

THE MORCOVE TREASURE HUNTERS

AN EARLY ADVENTURE OF
BETTY BARTON & Co.

BY
MARJORIE
STANTON



4^d

The Schoolgirls' Own Library. N^o 157.

NOW is the time to commence reading that
delightful schoolgirls' paper—

THE SCHOOL FRIEND

EVERY THURSDAY. PRICE TWOPENCE.

A magnificent new mystery serial, featuring one of the jolliest characters in schoolgirl fiction, begins in the issue dated March 3rd. It is entitled:



By
RENEE FRAZER.

and tells of the adventures of Tess Everton, the madcap of Templedene School, in a strange old house on the cliffs!

Each week, too, there is a long complete story of Barbara Redfern & Co., the famous Fourth-Formers of Cliff House School, by Hilda Richards, and a long instalment of a grand serial: "The Schoolgirl of Mystery!" by Ruth Maxwell.

Place an order now with your newsagent for

THE SCHOOL FRIEND



THE MORCOVE TREASURE-HUNTERS!

An Early Adventure of Betty Barton & Co.

By MARJORIE STANTON.

Author of "MADGE MINDEN'S SECRET," "WHEN MORCOVE MOVED," "PAULA CREEL'S COUSIN," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

Off for the Holidays.

"THE coach is here!" Polly Linton, the madcap of the Fourth Form at Morcove School, executed a war-dance, and paused in the doorway of the room that served as a dormitory in the Old Priory.

Morcove School was still suffering from the effects of the disastrous fire that had turned the girls out of their home, and, although the work of reconstruction was progressing rapidly, the school was not yet ready for them.

So the Fourth and Fifth Forms were still housed in the Old Priory, an old mansion set in a wooded hollow, some two miles from the school.

"The coach?" asked Betty Barton, the Fourth Form captain, looking up. "Sounds more like olden days—coaches. I suppose you mean the motor-coach, Polly?"

Polly Linton nodded, and hurried to the window. Betty was beside her, and together they glanced at the snow-clad trees and undergrowth.

How beautiful it was, how exactly as Christmas should be! And the motor-coach, expressing modernity, seemed strangely out of place.

"We can't keep that poor driver stamping about in the freezing cold!" exclaimed Polly Linton, wheeling round. "I'm ready! Come on—"

"Bai Jove! I say, deah geals, wait—"

Paula Creel, the most elegant girl in the Fourth Form, stood upright and sighed.

"My twunks aren't nearly weady!" she protested.

"Trunks!" ejaculated Polly. "How many

trunks do you want? Isn't a suit-case enough?"

"Don't tease her, Polly," rejoined Betty, with a smile. "The less you say, the sooner she'll be ready. She's been since the day before yesterday packing, as it is."

"Yesterday, deah geal!" Paula protested.

"Well, yesterday, then," said Polly. "If you don't jolly well hurry up, Paula, you'll have to spend your holiday at the school by yourself!"

At that dire threat, Paula Creel once more set to work on the task of packing her trunk. One trunk was packed already, as also were three hat-boxes, and now Paula Creel was engaged in carefully folding silken garments, interposing them between sheets of tissue-paper.

"Look at her!" groaned Polly. "Anybody would think she was packing for next Christmas instead of this!"

The other girls chuckled as Polly, with a frown, stepped forward.

Her intention was obvious, and Paula Creel raised her hand in alarm.

"Pway keep away, Polly, deah," she said hastily. "I'd rather do it myself."

But what Paula would "wather" do did not worry Polly. With an air that was businesslike in the extreme, she gathered up some of the most dainty dresses and flung them into the trunk.

"Soon be ready!" she said cheerily.

"Polly—my dwesses, you're wuining them!" shrieked Paula as she gazed in horror at helpful Polly's handiwork.

But Polly paid her no heed. She regarded it as more a question of time than of care,

and Paula's dresses disappeared into the trunk in record time.

"That's all right!" said Polly when the last garment had been disposed of, more or less successfully. "It's a bit of a squeeze, but they're all in."

And while Paula wrung her hands in despair and the other girls chuckled, Polly Linton, apparently quite oblivious of the fact that Paula was in any way annoyed, planted herself heavily upon the trunk.

The catches snapped to, and a moment later Polly had locked it.

"Ready at last!" she sighed. "And now for the jolly holidays! Hooray for the jolly holidays!"

And, grabbing the still bewildered Paula around the waist, she whirled round the room. But the door opened, and Madge Minden, of their Form, appeared in the doorway.

"Come along—do!" she said. "The man's nearly frozen. We shall never get to Scotland at this rate."

At that, there was hurrying and scurrying for trunks and suitcases. The driver of the motor-coach came up, and, with the aid of Polly and others, he soon got the baggage downstairs.

Paula Creel, shaking her head sadly, stood in the background.

"Wuined!" she murmured. "Absolutely wuined!"

Polly Linton, returning from the last journey with the baggage, clumped her on the shoulder.

"Cheer up!" she urged. "Don't look as though you were going to a funeral! You're cold—that's what's the matter! You want a run. Come on!"

And Polly caught Paula by the arm. In another minute the elegant girl was being hurried pell-mell down the stairs, taking them three at a time, while the others laughingly followed.

In the porch of the old house they paused to regain breath. The air was cold, clear and crisp, and scarfs were pulled more tightly about necks, hats were pulled down to cover their ears, and gloves were adjusted.

Already the rest of the girls were seated in the motor-coach, the engine of which was "ticking-over." Some of the girls were warming their hands on the radiator, and others occupied themselves with the snow.

"Snowball the last on the coach!" called Tess Trelawney from a point of vantage.

Immediately there was a rush for the motor-coach, and Betty, Polly, Madge Minden, Tess Trelawney, and Trixie Hope bundled in. Paula Creel was last, and she reaped her reward.

Scraping the snow from her hair and face, she clambered into the coach.

"Right away!" Polly Linton called, then added: "Good-bye, Old Priory!"

"Good-bye!" the others echoed; and, as the motor-coach moved off, they took their last glimpse of their temporary school.

For next term would find them back at Morcove, in their old dormitory.

"Good-bye, yes—and now for the holidays!" Betty cried. "Oh, girls, it's going to be just grand! Paula, your uncle is splendid—"

"Hear, hear! A vote of thanks to Paula's uncle!" cheered Polly, who was ready to cheer everything and everyone. "It's jolly decent of him to buy that castle so that we could spend Christmas there—"

"Weally, Polly, I wather fancy you are mistaken, deah geal," Paula put in gently. "My uncle bought the castle before he asked us, you know. Yes, wather! How-eh-eh—"

"How-eh-eh, he's asked us," finished Polly, "and that's the great thing. I hope we have snow like this in Scotland. Won't it be just great, girls? Snow and the old castle—and Christmas pudding, and mince-pies, and —"

"Ghosts!" suggested Betty, with a laugh.

"Bai Jove, deah geals, I wather fancy there are ghosts there, in the castle, you now! My uncle said something about it."

"Ghosts?" asked Polly. "Oh, good! I like ghosts. Plenty of them for Christmas — Ooh!"

That last exclamation was caused as they went down a slope and the cutting wind took charge of Polly's hat. But she recovered it, and held it on tightly.

Ahead of them was another motor coach—the one that had been chartered to take the Fifth Form girls to the station and there was a waving of hats and hands as it came into view.

The Priory was out of sight now, and they were near to the station. Only a few hundred yards more, then the coach came to a standstill, and they all alighted.

Porters hurried to and fro frantically, snowballs flew hither and thither, adding to the confusion, and a moment or so later they were all bundling into the local train.

Betty & Co. saw to it that they had a compartment to themselves, and, with their small bags safely on the rack and the travelling rugs thrown about the carriage, they settled down to the journey.

"Thank goodness we've started at last!" sighed Madge Minden. "London—then the North! Wonder when we shall get there?"

"Some time to-morrow night if we catch the express," Betty smiled. "I believe the local train that we get at Farlay Junction is slow; but to Farlay Junction it's fast going."

And snow there was in plenty. The whole scenery was obliterated by it. It seemed a different world from the one that they knew so well.

From other compartments came joyous shouting. Most of the girls were going to London, thence diverging to go their different ways.

For Paula and her friends rooms had been booked in a London hotel, and there they were to spend the night.

"Wish we were making a one-day journey of it," declared Tess Trelawney.

"Bai Jove—"

Paula was rendered speechless. It was a long-journey from Devon to London in a day. But with the additional journey to Scotland! Small wonder that Paula groaned.

Despite the coldness of the weather, however, it was an enjoyable journey to London. But none of them wished to take another long journey until the morrow.

So all were glad when the London hotel was reached. There had been good-byes at the London terminus when they had parted with the other Morcove girls, and now, with the feeling that the holidays really had begun, they had dinner.

It was a festive meal, and one that they thoroughly enjoyed. But at the end of it there were six sleepy girls round the table, and glad indeed they were to stagger up-stairs to bed.

CHAPTER 2.

Away to Bonnie Scotland.

AWAY," sighed Betty as the train moved off from the big London station. "And now for Scotland and the castle! Hip, hooray!"

Polly's spirits rose as the distance between them and school increased, and the occu-

pants of the next compartment must have been sorely troubled to know the reason for the hilarity that came to their ears through the none-too-stout panelling.

Six of them there were—Betty, Polly, Madge Minden, Trixie Hope, Paula Creel, and Tess Trelawney. And there could not have been a happier party.

The long hours seemed to pass quickly, and as the sun set their excitement was only redoubled. For now they were getting near the land of wonderful scenery. Scenery that was wilder than any they had seen, yet very beautiful. Wild hills, wild winds, stormy but beautiful skies.

And everywhere was snow-clad.

An hour or so later they bundled from the express and tumbled into the local train, feeling that the end of the journey was now in sight.

"Three stations," mused Betty at length, "and we've passed two already. Rendee is the next stop, and then the castle—"

Three heads were pressed out of either window, regardless of the stinging wind and the falling snow that blew about their hair.

Ahead were dim lights, but all around was darkness, save where the lights from the carriage windows of the train lit up the side of the metals.

"Nearly there!"

Back into the compartment they dodged, and there was a mighty scrambling to gather bags and rugs. Paula, in folding her rug, tied herself in a complete knot. And when finally the small station was reached, there Paula lay on the floor, her rug wrapped round her.

"Carry her out!" said Polly sternly. "Can't wait! The train may go at any minute! Roll her out!"

And Polly actually laid hold of the elegant Fourth-Former. That was enough for Paula. She was on her feet in a twinkling.

Bags were dumped into the deep snow, and almost lost to sight. Rugs were flung on the bags, and almost immediately the rugs became white sheets, snow-covered.

On the platform they stood in a cheery group, rubbing hands, and pulling hats down lower over ears.

"Well, here we are!" said Betty as she looked up at the flickering lamp, on which could be read "Ren—" the remainder of the word being snow-covered.

They watched the train for a moment, watched its cheery lights disappear into

the darkness until the small, glinting red light in the rear finally disappeared.

And then, save for that flickering lamp, all was darkness.

"Here we are, then!" exclaimed Polly.

"And all alone! Which way is which? Is this a station, do you think?"

"Yes," Betty answered, looking over her shoulder, "and we're not alone. I heard a carriage door slam farther down. Someone else has got out here—"

"What on earth for?" asked Polly.

"Surely no one lives about here—"

"Wather not," smiled Paula Creel.

"Uncle said that there isn't another house for miles round, y'know."

"Well, someone did get out of the train," said Betty with certainty.

And, as though to prove her words, she went along the platform. Betty was quite sure that she had seen someone, and she wondered if it were another guest of Paula's uncle.

But no sound came from along the platform, although she knew that the rails ended just there, and that anyone leaving the station would have them to pass first.

Wondering if perhaps the stranger had taken a false step in the darkness and landed on the line, she moved forward again.

"Hallo!" she exclaimed. "Is anyone there?"

But there was no reply. She took another step forward, and then—then she reeled back as something soft hit her full in the face.

So staggered was she at first that she did not realise that it was snow. Then, laughing, she wiped it from her face.

"All right, Polly!" she laughed, and, stooping, gathered a handful of snow. But, in the direction whence the snowball had come, there was silence, and she paused, snowball in hand, wonderingly.

Footsteps sounded behind her, and she wheeled, to face her chums.

"So there you are!" she exclaimed. And she threw the snowball at the grinning Polly.

Polly ducked just in time, then bobbed up again.

"Here, I say!" she exclaimed. "Pax! It's too cold for snowballs!"

"You threw one at me!" ejaculated Betty.

"I?" retorted Polly. "I haven't

touched any snow, have I?" she asked, turning to her chums.

And they shook their heads.

"Then—then," protested Betty, "who did?" And she told them what had occurred.

They could not say that she had imagined it, for the remnants of the snowball were still upon her.

"Someone's playing a joke," said Polly.

"I suppose your uncle isn't a practical joker, is he, Paula?"

"Pwactical joker—bai Jove!"

Paula Creel seemed so overcome by the suggestion that its reply was obvious, and Polly Linton, with unusual presence of mind, struck a match.

"No one here," she said. "You must —"

Then, as the match died out, she glanced at her chum.

"What's the matter?" they asked together.

But Polly Linton did not reply in words. She lit another match, and pointed to what she had seen in the snow.

There, clearly traced, were footprints! They came from the edge of the platform and veered to the left.

"Someone has been here recently," nodded Madge Minden, the first to speak.

"But goodness knows where they have gone!"

For several seconds they stood there, as though expecting the snow to answer their unspoken question.

"I'm freezing!" said Betty Barton at length. "It was probably some silly practical joker; but if we stay here much longer they will be wondering what's happened to us."

So they gathered up their baggage and made for the exit. An old porter, stamping his feet, stood waiting for them and took their tickets.

"You the young ladies for the castle?" he asked. And as they nodded, he pointed to two lights that gleamed in the darkness.

"That's the car!" he said.

Even as he spoke, a man came out of the gloaming, a man in chauffeur's uniform, and touched his cap respectfully.

"Hallo, Wobinson!" exclaimed Paula cheerfully. "Here we are! The twunks are on the station."

The luggage was brought out and plumped on the roof, and two suit-cases were bundled inside with the girls.

"Now we're off!" shouted Polly, as the large car moved forward.

They could see but little of the countryside as they passed along, but they knew that there were many hills, and many sharp turnings.

"We'll tip over mighty soon! I suppose he's a safe driver?" asked Madge Minden fearfully.

But Paula quickly reassured her. The roads were twisty and windy, as they could discern when they stood up and saw what the headlights picked out.

"I bet it looks pretty black behind!" observed Polly Linton, and she raised herself to look through the small back window.

As she did so she gave an exclamation of surprise.

"Look—look!"

And the others, springing to their feet at her excited shout glanced up—just in time to get a glimpse of a woman's face that moved hastily aside.

"Gracious! A woman!" cried Tess Trelawney, aghast.

"She's holding on behind! Goodness!" ejaculated Betty. "Tell the chauffeur to stop. If she fell off, she'd be killed."

"Stop! Stop!"

They tapped the window in front until they attracted the chauffeur's attention. But it was not until some few minutes had elapsed, for his cars were deep in his coat collar.

Finally he brought the car to a standstill, and clambering out, opened the door.

"Hallo—what's wrong?" he asked, peering in with the snow dropping from his cap on to the floor.

"There's someone hanging on behind!" explained Tess Trelawney, breathless. "Quick—or she'll get away!"

For a moment the man did not seem able to grasp their meaning, and he stared at them. For, truly, it was a startling announcement. They had been travelling fairly fast, and the stowaway must have been anything but comfortable.

Almost as soon as he turned, Betty and Polly had jumped out of the car and were round at the back.

"Gone—of course!" ejaculated Betty.

"Gone?" asked the chauffeur, with a slight laugh.

"You must have been mistaken. She couldn't have flown away, and, see, there aren't any footprints!"

The gleam thrown by the red rear-lamp only too clearly proved his statement. There were no footprints, and most certainly the stowaway could not have flown.

"But I'm—I'm sure," Betty insisted. And she frowned thoughtfully as she glanced back into the darkness. "She couldn't have flown but she might have alighted, yards back, when you slowed up."

She made as though to march in that direction, but the chauffeur shook his head.

"I don't see that it matters much, miss," he said. "The sooner we get back, the better. With this snowstorm hanging about, it's not off the cards that we shall get snowed-in—"

"But the woman?" objected Betty. "If she is some poor stranger requiring a lift, we can't, in the name of humanity, leave her out on this awful night. Suppose she got snowed in?"

The chauffeur still hesitated, then he sighed, and, going back to the car, searched for a moment. He returned with a powerful electric torch. In his other hand he held a large spanner, which he carried in a most business-like manner.

"But—but I can't quite understand it," murmured Madge Minden to Betty. "If there isn't a house anywhere near the castle, where does that woman want to be taken? And if she is a servant or anything at the castle, we could have given her a lift. I—I can't understand it at all."

"Nor I," Betty agreed thoughtfully. "Do you know, Madge, it seems to me as though—"

"Yes?" Madge prompted.

"Well, what about that passenger who snowballed me? Was it a joke, or was it so that I shouldn't discover her presence? If she had been an ordinary passenger, why did she keep so quiet?"

But before Madge could think of an answer to that question, they had halted. The chauffeur was pointing to the ground, and Polly Linton was kneeling down.

"Goodness! Footprints!" she exclaimed. "And—and what's more, I recognise them—"

At her words, Betty dropped to her knees. For a while she examined the imprints in silence, then she looked up to Madge Minden, and nodded her head.

"I was right," she mused. "The mysteri-

ous passenger and the stowaway are one and the same person."

She rose to her feet, and the girls looked at one another blankly.

"What—what on earth can it mean?" ejaculated Betty. "Why didn't she get a conveyance at the station?"

"There isn't one," said the chauffeur, with a slight grin. "You see, miss, this is a sort of wilderness. There are a few farmhouses miles in the other direction; but this way, nothing but the castle. Looks as though she were coming to the castle for the night."

He banged his gloved hands together and picked up the spanner, which he had placed on the ground.

"Wait!" ordered Betty sharply. "There is someone moving yonder! The torch—quick!"

She took it, stepped forward, and held it aloft. For the fraction of a second she remained thus poised, the torch held high, its bright rays shining toward the slope that led from the road to the valley below.

Then, with a whiz, something hurled through the air! The torch flew from Betty's hand to the ground, and snow trickled down her sleeve.

In black darkness they blinked about them, while the chauffeur recovered the torch and sought to switch it on, wiping the remnants of the well-flung snowball from the glass.

"Where is she?" asked Polly excitedly. "We're not going to stand this, are we?"

She gathered up a snowball, but Betty Barton caught her by the arm.

"We'll try quieter methods first," she said.

So saying, Betty Barton stepped forward into the inky darkness.

"Hallo, whoever you are!" she called. "We're going to the castle, and if you are going that way, we'll give you a lift."

But from the darkness came a shuffling movement, although no reply to Betty's offer.

"If you do not answer," Betty declared, "we will go."

They waited, and the chauffeur, switching on the torch, flashed it round.

But nothing was to be seen or heard, and Betty Barton shrugged her shoulders.

"I think we had better be going," she said.

But as they walked back to the car they listened eagerly for the sound of footsteps.

Once the chauffeur wheeled about, flashing the torch, in the hope that the woman might be following them; but, for all they could see or hear, she might have been miles away.

Puzzled by the strange occurrence, they stepped once more into the car, and soon had resumed their journey.

CHAPTER 3.

Watching Eyes.

"CASTLE GARTH!"

Betty Barton murmured the name as the car passed through the lodge gates and went smoothly up a long drive.

That drive, through an avenue of trees, past the frozen lake, was nearly a mile in length, but it seemed no distance in the fast-moving car.

Then, out of the pitch-black darkness came bright lights shining through the old snow-covered windows. Snow-mantled turrets showed up against the leaden grey sky, and the girls, alighting from the car, stood for several moments motionless, intent upon the striking beauty of the rugged old castle.

Betty Barton smoothed her hand against the ivy that grew from an old stone wall, scooping snow into her hands, soft, clean snow, crisp and white.

And while the girls stood up, the chauffeur mounted the steps to fetch the luggage from the roof.

He dropped down a second later, his face transformed with excitement.

"Stop her!" the chauffeur cried wildly. "That woman who was hiding on the roof!"

Not pausing to ask questions, the girls ran round the car; but they had not the torch with them, and chase was impossible without it.

"Stop!" yelled the chauffeur. "You'll be in the lake before you know where you are!" And, realising the wisdom of his words, they returned.

Mr. Creel was waiting for them when they reached the castle at length, and breathlessly they told him all that had happened.

He seemed surprised at first; but not as surprised as they had expected him to be, and he nodded when they had finished,

almost as though he had anticipated the incident.

"You've had an exciting journey," he said, with a faint smile, screwing a monocle into his eye. "Come inside, and we will have a chat about it there."

Betty looked at her chums in amazement, as Mr. Creel led the way inside. She felt they had not over-estimated the strangeness of the incident, and Mr. Creel's attitude was certainly rather surprising.

There was a bright light in the hall, and he smiled as Paula introduced her friends, one by one.

Then Mrs. Creel came forward, a beautiful woman who looked far younger than she really was. They found her a far more sympathetic listener. She took them upstairs, where they changed and washed, and prepared themselves for dinner.

Then, in a laughing crowd, they hurried down the long, winding staircase to the large hall below. Thence Mrs. Creel led them to a low-ceilinged dining-room.

At the doorway the girls paused, a little amazed, yet hugely delighted. In a large, open fireplace burnt a great crackling fire of logs, and the only other light in the room was supplied by candles, many of them in quaint old candlesticks, and their flickering light cast merry shadows on the old panelled walls, investing the old carvings with life.

On the table were small, dark, dainty mats that toned well with the wonderful old carved table, with its polished top.

They seated themselves in their appointed places around the table, and Mr. Creel beamed at them through his monocle.

"I sincerely hope that this room doesn't unnerve you," he said slowly, "after your escapade. I've sent the men out with torches to see if they can find that woman. These people seem mighty persistent."

"People?" Betty voiced the question involuntarily and Mr. Creel opened his lips as though to reply; but a footstep sounding in the passage caused him to change his mind, and he said nothing until the servant who brought in the first course of the dinner had retired.

He looked round slowly at the closing door, then nodded.

"One does not know whom to trust" he murmured in explanation. "As a matter of fact rather queer things have been happening lately, nothing serious, of course!"

"Bai Jove!" murmured Paula Creel. "I'd forgotten, uncle. Didn't you say, when you wrote, that this place had some legend?"

"I did. This is a very old castle, as you have no doubt realised," he drawled. "It belonged to some famous old Johnny, whose name doesn't really matter, who was a miser. It's not an uncommon complaint, but in this case it had a rather extraordinary sequel. His hoard of wealth was never discovered, for he died suddenly. His son, to whom he left all the money, ransacked the place from top to bottom but without success. The other estates were worth little, and what little the son realised on them he very quickly spent in fruitless endeavours to find the hidden thousands. Needless to say, he died a poor man. He was forced to close the castle, although he would not sell it. Naturally enough, there were many people willing to purchase it, and they offered him huge sums, but it only served to make him all the more certain that the money was hidden in the house."

"My--my word!" Polly ejaculated. "And you bought it?"

Mr. Creel smiled.

"The incidents I have related," he exclaimed, "took place a hundred or so years ago. Save for an old woman who lived in a small cottage on the hills, the family is extinct, at least, I believe so. I had a great task in convincing her that if after a hundred years or so of searching, the money had not come to light, it was more than likely that it was not in the house at all."

"I see," murmured Betty Barton. "So the old woman in the cottage no longer needs to live in the cottage, as it were, for she has the money from the sale of Castle Garth."

"Exactly!" smiled Mr. Creel. "I have bought the castle; but, with my permission, she is living in one wing of it. She has plenty of money to spend, but she still seems certain that the treasure is hidden here somewhere, and now—" He broke off and looked towards the window.

"Bai Jove, uncle, you mean that these people—this woman who followed us, is trying to get that fortune?" Paula cried eagerly.

Her uncle nodded slowly.

"There is no doubt at all," he said. "I have received an anonymous warning that makes me quite certain there are some un-

scrupulous people endeavouring to make me leave the castle, in order to further their scheme for thieving a hidden fortune."

The girls were listening eagerly; but Betty, instead of joining in the chatter that ensued, watched Mr. Creel intently, for she could see that he was listening for something outside the room.

His wife, too, noticed the expression upon his face, and he, muttering an excuse, placed his serviette on the table and crossed on tip-toe to the window. Immediately conversation ceased, and the girls watched him wonderingly.

But he grimaced and waved his hand to them.

"Talk!" he urged in a hiss, and, realising that he meant them to keep up a pretence that everything in the room was quite normal, they chattered on.

He was close to the window now, every muscle in his body tense, and he placed one hand on the curtain that covered the lattice window.

With a swift movement he dragged the curtain aside, and there, flattened against the window pane, was a face that vanished almost instantly.

"The woman!" Betty cried. "That woman we saw to-night!"

They rushed to the window, peering through the space that the woman had breathed in the snow, but the darkness, after the light of the room, seemed doubly black, and they could see nothing at all.

Mr. Creel's hand was upon the bell-knob, and he gave it a vigorous tug. Its clanging summons rang eerily through the castle.

Almost before it had died away, a maid-servant opened the door.

"Tell the men that I've just seen that woman outside the window," exclaimed Mr. Creel. "Tell them to search until they find her."

He returned to the table then, and the girls reluctantly followed suit. They would have preferred to assist the menservants in their chase of the woman, but apparently their host had decided otherwise.

It is to be feared that they paid little attention to their dinner, for other thoughts occupied their minds.

"She can't stay out there all night," Betty protested. "She will have to come in sooner or later, and then we shall bowl her out."

But Betty was mistaken. They had just

finished dinner when the chauffeur entered the room, snow on his face.

"It's no good, sir!" he said. "We've searched everywhere, but she's slipped away."

"Surely you could trace the footprints in the snow?"

The chauffeur shrugged his shoulders.

"We could up to a certain point, sir," he agreed; "but she seems to have concealed her footprints. Anyway, we haven't found her."

Mr. Creel paused in silence for a moment, then made a sign to the man that the interview was over.

"Tricked!" he exclaimed, when they were alone again. "Tricked! I wonder where that woman can be hiding?"

"Shall we search, sir?" asked Betty Barton eagerly.

But Mr. Creel shook his head.

"I rather fancy that she will return in the morning. We haven't seen the last of that woman. Of that I am quite certain."

But he changed the subject abruptly then, as though not wishing to worry the girls by discussing further the mysterious happenings.

When later, yawning, they made their way upstairs to the rooms that had been placed at their disposal, there was much whispering; and for quite a long time they sat round the fire that burned in the grate of the larger of the two rooms.

"It's certainly very mysterious," Betty mused, after some moments of silence.

"This woman is evidently after that hidden treasure. I wonder——"

"You wonder what?" asked Madge Minden.

"I wonder if it is in the house?"

"My word!" Polly Linton's eyes shone. "If it is," she added excitedly, "then we'll jolly soon find it, that's all!"

CHAPTER 4.

The Key.

"STEPS this way!" At the command Polly Linton raised a pair of step-ladders, and carried them across the floor to where Betty Barton was standing.

That morning the hall of the castle was a hive of industry. The floor was littered with holly, and sprigs of mistletoe lay about everywhere.

Already the girls had strung one long wall with holly, the red berries of which made a colourful picture. Betty, with skilful fingers, fastened further sprigs of holly.

Everyone had something to do, and Mrs. Creel was supervising.

"It's looking more Christmassy now," she observed.

Betty, leaning over to affix a piece of holly to a spot that was really out of arm's length, almost overbalanced, and Polly saved her just in time.

"You'd better let me do that, Betty, deah!" urged Paula seriously. "I don't want you to fall and hurt yourself."

Polly winked to her chum, and Betty descended.

"Now, Paula," urged Polly. "show us how it should be done." And Polly Linton pressed a sprig into the elegant girl's hand.

Thoughtlessly Paula grasped it, and the next moment yelled for a spiky piece had run into her finger. Paula, however, took things in good part, and, quite sure that it was up to her to lead, she mounted the steps.

"Mind you don't fall, dear!" urged her aunt. But Paula was confident that she would not. Putting her head on one side, and half-closing her eyes to get a light and shade effect of the decorations, she poised herself on top of the steps.

"There's a nice spot further away," Polly pointed out; "only mind you don't fall!"

And Paula took the tip. She leaned over, with the intention of planting some holly on a great old picture frame.

"Look out!" warned Betty anxiously. And only just in time; for Paula had reached too far, and was clinging for support to the huge gilt frame.

"Oh, deah, I'm slipping—catch me, someone!"

Betty ran up the steps, and then something happened that took their breath away. The jolt that Betty had given the steps had caused Paula to lose her footing, and now, clutching wildly to the frame, she was momentarily suspended.

"Help, help!" she cried anxiously. "This is dreadful! I shall fall! Pwaw wescue me!"

"Place the steps under her," urged Mrs. Creel. And her order was obeyed immediately.

They hurried the steps along to place them under Paula's plunging feet, and an

ominous creak came from the fastening that held the picture.

Even as the elegant girl's feet touched the steps the picture gave way, and went hurtling down to the floor.

On the top of the steps Paula floundered helplessly to regain her balance, then, crash! She fell forward against the panelling, her hand pressed against it.

Only for a second did she remain there, then to the girl's ear came a sudden click!

"Oh!"

"Great Scott!"

The faces of the girls below were white as those startled cries rent the air.

Bewildered eyes stared at the top of the steps, where, but a moment ago, Paula Creel had been standing.

No wonder they were amazed, for Paula Creel had vanished from sight.

"Where—where's she gone?" stammered Betty Barton, almost dumbfounded.

And she turned to her friends.

"Through—through the wall," was all that Polly Linton could reply.

It seemed as though magic had been at work—for what else could have caused Paula Creel to have vanished so mysteriously?

There was not a trace of Paula; for all they could see of her, she might be miles away, yet, but a minute ago, she had stood at the top of the steps.

"She—she went through the wall, I'm sure she did," said Madge Minden, none too certainly.

"Through the wall—but where?" ejaculated Mrs. Creel blankly. "The place is haunted, I'm sure it is!"

They all fixed their eyes upon the wall wonderingly. There was no trace of any spot through which Paula could have vanished. The wall was complete, and it was not likely that the girl could have vanished through the panelling without disturbing it.

Betty Barton, with an air of determination, mounted the steps and felt the panelling.

It seemed to Betty quite obvious that there must have been some panel in the wall that Paula had opened. But, although she ran her fingers along the edges, she found nothing, and she turned a puzzled face to those below.

"Nothing at all!" she said. "I can't understand it!"

"She must be there somewhere!" Mrs.

Creel exclaimed, for now that the first amazement was over, they all realised how obvious it was that Paula had disappeared in some material, ordinary manner.

"Paula!" exclaimed Betty, placing her mouth close to the panelling. And from the other side came a muffled reply.

"She's there!" Betty cried joyfully.

"Paula, Paula!"

A thumping noise sounded on the other side of the panelling, then a click announced that Paula had found the hidden catch.

Betty almost jumped off the top of the steps as the panel, upon which she was resting her hand, suddenly opened inwards, and Paula Creel's face appeared.

"Thank—thank goodness!" Mrs. Creel muttered. "Paula, whatever happened?"

Somewhat shakily the aristocratic Fourth-Former descended from the steps before replying.

"I'm all wight!" she murmured in reply to a question from Madge Minden. And then they saw that she held something in her hand.

"I just tumbled in," she exclaimed, "and that door closed wight after me. It's got a howwibly stwong spwng!"

"Plenty of dust in there, anyway," laughed Polly Linton, a little shakily. "I thought you'd gone for good that time, Paula."

"So did I, deah gee!" drawled the other. Then she smiled, and exhibited the thing that she held in her hand.

"A key!" ejaculated Betty, and took the rusty thing from her friend. She stared at it for a moment, then passed it round for the others to examine.

"I fell on it!" Paula exclaimed. "There's a sort of box in there, I bumped my head nastily when I fell in—"

"A box?" the girls asked her eagerly.

"I mean," Paula exclaimed, "that it is like a box in there. It's not a secret corridor."

"But what can that be the key of?" Madge Minden asked. "I say, we'd better explore, hadn't we?"

But Betty Barton was already exploring, as they saw when they looked upwards.

She had opened the panel again, and was peering into the dark interior.

Polly Linton, picking up a box of matches, following her friend up the steps, and now, by the light of a match, she and Betty examined the interior of that space.

It was more like a secret cupboard than anything else—dirty, dusty and empty.

"Can't be more than about four feet long," Betty mused. "Big enough to hide in, though." And she clambered into it.

"Be careful, dears!" warned Mrs. Creel. "Don't take unnecessary risks."

But Betty, being inside the cupboard, could not hear the warning. She was tapping the sides and bottom hopefully, but so far without result. Then she asked for another match, and Polly handed one to her.

Coinciding with the flash of light as she lit a match came a shout of triumph from Betty.

"The other end opens as well," she said, and they could hear her struggling with a lock.

A second later, begrimed with dust, yet all excited, she clambered out and down the steps.

"What is on the other side of the room?" she asked eagerly.

"The dining-room," Mrs. Creel replied wonderingly. "Why?"

Betty looked a trifle disappointed.

"Then it's no good," she said. "This simply goes into the dining-room."

Anxious to pursue inquiries, she went into the adjoining room and examined it.

"That's the place," she said, and pointed to a large picture that rested on a portion of the wall. "See, I have arranged it."

"I suppose they used it for hiding," said Mrs. Creel slowly. "There are lots of funny old places here, I know; but I don't see that this discovery helps us much."

Betty Barton shook her head slowly.

"I'm afraid it doesn't," she admitted. "But about the key. I wonder what that opens? Where is it, by the way?"

She turned, with the intention of inspecting it.

"Who has it?" she asked.

"I think I had it last," admitted Tess Trelawney. "I put it on the steps in the other room."

They trooped back to the hall, and Betty hurried to the steps, pausing there amazed.

"Aro you sure you put it here?" she asked.

"Yes—why?"

"It's not here now."

There was a slight pause, and Tess Trelawney laughed rather awkwardly.

"It—it can't have vanished," she said.

"I don't see why anyone should come and take it."

"Someone must have done," said Betty seriously. "It can't have walked of its own accord. It—"

She broke off abruptly in the middle of her sentence, and stepped quickly to the immense door that gave on to the castle grounds.

"That snow!" she exclaimed, pointing to snowflakes that were upon the floor. "They weren't there a minute or so ago. Someone has opened that door; otherwise, how did the snow get there?"

"My gracious!" ejaculated Polly Linton. "You—you mean that someone, whoever it was, stole the key?"

For several moments silence reigned, as it became only too evident that Polly was right.

"Then—then the key was worth something?" Betty said slowly. "We've lost the first round. If that key is a clue to the treasure's whereabouts, we shall be to blame if the treasure is stolen."

Polly Linton set her lips grimly.

"If that's so," she said, "we're jolly well going to find that key. Come on, we'll search the ground."

Ten minutes later, wrapped in their warmest clothes, they hunted the length and breadth of the castle grounds; they followed the tall-tale footsteps from the doorway—followed them until they ended in clean-swept snow, almost as though the fugitive had vanished in thin air.

But they did not give up the search—not until they had marched round and round the grounds till they were all but frozen. And then even Polly Linton admitted that it was "no go."

The enemy had opened the scoring, and, at present, it looked as though they would win.

CHAPTER 5.

Presents for Paula.

"MERRY Christmas, Paula!"

Paula Creel opened first one eye and then the other. Next she pulled the sheet higher and closed both eyes, while Polly Linton, in her dressing-gown, stood smiling by the aristocratic Paula's bedside.

Polly, of course, was in the best of spirits. For it was Christmas morning, with crisp

snow outside and a general air of loveliness and liveliness. Just the morning for mad-cap Polly Linton.

But it was not the morning for Paula, who felt quite "pwoostwate."

"Lazy duffer, when she's got all these lovely presents!" chuckled Polly. "If you don't wake up by the time I count three, I'll confiscate them all, Paula."

Then Paula opened her eyes and smiled.

"Pway postpone Chwistmas for a minute or two, deah geal. I'm vevy sleepy, and I was having such a delightful dweam—"

"About a new dress, of course," said Polly.

"P'waps it was in a way, deah geal," said Paula. "I heard a wustling, you know, and a mysterious woman snatched away a beautiful dweas. And then I got another"

"Well, wake up before it's snatched away again," urged Polly. "You know, girls who don't claim their presents ten minutes after they open their eyes don't get them. That so, Betty?"

Betty Barton smiled. She had not Polly's high spirits or her teasing ways, but she was as amused as Polly to see the puzzled way that Paula blinked, for Paula was apparently still half asleep.

"Weally, Polly, I don't see why?" said Paula. "How can the pweasents be confiscated, you know?"

"Santa Claus takes them back," Polly explained, with deadly seriousness.

"Bai Jove, deah geal, Santa Claus doesn't weally exist."

Polly Linton looked as though she were going to shriek with laughter, and Madge Mindeu did giggle. But Polly managed to keep a straight face in the end. She just managed to look suitably alarmed.

"Paula! What are you saying?" she cried.

"But weally. I mean it, you know," said Paula in distress. "Santa Claus is a myth."

"Goodness! But I thought he was a moth, I mean," corrected Polly, "that he came down chimneys and had a team of reindeer. Didn't you know?"

Paula Creel awoke then and propped herself up on her pillows.

"This is weally wather distweasung," she said. "I'd no ideah you believed that, deah geal. Pway don't let it wowwy you."

"I won't," said Polly. "But this is an awful shock. All my childhood's dreams

shattered!" she said dramatically, and then she fell into Paula's arms and began to sob.

"Oh, you silly!" laughed Betty.

But Paula was quite agitated.

"Pwaw don't laugh, Betty, deah geal," she said anxiously. "A cousin of mine was most upset when she knew there wasn't such a weal person as Santa Claus. Deah, deah, pwaw be calm, Polly—"

"Boo, hoo—" said Polly, winking at Tess Trelawney, who was brushing her hair. "Boo hoo—there isn't a Santa Claus, and I want to stroke his reindeer—"

"Oh, deah!" said Paula. "This is weally vewy touching, Betty; pwaw assist me. I hope Polly won't distwess herself unduly, you know."

Betty laughed, and looked at Madge Minden, who thought it all rather good fun.

"Quelle est enfant," shrugged Trixie Hope. "What a child she is, you know."

"Pew'aps so, deah geal," replied Paula. "But Polly is gweately upset. Whatevah can I do?"

"Dress up as Santa Claus," suggested Betty. "What else?"

"Good gwacious, that's a vewy good ideah. Pew'aps my unelo has got the things, you know. He said he had, in fact."

"Then hurry," urged Madge Minden. "For goodness' sake, Paula, never mind your presents."

But Paula, as she got out of bed and left Polly lying there, had to look at the heap of parcels. Paula, however, always thought of others before herself, and she looked at Polly, who lay on the bed shaking all over with what appeared to be sobbing, and her mind was made up.

"I must huwwy," she mused. "I will just look in the box, you know. But I can't get the weindeah—"

"There isn't any rain, dear," sobbed Polly. "There's only sn-snow!"

Then, of course, directly Paula had gone Polly simply rolled over and over with laughter.

"Oh, my goodness, Betty, Paula really thinks that. I believe in old Santa Claus. Goodness, what a joke!"

And Polly slapped her hands with the joy of it, while the others laughed in unison. For Paula really was rather absurd, after all.

"Still, she's a good little duffer," said

Betty. "It's nice of her to try to act the part of Santa Claus. You'll have to play up now, Dolly. You are a scamp, though—"

Polly sat on the bed and wrinkled her brow.

"H'm, yes," she admitted. "I suppose so. What fun when Paula comes in wearing a long beard." And Polly doubled up with laughter.

"Better get dressed, anyway," said Betty. "And I want to try these new skates."

"I'm trying this new toilet set," murmured Madge Minden. "I do think it's lovely, have you seen it, Betty?"

Betty had not, and all three of them gathered round to see that toilet set. All their presents were shown in turn, and what excitement there was.

Polly Linton would have written some lines or Latin with her fountain-pen, and she was quite worried until she found some paper to try it on.

All their presents had been kept and delivered in the room during the night by Mrs. Creel, and how jolly it was to have them as a-surprise!

"Paula must be burning to see hers," said Polly. "And I've put one or two there myself."

"Oh, it's a shame!" said Betty. "You really are a teasy Polly!"

"Does her good, and she takes it all so well!" laughed Polly. "Shush, girls—here she comes. Do! look miserably. Quick, give me some water."

And Polly made tears on her face with some water, and then, at Madge Minden's advice, with some glycerine, so that when Paula knocked at the door, Polly really looked the picture of misery.

The door opened, and Paula entered wearing a long, red dressing-gown that trailed the ground, and a red hood. Very little indeed was visible of her face, but she wore a white beard of immense length.

"Heah I am, deah geals!" said Paula. "I'm Santa Claus."

"Santa Claus?" cried Polly with a whoop of joy. "How-ripping! Don't scratch me with your claws, will you?"

"Wather not, deah geal. I am Santa Claus," said Paula, who at times lacked imagination.

"Hooray!" cheered Polly. "And where are the presents, Santa Claus?"

"I have already delivered the presents, deah geal!"

"Then I'm going to hug you!" said Polly.

"Hooray!"

And she clasped Paula round the waist and waltzed her round the room until the elegant girl really had to protest.

"Oh, deah, stop! Pway stop!" exclaimed Paula.

Her beard was then sideways, and Polly pulled it straight. Unfortunately, she pulled it so hard that it came off, and Paula's face was red.

"Paula," said Polly. "It's really Paula, girls! Santa Claus is Paula. All these years it's been Paula who comes climbing down the chimney and braving the soot."

"Oh dear! Not at all, deah geals! You see—"

"Good old Paula! Thanks awfully for the dolly you gave me when I was five!"

"Weally, I didn't, deah geal—you see—as a mattah of fact—as a mattah of fact, it's not quite twue, you know. I want to break it to you gently that—that Santa Claus does not weally exist—"

Then Polly had to shriek with laughter at Paula's way of breaking it gently.

"Bai Jove! I believ you knew all along!" exclaimed Paula. "Well, weally, you were being vewy fippant."

"More or less, dear," said Betty. "But you ought to know Polly by this time. And where did you get that dressing-gown?"

"I found it, deah geal, in the cowwidah. Pewwaps my aunt dwopped it, you know, and the beard as well."

Betty Barton nodded her head and looked thoughtful.

"I asked," she said, "because I can rather remember seeing it in the night. Of course, I didn't let your aunt know that I had seen her, and I pretended to be asleep. She came and looked at me, but I closed my eyes. I recognise that brown mark on it."

"Pewwaps so, deah geal. Howevah—"

"Nothing strange in it, Betty," said Madge Minden, who knew Betty well enough to know when she was perturbed in mind.

"Well, not really anything much," Betty said. "But I did notice something. This woman was taller than Paula's aunt."

That startled them all; for a strange thought came into every mind. It was only natural in the circumstances that it should.

"You mean," said Polly, her gaiety going and seriousness taking its place, "that it might be that woman. Oh, Betty, but surely—"

"There's one way to find out," said Madge Minden.

"Cherchez le femme," nodded Trixie.

"Look for the woman."

"Nonsense, dear. Look for Mrs. Creel," replied Madge. "Surely that's obvious, girls. I'm dressed, I'll go and ask."

So Madge hurried off while Paula Creel opened her parcels one by one in the greatest possible excitement. There were two splendid presents from her own people and from her aunt and uncle, a writing-case with delightful notepaper embossed with the school address, and complete with writing requisites in the same colour tone, while the school address might have been written by Paula herself, for it was an exact replica of her own handwriting.

There was also a dressing-case and one or two well-bound books which Paula thought were exquisite, and which she would probably try to read—and fail.

From each of her friends there was a little present, and she was delighted. But there was finally a gold watch.

"Gold!" said Betty, with a look at Madge. "How nice. And from Polly, too."

"Two presents from Polly," nodded Paula. "How very nice—but—"

There was a big but for Paula; for the watch was nothing like gold at all, and when it did go it made a loud clonking noise.

Really it was the sort of toy that might be sold for a shilling to amuse some small child, and Paula looked at it with horror, for it had a large "gold safety-pin" to enable the wearer to pin it to her dress as watches had been made in her grandmother's day.

"How do you like it?" said Polly, with a wink at Betty.

"Oh deah—I mean vewy much, deah geal. I must put it away and keep it safe."

"Oh, I say, you must wear it!" said Polly seriously. "I've been looking forward to your wearing that at Morcov, Paula. So smart pinned on your dress. And if you keep shaking it, it keeps good time."

"Yes, wather, deah geal," said Paula in great distress. "Of course it's vewy kiud."

"There," said Polly, and pinned the large, ugly watch to Paula's dressing-gown. "What could possibly be more 'chic'? It's the rage in Paris, I'm sure."

"Yes, wather. Pwobably! Howevah——"

"So glad you like it!" said Polly.

"Everyone at Morcove will know the right time just by looking at you, you know. So smart——"

"Que est chic," nodded Trixie Hope.

"How lovely! It suits you very well——"

So long did Paula's face go then, and it was so apparent that she hadn't the heart to refuse to wear that awful ornament that Polly thought her little jest had gone far enough, and she unpinning it and dropped it.

"Broken," she said.

"Bwoken?" said Paula in delight.

"Ahem, I mean, how vewy distwessiug! Now it will have to go away to be repaired."

"Oh, I can mend it easily!" said Polly.

"Where's the poker? It just wants to be opened. There!" And she dealt it a thwack with the poker.

"Polly, deah geal!"

"Soon have it mended," said Polly.

Smash!

And then Paula saw that it was only another joke, and how she sighed in relief! And how the others laughed! But their laughter, of course, died away when Madge came hurrying back.

"Oh, it's not Paula's aunt!" she said.

"Mrs. Creel did not dress up in red. She has never seen that dressing-gown before.

And your uncle says that the woman probably used that as disguise, knowing that she wouldn't be suspected on Christmas Eve, were she seen in it."

"Bai Jove! But why, deah geal--pway why——"

The answer to that came at once; for Madge Minden literally pounced upon Paula's remaining small parcel and tore off the string.

"The key?"

How they stared as the key that had been so mysteriously stolen was found to be back in their possession.

"But—but—why?" asked Polly. "I'm blessed if I see that. Why return it like this. Why not drop it somewhere?"

But Betty Barton saw the answer to that.

"Why, dear, because that woman wants us to think that one of us is fooling about.

Don't you see. You might be suspected. You put those things amongst Paula's presents, and goodness knows how much she spies, or if any of the servants are her accomplices. So she probably guessed that we should blame you."

"Oh!"

"And might blame you for other things," nodded Madge. "My goodness, yes! We might start to suspect Polly."

"That's what I think," nodded Betty.

"But—but—look at this key. Is it really the same?"

"Think so," said Polly, rubbing her nose.

"Looks the same."

But Betty shook her head.

"It looks a little different to me. The other was rusty. They might have cleaned it, but look—there's no rust in these intricate pieces, and why clean it to give it back?"

"Yes, wather. That is certainly so, deah geal. Pewwaps they had a copy made, you know."

"Goose," said Betty. "They wouldn't give us the new copy and keep the rusty one. This is just a trick, I think, to make us believe one of our number is playing a trick. It's cunning of them, and just shows what we are up against."

Polly Linton rubbed her hands.

"Just shows us," she said. "That we've got something worth bowling out, you know. Foemen worthy of our steel, what? My goodness, this is going to be a stunning Christmas, I think we really ought to pass a vote of thanks to this woman."

But the others were not quite agreed to that; for they had not Polly's madcap outlook. Nevertheless, it was certain that they were in for some excitement—in for it, and none meant to be out of it!

CHAPTER 6.

Two—Nil.

"HUNGRY?"

Betty glanced up from the book she was reading, and looked at her chums.

The girls were seated before a large fire in the library, and most of them had lowered their books; for it was too dark to read save by firelight, and they had no wish to have artificial light.

"It seems awfully ghostly in the dark,"

murmured Madge Minden. "Eh, Betty? Oh, hungry? My word, I've been hungry for the last hour! I can smell turkey, and Christmas pudding."

"Gong!" shouted Betty, springing to her feet.

And echoing through the building came the deep, solemn note of the large gong.

They were out of the room long before its echo had died away, and only managed to assume an air of seriousness when they were near to the dining-room.

"Enter!" laughed Mrs. Creel, and then the girls paused in the doorway to admire the preparations that had been made. Certainly Mrs. Creel had succeeded in imparting to the room a festive, Yuletide air—holly, mistletoe, and other decorations were festooned round the room cheerfully.

But when they saw the table, they voted the parlourmaid a gem.

Bon-bons were artistically arranged around a small but beautifully-decorated Christmas tree, and the candles were coloured to tone with the rest of the scheme.

What better light could they have wished than the combination of candle and fire?

And when the giant turkey was brought in in state, it was greeted by smiling faces and shining eyes.

Toasts were drunk, and the turkey, by the time it was taken to the servants' quarters, had lost most of its former glory.

It was a merry Christmas meal, made all the more merry when paper hats were donned. Mr. Creel, for one, looked extremely amusing when he placed a Dutch girl's bonnet on his head, and smiled at the girls through his monocle.

"Better not wave those hats about, with all the candles alight," warned Mrs. Creel. "I don't see that we want them all going, really." So they doused them all, save the very large candlestick that held about six candles.

"We've got everything here for Christmas," smiled Mr. Creel; "for we've even got a ghost! The man who died, leaving the hidden hoard, is said to wander through the building at midnight, and count over his gold. I did take the trouble to sit up one night," he added with a smile; "but I didn't have any luck."

"He's bound to walk on Christmas night," said Polly Linton excitedly. "We'd better sit up to-night and wait for him." And the others chorused approval.

Mr. Creel, however, shook his head.

"If I were you," he advised, "I'd get a

jolly good night's rest. You'd find it more beneficial, and far less cold. Besides," he added, a frown marring the joviality of his expression, "that woman may choose to wander about, and you don't want that. No sense in risking an encounter with her. She can't do any harm, wandering about, she's after the treasure and nothing else, and I fancy she'll never get the treasure."

As he spoke, he drew a sheet of paper from his pocket. All eyes were upon him as he did so, and they watched him smooth it out upon the table.

It was an old piece of paper, yellow and discoloured by age, and the girls leaned forward eagerly; for none of them were near enough to discern what was upon it.

"It's a plan of some sort," he said. "I found it this morning in a store of old books in the library, but the library has been searched through and through, hundreds of times, and I can't be sure that this plan hasn't been found and examined before; yet I rather fancy that it has not. It isn't crumpled, and I found it hidden away."

There was a tense excitement as he took his cigar from his mouth, about to resume the narrative.

But before he could speak, something lit sharply against the candlestick, bowling it from the table. Hastily Tess Trelawney stamped out the flames, and, save for the firelight, the room was in darkness.

There came a muffled exclamation, a rustle as something crossed the room. Then—

"Stop! The door!" Mr. Creel cried hastily.

And Betty Barton, asking no questions, ran to the door immediately, but it clicked to, and, as she tugged the handle, she heard the key on the outside turn.

"What—what was it?" stammered Paula. "Bai Jove, I feel quite pwoastwat! Who knocked the candlestick over—was it you, Polly?"

Before the indignant Polly could reply, Mr. Creel struck a match, and lit two of the candles.

"It was not Polly," he said tensely. "Look!" and he held out for their inspection a torn half of the plan that he had been exhibiting.

"It was the woman!" he exclaimed bitterly.

"I caught a glimpse of her." Tess Trelawney, who had placed the fallen candlestick back on the table, held aloft for their inspection a tangerine.

"She threw this," she pointed out.

Mr. Creel nodded shortly.

"She must have been in the room!" he exclaimed through his teeth. "Probably she was hidden behind the curtain. Anyway, she's in the house now!"

To all intents and purposes the meal was over; the fact that it was Christmas was almost forgotten; they were thinking of the paper, and of the mysterious woman who had stolen it.

Mr. Creel had rung the bell, and now a servant had unlocked the door. In another moment the whole crowd of them ran down the corridors, searching alcoves, running hither and thither.

Betty went to the large main door, but the bolts of it were shut fast. The woman could not have fastened them after her, so, only too obviously, she was still in the castle, unless she had found some other exit.

The servants were warned, and all over the castle there was a hue and cry.

"The-west wing, sir?" asked the servant.

Mr. Creel nodded.

"She might be there," he agreed. "I had promised Dame Garth that we should not disturb her. However, she can't object to our searching for a thief who is endeavouring to gain her fortune."

He then led them to the west wing, and the girls excitedly followed, somewhat curious to know what manner of woman Dame Garth would be.

Down a long corridor, dark and dismal, he led them, and half-way down paused to unlock a door, and pushed it open.

He stood still, then swiftly lit a match. And, ahead, in the bright light cast by the match, the girls saw an old woman whose grey hair glinted strangely.

She was obviously alarmed, and her gnarled hand gripped tightly the knotted stick that supported her. Her other hand clutched nervously at the long, voluminous black skirt.

"You—you, what do you want; why are you here?" she demanded, throwing back her head.

"Your pardon, Dame Garth," murmured Mr. Creel, taking the electric torch that a servant handed to him. "There is some stranger in the castle. I fear that they are after you—your fortune—"

"My fortune?"

As she echoed the words, the old woman started forward, her eyes opening wide. But she paused, and her eyes narrowed to mere slits as she regarded the girls and servants

"My fortune!" She laughed harshly. "Who isn't after my fortune? I—Dame Garth—the last of the Garths, banned to this miserable corner, whilst usurpers make merry. Do not the portraits sneer at you—do not those ancient warriors on painted canvas writhe and turn to hear this mockery—"

Mr. Creel sighed slightly, and bowed.

"I regret the sound of Christmas revelry does not please you, Dame Garth," he observed. "It is most unfortunate! Not for worlds would I have disturbed your serenity here; but, as I have already stated, there is a stranger here—one who is endeavouring to rob you of your fortune."

The old dame pulled at her mittens nervously.

"One thieving stranger more or less does not matter," she said. And she raised one hand, pointing to Paula's uncle, while her thin lips curled.

"Take heed!" she warned. "Evil is the day that traitors cross the threshold of Garth Castle! Evil the day on which Dame Garth is robbed of her due! Beware!"

And she wheeled about. They heard the clump of her stick as she hobbled off into the darkness. And no one spoke until the echo of it died away.

CHAPTER 7.

Vanished.

"AWAKE?"

A Betty Barton sat up in bed, and, blinking through the intervening darkness, whispered that word to her chums.

"Ready?" she asked, a moment or so later, when a clock had just finished its twelfth stroke.

And there was a nodding of heads. The coldness of the night air had awakened them now, and they were once again the keen ghost-hunters that they had been before bedtime.

Softly Betty opened the door of the room, and crept on to the landing. From a high window came a ray of greenish light, where drifting clouds revealed the moon high in the sky.

"Whither bound?" Polly whispered.

And Betty paused, thoughtfully regarding the "land."

"Paula's uncle says that the ghost is supposed to walk from the library, where the old man died—we'd better go down there."

"Bai Jove; but it's feahfully dark, y'know! Can't we go in the morning, deah geals?"

Polly sniffed disdainfully.

"What's the good of that, when he walks at midnight, silly?" she demanded.

"Midnight—oh, I nevah thought of that, bai Jove!"

Betty Barton groped her way forward, then stopped again, and returned to the bedroom. Returning a second later, they saw that she was carrying a candle. A flick from a match and it was alight.

Shielding the flame with her hand, and throwing back her head to remove her plaited hair from the candle's flame, Betty led the way down the giant staircase.

A deathly stillness hung over everything. Not a sound was to be heard. Snow was no longer falling, and through a staircase window they had a glimpse of moonlit, snowclad distant hills.

"Don't make a noise!" Betty cautioned, as Paula commenced to whisper that she was cold.

"Ghosts can't hear, deah geal!" protested Paula. "I—what's that?" she stammered suddenly, halting.

"What's what?" asked Madge Minden.

Paula held up her hand.

From the corridor below came a faint sound.

"There's something queer about this!" Betty whispered in tense tones to Trixie Hope, who stood beside her. "I think I aw someone or something down there—"

She leaned over the banisters, and from the direction of the library came a sudden flick that cut through the air, piercingly breaking the silence.

"Wh-what's that—"

"Ssh! Not a word—"

The candlestick clenched tightly in her hand, Betty crept silently down the large staircase, avoiding carefully the patches of light where the moon shone through the tall windows.

Slowly the others followed, and presently Trixie and Betty, who moved side by side, were out of sight of the others.

"This way!" Trixie Hope exclaimed, forgetting her French in the excitement of the moment.

But Betty had already turned her footsteps towards the room whence the noise came. It was dark, though, and progress was slow. Once Polly Linton, following, banged her leg against a chair, and the

whole group of them stopped lest they should have been heard.

Hearts were in mouths as they neared the large library, the door of which stood open. From inside came faint sounds, shuffling and scraping.

Inside the room all was darkness. The moon was hidden behind heavy clouds, but Betty Barton, opening the door slightly, peered through the gap where the door was fixed to the hinges.

There she remained, scarcely breathing, the others just behind her.

One eye was fixed upon the dark sky, which could be seen through a latticed window, and the other was on the interior of the room.

Now, the clouds were drifting by—they were gone!

A bright beam of moonlight lit up a portion of the room, and there, clearly outlined—made greenish by the moon's pale light—was a figure.

"The ghost!" breathed Trixie Hope.

And at her words the figure moved from the beam of moonlight into the darkness.

"It's not a ghost," Betty whispered. "It can't be! It's the woman—that woman in white! Quick—capture her!"

Her quivering fingers struck a match, and the candle-wick spluttered into flame.

Eagerly they flung wide the door. But in the doorway they paused, motionless. Betty Barton was holding the candle high, and it lit up the large room.

They could see even the darkest corner. But they did not move.

For the library was empty—the figure had vanished!

"It was a ghost—I told you it was!" exclaimed Trixie, her throat dry. "Oh, goodness, I don't like this!"

But Betty Barton tilted the candle suddenly, so that the grease splashed on to the carpet. With her other hand she pointed to a large picture that hung upon the wall.

"That picture!" she cried wildly. "Look—look—it's moving!"

And six pairs of eyes were riveted upon an oil painting—a large, sombre painting which was moving bodily, inch by inch, back to the wall.

They watched it, never moving, standing as though they had been petrified, a group of stone statues; and, as they watched, the picture moved, then became still, and no sound came to them but the

solemn ticking of a large clock against one wall.

Betty Barton tried to speak, but she could not regain her voice. Her throat was parched, and her lips stiff.

But if she could not speak she still had the use of her limbs. Always accustomed to lead, she flicked on a match and lit the large chandelier.

Then she closed the massive door, first taking the key and slipping it into her pocket.

"Now," she breathed, dumping herself into a chair, "what must we do? Chase her—I'm sure it's the woman—or shall we arouse the house?"

With one accord the girls answered:

"Chase her!"

And Betty Barton, dragging a bureau beneath the picture, clambered on to it. She tugged at the picture frame, and the girls gathered below her watched her efforts.

Polly Linton clambered up beside her, and together they struggled while the others gave advice.

"Now—I think you've got it!" Polly exclaimed. "I—"

She stopped short, and almost fell from the bureau; for Trixie Hope, white-faced, wheeled round.

"Look!" she shrieked. "Look!"

But before the others could turn, the room was plunged into darkness, and they blinked about them helplessly.

"What—the— I say, strike a match—"

"Betty, where are the matches—"

"What did you see, Trix?"

Betty Barton, trembling all over, clambered down from the bureau, and groped for the matches.

"I—I can't find them," she confessed huskily, then turned sharply to the girl beside her.

"What was that—that click?" she asked. "Someone else is in the room. Oh, the matches—why can't I find them—where are they?"

"Here they are," said Tess Trelawney, her voice shaking. "Mum—my hands are trembling so that I can't light one."

Betty took the box, controlled herself, and struck a match. In another moment the candle was alight. She glanced quickly round the room, but in appearance it was no different from what it had been a moment before.

"What on earth made you scream out like that, Trix?" she asked, and she looked about her. "What—"

The words died away on her lips, and the candlestick nearly slipped from her fingers.

"Trix?" she asked huskily. "Where is she?"

"She's here, isn't she?" frowned Polly, and glanced about her.

But she wasn't. Five girls only were there; and five white faces interchanged anxious glances.

For Trixie Hope was certainly not in the room.

"But she can't have vanished?"

Mr. Creel frowned worriedly as he fixed his monocle, and plunged his hands into the pockets of his dressing-gown.

"We've searched everywhere," quivered Betty; "but she's not to be found. I—I think she must have chased the woman, and been trapped somewhere."

Mr. Creel paced worriedly up and down the library.

"The place shall be searched thoroughly to-morrow," he said, "and I shall send for a detective. That is the only way."

"A detective?" Polly asked eagerly. "But—but we can solve it."

Mr. Creel smiled and shook his head.

"You may help her, but a detective is essential. It is my duty to employ one. Now," he added, rising, "you girls pack off to bed again, and get just as much sleep as you can. Hurry along!"

It was all so strange, so unaccountable. Question after question the girls asked each other, but without being able to reach any satisfactory solution of the mystery.

"Let's have another look round," suggested Polly. "Oh, Mr. Creel, I can't rest until I know what has become of poor Trixie!"

"Quite wight, Polly," Paula Creel backed up her chum, while the others murmured assent. "It seems towivable, uncle," added the swell girl. "Trixie may be needing our help at this vewy moment."

The thought made them all murmur uneasily.

But Mr. Creel was adamant.

"I am sure you can do no more than you have done already," he answered. "You must all go and try to get some sleep. And if it will ease your minds, I

may say that the menservants and I will continue the search. Be assured of that."

"Mr. Creel is right," Betty put in at length, though a trifle reluctantly. "We can do little good and might only be in the way. Come on, girls! We'll do as Mr. Creel says."

But there was no sleep for the girls that night. They locked the doors of their rooms and gathered round the fireside, discussing all the strange things that had happened at Castle Garth.

"To tell the truth," murmured Betty Barton, "I'm not scry that the detective is coming. In fact, I'm glad—this business of Trix rather worries me."

And even Polly Linton, who wanted to do everything off "her own bat," admitted that she was not disappointed.

"Of course, it would be better if we could solve it," she added in qualification. "But perhaps we shall help—and perhaps, after all, we shall be the means of clearing it all up."

"Yes, rather!" nodded Tess. "Anyway, here's luck to the detective! And let us hope she'll find poor Trix!"

And with that sentiment the others heartily agreed. But had they possessed the ability to see into the future, they might have said—

But that is quite another chapter.

CHAPTER 8.

A New Helper!

"NO luck?"

Betty Barton shook her head wearily.

"No luck at all," she said.

"We've searched everywhere."

"Absolutely everywhere," lisped Paula Creel, as she stroked her aunt's hand.

Mrs. Creel rose from the deep armchair and shook her head worriedly.

"It is terrible," she said. "If I had known that these people were so persistent, I should not have asked you here."

"But it isn't your fault—or Mr. Creel's," Polly Linton assured her. "It has been awfully jolly here, and we are enjoying ourselves. Trixie will—will probably come back soon, you know."

Polly's speech ended lamely, and, following it, there was silence in the large library of Castle Garth.

Outside, the Scottish hills were snow-covered, and the grey December sky was cold and forbidding.

"Yes, Trixie will come back," Betty Barton added, and looked about her, for it was from this very room that Trixie Hope had disappeared. She had vanished completely, and though they had searched the castle from top to bottom, they had found no sign of her.

"We ought not to have hunted the ghost," Betty remarked penitently. "It was my fault. The others were asleep at twelve o'clock."

"Well, that was our fault," said Polly Linton, determined that her leader should not take the blame. "We were as keen as you to hunt the ghost."

Mrs. Creel smiled slightly at Polly's loyal speech.

"Probably you were, dear. Goodness"—she sighed—"I shall be glad when that detective arrives! Ah, what news?"

She turned to the door as her husband entered, but Mr. Creel's lean face seemed longer than usual, and he fumbled with his gold-rimmed monocle as he halted before the group.

"No news." He frowned. "But if you girls would like a run to the station, hurry along and get your coats on. I'm sending the car in. The detective is arriving soon."

The girls needed no second bidding. They flew upstairs to their rooms, and soon had descended again, warmly wrapped up.

The large enclosed car was waiting outside, and they scrambled into it. Mr. and Mrs. Creel, on the stone steps, waved their hands as the car departed to make its second journey that morning to the station.

On the first occasion Mr. Creel had accompanied it to telegraph a detective agency, and he had received a reply that they were sending a woman at once.

That had been some hours ago, and the woman should certainly arrive by the train that was nearly due in.

"Wonder if she'll be any good?" Betty Barton mused. "Of course, we're lucky to get anyone at all on Boxing Day, but I suppose the idea of spending a few days in a large castle isn't unattractive."

"Rather, not!" Polly Linton agreed. "Wish I were a detective. It isn't at all a bad job."

And then silence reigned until the station was reached. They could see it

in the distance below, almost hidden out of sight.

It was a winding road that led to it, and the chauffeur drove carefully, for had the car left the road it would have rolled over and over to the valley below.

And hills and mountains were on either side, shutting out sweeping plains that lay beyond.

On the small station they marched up and down, stamping their feet, waiting for the train which was apparently very late.

"Do you remember our journey from the station on the night we arrived here?" Betty asked. "That woman—"

And the others, nodding their heads, showed that they did remember clearly. They were not likely to forget that mysterious woman who had left the train unobserved, and who had stolen a lift on the car.

"She's to blame for all this. I am sure of it!" vowed Polly Linton. "She's after the treasure, and perhaps Trixie saw her."

They fell to discussing the strange incident again, and then the whistle of the approaching train drowned their voices.

Eagerly they drew back as the train, sending clouds of feathery snow in front of it, churned its way along the rails.

The train drew to a puffing standstill, and the girls looked to right and left, waiting for a carriage door to open. But none did.

"She hasn't come," said Betty, in disappointment. "And it's the only train to-day. Oh, gracious!"

They walked the length of the train, looking into the carriage windows. But at the guard's van they halted and turned round.

"Not here——" began Betty. Then she pointed up the platform. "Hallo, that must be she! I didn't notice her on the train."

A woman who was walking towards the exit turned as Betty spoke.

She was a woman of medium height, with a dark-complexioned face and thin lips. Horn-rimmed spectacles gave her a rather quaint appearance, that was only increased by the thick woollen scarf she wrapped round the lower portion of her face.

She halted and stared at the girls, changing her suit-case from one hand to the other.

"Excuse me, madam," said Betty breath-

lessly, as she ran forward, "but we've come from Castle Garth. Are you the lady detective?"

The woman stared at her keenly through the horn-rimmed spectacles, and remained staring for several seconds before replying.

"I reckon I am," she admitted. "Lillah K. Story's my name—private detective."

"Oh—oh, good!" Betty murmured. "Then—then will you come with us, please? The car is outside. Mr. Creel asked us to meet you!"

The woman did not reply, but put down her suit-case and fumbled in her pockets, for the porter was staring at her.

Betty, with the intention of helping the woman, picked up the suit-case, but her wrist was knocked sharply aside.

"I'll see to that," the woman said, and handed something to the porter.

A little indignant, Betty moved aside. Next moment, bag in hand, the woman led the way to the waiting car.

The chauffeur opened the door and she stepped inside.

"Now," she exclaimed, when they were all settled and the car had moved forward, "tell me what's all this about?"

Together then, the girls told her of the incident of the previous night, when Trixie Hope had so mysteriously disappeared.

"So that's all?" the woman asked. "I've got to find out who kidnapped this girl, and why?"

She leaned back on the cushion and looked up at the roof, while the girls regarded her hopefully.

It was Miss Lillah K. Story's business in life to unravel mysteries, and the girls felt that, despite her somewhat unprepossessing appearance, she ought to be able to throw some light on the incidents that were paramount in their minds.

The castle was reached, and before Miss Story could stop him the chauffeur had raised the heavy suit-case.

Something loose rattled inside, and the detective took it from him.

"I never let this bag leave my hands," she said, and marched straight up the steps.

"What's the matter with the silly old bag?" Polly Linton asked. "I can't see that there's any need to make all that fuss about it."

"Perhaps she's got disguises and we-wolvers in it," suggested Paula Creel,

whose ideas of detectives were rather stereotyped.

They watched the woman greet Mr. Creel, and sighed as she disappeared with him into the library.

"She may be a bit of a freak," said Betty Barton, "but I think she'll get to the root of the mystery. In fact, I'm jolly well sure she will."

But that was Betty's generous way. She was always willing to give people the benefit of the doubt. The others, however, were not nearly so confident.

CHAPTER 9.

The Tell-Tale Coat.

"GIRLS, Miss Story wants you."

Mr. Creel opened the library door, and as he called to them, Betty, Polly, Tess, Paula, and Madge hurried forward.

"She would like to question you," he added, as they entered the room.

Betty glanced round the library, and saw Miss Story standing by the table. The detective was looking very grim and severe, and a notebook lay on the bureau.

"You wish to ask me a question?" Betty asked.

"I do. Now cast your mind back to the affair of last night, my girl," the detective said sharply. "Are you quite sure that the story you have told me is true? Now be careful, this is a serious matter."

"Miss Story," ejaculated Mr. Creel, "I am sure—"

"Possibly," she assented. "Nevertheless, I want to make sure. It looks to me as though there is something like a childish practical joke in all this."

Betty drew herself up, stared angrily at the woman for a moment, then laughed rather shortly.

"Really," she protested. "You're misjudging us, Miss Story. I, for one, can see no joke in my friend's disappearance."

Miss Story smiled, and picked up her notebook.

"Perhaps your friends can," she suggested. "You do not mean to tell me that she was kidnapped without making a sound. Does it not occur to you that she may have gone from the room, possibly to pursue a figure she imagined she had seen?"

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Paula Creel. "I must say that sounds wather pwobable. But why didn't Twixio come back? Ask her that, Betty, deah."

The woman shrugged her shoulders slightly.

"Possibly she thought it amusing to add further complications to this already complicated business."

"I'm sure she didn't!" Betty retorted hotly. "Why should she? Trixie is not that sort of girl. I'm sure you are on the wrong track, Miss Story."

"On the wrong track—yes," put in Madge Minden. "The person we want to find is the woman in white. It is she who holds the key to all this mystery."

"Indeed!" The woman smiled superciliously, a sneer discernible in her tone. "If you are all so certain as to what is the cause of this affair, why bother to enlist the services of a detective?"

Mr. Creel coughed.

"You appear to misunderstand the girls," he remarked. "They all want to help you, and I really must say that I agree with them. It seems quite obvious to me that the people who are at the bottom of this affair are those who are seeking to discover the hidden treasure."

"Very probably," the woman admitted grudgingly—"very probably. That being so, we had better do our best to discover that treasure, thus forestalling these people. Do you not agree?"

"I think that can wait," Mr. Creel said. "At present our chief concern is to find the missing girl."

Betty Barton frowned as the woman detectively shrugged her shoulders.

Although Betty had been so willing to give the woman the benefit of the doubt, she could not help thinking now that she was going the wrong way to work.

But Miss Story apparently was not the sort of woman to seek advice, as the manner in which she snapped her notebook told them.

"I'll interview the servants next," she said suddenly. "Possibly one of them is humorously inclined, or may even be an accomplice of the woman in white."

Then, placing her hand behind her back, she wandered round the room, eyeing the pictures critically and tapping a panel or two.

Seeing that they were no longer required,

Betty asked if they should go, and Mr. Creel smilingly assented.

Outside in the corridor, the girls looked at one another.

"What a wretched, disagreeable woman she is," Paula declared. "Don't you think so, Betty, deah?"

"I do," Betty agreed seriously. "But we've asked her in to help, and, anyway, it isn't our business, is it?"

They wandered rather aimlessly round the corridor, but seemed to gather no consolation from the decorations.

"To think," said Betty, "that yesterday Trixie was with us, laughing and spouting her funny old French at dinner—such a happy Christmas dinner—and now she is

"Goodness knows where!" Madge Minden finished gloomily.

For several moments they stood round the blazing fire in the hall.

"Ah, well!" murmured Betty. "It's no good moping, I suppose. How about some skating? Come on, girls; let's get the skates and be off!"

"Yes, wather! Skates, deah goals!"

And a few minutes later, with woolly scarves round their necks, and swinging skates in gloved fingers, they were making towards the lake.

"How wonderful it is here!" Betty musd. "The scenery is just gorgeous. And these grounds! Wouldn't I just love to live here?"

"If it were in Devon," prophesied Polly Linton cautiously and loyally. "Even the best scenery couldn't touch Devon."

And the other girls admitted that it was true.

Morcove School was in Devonshire, and they loved it as though they had been born there.

"Betty deah, I'm feeling quite wewfshed," lisped Paula, as she endeavoured to fix her skates.

"You be careful!" chuckled Polly. "Better not cut any of those 'wipping figures' you showed us last year."

Polly had already fixed her skates, and now she was skimming across the ice, cutting daring figures while the others watched her admiringly.

"Bai Jove, you know, I wather like that! Yes, wather!"

Paula's skates were fixed now, and she stood on her feet; but she stood so only for a minute, then—flop!—down she went

on to the ice, in a sprawling heap, and Polly Linton skimmed round her in a circle.

She took one of Paula's outflung hands and then circled round and round, dragging Paula with her.

"Up you come," she yelled.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Polly, Polly!" Betty laughed, as the high-spirited girl whisked round on her skates. "Do let her get up!"

And Polly did at last desist.

"Weally," gasped the unfortunate Paula, "I feel quite pwestwate, you know. Polly, you dare do that again!"

She frowned at her friend.

"I won't," Polly agreed. "But, come along; I'll teach you how to skate."

"But, Polly deah, I can skate. I'm a fearfully good skater. I mean I skate fearfully well."

"You catch hold of me, and I'll tow you along," Polly said generously.

"I'll tow you, deah geal. The Cwecls always have to lead."

They caught one another's hands, and for a moment stood irresolute. Then Polly's face broke into a smile, and it was easy to see that mischief of some sort was brewing.

"Right away, then!" she agreed; and she skated dexterously backwards.

"Poor Paula!" Betty exclaimed compassionately, as the elegant girl, her skates clattering on the ice, was forced to follow the madcap of the Fourth.

"Welease me—pway welease me!"

"You're leading," Polly pointed out. "Don't push so hard, Paula!"

Faster and faster Polly went, and Paula, dragged along in the rear, stumbled and clattered giddily.

"Welease—"

No sooner had the words left her lips than she was released. Polly darted aside, and Paula, released, went clattering, almost falling over at every slithering, slippery, sliding step she took.

On she went, and then there came from her a wild cry:

"Help!"

It came to their ears across the lake, breaking the stillness, and Polly, who was nearest, skimmed forward.

Not until she was close upon the frantic Paula did she realise what was amiss. When he did, she drew in a sharp breath.

For a short distance ahead of the elegant girl was a gaping hole—a jagged, large hole, with something lying beside it.

And towards that hole Paula was skimming, unable to stop herself. Polly Linton, her face white, realising what might easily be the end to what had only been a thoughtless prank, skated as fast as she knew how.

"Straight for Paula she went, straight as a die, her skates moving like lightning, ringing musically on the hard, firm ice.

"Turn—turn!" Polly yelled.

But Paula, despite her assertions, was rather a duffer on skates, and she could not turn. Had she fallen she would have saved herself. But she seemed to have lost her presence of mind.

"Oh, gracious! Polly—Polly, just another spurt!" Betty yelled frantically, and she could imagine the splash if Paula met those icy waters.

But Polly Linton, her teeth set, her hair flying in the breeze, was nearer and nearer now to Paula, nearer and nearer to that dark hole.

They were meeting, Polly just between Paula and the hole.

She caught the elegant girl by the shoulder, and was swung round herself by the impact, while Paula, losing her balance completely, went down with a mighty—thud!

"Oh, crumps! My shoulder!" Polly groaned. "I gave it such a wrench. Paula, you duffer—"

"P-Polly darling—sowwy, you know! But I couldn't stop! Thank goodness—"

"Oh, blow that!" growled Polly, as she scrambled up, rubbing her shoulder. "I shall take those skates away from you! You ought not to be trusted even to look at a pair of skates—"

Just then Betty and the others arrived, breathless and anxious.

"No one hurt," Polly reassured her. "But I wonder who smashed that hole in the ice?"

"Yes, I wonder," Betty agreed, when she had ascertained that Paula Croel was none the worse for her fall.

"One of the servants may have done that, you know. The snow has been freshly swept, and they have been skating."

"Looks as though someone has fallen in there."

Polly frowned, and she skated nearer to the hole; then she dropped to her knees, and Betty beckoned to her chums.

"I rather fancy," she said, slowly and seriously, "that someone has been in here.

Look!" And she held for their inspection a white coat that lay beside the hole and half in it.

Betty Barton took it from her and examined it. Half the coat was covered in snow, and the other half, which had been in the water, was stiff and frozen.

"You're right," she said. "And you know whose coat this is?"

Polly Linton nodded.

"I do," she said. "The woman in white."

Their faces were serious, but they became more serious still when Madge Minden spoke.

"But—but if that's so," Madge said. "what about Trixie? Suppose she is locked in somewhere a prisoner, and the woman—"

She did not finish her sentence, but she had said quite enough, and five sad, mystified pairs of eyes stared at that gaping hole.

CHAPTER 10.

Doubts.

"MY word, they're having great revels in the servants' hall!" Madge Minden observed, as they re-entered the castle.

For a moment or two they paused, and they smiled as they heard sounds of laughter and crackers.

"Seems to me we're late," Polly observed; and entering the dining-room they found that they were.

"Thank goodness you've come!" murmured Mrs. Croel. "I was getting quite anxious about you, girls, and wondering where you were."

"Oh, they can look after themselves, I think," smiled her husband. "But I couldn't have waited much longer for my lunch. Don't look so miserable, girls, Miss Story thinks she's got a clue."

"She does!" Betty exclaimed. "Oh, how splendid!"

"Thank goodness!" breathed Madge Minden.

And then they told of their new discovery—of the coat they had found lying beside that hole.

The woman-detective watched Betty during the narration, and hardly waited for the girl to finish before speaking.

"How long had the coat been there?" she asked.

"I—I couldn't say," Betty replied. "It was covered with snow, and the sleeve which had been in the water was frozen hard."

The woman smiled.

"Then it's extremely probable," she observed, "that, as I supposed from the first, you saw no one at all last night. Probably you were afraid, and your imagination played tricks with you. It seems certain to me that the woman was on the ice when all this happened."

"I don't see why," Mr. Creel objected. "She might have gone directly after. In fact, I think it is probable that she did."

"I do not think so," the woman rejoined. "If you ask me, these girls were extremely nervous last night, and imagined the whole thing. Their companion may have frightened them—in fact, I think it very likely that the missing girl is the cause of the whole disturbance."

Polly Linton opened her mouth to make an indignant reply, but Betty Barton silenced her with a nudge on the arm.

Madge Minden, who was more observant than the others, noticed the fact, and she watched Betty intently.

She could see that argument was useless. Besides, Betty had something else in mind.

During the meal Miss Story told them of her previous exploits, and of how she had captured famous forgers and swindlers.

The meal over, Mr. Creel and the detective engaged in conversation, while the girls, at a motion from Betty, went into the library.

"I'm rather fed-up with that detective woman," she exclaimed. "So don't say a word to her of what I'm going to tell you."

"Wather not!" Paula agreed. "I'm not going to tell her anything, Betty deah. Fancy blaming poor old Twixie!"

"But what's the idea?" asked Polly. "Don't say you've got a clue, Betty!"

"I haven't," Betty smiled. "But an idea has occurred to me."

She tip-toed to the door, and, after looking into the passage to see that no one was outside, shut it. Then she crossed to her chums in the most secret manner possible.

Much mystified they stared at her.

"This is what I'm going to say," Betty whispered. "I don't think that woman in white fell into the water at all."

"You—you don't!" Polly cried excitedly and Paula Creel murmured faintly:

"Bai Jove!"

"But why?" asked Madge Minden.

Betty smiled.

"Because," she said, "if she had, she wouldn't have taken off her coat and left it beside the hole."

They stared at her blankly, and Polly Linton whistled softly.

"Don't you see," Betty resumed eagerly, still speaking in the same subdued tones, "She could easily have found out that Mr. Creel had sent for a detective? What more simple, then, than to make believe that she was drowned?"

Polly gazed at her leader admiringly, and gave her an enthusiastic thump on the shoulder.

"You wonder!" she murmured. "What a brain—eh, girls?"

"Never mind your teasing now, Polly," Betty smilingly rejoined. "Just look at the facts. Why should she take off her coat if she fell through the ice? It isn't likely that she would be holding it in her hand—"

"No fear! Of course—"

Betty held up her hand warningly.

"Walls have ears—the woman is probably in hiding," she said. "And to think that the detective didn't tumble to it—"

"Of course, she wouldn't," said Polly, in the utmost contempt. "That detective woman wouldn't tumble to anything—"

"Wouldn't she?"

It was a new voice from the direction of the door, and the girls wheeled about sharply to find the detective looking at them.

"What wouldn't I tumble to?" she demanded, with a sneer. "Ah, I have bowled you out! I was right. This is all the handiwork of you children, and you didn't think I should tumble to it—eh?"

Betty breathed her relief. The words passed clearly that the woman had overheard nothing of any importance.

"You seem to have tumbled to it," Betty pointed out. "But I wish you would believe us when we say that we have had nothing to do with this—"

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

"I shall watch," she remarked.

And then the door closed.

"She didn't hear—" Polly began, when Betty placed a hand forcibly on her chum's

mouth, and made a gesture that sent Madge hurrying to the door.

Nimble Madge Minden flung the door open wide, and there outside knelt Miss Story, her face slightly flushed at being bowled out so easily, and her eyes glittering.

"Have you dropped anything, Miss Story?" Polly Linton asked lightly. "Can we help? You haven't dropped a clue"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The woman-detective waited for the laughter to die away, then she smiled grimly.

"I have not dropped a clue," she retorted icily, "but I have found one."

With that cryptic remark she took her departure.

"What did she mean by that?" asked Polly, slightly puzzled.

"Bluff," Tess Trelawney sniffed. "Just bluff. It'd be years before she found out anything. But, my word, Betty, you're on the track, I think, and to-night—"

"To-night," whispered Betty softly, "we are going to watch. We interrupted the woman last night. She probably hopes that she has put us off the track, but we haven't finished yet. We're going to find Trixie."

They discussed no further plans then, for Mr. Creel entered the library, and the detective, giving the girls a very sour glance, followed him in.

"I suppose, Mr. Creel," the woman was asking, "you have no theory as to where the hoard is hidden? Some say a secret room, but where could there be one in this place?"

Mr. Creel blew a smoke ring and smiled. "Anywhere—everywhere," he said. "The place is simply a warren of secret tunnels and passages; we find them at every turn. But I rather fancy the ones that we have found are well-known ones—at least, were well-known in the days when the Garths lived here."

The woman appeared to be slightly disappointed.

"A pity," she mused. "If you had some suggestion to make, I thought we might keep a watch in case these people should make another attempt. For I admit that there is a possibility of further attempts."

"Well, I must say that it is probable, although with the—or—disappearance of this unfortunate woman, I doubt it."

Miss Story shook her head wisely.

"I must watch," she said.

Then the topic was changed.

That night, when they were all gathered in the library, Miss Story found a book which deeply engrossed her. But Betty, who was watching her under cover of a magazine, noted that the woman seldom turned over a page.

What thoughts were passing in the woman's mind? Had she found a clue as she had said? Did she really suspect them, or was it mere bluff?

Betty had to confess that she found the woman rather a mystery, and presently, feigning tiredness, she asked to be excused to go to bed.

The others followed her, but they did not undress. They went to the open window and watched the bright lights in other parts of the castle. From the servants' hall came the sound of revelry, and someone was singing a carol.

"Good old Christmas!" murmured Betty. "Splendid Christmas! But somehow I didn't feel like fooling to-night. I think we ought to get in a few hours' sleep before our wanderings below. One of us ought to keep awake, though."

"I will," Polly volunteered. "You did last night."

And Polly was granted that rather doubtful honour.

When the others, still in their clothes, were asleep upon their beds, Polly Linton sat up, her chin resting upon her knees, and her eyes wide open.

For a long time she could hear the joyous sounds that came from the servants' hall, and the carol-singing was augmented by a chorus of voices.

She smiled as she heard them, and almost nodded to sleep. But she remembered her duty, and pulled herself together.

At last she heard footsteps up the staircase, and knew that Mr. and Mrs. Creel were going to bed. Then there was silence—silence and darkness.

She softly rose from the bed and crossed to the door. Half an inch she opened it and peered out. For quite a while she stood there, hardly realising how cold it was, forgetting to replenish the fire, which had burned down in the grate.

Now she took a step forward, for she could hear a sound below.

Tap, tap-tap, tap! Tap, tap-tap, tap!

Distinctly she heard it, and ran softly across the landing. She held her breath:

and leant over the banisters, her hair falling about her cheeks.

Now the sound came more distinctly, a rapping on the woodwork. Tap, tap!

CHAPTER 11.

Polly's Adventure.

TAP, tap, tap!

Polly Linton's hands gripped the handrail of the banisters tightly until they became white with the strain of it.

Her breath came in short gasps, as once again she heard that distant rapping breaking the stillness of the night.

Who was it downstairs there, moving in the darkness silently, rapping the walls? Who could it be but the woman in white?

For a moment the idea occurred to her that it might perchance be the ghost; but almost immediately she smiled at the thought. Polly Linton was not a ghost-believer.

No, it was no ghost; she was sure of that. Only human agency could be accountable for that rapping.

Tap, tap, tap!

Insistently and sharp it came to her ears, and she looked back to the room where she knew her chums were sleeping, wondering if she should arouse them, or if she should go down herself.

She half-turned as though to tell her friends and invoke their aid. But she did not reach the room. They were asleep—why wake them? That was her thought. Two or three would be noisier than one. Besides, they were in want of sleep.

Polly was in need of sleep herself, but that point did not occur to the madcap of the Fourth. Polly wanted to make investigations.

She was half-way down the stairs before she thought of a candle, and she had to return for one. She groped about for matches, and aroused one of the girls from slumber. It was Tess, but she only stayed awake long enough to mumble a few words before sleep reclaimed her.

Candle in hand, Polly descended the stairs. She did not light it, but held the box of matches in readiness, lest a light should be necessary.

Pitch black it was downstairs, and she had to grope her way very carefully indeed, for fear that, by stumbling against

some chair, she might give warning of her presence. And if it were the woman, then discretion and care were indeed necessary.

The woman in white had proved herself cunning, not perhaps sufficiently cunning to "pull the wool over Betty's eyes," Polly told herself, yet certainly sufficiently wily to keep her identity and whereabouts a secret.

To walk downstairs without making the treads creak necessitated very careful going. One hand on the banister-rail and the other holding the candle, Polly progressed slowly, keeping close to the side where there was less leverage on the boards.

"Once on a small landing, she bumped a chair, and paused, horror-stricken, to judge what effect her carelessness had had.

But from below the sound of tapping came with uninterrupted steadiness.

She was on the ground-level now, and, standing still, she listened intently, endeavouring to discover whence the tapping came.

She was half-way across the hall before a more subtle idea occurred to her. That the noise came from the dining-room, she was quite sure. But to walk into the trap that had caught Trixie would be futile to the last degree.

The alternative was so simple that she wondered why they had not thought of it the previous night.

After a second or so's careful movement, she managed to place a chair upon the spot under the panelling through which Paula Creel had so mysteriously disappeared when they were decorating the hall. Even as she mounted the chair Polly could not help chuckling at the memory of that incident—Paula clutching on to the picture to save herself from falling, then the collapse of the picture, and—lo!—the disappearance of Paula into nowhere.

As she swung open the secret panel, Polly peered cautiously into the interior. The spring on the panel was so strong that it was as much as she could do to keep it open. But she had made up her mind as to her course of action, and she did not waver.

Probably it would be none too pleasant lying in that small, dusty cupboard, but there could have been no better place for her purpose.

At the other extremity of it, she knew, was a small door that opened on to the

lining-room. Thus she would be able to see and hear what was happening in that room.

The rapping was close at hand now, and many another girl in her position would have been afraid; but not so Polly! She not one of the nervous sort.

She did not believe in ghosts, and to her there was nothing supernatural in that rapping.

Now the rapping had ceased, and, all eagerness to discover the cause of it, Polly clambered through the opening in the wall, flattering herself rather that she would score where the detective had failed.

It required a strong pull to raise herself to the level, but Polly was well up to that, and in another moment she was crouching in the cupboard, for it was not large enough to be graced by the name of passage.

Her knees were resting on the edge as she lunged forward. But suddenly she stopped, and a quiver ran through her. Small wonder, too, for Polly's hand, in groping forward, had encountered a human arm!

There was someone else in the cupboard! Plucky though she was, Polly for once was too scared even to speak. She could scarcely move.

Now she could hear the other person breathing heavily.

"Got you!" Polly jerked out, and threw herself forward to grip the woman. "Help!" she yelled, as loudly as she could. "Help, help!"

Her ringing cries were smothered suddenly as a hand was placed over her mouth, and Polly struggled frantically. But she could no longer shout, and for rescue she relied upon her friends hearing her previous wild cry.

Her adversary did not speak, but her breathing was hard and steady.

Strong though she was, Polly was no match for this person, and something was quickly tied round her mouth.

She gripped at it, trying to tear it off, and she found that her hands had been released. She had almost torn it off now, and was drumming her heels against the panelling to give warning of her perilous plight.

When at last she had got the gag from her mouth, she realised that she was alone—that her foe had vanished. But from the

other side of the panelling came the sound of well-known voices calling her name.

"Polly! Polly!"

"Who was that calling out? Where is she?"

A fresh voice sounded now—the voice of the woman detective.

"That panel—the sound came from there. We can capture the miscreant now."

"In the secret cupboard—yes," came Betty's voice.

Next thing Polly knew the panel had swung open, and the woman-detective was peering in.

"Here she is!" she cried excitedly. "I've got her!" And then she gave a long-drawn "Ah!" that made the girls below stand on tip-toe to see what she had discovered.

"I was right!" she cried triumphantly. "See—it is that girl. She has been hiding in there, frightening the household."

As the woman-detective's hands clutched at her, Polly Linton dodged, and fought off the grip.

"You may as well come out!" the woman fumed.

"I'm coming!" Polly retorted; and she scrambled down, to meet the looks of surprise and reproach.

"Got her!" the woman jeered, clutching Polly by the shoulder. "Here's the culprit, caught red-handed."

"Polly, what on earth has happened?" Betty asked anxiously.

"Happened!" Polly choked in rage. "Why, I heard rapping, that's all, and came down here to investigate. I crept in that panel, and found someone there."

She told them, then, of her struggles, and when she had finished, the woman-detective looked her up and down, and smiled sneeringly.

"You expect us to believe that," she asked—"that someone gagged you in there?"

"I do!" Polly retorted. "And you might do more to solve the mystery, if you weren't so jolly sure we were to blame! If you want to prove my word, you can find the gag in there!"

Betty, anxious to prove her friend's statement, clambered on to the chair, and searched the interior of the secret cupboard by candle-light.

But one glance sufficed to tell her that the cupboard, like that of Mother Hubbard's, was bare.

"It—it can't be!" objected Polly. I took it off only a moment ago. Let me have a look!"

But when she had clambered on to the chair and searched she was forced to admit that Betty was right.

"The woman vanished somehow," she murmured. "I—I can't understand it!" She faced round, to find Mr. and Mrs. Creel and her friends giving her very strange looks.

"I can understand it," the detective said sharply—"quite readily. There was no gag, and there was no other person in that cupboard."

Polly Linton threw back her head.

"Then, pray," she asked, "how do you account for this!"

And she opened her hand, revealing a piece of material that was clutched therein.

"I tore that from the woman," she exclaimed. "It is part of her blouse."

For several moments there was silence, and the woman-detective, tightening her dressing-gown about her, took a step forward.

"Oh," she remarked, "that rather alters matters!"

She took the piece of material from Polly's hand, and looked sharply at the girl under her lids.

"Your friend Trixie," she asked—"had she not a blouse of this material?"

"Bai Joyce, wather not!" said Paula languidly. "But I fancy I have seen it somewhere."

"Yes, May we have a look at it?" Betty asked.

The woman detective smiled, and turned to Mr. Creel.

"The case is in my hands, I believe," she said. "I wish to risk nothing. If you don't mind, I will keep these clues myself!"

With that, she turned on her heel, and walked up the stairs.

"Well," ejaculated Polly Linton slowly, "of all the duffers! She hasn't even searched—"

Betty shrugged her shoulders.

"I suppose that she knows best," she murmured. "But, Polly—my word, I was scared when I heard you yelling. It must have given you an awful fright. Didn't you see at all who it was?"

Polly shook her head rather glumly as she saw Paula's uncle looking at her keenly.

"Fraid not," she admitted. "But, that

bit of blouse—I've seen a blouse like that somewhere, and before long I shall remember where!"

"On the woman in white?" suggested Paula.

But Polly, frowning thoughtfully, shook her head.

"I think not," she said. "I'm certain not. I've never seen her without a coat. Someone else, but who—"

Who? That, indeed, was the question. If only Polly could have remembered—if only she had had some more tangible clue!

Perhaps she would remember in the morning. But the morning held other surprises.

CHAPTER 12.

On the Scent.

"THIS castle worries me greatly—"

Mr. Creel spoke slowly as he placed down his coffee-cup, and glanced round the breakfast-table.

"I'm beginning to wish that we had not bought it," he added.

"Oh, that will be all right soon," smiled the detective. "I spent some of last night in working out plans, and I have discovered some interesting facts."

Polly Linton winked, and Paula Creel sniffed audibly.

"It was that girl Polly who put me on the track," Miss Story amazed them by asserting. "She proved very useful. Now," she added, turning to Polly, "you say you heard rappings. Did you discover whence they came?"

"No," Polly returned, surprised that the woman had admitted her usefulness. "I—I didn't. I'm fairly certain that they came from the dining-room, but where in the dining-room, I simply cannot say."

"Ah! There is much to investigate. It seems that the best thing we can do is to search that panelling," the woman murmured, half to herself. "At first I surmised that the servants might be to blame; but I've dismissed that thought. Last night I took the precaution of locking their doors."

"Oh!"

Betty brightened rather. It looked as though the woman-detective was at last taking an interest in the case, and had ceased to accuse them.

And, when breakfast was over, they willingly followed the woman to the hall to examine the dusty cupboard.

"Now, it seems," the woman remarked slowly, "that the culprit was hidden somewhere in the cupboard whilst we were standing around—that is to say, she was in a position that enabled her to regain possession of that gag that had bound this girl—"

"Ah, of course," cried Betty excitedly, "she must have been!"

"Precisely. For the only other means of escape would be into the dining-room. Short of there being another secret passage from there, she must have emerged from the dining-room to the hall. Now, I was the first down here after those shouts for help, and I saw no one—"

The woman nodded, and tapped the panels, listening carefully as she did so.

"More than likely," she murmured—"more than likely that the bottom of that cupboard slides, revealing a passage underneath."

The girls were gathered about her, listening with interest, and Mr. Creel stood by, nodding approvingly.

Standing on a chair, the woman opened the panel and lit a match.

"Hallo!" she ejaculated suddenly. "What—what's this?"

She jumped from the chair, and they gathered about her as they saw that she held in her hand a sheet of paper.

"Gwacious, what is it?"

The woman walked quickly to the door, and held the paper up to the light.

"Pencilled," she murmured, half to herself, "and written by match or candle-light. The paper is scorched here."

She turned it over, then handed it to them to inspect. The paper was passed round and examined intently.

"A message!" Betty exclaimed. "But I can scarcely read it. What's this?"

"Take warning!" Tess Trelawney exclaimed. "Take warning—"

"The castle," added Polly eagerly, "is not—"

For several seconds they stared at the last word, then Paula Creel clapped her hands.

"Safe! Bai Jove, the castle is not safe!" she murmured. "Gwacious, a warnin'!"

They looked at one another, and the eyes of the woman-detective shone.

"I will take that, please," she said. "This is a most valuable clue. It seems as though the culprit wishes to intimidate us, and prevent our searching the passage. Ah! This is indeed a clue!"

She looked at them all keenly, and glanced down the corridor.

"Listen!" she added. "I have made investigations. That woman in white is still alive—that coat was a fake. I have proved it—I proved it yesterday."

"Great Scott! You did?" ejaculated Mr. Creel.

"I did. But—well, a detective who makes secrets public is no detective. A detective must begin by distrusting everyone, and making confidants of no one. I distrusted the girls." She shrugged her shoulders expressively. "Come!" she added. "Candles—matches. We must search here."

They simply flew for the candles, and each girl returned holding one.

"Wait," interposed Mr. Creel. "I don't think it wise that you should wander through those secret passages. It would be advisable, perhaps, not to ignore that warning message."

"But the girl Trixie!" the detective exclaimed sharply. "She may be hidden down there, locked in a secret room. It is our duty—"

"Yes, let us go, please," Betty urged him. "It will be safer with a crowd of us, and we won't separate."

But they had to argue a long while with Mr. Creel before they could convince him that it would be wise to allow them to join the woman-detective in the search.

"Very well," he said reluctantly. "But for goodness' sake, be careful! Wait. I will give you a police-whistle. If you are in danger, blow it."

He gave the whistle to Betty, and they waited anxiously while the woman-detective groped in the interior of the cupboard.

They heard her give an exclamation of satisfaction, and then she jumped back on to the chair and smiled.

"I have found it," she said—"a secret passage, but where it leads I don't know. It goes vertically, down under the ground."

Polly Linton was the first to clamber into the hole, and the candle revealed to her the shaft that ran down into the ground. The bottom of it she could not see, but in the centre was an old beam of wood

with pegs driven into it—pegs that were obviously intended for hand and foot rests.

Polly needed no further bidding, and a second later she was clambering down the centre pole, resting her feet on the pegs, descending hand-over-hand.

The others at the top watched the light of her candle becoming smaller and fainter, and then finally she heard her shout:

"Right-ho!"

One after the other then they descended, amazed by the smallness of that vertical shaft; for in descending their shoulders sometimes touched the sides.

In a few moments they were standing together, staring round in the darkness.

"This is wather uncanny, y'know," Paula simpered, shaking her head.

"Jolly uncanny!" Polly agreed emphatically. "Hallo, here's the detective!"

"Jolly lucky you didn't tumble down here last night, Polly," Betty murmured seriously.

"Yes, jolly lucky," Polly agreed, as she glanced about her in the dark and gloomy cavern.

The detective was groping ahead, and she motioned the girls to remain where they were.

"Give me that whistle," she said to Betty. "I will forge ahead here, and if I need help I will whistle you."

Betty gave up the whistle without a murmur, and they waited while the woman disappeared into the darkness.

Presently her light vanished from sight, and they turned to inspect the small space in which they found themselves.

But there was nothing interesting there, and Polly Linton, after they had waited five minutes, wanted to go ahead.

"Better not," Betty advised. "The woman may need our help, and we promised to stand by in case she does."

"She's gone a jolly long time," Polly mumbled.

But there was nothing for it but to wait in the darkness, while their candles spluttered lower and lower.

Then, when even Betty thought they might move on, a sharp sound came to their ears.

"A whistle!" Betty ejaculated. "Hark!" And then through the silence of the subterranean tunnel came the sound of a police-whistle. It ended abruptly, and the girls looked at one another, white-faced.

Only for a moment they hesitated, then Betty led the way on.

The tunnel was as damp as it was dark, and the silence after that piercing blast of the whistle was suggestive of a drama that must have been in progress somewhere ahead.

Betty was running now, stooping low to avoid the domed roof of the tunnel.

"There, there!" Madgo Minden shouted, pointing ahead. But others had already seen the huddled figure that had caused Madgo's warning shout.

"My gracious!"

"Goodness!"

They drew up short and stared, for there, on the floor of the tunnel, lay the woman-detective, her ankles bound tightly and loose sacking thrown over her head.

She was struggling, as they could see, and in another moment they were beside her.

Polly whipped off the sacking, and Betty stooped to unfasten the bonds that bound the woman's ankles.

"Has she got away? Did you see her?" were the detective's first words, as she struggled to a sitting posture and brought her hand from behind her back.

"She is not very good at tying knots," she continued. "See, I had my hands free when you came. The detective soon learns to loosen bonds."

She was on her feet now, and peering into the darkness.

"She tricked me," she said, between her teeth. "I blew the whistle, but she snatched it from me. Never mind, I got a glimpse of her, and I saw that she was wearing that blouse. See, I have another piece of it."

And she held for their inspection a piece of material that was almost the duplicate of the piece Polly Linton had captured.

"But where did she go?" Betty asked eagerly.

The detective shook her head.

"Straight on, that is all I can say," she answered. She was looking into the darkness ahead, and suddenly drew up, pointing a quivering hand to something. "Look—look! What is that?"

"I—I can't see anything," Madgo Minden stammered.

The woman did not heed her. She was still staring straight ahead.

"Follow me!" she exclaimed sharply. Then she drew up, wheeled round, and

ran back through them, scattering them, her face white.

"Run, run!" she shrieked.

She dropped her candle and brushed against Betty, putting out that girl's.

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, gwacious! Wun like anythin'!"

In vain Betty Barton endeavoured to stem that riot. The woman had run back up the passage, and Madge Minden had turned. Tess Trelawney's teeth were chattering, and even Polly Linton looked afraid.

"Hark!"

There came a faint sound, though it was only the echo of the woman's footsteps. But it was enough. The girl's nerves were at tension point, and with one accord they turned and fled back along the passage.

Only Betty's coolness saved a general scramble up the pegged shaft. She stood back, regarding the dark tunnel with worried eyes while her friends clambered to safety. Then Betty, with perhaps more haste than dignity, scrambled up the shaft herself.

And only when they were back in the light, cheery hall did they recover their self-composure. The woman-detective was narrating their adventures, and Mr. Creel was listening anxiously.

"That's enough for me," the detective said. "I don't like this place. It was a ghost I saw—a ghost, or some strange figure! Ugh!"

And she went off to her room, obviously shaken by her experiences in the tunnel.

"Phew!" gasped Polly Linton. "It was a bit unnerving, but—well, I don't think much of her as a detective! What did she see, anyway?"

But that was a secret that the detective did not share with them. Nor did she let them know all her clues; perhaps she did not wish them to share the honours of solving the mystery.

CHAPTER 13.

The Return.

EVERYWHERE has been searched, no stone has been left unturned, yet we seem no nearer to finding her than we were before!"

Mr. Creel's brow was lined, and his former cheery look had completely vanished.

The Morcove girls were seated round the large fire, and they looked no more cheerful than did their host. Small wonder, when Trixie Hope was still missing!

"Poor old Trix!" Betty sighed. "It's so mysterious. I—I can't think where she can possibly be. She must be in the house, and yet—where—where can she be? Surely she could give warning—let us know in some way!"

"One would think so," Mr. Creel sighed. "It's indeed a problem. I don't want to wire to her parents and alarm them unnecessarily, but, on the other hand, we can't continue like this indefinitely, can we?"

His wife did not reply, but a glance at her face showed that the mysterious disappearance of Trixie Hope worried her no less than it did her husband.

She had had little rest the night before, and the incidents of this day had not served to help matters.

Trixie Hope—where was she? Where could she be?

The woman-detective was upstairs, and had told them that she had a clue—that she might soon be able to find the hidden treasure.

But the treasure—that was not their aim now. The treasure could surely wait, as it had done for a hundred years, although the detective, perhaps keen to prove her superiority over all those who had attempted the search in the past, seemed to have made the discovery of it her aim.

"The police—I might invoke their aid. But I do not like the thought. And, really"—Mr. Creel shrugged—"I fail to see how they could succeed when we have failed."

He plumped down heavily into an arm-chair, and sighed. While silence reigned in the room the sound of the snow flicking against the window-panes and the moan of the wind came to them audibly.

"Poor old Trix!" sighed Madge Minden. "She—she was such a good pal. What wouldn't I give to hear her funny French

"Yes, rather!" Polly agreed—Polly, who had always teased poor Trixie so unmercifully. But it had always been in fun—just Polly's way.

And Polly Linton was as depressed as the rest of them—perhaps more so; for when her high spirits were dampened she was always very much down in the dumps indeed.

"If Trixie came back, too, we could clear

up everything. For she must have seen something important—an important secret passage or the woman," Tess Trelawney unused.

"She must—yes," Betty agreed. "And that is just why she is being kept a prisoner. If we could only find that secret passage!"

She rose and crossed to the wall of the library, eyeing it thoughtfully.

"Miss Story has been all round that wall, measuring, calculating, tapping," pointed out Mr. Creel. "I fancy she knows her business."

"I think she does," agreed Betty. "But—well, she may have missed something, you know. For Trixie couldn't have vanished into thin air!"

"But she might have been led into the passage. Something might have been flung on to her head. At least, that is Miss Story's theory," Mrs. Creel interposed. "It is quite likely, Betty dear, don't you think?"

But Betty, although she agreed, did not really think so. She could not help feeling quite sure that Trixie Hope must have seen something important to cry out as she had done just before she was kidnapped.

"Then there's that picture—we saw that moving!" Madge Minden exclaimed, pointing to the large picture on the wall. "We've never found what lies behind that. No one has been able to open it."

"You are sure you did see it move?" Mrs. Creel asked, rather doubtfully. "It is odd that if the woman vanished into some passage there she should be on the opposite side of the room a second later. You would have heard her walk round the panelling."

"I—I suppose so. Oh, what a puzzle it is!"

Betty frowned.

She was tapping the wall now, and reconstructing the scene of that night's adventure.

There was the large picture that had appeared to move on the side of the room opposite her. It was to this spot where she was standing that Trixie had pointed. Then the lights had gone out, and when finally they had got a candle alight Trixie had gone, and no one else was to be seen. The party of six girls had dwindled mysteriously to five.

"Through the wall," she murmured to

herself. "Yes, that surely is the explanation!"

She looked thoughtfully round the library, examining it in detail. There was the large oak table in the centre. The bookshelves on either side. That the bookshelves did not move she had ascertained to her own satisfaction, for the bookshelves had been fitted by Mr. Creel himself.

The woman had vanished from the room—not by the door. In what way had she vanished? Through a panel behind the large picture? If so, then how had she got round to the other side of the room to kidnap Trixie?

Slowly Betty returned to the fireside to unravel the tangled skein.

But hardly had she seated herself when she sprang to her feet.

"What was that?" she gasped, her face suddenly chalky white. "That moan—"

"The wind, dear. You mustn't get alarmed. You're unnerved," murmured Mrs. Creel.

"Yes, Betty dear, only the wind—"

But Betty had crossed to the window, and now she flung aside the heavy curtains.

"Hark! Oh, can't you hear it?" she cried. "It is not the wind!"

There was silence, and the sound of the wind came to them—the wind and the swirling snow.

But above those sounds intermittent, and sometimes so faint that they could hardly hear, came the sound of a groan.

"I say!" ejaculated Mr. Creel, springing up. "Can there be someone out on this fearful night?"

He hurried to Betty's side and peered out into the gloom. For several moments they stayed there motionless, and thrice was that low moan repeated.

The last time it came to them so faintly that they scarcely heard it.

"We must do something quick! Oh, I can see a figure! Look, against the snow!"

The others rushed to the window, and there, their faces pressed against the pane, they saw what Betty indicated—a figure that swayed and staggered in the snow-storm, a figure that they could not have seen against the black skyline save for the snow that clung around it.

The huge flakes twisted, blown hither and thither by the fierce gale, and swept over the forlorn figure.

Even as they watched the figure collapsed on to the ground, lying full length in the

snow. In another moment the snow would have covered it.

But that moment did not come. For Betty and the others, heedless of the fact that they were hatless, heedless of the snow-storm, ran out into the wild night.

As the main door was opened a sheet of snow swept in upon them, sending them staggering back, blinding them momentarily, and the pictures shook and rattled on the wall.

But it was no time for qualms.

Battling her way against the piercing, whistling wind, head down, almost knee-deep in the soft snow, Betty forged ahead, the others just behind her.

They were groping forward, their hands outstretched. So thickly fell the snow that they were blinded by it, dazzled.

"Not a thing could Betty see, and she wandered on until her foot caught in something soft, and she fell on her hands and knees, the snow reaching up to her elbows.

"I've got her! Help!" she yelled, as she staggered up, only to be blown off her feet.

She had the limp figure in her arms now, and was half-carrying, half-dragging, it back to where the lights of the castle shone dimly through the snow.

"Betty, dear girl, where are you? Oh, dear! Betty—"

And now Paula, game to the last, had caught hold of Betty, and soon was supporting her share of that limp figure.

Dripping snow, sending it in clouds from them as they moved, they gained at last the warmth of the hall.

Poor Betty dropped into a chair, and left her burden to the mercy of the others.

"Poor girl!" Mrs. Creel murmured. "How came she out on such a night?"

They moved the arm that covered the face, then brushed away the snow.

The limp figure stirred, rolled over, so that her white, cold face looked up to the ceiling. Then it was that a shout arose—a shout of mingled fear and joy.

"Trixie—Trixie Hope! Oh, gracious!"

And even as they spoke Trixie Hope opened her eyes and blinked up at them.

"You can't remember anything?"

Trixie Hope, still white and pale, turned her head to her chums. She was lying in bed, the room lit by a crackling fire, and

the girls were gathered about her, asking questions.

"Nothing," she murmured. "I saw the woman in white; she was lying on the floor, it seemed. Then the next I knew the lights went out, and something was flung over my head. What happened next I—I don't know, because I—I fainted," she admitted with a flush.

"But—but what a pity that you can remember nothing after you were captured. You had no idea where you were hidden?"

"No. I was tied, and I had food. That's all I know. Sometimes I heard noises and voices, but—but whose and where, I couldn't tell."

"But how came you into the snow?"

Trixie drew a breath and shuddered.

"I was carried out, and the first I knew was when I felt the snow swishing round me. I was blindfolded, and goodness knows where I was led! I fell down for quite a time, until I was almost snowed in, and then managed to get the bandage from my eyes. But even then I could see little. The snow was thick and heavy, and when I glanced up snowflakes nearly blinded me."

She shuddered, and Betty Barton pressed her hand reassuringly.

It was Polly Linton who first broke the silence, and Polly's eyes were blazed with the light of fire.

"We're not finished yet!" she said, through her teeth. "We have the detective to help us, and, by Jingo, we shan't give up hope! We're going right on until we bowl them out."

Although no one spoke, five heads nodded agreement, and the pact was sealed.

But it was a strange battle—this fight against unknown adversaries.

Who would win it? The howling wind that blew the snowflakes against the window-panes of Castle Garth seem to ask the question jeeringly, as though it were an enemy itself.

But if the wind knew the secret of the castle, it managed to keep it.

CHAPTER 14.

A Startling Incident

"I T'S beyond me, I'm afraid."

Mr. Creel sighed as he spoke, and glanced round the spacious library of Castle Garth. Pictures adorned the walls, and on one side was a huge

bookcase. In the centre of the room stood a large carved table, and around it sat six schoolgirls, guests of Mr. Creel's.

"Yes, there doesn't seem much hope of finding the catch. The detective tried"—Betty nodded—"and she's keen enough to solve the mystery. It would be a good advertisement for her."

"Wonder where she is now, by the way? Nosing around somewhere, I suppose," Polly observed.

Paula Creel, who had been languidly resting her elbow on the table, suddenly sat erect, and her expression told the others that she was listening intently.

"What is it, Paula?" Mr. Creel asked.

"I—I fancy I heard something."

"Heard what?" Polly asked half scoffingly.

But the words were hardly out of her mouth when she backed away suddenly from the table.

"What's the matter now?" asked Tess Trelawney, rather wearily.

"The floor!" ejaculated Polly, springing to her feet. "It moved! There—there's someone under the table!"

"Moved!"

Away from the table flew the girls, and Mr. Creel stepped forward cautiously. Betty Barton ran to the door to bar the progress of any stranger, and then carefully Mr. Creel bent down. The table was large and heavy, and in the dim light of the room was deeply shadowed.

"No one there," he assured them. "No one—Hallo!"

The exclamation that concluded his sentence was like a pistol-shot, and the girls drew nearer.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed. "The floor's moving! Push the table away!"

Ready hands were laid upon the table, and it was pushed aside. But once it was clear they ran back to the side of the room.

Then in hushed silence they watched and waited.

For the floor, or at least a part of it, was moving, slanting upwards like a trapdoor! With a quick gesture, Mr. Creel indicated to the girls that they were to stand behind the slanting portion.

Prepared for action, they stood tense and waiting, every muscle taut.

The trapdoor was opened, and now moved swifter, but softer, so that not a sound was heard. Soon it was stationary,

and a slight click announced that it had been fixed in some manner.

Leaning forward slightly, they scarcely breathed. Who would emerge—the woman in white? And whence had she come?

A scraping sound, and the top portion of a woman's head appeared. Mr. Creel crouched so that his presence should not be revealed, but he crept closer to obtain a grip upon the arm that now protruded.

What would have been the result they could not tell, for the next moment Mr. Creel raised himself erect, then stared, and burst into a laugh.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed. "Miss Story, our detective!"

And the spectacled face, emerging from the hole in the floor, was wreathed in smiles. In another moment the woman-detective was standing before them. Dust was all over her clothes, but there was a glint of triumph in her eyes.

"There!" she exclaimed, pointing to the trapdoor. "There's the secret of that girl's disappearance!" And she pointed to Trixie Hope.

"But where does it lead?"

The woman-detective smiled.

"You remember," she said, when the girls gathered around her eagerly, "that when I examined that secret passage that led from the hall to the dining-room, I found a side piece moved and revealed a shaft?"

"Yes, yes—to a long, underground tunnel that ended at the castle walls," Betty nodded.

"Precisely. Well, this trapdoor is in the roof of the tunnel. Look."

And when they glanced into the cavity, they saw that she was right.

"But—but the picture," said Betty Barton slowly. "If the woman in white vanished through that?"

Miss Story smiled, and shrugged her shoulders.

"Another shaft," she said. "That is all. It is quite simple. When we examined the tunnel, we did not look at the roof of it. There were at least two other trapdoors. One led down from behind that picture; the other here. The woman in white vanished behind the picture, walked a yard or two, and came up here. Trixie Hope saw her, so was captured and taken into the tunnel."

"And hidden—where?"

But that was a question the woman-detective was unable to answer.

"Never mind that," Mr. Creel said. "I congratulate you on your discovery, Miss Story. This has been worrying me rather. I do not like to know that there are entrances and exits of which we have no knowledge. These trapdoors shall be fixed securely."

"Which is the old miser who hid the money?" Betty Barton asked.

Mr. Creel indicated the portrait of an old man. The face was wrinkled and lined, and from under the heavy brow small eyes, dark and keen, seemed to glitter as with life. That he was the man who had caused the owners of Castle Garth all this worry they could readily understand, for there was a meanness even in the manner in which he held himself.

"Can't say I like the look of him," Polly Linton answered.

"Nor I," agreed Tess Trelawney.

"I don't care much for the appearance of any of them," frowned Madge Minden.

And certainly they did not look a very prepossessing crowd. Men and women were equally represented, and none of the women seemed any more attractive than their male relations.

"I shouldn't be at all surprised," said Mr. Creel thoughtfully, "if the looks on their faces are the result of constant hunting and searching for the hidden hoard."

"Who is that person?"

The woman-detective inclined her head towards a portrait that hung at the end of the row.

"That," Mr. Creel informed her, "is the last of the Garths—Dame Garth, who is living now in the west wing. Of course, she looks much older than that, and is much older."

Miss Story nodded her head slowly, and gazed intently into the rather severe-looking face that was portrayed upon the canvas.

"You say that she is now in the west wing?" she asked. "H'm!"

For several seconds she stood staring at the portrait, and then in turn she turned her attention to the others.

"By the way," she remarked, turning round suddenly, "it has just occurred to me. The west wing has not been searched. Is it not possible that we could find some clue there?"

She was looking keenly at Mr. Creel, and by the expression on her face it was easy to see that she imagined that she had

come across some new clue, and even Mr. Creel was a little impressed by her query.

"It is possible, I suppose," he admitted slowly. "But, you see, I have handed the west wing over to Dame Garth, and, so far, I have not searched the wing. The door leading to it is locked."

"But, uncle," interrupted Paula Creel, "didn't we chase the woman in white there?"

"Yes, we certainly went to the west wing," agreed Betty Barton quickly. "We didn't follow the woman in white, though, strictly speaking, because we did not see where she went."

"That is so," nodded Mr. Creel. "I had almost forgotten the fact. But if my memory does not play me false, I rather think that Dame Garth was pretty upset by our intrusion."

"She was," Polly Linton agreed emphatically. "I remember we said something about it at the time; she got jolly ratty."

"Well, well," murmured Mr. Creel tolerantly, "the poor woman certainly had enough to irritate her. As you know, she had to sell me the castle in order to get a means of livelihood. I feel that the least we can do is to allow her the seclusion of that wing."

"But suppose that this woman in white should be there in hiding?" the woman-detective inquired eagerly. "Don't you see—could there be a better hiding-place for her, since she knows that we do not invade that quarter?"

"Gracious!" Betty Barton exclaimed. "Do you think that she might be there? I—I suppose she might really."

Miss Lillah K. Story shrugged her shoulders.

"It is difficult to make theories in a case such as this one," she announced. "But I do feel that we ought to leave no stone unturned. For the sake of disturbing Dame Garth's quietude, it is rather a pity to miss an obvious chance."

"I agree," Mr. Creel nodded. "Probably if I asked Dame Garth, she would have not the slightest objection to our searching. In fact, I am practically certain that she would not, for, after all, it is to her advantage as much as to ours. If the fortune is found, it will become her property, and if we do not find this secret searcher, we may never find the treasure, even should we locate its hiding-place."

The girl's eyes lit up as they saw that

their host was convinced that there might be something in the woman-detective's suggestion.

After all, why should not the west wing be searched? And they began to think that they had acted in a rather absurd manner not to have searched it before.

"Shall we strike whilst the iron is hot?" Mr. Creel asked. "There is no sense in delay."

And it was only too evident that the girls were of the same opinion. There was an immediate nodding of heads, and a ready movement forward.

There was new hope now that they realised, unexplored land lay near at hand. What the west wing would reveal, they did not know. It might reveal nothing at all, or it might show them a clue that would lead to the unravelling of the whole mystery. Who could tell?

A few minutes later Mr. Creel had unlocked the huge door that divided the west wing from the rest of the castle, and eagerly they made their way along the dark corridor. Their footsteps rang noisily on the stone floor.

"Perhaps she's asleep," Madge Minden suggested. "Can't hear anyone about. But I suppose she would not make much noise."

"Well, hardly," Tess Trelawney agreed.

For all that they could see as they progressed along the dark corridor the place might have been quite deserted.

Before a door Mr. Creel halted and tapped lightly on the panelling, but received no reply.

"This room," he explained, "is one that she uses as a sitting-room, the bed-room is a door or so away."

He tapped again as there came no reply, and this time called Dame Garth by name. But still there was no reply.

"That's rather strange," he frowned, for the door was locked.

"Perhaps she is in the bed-room," Madge Minden suggested.

But the woman-detective had already visited that room, and was now returning, shaking her head.

"She is not there," she explained, "although the bed has been occupied."

At that announcement there was silence, and the girls looked at one another rather anxiously. Mr. Creel gave the panelling a hearty thump, but from the room inside came no reply.

"It's rather strange," he murmured.

"Even if she were asleep, I should have thought she would have heard and answered to that knock."

"What's going to be done?" the woman-detective asked. "Surely she can't be asleep! Do you think we should force an entrance, Mr. Creel?"

There were looks of anxiety now on the faces of the girls, for they were worried on Dame Garth's account. Why was there no reply to their knocking and calling?

It must have been a sound sleeper indeed who could not be awakened by their hammering and knocking!

"There's a sturdy chair in one of those rooms, bring it to me," said Mr. Creel, a little curtly—"anyone of you, please."

Almost before he had finished speaking Madge Minden had returned with a chair, and, thanking her, he took it and raised it above his head.

"I wonder," Betty Barton murmured, "what we shall find now, Polly? Do—do you think that the woman in white—"

"That she has gagged Dame Garth?" Polly inquired, with a start. "My word! That is certainly possible, Betty. That woman would do anything. Perhaps Dame Garth has seen her, and she has made the poor old woman a prisoner, thinking perhaps that no one would miss her."

Betty Barton nodded her head slowly, and her eyes were troubled.

"That is just what I have been wondering," she said. "And I think Mr. Creel has some such idea in mind, you know."

Crash, crash, crash! went the chair against the panel. The leg of the chair smashed in two, and then there was a sharp report as one of the panels split down the centre. Another tremendous blow, and a small piece of wood flew into the room behind, leaving in the panelling a gap that was sufficiently large for Mr. Creel to insert his hand.

Then one mighty tug on the wood, and half the panelling came away in his hand.

Instantly the girls pressed about him, and the woman-detective peered anxiously into the room.

"Empty," she said, in a tone that indicated that she was as surprised as she was disappointed.

"Well—"

"What on earth—"

But their exclamations died down as a rather sharp voice sounded behind them. Wheeling, they saw Dame Garth regarding them keenly.

"You again!" she exclaimed. "Can you not leave me in peace for one moment?"

Then, as she saw the havoc the chair had made in the door, she drew herself up angrily.

"What is this?" she exclaimed, her grip on the old knotted stick tightening.

"I am sorry, Dame Garth," Mr. Creel apologised. "We came here to obtain your permission to search this wing."

"Search!" she inquired bitterly. "Is it necessary to smash down my doors in your search?"

Anxious to placate the indignant old woman, Mr. Creel explained their reason for forcing the door.

"Even now," he added, with a puzzled smile, "I cannot imagine whence you have come. We searched the bed-room and found you were not there."

The woman stared at him before replying.

"Where I have come from matters little," she assured him cuttingly. "The west wing is mine, and I do not wish to be interfered with. You are searching for my treasure," she added, flaring up suddenly. "It is useless to deny it, but you will never find it!" she added mockingly. "For a hundred years we Garths have searched in vain. Do you imagine now that you, in a few seconds, can find its secret?"

Ever so slightly, Mr. Creel sighed.

"I assure you, Dame Garth," he said sincerely, "that if the treasure is found, it shall go to you. Do you not wish it to be found?"

The old woman made no reply, but fixed her eyes upon him steadily.

"Who is this?" she demanded suddenly, raising her stick in a trembling hand and pointing it at the woman-detective.

"Miss Story, the lady-detective, who is doing her best to capture the mysterious person who is hiding in the castle."

"A detective!" The woman repeated the words fiercely, and glared at Miss Story. "You can employ a thousand detectives, and you will never find the treasure!" she exploded. "Nothing but evil awaits those who scheme to rob the Garths! Have they not tried before and failed? Take heed, I warn you!"

"But, my dear Dame Garth," protested Mr. Creel, "please understand that we have no desire whatever to rob you. We are acting in your interests."

But the old woman made no reply save

to thump her stick on the ground and stalk off down the corridor.

She walked in a huddled, cramped manner, and angry though some of the girls were, they could not but feel sorry for the old woman's obvious infirmity.

"Still, even though she is ill, she might be civil," Polly Linton remarked. "Anyone would think we were trying to rob her."

"That is what she thinks," Betty smiled. "But I don't see really that we can alter it."

"Nor I," Mr. Creel agreed. "But, despite her protests, I fancy we should be foolish not to search these quarters now. If Dame Garth is not here, then who locked this door?"

He reached his hand inside, and a click announced that he had unlocked it.

"It was locked on the inside," said the woman detective to herself. "Surely that's rather strange."

"Very strange," agreed Betty, who was close beside her.

"By the way, where did Dame Garth come from? She didn't say."

"It seems to me," Miss Story said slowly, "that she came from the bed-room, but in that I may be wrong."

She was looking round the room carefully, and now she tapped the walls.

Not for some minutes did the girls notice that Dame Garth stood in the doorway, regarding them intently.

"What are you doing?"

The woman-detective wheeled round sharply, amazed at the interruption.

"I am tapping the wall," she replied truthfully.

The old woman hobbled forward into the room, staring at them angrily.

"This is my room! Outside, you interlopers—outside! I will not have you meddling here! Out—"

Her eyes flashed, and she raised the stick, pointing to the door.

"But surely," Mr. Creel protested, "we are doing no harm. It is all in an endeavour to discover the cause of the mystery. You do not seem to realise that there is someone hiding in this house—some stranger who wishes to deprive you of the money that is rightly yours!"

Dame Garth regarded him keenly for a moment or so, then she laughed.

"Realise it?" she croaked. "Haven't I

been telling you it plainly enough to your faces?"

Mr. Creel drew himself up.

"Very well, Dame Garth," he returned stiffly, "the matter ends here. But," he finished sternly, "if you find your fortune gone, don't blame me!"

And, with the angry girls in close attendance, he went from the room.

"Well, of all the unreasonable people!" Betty Barton exclaimed. "Fancy her taking the matter like that. Miss Story was annoyed. Hallo, she's gone."

"Gone!"

Mr. Creel wheeled about him and stared in bewildered fashion along the corridor. The woman-detective, who but a moment before had stood by his side, had disappeared.

Without a word he strode back along the corridor, halted for a second outside Dame Garth's sitting-room, then passed on. At the bed-room door he paused again, and this time the start that he gave as he entered showed that he had found the detective.

Quickly the girls followed in his steps, pausing in the doorway of the bed-room.

The woman-detective was inside, and she hardly heeded the girls' entrance. With a somewhat peculiar expression on her face, she was examining the fireplace.

"What's the matter?" Polly Linton inquired anxiously.

Miss Story glanced up.

"Someone has been in this room since I last saw it," she explained, straightening herself.

"Dame Garth may have entered it."

"No one has walked through the door, but someone has walked out."

"What—what on earth do you mean?"

Betty Barton exclaimed, greatly puzzled. "How could they walk out without first walking in?"

The detective smiled in a superior manner.

"I took the precaution," she explained, "of smoothing the footprints from this polished wood. As you see, it is greasy."

To prove her words, she planted down her foot firmly, and showed them the imprint.

"Now," she began, "when I left this room there was not a footprint visible. As you will see, there are two beside this that I have just made—and Mr. Creel's!"

Betty had seen them, and now, dropping to her knees, she examined them closely.

"A woman's footprints," she murmured. Miss Story smiled.

"Without doubt, a woman's footprints," she agreed. "See, they are small and neat. The woman in white! Surely it is only too evident?"

"I—I suppose it couldn't be the woman in white, y'know?" Paula suggested.

Miss Story laughed outright.

"That old woman wouldn't hobble about. Likely as not she has some hoard of her own hidden in one of the old rooms. Possibly she was counting over the gold. Gold-hoarding runs in the family."

There was a pause as the girls examined the footprints and stared round the room.

"But if she didn't come from here, then, hai Jove, where did she come from?" Paula persisted.

"I don't know. One of the other rooms—any of them," the detective replied absently, as she measured the footprints. "No, the woman in white is here. I am certain of it. The footprints tally."

She rose to her feet and ran her hand across her eyes.

"I am trying to find out this," she explained. "How this room can connect with those downstairs. That it must do, I am certain, but the point is—how?"

"Surely it is strange," Mr. Creel murmured, that someone should have been wandering about here, unheard and unobserved by Dame Garth?"

Miss Story shrugged her shoulders slightly.

"Strange," she agreed easily, "yet not amazing, for Dame Garth may be a trifle deaf, and, since she is so determined that nothing is wrong, she may also be a little unobservant."

Then she resumed her examination of the room, endeavouring to find some form of entrance or exit in the panelling, but without success.

"I think we had better go down," Mr. Creel murmured, a little uneasily. "I am as anxious as anyone to solve this mystery, but we have already damaged that door, and I think that we might leave Dame Garth in peace for an hour or so."

It was only with great reluctance that the woman agreed; nor were the girls anxious to relinquish the chase, which now seemed to be drawing to a close.

However, Mr. Creel was master of the

situation, and unquestioningly they obeyed him.

"I think there is little hope of finding more in the daytime," he explained, as they went downstairs, "and if we give warning of our intrusion we might lose the opportunity that night would afford. Besides which, if we annoyed Dame Garth, she might barricade the door against us, and then, indeed, we should have to give up hope of discovery in that quarter."

The woman-detective seemed far from pleased, and, apart from displeasure, anxiety was also expressed on her face.

"You seem very worried," Mr. Creel remarked.

"Not worried," she said, "but very puzzled."

For several moments she remained as though lost in thought, and Betty Barton, whose faith in the woman had increased, regarded her with interest. She felt that even yet they might stumble across some important clue. But Miss Story was not the only one in the party who wore a puzzled look.

Paula Creel was knitting her brows in deep thought, and Polly Linton, noticing it, slapped her on the shoulder.

"Penny for them!" she exclaimed, and Paula started violently.

"I was just wondewing," the elegant girl murmured. "Do you remember what Dame Garth's nose is like, Polly dear?"

"Dame Garth's nose?" the amazed Polly inquired. "Why—er—"

And Polly had to knit her brows in thought then, for though she had seen Dame Garth quite close, she could not remember her features clearly.

"I don't see what her nose has to do with the case, Paula dear," Betty smiled.

"Bai Jove, wather not, dear geal! Only—only—" And the puzzled look returned to Paula Creel's face.

But the woman-detective turned to her sharply.

"The nose!" she exclaimed. "That's it!"

But the others were still looking very puzzled, unable to make head or tail of this somewhat cryptic discussion.

"I'm blest if I can see what Dame Garth's nose has to do with it," Polly Linton agreed, "but if you want to know, I think I can tell you. It curves out from under the eyebrow—rather as though someone had flattened it on the bridge."

The detective sat forward on her chair, her eyes alight with eagerness.

"The opposite, then, of a Roman nose?"

"Yes, I suppose so," Polly Linton agreed. "Anyway, it's quite different from a Roman nose."

Miss Lillah K. Story sprang up from her chair and looked quickly at Mr. Creel.

"Could I be granted another inspection of the portraits?" she asked.

Somewhat surprised, Mr. Creel assented, and a moment later the girls found themselves staring at the portrait of Dame Garth. Miss Story was trembling with excitement as she pointed dramatically at the portrait.

"Look at that!" she exclaimed. "Just look at it—the nose! Is there any resemblance between that and Dame Garth's?"

Closely they inspected it, but one glance at the portrait showed them from mental comparison with the original of it that the noses, at least, were not all the same.

"You are right," Mr. Creel remarked slowly, but still rather puzzled. "It proves, of course, that it is a very bad portrait."

Miss Story laughed softly to herself.

"On the contrary," she said, "it proves that the woman upstairs is not the original of that portrait."

For a second they were dumbfounded, and Paula Creel was the first to break the silence.

"Bai Jove!" she exclaimed excitedly. "Then—then if the woman upstairs is not Dame Garth, pway, who is she?"

CHAPTER 15.

In the Snowy Night.

"NOT Dame Garth?"

The words came from the amazed girls, who stared rather blankly at the woman-detective.

Miss Story's eyes glittered and she turned to the door, closing it after ascertaining that no one was listening outside.

When she spoke it was in a whisper, and there was a tenseness of excitement about her.

"It is all so simple now," she agreed. "Can't you see it? This woman is not Dame Garth; but by her cunning she has gained access to the west wing of the house, and has been there undisturbed, free to do as she chose, search as she pleased."

It was an amazing story, yet no less possible for that, as the girls quickly saw.

"Great Scott!" Mr. Creel exclaimed. "If this is so, how that woman must have laughed at us, to think that we have been searching everywhere and that all the time she has been hiding in that west wing."

"Well, she is cute enough," Betty smiled.

"Not quite cute enough," Miss Story replied, "if we go carefully, and before she realises that we suspect."

There was silence in the room for a moment or two, as the full results of their discovery dawned upon them.

There seemed little doubt that the woman-detective's story was correct, and Polly Linton was for going and capturing the woman whilst they could, but Mr. Creel shook his head.

"We cannot do that alone," he said. "As yet we have no definite proof; there is nothing of which we can accuse the woman. It may be rather difficult to prove that she is not Dame Garth. I admit that on the face of it there seems little doubt, but it is not impossible for a person's features to alter, and it is within the realms of possibility that the portrait-painter may have blundered."

Miss Story shrugged her shoulders.

"To me," she observed, "it seems waste of time. That the person who pretends to be Dame Garth is really the woman in white seems to be a perfectly obvious explanation of everything."

"I think so, too," Madge Minden agreed, "but we haven't got a great deal of proof. Dame Garth has acted strangely, it is true, but that doesn't prove that she isn't Dame Garth. From what I have heard of the Garths, they seem just the people to act strangely."

The woman-detective was obviously impatient.

"Very well, I will get proof," she said, "if proof is all that is required." But she frowned rather angrily.

"We can get proof all right," Polly Linton declared suddenly, "only can we capture the woman in white?"

Then for some time the matter was discussed, and it was finally decided that they should open this campaign that evening.

When night came it found the girls out of bed, sitting round the fire in their bedroom.

It was a clear night; no snow was falling,

although the ground was mantled in it. An ideal night for skating, Polly Linton declared, and even wanted to start a party at that moment and go out on to the ice.

"Wonderful slides," she murmured, as she gazed out of the window. "I should love to be out there."

"So should I," Betty agreed, "if only for a few minutes, eh?—snowballing and sliding. But it's too late."

They glanced at the time and saw that it was not yet eleven o'clock. They had retired early in order, as Mr. Creel had suggested, to get a good night's rest. But they were not resting, and, indeed, were not likely to be.

"Might just as well be out there skating and sliding as be in here moping about before the fire," Madge Minden said wisely. "We shan't get any rest here, and I'm quite sure that it will be much, much better for us there."

She rose to her feet and yawned.

Polly Linton was already slipping on a warm coat and tucking her hair into a warm, woollen tam-o'-shanter that covered her ears.

And in another moment the others, too, were dressing. Paula Creel shivered slightly, then snuggled into the depths of her coat collar anxiously.

"I wather fancy it will be cold," she murmured anxiously.

"Paula's getting quite bright up here," Polly chuckled to her friends. "It must be the Scotch air. Fancy her working out that it'll be cold outside!"

"Polly, deah, please westwain yourself. Don't go yet, deah geals, I'm doin' my hair."

Polly Linton crept behind the elegant girl, then, without any warning, jammed on top of her head a woollen tam.

Paula Creel shrieked, and tugged at the tam, which now covered her head completely.

"You'll wuin my hair. I shall nevah get it out of tangle! Ugh! Polly, pway, take this away!"

But Paula had to free herself, shouting, pleading, and coaxing to her friends.

"Weally," she gasped, when she had at last released her head, "I think that most unfriendly, Polly deah. I'm feeling qwite pwestwate."

Then, amazed at the silence that greeted her words, she gazed round the room.

It was empty! And one look round the

room convinced Paula Creel that she did not wish to be alone in it. Far more quickly than she had ever done it before, she rearranged her hair, and was soon skipping down the stairs, in quite an inelegant manner, until, reaching the grounds below, she found her chums awaiting her.

"Great!" Polly Linton breathed. And she lunged out her arms as though to embrace the chill night air. They were up to their ankles in snow, but the girls did not mind that; their feet were clad in thick shoes, and they were not afraid of getting cold.

It did not take Polly Linton long to find a smooth place that would serve as a slide, and she went careering down it in great fashion, ending in a heap of snow at the bottom. Almost before she was on her feet again, Betty Barton, who had followed, came tumbling on top of her. One after another they went skidding down, until only Paula Creel remained, shaking her head rather doubtfully, apparently not convinced that sliding was an excellent pastime.

"Come on, Paula," Polly urged, and she placed herself behind the elegant girl, then wrapped her hands about her waist.

In another moment she went careering down the slide, pushing Paula along before her. The elegant girl had no option but to go. And she went.

"Polly—Polly! Gwacious, we're falling! Oh, dear! Welease me! Oh—"

Bump! They landed, Polly, all the breath knocked out of her, underneath, and Paula as queen of the castle.

"Gwacious!" Paula exclaimed, sitting up on Polly. "Bai Jove, Polly deah, what fun!"

And she laughed merrily, brushing the snow from her legs.

"Get—get off!" gasped poor Polly from underneath, whilst Paula, at her leisure, flicked snow from her coat. "Ugh! Oh, you—you're crushing me!"

"Paula—Paula, get up, dear!" shrieked Betty, between peals of laughter.

Paula blinked at her in surprise, then glanced down, horror-stricken at Polly, on whom she was sitting.

"Bai Jove, deah geal, I'm fwightfully sowwy—weally I am. I thought it was snow, you know. Ha, ha, ha! How fwightfully funny!"

"Well, get—get off, stupid!" panted Polly.

"Ha, ha, ha! How silly! Betty, I thought Polly was snow I was sittin' on. Oh, deah, how pwicelessly funny!"

"Ta-take her off; I'm ch-choking!"

Betty Barton, laughing merrily, lent a hand, and Paula was dragged off. Then Polly, almost flattened and completely devoid of breath, was helped to her feet, to stand glaring at Paula, who was convulsed with laughter.

"Feahfully funny! Polly, deah geal, let's do that again!" she cried.

But Polly was not "having any," as she expressed it, and Paula had to forego her comfortable seat when she took a slide by herself.

"She turned the tables that time, Polly!" Madge Minden smiled. "You'll have to be careful."

But Polly, whose spirits had quite recovered, winked. What that wink meant Paula Creel was destined to learn later, perhaps.

"We mustn't stay out here too long," Betty murmured, as she glanced at her watch. "We've got to be inside, taking part in a trap for Dame Garth at midnight."

"Heaps of time yet," said Polly. "Let's stay out here a bit longer." And she went on with her sliding as though it were mid-day instead of nearing midnight.

But Tess Trelawney had a better suggestion to make.

"How about 'Hide-and-seek'?" she asked, with a meaning look at Polly which the others did not understand.

"That's a kid's game," Madge Minden explained, rather indignantly. "You'll be suggesting 'Hunt-the-slipper' next."

Polly Linton, whose eyes were sparkling with fun, shook her head.

"It depends who's playing," she said. "It wants someone clever to hide. I dare say if Paula hid herself really well, it would take you some time to find her, Madge."

And because Polly had plenty of persuasive power, it was not very long before Paula, somewhat flattered, had run off to conceal herself.

They soon, however, discovered her, and next Polly suggested that they should all hide themselves and Paula find them.

That Polly Linton had something in her mind was obvious by the twinkle in her

eyes, and by her eagerness to fall in with Tess Trelawney's suggestion.

No sooner were they round the corner than Polly clambered up on to a small portion of sloping roof. It was only a foot or so from the ground, and offered but little concealment. But that did not seem to worry her. She had hardly settled herself, however, when Paula Creel, tracking footprints in the snow like a bloodhound, arrived just under that portion of wall.

"Polly, Polly, deah geal, you're spotted!" she cried, and then Polly flung her force into action, as it were. Had Paula Creel been a little more cautious she would have noticed the snow Polly Linton had gathered in front of her.

Its presence, however, was soon to be forced upon her, for, with a war-whoop, Polly Linton released her hold, and gathering momentum, she went swooping down the small piece of roof, shooting piles of snow before her—piles of snow that quickly transformed Paula Creel into a snow-woman.

Back staggered Paula, snow-covered, and Polly Linton, just missing her, landed neatly on her feet.

It was some time before Paula had scraped the snow from herself, and this time it was Polly's turn to laugh. Thus ended the game of "Hide-and-peek," and all the others near at hand quickly gathered in, all save Tess Trelawney.

"Hallo!" Betty exclaimed sharply. "Where's Tess? I thought that she was here a minute ago."

They called and called her by name, and as there was no reply stared about them anxiously.

"There she is!" Polly cried excitedly. "On the roof there. Look!"

And as they glanced upwards they saw a figure outlined against the sky—a figure that moved slowly and cautiously; as indeed was necessary upon the slippery snow-covered roof.

"Surely—can it be Tess?" Betty asked wonderingly and doubtfully; and almost immediately her question was answered by someone just behind her.

"Here I am! I've been standing here, watching you shout and yell!" laughed Tess Trelawney.

Betty turned quickly.

"Thank goodness!" she murmured. "But"—a puzzled frown was on her face

as she stared at that dim figure on the roof—"who is that?"

But as they looked the figure disappeared, clambering or dropping into a cavity.

CHAPTER 16.

Dame Garth at Home.

"WHERE on earth can she have gone?"

Polly Linton asked the question as she looked blankly at the roof above. The woman had vanished—melted, as it were—and their wonderment changed quickly to alarm.

Had she fallen—had the roof proved too treacherously slippery?

As though to find the answer to those questions they hurried round the corner of the castle wall, over which part the woman had last been seen.

They stared up, but saw nothing either to confirm or to disprove their surmises.

"We can't very well get up the wall from the outside," Betty murmured slowly. "There's no ladder—"

"The fire-escape!" Madge Minden exclaimed suddenly. "I noticed it the other day. Mr. Creel said that he'd had one fixed just here."

And she quickly guided them to the spot where the long iron-runged ladder ascended.

Polly Linton was up in a trice and climbing hand-over-hand upwards. Betty rather doubted the wisdom of that proceeding, but she was not a girl to leave her chum in the lurch.

Polly had chosen to lead, and it was now for them to follow.

So follow they did, and soon the ladder was holding the weight of the six of them, Paula last, sighing at the exertion called for by the upright ladder.

But Polly was now on a flat portion of the roof, standing erect, gazing about her. And it was not very many moments before the others were standing beside her.

"There, that's the spot, and now I see how it happened," Betty remarked, with a smile. "That wall there blocked our view—this chimney we couldn't see—"

They found themselves staring at a large square chimney opening, old-fashioned, and large enough for anyone to climb into.

"They're ages old," Betty explained.

"You know, in the days gone by, sweeps actually used to climb these sort of chimneys to clean them. There are rungs all the way down."

"And you think that the woman—for it must have been the woman—vanished down here?" Polly asked.

"I do."

"But she must be mighty active, and that woman who plays at being Dame Garth is old."

"Or pretends to be." Madge Minden smiled. "After all, it isn't so very difficult pretending to be old, is it? No, she is the woman in white, and is playing the dual role."

"Anyway," said Betty, in her practical way, "where does this chimney lead?"

But they could not work out that problem. Polly wanted to clamber down it and investigate, but Betty did not consider that a wise plan. And it was lucky for Polly, really, that she had a leader who thought before she acted, for Polly invariably performed the usual function of thinking long after she had impulsively acted.

Betty was leaning over the edge of the chimney looking down into the dark interior, and the others could see by the strange expression on her face that she was listening intently for some sound.

"Hear anything?" asked Madge Minden, joining Betty.

The captain of the Fourth Form at Morcove School nodded her head slowly.

"I thought I heard something," she said. "No one has the torch, I suppose?"

No one had, but Tess Trelawney produced a box of matches, and Betty lighted one and peered closely into the darkness of the chimney. (Snow had fallen outside, and obviously there had been no fire to melt it.)

Snowy lines on the outside of the chimney located the iron rings used for climbing.

"I don't see that there is any point in staying here," grumbled Polly Linton.

"Unless one of us goes down we might stay here till midnight and hear nothing."

And the bell, tolling the hour of twelve, showed that her prophecy had been fulfilled.

"We're over the west wing, anyway," Betty said suddenly. "You remember Miss Story thought it possible that Dame Garth would lock the door and keep us out? I think she is probably right. Even if she is wrong about Dame Garth—even supposing that the old woman is really Dame

Garth—it seems certain to me that the woman in white hides somewhere in this part, and takes her prowls at night."

"Then what are we going to do?" Polly Linton asked. "If we can't get into the west wing by the door, and are not allowed to climb down the chimney, it seems we have got to stay here for the night."

"The chimney is certainly the best way," Madge Minden declared solemnly, "but I suppose it is dangerous, really."

"Pooh!" scoffed Polly. "Anyone would think I'd never climbed anything before! I'm going down, anyway."

And, with a look of fixed determination on her face, she commenced to scramble into the dark cavity, despite her chums' restraining hands.

"Polly, you mustn't go!"

"But I'm going!"

Before they could say another word she had gone, disappearing into the large chimney.

For a moment Betty Barton appeared anxious, then she gave a little shrug of helplessness. After all, when Polly said she was going to do a thing she usually did it, and to demur was but a waste of time.

As they listened at the top they could hear her feet scraping as she descended.

"All right?" Betty called anxiously, and a faint whistle came in reassuring response.

"Hadn't we better follow?" Tess Trelawney asked.

But another thought had occurred to Betty, and once again she called down the chimney to Polly.

"Open the west wing door for us."

And scarcely a minute after Polly's reply came up to them, they were once again in the warm interior of the castle.

They made their way to the west wing, where they found the woman-detective waiting for them, with Mr. Creel close at hand holding a powerful electric torch.

"Locked out—as I thought!" the woman-detective exclaimed. "She has tricked us. All I hope is that she does not suspect."

Betty's explanation of Polly's venture met with a very mixed reception. Miss Story was highly elated, but Mr. Creel felt anxious on Polly's account.

"It was too dangerous—she has probably fallen," he said nervously. But he broke off as the detective placed a restraining hand upon his sleeve.

"Footsteps!" she whispered. "Either Polly's or our quarry!"

And they listened intently, almost painfully, to the footsteps that rang on the stone flagging on the other side of the door.

"Polly!" said Betty with certainty, and when the bolts had been withdrawn and the door was flung open they saw their chum awaiting them.

Polly Linton was a sight to behold. Her face was dusty and grimed with the dirt she had collected in the chimney, but she smiled cheerfully, almost triumphantly, at her success.

"Well done, Polly!" Mr. Creel praised her. "You have done well; but, all the same, I don't think you should have risked it. Those old chimneys are none too safe. You mustn't take risks like that again."

"Oh, it was an easy climb!" Polly assured him. "But someone had been down before me; I could tell that easily enough, and I don't doubt at all who it was, for I heard someone cough below when I was half-way down."

She held up her hand and the others listened. From further down the passage came the sound of a cough, twice repeated.

"Dame Garth!" Miss Story exclaimed triumphantly.

The girls hurried along the dark corridor in the direction from whence the cough came. They guessed that their quarry, all unsuspecting of impending disaster, was acting as though she had the wing to herself. Indeed, there was no reason why she should suppose otherwise, not having heard Polly Linton's climb down the chimney.

In dead silence they progressed, gaining confidence of success as they drew near to Dame Garth's room. How would they find her they knew not. It might be as Dame Garth, or as the woman in white. Who could tell?

The detective, who was leading, stopped suddenly, raising her hand as a warning to the others to halt. They came to a standstill, listening to the sound that came from the adjacent room. With a swift movement—so swift that it even surprised the girls—Miss Story flung wide the door of the room where Dame Garth slept. A sharp cry rent the air as she entered, and the girls, following in her wake, saw Dame Garth in strange attire. Strange indeed, because it was so different from any in which they had seen her before. No longer was she an old woman, needing the use of

a stout stick. Her wig lay on the floor, and in place of the silvery hair were dark tresses.

The lines seemed to have been removed from her face, and with them every trace of old age had vanished, too.

No wonder, then, that the girls stared! But their amazement was as nothing compared with Dame Garth's.

Her jaw dropped and her eyes widened. What use now to pretend? What use to indignantly order them away?

"Caught!" said Miss Story curtly. "Caught red-handed!"

By a cavity in the wall the woman stood motionless, eyeing her captors fearfully. That cavity in the wall told its own story.

"Stay here with her," Miss Story exclaimed to the girls. "I will investigate."

The woman who had posed as Dame Garth raised her hand in protest.

"Stop!" she exclaimed.

But Miss Story only laughed.

"You have played your game well," she sneered, "but you are not quite clever enough. This is where I score."

And, leaving the woman in the care of the girls, she vanished through the cavity in the wall.

CHAPTER 17.

A Slippery Customer.

DURING the time that the woman-detective was searching the interior of the cavity in the wall, the girls' captive stood as though petrified, a peculiar, meaningless smile on her face.

She was staring into the interior of the secret opening, and Betty, as she looked at the woman, wondered what was passing in her mind.

Had she discovered the secret hiding-place, and was she hoping still that it would not be revealed by the detective's rapping and tapping of the interior walls?

It was a puzzle that Betty felt unable to solve. Yet, as she looked at the woman, she could not help feeling a thrill of success, for they had evidently captured their quarry in the nick of time.

Now the detective was returning, and by the angry look on her face they judged that she had not been successful.

She seemed unusually angry when she faced the prisoner, whilst the prisoner, on the contrary, was quite at her ease.

"Where is the money? You have found

it," the detective exclaimed angrily; "it is useless to pretend!"

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

"I have not found it," she said. "I don't understand the reason for this intrusion."

"That won't go down with me!" the detective told her. "You're bowled out this time, and pretending is of no use. If you tell us where the money is, you may be allowed free—"

"One moment," intervened Mr. Creel. "I do not think that I can agree to that, Miss Story. This woman has been guilty of many things. We want to know for one thing where Dame Garth is—the real Dame Garth, I mean."

Angry words seemed on the detective's lips, but she checked them quickly.

"Very well," she managed to say. "But at that rate we shan't get anywhere. This woman's mighty clever—or thinks she is—and we shan't find the hiding-place of the money—"

"Yes, yes," Mr. Creel agreed quietly. "But we cannot force matters in this way."

The air was electrical, but the woman-detective calmed down quickly, and actually smiled.

"Very well," she said smoothly. "It shall be as you direct. But I must question this woman. Take her to my room, please, girls. One moment—"

She produced a pair of handcuffs, and advanced with them to the woman.

"Dame Garth" took a quick step backwards, and placed her hands behind her. It was quickly accomplished, but not sufficiently quick to avoid detection. Moreover, one of the girls was standing behind her. It was Polly Linton, and Polly, with a rapid movement, gripped the woman's hands tightly.

And Polly Linton's hands were as sure in their grip as handcuffs.

"Betty—quick!" Polly cried out. "There's a paper in her hand—get it!"

The woman was struggling frantically, but she would never have escaped had she not used cruel means. She kicked back her leg suddenly, and the sharp heel of her shoe bruised Polly's shin painfully; then stamp! went her foot on Polly's toe.

"Oh!"

With a sharp cry of pain, Polly released her hold, and before the others could get

at her, the woman had dashed through the door.

"After her!"

"Stop her!"

There was certainly no trace of old age about the woman now as she sped along the old stone corridor. After her, in chase, ran the girls, with Mr. Creel and the woman-detective but a few yards behind them.

"Don't let her go—don't let her go!" the detective was shouting excitedly; but she could have saved her breath, for to get away from the schoolgirls "Dame Garth" would have required the speed of a hare. She rounded the corner, and for a second was lost to sight; but only for a second.

With a whoop of triumph Polly Linton laid a firm hand upon the woman's dress, clutching it tightly. But for the strength of that material, it is probable that even then the woman might have escaped. But not for a second did Polly Linton's grasp relax, and soon Betty, too, was grasping the dress.

A few more staggering steps, and the woman came suddenly to a standstill. Then, indeed, there was no chance of escape. Captors surrounded her, and she gave herself up to her fate.

Polly's first action was to search the woman's hands, and a look of disappointment crossed her face as she did so. Quite cheerfully the woman displayed her palms. They were empty!

"What have you done with it?" Polly asked sharply.

"With what?" the woman asked coolly and insolently.

And not a word could they get from her, even though the detective shook her roughly by the shoulder, pleading, exhorting, and demanding. "Dame Garth" was adamant.

"Very well," Miss Story said, through her teeth, "in the morning you may come to your senses. We shall see."

"And, anyway," put in Betty, "since she has not got it on her, she must have dropped it during some part of the chase."

Quite nonchalant, the woman smiled, and suffered herself to be led to the other portion of the castle. She was taking her defeat well, for it was really only a small clue that had led to her downfall.

And the girls, looking at her, could not help thinking what a bold game she had

been playing—a bold game, yet distinctly treacherous and underhanded.

"I'll see to her," Miss Story said. "She shall be locked in my room out of the way."

"I agree. It is the best place now," Mr. Creel answered.

And they waited in the library until the detective had marched the handcuffed woman to her room and locked her in. When she returned she found them discussing the matter excitedly.

She had been gone a long time, but, she explained, she intended to make sure that the captive would remain a captive.

Late though it was, they then searched for the dropped paper. Up and down the corridors, along which the woman had run, they hunted, using candles and pocket torches. But the paper was not to be found.

Miss Story was leading the way, bending low, and searching every inch carefully.

"The woman is clever," she admitted. "How she got rid of that paper, I do not know. It is not hidden upon her, for I have searched."

"Then it must be here, surely," Mr. Creel frowned. "I can think of no other place. There are no secret places round here, and she had little time to pause—"

But Betty Barton, who had been standing by, interrupted him.

"Yes, yes. There is, Mr. Creel. Don't you see, we only searched her hastily when we caught her. Suppose she had hidden it in her hair, or in her shoe?"

"But I have searched!" the detective exclaimed, rather snappishly.

"Ah, yes! But suppose she did not leave it there? Suppose she dropped it somewhere as you were marching her to your room? Suppose she dropped it on the floor, for example, and tucked it under your carpet with her foot?"

The detective was about to deny the possibility of that, but she changed her mind.

"Well, it must be somewhere certainly," she agreed. "That means that we must search practically the whole house, and that will be a long task."

"A long task, and therefore one for the morning," Mr. Creel agreed. "Paula, for one, is nearly asleep. We have done well. You, especially, girls."

"One thing, anyway, is certain," Tess Trelawny yawned. "We've solved the mystery of the woman in white—or rather, Miss Story has."

"Yes, Miss Story has the honour of that," Mr. Creel smiled. "And it was a test of observation. But for Miss Story, that woman might have vanished one night—and vanished, too, with the fortune."

"Or, since she was Dame Garth, she could have walked out in a perfectly natural way," Betty pointed out. "There was no need to vanish. It was a clever scheme. And just fancy that, the woman in white was talking to us a moment after we were chasing her. She changes disguises quickly."

"She certainly does," smiled Mr. Creel. "For I am certain that the real Dame Garth was here first of all, although I do not see much difference between this woman and the person she impersonated. Save, of course, the nose. But I couldn't swear to that."

"It would be interesting to know," Madge Minden said seriously, "just when Dame Garth ceased to be Dame Garth, and became the woman in white in disguise."

They had given up the searching for the night, and were gathered in the hall talking, when Paula Creel, turning, found her aunt on the stairs.

"I heard the noise," Mrs. Creel murmured. "What has happened?"

"We've found her, Mrs. Creel," Polly Linton cried excitedly. "Bowled out the woman in white!"

And when they told her all that had happened, Mrs. Creel was as excited as any of them, and the woman-detective was expanding her chest in pride.

"What happened is perfectly simple," she explained. "Dame Garth, proper, had the use of the west wing. This woman in white secreted herself in the castle, was chased, and hid herself in the west wing. There she found Dame Garth, and, fearing escape, or, better still, realising what an excellent opportunity for searching she would have if she disguised herself as the dame, she impersonated her, and probably even now Dame Garth is hidden in the castle."

It was a plausible theory, and there was a nodding of heads.

"You mean," said Mrs. Creel slowly, and in a rather puzzled manner, "that this impostor is the same person that smuggled

herself aboard the car when the girls arrived?"

"Certainly."

"But it—it can't be! It's impossible!"

"Impossible?" cried the detective sharply.

"What do you mean, Mrs. Creel?"

Paula's aunt flushed slightly at the sharpness of the detective's words.

"I mean," she said, "that up to a second before the girls arrived, I was talking to Dame Garth in the west wing."

Miss Story laughed softly.

"No doubt. That proves nothing, however," she said coldly, "for it was the real Dame Garth to whom you were speaking, the impostor had not then taken place."

And the girls, rather puzzled at Mrs. Creel's inability to see that point, frowned slightly.

"I beg to differ," Mrs. Creel smiled. "The woman to whom I was speaking was the impostor. After you had mentioned the difference between the woman in the west wing and Dame Garth of the portrait, I examined the portrait carefully, and wondered that I could ever have been mistaken. You see, the evening of the girls' arrival I spoke with Dame Garth for quite a while, and she had not a Roman nose, nor had she Dame Garth's large ears with long lobes. Those points I did notice."

The detective seemed about to reply, then bit her lip.

"That being so," she admitted grudgingly, "our theory is wrong. For certainly the woman in white could not have been in two places at once, I suppose."

"Bai Jove, no! Besides, deah geals, wasn't it wather wapid work for her to change into Dame Garth's clothes that day when we chased her?"

There were looks of disappointment on every face, and Mrs. Creel was almost beginning to wish that she had not spoken.

Yet she was quite right, as she well knew. And her evidence was indisputable.

The impostor of Dame Garth was not the woman in white!

"Let's go to your room, Miss Story, and interview the woman. This matter must be settled. We want to know definitely whether the woman in white is still at large."

At first Miss Story seemed inclined to demur, but a moment later she was leading them down to her room.

She unlocked the door, and Mr. Creel lit a match. He groped his way to a candle, then paused.

"The window's open!" he exclaimed sharply.

"The woman—where is she?" the detective cried wildly. "I left her in that chair, handcuffed!"

Blankly they stared about the room, occupied only by the old, heavy furniture. The curtains that hung across the window blew about in the wind.

"She has escaped through the window!" Miss Story exclaimed, and rushed to the open window, peering out.

"Are you sure that she has escaped, Miss Story?" exclaimed Mr. Creel, gazing incredulously round the room. "How could she have made her escape from the chair in which you had tied her?"

"And the woman was handcuffed, too," supplemented Madgo Minden.

"Bai Jove, yes, deah geals!" cried Paula Creel. "How weally intwesting! The woman must be a most extwaordinawy cweature!"

The woman detective jerked her head angrily over her shoulder and glared at Mr. Creel.

"To me it is quite obvious that she is not in the chair at the present moment," she replied coldly. "From the empty chair and the open window, I naturally come to the conclusion that our captive has made her escape through here."

Without waiting for a reply, Miss Story continued her inspection of the snow-covered landscape outside.

And the girls, too, gathered around her. It was quite a long drop down into the snow, but that did not seem to have worried the woman.

In the chair lay ropes twined about, obviously cut through with a knife, but of the missing woman there was no other trace.

"How stupid of me!" exclaimed the detective. "She has slipped through my fingers."

But protestations were of no avail. It was unfortunate and exasperating, but to blame the detective was hardly fair.

Betty Barton turned from the window a little glumly.

"Oh, well, that's the end for to-night!" she said. "It's a pity, but—but it couldn't be helped, I suppose."

And that view was the only one to take. But when the girls went up to their bedroom, tired out, they observed that Betty Barton was unusually quiet and thoughtful.

"What's the matter, Betty?" Polly asked.

The captain of the Fourth turned to her and smiled.

"I was thinking," she said. "Miss Story has failed, and it's up to us to get that woman back."

"Get her back!" scoffed Polly wearily. "A fine chance we stand. Why, by morning, she'll be miles away—across the castle grounds!"

Betty Barton gave a peculiar smile and shook her head.

"I don't think so," she disagreed. "In fact, I know that she didn't escape through the window at all."

"Didn't escape through the window? What on earth do you mean?"

"She meant us to think that she did," Betty pointed out wisely. "But I happened to notice when I looked out of the window that, though the snow was deep and clean, there were no footprints anywhere beneath the window!"

CHAPTER 18.

More Puzzling Than Ever.

"YOU see—no marks at all!"

Betty Barton, captain, crossed to the window and pointed to the white, smooth, undisturbed snow that lay beneath it.

Her five chums nodded eagerly, and their eyes were fixed upon the window above, the window of the room occupied by Miss Lillah K. Story, the woman detective.

"That means, then, that the prisoner Miss Story took could not have escaped by the window," remarked Polly Linton, the madcap of the Fourth.

"That's right, and she didn't escape by the door, either, for Miss Story unlocked that to get into the room. She must have known of some secret passage," Betty replied.

There was a very thoughtful look on her face as, with her chums, she made ready for bed.

In the morning they were up betimes, and made their way to the wide, warm hall of Castle Garth.

"Better not say anything to Miss Story," said Betty, referring to the discovery of the previous night. "She has done her best, and it's awfully bad luck that the woman escaped."

"Yes, I suppose she's done her best. She must be awfully fed up," Polly Linton agreed.

They found Mr. Creel discussing last night's adventures with Miss Story.

Miss Story smiled at the girls through his gold-rimmed glasses, and her eyes seemed very keen indeed.

"Oh, here we are!" observed Mr. Creel. "Miss Story has been searching everywhere for her lost captive."

"I have found nothing," said Miss Story, a little grimly.

"How do you think she escaped, Miss Story?" Betty asked suddenly.

"By the window," came the decisive answer. "She was foolish enough to forget to close it after her."

Betty and her chums exchanged glances, and then suddenly looked at the detective. Miss Story, her face keen and alert, was looking towards the stairs.

"Did you hear that?" she exclaimed. "What was it—a cry of some sort?"

In a moment, before the others had moved, she was rushing up the wide staircase, and they heard her footsteps upon the landing above.

For several moments the girls remained motionless, and Mr. Creel took a stride towards the stairs.

But the silence and immobility of the little group was soon broken, as they started forward at a piercing scream.

"Oh—oh, goodness!" exclaimed Betty, her mouth quite dry. "What—whatever was it?"

And then pattering footsteps sounded above, and flying down the stairs came one of the maids, her face white, her hands outstretched, as she blundered down the stairs three at a time.

"A ghost! I've seen it!" she cried. "Och, it was tur-rible!"

She shuddered and gazed in a frightened manner up the stairs, and now over the balustrades of the landing above the woman detective's head appeared.

"Quick! Quick!" she urged. "The woman in white—"

"A woman in white!" the servant-girl muttered. "Och, it was tur-r-rible!"

The girls needed no second bidding, but were flying up the stairs in a moment, and soon they were beside the panting woman detective, whose hair was ruffled, and in whose eyes was the light of battle.

"I've got this!" she exclaimed, and extended a piece of white material. "It was that servant-girl's first scream I heard. The woman in white was running. I caught her

and snatched this. Then she grappled with me, and flung me down. Goodness, she is strong!" she added ruefully, rubbing her shoulder.

"You saw her! Where did she go?" inquired Mr. Creel anxiously.

But Miss Story shook her head.

"I lost her in that corridor!" came the breathless reply.

And the woman detective pointed to a corridor that ended in a tall window.

On either side were only blank walls, and there was no apparent means of escape by which the white lady could have disappeared.

"My word!" Polly Linton exclaimed. "Then—then she must have slipped through the panelling! Goodness, the whole jolly house is like a rabbit warren!"

Then, all eagerness, they tapped the panelling, tapped every inch of it, but without result. They even searched the stone floor, looking for some sort of trapdoor. But it was not to be found.

The woman in white had vanished as though she were the ghost that the servant had supposed her!

Betty Barton & Co. edged away from the grown-ups, and made their way towards one of the bed-rooms.

For some moments they were engaged in animated conversation.

Then Betty Barton summed up their decision.

"Then we're going to search?" she asked.

"It's decided?"

"Yes, wather!" agreed Paula Creel. "But ought we to act without Miss Stowy, Betty?"

"I don't see why not," Betty answered. "If we do find out anything, we shall tell her, of course; but, you know, we haven't done much to uphold the honour of Morcove, and if we can find out anything off our own bat, it would be rather a feather in our cap."

"Hear, hear!" Polly Linton agreed. "Miss Story is getting all the honour and the glory, and Morcove is nowhere."

"Then you think," said Madge Minden, "that we ought to search?"

"I do," Betty smiled. "What will they say to us when we go back to Morcove if we have to admit that Miss Story did everything?"

And that settled it. None of them had

been unwilling to join in the search, but now their keenness was redoubled.

"All ready?" Betty asked, and she placed her hand upon the door-handle.

Carlessly she turned it, preparing to walk through, but when she pulled the door did not move.

"What's the matter?" Polly asked quickly as she watched her friend pulling and tugging without effect at the handle.

"We're locked in!" Betty exclaimed. "I can't open the door!"

"Locked in?"

Polly pushed by, and Betty relinquished her hold on the handle, for Polly was stronger, and it might be merely a question of a stuck lock, which did not allow the door to open.

But Polly, strong though she undoubtedly was, could not make that door budge.

"We're not going to be done," said Polly Linton firmly. "That woman must be laughing up her sleeve at us the whole time. We've simply got to get out of this room somehow."

Helplessly Betty Barton paced up and down the room. A glance out of the window proved that that means of exit was impossible.

Was there no other way? It seemed as though every room in that house had some secret corridor. Could this room be the sole exception?

But to search for a secret passage was quite out of the question. It would take them a long time at the best, and that was presuming that there was a secret passage. Of that they had no proof.

"There is one way of getting out," Madge Minden suggested. "The lock is on the inside here. Can't we take it off? There must be a screwdriver or a pair of scissors that'd do to remove the screws."

And that suggestion gave them fresh lines upon which to hope.

The lock was of an old-fashioned type, not concealed in the woodwork, and Madge Minden's idea was therefore quite practical. In a few more moments a general search brought to light a tool that would do service as a screwdriver. One by one the screws were withdrawn, and a few minutes later an exit from the room was made possible. Betty held the lantern, but she snuffed the candle that was in it when they started their investigation.

Downstairs they went, cautiously and

quietly, lest their movements should disturb their quarry and warn them of their coming.

From downstairs came no sound to warn them that a marauder was abroad. But that did not lead them to suppose that the woman in white had returned to her hiding-place. Since she had troubled to lock them in, they felt sure that she must have had some reason for so doing, and the only plausible reason was that she wanted to make quite sure that they would not be about to hinder her purpose.

"If she's quiet," Betty whispered, "it may mean that she has heard us, and is listening for us."

For quite a time, therefore, they remained motionless, but still there came no sound.

"I wonder?" Madge Minden remarked suddenly, in a low whisper. "Perhaps she is about; but not downstairs, surely. Isn't it possible that she might be in the west wing, for example. She may quite probably have heard of the capture of the other woman, and may be investigating there."

They had gone hardly a few yards along the dark corridor when Betty motioned with her hand for them to stop.

"I heard someone," she whispered excitedly. "Wait!"

And then she crept softly forward, leaving the others in the corridor. As she went forward a sound that she had heard was repeated, and there was no doubt in their minds then that they were upon the right track.

Tense with excitement, the girls waited.

It was a creaking that told them only too clearly of someone endeavouring to make surreptitious movements. Polly Linton was for hurrying forward then, but Madge Minden, more cool and impassive, managed to persuade them to wait for a few seconds.

They could see Betty dimly as she advanced slowly up the dark corridor, and waited for her to give them a signal. But Betty, like Madge, was cautious. She knew how cunning the woman in white was, and realised that it would be absurd to take action until they were sufficiently close at hand to prevent her escape.

One warning sound now, and she would vanish. A slight movement from Betty told them to advance.

Now they were close upon the doorway whence the sound came. The door was half closed, and Betty paused, considering

what action to take. Her natural impulse was to slam the door and make the woman a prisoner. In an ordinary house that would have been an excellent plan, but Betty knew from experience that it was more than likely that when finally they did open the door they would find the woman gone. So she was puzzled how to make sure of capturing the woman.

Now that she had put the idea of locking the door out of her mind, there was but one other scheme—they must rush into the room and make their capture. Quickly though Betty's mind had worked whilst making these plans, a moment or so had lapsed, and while those moments passed the girls had stood in the doorway.

The breathing of six girls could scarcely be called inaudible, and, although they did not realise it, in the silence of the west wing the breathing was particularly noticeable. Polly Linton, for one, was breathing with the extreme vigour due to excitement.

"Now!" Betty whispered, deciding that at last the time for action had really come.

But even as the girls made a motion forward the door of the room was flung wide. A white-clad figure emerged and flung itself heavily upon the small party. So sudden was the attack that the girls were scattered right and left.

Polly Linton made a wild, plucky grab at their assailant, but too late. Polly's arm was thrust off, and the white figure went fleeing down the corridor. It took the girls scarcely a minute to recover their equilibrium, but in that one moment the woman in white got clear away, and they could find no trace of her.

"That room!" Betty cried suddenly, for from the room on their right there had come a clatter that warned them at once of the hiding-place of the woman they sought. At the room they dashed, but Polly Linton, who was foremost, drew up suddenly as the heavy door was slammed right in her face.

It actually hit her nose, but that small detail Polly Linton did not heed. The woman in white was practically captured, and that was all that mattered then.

"We've got her! We've got her!" Polly Linton exclaimed enthusiastically. "Morcove has scored as usual!"

"Better not make too sure," the captain of the Form cautioned her wisely. "There is probably some secret way out of that room, otherwise she would not have entered it."

"But she slammed the door in our faces, instead of escaping!" Polly protested.

"Ah, yes!" Betty smiled. "But perhaps that was to give herself a chance of escape. It would have been small use escaping from a secret passage if we were to know the location of that passage."

And Polly had to agree that Betty was probably right.

"First thing," Betty said, "someone must hurry out into the grounds. The woman in white dodged us once by climbing down a chimney. She may now dodge us by climbing up one. Paula, you and I must find Miss Story. It's all very well for us to capture the woman in white off our own bats, but we don't want to take the full responsibility, or even the full praise."

Perhaps one or two of them did not agree entirely with what Betty said; but she was their leader, and like good followers they obeyed her command without question.

Trixie Hope and Tess Trelawney were soon scudding down the stairs to reach the open air of the castle ground. If, as Madge supposed, the woman in white were to escape by a chimney, then it was obvious that she would have to make her appearance on the roof.

But to run downstairs and open the massive doors that gave on to the castle grounds was not the work of a second. There were bolts to undo and several flights of stairs to negotiate in darkness. Meanwhile, Betty and Paula were hurrying to Miss Story's apartment, leaving Madge Minden and Polly Linton to wrestle with the woman should she endeavour to escape by the door.

"Hallo!"

Betty drew up sharply as she and Paula Creel reached the corridor in which Miss Story had her room, and Paula soon realised what was the cause of her friend's exclamation of dismay. Across the corridor stretched a rope—a rope that extended from a handle on the door of Miss Story's room to that of the door opposite.

"Bai Jove! Betty, dear, I weally think—" Paula began.

"Look at that!" Betty exclaimed. "We were not the only prisoners she made. If she had stretched that rope in our corridor, we would not have been able to escape. She obviously has more respect for Miss Story's perseverance than for ours."

To untie the rope did not take Betty a moment, and then she tried the handle of the door, nodding as she found that it was

locked. It was what she had expected. Then quite loudly she tapped on the door panel. But from inside there came no response, and Betty tapped again.

She did not hammer too loudly, excited though she was, lest the din of it should arouse other members of the household. After a few more seconds of knocking, however, she began to pound the panel quite loudly. From inside came a sleepy voice:

"Hallo! Who is there?"

A further scrambling, and the sound of someone trying the handle came to them.

"I'm locked in!" exclaimed the voice of Miss Story. "Who is that? What does this mean? I demand an explanation!"

"It is Betty Barton, Miss Story. We have run the woman in white to earth. She is locked in the room in the west wing. Can you come out, Miss Story?"

"If I could find the key—yes. Who has locked me in? Is the key out there?"

Paula, who had been feeling all over the floor searching for it, looked up at Betty and shook her head.

"It's not here," Betty returned to the detective. "The woman in white locked us in, too, but we took off the lock."

For a moment Miss Story did not reply; then her voice came to them sharply.

"I'll make some sheets and things into a rope," she said, "and get out into the grounds. You open the doors for me."

They heard her shuffling about the room, and then went downstairs to find Tess and Trixie. The main door was open, and as they reached it Trixie came rushing in.

"See her?" Betty asked eagerly, but Trixie Hope shook her head negatively.

"No luck!" she grimaced. "Our luck's clean out! But Tess fancied she could see tracks in the snow."

"But we hadn't got a lantern!" Tess pantingly exclaimed.

Betty had the lantern and eagerly she went with the two girls out into the grounds. To find the tracks of which her chums had spoken was not very difficult, and soon they were red-hot on the trail. Holding the lantern high, Betty, with Paula, Tess and Trixie in close attendance, went slowly forward, examining the way inch by inch. The footprints were quite clearly impressed, and they had not the slightest difficulty in following them.

That the woman in white had made them they did not question, for the size of her footprints was well known to the girls.

"This will mean that we shall find where she entered the house," Betty remarked. "It's also proof of which way she escaped. Paula dear, would you mind running back and telling Polly and Madge that they need wait there no longer?"

"Wather not!" And Paula ran off to the castle.

In silence they progressed, until suddenly Tess Trelawney caught Betty by the arm.

A thin mist of snow was falling, and the old-fashioned lantern which Betty held high waved to and fro, sending a yellow beam of light that was cut by dark shadows made by the lantern's sides.

"Who's that—that dark figure?" Tess ejaculated. "She is coming towards us."

The lantern waved to and fro, and Betty peered into the gloom. Then from the darkness ahead came a voice—the voice of Miss Story.

"That you, girls? The lantern here—quick! I have found footprints."

They hurried to her then, and saw that she was examining the footprints that they were following.

"See—see! There they go—along there to the lake!" she murmured.

And Betty, with the swinging lantern, followed, as the detective, bending low, led the way. She was moving quickly, just out of the lantern's beam, and she seemed like some dark animal hopping to and fro.

"See—here!" she exclaimed, coming back to them. "The toe of the imprint digs in deeply, almost as though she were sliding—the heel makes no impression. We must conclude that she was running. Perhaps she heard you give chase—"

"Yes, but—" Betty Barton hurried forward, swinging the lantern. "Look—look!" she ejaculated. "The footprints end—end in the middle of all this snow! What—what can it mean?"

In absolute amazement they stared at those footprints.

"Vanished!" ejaculated the detective, amazed as they. "Truly this is astonishing! I—I confess I am puzzled. The woman must have wings—"

"A human glider," murmured Tess Trelawney. "But—but that's rather impossible, isn't it?"

They turned then, and stared at the marked snow that showed whence they

had come. Carefully they had steered clear of the trail they had followed, but beside it were the marks of their four pairs of feet criss-crossing.

"We must trace them back," the woman-detective decided.

They did so, and Miss Story took the lantern from Betty. Presently she paused, and pointed to a fresh set of marks.

"Those are my footprints," she explained. "I had to make two journeys, for when I came out at first I left the knotted sheets hanging from the window—a handy way in for our quarry, had she been looking for one."

They looked at the double line of footprints and nodded, for they were not particularly interested in them.

Back they traced the footprints to where the woman in white had slid from the roof to the ground. But they learned nothing afresh.

"The trail ends," said Miss Story, pursing her lips. "It ends in absolutely nothing. Let us return."

In the hall of the castle they found Polly, Madge, and Paula, and they told them quickly of the mysterious end of the trail. But though they talked for quite a while, they came to no definite conclusion.

And at last, greatly disappointed, they parted from the detective and went back to their bed-room.

"Seems to me," Polly Linton grumbled, "that we shall never find that woman at all! I wish to goodness we could think what happened to her—how she vanished—where she went!"

"I wonder—" Betty exclaimed suddenly.

"Hallo! What do you wonder?"

"Oh, just something that occurred to me—some way in which she could have escaped. Really, I suppose it—it's rather silly—"

And she relapsed into silence. Eagerly her chums pressed her to share her theory with them, however crude it might be, but Betty shook her head.

"It's only a surmise," she said. "I may be wrong—"

And that was all that she would say. Nothing further could they elicit from her, though they repeated their questions anxiously and eagerly.

Whatever was Betty's theory she kept it to herself.

CHAPTER 19.

Caught!

"IF only we could lay a trap."
Breakfast was in progress at Castle Garth when Mr. Creel expressed that wish.

The girls had explained to him their adventures of the previous night, and it was when they had finished that he spoke.

"A trap?" Mrs. Creel queried.

The woman-detective lowered her coffee cup and regarded him thoughtfully.

"What manner of trap would you suggest?"

"Bells," he replied. "Suitable wiring and bells would provide sufficient warning, and we could hem the woman in; or possibly, before the trap comes to her knowledge, we might discover her whereabouts."

"The idea had occurred to me," Miss Story replied, "for it is a system that is used quite a great deal in trapping criminals. As a matter of fact, I have a very large battery and bells complete in that bag I brought with me."

"Oh!"

Almost involuntarily the girls gave vent to their ejaculation of surprise.

They looked at one another, and the same thought was in every mind. Clearly they remembered now how heavy the detective's bag had been, although they could laugh at the thought now they remembered that they had suspicions of her.

Upon what grounds their suspicions were based they could not have explained, but at the time they had wondered greatly at the bag's heaviness, without surmising as to its contents. That heaviness was now clearly explained since the bag contained such heavy things as batteries and bells.

"If one of you girls would be good enough to go to my room and fetch the bag," Miss Story asked.

It was Polly who went, and a few moments later she returned, bowed down with the weight of the bag.

"Phew!" she gasped, placing it on the floor. "I should say it is heavy! I always thought I was pretty strong, but it is as much as I can do to carry that!"

Miss Story held out the key, and Polly, taking it, clicked open the lock. She pulled the top of the bag open, stared inside, and drew back her head sharply.

"My only aunt!" she ejaculated.

Then as everyone turned in amazement, she groped inside the bag.

With a look of absolute stupefaction on her face, she held up for their inspection two large lumps of old brick.

"What—what are they?" the detective exclaimed. "You did not find them in my bag, surely! Who put them there?"

She jumped to her feet, knocking back the chair in her excitement.

Polly Linton, without considering the carpet tipped up the bag. To the horror of Mrs. Creel and to the amazement of the others, there crashed on to the carpet the most peculiar assortment of broken bricks and stones imaginable.

"But the batteries—the bells!" ejaculated Miss Story. "Where are they—what have you done with them?"

"I?" Polly exclaimed. "I haven't opened the bag till this minute!"

"I'm sorry," Miss Story apologised. "It was stupid of me to accuse you. This is the doing of the woman in white, I suppose."

The expression on Miss Story's face was grim to the extreme.

"Apart from knocking our scheme on the head," she said, "I have lost those expensive batteries."

"That, Miss Story," Mr. Creel hastened to assure her, "is my loss, and I shall make it good. I will send at once for some new batteries to replace yours."

The woman-detective thanked him, and, for a moment, the matter ended there.

But breakfast was not destined to be concluded without further incident. The toast and marmalade course had just been reached when a rather urgent tap came at the door.

They turned to find the cook standing in the doorway.

"Why, Parkins!" Mrs. Creel exclaimed, surprised by the domestic's entrance.

"There's some very very funny happenings going on, ma'am," the cook said, in a flustered manner. "Food's vanishing something terrible!"

"Vanishing! How do you mean?"

"Every day I find things missing," the stout cook declared. "Systematic stealing, that's what it is."

And while the others expressed their amazement, Miss Story smiled.

"That woman in white, of course," she said. "She must live somehow. I don't

suppose she brought a supply of food with her, so she appropriates yours."

"Just what I thought," Mrs. Parkins agreed. "I said so to-day. I says, 'Mary, you mark my word,' I says; 'it's that woman, or I'm a Dutchy!'"

"I wonder," Betty exclaimed suddenly—"I wonder if we could trap her by the missing food?" she asked.

"Trap her?" Miss Story narrowed her eyes. "Yes, I wonder!" she mused.

"As a matter of fact," the cook interrupted, "that's just what I was a-goin' to suggest. You see, I had been suspecting it for a day or two, and I ses to Mary: 'You watch me; I'll do 'er!'"

"Ah!" Miss Story nodded, as the cook waxed eloquent, one arm on hip, the other extended. "I have an assistant!"

"Yes," the cook nodded, "I know a trick or two all right, and I have bowled her out now."

"You—you've bowled her out?" the detective exclaimed. "That is splendid!"

"Well, not exactly run her to earth," the cook qualified. "That's not my line. But I've laid a trap so that you can catch her."

Flattered at the excitement she had caused, Mrs. Parkins smiled quietly.

"She came this morning," she went on, "and took one of my fruit pies. I dare say she thought she was mighty clever, but she's left a trail of fruit-juice behind her."

The detective turned her head sharply. "You are sure of this?" she exclaimed, and murmurs came from the others at table.

"Sure as eggs are eggs!" the cook beamed. "I have followed it part of the way, but me and Mary couldn't track it beyond the library."

There was a murmur of excitement then, and there would have been small cause for wonder had the cook shown signs of developing a swollen head.

"Excellent!" said Miss Story. "You have certainly done well. This may mean the capture of the woman in white. But we must act at once, and perhaps we may be fortunate enough to discover her attempting to obliterate that tell-tale track of fruit pie."

But there was no need for her to urge them. They were all upon their feet and, leaving fragments of toast and marmalade, and half-finished cups of coffee, they followed in the wake of the excited detective.

That Miss Story had been startled by the cook's announcement was plain to see, and they felt certain that at last they were near to discovering the true identity of that mysterious woman.

But to hurry about in a herd would probably alarm the woman, and give her time to escape, so Betty warned her chums to speak only in whispers; and almost in silence they reached the library.

Mrs. Parkins' plan was patently successful, although it could hardly be said to have improved either the floor or the carpet. The fruit-juice trail stood out clearly on the carpet and floor, easy to follow to its termination. Quite abruptly it ended under the large table in the library, and, search though they did, they could find no trace of it elsewhere in the room.

"You see," Betty exclaimed sharply, "it ends under the table here. This is where that trapdoor is."

"Where I was dragged down," Trixie Hope nodded, with a little shudder.

She looked appealingly at the detective, for it was Miss Story who had solved the mystery of Trixie Hope's remarkable disappearance.

"That is the spot," the woman-detective agreed. "It certainly seems that she uses that means of escape, although it is rather unusual for her to do so, since the library is so often occupied."

"It certainly does seem remarkable," Mr. Creel agreed. "But is it not probable that she has some means of watching us, and of learning our whereabouts? Her task was difficult in the extreme, for not only had she to avoid us, but she had also to be wary of the cook's keen eyes. Cooks are not kindly disposed towards people who steal their fruit pies," he smiled.

"She is clever enough for anything," admitted Miss Story ungrudgingly. "And from the facts we have, it seems tolerably clear that it is through this trap door that the woman escaped."

In a moment she was on her knees, busily engaged in unfastening the catch that held the cunningly concealed trapdoor, then she stood back as she raised it.

"Be careful!" she warned. "She may be lying in ambush for us, and we won't want any of our number kidnapped. I will lead; you others keep close to me."

Then, with the utmost caution, she de-

scended into the dark tunnel, Mr. Creel handing her matches.

Eagerly the girls followed her, with no fear of danger or of failure.

"We've got her now!" Polly whispered, as, by the light of the woman-detective's match, they could trace distinctly the fruit-pie stains.

Miss Story stopped suddenly and pointed to the ground.

"Beaten!" she exclaimed. "It seems almost as though the woman in white realised the trap, and stopped the juice dripping."

The detective struck another match and glanced at the wall, smiling with triumph as she did so.

"I was wrong," she said. "See, there is a juice-stain on the side of the wall here."

Match after match was lit without their discovering any sign of any opening.

It was Miss Story, however, who solved the mystery. She pointed to the roof of the tunnel in which they crouched, and there they saw another fruit-stain.

"I might have guessed," she whispered. "Entering a secret opening in the wall would not stain the wall. But you see there is an opening in the roof; the juice was splashed on to the wall as the pie was raised."

She pushed at the stone slab about her head, but could not make it move, and the others took turns at moving their hands about in an endeavour to find a secret catch.

When they had all tried the detective made another attempt, and with more fortune than before, for this time there was a sudden click, and she was able to push the slab upwards.

As the slab moved upwards she jumped back, urging the girls to do the same.

"She may jump out," she warned them. "Stand back!"

They did so, but nothing happened, and, giving Betty Barton the matches, Miss Story placed her hands on the ledge of the opening above, and, with the aid of Polly, scrambled inside. No sooner had she disappeared than one by one the others followed.

In amazement they stared round at the small apartment in which they found themselves. There was a long window that had recently been cleaned, and a fireplace which had obviously not been used

for years, but the trap-door was the only means of exit and entrance. It was a dummy room, the existence of which they had not known.

"My hat!" Polly Linton exclaimed, in sheer amazement, and ran to the window looking on to the courtyard.

"To think," she exclaimed, "that this room existed unbeknown to any of us! What room is next door, I wonder?"

They could only surmise by glancing into the courtyard, and then they could make no very accurate guess.

Since the room was lighted by only the one window it was quite dim, but, glancing around it, Betty discerned a heap in the corner—a heap of what she knew not, for an old tarpaulin covered it.

"Old rubbish, I suppose," Madge Minden demurred.

"Rubbish?" Betty cried excitedly. "Look—look! It's someone hiding! That is a hand I can see!"

And they, too, could see the hand that peeped from one corner of the tarpaulin.

"Great Scott!"

"The woman in white!" Polly Linton shrieked excitedly.

The detective jumped forward and pulled back the tarpaulin sheet. The next moment she dropped it, and, standing back, the girls stood beside her, speechless with amazement, for in the corner of the room, with a partly eaten fruit pie beside her, lay a gagged woman, bound hand and foot.

That in itself was amazing, but not so amazing as the identity of the woman.

From seven throats came the same words:

"Dame Garth!"

And the impostor Dame Garth stared back at them.

CHAPTER 20.

Cross Purposes.

IT took them several minutes to recover from their stupefied amazement, and then the detective cut the woman's bonds, removed the gag, and helped her to her feet.

The woman did not speak at once, but stood glaring at the girls, rubbing her wrists where the bonds had cut them, and stretching her aching limbs.

"How long have you been here?" Miss

Story demanded, when the woman had recovered somewhat from her stiffness.

"Since the night you captured me," the impostor Dame Garth returned sulkily.

"Did you escape, then?" the detective asked.

But the woman did not reply, indicating that she was thirsty.

"Shall I get her some water?" Betty asked. "We ought to remain here, oughtn't we, to capture the woman in white if she returns."

"The woman in white?" The impostor uttered the words sharply.

"You know her?" Miss Story asked quickly.

The other shrugged her shoulders.

"It was the woman in white who captured me when you left me tied in the armchair," she said. "She has locked me in here since, and visited me every day for the purpose of bringing me food."

Miss Story smiled grimly.

"Then we can trap her yet," she said. "I will hide under the tarpaulin there, and capture her when she enters."

It seemed an excellent plan, and one that might well succeed. But Betty Barton shrewdly pointed out the danger.

"She might overpower you, Miss Story," she said. "I think it would be better if we all waited here and caught her as she came up through the trap-door."

But at that suggestion the impostor Dame Garth laughed.

"Often she comes only once in twenty-four hours," she smiled. "You intend sleeping and living here until she comes?"

And they realised that the suggestion was not practical.

"Well, we're going to capture her somehow," Betty declared. "We're near to doing it now, and we're going to succeed."

"But—but if she only comes here once

in twenty-four hours, where does she hide all day long?"

"Yes, where indeed?" Trixie Hope queried. "For I'm pretty sure this is where she put me? Where did she get to all day, then, if she wasn't in here with me?"

And it seemed that they were as far away as ever from discovering the whereabouts and identity of the mysterious woman in white.

They took the impostor Dame Garth back to the library, and waited while she drank and ate. To Mrs. Creel they had told the story, and with what patience they could muster they waited for the woman they had just captured to finish her meal and answer their questions.

"I should like to know," Miss Story began, "how you were taken prisoner? I left you tied in the armchair in my room."

Leaning back in the armchair, the woman they had once believed Dame Garth told them what she could remember of her capture.

"I was left a prisoner," she explained, "tied hand and foot. The next thing I knew after the detective here had gone was that someone else was in the room. Something was flung right over my eyes, but I had a glimpse of a white figure."

An "Oh!" of excitement went round the table, and no one could have had a more interested audience than the woman had at that moment.

"Yes, yes!" Polly Linton prompted eagerly.

"And then—then——"

"Then," shrugged the woman, "I was half-led and half-carried to this place, and I got a nasty bump on the head, too, when I was pushed in here."

"That is all you can remember?" Miss Story asked quickly, and the woman inclined her head in assent.

"Since that time," she supplemented,

"she has brought me food, and tried to make me tell her the whereabouts of the fortune."

"You know it?" Polly asked quickly; but the woman gave only an enigmatical reply.

"That paper you had when we captured you—what happened to that?" Miss Story asked. "Where did you hide that?"

The impostor smiled blandly.

"What paper?" she asked.

"Oh, well," Polly Linton said huffily, "she needn't tell us! But one thing is certain, we know of the woman in white's hiding-place."

"Yes, and—we can trap her," nodded Miss Story. "It will not be difficult, I imagine."

But she did not outline her plan until they had locked their captive safely away out of hearing. And before that scheme of hers could be put into operation, they had to wait for the bells and batteries that Mr. Creel had sent the car for.

When they did arrive, some hours later, the girls and Miss Story crept down into the tunnel, and there placed the wires, cleverly concealing them.

"And now," the detective murmured in triumph, "we shall be able to trap the woman in white. I have placed wires in the chimney out of sight, and other wires inside the trap-door. When she enters she will hear nothing, but there will be one bell in your room and one in mine. It will save us sitting up."

"Both bells will ring, then?" Polly asked.

"Yes; and make sure that you cannot be locked in your rooms, girls. Directly your bell rings, hurry downstairs to the tunnel."

And the plans were made.

"I wonder if that key the woman in white stole had anything to do with the mystery?" frowned Paula Creel. "Uncle

says that the secret room was marked on the piece of plan that the woman in white stole."

"Doubtless that is how she discovered its whereabouts," the detective smiled. "The woman in white is certainly very smart—an enemy worthy of our best efforts at detection."

And that was a sentiment with which the girls readily agreed.

Later in the day, the impostor Dame Garth was brought into the room where she had been a prisoner and searchingly questioned to know where she had hidden the real Dame Garth. But she maintained a smiling, impenetrable silence.

"Then," Mr. Creel said, "why not tell us where that piece of paper is you had when you were captured?"

"I don't know where it is myself," the woman returned sulkily. "But you will never find it, and if you found it you could never solve its cipher. Only two people know that cipher—Dame Garth and I."

"Ah!"

They realised the reason for her silence. Dame Garth evidently had some clue to the whereabouts of the fortune, and that clue this woman wanted to keep secret.

In the end Mr. Creel took a firm step, threatening the woman with arrest.

And then angrily, and with the realisation of defeat, she told them where the real Dame Garth was a prisoner.

"She is at Glendon's Folly," came the unwilling reply.

What excitement there was then when they learned that the last of the Garths was a captive in the old farmhouse on the hills—a farmhouse that was supposed to be haunted, a place avoided by everyone.

Even those who were not superstitious looked away from it as they passed, for in its state of ruin it presented a sinister and forbidding appearance. Nothing would

content them then but that the car should be got ready to go to Dame Garth's rescue.

Nor was Mr. Creel at all reluctant to agree to their suggestion. In fact he would have countenanced no other course.

"Miss Story had better remain with this woman, however," he said, "and doubtless she would choose to remain in her room, where, if the warning bell rings, she can hear it," he added, in an undertone.

What a ride it was, then—over the snow-clad hills, over narrow, treacherous bridges, till the old ruined farmhouse came in sight.

And more sinister than ever it looked with snow covering the shattered roof and marking the broken windows. From one of the chimneys a tell-tale wisp of smoke curled.

Out of the car they tumbled, and were soon plying through deep snow to the ruined farmhouse.

The door was fastened, but entrance by one of the old windows was simple, and Polly Linton accomplished it quickly. A moment later she had the door open to admit her friends.

As they went, strangely silent, awed by the eeriness of this lonely, fearsome ruin. How hollow sounded their footsteps on the broken stone flags!

It seemed scarcely credible that in this place there could be live people. They could well believe that it had the reputation of being haunted, for the howling wind whistled through glassless windows and uncovered roof.

"Which way?" Polly Linton asked, almost in a whisper, for even high-spirited Polly was overcome with awe at the weirdness of this place.

Dusk was falling, and they had difficulty in finding their way about: but it was the sound of someone singing that eventually guided them to the wardress of Dame

Garth. They took her completely by surprise, for Polly Linton rushed at a door, beneath which a chink of light showed, and threw it open. The singing stopped abruptly, and by the light of a candle on the table they saw a thin-faced woman staring at them as though they were ghosts, momentarily bereft of speech.

"Your game's up!" Polly Linton assured the woman. "It's no use your struggling. We've caught the woman who is posing as Dame Garth. Where have you hidden the real Dame Garth?"

"Yes, it's no good struggling," Mr. Creel assured her, but the woman was far too amazed to struggle. "Hold her, girls, while I search!"

And Mr. Creel, without waiting for the woman to reply, hurried through the door on the other side of the room. Scarcely a minute later he returned, accompanied by an old woman who blinked almost unbelievably at her rescuers.

"Can it be—can it be?" was all she could mutter, as though she had begun to believe that rescue was quite out of the question.

Then they explained everything to her, and, completely overcome, she wept.

"And—and the fortune has not been found?" she quavered.

"Not yet," Mr. Creel returned, "but you have some clue, I believe."

"Clue?" The woman looked at him. "All I know," she said, "is that the fortune is in a chimney in the west wing."

CHAPTER 21.

Empty.

"A CHIMNEY! Yes, but which?" The girls were back at Castle Garth, and now, in the library, they were discussing the treasure. Dame Garth was there, her wardress, and the impostor who had taken her place. Miss Story it was who made the

exclamation as she walked restlessly up and down the library.

"You will never find it," the impostor Dame Garth explained sneeringly. "I searched every chimney in the west wing without finding it, why should you succeed?"

"You searched every chimney?" Betty Barton exclaimed.

"Every chimney in the west wing," the impostor Dame Garth assented.

"Yet," Betty interrupted excitedly, "you did not know of the existence of that secret room. That is the west wing, and it has a fireplace."

"Yes, wather!" Paula Creel chimed in. "And no fireplace is without a chimney."

"A secret room!" Dame Garth ejaculated. "What secret room is this?"

Then they told her of their discovery, and she leaned forward excitedly.

"That room has a fireplace," she exclaimed, "yet this woman has climbed down every chimney without finding a room! What can it mean but that there is no chimney to that fireplace—a dummy fireplace?"

"A dummy fireplace! As she echoed the words, the woman-detective stopped abruptly. "Of course," she cried excitedly—"of course—fools that we were not to have thought of it!—a dummy fireplace."

Then she laughed, and the others smiled, certain that the mystery was at last solved.

"It amused me," she exclaimed, "to think that this woman in white, who has been so clever, has known of that room yet never guessed its secret. But we must be quick. We—"

She broke off and stepped suddenly to the door, listening.

Surprised, they watched her as she turned the door-handle and glared into the passage.

"I thought I heard someone. I must have been mistaken."

"Great Scott!" Mr. Creel ejaculated. "Don't say that that woman has heard our secret!"

But the words were scarcely out of his lips when the bell on the wall rang clearly and penetratingly.

"The bell—the bell!" Polly cried, and she rushed for the trapdoor in the floor. In a second she had opened it, and was tumbling down it into the tunnel below. One after the other the rest scrambled down, Miss Story with them. Now Polly had the trapdoor of the secret room open, and the bell buzzed forth anew. They rushed after her into the dark room, and someone lit a match; but a groan of disappointment went up, for the room was empty.

"The bell must have warned her as it warned us," Madge Minden exclaimed. "Never mind, now is the time to search for the treasure."

To get a light did not take them long, and then Polly Linton scrambled up the dark chimney, tapping the walls with one hand as she clung to the iron bars of the chimney with the other.

Betty climbed up after her with the lantern, and together they searched. The others below waited anxiously to hear the result, but the search was not proving as easy as they had anticipated.

It was Polly who made the discovery, and her whoop of joy was a merry sound to those who waited below.

"A key-hole!" she cried. "Oh, if only we had that key!"

A scuffle came from below, and they found Miss Story beside them.

"Well done!" she exclaimed. "I think our searching is at an end."

"Never mind about the key! We can force this slab all right."

And that prophecy proved correct. It was hard work, but an improvised crow-bar enabled them to force the side of the

huge stone slab. It was difficult work standing on the rungs of the chimney, but it was accomplished at last, and Betty Barton swung the lamp high to peer into the dark interior of the small room thus revealed.

"An old, iron-bound chest!" she exclaimed. "Hurrah, girls, we have found it!"

Polly, as usual, was first inside the room, and it was so small and pokey that it was scarcely possible for the others to crowd in.

"You cannot lift it by yourself," the detective exclaimed. "It's bound to be heavy."

But Polly Linton had already commenced to lift it. She gave a tug, and then almost toppled over, for the case was as light as a feather.

As she fell back the case rolled over on its side, and from the others came a cry of disappointment.

"Empty!"

They stared in a stupefied manner at the old chest, and then the detective voiced the sentiment of them all.

"Someone has come ahead of us!" she exclaimed.

"The impostor Dame Garth," Madge Minden said quickly. "She said that we would never find it."

"Then—then perhaps we are not too late," Polly Linton said hopefully. "Perhaps she was just packing it up when we caught her. If the impostor Dame Garth got in ahead of us, there is still a chance."

But Betty Barton, who was examining the interior of the chest, turned her head at Polly's words.

"It was not the impostor Dame Garth who sent us," she said. "Look!"

They stooped beside her, looking at the scratches on the chest to which she was pointing. In the chest lay a small scrap of iron, and it was that that had been used

to scratch on the woodwork the words that Polly Linton read aloud:

"'Au revoir.—THE WOMAN IN WHITE.'"

There was silence for a moment until the detective spoke.

"The woman in white!" she exclaimed. "But why 'au revoir'? Why not 'adieu'?"

"Au revoir," murmured Trivic Hope—"till we meet again."

Madge Minden laughed heartily.

"She probably meant 'adieu,'" she said. "I don't suppose we shall ever see her or hear of her again."

It was some time before they could reconcile themselves to the true state of affairs. They had lost the struggle now, unless, as Polly Linton wildly suggested, they should search the vicinity; and the woman-detective supported that suggestion.

"There is a chance," she said, holding her head hopefully—"just a chance. She must go to the station, surely; but she will have to walk. It is dark now."

"And that," Mr. Creel interposed, "is her salvation, for on such a night amongst the hills we should stand but a poor chance of finding anyone, especially a person who feared pursuit and acted accordingly. I know how you feel, Miss Story. Naturally you would have liked to succeed. I should have liked you to, but you have done your best." And Miss Story bowed her head as the others endorsed Mr. Creel's opinion.

Later in the evening they helped the woman-detective to collect the electric batteries and wires, and she spent the rest of the evening packing.

"I feel rather sorry for her, in a way," Polly Linton remarked. "And if there is still a ghost of a chance of catching the woman in white, we ought to give Miss Story the credit. It might have meant a

lot to her career had she been able to solve this mystery."

"It would," Betty agreed. "And we'll give her a jolly good send-off in the morning."

Poor Dame Garth, completely upset at news of their discovery, proved difficult to control, and there was no love in the hearts of any of them for the woman in white, although one and all admitted that she had outwitted them thoroughly.

CHAPTER 22.

Betty's Triumph.

THE mystery of Castle Garth was finished, and there would be no more searching for the hidden fortune. In the morning Polly Linton carried the detective's bag down to the waiting car, grimacing humorously at the weight of it.

"Yes, I think they are even heavier than my own batteries," Miss Story remarked.

Then they shook hands with her, one and all, giving her a rousing cheer. Betty Barton went to see that the windows of the car were completely closed.

"All right now," she smiled, looking through at the woman-detective.

"Yes, all right now, thanks! Good-bye!"

They waved their handkerchiefs until the car disappeared from sight down the bend of the long drive, then they went into the castle.

"Have you got that note she gave you, Polly?" Betty asked.

Polly Linton, who had been thinking of something else, started.

"Yes, here it is," she said. "It's for Mr. Creel. He's out at the moment, isn't he?"

Betty nodded, and took the letter from her churn.

"He's only in the grounds," she said. "You'd better take it to him."

"It's not urgent," Polly assured her. "She asked me to put it on his desk."

But Betty was hardly listening. She turned back into the castle grounds, and the others followed her, rather wonderingly. They found Mr. Creel talking to the head-gardener, and Betty gave him the note.

"Oh, this is from Miss Story?" he asked. "The address of her chief, I suppose. I asked her to let me have it, because I wished to write praising her services."

He opened the note, and stared in some surprise as he found that it contained nothing but blank sheets of paper wound round a key.

"What—what's this?" he ejaculated. He looked again at the paper in which it had been wrapped, and he read aloud the words that were pencilled upon it. "The key of my room, in which I have left you a small present."

"A small present!" the girls echoed.

"That's very nice of her," Mr. Creel murmured. "Come along; we must see what it is."

Smilingly he led them up to the room that Miss Story had just vacated, unlocked the door, and entered.

But he got no further than the doorway, and the girls, gathered around him, stared, surprised as he at the batteries and bells that lay on the table.

"But I bought those for her!" he said. "Why has she left them?"

"But—but what did she take, then? The bag was fearfully heavy. She said the batteries were in it!" Polly exclaimed.

"Fearfully heavy? Betty Barton asked quietly.

"Yes, fearfully!"

"Almost as heavy as though it were packed with gold?" Betty asked, approaching the table.

"Packed with gold! What—what do you mean?" they cried.

For reply, Betty Barton pointed to the back of the open door.

Eagerly they turned round, and it was a wonder they did not collapse. They certainly looked as though they might do so.

For on the door hung a loose, white gown, with a white hood. On the gown was pinned a sheet of paper, on which, in printed letters, were the words:

"THANK YOU FOR AN ENJOYABLE HOLIDAY, AND A STILL MORE ENJOYABLE BAG OF GOLD INGOTS. A HAPPY NEW YEAR!—LILLAH K. STORY 'in white.'"

They read it, word by word, almost in a whisper, then looked at one another blankly.

"Beaten!" groaned Polly Linton.

"But how did she get the treasure in the end?" Trixie Hope asked wonderingly.

"I can't answer that," Betty Barton replied. "You will have to ask her when she comes back."

At that the others blinked, and stared at Betty as though she had suddenly taken leave of her senses.

"Come back!" exclaimed Polly. "She will do a lot of coming back!"

"But I know she will come back," Betty smiled. "She will come back as fast as the chauffeur can drive her. You see," she added, with a twinkle in her eyes, "I took the trouble to fix the windows in the car so that she couldn't open them, and then locked both doors—Ha!"

She raised her hand, and from the direction of the drive came the sound of a horn.

Down the stairs they tumbled, to find the chauffeur at the door.

"This lady was locked in, sir," he said, "and you didn't give me the key."

With her friends standing round the doorway, Betty Barton unlocked it,

smiling at the glaring, ferocious-looking "detective" inside.

One last attempt at escape she made as the door opened. But they were too numerous for her, and while the others held her tightly, Polly Linton took the key from her and opened the bag.

At last they had found the treasure, and at last the woman in white was their prisoner!

That night Betty Barton was their heroine, and she had to tell them how she had come to suspect that the detective was really the woman in white.

"I didn't like to say anything at first," she explained, "because I wasn't quite sure, and it sounded rather absurd. But you remember those footsteps in the snow, when we were locked in our room and Miss Story was locked in hers?"

"Yes, yes," they prompted her.

"The footsteps of the woman in white ended abruptly, but half-way back they branched off to the detective's set. There was more than one set of them."

"She explained that, though," said Madge Minden. "She said that she'd walked towards us, then realised that she had left her window open or something, and so went back to shut it, and came along to us afterwards. That would account for there being two sets of steps."

"That is what she would have us believe," Betty smiled. "There were only two sets of steps, but if her story were true there should have been three sets, and there weren't."

"My word—no!" Madge exclaimed. "I did not think of that."

"And since there were only two sets of steps," Betty went on, "it means that she walked from the middle of the grounds to her window and back again."

"Moreover," Betty pointed out, "she couldn't have dropped from the sky into

the middle of the castle grounds. She must have walked there. And the only other footstaps near were those of the woman in white, so you can see what happened. She walked in the woman in white's shoes until she was near to her window, then changed into the 'detective's' shoes, clambered into her room, answered me when I called her, and went back into the snow. Then before we reached her she went along, making further impressions with the woman in white's shoes by pressing them in with her hands."

And the more they discussed the things that had happened, the more they realised how it had been possible for the detective to play the dual rôle; but that dual rôle was finished now, and she was safely bound, under lock and key.

The mystery of Castle Garth was solved,

and the real Dame Garth found herself richer by many thousands of pounds. Nor did she forget that it was to Betty Barton she owed the fact that Miss Story had not been allowed to escape. Thence onwards it was a merry holiday indeed, a holiday of the best sort, with skating, tobagganing, and all the winter games. But even the best of holidays comes to an end some time, and the day came when Betty Barton and Co. had to part company with Castle Garth.

But they did not part from each other, for the remainder of their holidays were to be spent at Betty Barton's home in Lancashire, and there they were to encounter experiences, not perhaps so weird, but certainly equally as thrilling and exciting as those encountered at Castle Garth.



Three more splendid numbers of "The Schoolgirls' Own" Library will be on sale on Thursday, April 5th.
See page iii of cover for further particulars.

THE CHARM COLLECTOR.

It is strange what a fascination collecting things has for nearly everybody. Most of us have, at some time or other, collected coins, stamps, birds' eggs, china marks, miniature door knockers, postcards, cigar bands, or something else of little material value.

Many years ago picture postcard collecting became a veritable craze, and very few girls there were who did not boast of albums full of views of famous theatre stars, holiday resorts, animals, flowers, etc.

Picture postcards are still with us, but the craze for collecting them and putting them in albums is comparatively dead. Other fashions have supplanted them, and to-day there is a distinct demand amongst collectors for something that is either beautiful and artistic on the one hand, or grotesque and weird on the other.

Amongst the latter variety many of the lucky charms and mascots can be numbered, and a good many girl collectors definitely select weird specimens only and decorate a shelf or mantel-piece with them. There is something to be said for their choice, for the strange-coloured, misshapen, unreal-looking assortment of cats, dogs, and other figures provokes many a smile, and one gets a sort of affection for these Bonzos, Dismal Desmonds, Felixes, etc.

One of the queerest of such collections I ever saw was composed entirely of cats. In the very centre of them all was a great pink, long-necked, grinning feline, whose very eyes seemed to twinkle with mirth. Its big, pink bow-tie was even several inches wider than its smile, and as it sat contentedly amongst a host of medium-sized, small, and even diminutive cats, its smile seemed to denote a smug satisfaction at being king of such an unusual crowd of subjects.

Another collection I very much admired was composed entirely of Felixes. Here again there were cats of all sizes, from Grandfather Felix to Baby Felix.

This type of mascot is the up-to-date notion of the lucky charm. Many of us wear small metal reproductions of them on bracelets or chains without any great hope that they will bring luck in their train. It is just a survival of an ancient custom when charms were worn not so much for ornament as to bring luck, health, or prosperity to the wearer, or to guard her against some form of evil.

Of course, in this country we are too enlightened nowadays to believe in such nonsense, but there are plenty of less educated peoples abroad who even to-day cherish talismen to bring luck or defy evil. A collection of such charms provides a most absorbing hobby, especially if you can obtain the history of each one.

They are not necessarily expensive to buy, but nevertheless need searching for. Sometimes you will run across one in a dusty second-hand shop, looking curiously out of place amongst rickety chairs and odds-and-ends of furniture.

I came across one ugly figure of this kind recently. It was carved out of a solid piece of wood, and represented a hairless red man with a diamond-shaped head, a muscular body, hands resting clenched in front of the body, ankles, wrists and upper arms adorned by bracelets, and with a kind of moustache growing out of the side of his nose.

He originated in New Guinea, where the natives are extremely superstitious, and was supposed to bring happiness to the wearer and to scare away all evil spirits.

But he is beautiful in comparison with the Hei-Tiki, a green-coloured lucky charm carved out of jade, whose most striking feature apart from his quaint lack of beauty, are the red rings around his eyes. To describe his shape is impossible; he is like the green demon of a nightmare, yet somehow those red eyes give him a kindly, winsome look.

His home is in New Zealand, where he is worn by the Maoris, who hand them down from generation to generation, believing that good qualities are passed on from one wearer to another. Hei-Tiki has a great reputation for scaring off witches.

If you are collecting lucky charms with a history, the common swastika must have a place, for it is one of the oldest and widest-used luck-bringers in existence. Its chief gifts to the wearer are good fortune and long life, and it has been used as long as history tells in all quarters of the globe.

This remark applies to a great many lucky charms, and the greater their antiquity the more their owners seem to believe in their magic power.

NEXT MONTH'S NUMBERS! ORDER NOW!

ASK FOR
"THE
SCHOOLGIRLS'
OWN"
4d.
LIBRARY.



WILL
BE ON
SALE ON
THURSDAY,
APRIL 5th,
1928.



**You Must Not Miss These Splendid
Companion Volumes!**



A splendid school story specially written for "The Schoolgirls' Own Library," by the author of "A Cheat Against Her Will," "In Peril for Her School," "How Could She Trust Them," etc., etc.

NOW ON SALE!

Here is a circus story that is different. You will be enthralled and interested in the adventures of Joan Cleaveland of the circus and her rather headstrong sister Sheila, about whom there is a strange mystery.

**PRICE FOURPENCE
EACH!**

