh!"

"We've gone past it!"

"Bai Jove!"

"It is over there—close handy, quite close!" Brenda cried. "One of those buildings over the way!"

They flashed across the street, Polly leading.

"Here—here!" the madcap yelled, as she landed on the pavement. "A lawyer's office—Mr. Carmichael!"

"Carmichael! That's the name!" panted Brenda.

There was a dingy doorway. Through it they surged and plunged into the outer office of Lowhampton's leading solicitor.

"Hark! The town clock is striking, isn't it?" gasped Polly, as Miss Somerfield started to speak breathlessly to the clerk.

"No," said Betty; "but—"

She pointed to the office clock.

One minute to five!

Miss Somerfield suddenly left off talking to the clerk and flashed round upon the girls.

With a gesture she signed to them to follow, and then walked straight along a corridor to a door marked "Private."

With a hasty knock she threw the door wide open and led the way in.

Mr. Carmichael was there, taking some papers from his safe. Near the table stood Mrs. Ravel and her daughter Rachel.

"Stop—stop!" cried Miss Somerfield, in the very instant that she entered the room. "This document! We are in time!"

But only just!

Even as she laid the vital paper upon the table, they all heard the town hall clock strike five!

## CHAPTER 29.

### A Race Well Won.

ONLY too clearly were the town chimes audible in that room, for there was suddenly dead silence there.

Utter silence, that is to say, except for the hard breathing of those who had finished that thrilling race against time at the very last moment.

Mr. Carmichael, after turning about, looked staggered. His startled gaze went from Miss Somerfield and the girls to the paper lying on the table; then he looked impressively at Mrs. Ravel and her daughter.

That woman's face had turned sea-green with despair and fright. Rachel seemed to want to sink away.

"Mr. Carmichael?" Miss Somerfield began at last; and the lawyer bowed, fast recovering his composure.

"You were on the point of handing over certain securities, representing the estate of the late John Ravel, of Australia," the headmistress pursued, getting her breath back.

"Yes. Under an order of the court, duly advertised in various papers," the lawyer said, "I was empowered to transfer the whole estate to this lady, who was John Ravel's second wife at the time he died."

"A time-limit was fixed for the production of any document varying the will you were acting upon?"

"That is the case. And the time-limit expired two minutes ago."

"But we were here by five o'clock!" said Miss Somerfield, with precision. "There is a certain document—the one I placed on your table before the time-limit expired. It is a sort of codocil, leaving certain money—"

"One moment, I beg!" the lawyer pleaded; and then he took up the parchment sheet. In a flash his practised eye got at the gist of its contents, and he nodded slowly.

"Yes. There was always some supposition that a deed of this sort might be in existence. That is why the disposal of the estate was hung up. Mrs. Ravel—"

He was smiling in a dry, yet satisfied way as he looked at that quailing woman.

"I will have you furnished with a copy of this deed, Mrs. Ravel," he said composedly. "In the meantime, I must notify you formally that it was presented before the time-limit expired, and therefore it is valid. Out of the estate which I would otherwise have handed over to you in its entirety, I must now pay a legacy of ten thousand pounds to John Ravel's daughter by his first wife."

"Oh!" shouted Polly. "Brenda dear, do you hear? Ten thousand pounds for you!"

"And likewise," said the lawyer, "a sum of two thousand pounds to the testator's favourite niece, Paula Creel."

"Oh!" shouted Betty and Polly together. "Paula, dear, do you hear? Two thousand—"

"Yes, wather! Howevah—"

"All I can say is, it's a shame!" Mrs. Ravel suddenly burst out furiously. "What does a gal like that need with the money? And Brenda there—bah! A cruel shame, I call it! For me to have been left—"

"Mrs. Ravel," the lawyer broke in sternly, "that is ungenerous of you. Your late husband left you amply provided for—you and your daughter both. That daughter was your child by a former marriage, and—"

"I don't care! We ought to have had the lot!" panted Mrs. Ravel vulgarly.

The lawyer shrugged.

"It is the law of the land, Mrs. Ravel, that a man may still dispose of his own property as he thinks fit. And I am bound to say that John Ravel seems to have done his best to be fair all round."

"I may add this, Mr. Carmichael," put in Miss Somerfield gently. "Mrs. Ravel says that she and her daughter should have had the lot. Well, they have certainly done their best to get the lot—unfairly. It is entirely due to certain of my girls—members of my school at Morcove, Devonshire—that Brenda Ravel and Paula Creel were not cheated in the most ruthless manner."

"You and your precious gals—bah!" Mrs. Ravel sneered, at the same time striding towards the door. "Come on, Rachel gal! That's enough of this. We don't want any argument!"

A smile quivered at the lawyer's lips. To see this woman so anxious all at once to end the interview and get out of the office was quite enough for him to know whether she were an injured party or not.

"One moment, though," he said, with sudden sternness, stepping after her. "It may be that this lady from Morcove School will require me to take action in the matter. There has been unscrupulous work, and so—"

"May I suggest that we leave it to

Brenda Ravel and Paula Creel to say whether any steps shall be taken?" broke in Miss Somerfield. "Brenda dear—Paula, now that your rights have been secured, what do you say?"

"I say this," said Brenda, with a calmness and dignity that obviously pleased the lawyer. "After spending two very unhappy years with my stepmother and my step-sister since my dear father died, I wish to have nothing more to do with them. The sooner they are out of my sight the better!"

"Yes, wather!" agreed Paula affably. "Bai Jove. I weally cannot help wemarking that it will be a gweat welief to me, too! Howe vah——"

"Come on, Rachel gal!" exclaimed Mrs. Ravel, plucking her daughter by the sleeve. "Don't stand staring. She's a fool, that Paula!"

Rachel, realising that nothing in the nature of a criminal prosecution was going to happen, was now looking much bolder. She looked, indeed, as if she would very much like to flare out at Paula and all of them. But her mother was still as anxious as ever to get away—what wonder, either!—and next moment the door had slammed behind them both.

"Just as well," commented Mr. Carmichael, with his dry smile. "And so," he said, offering his hand to Brenda Ravel, "you are John Ravel's daughter by his first wife. What a fine girl, too, to be sure! And this is your cousin."

"Yes, wather! And pwoud to be her cousin, too, bai Jove!" beamed Paula. "Howe vah——"

"I gather that you had a trying time getting to this office?" remarked the lawyer; and Polly said below her breath:

"Oh, didn't we just! I wonder, Betty," she was heard to add in a whisper, "if there is any chance of a cup of tea?"

"Bai Jove, geals, now you make the wemark——"

"Tea!" exclaimed the lawyer genially. "To be sure! Perhaps the most practical way, in the circumstances, of celebrating the occasion. Here is my hat, and the tea-shop is only a few doors off. May I have the pleasure?"

And above the delighted murmurs from Miss Somerfield and the others, came Paula's emphatic: "Yes, wather!"

Over the teacups during the next half-hour the lawyer was put in full possession of all the facts that had come to light in connection with the great conspiracy, and he agreed most emphatically with Miss Somerfield that a very great wrong would have been committed if it had not been for the astute and plucky behaviour of the chums of the Fourth Form.

It fell to the headmistress to unfold most of the amazing story, but one explanation devolved upon Brenda.

Betty & Co. were still rather puzzled as to why the girl Rachel had been sent to Morcove to personate Brenda. And so that girl—Paula's real cousin—explained that all arrangements had been made for her going to the school when she discovered the existence of that document entitling her and Paula to a share in the fortune.

As a result, Mrs. Ravel had warned the girl that if she took any steps towards disclosing the true situation before the time-limit expired she would simply tear up the document, and then Brenda's statements would be beyond confirmation.

At the same time the ruthless woman had hit upon the idea of sending Rachel to the school in place of Brenda, so that nothing would ever be suspected by Paula or her people.

Well, the school would see no more of the sham Brenda now, and was there anybody who would regret her departure? Nobody!



But it was going to be a matter of very genuine regret that the real Brenda could not take her place in the school.

Her education was far advanced, however, and it so happened that a certain maiden lady—an aunt of Paula's—was in need of someone to brighten her rather quiet life.

Brenda paid the lady a visit, and in her own orphaned state was so glad to find such

a happy home and such a sweet woman to "mother" her, that she declared in favour of that life at once.

Still, we are going to meet Brenda again, most likely, when we go with the chums of Morcove on some of their holiday adventures!

A Brenda freed from the persecution of an ill-natured stepmother, thanks largely to Betty Barton & Co.



Three more splendid numbers of "The Schoolgirls' Own" Library will be on sale on Friday, Oct. 7th. See page iii of cover for further particulars.

# IF YOUR DOG COULD TALK.

Quite a number of girls will, without doubt, give an amused smile at the title of this article. "My dog can talk, or as good as!" they will be thinking.

Quite true, too! The average dog, no matter whether he be mongrel or thoroughbred, has a language all his own. But it is doggy language, and by it they convey quite a lot in their own pretty way.

When a dog goes to the door, for instance, and gives it a light tap with his paw, he is very obviously saying, "Please let me out!" When he rattles the piece of sulphur which you put in his water-basin to keep him healthy he is very plainly saying: "No water left, mistress."

And so on, with a host of other small but very telling actions, he is able to make himself clearly understood. But haven't you ever found your dog sitting up and looking with a most intelligent and patient gaze into your eyes, as if he has something to impart and is trying his hardest to make you understand what it is?

"I'm sure that dog is trying to tell me something!" is a remark you, as well as most other dog-owners, must have made many and many a time. It is then that the dog, failing to find actions to replace words, must devoutly wish that he could speak in human language.

If your dog could speak, the first thing he would say to you when he sees you in the morning would be, "It's really a lovely morning for a walk, mistress. No, don't look out of the window and say it's too dull, or too windy, or too hot, or too anything else! It doesn't matter what the weather's like in the morning, 'cos it'll do you all the good in the world to come out and have a scamper with me. Come on, if only for ten minutes."

That's advice which is well worth listening to—both for the dog's sake and your own.

This isn't the only time of the day your dog will plead for a walk. He will do it at any time, but that is where you say a few words to him.

"You've got to understand, Spot," you tell him, "that twice a day regularly your mistress will take you for a walk. Ten minutes in the morning and an hour at night. With special trips during holidays."

He will quickly understand that, when you get into the habit of it. Habits are excellent and necessary things for dogs, and if they could talk you would quickly find out that a privilege granted one day is expected the next.

You give your dog a biscuit at tea-time on one occasion. Next tea-time, as soon as the biscuits come to view, he will come and beg, or rest his chin upon your knee and say as plainly as possible: "Isn't it my tea-time, too?"

But that is a habit which should not be encouraged. A dog that is allowed to ask for tit-bits, and to be sure of receiving them, will quickly be spoiled. There's no reason why he should not receive some dainty occasionally, but it should be given him only as a reward for some special exhibition of cleverness or goodness.

Another thing your dog would ask for if he could talk would be a proper grooming every morning or evening. Probably he would say, "I'm always getting into trouble for scratching out loose hairs on the carpets and rugs. Everyone says 'That dog's hairs are an awful nuisance. We really must keep him out of the house.' But if only you would give me a good brush once a day and an occasional combing with a fine-tooth metal comb, there would be no loose hairs and I shouldn't have to scratch."

Being a very intelligent animal, he might add: "And please don't do my grooming when it's time to go out for a frolic, 'cos I shall be so excited that I simply won't be able to stand still. I shall be as patient as anything, though, when I've had a good run."

A dog may think all these things, but, unfortunately, his vocabulary is limited to "Woofs!" "Grrrrrs!" and similar sounds. Actually, he says quite a number of things in this way. The deep, warning note which means "Come into this house at your peril!" is quite easily understood.

But he can also express anger, impatience, pain, sorrow, and many other emotions by the same means. As this is the best he can do in the way of talking, and will never be able to use human language, you will find the best way to understand your dog is to try to learn his language.

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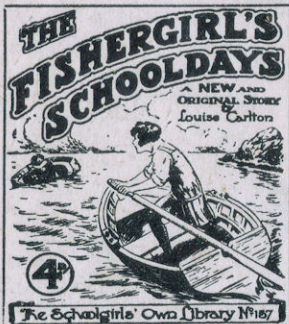
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