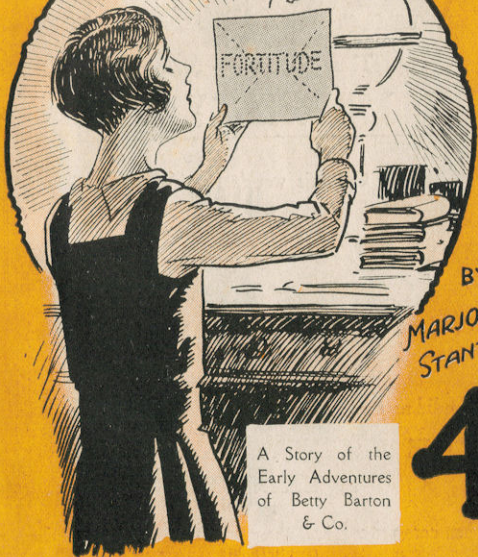


THE HUNDRED GUINEA PRIZE!

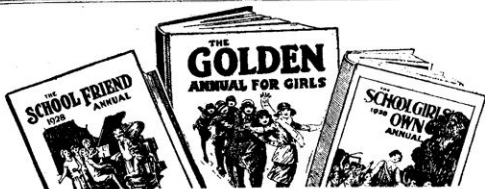


BY
MARJORIE
STANTON

A Story of the
Early Adventures
of Betty Barton
& Co.

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THE HUNDRED GUINEA PRIZE!

A Magnificent Tale of the Early Adventures of
BETTY BARTON & Co., of Morcove School.

By MARJORIE STANTON.

Author of "THE MORCOVE TREASURE-HUNTERS," "MADGE MINDEN'S SECRET,"
"WHEN MORCOVE MOVED," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

Mr. Barton Speaks Out.

THE mean street was not the sort of place where one would have expected to come upon such a well-dressed group of schoolgirls. It was the poorest part of a large town in the county of Lancashire—a double row of grimy little houses forming a portion of the awful wilderness of brick and mortar.

Yet here they stood, these jolly-looking schoolgirls, in the smartest tailor-made costumes, and wearing the particular style of becoming hat that formed part of the outfit for Morcove School, North Devon.

A week to-day, and these girls would be feeling the salt wind of the Atlantic upon their faces as they alighted from the train that would have brought them back to another term of work and play at Morcove after the Christmas holidays. Meantime, however, it was an atmosphere odoriferous of gas-lime, canal-water and coke which Betty Barton and her chums were breathing as they stood grouped on the pavement viewing the squalid street like sightseers from afar.

"Well," exclaimed Polly Linton at last, "it's an eye-opener!"

"Yes, wather!"

That was Paula Creel—oh, quite the smartest girl of the batch, for was she not the stylish aristocrat of the Fourth Form at Morcove, just as Betty Barton was its captain, and Polly Linton its madcap?

"Bai Jove, geals, I wegard this twip of ours this morning as a most impressive affeah!" declared Paula. "To think that you, Betty deah, were once—I shall get the word in a moment. Incarcowated, that's it!"

"Oh, help! When I'm two or three hundred miles from a dictionary!" said Polly. "It only remains for Trixie Hope to say something in French and I shall collapse."

"Oui, oui," said Trixie promptly. "What a dreadfully hard life you must have had, Betty. I never dreamed it was quite as hard as this—jamais, jamais—never, never!"

"Jammy?" said Polly. "Not much jam for Betty in those days, I reckon."

"Still, we managed, mum and dad and Doris and Joe and I," was Betty's cheery answer. "I do sometimes wonder, though, if we could have struggled along much longer if my Uncle George had not come home with a fortune in his pocket!"

"Do you know I've got an idea," put in Madge Minden in her quiet way; "there must be heaps and heaps of poor souls round about this district who are struggling along just as Betty and her people had to struggle before the tide turned, and so —"

"Hear, hear," said Polly. "I don't know what the idea is, but it's bound to be a good 'un!"

"I was only thinking," said Madge. "we might get up a concert at the school, and"

give the proceeds to the poor of the particular neighbourhood. How does that strike you, girls?"

"Bai Jove!"

"Oui, oui!"

"Hear, hear, and many of them!" chimed in Polly, whilst Tess Trelawny patted the propounder of the fine idea on the back.

"Well done Madge!"

Betty, in particular, looked most happy, and altogether it was certain that as soon as they were back at school the idea would go forward with a bang!

Certain it was, too, that not only would the town's luckless ones benefit by the grand concert, but the girls would get any amount of fun out of it.

"And so now I am glad I brought you to see the old home!" Betty exclaimed. "When you begged me at breakfast-time to bring you round here, I felt—well, rather queer. I thought it might make you miserable, and you know I said you were not to have a single humpy moment during the whole of your stay with me, up here in Lancashire!"

At this instant some bellowing steam siren sent its horrific shriek all over the town. Other factory sirens and steam whistles joined in the uproar, but that first one seemed to over-ride all the rest. It kept up its strident note after the others had lapsed to silence.

"The din for dinner, eh?" said Polly.

"Yes," nodded Betty, "and that dreadful loud hooter, you may be pleased to know, belongs to Josiah Grandways' mill."

"The great Josiah?" said Tess. "In other words—"

"Yes, the one and only Grandways, father of Cora and Judith Grandways," Betty said with a smile and another nod. "I've not a word to say against Judith now; she made good long ago at school. But Cora—"

"Yes, wather! Howevah—"

"Quite right, Paula! It's time we thought about dinner," said Betty.

"Hear, hear!" laughed Polly. "I've got a very empty feeling, in spite of that enormous breakfast. It must be the Lancashire air. People do eat up here, don't they?"

"And work, too," murmured Madge, watching the sudden rush of a batch of "hands," who had been the first to get away from some mill or factory just round

the corner. "How hard life is for some people, girls!"

"Yes, wather!" agreed Paula, just as feelingly. "One result of this visit to this place, girls, will be to leave me more democratic than evah."

And so they retraced their steps, through the workaday streets, anything but indifferent to the many sights and scenes that were so eloquent of toil and want.

It was the girls' holiday time, and it is certain that they were plentifully supplied with pocket money. How much money remained in their purses, however, by the time they got clear of the mean streets is another matter.

Betty began it when she met a couple of ill-shod children scampering home from the very small council school which she had attended once. And the generous work of unostentatious giving went on until she and her chums must have left themselves pretty well penniless.

"Look, this is Grandways' mill, the very biggest in the town," Betty informed her interested companions as they approached a gateway forming the entrance to a high-walled yard. "And that's the Grandways' car, waiting to take the great Josiah home to lunch, I expect."

The showy car was standing at the kerb, whilst past it streamed the great tide of humanity that had just been released from the huge mill. At least half the workers came flocking past the schoolgirls, and there was a free interchange of glances.

Some of the mill-hands looked very jaded and depressed after the morning's exhausting work in the great hive of industry, where the very atmosphere necessary for their task was sufficient to sap their energies. It would not have been very surprising, therefore, if a few over-wrought hands—especially the young girls—had shown resentment against the schoolgirls for looking so well placed in life.

But there was nothing like that. Two things forbade it. There was the fact that Betty and her chums were moving amongst the toilers without any "swank." Above all, Betty herself was recognised as that same "guid little lassie" who had kept a stout heart in the old days, when she and her people were high to the very work-house, and all through cruel adversity which had made them pitied by all.

If there were one honest soul whose face suddenly lit up at the sight of Betty, and

who voiced a cheery greeting, there must have been fifty. And whether our Betty simply passed on with a mere "Hallo, so-and-so!" or stopped again and again to ask after many an old friend of the family, there is no need to say.

The press of people about the mill gateway was now very great, and it gave Betty's companions rather a throb of alarm to see a sudden sort of arrested movement there, whilst at least two voices were raised in altercation.

Was it a quarrel, and would it end in a street brawl, they wondered?

And then, to increase their uneasiness, they all suddenly recognised one of the angry voices was that of Betty's own father! Betty herself cried out in sharp alarm:

"Oh, that's dad! But what—why—You stay here, girls; I must go and see."

Not half a dozen steps had she run forward, however, before her chums were hastening after her.

In a few moments they were in the midst of a great throng, composed of home-going mill-hands who were pausing to witness the disturbance. Betty, in advance of the other girls, managed, somehow, to penetrate to the very centre of the crowd, but Polly, Paula, Madge, Tess, and Trixie, found themselves shut in.

"What is it all about, please?" Madge asked one giant of a fellow, who was tall enough to see over the heads of the rest.

"Mr. Barton—"

"Ay, miss—him and t' boss. They're at it together, sithee."

"What about? Do you know?"

"Nay, my lass; but we maun hope as t' boss gets it good and hard."

At this instant something voiced by Betty's father, in a tone of bitter scorn, caused a great uproar amongst the bystanders—a prolonged, ringing cheer.

"Gud for you, Joe Barton! Gud lad!" the men were roaring, just as if Betty's father was still one of them. And indeed he was, in the sense that he was Lancashire to the backbone.

"Say that again, Barton, and I'll have the law on you!" now came in a furious voice from Josiah Grandways. "In front of all my hands you ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

"Put the law on me!" challenged Betty's father, and again the crowd

roared its delight. "I have nothing to be ashamed of. It's you, Grandways! You wouldn't have a man-to-man talk in the office, and so the matter shall be discussed out there, or before the judge and jury—I don't care! My hands are clean!"

"Gud lad, Joe!" went up another approving roar. "Let 'un have it!"

The girls on the fringe of the crowd felt terribly shocked. It seemed a terrible thing to them that Grandways' own employees should be taking side against him.

Whatever the cause of the dispute, it was certain that Betty's father was in the right, and doubtless the mill-hands were as sure of this as were the schoolgirls. All the same, this readiness to become partisans in Mr. Barton's favour only showed what a hated master Josiah Grandways was.

At this moment, when the angry scene was still at its height, the girls had their attention attracted to the Grandways' car. For the first time they noticed that it had an occupant—a schoolgirl like themselves!

"Cora—it's Cora!" exclaimed Madge.

"Bah Jove, yes, wather! Howovah—" "Oh, no, we're not going to shake hands exactly," muttered Polly; and she looked the other way.

The others did the same, but not before there had been time for Cora to give them a hostile look.

There she sat in the luxurious car, fully aware, no doubt, as to who it was with whom her father was making such a public scene; aware, too, of all the workers' hatred of her father. She thought all the world of him, perhaps; let us hope she did. But in her heart there must have been a sense of his having done many a hard thing as an employer, to be held in such scant esteem.

Suddenly the crowd split apart, and Josiah Grandways stormed to his car, entered it, and was driven off with his pallid-looking daughter. Some hooting was sent after him, and then the pleasanter sound of cheering went up again as Mr. Barton and his pretty Betty prepared to quit the spot.

They were hand-in-hand, the father limping slightly as he had for many a day now. Betty was looking very upset, and yet there was a spirited flash of the girl's eyes that showed she was not ashamed of anything that her father had said to Mr. Grandways.

Some of the workers, hungry enough for

their dinner, now hurried away, but others pressed about Mr. Barton, wanting to know exactly why he had "gone for" Grandways.

"Because I have caught him trying on the same game with some poor fellow that he tried on me," Mr. Barton exclaimed disgustedly. "Just such another case, and I say it is not good enough! The fellow was injured at his work, and Grandways is out to trick him into losing proper compensation, because it is a case that the insurance did not cover."

From all sides came angry murmurs, which showed that everybody understood now. Yes, it was a trick that Grandways had played before, and it was time that he came up against somebody of an independent nature—as Mr. Barton was to-day—to see that another simple victim should not be added to the list.

Mr. Barton began to smile now in a rather grim way. There was that in him which made him feel a certain keen pleasure in having "tackled" his one-time employer.

"But, Betty lass, what must you and your chums think of me?" he exclaimed a minute later, with a sudden rueful laugh. "They won't want to spend another week with us at any time when they find that I am like this."

"Don't you make any mistake about that, please!" Polly said promptly. "We have had our own little bust-ups with Cora Grandways at school, and so we can sympathise."

"Yes, wather! We wealise, don't you know," beamed Paula, "that the Gwandways' tempement is a wather aggwating one, bai Jove! The twouble seems to be Mr. Gwandways is all waistcoat, bai Jove, and no heart behind it—eh, what?"

The girls exploded with laughter, whilst Betty's father smilingly agreed that Paula had "just about hit it."

"Ah, but it is a shame when a man has such a lot of money and can yet try to cheat others," Betty exclaimed with extreme bitterness, after the merriment had died away. "Mr. Grandways should have been as poor as we were once, dad! And perhaps he will be, before the end!"

The father gave a painful side-glance at his schoolgirl daughter, as if he were going to say:

"Hush, Betty dear! It is best not to

have thoughts like that, dear lass. We maun bear and forbear, tha' knows!" For that was a favourite precept of his; one that he practised as well as preached.

But perhaps because he knew that Betty would never have spoken like that, only an old wound in her heart had been suddenly opened—a wound surviving from all the old, sad days of cruel injustice, when the whole family had suffered at the hands of harsh Josiah Grandways—no gentle rebuke was voiced.

Polly and the rest also passed over Betty's bitter remark in silence, and so it seemed as if it were forgotten at once. Forgotten, never to be recalled!

But was that to be the case? Or was the hour not far off when those bitter words were to be remembered by those who had heard them—an hour when everything would point to Betty's having voiced a cry that meant more than a mere passing wave of bitterness? An hour when she would be accused, not merely of having wished misfortune to Josiah Grandways, but of having tried to bring it about with her own hands!

Well for Betty, at any rate, that only a loving father and loving friends had heard her bitter murmur!

It was to be a shuddering thought recurring to Betty herself time after time in the next few weeks:

"Supposing any of the Grandways had heard, then what chance would I have stood?"

CHAPTER 2.

Something in the Air.

LUNCHEON was over at the very showy Grandways' mansion, and Mr. Grandways' expensive cigar was going, now that he had shifted out of his seat at the head of the table to spend half an hour in the armchair.

Opposite him, as he sat near the hot fire, was his wife, a good feminine counterpart of the stern, hard-headed industrial king. As for the two girls, they had withdrawn from the room, one at a time.

Judith, the younger, had been the first to slip away, making for the drawing-room and the book she had been reading when the gong sounded for luncheon. Cora, coming in a few moments later, found her sister at the fireside, with the book upon

her lap, but her eyes anywhere but on the printed page.

"Well?" Cora threw out, after drifting aimlessly about the very gorgeous room. "What are we going to do this afternoon? But I suppose you mean to sit there, reading yourself silly!"

"No. As a matter of fact," said Judith softly, "somehow I can't get my head into the book at all just at present. I—"

"It's like father and his cigar; he's not happy with it, I can see!" Cora said, with one of her bursts of sullen laughter. "And the silence at lunch—ugh!"

"Yes, Cora, and what does it all mean?" Judith asked, laying aside her book and coming across to her sister with a very anxious expression. "There is something—something in the air. Father—he is so irritable!"

"You must know the reason!" Cora exclaimed impatiently. "Betty Barton's father had that row with dad outside the mill this morning. Enough to upset anybody for the day, and I do think Mr. Barton should have been given into custody!"

"Is dad in the right over it all, or is—Betty's father?"

"It is no business of Betty's father to interfere, anyhow!" was the reply—one so evasive that it left Judith looking more unhappy than ever.

"But, Cora," she broke out with a sudden sigh, "there is something else apart from that upset. Father was like it at breakfast-time this morning. He has been so touchy all through the holidays."

"Well, business—"

"Is business bad, dear?"

"How do I know, any more than you?" snapped the graceless elder sister. "But all the world knows that these are wretched times for the masters. The men themselves know it, only they don't choose to admit it."

"Well, after all," Judith said presently, "I suppose if anybody can afford to have a bad time, we can. Father is so rich, slack trade can't be as bad for him as being out of work is in the case of a—"

She broke off abruptly as the door swung open and Mrs. Grandways rustled into the room, preceding her pompous husband.

"And what are you two girls going to do this afternoon?" the mother wanted to

know, rather wearily. "You can't have the car—"

"Why not, mother?" asked Cora sulkily. "Because I say you can't, and when I say you can't, you can't!"

Such was a fair sample of Mrs. Grandways' mode of treating with her children; not one, it will be imagined, that made for happiness in the home.

"Cora—Judith!" said Mr. Grandways, waving his cigar at them impressively. "All I've got to say about it is this: If you're a-going out, and you should meet that fellow Barton's daughter, and the girls who are staying with the Bartons, you're not to speak to them—see?"

"All right, father," Cora answered, shrugging. "I'm sure I had no wish to speak to them! They are no friends of mine!"

"I'm well aware"—Mr. Grandways nodded approvingly—"that there's been precious little love lost between you and Joe Barton's daughter. Well, just see to it that you give her and her friends a colder shoulder than ever!"

"Yes," chimed in Mrs. Grandways, subsiding into a chair with imagined dignity. "even if they do go to the same school, you are a cut above them, remember. What book is this?"

"It's mine, mother!"

"Yours, Judith? Ruskin—tosh! That's where it all began, this precious labour unrest! And to think that a daughter of mine should start reading Ruskin!"

Mrs. Grandways pitched the book on to a side table, whereupon her husband crossed over and took it up, blowing at his cigar as he twirled the pages through. Cora and Judith quitted the room, shutting the door behind them.

"Well," the father exclaimed, throwing down the book at last as being something beneath contempt, "I suppose I must get back to the mill! Confound the business! That's my feeling at present."

He flung the cigar-stump into the fire with some of the irritability which had filled Judith with uneasiness.

"Ay," he went on, turning towards the door, "and this is the time that that Barton fellow chooses for coming to me and asking me to chuck away money on an undeserving case. It's like his impudence."

He let himself out of the room, and was shutting the door behind him, when his

younger daughter came timorously towards him.

"Father!"

"Well, Judy?"

"Father dear!"

"Well, what is it?"

"Are you—worried, father? Please don't be angry with me for asking if—if there's anything wrong at the mill, father?"

No, he was not angry. He was, in fact, suddenly touched, softened by this display of concern on his younger daughter's part. At the same time, he wished she had been a little more discreet.

"Judy, you shouldn't come rushing at me out here in the hall! Supposing some of the servants heard you! Things are not very grand at the mill. They're bad all over Lancashire just now. Falling prices, and so on. But you wouldn't understand."

"Still, father—"

"But just remember, my girl, we don't want it shouted all round the house. Remember what servants are, Judy."

In her affectionate concern, she looked loath to be put off with no more talk than this; but he detached himself from the hand that had caught him by the arm, and passed on.

"My things, William!"

That was an impatient cry to the manservant, who should have been on duty in the hall, but had gone to the library to give an eye to the fire and had stayed there reading the paper.

William, in all the glory of livery, came hurrying out to say, "Sorry, sir!" whilst he helped his pompous master into a fur-lined coat. Just as Josiah Grandways was swaggering out of the house, Cora came running downstairs, dressed for going out. Racing across the hall, she overtook her father on the porch steps.

"You can drop me in High Street, dad?"

"What? Oh, yes. But you're getting more and more fond of saving your legs these days, Cora girl. What are you going to do if ever there isn't a car to loll in?"

She laughed lightly, and that was her only response until they were in the car. Then:

"Things are not as bad as that, dad, I'm sure!"

"They are pretty bad. Going back to Morocco next week, aren't you? Well, mind you make the best of the term, in case it is your last. Only don't go blabbing

all over the place, Cora, that your father is not far from Queer Street."

"Just as if I would, dad!"

"No, you wouldn't; but Judith, she's younger than you, and a bit different," he mumbled. "You see she don't talk, Cora!"

Then he took out his pocket-book and pencil, and began figuring out some bit of the day's business whilst the car sped along, Cora meanwhile sitting in it like a young queen.

She was a handsome girl, no question about that; but she had inherited her parents' cast-iron dignity, and that was a bad blemish.

Nobody, chancing to see her in the car as it flashed by, could have held any other opinion of her than that she was—shall we say it?—a vulgar snob.

In the High Street she herself stopped the car, got out, said, "So long, dad!" and then turned away to begin her saunter amongst the shops. For a whole hour she loitered in this thoroughfare, which was quite the Bond Street of the town, diving into a few shops to buy things and having them sent home, and giving her name and address with a hauteur that made some of the shop assistants turn away to hide smiles.

Then she drifted into a rather swagger teasshop, which generally filled up with shoppers during the afternoon. The place was fairly crowded already, and she was all amongst the tea-tables when she suddenly received a shock.

There, at an extra large table that just accommodated them all, were Betty & Co.

CHAPTER 3.

Mr. Grandways Makes His Choice.

ANOTHER girl in Cora's place just then, not being on friendly terms with these others, would have done her best to have withdrawn without letting any of the rest of the patrons detect any sign of strained relations. But Cora did just the opposite.

There was one small table still vacant quite close to Betty & Co.'s. Cora, after stopping dead in the teasshop to treat her schoolfellows to a hostile stare, seated herself with an air of rude contempt that must have scandalised all who witnessed the action.

There was quite a stir of excitement when, next moment, Betty was heard to say to the waitress:

"Would you ask the manageress if she can spare us a moment, please?"

This, in view of Cora's insolent behaviour, seemed to promise an exciting development of some sort.

But it turned out that Betty was not concerned with Cora at all.

"Oh, I say," the Fourth Form captain of Morcove exclaimed gaily, when the manageress came up. "We just wanted to make sure! Have those things gone off for the you-know-what?"

"Yes, miss, it is quite all right," was the reassuring answer. "The man left half an hour ago."

"Thank you. Then it only remains for us to pay the bill—"

"Yes, wather! And geals," put in Paula Creel, who had been touching her hair to rights after catching sight of it in one of the shop mirrors, "I twust I am to be allowed to have my own way for once, bai Jove! You—"

"Steady a bit!" said Polly breezily. "We are all in this!"

"Polly dear—"

"Paula darling, you are not going to pay more than your share!"

"But—"

"Get on with the cream buns," said Polly, helping herself to one as she spoke. "Let Betty settle up, and we'll settle with Betty by and by! Cream buns, Madge dear? Tess— Trixie!"

All this was said in Cora's hearing, and next moment she saw Betty slip away to settle some account or other at the pay-desk, whilst the girls went on with their tea and talk.

Needless to say, Cora affected absolute indifference to her schoolfellows. But at heart she was curious to know what it was that Betty had cryptically referred to as "you-know-what."

She kept her ears open, and, although Betty and her chums were not a bit inclined to "shout" about the project they had in hand, their very enthusiasm kept them talking about nothing else, in more or less subdued tones.

And so, bit by bit, the listening Cora gathered that the girls had arranged to give an evening "treat" to the girls of Betty's old Council school.

Permission had been obtained from the right quarter for the treat to be held this evening in the council school itself, this being quite the best place for it in the whole of the poor district. Some of the teachers were to be on hand, but the entire expenses of the evening would be borne by the chums, who, of course, meant to go along and help with the fun.

"Nothing but a show-off!" was Cora's cynical thought, as she sipped her own cup of tea. "I must tell Judy about this, and we'll go along, too. It will be something to tell the girls about when we get back to Morcove—how Betty and her cronies swanked it to a lot of miserable, snivelling brats!"

Meanwhile, in his private office at the mill, Cora's high-and-mighty father was having a more worrying time than ever this afternoon over his private ledgers.

He was all alone, for things were at such a pass, as he knew, that it was not safe to disclose the situation even to his confidential clerk.

All last year things had been shaping badly, but it had needed the close of this year to make him realise the magnitude of his losses.

Here were the one or two small account-books, with brass locks, which summarised all the transactions recorded by the vast staff of clerks in the office ledgers. With one of these small books lying open before him, Josiah Grandways could put his finger on the cause of all the trouble.

Yes, here it was, just a brief entry concerning the stock of goods on hand. An enormous stock! That was because he had tried to be clever, when other men in the same line of business had decided to be simply cautious.

The private book told him what that stock had cost him to buy or make, and it told him, too, that it was not worth half the figure to-day.

Deep in! Ruined—utterly ruined!

There was no blinking at the fact, ugly though it was. He had his mill and warehouse cram full of stock-in-trade that was a drug in the market. And the longer he held it there unsold, the less he would get for it.

He wanted money—wanted it desperately—to tide him along. But he could not possibly turn his stock into cash except by letting it go at any price, and if he did

that, the money obtained would not be nearly enough for his purposes.

Insolvent! That was his position. According to law, he ought not to go on trading for another day without disclosing his position. Until to-day the position had been too involved for him to be quite certain how he stood, although he feared that he was going to "come out badly." But now—

What was he to do?

Merciful goodness, what else could he do but throw up the sponge—make it known to all the world that he, Josiah Grandways, was smashed?

Pushing the tell-tale ledger from him, he swung round in his revolving chair and sat cross-kneed, chin in hand, staring wildly at nothing.

His flabby face became every moment a little more pallid and sickly as he pondered desperately, and still saw only one possible end to the crisis.

Bankruptcy—the sale of everything he possessed for the benefit of his creditors—and even then they would suffer heavily.

The home sold up, the girls forced to leave school—thrown out into life to earn their livings as best they could, and he had meant them to be such fine ladies!

Oh, how frightful it all was, this punishment that was coming upon him for his rashness! Fool, fool that he had been to overreach himself!

CHAPTER 4.

Such Fun.

"COME along, Paula, do!"
 "Yes, wather, Polly deah!
 Howevah—"
 "You don't come along, Paula!
 You just stand there at your dressing-table

"My deah Polly, I gweatly wegwet—"
 "So do I, Paula. So do we all, I think!
 There's nobody who knows you, Paula, who doesn't regret the awful vanity which makes you pass every moment putting your hair to rights!"

"Theah, you are gweatly mistaken, Polly," was the bland protest from Paula Creel, who looked very plainly dressed, considering this was a time of the evening when she usually arrayed herself most gorgeously for dinner.

"Without wishing to enter into any disagreeable argument, Polly, I must protest—"

"Are you or are you not going to come along?" vociferated Polly.

"Yes, wather! Howevah—"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! What's all the rumpus about?" came the laughing inquiry from Betty Barton, as she suddenly joined Polly Linton in the doorway. "The old, old story, eh?"

"Yes, wather, Betty deah! You are a reasonable cweature, Betty; you realise that my hair is a twifle twoublesome at times. Therefore, don't you know—"

"Oh!" groaned Polly in mock dismay, as the dandy of the Fourth Form turned back to her looking-glass. "She is going to start again! Leave your giddy hair alone, duffer!"

"Haow you do twy me, weally!" sighed poor Paula, who, indeed, was a long-suffering victim of Polly's love of teasing. "Well, I'll say no more, bai Jove! Geals, I'm weally weady at last—yes, wather!"

"Hooray!"

Polly, having given that cheer, passed the information on to Madge, Tess and Trixie, each of whom was just coming away from her nice bed-room in the Barton house.

"Paula ready, girls! Just fancy—"

"One moment, howevah—"

"Oh, she's off again!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" Betty flopped back on Paula's bed to enjoy the laugh to the full as the pretty aristocrat turned back once again to take just another glance at herself.

"I wonder if you realise," Paula said, giving a touch to her hat, "it is not a question of wanting to look gwand this evening, but wather the weverse. Geals, I would not—"

"For the last time, Paula, are you coming or—"

"I wepeat, geals, I would not have those poor children at the tweat be made uncomfortable—"

"I shall be making you uncomfortable in a jiffy!" fumed Polly. "You know what I am when I am roused."

"Yes, wather!" sighed Paula. "When you are woused, Polly deah, it generally results in my getting wuffed! Howevah, here I am, bai Jove, so pway lead on!"

"Ta-ra, ta-ra, ta-tee!" Polly said, imitating a circus band. "Off we go, then,

and what fun it is going to be!" Her arm went around Paula's waist in the old, old loving way.

"Cos you're not a bad sort, after all, Paula dear. I know I tease you awfully——"

"Yes, wather!"

"But you do forgive me, don't you, Paula?"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove!"

"Because you are my great chum——"

"Yes, wather!"

"And besides you being so pretty——"

"Pwecisely, Polly deah! As I always remark——"

"More beauty than brains, eh?"

"Yes, bai Jove—I mean—ch, what?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Haow frivolous you are!" Paula exclaimed with another sigh when she realised why they were laughing. "Howevah, if you will just let me wun back to my room, Polly——"

"Oh, no! No, you don't!"

"But, Polly deah! Pway wealise, I've forgotten——"

"You come along o' me!" said Polly, keeping that arm tightly about Paula's waist; and so, like the good-humoured girl she was, Paula resigned herself.

Down in the hall the merry party of girls came in for a send-off from Mr. and Mrs. Barton. Betty's sister, Doris, and young Joe, her brother, were going to the poor children's treat, of course, and they were ready.

"This is your affair, not ours," remarked Mr. Barton. "Still, you may find us looking along presently to see how the evening is going off."

"Come with us now, dad—mum! Do!" Betty promptly pleaded, whilst her chums clamoured to the same effect. "They will love to see you."

But the father and mother, although so keen on the whole thing, had made up their minds to let the girls have the fun and joy of carrying out all the arrangements, and so it ended with the young folk setting off without much more ado.

It was a dark evening, inclined to be foggy; nevertheless, Betty & Co. were quite content to trudge the whole distance to that poor quarter of the workaday town where the "treat" was being given. Just as they had all refrained from a display of fine clothes, so they would have felt ashamed

to turn up at the school gateway in so many swagger cars.

"We shall find the kiddies all there waiting for us," Betty predicted with a happy smile.

And she was right.

Not only did they find the lower part of the school building all lit up for the occasion, not only was a riot of romping and laughter to be heard from inside the place of entertainment; the playground and its entrance gate simply teemed with girls and boys who were waiting to greet the founders of the feast.

Over the way every street door was open to the night, so that fathers and mothers and other grown-ups could watch the happy scene from their doorways.

Of course, such a fias was the last thing on earth that the good-hearted schoolgirls wanted the poor children to make; at the same time, the very craziness of all this rushing about and cheering was proof of the real treat this evening was going to be.

Mobbed about by children ranging from eight years old to twelve, all of them somehow rigged out for the occasion, the boys with at least a few starched collars amongst them, and the girls with ribbons in their hair, Betty and her chums battled along into the school, which reeked like a pastry-cook's shop.

Betty's own old mistress was there, and what a sounding kiss was exchanged between that good young lady and her one-time ragged scholar—still the same unaffected Betty, for all the dark days of poverty were over and done with for ever.

There were other eager helpers, too, of course, including the schoolkeeper and his wife—an honest couple who were just in their element getting the trestle-tables arranged and the tea and coffee made in great silvery urns.

From first to last, however, the "treat" was free from all that stiff superintendence by grown-ups which usually attends events of this sort. Rather a disorganised time of romping and playing games, perhaps, but that was just what the kiddies liked about it.

First of all they all sat down to the cheering display of sandwiches, meat-patties, cakes, cream-buns, oranges and apples, nuts and grapes—such a "tuck-in," and all at

Betty & Co.'s expense, although not a word was allowed to be said about that.

Then, never mind the risk of indigestion caused by jumping up too quickly after the "banquet." All at once there was a crash of feet to the floor, forms and chairs were pushed back, many of them being tumbled over with deafening thuds, and away rushed the whole happy throng to a nice warm class-room that had been cleared for the evening and gaily decorated.

A piano was there. Down sat Madge Minden, Morcove's really brilliant pianist, and instantly such music started as seemed to change every little girl into a dancing fairy and every poor boy into a young Puck.

Then there were games—musical games some of them, with all the attendant "inging and chanting and peals of hearty laughter.

Never in her life had Madcap Polly enjoyed herself quite so much; such a chance there was for amusing others with her foolish antics. As for Paula—

Paula's hair this evening! "Ruffled" was not the word for it!

"Bai Jove, it weally is whipping, this!" she said to her chums at the end of one breathless game. "I am utterly pwestwate, geals! I shall never wecover, I know!"

"Musical chairs!"

"Oh—"

"Yes, wather! Hooway, hoowah!" Paula could be heard exclaiming eagerly above all the din of applause and handclapping.

So chairs and forms were set down the centre of the long room, and then Madge started off again at the piano, with the breathless procession marching round and round until—

A pause at the piano—a sudden wild scuffle—then shrieks and yells of laughter! Somebody was "out," but, wonderful to say, it was not Paula.

She was all alive this evening, was Paula.

They started again; round and round, round and round still, because Madge meant the break to come as a real startler this time!

Then—another check to the music; another excited br-r-ump! of everybody sitting down—or trying to. And there was Paula, with Polly sitting on her lap!

That, of course, was the funniest thing that had happened so far!

All the guests had discovered that Paula was Polly's "butt," and how they yelled

with laughter to see the frail "aristocrat" looking almost squashed under the by-no-means light weight of Madcap Polly!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yes, wather!" beamed Paula, when at last Paula got up. "Oh, I don't mind geals! The more you gwin, the more I like it, bai Jove!"

On again went the merry game. Round and round, round and round! Really, Madge was artful! But the break came at last, and this time Paula was out!

Br-r-rump, flop, wallop!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Paula, in fact, was sitting on the floor!

"Bai Jove—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" The peals of laughter were delirious.

"How wemarkable!" exclaimed Paula, looking very surprised at finding she had sat down where there was no seat for her. "Howevah, I don't think I could have managed another wound, bai Jove!"

It was at this instant, when the game was being resumed, that Betty caught sight of a strange face looking in at one of the windows. More than that it was a girl's face she had no time to see, for it was withdrawn in a flash. She was going to think no more of the occurrence, and then the uneasy thought seized her—what if it were some poor girl who had got left out of the evening treat, when she should have been asked?

Or, perhaps it was some poor girl who, though not strictly entitled to have a share in all the fun, all the good cheer, had come creeping to the window to watch the others, envying them the happy treat!

For Betty to be seized with a compassionate idea of this sort was for her to feel she must slip out and see if the girl was still in the dark playground. If she was, she must be asked to come in!

That it might be Cora Grandways, doing a bit of ill-natured spying, never entered Betty's head.

Unnoticed by the others, she slipped away into the asphalted playground, and peered around.

No one!

But Betty was not satisfied. The very swiftness with which that strange watcher at the window had disappeared gave probability to the theory that she really was some poor girl who felt she was "not wanted."

So Betty advanced into the centre of

the playground to look around in all directions. There was a gas lamp over the gateway, and one or two street lamps also gave a faint illumination through the misty darkness. But on the side of the big playground away from the street all was deep silence.

And it was from over there, suddenly, that Betty heard a tell-tale sound. It was just like that made by someone scrambling over a wall.

Betty ran across to that remote part of the yard, stopped when she was close to the wall, and called softly:

"Is anyone there? Hallo! Hallo! You can come in to the party if you like!"

There was no answer. Instead, Betty heard another tell-tale sound. This time it was caused by someone stumbling in the dark on the other side of the wall.

In a moment Betty's mind was made up.

She was not going to be the means of scaring away some poor girl, whose nervous shyness was simply cheating her out of a share in the treat.

"I'm going over after her!" decided Morcove's Fourth Form captain.

And next moment she was tackling the wall, whilst the thought came to her how much lower the brickwork seemed to be than in the old days, when she used to come to play in this asphalted yard, a very shabby, ill-shod Betty, little dreaming of the time to come when she would be the leader of her own Form at a great boarding school!

Then she reached the top of the wall.

"Oh, gracious!"

That was Betty's half-laughing exclamation to herself as she jumped down on the other side of the wall, to find herself on a very nasty piece of waste ground, lying between the Council school and one of Lancashire's great cotton mills.

She peered around once more, but could still see nothing of the vanished girl, which was a thing more puzzling than ever. On across the rough ground Betty trod, her curiosity piqued to a still greater extent. It seemed foggier here, as it always does on a misty night where one is on waste, undrained land.

The mill was all in darkness, a monster pile of buildings looming blackly in the gloom. Betty had got quite close to the grimy walls before she was suddenly reminded that this was the Grandways mill,

by discerning the well-known name in huge white letters between the two long lines of upper windows.

"Well, I mustn't go any further, or I shall be trespassing, and having the night-watchman catching me!" she reflected as lightly as ever. "And yet it is queer, the girl making off in this direction!"

She worked along under the towering factory wall, remembering that there was a sort of alley-way between two great store-sheds, through which the elusive girl might have flitted. Still more likely, Betty considered, the girl might be timidly hiding there, for to go on through the alleyway would mean crossing the central yard to get to the main exit in another street, and then the watchman would have something to say!

So, when Betty got to the covered way between the sheds, she peered around with greater keenness than ever.

Then she remembered she had a box of wax vestas in her dress pocket, some she had used an hour ago to attend to the Chinese lanterns in the school-room.

She struck a match and let its light help her to look round. On either end of her she seemed to be walled in by bales of cotton goods, and it looked an easy thing for anybody to have climbed to the top of some of the bales and lain down in concealment.

Betty extinguished the match very carefully for fear of fire, and scrambled to the top of one pile of bales.

"I say, is anybody there? Do answer, please!" she entreated.

Still no reply.

She struck another match, and had another look round by the aid of its steady flame.

No one!

That ended Betty's efforts to befriend one who, she was certain, had been drawn to the school-room window by a wistful longing. She blew out the match, and scrambled down to the ground, and, five minutes later she was in the thick of all the revelry once more.

Her absence had been remarked upon, but nobody now had time to ask her, lightly, what she had been up to, for the fun was raging more furiously than ever.

By and by they started blind man's bluff, and merrily the game went on for a full half-hour. At the end of that period, who

else should chance to be "blind man" but Paula Creel!

It was pandemonium let loose; then! Such a nipping and darting about of forty or fifty youngsters, all in fits of laughter at Paula's wild efforts to catch someone.

In vain the blindfolded aristocrat of Morcove School dashed this way and that; in vain she waved her slender arms about, or groped before her. She banged up against walls, and she embraced objects that she thought really must be human ones at last, only to find that they were chairs, or cupboards, or coats, hanging on the wall.

All the time the nimble youngsters were dodging up behind her, to give her playful pinches and tugs at her hair, so that altogether Paula had excuse for flopping down at last with an exhausted:

"Pouf! Bai Jove, geals, I weally am too pwostrate!"

Then Tess allowed herself to be blindfolded and the game began again, it being one that the kiddies simply could not have too much of. Betty was looking on, keeping clear of the turmoil, when she felt her gaze drawn to the open door by the appearance of two newcomers on the scene.

They were her father and mother, and, strange, there was none of that jollity in their looks such as they might have been expected to show on arriving at the uproarious entertainment.

With a sudden throb of alarm Betty was asking herself in an instant: What did it mean—dad and mum looking so upset, so scared?

Avoiding the excited merrymakers, she got to the doorway and voiced the anxious question.

"Dad! Mother! Is anything the matter? You look——"

"It is terrible, Betty dear," her father answered hoarsely. "Come outside and see!"

"Outside, dad?"

"Ay! We have only looked in for a moment to tell you. The Grandways cotton mill——"

"Yes, what?" gasped Betty, with a leaping heart.

And above all the shouting and laughter of the party came her father's agitated cry:

"Fire! The whole mill is on fire, and will burn to the ground!"

CHAPTER 5.

The Burning of the Mill.

"FIRE!" All over the night-bound Lancashire town that one dread word was being voiced.

People who rushed forth from shop and parlour into the streets found the foggy darkness luridly illumined by the great glare in the sky.

And hark! There were the engines, tearing and rattling through the wider thoroughfares from the fire-station, whilst the helmeted firemen clanged the warning bells and roared their lusty:

"Hi, hi, hi!"

Hundreds of people tearing along in the wake of the smoking engines; hundreds were pelting through the side streets, to get to the scene of the fire.

Where was it? Everybody seemed to know and was eager to tell everybody else.

"'Tis Grandways! A fire at 't mill!"

Many a face turned white with its owner's mere thought of what such an outbreak was bound to mean. The enormous buildings, stocked with inflammable materials—dreadful! But what was that first appalling thought, compared with one's actual sight of the conflagration, when one had thronged with thousands of other folks as near to the burning building as the police would allow?

There, in the thick of that gigantic, awe-struck crowd Betty and her chums could have been found during the next two hours.

The children's entertainment had been cut short with dramatic abruptness, and within a few minutes of the fire alarm every boy and girl was with his or her own people, thus freeing those who had organised the "treat" from all anxiety as to the youngsters.

But that other anxiety weighing upon heart and brain alike, which the fire itself was causing, how Betty & Co. felt it whilst they stood packed together in the excited crowd, along with Mr. and Mrs. Barton.

The engines had got to work, but what effect were the rods of water having as they were directed against the burning building? None whatever, apparently.

Louder and louder roared the conflagration, as it spread pitilessly through the

whole block of premises. From smashed windows darted tongues of flame amidst the billowing clouds of smoke. Parts of the roof began to fall in with a sickening, rending crash, and then the flames leapt forth up there.

In the glare of the fire all sorts of debris could be seen floating high in the air, wafted towards the lurid heavens by the furious heat.

Grandways' was going to burn to the ground, that was a certainty. And it meant how terrible a calamity to the town.

Hundreds of people would be thrown out of work. That was Betty's most distressing thought. The same with her chums. Although they had not been born and bred to the work-a-day life of a cotton town, as Betty had, they also realised that that would be one of the most tragic sequels to this terrible calamity—loss of employment for hundreds.

Then there was the unhappy thought as to what the fire would mean to the owner of the mill. A terrible blow, surely.

Poor Mr. Grandways; poor Cora and Judith. Although there had been nothing much to like about the Grandways family—rather the reverse—still, one must feel sorry for them now.

As to all this, however—the harm that Josiah Grandways looked like suffering—the girls presently heard people round about saying most reassuring things.

They were saying that everything was fully covered by insurance, and so Grandways would be all right. "He'd come out of the disaster on the right side, as he allus did, somehow."

"Father dear, is that really so?" Betty asked, giving a tug at the arm she was holding.

He tore his fascinated gaze from the blazing building, which by now was simply a fiery shell of outer walls.

"The loss, father; will it fall upon the insurance people?"

"Eh? Oh, for a certainty, my dear! Grandways was too good a business man not to be fully covered!"

"Ay, with a bit over and to spare, sithee!" remarked one Lancashire stalwart, who was standing by. Betty looked at him, and recognised him as an employee at the mill.

"Dweadful, all the same!" exclaimed Paula, her pretty face, like thousands of others, all lit up by the glare. "If only because of the distwess that is bound to follow. Geals, if 'there is a welief fund, don't you know—"

"Quite so; we'll know what to do!" struck in Polly. "Phew, the heat!"

"Yes; let us get away now, my dears," pleaded Mrs. Barton sadly. "Ah, it is altogether too sad, watching the place burn before one's eyes."

Mr. Barton nodded approval to the suggestion that they should get out of the crowd and make for home. He did not say so, but it was his belief the building would collapse at any moment. A glance at his watch told him that the time was eleven o'clock, two hours or a little more, since the outbreak was discovered.

Only two hours! Not long, one could say, for a costly building and all its contents to change to a blazing ruin. But how ruthless is the progress of fire, when it has the right material to devour.

Again and again, after they had struggled clear of the enormous crowd, the Barton party looked back. Sometimes the scene had darkened; at other times there was a brighter glow than ever, as some fresh fall took place amongst the burning ruins.

Midnight found the girls at home in the Barton house, right at the other end of the town; yet even then they still seemed to hear the hubbub of the crowd, the mad pulsing of fire-engines, and the continual roar of the fire itself. Last thing of all, they looked forth from the upper windows of the house.

The night was still slightly foggy, and all they could see was a glare as great as ever in the lowering heavens. At that very instant the ding-gong of the midnight bells was lost in a far-off, yet tremendous rumbling noise, and they knew that that must be the total falling-in of the roof at the blazing mill.

Followed a few moments during which the whole of the town seemed to be as light as day itself; then darkness fell sharply as the glare died utterly from the sky; and Betty & Co. knew then that the fire had spent itself, and all that was left of the great Grandways' Cotton Mill was a pile of smoking ruins.

CHAPTER 6.

Who Fired the Mill?

NEXT day the appalling fire was the one topic for fifty miles around.

Even the London papers had lengthy accounts of the "great fire in Lancashire." As for the local papers, under headlines that streamed right across the pages, they had column after column of print dealing with the disaster itself, its probable effect upon employment, anecdotes connected with the famous mill, and interviews with its wealthy owner.

At breakfast-time, Mr. Barton gave the girls the gist of that last-mentioned item in the local dailies—the interview which the reporters had had with Josiah Grandways.

"From all accounts," said Betty's father, "he seems to be chiefly concerned with the dislocation to business which the fire entails. He seems to be anxious to let everybody know that he himself was fully covered."

"Then he will not lose by the fire, dad?"

"Oh, no; and I am sure I would never have wished him to. But there is one thing Grandways said to the reporters that I think he would have been wiser to say nowt about, even if he had his suspicion. He rather suggests that somebody set the place on fire!"

"Oh!" It was a shocked exclamation from all the girls.

"Dad, darling, do you think it is possible—believable—that even anybody with a grievance could have done such a wicked thing?"

"No, my dear, I don't," was the father's emphatic reply as he tossed the paper aside. "We are a blunt lot, some of us up here in the North, but we don't go in for that sort of rascally work out of sheer spite—a thing that only hits back at poor folk who had their living to get out of the mill."

"Mr. Grandways will soon be sorry he ever insinuated such a thing, I know," declared Mrs. Barton, in her quiet way. "Too bad, to make a mere random charge of that sort!"

That opinion was Betty & Co.'s emphatically, and it came very near to putting a check upon the good-natured impulse that had seized them all first thing this morning.

"After this, I, for one, have a very good mind not to go round to sympathise with

Cora and Judith, as we talked of doing," Polly exclaimed, a few minutes later.

"It does alter one's feelings, rather," agreed Betty. "The only thing is, we are concerned with Cora and Judith, our two schoolfellows, and not with their father. So I think we'll go, shall we?"

"Yes, wather! I'm quite agweeable, if the west are!" said Paula; and so, an hour later, the whole bunch of chums turned up at the Grandways' front porch.

William, the liveried footman, admitted them, ushering them into a morning-room with as much dignity as if they had called to see royalty. He withdrew, to reappear with the news that "Miss Cora" would be down in a minute.

"Did he say 'her ladyship'?" grinned Polly. "Oh, how I hate this swank!"

"Myself, it positively distwesses me, gwieves me," sighed Paula, the democratic aristocrat. "And what a frightful lot of expensive wubbish there is in this woom!"

"Hush—high treason!" chuckled Polly. "Remember where you are, Paula dear!"

Paula remembered something else instead, however, and that was that her hair could do with a setting to rights, after the walk through the foggy streets.

She was quite serenely touching one damp curl into position when the door opened and Cora sauntered in.

"Good-morning!" she said loftily.

"Good-morning, Cora!" they all murmured. And Betty asked:

"Is Judy about?"

"Oh, if you wanted Judith, why didn't you tell the man?"

"We wanted both of you!" Betty exclaimed, doing her best to overcome the impatience she felt at Cora's being on her dignity. "We felt it only right to look round—"

"Yes, wather, Cora; the fact being, don't you know, that we are wather sowwy, extwemely sowwy, bai Jove—"

"Oh, indeed!" Cora tilted her chin. "But there really is nothing to be sorry about. Father was insured. We shan't lose by a single penny! And I hope," she added, with a sudden malignant look at Betty, "you will see what comes of trying to hit at people you hate! You have missed the mark, Betty."

Madge exclaimed spiritedly:

"Nothing to be sorry about, Cora! How

about all the loss of work, and the inevitable—"

"One moment, though," Betty broke in. "Whatever do you mean, Cora, by saying I have 'missed the mark'? When have I tried to hit at people I hate? Who are the people? I am not given to hating—"

"Bah!" blazed out Cora fiercely, so that Betty and all stood amazed. "You know you hate us Grandways! You and your people—you have always had your knife into us!"

"Cora—"

"And dare you deny, Betty—dare you deny that you yourself caused the fire last night?" was the angry challenge that came in a hissing tone from Cora's lips.

For a moment afterwards, dead silence reigned. Then—checking the other girls just as they were about to burst out indignantly—Betty spoke huskily:

"It is for me to say 'How dare you!'" she panted. "Cora, how dare you suggest that I—oh—"

"Monstrous thing!" gasped Madge, whilst the others echoed the word.

"I accuse you—at least, I suspect you," Cora said wildly, "because I know you left the school-room and went into the mill last night! Ah, that makes you change colour a bit—see!"

"You—you were the girl at the school-room window!" cried Betty.

"I was! I thought I would give myself the fun of seeing you showing off. But I saw something that was not funny, Betty Barton; something which father knows, because I've told him!"

"And do you mean, Cora—"

"I saw you sneak out of the school and go across to the mill. You lit matches there—"

"I did—yes. I admit it. But I was careful—oh, ever so careful!" protested Betty. "I only went there because I felt there was a girl to take pity on!"

"You set the mill alight, anyhow, and father knows you did. And—"

"Wicked wretch! Cora, not another word!" Madge interposed, with a raised hand as if she would strike Betty's accuser. "Oh, what a thing to say! But there's one comfort—"

"Yes, wather!"

"No one will ever believe such a thing against Betty!" cried Polly. "Is it likely?"

"Won't they? Wait and see!" flashed back Cora. "Father may not take action at once, but if he does feel justified in making the facts known, plenty of people will remember the grudge that Betty and her people have always had against the Grandways' family."

Betty burst into tears. She could not help herself, and in a moment Polly and the rest were grouped about her, trying to soothe her, begging her to come away before Cora's vicious tongue could say another word.

If only to allay their distress—such good chums as they were, feeling it all as much as she herself was bound to feel it—poor Betty suffered herself to be led away. That pompous footman must needs come forward in the hall to see them out, but Polly settled him with a withering:

"Oh, get away! There's far too much of you!"

Then, having gained the open air, the chums took full advantage of such a quiet road as they were in to discuss the outrageous insinuation that Cora had made.

Looking white and stricken, Betty gave a faltering but exact account of her behaviour last night, and thereupon Polly and the rest had only one thing to say. Best to get home and let Mr. Barton deal with this business!

So presently they all re-entered Betty's home, to find her father waiting to greet them with looks of great dismay.

"Come in here for a bit of talk, will you?" he pleaded gently, leading them to his small library. "Your mother is out, luckily, Betty; she was out when Mr. Grandways called."

"Mr. Grandways! He has been to see you?"

"Yes, my dear, and an abominable sort of suggestion he has been making!" Mr. Barton cried indignantly. "I am loath to tell you—"

"Dad, I know—we all know!" poor Betty broke in tragically. "We went round to tell the Grandways girls that we were sorry about the fire, and—"

"If you ever heard of such a thing, Mr. Barton, that horrid Cora is suggesting that Betty caused the fire!" Polly exploded.

"Ay!" the father exclaimed, frowning fiercely. "Exactly what Mr. Grandways suggested to me. But, Betty, it would be

ridiculous, if it were not so outrageous! Don't cry, dear!" He kissed her tenderly. "Just tell me everything, dear lass!"

So for the second time that morning the poor girl faltered her faithful account of exactly what she had done last night in the belief that there was someone wanting to come to the children's party and yet was shy of doing so.

The father was nodding his perfect understanding of motives and actions all the time, giving the half-weeping girl many a soothing pat. Hardly had Betty voiced her last word before he was speaking comfortingly.

"You only did what any other kind-hearted girl would have been drawn into doing, my dear. It was a mistake to venture into the mill, and to strike matches there."

"Yes, father; but I was—oh, so careful!"

"No need to tell me that, dear lass. Bah, it is absolute rubbish to suppose that you could have set the mill on fire by accident."

"They—they don't suggest that it was accidental," wailed Betty. "That is what makes it all so much worse! They say I did it on purpose, and, as I was seen to go in and out of the mill buildings, and light matches—Oh, dad darling—she broke down in utter distress—"what trouble I have brought upon you!"

"No," he answered sturdily, "say, rather, what trouble are those people, the Grandways, trying to involve us in? But let them do their worst!"

"What can they do, father—at their worst?" Betty wanted to know, whilst her cheeks looked equally concerned.

Mr. Barton drew a deep breath, and then pursed his lips for a moment.

"As the very worst, Betty, they can never touch you, even if the accusation goes forward and is believed by all the world. You are a minor—a mere schoolgirl. So don't worry, little girl."

"But you?" she questioned, unable to look comforted. "Can't they come down on you, as being my father?"

Mr. Barton gave a shrug. His one thought, at present, was to allay the girl's distress as much as possible.

"They cannot come down on me, Betty. Oh, no! It would have to be proved first that I put you up to doing it!"

"Ah!" Betty cried out, her face blanching again, "and that is just what they will try to do, father! It was so clear, wasn't it,

girls, from what Cora said? They are going to make out that you incited me to fire the mill if I got the chance."

"They'll have to prove it!" was the father's grim rejoinder.

"Yes, wather!" agreed Paula, finding her tongue at last. "Betty, deah—"

"Yes, Betty dear," murmured Polly. "This will be all over and done with in a day or two. Long before you have to go back to Morcove School."

"But will it—will it?" Betty cried, striking her hands together. "When we know what the Grandways are! Oh, what a thing for you to have hanging over you, dad; and all because of me! How can I go back to school next week—"

"Betty, you must not let it worry you. If you were not quite certain that you were very careful with those matches, it would be a different matter altogether. But you are certain, aren't you?"

"Yes, father—yes! Could I have been so careless as to have dropped a lighted match anywhere? It was a bad blunder of mine ever to have gone into the mill, but I can't—I can't believe I was clumsy enough to have dropped a lighted match!"

"Neither can we believe it," Madge Minden murmured. "Cheer up, then, dear, and trust to your dad!"

Betty smiled a brave little smile through her tears.

"I will try to be brave, but—but fancy Cora thinking such a horrible thing about me!" she faltered. "I know she does not like me, but just fancy her thinking I would set her father's mill on fire. It's terrible!"

Paula indulged in an aristocratic sniff.

"Oh, Cowa, deah geals, would say anything to twy to destwoy Betty's holidays: She is a howwid little cat, so there!" she exclaimed indignantly.

"I quite agree with you there," burst out Polly. "Cora is never so happy as when she is making mischief or causing unnecessary pain to people; but even I would not have credited her with taking advantage of such a calamity as last night's fire to vent her spite on Betty! A cat, did you call her?" turning to Paula. "A hyena, I think, is more appropriate!"

"Polly, dear, you must not speak like that," interposed Betty quietly. "Cora is very agitated over the destruction of her father's mill, and does not realise the full significance of her words. When she gets

over her excitement and can see things in their true perspective, I feel sure she will retract the words to which she has given utterance."

"Retract?" cried Polly. "The idea! My dear Betty, have you ever heard a cat apologise for stealing fish from the table?"

The talk languished suddenly. Betty was taking an agitated turn about the room. When she stopped she still looked as if nothing could comfort her—nothing except a complete withdrawal of the cruel insinuation by Cora, and her father, and that withdrawal it was hopeless to expect.

There was, indeed, a sudden look of worse dismay in poor Betty's eyes, causing Mr. Barton and other girls to wonder what dreadful misgivings had now seized her.

"Well, dear?" the father asked very gently. "Well, Betty?"

Before she could answer they were all startled by a prolonged ring at the hall door.

Who was that? they wondered.

Swiftly enough the question was answered.

A servant tapped at the room door, and then announced:

"It is the police, sir. If you please they have come to see you about last night's fire!"

CHAPTER 7.

Audrey at It Again.

"O H, how gorgeous the old school looks!"
"Spiffing!"
"Simply topping!"

All day there had been delighted exclamations of this sort, as train after train and car after car brought the girls of Morcove School back from the winter holidays—back to another term of class-room work, outdoor sport, and all the fun and merriment of their cosy studies.

It was re-opening day in more than the usual sense of the word.

The girls who were flocking back to-day could remember Morcove School as looking little better than a mere shell of brick and mortar, after the fire that had rendered them houseless almost at the commencement of last term.

Night and day ever since then, however, had a whole army of workmen been kept at the big task of restoring the famous

school in time for the scholars' return after their Christmas holidays. And now—

"It's just the same jolly old Morcove, with a difference!"

"With a hundred and one improvements!"

"Yes, wather, geals! And, bai Jove, how wipping!"

This time it was Polly Linton, of the Fourth Form, who had started the chorus of pleased cries. With her were Madge Minden, Tess Trelawney, Trixie Hope, and—last, but by no means least—popular Paula Creel, the "aristocrat" of the Fourth.

These five had just got indoors, and had "reported," after traveling since early morning from a town in Lancashire. There had been a few exclamations of delight even before the girls were really inside the schoolhouse; but this was the climax, so to speak, now that they had sought out the old studies and found them all "done up" in the most wonderful fashion, replete with new furniture.

At the moment the girls were in the study which Polly Linton had always shared with Betty Barton, the Form captain. And how Paula Creel's pretty face beamed as she took stock of the furnishings!

"Bai Jove, Polly deah! They've given you new cheeahs—wippers, by the look of them!" Paula cried, promptly stepping across the room and sinking into the depths of one lounge-chair.

"Weally, geals, I hardly know how to express myself! Most gwatifying, bai Jove!"

"Out of it!" Polly felt called upon to tease her long-suffering chum. "You've got your own study, Paula. Go to it!"

"Polly deah, you don't mean that!"

"I don't know so much!" said Polly, the madcap grimly. "There'll have to be a change—"

"Not weally, Polly—"

"Yes, Paula. You simple wore out that other best chair of ours by always coming in and lolling about in it. We shall make a charge, Betty and I. In future—"

"Wight-ho, deah! Give me half a cwown's worth wight away," said Paula quite seriously, so that the others all burst out laughing.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Haow fwivolus you are!" Paula reproved them, with her delicious simper.

"Pway be sewious, geals, on the first day of term. Wemember—"

"Luggage for Miss Linton, please!" broke in a breathless, gruff voice from the doorway, and Polly flashed out gaily, to say "Oh, thanks!" to the porter and to send him on his way with a handsome tip.

"Now," Polly said to Tess, "if you will just help me get this bag inside— Somewhere over there will do," she added, and began, with Tess's assistance, to lug the bag across the room to where languid Paula Creel was looking so comfortable.

"We will have the bag—" Polly began, and then something happened.

What happened was that she let go of the bag—was it by accident? we wonder—so that it flopped upon poor Paula's lap.

Whallop!

"Oh—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Healp, I'm cwushed!" came in a plaintive wail from the squirming Paula. Her slender arms made frantic waves in the air. "Polly deah—geals—healp!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Sorry, Paula, and all that—"

"Sowwy!" gasped the long-suffering victim of the madcap's love of a joke. "You always say you are sowwy, Polly. I wegwet to say I sometimes fancy you are remarkably clumsy when I am about."

"Well, if you sit there—"

"Polly, deah, pway wefwain! At this pwesent moment," Paula said, having heaved the bag on to the floor, "I am pwactically pwostwate after the vewy twy-ing twavelling. I—"

"Luggage for Miss Paula Creel!" announced another gruff voice in the doorway. "Where will you have it, please?"

"Oh, not here! Paula, hustle!" cried Polly gaily. "Bustle up, Paula!"

With a dismal sigh, poor Paula heaved out of the chair and went off to attend to her particular belongings, and then Polly, having stopped laughing, said to her remaining chums:

"Oh, dear, how jolly it is to be back! But I wish Betty were with us!"

"Oui—es," agreed Trixie, who evidently meant to air her alleged French just as much as ever this term. "I never knew anything quite so unfortunate, jamais, jamais—never, never!"

"Jammy, jammy! I think I hear Paula

getting jammed in her doorway!" chuckled the irrepressible Polly. "Hark!"

At this instant, however, the girls were prevented from listening to the hubbub arising from Paula's enormous amount of luggage being "moved in." A girl came to the open doorway of this study where Polly, Tess, Madge, and Trixie were congregated.

"Hallo!" she said sweetly.

"Hallo, Audrey!" they all returned, not too cordially.

"So you have all turned up safely," Audrey Blain remarked, with a sweet smile on her very pretty face. She came a step farther into the room, touching her hair to rights. "But where is Betty?"

"Betty won't be here until to-morrow. She was kept back at the last moment."

"Oh, fancy! Why?"

"It's a long story to start telling now," Polly said evasively, and, perhaps as a hint that she preferred Audrey's room to her company, she turned her back and began to unstrap the luggage.

"I'm sorry if Betty is in trouble!" Audrey purred, turning for information to the other girls. "Is it serious, then? Illness?"

"Oh, no; not illness! But serious enough—at least, worrying," Madge answered.

"You have been staying with her at her home in Lancashire?"

"Yes; we were all there for the last week of the hols. Want any help, Polly?"

"Thanks, Madge, if you wouldn't mind!"

Even then Audrey would not take the hint and go. She appealed to Tess Tre-lawney.

"Do tell me!"

"Oh, but we don't know that Betty wants it shouted all over the school!" Tess said brusquely. "You'll hear soon enough, no doubt."

"You are very mysterious!" Audrey commented dryly.

"The whole thing is very mysterious," said Tess. "I say, Trixie, we had better get along and get our things unpacked."

"Oui, out!" agreed Trixie eagerly, and the pair of them departed.

Audrey, too, went off after that. She simply had to, although it was evident that her curiosity as to why Betty had been prevented from returning to school on re-opening day was very great.

Not that Audrey was exactly longing to see Betty. It would, in fact, have suited Audrey's secret ambitions quite well to hear that Betty was not to come back for weeks!

With the Form captain away from the school for a protracted period like that, there might have been a chance for some other girl to act as deputy. Audrey herself, for instance!

Then, in the corridor, Audrey almost collided with a scholar whom she had not yet seen to-day.

"Cora! Hallo, Cora!"

"Oh, is that you, Audrey?"

They were not exactly chums, these two. There had been a time, indeed, when the bitterest feeling had existed between them. But they both had that self-seeking, scheming disposition which enables shallow natures to band together as allies without bearing any goodwill towards each other.

"Had a good holiday?" Audrey questioned airily, stepping after Cora Grandways into the study which that girl shared with her sister Judith. "Where is Judy?"

"Oh, she is about the place somewhere!" shrugged Cora.

"And, I say! Your home is in Lancashire, too, isn't it? Then what is this about Betty Barton? She is not back—"

"She should be in prison, if I had my way!" exclaimed Cora, causing Audrey to stare excitedly. "She would be, too, I verily believe, if she were old enough to be convicted."

"Why, what ever has she done?"

"Done? I will tell you in few words what she has done!" Cora said fiercely. "Last week my father's cotton-mill was burnt to the ground—guttered—and I myself have been able to as good as prove that Betty set the place on fire!"

"No!"

"Yes! She and her chums, they gave a sort of tea-fight to some Council school kids. It took place in the evening, at the school which practically adjoins the mill. Betty slipped out. I saw her go into the mill and strike matches—"

"Gracious! But surely—"

"You are going to say what motive could there be? The Lancashire police had been told the motive!" Cora said bitterly. "The Bartons have always hated us Grandways. Jealously, you know. It's our belief that

Mr. Barton put Betty up to setting the place on fire."

"Oh, but—"

"Oh, all right!" shrugged Cora. "You find it hard to believe, but there it is. Of course, nothing will be done to Betty. Even if it were proved—and I am afraid it won't be—they would only come down on the father. He may yet go to prison, and I hope he will!"

Audrey's interest was as great as her amazement.

"Extraordinary, Cora! Has the case come on in the police-court, then?"

Cora gave one of her sulky shrugs.

"The police are so slow!" she exclaimed. "Father went to them about it all the day after the fire, and they went round to the Bartons' house and questioned Mr. Barton and Betty. Of course, there were complete denials, Betty pitching some story to account for why she went into the mill. Afterwards the police told my father that the evidence was not good enough to act on, and so—"

"They are sort of marking time?"

"That's about it. But father will keep at them. I can promise you that!" Cora said fiercely. "And Betty, when she does turn up here, will look pretty worried, you see!"

"Yes, I can quite see that," Audrey murmured.

Her small hand went to her fair hair in that caressing way again, always a sign with her that her thoughts were running deep. After a moment she walked away without speaking, another habit of hers when she was starting to scheme.

Her own study was close at hand. She went to it, closing the door after she had entered, and stood quite still, starting a faint smile.

She was thinking. If Betty were to come back to school to-morrow, burdened with such a load of anxiety as this, then what about the chances of the girl tendering her resignation as Form captain?

How could she possibly carry on the onerous duties of Form captain when she would have this awful cloud hanging over her? She must be feeling worried to death about it all!

But Audrey's deep thoughts did not end here.

Slowly, as she pondered what she had

been told, there came another idea. Why wait for the Form captain to tender a resignation?

Why not put it about the school quietly that whilst Betty and her people were in the throes of this great trouble the girl could not be expected—now, could she?—to see to Form affairs!

"I'll do it!" Audrey said to herself softly all of a sudden. "I have always felt I would rather like the honour of being captain, and it ought to be quite easy to get Betty just pushed out of the way!"

But would it be easy?

Perhaps Audrey Blain didn't know Betty Barton quite as well as she imagined!

CHAPTER 8.

The Great Prize.

ABOUT half an hour after Audrey Blain had gone away from the Grandways girls' study someone came bursting in upon Cora.

It was her sister Judith.

"Cora!"

"Well?"

"Have you been telling it through the school about Betty Barton and the fire at the mill?" Judith asked in a shocked tone, whilst she closed the study door, so as to be sure of privacy.

"I have told Audrey—only Audrey—"

"Ah, then Audrey has already told others!" the younger sister exclaimed with intense regret. "Oh, Cora—"

"Don't be a stupid, Judy! It had to be known, anyhow. Gracious—"

"Yes, I suppose it was bound to come out," sighed Judith, sitting down dejectedly. "But it does seem a shame—before Betty herself is here. Besides, was it fair of you, Cora, to suggest that Betty simply must have caused the fire out of malice, when you know that the police are inclined to—"

"Oh, hang the police!" snapped Cora. "What did father say the other morning, Judy? They are prejudiced!"

"Yes, I know—I know father talked like that," Judith answered, after a pause. "But, then there are excuses for his being rather bitter and—and talking wildly about it all. We are different, Cora. We are only young, and—"

"Oh, shut up! You make me savage!" cut in Cora, with a violence that left her sister wincing. "We are father's children; his misfortune is our misfortune."

"No one realises that better than I do," Judith protested gently. "But it was no misfortune, as it happened, the mill being burnt down. To the workers, yes; but to dad himself—"

"He would have been ruined if he had not been insured!"

"Oh, of course; but, like every other business man, he was insured," Judith returned quietly. "And when we remember how worried he was about trade at the very time the fire occurred—"

"Judy, what are you saying?" gasped Cora, standing still to look at her younger sister in a frightened way.

Judith simply gazed back calmly.

"Why, I am not saying anything terrible, Cora! Only that we know father was greatly worried all through Christmas and the holidays because trade was so bad, and so the insurance money—"

"Be quiet about the insurance money—be quiet about dad's being worried!" Cora whispered almost frenziedly, with a nervous glance at the closed door. "Next thing, you'll have people putting the two things together and saying that the fire came just at the right time! You'll have them saying that father—that he wanted a fire! He—"

"Cora! Oh, no! Surely nobody would ever hint such an awful thing?"

It was Judy who was the excited one now. She had jumped up from her chair, and was staring in horror at her sister, breathing fast.

"For anybody to say a thing like that—such a wicked thing," she panted—"it would be quite as bad as saying that the Bartons caused the fire, when there is no real proof that they did anything of the sort! Cora darling, how can anybody ever say that father—"

"Well, hold your tongue!" Cora silenced her agitated sister roughly. "There's the bell for assembly going; so that's enough about it all, Judy!"

In the silence that fell between them then the familiar clang of the school bell was quite audible, whilst another moment produced the sound of girls scurrying off downstairs, talking and laughing as they went.

It was significant of the unhappy relations existing between these two sisters at this time that Cora presently went off without Judy, who lingered behind, looking very ill at ease.

Time was when there had been little to choose between the two girls as regards character, or lack of character. The one had been as much disliked as the other for those qualities which merit disapproval—craftiness, tale-telling, mischief-making. But although Cora, the elder sister, was still a girl with strong inclinations towards all that sort of thing, it is good to be able to say that Judith had long since reformed.

Nor had it been any half-hearted reform, either. It was her sister's grievance against Judith these days that the girl had become too "sporting" by half.

Cora didn't mind people being "sportive" in a fly-away sense; what she hated was the really "sporting" type of girl.

By hanging back like that in such a dejected state, Judith was one of the very last scholars to take her place in the great hall. The girls were seething with talk as they stood lined up Form by Form—and no wonder.

For, in the midst of all the remnants of gossip about holiday doings, the scholars had suddenly got wind of something that was to invest this first muster of the new term with greater interest than ever.

In any case, the assembly had promised to be quite an historic one, since it marked the formal reopening of the school after the fire. But what was this hint concerning a mysterious "something" that would give special and dramatic interest to Miss Somerfield's opening speech?

No one seemed to know exactly, but everybody knew that that "something" was in the air.

And now "Hush! Sh! Silence!" was the quiet call, from mistress and prefects alike, to quell all the excited chattering and the shuffle of feet. It was the signal that Miss Somerfield, with perhaps one or two of the school governors, was about to step forward upon the dais at the upper end of the hall.

Silence there was—for just the fraction of a second. No longer. Then—

"Hurrah-h-h!" went up the first great cheer, as all Morcove School got a glimpse of its beloved headmistress. "Hip, hip, hip—"

"Hooray-ay-ay!"

Nor, having started to cheer, were the high-spirited girls in any haste to leave off! Cheers as Miss Somerfield smilingly advanced to the centre of the dais, vociferous cheers as she bowed and smiled, louder cheers than ever the instant she opened her mouth to speak!

"Girls of Morcove School—"

And off they went again:

"Hurrah! Hooray! Hip, hip, hip—hooray!"

Ah, but it would have been hard indeed for most of the girls to restrain their feelings to-day! Grand to be back again at the dear old school, and grand to have found that it had been made to look so fine after last term's fire—all the old dignity and character of the place restored, and many a jolly improvement added, for the comfort of all!

Miss Somerfield was bound to allude to their being within the same historic walls again after such a disturbing time as they had had, and her speech might easily have been a tedious one. But it was not tedious. Catch Miss Somerfield prosing!

With deep feeling, she said just enough to give expression to all the delight that everyone was feeling, and then she passed to other topics. The coming term, sports, all the phases of school life which made the girls' schooltime pass so happily—she skipped from one subject to another. And then—a pause. A look of amusement, too, on Miss Somerfield's face, as if she knew that this was what all Morcove was waiting to hear!

"There is one thing more, girls—"

Ah, now it was coming. A rustle of excitement all over the hall.

"Some of you may have heard that I would have a special announcement to make," the headmistress went on. "Well, it is this."

Every ear was straining to catch every syllable to be uttered.

"A certain lady, who was once a scholar at this school—I am not going to give you her name, for she desires to remain anonymous, for the present, at least. This lady has offered a hundred-guinea prize."

"Oh!" came, in a great gasp, from perhaps a hundred pairs of parted lips.

"Yes, girls; a prize to the value of one hundred guineas, the winner having the

right to choose what form the prize shall take. I must say, I like that idea."

So did the girls, and they let Miss Somerfield know it! It was quite a half-minute before all the buzz of whispering could be quelled by renewed entreaties for silence.

"And now for the schemes on which the offer is founded," resumed the headmistress at last. "It is as novel, I think, as it is admirable. The prize will not go to the girl who does best at her work, nor yet to the girl who does best at her sport. To whom, then, will it be awarded, when the time comes?"

Miss Somerfield said the next words very impressively, whilst she looked out upon the sea of faces in front of her.

"The prize," she said slowly, "will go to that scholar of Morcove School who during the next few weeks exhibits a certain fine quality to a special extent. Do you understand?"

"Yes, yes. At least——"

"Sh! Silence, please!" murmured the prefects soothingly.

"In an envelope in my study safe," went on Miss Somerfield, "there is a scrap of paper with just one word written upon it. That word names the quality for which the prize will be awarded. Bravery? Brilliance at work? Skill at sports? Thrift? Industry?"

"Oh, goodness! Where do I come in?" Polly Linton whispered at this point to Paula Creel.

"Those are all the fine qualities that I have named," said the headmistress. "The quality in question may be one of them. I do not say it is, or that it isn't. In other words, no one is to know what that quality is that is going to bring the hundred-guinea prize to some girl or other. It is to be——"

"A secret!" came the delighted cry from half a hundred girls. "Oh——"

"Bai Jove!"

"How ripping!"

"My secret, yes!" smiled Miss Somerfield, with an air of being almost her final remark. "Remember, girls, no one will know what the fine quality is that will win the prize. So no girl can possibly make a false show of having that quality, in the hope of winning the prize unfairly. Of course, if you were told that thrift was the thing that would win the prize, you would

all start saving your pennies to-morrow—or industry, you would all be bustling about from morning to night."

"Yes, wather!" agreed languid Paula Creel. "Howevah——"

"Sh—sh!"

"There is really nothing more to say," wound up Miss Somerfield, "except that I hope and believe this novel competition is going to keep all Morcove well up to the mark. The new term has begun——"

"Hurrah!"

"Girls of Morcove School, let that term be a——"

But the rest was lost amidst the deafening cheers that again went up—round after round of hurrahing, lasting until Miss Somerfield and her associates had quitted the dais and the girls had broken ranks and were flocking away, to talk of nothing else for the next hour or so but the hundred-guinea prize!

CHAPTER 9.

The Word is—What?

"I HAVE just dwopped in for a minute, Polly deah," said Paula Creel, coming into Study 12 round about seven o'clock that evening.

And she "dwopped" into the easy-chair that had so taken her fancy.

Polly was too occupied for the moment to talk, but at last she broke out gaily:

"Well, what do you think of it, Paula darling?"

"I think it a wemarkably comfortable cheah, bai Jove! Yes, wather!"

"Duffer! I'm not asking about the chair. The hundred-guinea prize, you stupid!"

"Oh, bai Jove!" Paula beamed. "Weal, don't you know, it is a great idea, keeping that one word secret! Yes, wather! How-evah, I——"

"You never know," broke in Polly, swinging on to the edge of the study table. "It may go to the girl who shows the most fondness for fun. In which case, that prize will be mine."

"Yes, wather! Howevah, has it stwuck you, Polly deah——"

"Well?"

"The pwize may go to the geal who is—I won't say the pwettiest."

"No, don't! Or else, where do you come in?"

"Haow fwivolous you are, Polly! The pwize may go to the girl who is wather stwong on wefinement, don't you know! Gwaceful mannaahs, Polly; a wegard for—"

"Yes, I know! You think you are going to get that prize, by being just an ornament. No, Paula; not a little bit. But if ever a prize should be offered—"

"For a certain awistocwatic dignity, what?"

"Aristocratic fiddlesticks!" grinned Polly. "Do let me finish! If ever a prize should be offered for laziness—"

"Bai Jove—"

"Lounging about in other people's studies—"

"Polly!"

"And wearing out all their best cushions—"

"My deah Polly!"

"And always fishing out a pocket-mirror and comb to have a look at one's head. If, Paula darling, anybody is ever such a duffer as to offer a prize for that sort of thing—"

"Yes, wather!"

"Then you'll get it!" finished Polly. "Come in, Trixie! Is that Tess as well?"

It was, and the two girls came in accordingly.

"What do you think of it?" began Tess, meaning the prize.

But Polly chose to believe that Tess meant poor Paula when she said "it."

"Oh, it's as big a nuisance as ever!" sighed Polly, contemplating the bland Paula in her easy chair. "It comes in when it likes, you know, and doesn't go when it's wanted to. Such things are sent to try us!"

"Yes, wather!" said Paula, in a rather bewildered way. "I am not pweicisely aweah what you are weferring to. How-cvah—"

"Polly is referring to you!" said Tess, laughing.

"Oh, bai Jove! Howevah, this being the first evening of term," said Paula, shaking up a cushion, "one must allow for a little fwivolity."

"Sleep, darling, sleep!" quoted the teasing Polly, as Paula closed her eyes, as if for a nap. "I say, Tess—Trixie! It's rather great, that about the prize!"

"Yes," agreed Tess. "I suppose it won't

go to the girl who can paint a bit; otherwise I might stand a chance."

"Some people think languages are everything," said Trixie. "I might get it, with my French!"

"Your what?" asked Polly. "French?"

"Oui, oui!"

"It's French that is a wee-wee bit English, I fancy," chuckled Polly. "Hallo, Dolly! Yes, come along in!"

"I say," exclaimed Dolly Delane, entering with a rush, "do you know what some of the girls are talking about?"

"Yes; the hundred-guinea prize," guessed Polly. "But they need not worry. You'll get it, Dolly, with your obliging disposition. That is the word written on the secret paper, I'm sure—'Obligingness.'"

"Is that an English word?" asked Trixie.

"It is not French, anyhow!" Polly retorted breezily.

"Oh, you all talk nonsense!" Dolly said laughing. "But it is no joke, girls, what is going forward in the Form this evening. There appears to be a growing belief that Betty, when she returns to-morrow, will want to resign the captaincy."

"Wha-a-a-at?" screeched Polly.

The others looked amazed. Even Paula sat up, all agape.

"It is like this," went on Dolly gravely.

"That trouble Betty and her people are in, about the Grandways' fire, is all over the school. It is reckoned that she is bound to come back to the school awfully worried—"

"And that's a fact she will—poor Betty!"

sighed Polly. "Still—"

"Yes, wather!"

"The idea of girls jumping to the conclusion that Betty will resign!" cried Tess.

"They might, at least, have waited for Betty to give a hint."

"Hear, hear!" said Polly. "But who are the girls, then?"

Dolly gave a grimace.

"The usual lot, whenever there's trouble to be brewed," she said. "Some that like to lead, and others that are weak enough to be lead!"

"Not forgetting, perhaps, just one or two who are fond of keeping in the background, to pull the strings?" suggested Tess. "We know!"

Polly suddenly went to the door, opened it, and looked forth. Further up the cor-

ridor some half-dozen girls were holding a confab. She sauntered forward, and stopped when she was right among them.

"Oh—er—Polly," said Grace Garfield, "we have been talking about Betty. She—er—she's coming back to the school to-morrow with a whole pack of trouble, we understand."

"And so some of you want to make her pack heavier, is that it?" Polly returned, quite frankly.

"Don't be silly! What nonsense!"

There were many blustering answers of that sort. Then Ella Elgood said, in a virtuous tone:

"You are utterly wrong, Polly. As a matter of fact, some of us feel we ought to help Betty over her worrying times."

"How?"

"Well, she's captain. And it's a lot of bother being captain—"

"It's an honour and a pleasure," said Polly calmly, "and if only the Form plays up, Betty's captaincy won't be any extra trial to her. It will be a relief, I imagine, from the family worry. Anyhow, before you start casting about for another captain, don't you think you might wait and see what Betty herself has to say?"

"Er—"

Grace Garfield wanted to answer, but was rather stuck in her speech. She suddenly gave an appealing glance to Audrey Blain, who had been standing by in a most disinterested fashion.

"I quite agree, Polly," said Audrey, in her honeyed voice. "We must see if Betty really wants to drop the captaincy whilst this trouble is about. We all think it is fairly certain she will be much too bothered to care about keeping on the captaincy. Still, we are not going to have a meeting until to-morrow."

"Oh," said Polly, raising her brows, "you are going to have a meeting, are you?"

"Yes, a Form-meeting. So you can come—"

"Thank you so much!" Polly's ironical answer made Grace and a few others look furious. "What time may I ask?"

"The afternoon," Audrey said vaguely. "You know, there are no classes to-morrow afternoon, so that just suits."

"It suits you, no doubt. But may I just point out," Polly went on. "Betty is hardly likely to be here before five o'clock?"

"We had thought of that," said Grace, finding her tongue again. "We shall arrange a time accordingly."

"Oh, all right!" said Polly, and she walked away with Tess and Trixie, feeling that that really was good enough.

But it was not "all right."

The chums had not noticed that Grace Garfield's answer was a very adroit one, capable of two-meanings. It was not until after dinner next day that Polly and her friends had their eyes opened to this, by seeing a notice pinned to the Fourth-Form board:

"There will be a Form-meeting in Common-room at three p.m. to-day."

"Three o'clock!" Polly cried indignantly. "After what we said last night—after what they said—about waiting for Betty to turn up!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Come on!"

"Yes, wather!"

And away they went, racing up the stairs, straight to Grace Garfield's study.

Grace and Ella were there, also Cora Grandways, Audrey Blain, and some of the easily-led girls.

"That notice on the board!" burst out Polly. "You say three o'clock—"

"Yes, that seems to be a suitable time for all of us."

"Does it suit Betty? How can it suit Betty, when she is not expected here until five o'clock?" cried Polly hotly. "You said you would arrange a time accordingly!"

"Those were your very words!" added Tess severely.

"And I meant them," said Grace, with a sudden grin. "Knowing that Betty won't be here until five, we really have arranged the time for the meeting accordingly!"

Polly recoiled a little. There was a sudden dramatic silence.

"You mean," she said huskily, at last, "you really want to have the meeting before Betty gets here?"

"Why—er—you see—"

"Oh, let me answer Polly, and then she can clear out!" broke in Cora violently. "In plain English, you girls, the meeting is to discuss one or two things that are best brought up when Betty is not there."

"Oh," returned Polly, "well, I shall be there!"

"And I—and I! Yes, wather!" rejoined her chums.

"Please yourself about that!" shrugged Cora. "Only don't think you can get the time altered, because you can't! We are a majority, see?"

Polly's answer to that was to walk away, and her chum went with her, just as grimly silent. They were half way along the passage when Audrey came stepping after them quietly.

"Polly—all of you!" she pleaded soothingly. "Oh, don't let's have any bad feeling! We want to begin the term without a squabble. The Form—the good of the Form— What are you laughing at, Polly?"

"I am thinking," Polly answered, suddenly, checking her mirthless laugh, "if the hundred-guinea prize was for a girl who could say one thing and mean another, I know who would get it!"

Audrey said, with the sweetest air of injured innocence:

"That is unkind of you, Polly."

"I think myself it is quite deserved!" put in Tess coldly.

"Mais oui—but yes!" agreed Trixie.

"Yes, wather!"

And they all walked on together, whilst Audrey stood there, looking after them, with the mask off for once.

Audrey's was acknowledged to be quite the prettiest face in all Morecove School, but it was not a pretty face just then!

CHAPTER 10.

A Lively Meeting.

IT was a few minutes after three o'clock when the chums put in an appearance at the Fourth-Form general meeting.

They should have been there at three sharp, but "calling" for Paula had caused delay, as usual. So the meeting had begun without them, and they found that Audrey Blain had been asked to take the chair.

The whole Form had turned up. There were girls who seemed inclined to think it was merely going to be a lark; others looked very serious, taking the cue from Cora, whose face was more sullen than ever.

The chums noticed Judith and how dis-

tressed she looked. She was not sitting close to anybody else, and seemed to belong neither to her sister's following nor to the band of girls who meant to watch the absent Betty's interests.

Audrey gave the late comers a look as they filed in and took their seats.

"I'm afraid you are too late to hear what Cora had to say," she said blandly. "The first item on the agenda was to hear a statement from Cora Grandways concerning a certain matter affecting the well-being of the Form. Cora can't very well repeat her statement."

"Oh, help, no!" Polly assented cheerily. "What's next!"

Grace Garfield instantly jumped up.

"I think the idea is that we ought to pass a resolution sympathising with Cora and Judith and her people over that business of the fire."

"Hear, hear!" murmured Ella and others automatically.

"I propose that resolution," said Grace. Up bobbed Ella.

"I second it!"

"Hear, hear! Hear, hear!"

"Those in favour? Against? Carried!" Audrey said, with her usual blandness.

For all in the room had held up their hands. Polly, Paula, and the other chums, they felt they could honestly support a resolution of that nature. There was no love lost between themselves and Cora Grandways; still, one could feel sorry for her and her family.

"Then," Audrey said, glancing at her agenda, "that brings us to the next item. Being in the chair, it is not for me to express very decided views, so will someone —"

"Yes; I will myself!" cried Cora, starting to her feet. "Having given the Form a rough idea of what happened at father's mill last week, and having received such kind sympathy, for which I am sure Judy is as grateful as I am—our parents, too, when they hear—hear—"

"Hear, hear!" someone murmured flippantly, and was reproved by a glance from Audrey.

But the interruption brought Cora back to her point.

"I am quite ready to propose that this meeting of the Form passes a resolution which will have the effect of—er—"

"Getting rid of Betty as captain?" suggested Polly, cuttingly.

"Yes! Just that, and nothing else!" flashed Cora.

And again there was a chorus of "Hear, hear!"

Then Polly sprang up.

"Before anyone is so foolish—not to call it cruel—as to second any resolution of that kind may I saw a word? What happened to the mill has nothing to do with the Form!"

"Oh, oh!"

"Hear, hear! Yes, wather!"

"If it had been proved that Betty set fire to the mill—either by accident, or for the purpose—then it would be different. But it has not been proved!" Polly cried, in a ringing voice, amidst a babel of cries and counter cries. "Cora can't pretend that it has been proved!"

"It will be!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Never, never! Jamais, jamais!"

Trixie was giving her opinion in French, of course.

"Betty did!"

"Betty did not!"

"Order!" appealed Audrey softly, tapping her small table with a pencil. "We want to be fair."

"You all want to seize upon Betty's trouble as an excuse for making her drop the captaincy."

"No!"

"Yes, you do!"

"Well, if we do——"

"Shame, shame, then!"

It was uproar again with Paula, among others, now standing up to try and get a hearing.

"Gee, may I twespas upon your——"

"Sit down, booby!"

"Without wishing to use any strong expressions, gee, I am constwained to wemak——"

"Boo! Sit down, duffer!"

Rap, rap, rap! went Audrey's pencil.

"We want to be fair," she said sweetly.

"After all, as Betty is not here, let her friends speak for her."

"Thank you for nothing!" Polly shouted, causing fresh yells from Cora's side, which, of course, was really Audrey's section of the meeting. "If you are so concerned for

fair play, Audrey, why not adjourn the meeting until Betty turns up?"

"Hear, hear!" Madge Minden cried spiritedly.

"Why did you start hours before Betty was expected to turn up?" demanded Tess.

"The meeting knows the reason!" Cora jumped up to cry. "We do not consider we are here to try Betty. We consider she stands condemned, and so she is not wanted here for her to start trying to defend herself. She——"

"Shame, shame!" from the Betty party.

"No! Cora is right!" yelled back Grace and the rest.

"Order!" appealed Audrey once more. "My idea of the meeting was that it should give the Form a chance to consider the position, as it is certain that Betty will not be able to carry on."

"That is Cora's idea, put in a more artful way!" Polly exclaimed scornfully. "You are all alike. And you, Audrey, are only pretending to be fair. You——"

"Polly——"

"Oh! Turn her out!"

"I'd like you to try!" Polly defied the opposition grimly.

"It is not the first time to-day that Polly has been worse than rude to me," Audrey said, with deadly calmness. "It is a great pity she has got it into her head that we want to force Betty's resignation."

"So you do," Madge Minden remarked coldly.

"Oh, you think the same, do you?" returned Audrey. "But you are wrong. Do take the sensible view, please! Betty is going to be simply overwhelmed with worry in connection with that affair in Lancashire. If she has the good of the Form at heart—as I am sure we all feel she has—she will be asking to be relieved of the captaincy before the end of the week. Let us be prepared, then——"

"Yes, yes!"

"Hear, hear!"

"I will put my proposal in another form," Cora jumped up to say. "I propose that this meeting, anticipating that Betty Barton will not be able to carry on——"

"Hear, hear! That's got it!" applauded Cora's rank and file. "Go on, Cora!"

"This meeting is resolved that the Form stands prepared, by adopting some girl as Betty's successor, for when the occasion arises."

"Bravo! Yes! Hear, hear!"

Cora sat down, flushed and panting. What she now hoped was that someone would jump up and propose her as the future captain.

Grace Garfield stood up.

"I beg to propose that Audrey Blain be adopted," she said, and it was all Cora could do to suppress a gasp.

She could hear a lot of applause, and she knew what it meant. Grace and the rest must have been "got at" by Audrey.

"I second that!" cried Ella. "I—er—hope that Cora will not feel hurt. But I think it would be a mistake to nominate her, as the rest of the school might think she had used the fire at the mill as an excuse for getting Betty's captaincy!"

A very plausible argument, too plausible to have originated in Ella Elgood's mind. Cora was certain that Audrey had put Ella and the rest up to it.

"I—I am flattered—overwhelmed!" said Audrey, with her false smile. "I didn't think the Form had any opinion of me at all!"

"Well, anyhow, we shall have a nice easy time under you," blurted out Kathleen Murray, one of the weaklings.

That rather gave things away. There would have been a painful silence, only Polly, Madge, and the rest of Betty's chums laughed bitterly.

"Before I say anything more," Audrey resumed. "I must put it to the vote. Grace has been good enough to propose me as captain, in the event of Betty's resignation. Ella seconds that. Those in favour, then?"

A lot of hands shot up.

"Those against!"

Up flashed the hands of Polly, Paula, Madge, Tess, Trixie, Dolly, "Bluebell" Courtney and one or two others, including—Judith Grandways!

"Carried," said Audrey, without even troubling to count the "Noes."

Starting to smile, she pushed back her chair and stood up.

"Members of the Fourth Form——"

"Hurrah!" applauded Grace and a few others.

Cora was not one of them. She was finding it hard to swallow her mortification at the way the mill fire affair and this meeting had been used—not to her advantage, after all, but to Audrey's.

"I thank you very much indeed for the compliment you have paid me," Audrey said gracefully. "When I was asked to take the chair I never dreamed that things would go like this. I did think that it was going to be a big upset to the Form at the very commencement of term for Betty to resign."

"She has not resigned yet!" sang out Polly.

"She will resign, so you hold your row!" yelled Grace.

"She will not resign!"

"Bah!"

"Please!" entreated Audrey, ever so sweetly. "I do wish Polly and her friends would realise that we are only preparing for Betty's possible resignation! Personally, I do not see how it is going to work at all, her trying to carry on the captaincy at a time when she is worried about——"

"Of course not!" exclaimed Grace and Ella again. "She will have to resign!"

"She won't resign!" insisted Polly, just as stoutly as ever.

"She will!"

"She will not resign!" cried someone who suddenly flung wide the door and stood revealed to the whole startled meeting.

And it was Betty herself!

CHAPTER 11.

"That's the word—Fortitude."

NEVER were those present likely to forget the bombshell effect of Betty Barton's sudden, unexpected appearance and the cry which had attended it.

Silence, dead silence, prevailed for a second or two. Audrey sat down, the smile fading from her lips. Betty's own chums, although they wanted to rush at her and hug her, were too thunderstruck to be able to do so.

There she stood, practically only just at this moment arrived from her long journey, panting for breath so furiously that one might have imagined she had run all the way.

Then at last Polly and the other chums found their tongues.

"Betty!"

"Betty, dear!"

"Gweat Scott! Bai Jove, Betty deah—"

"Oh, thank goodness you are here!"

Murmurs expressing far different feelings were coming from the "opposition," but such hostile sounds died away as Betty came a step farther into the room.

There was something in Betty's air that had an intimidating effect upon girls like Grace and Ella.

"I had the luck to catch a different train at Bristol," she said, steadying her breathing. "The connection would not have been possible, only that train was a little late, and I just had time to bundle into it. I saw the notice on the Form-board when I got indoors, and so—"

She paused to take another steadying breath.

"I may as well admit it," she said; "I stood outside just a second or so, hearing myself being discussed."

"Listeners never hear good of themselves!" remarked Cora harshly.

"I heard the greatest good of myself!" Betty answered crushingly. "I heard my chums standing up for me, anyhow. I heard them speaking for me."

"I was telling the meeting," Polly said, "that you would not resign."

"And you were right, Polly," rejoined the Form captain very quietly. "I shall not resign. I have a lot to—worry me, but I shall manage."

"Yes, wather! Geals—"

"Oh, very well, then!" Audrey said, standing up and throwing down her pencil with a light laugh. "The meeting has been all for nothing! I don't mind; in fact, I'm glad!"

"The meeting has not been all for nothing," Polly said, looking Audrey straight in the face as that girl came away from the table. "It has served to show that there are girls in the Form who are not above plotting to get rid of their captain to serve their own miserable purpose!"

"Heah, heah! Bai Jove!"

"It is because the whole thing smacks of a conspiracy," said Betty. "I am resolved not to resign. When I fail in my duty towards the Form, just let me know, and then it will be another matter altogether. But until then—"

She turned to her chums.

"Shall we get away upstairs? I'm rather tired. The journey—"

"Yes, dear! Yes, wather!" all her chums instantly exclaimed, and next moment she was gone from the room with them.

Grace Garfield presently ended the rather flabbergasted state into which the "opposition" had been thrown by remarking derisively:

"She is tired, she says. Of course! Not with the journey, I know. Hasn't slept a wink for nights, most likely. And that's the girl who is still to hold the reins of office!"

By that time Betty had reached Study 12, and, in response to their compassionate murmurs, she certainly was owing to being fagged out for reasons apart from the journey.

"Of course, I—I haven't been getting much sleep lately," she said, sitting listlessly there with her hands in her lap. "To see poor dad looking so worried about that terrible business of the fire—"

"What is the latest, dear?" Madge asked softly.

"Nothing fresh," sighed Betty. "Mr. Grandways is still urging on the police to take action, and the police still say there is not sufficient evidence. They've got detectives going, we learned this morning. Dad has happier moments when he feels that they must be trying to find another way altogether of accounting for the fire. Then he fears that the detectives are only trying to get evidence against him."

"You mean—"

"Yes, evidence in support of what Mr. Grandways says, that dad put me up to firing the mill, because there was a chance that night. So there it is," Betty wound up, rising from her chair and unfastening her coat, "and how it will all end goodness knows!"

"Weal, Betty, deah, don't wowwy!"

"I wouldn't worry half so much, only—"

"Only what, dear?"

But Betty was silent now. She turned away to hide her face as a spasm of cruel anguish twisted it.

What would they think, she was wondering, if she told them of the awful misgiving that came upon her at times—the horrid fear that perhaps, after all, she really had fired the mill, by accident?

One of the first questions dad at home had asked her:

"You are quite sure, Betty, dear, you could not have had an accident with those matches when you went into the mill sheds?"

And she had been able to answer, with absolute conviction:

"I am quite, quite sure! Oh, I was ever so careful, dad!"

But the question had been put to her by the police since then. She had been asked the same thing so many, many times in the last few days the effect had been to wear her down. One night she had dreamed that the fire was her fault after all. And that dream, it seemed to haunt her still!

Oh, it was impossible that the fire could have been due to any action on her part! And yet there were these agonising moments when her weary brain felt a prey to this vague fear.

"You will want some tea at once, dear," Polly said. "All right; we'll hustle. Out of my way, Paula!"

"Bai Jove! Yes, wather! Howevah, pway let me be usefule, geals! Betty, deah, I entweat you to wecline in that easy-cheah. Do, deah!"

Betty shook her head, however, and remained standing.

"So the whole Form knows!" she broke out at last. "Cora Grandways has not lost much time in trying to turn that mill fire affair to her own personal advantago at Morcove!"

"It is Audrey who is the real danger, not Cora," said Madge. "In a clumsy fashion, Cora set the mischief going, but it was Audrey who was very artfully turning it all to her own use, only you turned up in time. I am so glad, Betty, that you are resolved to carry on!"

"Yes, if you really feel it won't be too much for you," said Tess.

"We shall back you up, Betty—trust us!" came from Polly.

"You girls—I know you will! And I— Yes, I mean to manage somehow!" Betty declared resolutely. "It simply means showing a bit of fortitude."

And after a moment she added, through her set teeth:

"Yes, that's the word—fortitude!"

CHAPTER 12.

Audrey Wants to Know.

SOME of the girls who had been weak enough to be led away by Cora and Audrey looked rather sheepish whenever they encountered Betty during the next day or so.

And the fact that Betty voiced no reproaches of any sort only made these unstable members of the Form more uncomfortable than ever.

If only Betty had flown into a tearing passion that would have given the weaklings an excuse for saying it was just as well the meeting had been called, to give the captain a plain hint that they were not "hers for life"!

But there was this silence on Betty's part, implying generous forgiveness for the lapse in their loyalty.

"We are not going to talk about it," she seemed to have decided. "I expect you all know by now that you were doing a silly thing, and you are sorry."

That a good few of them really were ashamed was what Audrey Blain realised, and it was like her artfulness to lie quiet for a bit.

There again she differed from Cora, who was all the time trying to create further discontent against Betty, only to find that most girls were sick of hearing Betty run down behind her back.

Grace Garfield, Ella Elgood, Ursula Wade, and one or two others, they were quite willing to keep things "simmering." Unrest in the Form was the very breath of life to them. Far better sport, the baiting of Betty, than the sport one got out of hockey and such-like pastimes!

But Cora had no longer a majority of malcontents. She tried to get back that majority, and was then forced to see that Betty's return had made all the difference.

Audrey had seen that at once, and so she was just biding her time. It would come. She was sure of that. For of this she was convinced—Betty could not possibly go on being worried about that terrible affair at home without neglecting Form affairs.

Meantime, the whole school was still talking a good deal about that hundred-guinea prize and the novel way in which it was to be won.

What was the fine quality named on that slip of paper in the envelope in Miss Somerfield's safe?

Everybody was guessing. Could it be one of the things Miss Somerfield had named—bravery, thrift, industry? It might be. Or it might be truthfulness, or tact, or honesty. Nobody knew.

What everybody did know was that the girl who won that prize in the end—won it,

without any conscious effort on her part—would be quite the idol of the school for the rest of the term. And deservedly so!

Was it a wonder, then, that in her quiet moments Audrey Blain often gave her thoughts to that hundred-guinea prize. The money—bah, that was nothing to her! But the glory! There the mysterious offer touched her weak spot.

No getting the captaincy just at present. But if she could win that prize!

And, by degrees, she began to think about the two things together. Into her cunning brain crept the idea that it would be a splendid thing if she got the prize just about the time that Betty's captaincy broke down.

The Form would then be casting about for a new captain. What more natural than for all of them to choose, with absolute eagerness, the girl who had won the prize? Not only would that girl be the pride of the Form, she would be the idol of the whole school!

So, as the first days of the new term crept by, there was one girl thinking more than all the others about the prize, and that girl was Audrey Blain.

She was wondering—always wondering—what particular quality was the prize to be awarded for when the time came?

When the fateful hour should have come for the envelope to be opened, what would prove to be the word written on that paper?

If only she could know! If only one could find out!

It was the very secrecy of the hidden word that made the competition so different from any ordinary contests.

When a prize was offered for, say, the best bit of needlework, one just went in for needlework for all one was worth, in the hope of beating every other competitor. But in this case no one knew what to "go in for"!

But supposing the chance came to some girl or other to get a peep at what was in the envelope—just that one secret word—then—well, the girl who got that chance, and who knew what the word was, could easily get the prize.

These were thoughts that were soon running incessantly through Audrey's mind, whilst all the time she was bidding her time for another bid for the captaincy.

She was watching Betty—not as Polly and the captain's other chums were watching her, with admiration for the way in which

the girl was struggling along. Audrey watched with secrecy and a feeling of rage, because the captain was not coming to grief at all rapidly.

"It is her fortitude," Audrey said to herself more than once impatiently. "She has all the fortitude in the world, that girl! If the hundred-guinea prize is to be the reward of fortitude, then—well, Betty will get it! I wonder— Oh, I do wonder, what is the prize to be given for!"

It was about this time that Audrey began to find excuses for going to see the headmistress. Once or twice she went along to the headmistress' private room, taking a letter from home to see her about. Another time it was to ask if her people could be put up for the night, supposing they wanted to come down.

Miss Somerfield was always in her room apparently. At any rate, Audrey never had the luck to go there when the headmistress was absent.

Then at last—at last her chance came!

It was one evening about a week after the school's re-opening when Audrey made her way downstairs to the headmistress' private room. The cunning girl's first feeling was that the luck was against her as badly as ever. Miss Somerfield was there. She could be heard talking to someone—one of the scholars apparently.

Audrey, however, decided to hang about. She had not announced herself, and had not been seen by anyone on her way to this remote passage on to which the sanctum opened.

She tiptoed to the end of the passage and hid round the corner.

Time passed—five, ten, fifteen minutes. Still Audrey was waiting out of sight round that corner whilst the headmistress continued her talk with the person who was with her.

Then Audrey heard the squeak of chair castors, as if Miss Somerfield had got up from her seat, to end the interview. A few moments more, and the door was opened.

"One moment, Betty, dear. You can carry these books for me," Audrey heard the headmistress remark, as she followed Betty to the open door. "There you are!"

In the pause that ensued Audrey heard the headmistress clicking off one or two lights in the room—sure sign that she was leaving it for the present. This was, in fact, her time for going in to dinner.

"I am glad, Betty," the secret listener heard Miss Somerfield remark tenderly, "that I sent for you and have had this talk."

"It was very kind of you, Miss Somerfield—"

"Not at all, Betty! Your Form-mistress was remarking to me how terribly worried you seem to be, and so it was only my duty to go into matters with you. I hope that what I have said will console you a little."

"It will—it does! When I write home I shall tell my parents how good you have been to me."

"Ah, dear child!" was the affectionate response to that, and then they passed on towards the hall, the stately headmistress resting a caressing hand upon Betty's shoulder.

Audrey saw them go, her white face peeping round the edge of the wall. For a minute she remained there, eyes and ears on the alert. Then she stole from her lurking place and crept towards the closed door.

Softly turning the handle, she pushed the door open and glanced into the room.

One electric light had been left burning. It was a screen light, over by the desk. Evidently Miss Somerfield would be returning for some more work after dinner, and that was why she had not locked up the safe.

For it was open—and this, this was Audrey's chance!

CHAPTER 13.

What Can Audrey Do?

PAUSING at every other step to listen, in case someone was coming, Audrey crossed to the open safe.

It was close to the headmistress' desk, and the suspended electric light shed its rays into the interior, which was divided into several sections.

There was one portion of the safe that held an array of private books, all neatly stacked together. Then there were bundles of documents, packed away with the same neatness. There were two or three drawers, which Audrey would doubtless have found locked had she tried them. But she had no need to do that.

In the very instant that she got to the open safe she fastened her gaze upon a wire letter-tray which was there. In it lay

numerous papers which Miss Somerfield perhaps intended to file away when she had time to do so. Audrey stepped closer, and, lifting the sheaf of papers, let them fall back to the basket one by one.

Thus she sifted through the whole batch, on the look-out for a sealed envelope, and then suddenly—

"Ah!"

Yes, here it was! A large sealed envelope, bearing this inscription, in Miss Somerfield's handwriting:

"THE HUNDRED-GUINEA PRIZE."

Audrey shot a glance over her shoulder towards the room door. Nobody coming, that was certain. And here, in her very hand, was the envelope containing what had come to be talked of as the headmistress' secret—the one secret word naming that special quality, in connection with which the great prize would be awarded!

But the letter was sealed—both it! Audrey was biting her lip, feeling baffled after all. Her daring idea had been to get hold of the envelope, take it away, and steam it open, afterwards returning it intact to the safe, and so no one would ever have been any the wiser. But the seal—the seal forbade all tampering with the envelope.

In a flash, however, she now had another idea—the electric light!

There was the one strong light, burning close at hand. She turned towards it, and held the envelope close to the electric bulb. Perhaps, with the strong light behind it, she could read the one word on the slip of paper inside.

Some vague, shadowy lettering became visible directly she held up the envelope, and then she read the secret word quite easily.

The one vital word, set down in hand-printed characters, and it was:

FORTITUDE.

Fortitude!

Audrey suddenly shook from head to foot. With a hard grasp, she lowered the sealed envelope and returned it to its place in the basket. No one would ever suspect that she had touched it. Nor would anyone else try that trick with the electric light to find out the word. Of that she was perfectly sure. Other girls were not so

clever as she, Audrey was saying to herself. She might have added, nor so mean!

Out of the room she hastened, meeting with far better luck than she deserved. Nobody saw her, and before another minute had sped by she was upstairs in her study. "Fortitude!"

Under her breath she said the word again and again, thinking all the time of that girl who just at present was exhibiting fortitude to such a marked degree.

Betty Barton! Betty, with all that load of trouble to bear in connection with the affair of the fire, and yet "carrying on" as captain day after day, bearing up bravely before all the school.

If that was not fortitude, what else was it?

Audrey took hold of her dictionary, and turned up the word. Here it was:

"Fortitude: that strength of mind or courage which enables a person to bear up calmly under opposition, adversity, or affliction."

That was Nuttall's definition of the word. Audrey slammed shut the dictionary, and pushed it from her, frowning the while.

Now that she had had a secret glimpse of the word in the envelope, she should have had an advantage over every other girl in the school. But how to practise fortitude when there was nothing in her daily life calling for that quality? One needed to have a big trouble, and to let the whole school see one bearing up bravely under it. What about inventing a trouble, then? What about— Oh, that was the thing! To invent a trouble, and then—

The door opened. Cora came in. She was evidently in the mood to make common cause with Audrey once again.

"Have you got a minute to spare, Audrey?" she asked, shutting the door behind her quickly. "I thought I would look in, because I— I've just had an idea. About Betty!"

"Oh!"

"Yes. What a lot of duffers we are!" Cora went on, with a grimace. "What we want to do is to start a campaign—a regular campaign! Never give Betty a moment's peace, but keep her bothered from morning to night about things she simply must attend to as captain. See?"

"I see, Cora—yes. But—"

Audrey gnawed a lip.

She was thinking. All that sort of thing, would only give Betty more and more opportunity of displaying fortitude!

"No, that won't do," she said.

"We are going to try it!" chuckled Cora. "Grace and Ella and a few others think it great, and they have already started. They are going to spend the rest of the evening dropping in on Betty, to pester her."

"Betty will realise what you are doing and lock the door," said Audrey. "What will you do then?"

"That is just what we hope she will do, don't you see?" cried Cora.

"I'm afraid I don't," replied Audrey Blain truthfully.

"Why, you stupid, if Betty refuses to answer our questions she is neglecting her duty as captain, and then we can call a meeting and demand her resignation," cried Cora enthusiastically. "Don't you think it a jolly good plan? I do!"

"But, dear, that is surely not a strong enough reason for demanding her resignation," protested Audrey.

Cora raised her eyebrows and smiled significantly.

"Not in itself, I agree, but one can make mountains out of molehills sometimes. Ha, ha, ha!" she laughed.

Cora went away, still laughing maliciously. As for Audrey, she sat down by her table and stared gloomily before her.

This first week of the term that was just ending, it figured in her mind as round one in a sort of tussle between Betty and herself. Other girls were involved, of course, but that was what it all resolved itself into—Betty versus Audrey. And round one had been won by Betty!

Betty was still captain of the Fourth Form. What was even more exasperating to Audrey, the very fortitude by which Betty was carrying on was putting her in the running for that prize!

What a quandary Audrey was in now! She could not incite Cora or any of the rest of the girls to make Betty's life a harder one. She wanted to, but she dare not.

When the sealed letter came to be opened, Miss Somerfield would say: "I have to award the prize to the girl who, to our knowledge, has shown the greatest degree of fortitude just lately. Who is she, then?"

And then the answer: "Betty Barton."

So for the rest of that evening Audrey

Blain remained alone in her study, thinking deeply.

She had lost round one, but did that mean she was beaten?

Was there no way, no possible hope whatever, of getting both the prize and the captaincy?

How make a start with round two?

That was the desperate problem confronting Audrey.

CHAPTER 14.

Piling It On to Betty.

A GIRL came along the Fourth Form corridor at Morcove School and turned into the Form captain's study.

"Betty Barton—"

"Well, Ursula Wade?"

"Some of the girls are wondering, did you write to the Barncombe House captain, as you promised to do?"

"Oh, yes! The letter went off this morning."

"I thought you might have forgotten," said Ursula.

"When I have a thing to do, I do it," remarked Betty; and with an air of having ticked off her visitor, she returned her attention to the task at present engaging her.

It was the hour for "prep.," and Betty, like her chum Polly Linton, who was seated on the opposite side of the study table, had settled down to tackle the two or three set lessons for the evening.

There was no question about Ursula Wade feeling that she had been ticked off. Looking rather sulky because she could not take the conversation any further, she flounced about and withdrew, slamming the door behind her as she went.

Polly Linton drew a loud breath.

"Oh!" she fumed. "They are piling it on to you shamefully, Betty! Just because they know you have a whole load of personal worry to bear, and because they want to see you give up the captaincy in despair. Betty dear, I am not going to look on and

"Here's another, I reckon," Betty interposed, with a calm smile, as the door was tapped again. "Come in!"

The girl who entered said at once coldly:

"Betty, did you put my name down for that party that is going into Barncombe next Saturday?"

"Yes."

"You are sure you didn't forget?"

Betty, refusing to lose her temper, got up and sought out a list of names.

"There you are, Grace Garfield, and now I hope you are satisfied."

"Oh, all right!" Grace said, with very little grace indeed, after picking out her name on the list. "I only wanted to be sure you hadn't forgotten. This is what comes of having to trust to the captain over every little thing!"

"Oh, clear out!" exploded Polly.

"I beg your pardon!" said Grace.

"Push off!"

Polly, the madcap of the Form, had acquired such phrases as these, it is to be feared, from a rather madcap brother.

"You rile me!" she explained bluntly, waving Grace away. "I'm fed-up with the whole jolly lot of you!"

"I am not aware that I have bothered you," Grace said, tilting her chin. "If one has to see the captain about every little thing that's going, then how can I help coming in here?"

And she went out, the door closing with another loud slam.

"Betty—"

"Yes, dear; but don't let it upset you so," counselled Betty. "I say, let's finish prep., and then we'll know where we are."

She put the list of names back into the drawer from which she had taken it a moment ago, and resumed her seat at the table.

Polly, with another loud breath of suppressed anger, fell to at some arithmetic, whilst her chum plodded on with French. The one girl was mentally taking fourteen from fifty-seven, and the other was whispering some bit of French grammar, when the door again opened.

And there again was Grace Garfield.

"Betty—"

"Oh!" shouted Polly.

"Betty, I have been thinking. I don't think I'll go to that show in Barncombe, after all."

"Very well."

"So will you take my name off the list? Scratch it off now, then I shall know."

"I'll remember."

"If you don't mind. I'd prefer to see you erase the name at once. Then I shall know there is not going to be any mistake."

Polly slammed a book about so violently that she upset an inkpot.

"Hang! Bother you, Grace Garfield!"
 "Really," protested Grace, "I don't see what you have got to blame me for! It may be a bit trying, having constant callers to see the captain. The obvious remedy in that case—"

"Oh!"
 "The obvious remedy is to shift to another study, Polly. Or else let us have another captain. Have you got the list, Betty?"

The captain did not answer, for no answer was needed. Laying the paper down, she took her pen and ran it through Grace Garfield's name.

"Thank you," Grace said, having seen this done. "And now, Betty, as you are captain of the Form—"

At this instant the door flew open once more, and Cora Grandways stood revealed.

"Betty, as you are captain of the Form, will you write a letter to those outfitters in Barncombe, hurrying up those sports things you were to get for us?"

"I'll make a note of it—yes."

"Don't forget! Some of us are ashamed to turn out until we get those things. Hallo, Di!" Cora said cordially, as Diana Forbes now appeared in the doorway.

"Betty," called out Diana, "as you are captain of the Form—"

"Will some of you clear out?" yelled Polly, simply spoiling for a row. "There's no peace at all, and I know what your game is. Shame—shame on you!"

"Why, what on earth have we done?" went up the bland chorus.

"You—you—"

"Polly, it's all right," struck in Betty soothingly. "I'd just like to assure these girls that the various matters will be attended to. Then—"

"Half a sec.!" broke in Diana Forbes. "You don't know what I had come to see you about."

"Well, fire away!"

Thus invited, Diana began a long rigmale dealing with something of no real importance at all.

The whole purpose of her visit, as was the case with the other girls, was to drive poor Betty Barton to distraction.

Cora Grandways stood by the door, grinning. So did two or three other girls who had turned up to see the fun. And there was Polly Linton, looking as if she would like to go for the lot of them.

As for Betty, however, she gave the most patient hearing to Diana, and so the crowd withdrew at last with rather less laughter than they had hoped to enjoy. If only they could make Betty give up the captaincy in despair! But no, she had fight in her yet!

"Well, we must keep on at her—that's the wheeze," counselled Cora Grandways, when she had assembled her band of weaklings in her own study to talk over the situation. "If you want a new captain, it is now or never!"

"I—I suppose we do want a new captain?" said Kathleen Murray rather dubiously, thereby drawing upon herself some very hard stares.

"You please yourself!" Cora exclaimed roughly. "But I thought we had all come to that conclusion. With a new captain, the Form is bound to have a jolly sight better time."

"Of course!" agreed Ella Elgood impatiently. "Just fancy, girls, if Cora here took on the captaincy!"

"Oh, thank you, but I shan't be the one!" Cora said decidedly—all the more decidedly because she knew full well that such an honour as the captaincy was utterly beyond her hopes.

Even these pliant girls who were with her now—easily led girls whom she had been able to use in her vendetta against Betty—even they could not be relied upon to "plump" for her en masse.

With them, as Cora knew, it was one thing to take a hand at getting rid of Betty; it was quite another thing to say "Cora shall be captain!"

In proof of this, Grace Garfield now came out with a remark, which must have expressed the general feeling, because of the approving murmurs that greeted it.

"What we want," said Grace, giving a wink, "is an easy time, and yet be able to keep the support of—well, girls who are not like us!"

Grace evidently meant by that girls who were not quite such slackers!

"Well, then, what did I tell you?" Cora pursued, when the murmurs of approval had died away. "There is a girl in the Form who would make just the captain we want—one who will wink at things that Betty would be so quick to put a stop to; a girl who looks nice, and is nice—"

"She ought to be all things to all people," said Ella. "It's the only way."

"The girl I mean is just that," declared Cora. "She——"

"Audrey Blain, eh? You mean Audrey?" put in Grace; and Cora promptly nodded.

"Audrey is a queer girl, we know. She's dying to get the captaincy, but she is too proud——"

"Oh, call her jolly artful, and be done with it!" grinned Ella. "We know Audrey. But not as a captain, Cora."

"No——"

"Oh, I don't mind if she is!" shrugged Ella. "Only give us a new captain who will let us do as we like, I don't care who she is."

"Now listen to me!" Cora said, with such sudden, passionate seriousness that her companions were electrified. She was sitting at her study table, and she suddenly flung out an arm and struck the middle of the table a blow with her hand.

"I have made up my mind there's got to be another captain, not because I'm in love with Audrey, or any other girl, but because I mean to see Betty Barton resign the post! I mean to make her resign—somehow, so there!"

In the dead silence that followed this fierce declaration, a girl who had been sitting quietly reading in a corner closed her book and got up. She went, without saying a word or giving a glance to the conspirators, towards the door.

"Judy, where are you going?" Cora snapped, for the girl was Judith Grandways.

"Oh, nowhere—anywhere rather than sit here and——"

Cora interrupted by springing to her feet noisily.

"That is pretty rich, Judy," she burst out reproachfully, "to let these girls see you siding against me, when we are sisters! And when you know as well as I do that there is every reason for feeling bitter against Betty."

"I see no reason, Cora, as I have said before, for our setting other girls against Betty. Even if Betty Barton was the cause of father's cotton mill being burnt to the ground——"

"If—if!" echoed Cora scornfully. She stamped a foot. "Oh, I'm tired of repeating it! I myself saw Betty steal into the mill yard that night. I saw her striking matches in one of the sheds. And the Barton family always hated us Grandways—you know they did!"

"I know this," Judith said, turning the handle of the door. "Father has not been able to convince the police that either Betty or her father had any part in the fire. And so I think it would be only fair, Cora, for you to talk less against Betty in front of these girls."

"Judy——"

But Judy was gone, sighing hard to herself as she gained the passage and pulled the door shut behind her.

She wandered on aimlessly, but was only half-way to the stairs when some scrap of paper lying upon the passage floor caught her eye.

It looked as if it might be a note that had been dropped by accident, and so she stooped and picked it up, thinking to restore it to its owner. But in another moment she realised that the scrap of paper was meant for whoever might find it.

"DOWN WITH BETTY BARTON!" she saw scrawled upon the paper. "GIVE US AUDREY BLAIN!"

All of a tremble, Judith Grandways stood gazing at the words in a shocked way.

"I know who wrote this," she whispered to herself at last. "She has tried to disguise the handwriting, but hasn't quite succeeded. It is Audrey Blain herself!"

CHAPTER 15.

Give Us Audrey Blain.

AT that moment someone who was neither scholar nor servant came round from the staircase and into the Fourth Form passage, advancing with a graceful, stately step.

Judith Grandways glanced up, and swiftly she crumpled the note in her hand as she saw who this was.

The headmistress!

Miss Somerfield looked as if she had some anxiety on her mind as she came on along the corridor. It was like her, however, to raise a genial smile as she met one of her scholars.

"Well, Judith! You appear to be rather in the dumps! I am sure that is not the way to win that hundred guinea prize!"

"Prize——"

"You can't have forgotten!" smiled the headmistress. "Isn't every girl in the school remembering that the one who exhibits most of a certain fine quality in the

course of the next few weeks will get the hundred guinea prize offered by an old scholar."

She patted the dejected Judith in a rallying manner.

"What it is that will secure the prize, no one knows until that envelope in my safe is opened," she said. "But I am sure the hundred guineas is not intended for the girl who looks most humpy. So cheer up, my dear! And now, which is Audrey Blain's study, tell me."

Judith faced about to point to a certain door, and the headmistress nodded her thanks.

"I was passing this way, so I thought I would have a word with Audrey Blain," she remarked, passing on to that girl's door.

And next instant she was inside the room.

Audrey was there, the very quickness with which she jumped up seeming to enhance her acknowledged prettiness. A smile broke out upon her lovely face, and it was an adorable, an angelic smile. At that instant she looked sweetness personified.

"Oh, Miss Somerfield!" she exclaimed demurely. "What an honour for me!"

"I always say the pleasure is mine when I look in upon any of my scholars," the headmistress answered. "This time, however—no, Audrey, I cannot call it a pleasure. I am distressed—"

"Oh, what about, please? Nothing surely, that I can have done!"

"Is it your doing, Audrey? That is what I wish to know at once," was the grave rejoinder. "This scrap of paper—I happened to be the one to pick it up in one of the downstairs passages just now. Read it, will you?"

Audrey did so, starting to look very upset. On the scrap of paper there was an appeal similar to the one that Judith had found only a minute ago:

"HOW MUCH LONGER ARE WE TO PUT UP WITH BETTY BARTON? GIVE US AUDREY BLAIN!"

Audrey was drawing a deep breath as she raised her eyes from the paper.

"Oh!" she cried out loudly, in a scandalised tone. "How disgraceful!"

"Yes, indeed. Infamous!" agreed Miss Somerfield indignantly. "And so I want

to know—I mean to find out, too—who wrote those words. You are going to say —"

"I did not write them, Miss Somerfield. Oh, no, no!" Audrey protested vehemently. "My name is mentioned, but not with my permission. You will accept my denial, won't you? Oh, you must!"

"I want to, Audrey," was the solemn reply. "But, frankly, this disguised writing has a faint resemblance here and there to yours."

"What! Let me see again!" panted Audrey, and she scanned the wording once more, whilst Miss Somerfield looked round as she heard some whispering at the open doorway.

Several girls were there. They had been attracted to the spot by hearing Audrey's excitable talk, and now, as Miss Somerfield looked at them, they were joined by others.

"Well, Audrey?" she asked at length, without having sent the other girls away.

Audrey slammed the paper upon the table angrily.

"I did not write it! If there is any resemblance in the writing—"

"There is your Greek 'e' here and there," Miss Somerfield said.

"Somebody has done that on purpose, then! I am innocent!" Audrey protested, drawing herself up. "It is a great shame if I am to—"

"One moment before you say any more," the headmistress struck in, and then stepped to the table. "That scurrilous bit of writing was done with violet ink. Have you any?"

"Violet ink? See for yourself!" challenged Audrey.

The crowd at the doorway, growing every moment larger, saw Miss Somerfield cast about in vain for any tall-tale bottle of violet ink. Its absence was obviously going to count in Audrey's favour, and the headmistress had already lost some of her suspicious expression when her eyes fell upon the girl's blotting-paper.

Miss Somerfield caught up the pad and examined it, but there were only blottings made with black ink. She set it down, again with an expression of relief, and then she turned over a "folder" of blotting-paper, and on the side that had been face downwards to the table there were many violet blottings!

"Audrey, look here! And yet you tell me—"

"I cannot help it!" the girl exclaimed wearily. "Is it likely I would stoop to writing notes like that and leaving them about the place?"

She was appealing to the girls at the door, but none answered. There were those who thought she might have been capable of doing it—why not? She had not such a blameless record as all that. And there were others—the Cora Grandways "set"—who thought it was quite likely she really had done it, to bring things to a head.

Miss Somerfield suddenly asked if Betty was there. She was not, but they ran and fetched her.

"Ah, Betty!" the headmistress said quietly when the Form captain appeared, accompanied by Polly Linton, Paula Creel, and two or three other devoted chums. "Would it surprise you to know that some very despicable attempt has been made to stir up the Form against you?"

"Yes, wather!"

"Paula Creel, I was not addressing you!"

"No, Miss Somerfield, that I wealise," simpered Paula. "Howevah—"

"Paula, will you kindly allow Betty to speak?"

"But, Miss Somerfield—" began Polly.

"Polly Linton, you heard me reprove Paula for interrupting! Now, Betty!"

"Such a thing would not surprise me at all," Betty said gently. "I have had it made quite clear to me that my resignation would be welcomed by some of the girls. But—"

"Well?"

"As they are not exactly the best girls we have in the Form—"

"Oh, I like that!" Cora almost shouted from the doorway, perhaps hoping to create quite an angry demonstration against the frank speaker. No one else, however, seemed disposed to challenge the captain's statement.

"I am just carrying on as usual, that's all," Betty continued.

"And quite right, too!" was Miss Somerfield's approving rejoinder. "Did you speak, Paula?"

"I— Yes, wather; I did dwop a we-mark," owned that amiable young lady with her best drawl. "I weally felt con-

stained to we-mark, don't you know, that it's quite wight of Betty to cawwy on. Yes, bai Jove, wather!"

"The Form knows—the whole school knows—that you, Betty, are carrying on under very great difficulties indeed. We know that you have a great deal of worry to bear in connection with that fire in the north, and I for one have been greatly impressed with the fortitude you have shown. I would have expected this to be a time when the Form would rally round you, not forsake you. As for this sort of underhand business"—and she waved the paper in the air—"it would be bad enough at the best of times."

"Don't blame me, please!" protested Audrey, with all the air of an injured innocent.

"I am going to blame you, Audrey; I am going to punish you," Miss Somerfield announced, in a steely tone. "For the simple reason that I am convinced you wrote these words. I am quite satisfied—"

"You are going to do me a great injustice—"

"No," was the emphatic answer to Audrey's cry. "I have not a reputation for condemning people before their guilt is proved. That Greek 'e,' the blotting-paper, the fact that the scurrilous appeal puts you yourself forward as a desirable successor to Betty—these things, to my mind, are sufficient!"

"Hear, hear!" cried Polly, whilst Paula put in a drawing: "Yes, wather!"

And then Audrey burst into tears. Out came her handkerchief, so that she could dab it to her eyes, and some of the girls wondered if this breakdown was the preliminary to a frank confession. Excitement amongst the crowd was intense.

In another moment, however, Audrey was checking her tears. She stood before Miss Somerfield and her schoolfellows, very erect and very pale, with her underlip caught between her teeth. Her eyes flashed. She was like one who, unable to vindicate herself, is suddenly resolved to bear injustice with the spirit of a heroic martyr!

"It is cruel of you—cruel!" she said huskily at last. "But Betty Barton is not the only girl who can show fortitude. Condemn me, if you like, Miss Somerfield; I shall say no more!"

"I think you stand condemned," was the

headmistress's stern response. "You have been guilty of undermining the girls' loyalty to their own captain at the very time when she needed that loyalty to the full. I say again it was a wicked thing to do, and it must be punished. Go to the detention-room at once!"

"What!" Audrey gasped, recoiling a little.

"The detention-room—go!" her headmistress insisted, waving her to door. "Convinced of your guilt, I do not feel you are fit to remain amongst my other girls! Go, I say, and you will have to purge yourself in no half-hearted manner before I let you return to your usual place in the school!"

Even as the angry headmistress waved the culprit to the door, the girls who were crowding there had fallen apart to let Audrey pass. Now there was a gap in the crowd plain for Audrey to see. For a moment she remained stockstill, holding her breath as if she could hardly believe that such an indignity was to be laid upon her.

Then, seeing the inflexible look in Miss Somerfield's face, the girl threw up her head with an air of great fortitude and marched from the room.

Less than two minutes later she was alone in the detention-room, and now the strange thing was she was smiling to herself in the most delightful manner!

Yes, it was strange, until one knew—as no one in Morcove School either knew or suspected—what a deep game she was playing.

Her ambition was the captaincy, and she meant to get that proud position in the end. To be in disgrace like this did not seem much like progress towards her coveted goal, but it was!

For this was the beginning of what was to be called in the end Audrey Blain's martyrdom—a martyrdom borne with such fortitude that it would be found, when the sealed letter in the safe was opened, that she was the very girl who deserved that hundred guineas prize!

The cunning of Audrey Blain—was there ever anything like it? Already, by the most cunning device, she had found out what nobody else knew, and that was the word in the envelope. Fortitude! And so, on purpose to give herself the chance of being acclaimed by and by as a girl who

had displayed the greatest degree of fortitude, she had arranged her own "martyrdom."

With her own hand had she deliberately written those scurrilous appeals in violet ink and dropped them around the school. Miss Somerfield had found one; other scraps of paper would be found as time went by. Meanwhile, she was already condemned as the culprit—packed off to the detention-room. Just what she wanted!

For unless Audrey's plans went wrong, she could count upon a certain person being dropped upon for the whole business before long, and then would be her own triumph!

Then it would be:

"Poor Audrey, what a shame it was that you were wrongly punished! But you did bear it bravely. If the hundred guineas prize proves to be for fortitude, then you'll certainly get it."

And the school would find that the prize was for fortitude, and so she, Audrey, would get it!

"Yes," she pondered, sitting there in a dim-lit room quite resigned to all the indignity and hardship of such punishment, "and if the girl who wins the prize can't turn her sudden popularity to good account, by getting the captaincy, too, human nature isn't what I take it to be."

She almost chuckled as she considered all this; but there was a well-assumed air of martyrdom upon her pretty face directly she heard someone turning back the key in the lock.

Miss Redgrave came in. She was the youthful and immensely popular assistant-mistress to the Fourth Form, a young lady who would go out of her way to woo a wrong-doer back to the right path, rather than coerce her.

"Audrey—"

"Yes, Miss Redgrave?"

The artful girl knew that martyrs never sulked, and so she was going to be most demure and complacent.

"I am so very sorry about all this, Audrey," the youthful mistress exclaimed, with deep feeling. "It is a shocking thing you have been guilty of. You deny it, I know, but—oh, Audrey, what is the use of denying it when Miss Somerfield has discovered evidence proving your guilt?"

"Miss Somerfield will be sorry some day," Audrey answered, with an injured, inno-

cent look. "I say no more. I am sent here, and—"

She heaved a pathetic sigh.

"I must be brave, that's all!"

Miss Redgrave's distress made her wince.

"Now listen, Audrey. I have it from Miss Somerfield that you may go from here immediately on condition that you promise to hand her a written admission of your guilt, and that you apologise to Betty."

Audrey said very "heroically":

"I cannot do any such thing, Miss Redgrave. No!"

"Then you will have to stay here."

"Very well. I have more fortitude than some people imagine."

"You will have to remain here until call-over, and then attend the muster as a girl in deep disgrace. You will be allowed to go to your dormitory for the night, but in the morning you will at once return here."

"Very well."

"And here you will spend the whole day, except for exercise that you will take whilst other girls are in school."

"Very well," Audrey said, as submissively as before; "if Miss Somerfield can be so cruel—"

"Audrey, you have not a cruel headmistress. She is the soul of good nature. But you have incurred well-deserved punishment by a very scandalous, mean action, a hit at the captain, just when the girl needs everybody's support. Think, Audrey! It is a terrible thing to hit a person who is down."

Audrey pursed her lips and reared her head aside, as if all this was being said to an entirely innocent girl who scorned to reply.

"Will you, then, Audrey—oh, will you own up, and say you are sorry?" pleaded the mistress. She laid a gentle, imploring hand upon the girl's narrow shoulders. "Will you, Audrey?"

"No!" It was said flatly, but not impudently. "It is going to be hard on me to have to put up with the punishment I am threatened with, but I shall not give in. And some day, Miss Redgrave—some day the whole school will see what fortitude I had!"

Miss Redgrave said no more. With a look of bitter disappointment she stepped back

to the door and passed out, turning the key upon Audrey again.

Once more the girl was left all alone, and once more she smiled to herself in her secret delight!

CHAPTER 16.

Worse and Worse for Betty.

ALL next day other scraps of paper, scrawled with phrases directed against Betty Barton, were turning up in the school.

They were found between the leaves of class-room books; they were pounced upon in various nooks and corners where they had escaped attention up to now.

Sometimes it was one of the scholars who found one of the hateful "screeds"; at another time it would be a mistress or a servant. The headmistress impounded all the papers that she heard about, and when she realised to what an extent the sowing of mischief had been carried on, she felt all the angrier with the culprit.

That so many scraps of paper should have turned up after Audrey's banishment to the detention-room did not, of course, argue that girl's innocence. Nobody needed to be told that the papers had certainly been spread about by her in secret yesterday, and were being found to-day because the whole school's interest had been aroused.

So, if the headmistress was angrier than ever with Audrey, others were angrier, too. Had the culprit been mingling as usual with her schoolfellows, she would have been made to feel the utter scorn in which she was held.

As it was, there were only two or three fugitive occasions when Audrey was amongst the scholars, and at such times the presence of mistresses forbade any hostile outburst. Yet a good many girls managed to give the culprit such a look as should have made her cringe with shame.

What was the result, however? The more opprobrium Audrey suffered, the better it suited her plan! So when she was brought in to take her place in the muster, or led away again, the more the girls displayed disgust and contempt, the higher she held her head!

But the best element in the school did more than proclaim its indignation by treating Audrey with this fierce contempt. Time after time, from first thing in the

morning until after tea, Betty Barton had assurances of sympathy and loyalty from many of her schoolfellows. They felt she deserved some word of consolation and encouragement, and so indeed she did.

Poor Betty!

Heavy indeed was the load of care she was bearing these days.

If only this "hit" at her in the school had come at any ordinary time she could have borne it with serene composure. But she had been called upon to grapple with a host of extra difficulties arising out of the captaincy just at a time when she was terribly worried about that awful fire which had gutted the Grandways' cotton mill during the last week of the holidays.

There had been a letter from home for her this morning, and she had been reading it again and again during the day—when ever she had a moment to herself. Once Polly had caught her brooding over the letter, and had asked: "Can't I read it, dear? Can't I help you somehow?" But no! Betty had felt that it was not advisable to let even her bosom chum know all that was in the letter.

Polly was so intensely sympathetic, for all hers was such a madcap disposition; the contents of that letter would only leave her worried almost as much as Betty herself. Worried, with no possibility of doing any good by worrying.

"Well, dear," Polly was remarking, now that they had had tea very quietly together in Study 12, "I expect you want to get a letter ready for the post, and so I shall clear out."

"Oh, but—"

"Yes, I'm off," Polly insisted cheerfully. "For a change, I shall go and sit in Paula's study, instead of Paula coming in here to—Hallo! Who's that, I wonder?"

It was Paula. There she stood, having followed her tap at the door by floating into the room. And already her pretty eyes were going to the comfortable armchair which was her favourite lounge every evening.

"Weal, geals—"

"Whoa!" Polly said promptly. "Right-about turn, Paula!"

"My deah Polly, how fwivolous you are! I wather wondah that you can indulge in fwivolous wemarks when you wealise that poor Betty is so wowwied!"

"My very dear Paula," said Polly grimly, "it is just because Betty is so worried that your presence is not desired. See?"

"Bai Jove!"

"Oh, it's all right, Paula!" put in Betty, forcing a smile. "Don't take any notice of Polly. There's the chair—"

"Yes, wather! Howevah—"

"Across my body first!" Polly said, putting herself in front of the chair. "Paula dear, quit! Clear out! Vamooosh!"

"I am constwained to wemark, Polly—"

"No speeches! I put it to you, Paula—how can Betty endure a girl sprawling in that chair, either making fatuous remarks or else snoring?"

"Not snorwing, Polly. I twust I have nevah committed the indiscwetion of snorwing. I twy to make myself agweeable, don't you know. I come here to bwighten you up. If Betty does not dewive a little welif fwom my agweeable society—"

"Oh, come off it!"

"I will certainly withdwaw!" finished Paula. "Howevah—"

Polly ended all palaver by taking hold of the elegant Paula and turning her round.

"Quick march, Paula!"

"But, Polly—"

"Left, right! Left, right!"

There was very little of the "left, right!" about Paula's exit from the study, however. Squeezing the elegant one's waist between both hands, Polly, the madcap, simply ran her out of the room, and a resounding bang suggested that poor Paula had collided with the passage wall opposite the door.

There was a dismal wail from Paula, but in a moment Polly flashed back to assure Betty that no harm had been done—to the wall, at any rate!—and then the study door slammed, leaving Betty all alone, with the ghost of a smile at her lips.

That smile soon faded. Out came the letter from home, and down she sat to read it once again, before taking pen and paper to answer it.

This was darling mother who had written, posting the letter yesterday evening. The first page was full of bright gossip, penned by one whose longing was to allay Betty's anxieties. Overleaf, however, there were references to the disastrous fire, and although her mother had bravely put the best appearance on things, Betty could read between the lines:

"... About the fire, Betty darling. You must not worry. It is true that Josiah Grandways is still setting on the

police to take some action against your father, on the grounds that he incited you to set the mill alight. But we still trust that nothing will come of such a wicked insinuation.

"I am sure that if the police had felt there was anything in Mr. Grandways' story, they'd have arrested your father before this. So I say again, darling, don't worry."

"Poor Betty! It would all have been hard enough for you to bear, even if your name had not been mentioned in the case. How hard it must be for you to attend to your studies and carry on all your work as captain of the Form when there is this hanging over our heads! But we all keep as brave and cheerful as we can up here, and you will do the same, we know. God bless you, darling Betty! We all send our fondest love and tons of kisses. . ."

Betty could read no more. Her eyes were dim.

She pressed the loving letter to her lips for a moment, then set it down upon the table and drew a pen and ink towards her. Taking up a sheet of note-paper, she put the date and the address at the top, and then wrote:

"Darling mother—"

That done, she sat pondering as to how she should begin. She looked at her mother's letter again, and this time re-read the post-script:

" . . . What comforts us such a lot, Betty darling, is knowing that you are certain you did not use those lighted matches carelessly that night. I am sure that the way you answered the police-inspector's questions satisfied him that you did not cause the fire, even by accident."

As Betty raised her eyes from that post-script her face looked more pallid than ever. A sudden sigh of extreme anguish escaped her. The thought that had persisted in troubling her since her return to the school was in her mind again. Why—why did it keep on recurring?

Was it because she had got so worn-out with worry that she was prone to yield to fears that had never troubled her at the start? Or was it because there was real justification for her awful misgiving?

She could not tell. She only knew that

now, whenever that awful question took shape in her harassed mind—"Could I have had an accident with those lighted matches?"—she found herself answering in these words:

"I might have done! I may have caused the fire, after all!"

She suddenly thumped her elbows upon the table and hid her white face in her hands. For a little while she sat thus, shuddering with the thought of such a possibility. Then she tried to brace herself together—tried to banish the dreadful misgiving as being one that had no right to trouble her.

At that moment she heard some girls drifting about in the passage, and her gaze went to the door. She realised that Cora and others might have arranged to pester her again this evening, just because they knew how worried she was. Why not lock the door, then?

No!

She would do no such thing; that she decided promptly. If Cora or anybody else came pestering her, she would let them see that she was still capable of carrying on. What was the watchword she had chosen just lately? Fortitude!

And so, taking up the pen again, she dipped it in the ink and began the letter with her door still unlocked.

She was just writing the first sentence when she heard some renewed sounds in the corridor. Some subdued talk was going on, but it did not seem as if she was going to be interrupted, for it was taking place outside another door.

Betty took another dip of ink and wrote on, trying to ignore all sounds from outside the room. Suddenly, however, several feet trod forward along towards her door, which flew open.

"Betty!"

It was Polly who voiced the excited cry. But Polly was not alone.

Betty heaved to her feet, giving something that was like a faint scream of surprise as she saw her mother there in the doorway—her mother, and two men in uniform!

A police-inspector and a constable!

"Mother! Oh—"

"Betty darling—oh, my Betty, my poor Betty!" came in a sobbing voice from the anguished mother, as she and her schoolgirl daughter rushed to each other's arms. "I had to come, dearie—I had to come!"

"Mother, oh, I am so glad, in a way, and

got— Why is it, mother darling? These policemen—”

Betty broke off in a dazed manner. The whole thing had left her with a stunned feeling. Vaguely she was aware of Polly explaining how the visitors had first inquired at the wrong study—Paula's. Then she realised that Miss Somerfield was here; she heard the headmistress saying that this should not have happened, but no one was to blame.

“You asked for me, I am told, but I had not then come back in the car, and so—”

“Oh, I couldn't wait about; I had to find my daughter,” Mrs. Barton pleaded in great distress. “Miss Somerfield, we are in great trouble at home!”

“Ah, I am sorry—terribly sorry! That affair of the fire—”

“Yes!”

Mrs. Barton was trying in vain to stem her tears, whilst Betty hung about her, crying in an agonised way:

“Mother—mother, darling! Oh, don't—don't cry! We'll manage!”

And there were Polly and Paula, trying to get closer to Betty to whisper comfortingly:

“Betty dear, anything we can do—”

“Yes, wather!” “Oh, Betty dear! Betty darling!” “Your chums, don't you know!” “Bai Jove—yes, wather!”

Miss Somerfield spoke quietly.

“All you girls, you must please go away,” she said, waving Polly and Paula and several others out of the room. “Yes, I know you are sorry for Betty, but this is the kindest thing you can do—leave her!”

So at last the room was clear of all save the mother and daughter, Miss Somerfield, and the two representatives of the law.

“Dad? What about dad?” Betty panted then.

And in a heartbroken voice came the mother's answer:

“Your poor father, Betty darling—he is arrested!”

CHAPTER 17.

The Police Want Betty.

A RRESTED!

Even as the dread word was uttered, Betty's whirling brain was able to appreciate an appalling fact. When the police had been so slow about taking action, it made the ultimate arrest all the more alarming.

“It was very early this morning,” Mrs. Barton explained tearfully. “And as soon as it happened I got a friend to look after Doris and Joe, so that I could come by the first train to Morcove. The police said they would have to question you again at the school, and I— Oh, Betty darling, I couldn't bear that you should be without me when—when—”

A fresh storm of weeping silenced the poor distraught mother, and now the police-inspector made a few remarks.

“You know me, Miss Somerfield—I belong to Barncombe,” he said to the headmistress. “I had a 'phone message explaining matters, and instructing me to come here—”

“Not to arrest this schoolgirl, surely?”

“Well, to question her, for a start, and then, when arrangements could be made for her going to Lancashire in proper company—”

“I am ready to go now,” Betty broke in steadily. “My mother is here—”

“Yes, miss, exactly! Your mother having got here so quickly, I expect that's what it will come to—your going off with her right away. First of all, though, I am instructed to ask a few questions.”

“Well?”

“It has been suggested that you, at your father's instigation, set the Grandways mill on fire.”

“I did not do anything at my father's instigation.”

“You have admitted you were at the mill that night.”

“I went into one of the sheds—yes. Everybody knows why.”

“To look for somebody, eh? And you struck a match or two?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now, miss, are you as sure as ever that you did not cause the fire?”

Before Betty could answer the police added gravely:

“I must caution you, miss. Anything you say will be taken down and it may be used in evidence against your father, or against yourself, for that matter.”

“Betty, dear,” Miss Somerfield murmured tenderly, “you quite understand?”

“Yes, Miss Somerfield.”

“Well, then? asked the police-inspector, standing notebook in hand.

“I—I was certain at the time that I did not cause the fire. I—I—I am not so certain now—”

“What!” gasped Miss Somerfield, falling

back a step, whilst Mrs. Barton cried out wildly:

"Betty! Oh, Betty darling——"

"Mother dear, I only want to be quite, quite honest. At first I was certain I had nothing to do with the fire, and so I said so. But since—since I got back to the school—I don't know—worrying about it all so much—— Oh, mother, it is dreadful, I know, but I have begun to wonder"—Betty was on the verge of tears now—"to wonder if I did cause the fire!"

"Heaven help us, then!" moaned Mrs. Barton crazily. "Ah, darling, I am not reproaching you. In any case, it was an accident. Only it makes it all so bad for your poor dear father!"

The police-inspector was conversing softly with his inferior. After a moment he turned to Miss Somerfield and Mrs. Barton.

"In view of all this, I think the young lady should be got to Lancashire by the first possible train," he suggested. "There's one from Barncombe in an hour's time, connecting at Bristol, and so——"

"Mother darling, do you hear? Shall I get ready at once?" Betty asked, taking a fresh grip on herself.

With a handkerchief at her eyes Mrs. Barton nodded distractedly. Nor did Miss Somerfield feel it was any use trying to get the journey deferred until the morning.

To the depths of her heart was the headmistress touched by the whole terrible situation. She was grieving for Betty—Betty, the Form captain, and ever one of her dearest scholars. She was full of compassion, too, for Mrs. Barton.

If Miss Somerfield could have had her own way she would have given the distraught mother rest and comfort for the night; but only to look at Mrs. Barton was to see that she would prefer a thousand times to start back at once, taking Betty with her.

She had come in a car from Barncombe with the police, and it was the inspector's suggestion that that car should take them all to Barncombe railway-station in time for the train he had mentioned. And so he and his constable withdrew to wait preparations for departure.

What a going away from the dear old school was this! Had there ever been anything quite like it before? Never! It was just as if she herself were under arrest!

A few minutes of wild scurry to get a small bag packed, and then she had to go

with her mother and Miss Somerfield downstairs to the headmistress' study, and no chance at all of getting a talk with any of her schoolfellows.

It almost seemed as if she was not even going to exchange one good-bye word with Polly, Paula, Madge, and other devoted chums. At any rate, Betty could not help noticing as she went downstairs that not a scholar was to be seen, which seemed to suggest that they had all been ordered to remain in their studies.

In the headmistress' private room there was some refreshment for the mother and daughter, but in vain Miss Somerfield implored them to drink the coffee and manage a sandwich or so before starting.

The steaming cups were almost unsipped, and not a mouthful of food could either Betty or Mrs. Barton swallow.

Then the clock on the mantelpiece tinged loudly, and that was a needless reminder of the flight of time.

In the meantime, all sorts of rumours had been flying around the school. The police had come for Betty. Betty, was actually under arrest. They were going to take her straight from the school to prison. The whole Barton family were to be put on trial for having conspired to burn down the Grandways' cotton mill!

Such wild talk as this was naturally discounted by the more sensible girls, including Betty's chums. All the same, they were as eager as any to see Betty, if only to have a chance of proclaiming their unshaken faith in her.

So when that impressive procession came forth from the headmistress' private room there were girls packing every inch of floor space downstairs.

A sudden hush fell, and yet that silence, so dramatic as it was, told just as much of wild excitement as all the babel of tongues had done only a moment since.

Yes, there she was—the captain of the Fourth Form! There, with her weeping mother and the two officers of the law, whilst Miss Somerfield came last, looking as if the next moment would see her also in tears.

Silence—that impressive silence, whilst mother and daughter moved on towards the front porch in such ominous company; and then suddenly there was a sort of scuffling amongst the crowd of girls, and one of them broke clear of the throng to make a rush at Betty.

"Betty darling!"

It was Polly, and her cry was one of great anguish. Her arms were stretched towards the chum she loved so well, and those arms would have gone about Betty's shoulders, but the inspector brushed Polly aside.

"I'm sorry, my girl, but this is not the time for that sort o' thing!"

"But I—I can't bear it!" was Polly's agonised cry. "Where are you taking her, then? When shall we see her again? Oh—"

"It is cwuel—downright cwuel!" wailed Paula. She, with Madge, Tess, and two or three others, had followed Polly's example in trying to get at their beloved Betty. "You—you howwid wetches, you!"

"Paula, dear, hush!" pleaded Miss Somerfield sadly. "These men are only doing their duty. I feel it, too—terribly! But this had to be, it seems."

Betty and her mother were at the door by now. All over the hall girls were standing on tip-toe to see over the heads of others—to catch a last glimpse of the Fourth Form captain. They saw the door thrown wide open, revealing the night-bound grounds and the waiting car; they saw Betty, at that last moment, turn and look back at them all, and then on the silence there fell the inspector's brusque remark:

"Come along, missy!"

And she was gone. Gone!

Gone like that, and they would see her again—ah, when, if ever!

Not the only ones were Polly, Paula, and Madge to burst into tears. There was quiet weeping everywhere in that thronged hall. Ah, and who was the girl who suddenly rushed away blindly upstairs to shut herself in one of the studies and there fling herself down like one crazy with grief?

Judith Grandways!

CHAPTER 18.

"You did it—you!"

"SO much for Betty Barton—hurrah!" exulted Cora Grandways, sailing into her study a couple of minutes after the car had driven off. Then she stopped dead, observing her sister Judith huddled in a low chair, hiding a tearful face.

"What are you howling about?" cried

Cora impatiently. "When you ought to be glad, you duffer!"

"Glad! Oh, Cora!"

"Glad, of course!" rushed on the elder sister. "It was father's own mill that was burnt down, and if he had not been insured we would all have been ruined. And Betty did it!"

"No, Cora—no!"

"She did! I have always said she did!" insisted Cora. "So you hold your row! The police have only done what they should have done on the very morning after the fire. But I've got no time to waste in talk. Now that Betty is gone—and may we never see her here again!—we are bound to have a new captain. And so, hurrah!"

Judith rose from her chair, fighting to regain her composure. She went to a chair at the table and seated herself there, then pulled open a drawer to rummage for something.

"What are you up to now?" snapped Cora.

"I—I am going to write to Betty."

"Write to Betty—you!"

"Yes, I must," Judith answered, still rummaging in the drawer for letter-paper. "I know I am the daughter of the man whose mill was burnt, but I—I feel—"

"Well, that's my side of the table you are sitting at, and my drawer you are turning upside-down!" cried Cora impatiently. "Oh, Judy, what a duffer you are to excite yourself so! You—well? What's the matter now?"

The scornful question was flung at Judith as that girl suddenly staggered to her feet, looking at something that she had chanced upon in the drawer, amongst all the litter of papers.

"Cora!" came in a horrified gasp from the young sister. "Oh, this sheet of paper—violet ink—"

"What!" screeched Cora.

"Look at it—look!" gasped the other. "It is a sheet of paper on which someone was practising disguised writing for those lines against Betty! And it was in this drawer, Cora—your drawer!"

Cora snatched at the sheet of paper, and would have crumpled it up, but Judith snatched it back.

"No, Cora, you shan't destroy it!" Judith panted, falling away from her sister. "You wrote those papers, then? You—"

"Judy, I did not! I swear—"

"Ah, how can you say that," was the younger sister's wild cry, "when what I have found by chance proves it? You were bitter against Betty—"

"That doesn't matter; I didn't write those papers!" Cora almost shrieked. "Judy, hold your tongue! I— Oh, why won't you believe me?"

"How can I, when all along you have been Betty's enemy?" pleaded Judith. "This, then, proves that Audrey Blain was not guilty, after all. You let her be blamed—"

"Judy, I tell you I did not have anything to do with those papers that were spread about!" Cora yelled the words again, stamping a foot. "I did not! I—"

And there she broke off, recovering her spent breath with a loud gasp as she saw the door fly open in front of Miss Redgrave and several of the girls.

"Cora—Judith!" came sharply from the youthful mistress. "What is all this quarrelling about? You made such a noise, I could not help hearing. Something about Audrey Blain and the papers that she wrote—"

Standing apart from each other, the two sisters remained silent. The paper from the drawer was still held by Judith in its crumpled state. Cora's wild eyes went to it in a panicky fashion. The mistress spoke again:

"That paper, Judith, let me see it."

"No!" implored Cora, with an imploring gesture, but Miss Redgrave insisted. "Yes, hand me that paper, Judith."

So, amidst dead silence, the sheet changed hands, and Miss Redgrave's were not the only eyes that scanned the tell-tale scrawling in violet ink.

Since she flung open the door and strode into the room, half a dozen girls had been crowding behind her. Polly was one, Paula another. There were Madge and Tess, too, and Trixie Hope and Bluebell Courtney.

"Why," burst out Polly, "it looks as if

"Yes, wather! Oh, bai Jove!"

"Violet ink!" cried the others.

"You found this, Judith—where?" the mistress asked gravely.

"In that table drawer."

"I see. And so I was not mistaken. You really were accusing your sister of having been the author of those scurrilous

attacks on poor Betty, as captain of your Form?"

Cora broke out passionately:

"Miss Redgrave, I have declared to Judy I did not write any of those attacks on Betty Barton. I was bitter against the girl—good reason, too, I think—but I did not—"

"You must say it all to your headmistress," Miss Redgrave checked the excited girl with a raised hand. "Go before me now."

"I won't—I won't!"

"Cora Grandways, control yourself. Such violent behaviour can do you no possible good in the eyes of those who witness it. Go, I say," the mistress repeated calmly; and this time Cora obeyed.

"I don't care. I shall be able to clear myself," she was saying over and over again in an excited way, as she passed along the corridor and down the stairs. "Audrey put that sheet of paper in the table drawer, that's what it means!"

And that was one of the suggestions she put forward in self-defence as soon as she had been brought face to face with the headmistress.

"It's all very well for you to say that, Cora," Miss Somerfield commented sternly. "Don't forget, however, that Audrey has always persisted that she was entirely innocent. Her own story is that she was victimised by someone's using her folder of blotting-paper."

"My defence ought to be as good as hers!" Cora exclaimed hotly. "Why shouldn't it be? I tell you, I—"

"Silence! Now, listen!" Miss Somerfield broke in. "Until you were brought in like this, a minute ago, I was absolutely convinced that Audrey Blain was the culprit. Had there been a shadow of doubt in my mind, the school knows that Audrey would have had the benefit of it. Well, I am bound to say that I seem to have done Audrey a grave injustice, after all. We will have Audrey brought from the detention-room."

A meaning nod to Miss Redgrave accompanied these words, and the youthful mistress hastened away, to find another crowd of excited girls hanging about outside.

She appealed to them to keep calm if they could not do the better thing and go away, and so the girls were silent enough as Audrey was presently brought along.

Calmly, and with head erect, she went by the staring girls who lined the way, still the injured innocent who was bearing martyrdom with fortitude! And now—was it a wonder if a good many of her school-fellows began to admire her, rather than scorn her for bearing herself like this?

It had not been a pose, after all! How could it have been? the girls were saying to themselves when evidence had just come to light that Cora Grandways had been the culprit.

"Audrey," Miss Somerfield began quietly, "I don't know if Miss Redgrave has explained to you—"

"Yes, she has," the girl from the detention-room throw out in a tone that matched her calm, confident expression.

"Here is the paper that was found in Cora Grandways' study," the headmistress went on, brandishing it before her. "It is a paper bearing traces of somebody's first attempts at a disguised handwriting. Violet ink was used."

"And so I am accused of the deed," cried out Cora excitedly. "Audrey, you know I didn't do it. It was done by you, in your room—it must have been!"

"Nothing of the kind!" Audrey answered quietly. "I was accused—Miss Somerfield was so very certain—"

"Yes, Audrey, I am afraid I was," exclaimed the headmistress, in a tone that showed she did not mean to spare herself over the apparent miscarriage of justice. "I blame myself—"

"Oh, I do not think you ought to do that!" Audrey interrupted demurely. "It was such a clear case against me, you were bound to feel convinced. Only I would just like to point out—"

"Well?"

"From first to last, Miss Somerfield, I think you will admit that my attitude was that of an innocent girl."

Cora, clenching up her hands, echoed chokingly; "Innocent girl—bah!" But Miss Somerfield gestured to her to be silent.

"Yes, Audrey, I quite agree that what seemed to be only a pose was, after all, a genuine display of fortitude. I will be my immediate duty to set you right in the eyes of the school, and then—"

"So you are certain that I did it now?" Cora broke out wildly again. "You are going to find me guilty—"

"I am, Cora Grandways, and this time

there will be no miscarriage of justice," the headmistress said solemnly. "You are known to have been extremely bitter against Betty Barton. The specimens of disguised handwriting have been found in your table drawer. Your violent state of mind since the charge was made is in itself a confession of guilt."

"How can I help feeling wild?" Cora protested hysterically. "I—it's like being caught in a trap. Miss Somerfield, it is true I was bitter against Betty Barton, but I did not write those papers. I didn't—I didn't!" wailed the wretched girl. "Oh!"

She burst into tears, and would have sat down to weep into her handkerchief, but the headmistress made a sudden sign to Ruth Redgrave to take the girl away.

"To the detention-room—yes."

Cora reeled to her feet. She looked as if she would like to spring at Audrey and strike her, and it was to prevent any such painful incidents as this that Miss Redgrave took the infuriated girl by the arm and almost dragged her away.

"I didn't—I didn't do it!" Cora was out of the room now, shouting her frantic denials as she was made to go along to the detention-room. "It was Audrey, I tell you! She cunning—oh, she's a wretch—a wretch!"

And Audrey, left standing in the headmistress' study, seemed to hear those cries unmoved.

"Audrey!"

"Yes, Miss Somerfield?"

"I shall certainly make it my duty, as I said, to set you right in the eyes of the whole school. I had thought of addressing a few remarks to the girls when they assemble at call-over, but I do not see why we should even wait until then. I will speak now."

"Just as you please, Miss Somerfield!"

Thus said Audrey, as demurely as ever, as she still stood before her headmistress in that lady's private room.

Miss Somerfield gave heed for a moment to the jabber of talk that was going on outside the study, and then she nodded to herself decisively.

"Come this way, Audrey!"

So saying, she crossed to the door and opened it, to find almost every member of the Fourth Form there, and certainly half the remainder of the school.

"All you girls," Miss Somerfield said at

once, in a ringing voice, "I want you to know that Audrey Blain should never have been punished by me. I want you to give her credit, as I do myself, for having acted with great fortitude whilst suffering such undeserved disgrace. I blundered badly, and although Audrey herself is generous enough to say that I was almost bound to deem her guilty at the time, yet I cannot forgive myself. -So, girls—"

The speaker, as she paused, rested a gentle hand upon Audrey's shoulder as the girl stood before the gazing crowd, drooping her head as if she was bashful.

"If you want to lessen the pain I feel over that mistake of mine," the headmistress went on earnestly, "will you take Audrey back into your everyday life with the best of goodwill? Will you do that, girls?"

There was a cheer, and then an absolute hubbub of talk as Audrey was simply mobbed by friendly disposed schoolfellows.

Seniors, Fifth-Formers, youngsters in the Lower Third—all were infected with this sudden change of feeling towards the girl who had been all day under lock and key.

Girls like Grace Garfield, Ella Elgood, and Diana Forbes—they saw great things coming for them now.

True, they were the very girls who had been ready to conspire with Cora, but Cora they seemed ready to forget about now, which showed just how much their friendship was worth to anyone. Audrey! Audrey for them! That was the cry, whilst they fluttered about her all the way upstairs.

And soon that cry was giving place to one that Polly and the other chums could not hear without experiencing a heart-throb of dismay.

"Audrey for captain—Audrey!"

Why not? the girls who were all for getting a slack captain wanted to know.

Just before call-over that same evening, Grace Garfield and Ella Elgood looked in on Audrey in her study.

"I say!" burst out Grace, rather excitedly. "Some of us girls in the Fourth have been thinking. Now that Betty has had to clear out—"

"And goodness knows when she will be back!" put in Ella.

"Perhaps never!" rushed on Grace. "So, Audrey, we have been thinking. The captaincy will fall vacant."

"There will have to be a deputy for a time, that is certain," declared Ella.

"Then, Audrey," clamoured Grace, leaning across the table in her great excitement, "what we want to know is, will you let us bring you in as captain? It can be done. Only say the word."

Audrey did not answer. She was too clever to disclose all her ambitions and her yearnings to girls who might be turning against her in a week.

But she was thinking—why not?

CHAPTER 19.

The Schoolgirl Witness.

NEXT witness! Call Betty Barton!" A rustle of excitement went through the crowded police-court as one of the lawyers voiced these words.

For some of the men and women in the public seats of the court this was the dramatic moment which they would not have missed on any account. It was the knowledge that Betty Barton, a mere schoolgirl, was to be called to give evidence in the case against her own father that had made people line up outside the police-court as soon as daylight broke.

"Betty Barton, go to the witness stand, my girl."

There she was, sithee! Poor lass, was the compassionate thought that seized many a tender-hearted woman, whilst the men folk frowned and mumbled to themselves with the same degree of pity. How deathly pale she looked, and what wonder, when it rested with her whether her own father would be acquitted of the terrible charge which had been brought against him, or would be committed to the assizes, with the certainty of being found guilty and sent to penal servitude!

It was a full bench of magistrates this morning, and even they all leant forward in their raised seats to take a good look at this pretty little witness.

Whilst the usher was administering the oath there was a pitiable sound of stifled sobbing from the well of the court. Mrs. Barton was there, sitting with a handkerchief to her eyes.

In the dock stood the accused, pale and anxious, yet holding himself erect with tremendous courage, whilst he looked across at his youthful daughter. One could

guess his thoughts. What a daughter to be proud of—his darling Betty, with those large, honest eyes of hers to make everybody feel that she was here to tell the truth. Ay, the truth and nothing but the truth, be the consequences what they might!

"Now Betty Barton——"

"Sh! Silence—silence!" called an usher, and all the whispering and the shuffling and rustling died away, leaving a great stillness. Even if the lawyer had been speaking in a whisper he would have been heard quite easily.

"You are the accused man's daughter, we know, and you go to school at Morcove, in North Devon? In fact, you have been fetched away from Morcove School to be present at this inquiry?"

A nod from Betty. She was saving her breath behind pressed lips.

"Well now," went on the prosecuting lawyer, not too sternly, "you know what the charge is against your father. It is that he incited you, a minor in the eyes of the law, to commit what we call arson. That is to say, by persuasion, if not compulsion, your father got you to set fire to certain premises in this town, namely, the cotton mill belonging to Mr. Josiah Grandways."

Betty, gripping the rail of the witness-stand, shook her head.

"My father never persuaded me to do anything of the sort, sir."

"On the night of the fire it is a fact that you entered the precincts of the mill?"

"Yes, sir."

"And struck matches there?"

"Yes, sir. I have always admitted that. We—I and some chums of mine—we were giving a sort of treat to some poor children in a building next door to the mill. It was the council school, and whilst the party was in full swing I saw a poor girl as I thought her to be, looking in at the window, as if she wanted to be invited inside to share the fun."

"Well?"

"So I went outside, sir, and saw the girl was hurrying away. I thought that was because she was shy. I went after her, following her into the mill yard, but it was foggy. I called out, and she did not answer. Then I struck a light to see around. I was ever so careful——"

"How many matches did you strike, Betty Barton?"

"Two or three, sir. I really did not notice."

"I see. At any rate, the alarm of fire went up soon afterwards," pursued the lawyer, "and you—where were you then?"

"Back in the schoolhouse, sir, enjoying the party. The first I knew was when my father came in to say that Grandways' Mill was blazing."

"Very well, then," the lawyer was bristling up at last. "Is it a fact that your family and the Grandways family have never been on good terms?"

"We did not bear any malice."

"I suggest that there has been this bitterness for a long time, between your father and Mr. Grandways——"

"Father had good reasons for feeling bitter, I think."

"Ay, gud lass, 'tis true enow!" mumbled some gruff voice among the public seats, causing the ushers to exclaim:

"Sh! Hush there—silence!"

"I further suggest that between Mr. Grandways' two daughters and yourself at the school there has also been bitterness?" asked the lawyer.

"We—we have not been friends, Cora Grandways and I. Judith Grandways wanted to be friends some time back; she changed a good deal. And so I—well, I just became friends, that's all." Betty said with such delicious simplicity that a murmur of admiration filled the room.

"And you mean to tell me," the lawyer said, trying to frighten Betty with a sudden glaring look, "that although there was this—this enmity, I will call it—your father never incited you——"

"Never, sir—never!"

The lawyer gnawed his underlip. Betty's vehement answer had made it useless for him to try any brow-beating.

"Be very careful how you answer this question," he said at last, breaking the profound silence with his metallic voice. "Did you or did you not set fire to the mill?"

"Sir, I—I was very careful. I——"

"Did you or did you not set fire to the cotton mill? When you used those matches that night——"

"I have wondered since, sir—dad and mother know—I have worried a great deal as to whether, perhaps, I did cause the

fire. I was—oh, so careful, I am sure! I can't imagine myself being so careless as to drop a lighted match anywhere."

The lawyer let a moment go by after Betty's anguished voice had died away.

"Now, listen my girl. I suggest that you did set fire to the cotton mill, although perhaps you did not go there with that intention. You caused the fire to start by accident, and instead of trying to put it out, you ran away—"

"No, sir! Oh—"

"One moment, let me finish, you have a lawyer watching the case on your behalf and your father's. I suggest that you, having set fire to a part of the mill by accident, made off like that, because you were suddenly tempted to let the place burn. It was the Grandways' Mill, and your father had talked—"

"No sir; he had not talked—"

"Are you going to say he had not talked with unusual bitterness against Josiah Grandways that day, because of a fresh dispute they had in the open street?"

Betty clutched the rail tightly again.

"My father was—he was very disgusted with Mr. Grandways that day. At home we were all led into speaking bitterly. But as for father encouraging me to burn down the mill if ever I got a chance—oh, it isn't true!" Betty cried, in a ringing voice.

In the buzz of excitement that followed this vehement protest, the lawyer sat down, and the one next to him stood up.

This was the solicitor who was acting for the Bartons.

"I just want you to tell the magistrates this, Betty Barton," he said soothingly. "On the very morning after the fire, did the police come to your father's house and question you, and did you tell them that you had entered the mill outbuildings overnight?"

Betty said: "Yes, sir."

"You have kept nothing back then?"

"No, sir. I did not tell them that I was afraid I might have caused the fire, because at that time I had not the least idea that I might have caused it. It was when I had been worrying for several days that I began to wonder—to wonder"—Betty almost broke down—"just what I did do on that night and what I didn't, sir."

Again there was a slight sensation in

court, causing the ushers to frown "Silence!"

Then in the renewed hush, the Bartons' lawyer straightened up and spoke to the magistrates.

"I submit that this witness has not only vindicated her father's innocence, but her own also," he pleaded. "You will observe she only began to imagine that she might have caused the fire after she had been worrying herself half crazy about it all. A very natural outcome of such terrible anxiety! All right Betty, you may go!"

He dismissed the schoolgirl witness with a kind smile.

Then he also sat down, and the tension ended for a moment except that it was distressing to see the struggle which Betty was making to bear up still whilst she resumed her seat next to her agonised mother.

The magistrates shifted in their chairs to be able to put their heads together as they conferred with one another in lowered tones. At this moment the accused man seemed to become a more prominent figure than ever in the crowded court, for the witness-stand was now vacant, and the lawyers were seated.

Tick, tock—tick, tock! went the clock on the wall whilst the justices deliberated amongst themselves. It was long past mid-day now, and the case had started at eleven. For more than an hour and a half Betty's father had stood there in the dock, whilst the prosecution did its best to demonstrate his guilt, and his own lawyer had made counter efforts to smash all the evidence that was so damning.

It was strange, but at that instant Betty was thinking in a detached way of Morcove School—of how they would be out of classes at this time, getting a bit of hockey practice in the sports field, or gossiping in the studies. The old school! Oh, if she were only there this morning, and if only this had never happened!

The old home, too—how awful it was going to be if they decided that darling father really had—

"Silence, silence!" called the ushers, as the magistrates suddenly showed that they had come to a decision. "Silence, over there!"

And what a decision it was, now that the presiding magistrate was ready to speak!

"We have gone very carefully into this case," he began in an even voice. "The prosecution has certainly made out a very grave case against the accused—"

"Oh, father darling."

"On the other hand the defending lawyer is quite right in pleading that the daughter's evidence is constant with a desire to be perfectly honest. There is also some conflict of evidence as to whether a fire starting in one of the sheds could so quickly have involved the main buildings."

The magistrate took up a pen and dipped it in the ink.

"Altogether, it is a case for judge and jury to decide and so we shall commit the the accused to take his trial at the next assize."

In the very moment that those grave words were voiced, causing the whole court to seethe with talk, whilst poor Mrs. Barton suppressed a scream of anguish, the defending lawyer sprang to his feet to ask for bail. If that was refused, then Betty's father would have to remain in custody until the trial came on.

"Bail?" returned the presiding magistrate. "I don't know; arson is a most serious charge."

He consulted his colleagues on the bench, who all shook their heads.

"No, the case is too serious, far too serious for bail to be granted. I am sorry," the chief J.P. said, starting to write rapidly, "but the accused must remain in custody."

There was a warder's hand on Mr. Barton's shoulder at once.

"Come along!" the warder said grimly, whilst Betty and her mother both reeled to their feet in the well of the court, and cried out wildly:

"No, no! Oh, dad—dad, darling! Oh, don't take him from us!"

But they hurried him away, hardly gave him time to send back one pitiful glance to his agonised wife and child before he was taken to the cells below. And then the magistrates adjourned for lunch, and the reporters hurried away, and the policemen and ushers shepherded out the dispersing crowd, and the lawyers put their papers together.

Swiftly the court-room emptied; but there, for many a minute after all others had gone, the mother and daughter sat

in tears, their voices choking with sobs whenever they attempted to comfort each other.

Tick, tock—tick, tock!

Heavily the moments were going by. And—oh, poor Betty was thinking distractedly, to think of one's own dear father, an innocent man, doomed perhaps to wear out months and years of imprisonment, moment by moment like this, behind prison walls!

CHAPTER 20.

Blow Upon Blow.

POLLY LINTON sent the door of Study No. 12 crashing open, and then stood and stared at Paula Creel, who appeared to be on the verge of dozing off in a most comfortable armchair.

"Hallo! So you are there, Paula, are you?"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove!" drawled the aristocrat of the Fourth Form at Morcove School. "Heah I am, don't you know, just weeljing—"

"Well, you just go and recline in your own den, Paula!"

"My dear Polly—"

"Hop it, do you hear? Skeedaddle!"

"The pwecise meaning of that word, Polly, deah, I do not quite gwasp. How-eh, if you are pwoposing that I should wemove my wetiring form fwom this study—"

"I mean this Paula, and I'm serious!" Polly said, coming right into the room. "It is half-past four, and Betty Barton may turn up at any moment now, for we know she is returning to the school to-day. And I put it to you, it isn't going to buck Betty up to come in and see you lying half asleep, as if you didn't care a rap!"

"As wegards not cawing a wap, Polly, deah, I twust that Betty will wealise I care a gweat deal more than a hundwed waps, or even a million, bai Jove! To tell you the twuth, I came in heah on purpose—"

Polly said "Oh!" in a fuming way.

"I am open to cowwection, Polly, deah, but it appears to me, don't you know, that a soothing pwesence like mine—I think you will gwesee mine is a wemarkably soothing pwesence—what?"

"Oh, soothing isn't the word!" said Polly, casting up her eyes to high heaven, as if to say: "What shall I do with this girl?"

"Weal, then; gwanted that mine is a soothing pwesence, we awwive at the vewy weasonable theow, Polly, deah, that I shall wather soothe Betty. Theahfore, I pwesume I may wesume my cheah—eh, what?"

"Resume anything, dear, so long as you don't resume the argument," gave in Polly.

"Pway what is the matter now, deah?" "Paula darling," rushed on Polly, standing in front of her chum, "how are we going to cheer Betty up when she arrives. It is awful! We have seen in the daily papers that her father is committed for trial. Betty herself will be in prison before the end of it, you see. And here at the school, whilst Betty has been away up north—"

She broke off abruptly, rearing her head to listen.

"Hark! There is someone saying that Betty is here. Oh—"

"Bai Jove!"
"Come on!"

And away dashed the madcap of the Form, reaching the corridor almost before Paula was out of the easy-chair.

Yet Paula was behaving with what was, for her, remarkable celerity.

After rising from her chair she never-wonderful to say—paused to fiddle with her hair. With her rather mincing step she went from the study, going past several girls who were standing about in the corridor in twos and threes. Some of these were chums of hers, and they went on with her to the stairs, full of excitement over the return of Betty.

There were one or two others, however, who intended to give the Lancashire girl anything but a friendly reception.

"Oh, yes, she has come!" cried Cora Grandways derisively. "What an honour to the school, when all the world knows that her father is going to get five years in prison!"

"I wonder she had the nerve to come back," exclaimed Ella Elgood scornfully.

Meantime, Polly had already gone through the house like a whirlwind, and now she fetched up with an impatient "Oh!" and a stamp of the foot, as she found that there was to be a minute or so before she could rush at Betty and hug

her, for the returned scholar was with the headmistress in that lady's private room.

But at last Betty came out, to find Polly Linton, Paula Creel, Madge Minden, Tess Trelawney, and Trixie Hope all there to greet her. Nor had these girls voiced the first loving "Betty darling!" before Bluebell Courtney and Dolly Delane came rushing upon the scene.

"Betty! Oh, you poor darling! Never mind, though, you have had a cruel time of it, but—"

"We've been thinking of you all the time, Betty dear."

"Yes, wather!"

And Betty knew, then, that one has to suffer in this life before one can really know the extent to which the loyalty and sympathy of friends can go.

These girls—all such good chums of hers for many a day now—mobbed around her in that downstairs passage, half crying because they saw how her eyes were glistening, and yet giving her their cheer-up smiles when they noticed how she was trying to stop her own mouth from falling at the corners. It seemed as if they would never leave off embracing her, but at last there was a move for upstairs.

Then if Betty had been a girl of different mettle she really must have broken down—not because of any warm-hearted greeting from the Form in general, but because their greeting was just the reverse from cordial.

The tea-bell was going, and Betty encountered almost all the other girls in the corridor. Some gave her a deliberately hostile look; others went by with eyes averted. The most she got in the way of a vocal greeting was a brusque "Hallo!"

The moment her chums had got her to Study 12 a look passed between Madge Minden and Polly. There was an approving nod from the madcap, resulting in Madge acting rather mysteriously. She nudged Tess and Trixie, and gave a "Follow me!" sort of glance to Paula, Bluebell, and Dolly, and all at once the whole lot of them melted away.

Then, finding herself left alone with Polly, Betty took off her outdoor things and laid them aside.

"You had a comfy journey, Betty?"

"Oh, yes, dear! Mother didn't come with me; I've made the journey so often,

I convinced her that I would be quite all right. And so—here I am, Polly!"

"Jolly hungry, too, I'm sure! Even though you did have the usual half-hour at Bristol to give you time to get a snack—eh, dear?"

Betty did not say so, but she had spent that half-hour between trains as she had spent the whole day's journey thinking, thinking, always thinking about poor dad, under remand at Beston Gaol.

Not a moment of the day passed but a vision of him was haunting her weary brain—a vision of his sitting there in the prison cell on a plain stool, with the sunlight striking into the gloomy place through the one little barred window. Oh, but she would remember it to her dying day—the brief and agonising interview that she and mother had had with him.

In vain had the lawyer and others tried to explain to mother and child that the gravity of the case had warranted the magistrates refusing bail, and that this was what many another accused person had had to submit to, only to be found "Not Guilty!" in the end.

To Betty and her mother alike it seemed as though her father was already condemned—shut away behind these prison walls, to drag out whole years of pining for freedom and the loved ones whose hearts would be breaking for him!

"I must explain, Betty darling. There would be tea ready for you in here—our own dear old study—only Madge thought you might like to be quiet afterwards, and the clearing away is always such a set-out! So she has prepared a spread in her study; and I expect we ought to go along at once."

"Thank you, Polly. I—Yes, I'll come. You—you are so good to me—"

"We need to be, Betty," was Polly's sighing answer. "I have something that had better be told at once, dear, and—oh, oh, please, please don't take it to heart too much, although I know it is bound to seem like the last straw."

"I think I can guess, Polly."

"I didn't write and tell you, dear," said Polly, "but whilst you have been away they have made Audrey Blain captain of the Form."

Betty was silent once again. She moved aside as if to hide her drooping face from her father's loving gaze.

Then the bowed head was suddenly lifted up, and Polly saw a face that was very white and tense, and yet full of sublime fortitude.

"I would have had to resign the captaincy, of course," Betty said, very steadily. "If they find father guilty at the assizes, I shall even have to leave the school. But I think—I think they might have made a better choice than Audrey."

"It's awful!" fumed Polly. "She simply slipped into the thing in the most artful way. Some of the girls are entirely deceived by her charming pose; others wanted her to be captain, simply because they know very well that she will let them slack about as much as they like. She—"

And there Polly broke off, as she realised that the very girl they were talking about was standing at the open doorway.

With a step as quiet as it was graceful had Audrey Blain come along from her own study—for what purpose, the false smile flickering at her lips made clear.

"Hallo, Betty dear!" she said sweetly. "I heard you were back! How are you?"

And she came forward, holding out her small, shapely hand.

Betty did not take it.

"How am I?" the ex-captain returned calmly. "How would you feel, Audrey Blain, in my position? I'll be along at Madge's in a moment, if you will just tell her and the girls—the few who are still my chums!"

It cost Polly an effort to tear herself away, but she went off at last, and then the deposed captain and her artful successor faced each other alone.

"I didn't want the captaincy," Audrey declared, with one of her demure shrugs.

"Didn't you?" returned Betty. "Then you must have changed very greatly from the Audrey of last term—of all last year! Then you simply didn't want people to know that you wanted the captaincy!"

Audrey could not help flushing.

"So you are going to be bitter about it, are you?" she said with a grimace. "I don't think that will win you much sympathy. Even your best friends cannot say that I have acted in an underhand way. If you ask them they will have to admit that my appointment found favour with a very big majority!"

She added with affected regret:

"I suppose you are not going to give

that support to me that one person who has held office generally gives a successor? Very well——"

"I have not said I will not support you," Betty broke in calmly. "Come in any time, and I will go into matters with you. Now you must excuse me, as I am keeping my friends waiting."

And so they went their ways—Audrey, back to the solitude of her costly furnished study, there to sit pondering this first encounter with the girl she had deposed, whilst Betty was soon feeling that, however hard a time she was passing through, her heart could never quite break whilst she still retained the love and loyalty of her old, tried chums!

CHAPTER 21.

Audrey on the Throne.

DURING the next week or so, beautiful Audrey Blain went on playing her own game as cleverly as ever, without a single blunder.

Now that she had got the captaincy she meant to keep it—oh, rather! And so her policy was to be "all things to all people."

Full well she knew that certain girls looked to her to do all that Betty Barton had done for the Form, from the sporting point of view. These girls she took care to appease by pretending to be very keen on sport.

At heart she looked upon hockey and such-like games as an "awful bore," but she took care to turn up on the field of practice looking her very sweetest, and with her glossy, fair hair specially coiffured, so that at the end of play not a tress would be out of place.

Then there were those girls who had hoped that her appointment to the captaincy would mean a chance for some "slacking about." Audrey gave them that chance.

How she did it was wonderful, but she kept up this pretence of wanting to see the Form shine at sport, and at the same time she managed to let girls like Ella Elgood and Grace Garfield give the hockey a miss whenever they wanted to. In public she rated the girls for "slacking," but they always found her ready to say in an easy-going tone afterwards:

"Oh, it's all right! Please yourselves as to what you do; I shan't ever pull you up—

not really pull you up, as some captains might!"

But all this was only a minor part of Audrey's system. It was no use being captain unless one "made a splash." In her eyes, indeed, the captaincy had always meant a position in which one could queen it over the other girls. She knew what she was about when she went in for entertaining in her study on the most lavish scale. That sort of thing made such an impression!

It was her belief, in fact, that she had nothing to fear so long as she went on in a royal way. The girls who had not much strength of character would simply become so many toadies. As for the better element in the Form, even they would be so dazzled by such a lot of pomp, they would come to feel at last that, although the Form was not exactly living up to its old reputation, term was passing very nicely.

It was after Betty Barton had been back at school some ten or eleven days that Audrey Blain let it be known that she was going to give a special "spread" in her own boudoir-like study.

This grand function was fixed for the Wednesday afternoon in that week, and it was quite too important for any out-of-door fixtures to be allowed to clash with it.

There should have been a hockey match that day, but it was cried off, and the few girls who felt that they must have a bit of recreation contented themselves with a hare-and-hounds run across country.

Even they were back by three o'clock, and getting into warm baths prior to dressing for the party. The titivating for the "banquet" was tremendous! Audrey had always been a great one for wearing expensive and elaborate frocks, and so the guests had made themselves look "drawing-roomish," to use their own phrase.

As for Audrey herself, her lavish toilette had been made by the middle of the afternoon, and she was to be glimpsed now and then taking in deliveries of expensive cakes and other eatables from the Barncombe Creamery, and supervising the laying of the table.

Such an elaborate affair meant far more than one person's work, and so Audrey had got Cora Grandways and Grace and Ella to help her. It was largely due to Cora's backbiting of Betty in the past, and the big trouble between Cora's family and Betty's at home in Lancashire, that Audrey had got the captaincy.

The two girls—Audrey Blain and Cora Grandways—might certainly have been bitter enemies by this time. For it was not so long ago that Cora had felt sure she was being punished by the headmistress for a misdeed that Audrey had committed. But Audrey, with her usual adroitness, had managed to convince Cora in the end that they were both injured innocents, victims of a culprit who had altogether escaped suspicion, and so a sort of peace had been patched up between the two.

Accordingly, it was "Cora dear," and even "Cora darling" these days, whilst Cora, for her part, was nothing loath to be "in" with the queen of the Form. Those who form the queen's court, Cora was shrewdly arguing, get the queen's favours!

Just upon four o'clock, when the company was due to arrive, Cora was returning to Audrey's study with one or two things she had been to borrow from the school kitchen, when Polly met her.

"You are going in to Audrey Blain?" Polly said brusquely. "Just give her that, will you?"

"That" was a note in an envelope, and when Cora saw it she scented its meaning. There was a knowing smirk on her face as she passed into the study, where Audrey was tinkling silver spoons into the saucers.

"Note from Polly!" Cora announced.

"Oh!" said Audrey demurely. "What does that mean, I wonder?"

She opened out the missive, and read as follows:

"Dear Audrey,—As you know, when you invited each of us to come to your gathering, we gave you our cordial acceptance. We did this quite supposing that Betty Barton was also being invited.

"Now, at the last moment, we suddenly find that Betty has not received an invitation from you, and in these circumstances we must ask you to excuse our inability to be present to-day.

"Yours, etc.,

"POLLY LINTON,

"MADGE MINDEN,

"PAULA CREEL,

"TESS TRELAWNEY,

"BLUEBELL COURTNEY,

"DOLLY DELANE."

Audrey's expression became one of injured innocence mingled with righteous indignation

"Oh, how abominable!" she cried. "To say that I have not invited Betty!"

"What's the trouble, Audrey? They say what?"

"They say that I have not invited Betty! And I did invite her! I— But this is a shabby trick!" Audrey panted furiously. "They have no right to charge me with having slighted their former captain!"

"I would tell them so," grinned Cora.

"I shall—at once!"

And with the words Audrey whipped open her study door and stepped haughtily along to Study 12.

Noticing by her looks how indignant she looked, two or three girls followed her. Other guests-to-be were just coming away from their studies to assemble in the corridor, when Betty Barton came by.

Cora Grandways threw up her head and laughed.

"There she is!" the spitfire of the Form chuckled, after Betty had gone by. "There goes the girl who thinks she should still be captain, although her father is in gaol!"

Betty heard the malicious words, but gave no heed. She saw Audrey turning about in the doorway of Study 12 to wait for her, and with a calm, dignified step the ex-captain approached that girl.

"I have just received this!" Audrey said indignantly, flourishing the note from Betty's chums. "You put your cronies up to writing it, of course!"

"Nothing of the sort!" cried Polly Linton, coming to the study doorway along with Madgo and the rest. "We agreed amongst ourselves the moment we heard that Betty was not invited."

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove, Audrey, if you think we meant to come to your spweed when Betty was not invited—"

"Betty was invited!" declared Audrey passionately.

"I was not invited," Betty herself said quietly. "I said nothing to anybody about it. I am not exactly in the mood for parties these days. When my chums found that I was not getting ready to attend the spread, they wanted to know why it was. Then I told them—"

"If you told them that you had never been invited, you told a falsehood," Audrey cried, with the whole Form now crowding around. "Why, I went to the special trouble of writing your invitation."

"I never had any—"

"Listen to me, all of you!" Audrey

rushed on, addressing the crowd that thronged about her. "As I particularly wanted to study Betty's feelings, I made a point of writing her a nice letter. I said I hoped she would not feel I was—well, swanking, now that I am captain of the Form, by giving this rather special party. I said I hoped she would come along and enjoy herself—try to forget all her troubles for once. And what more could I do than that?"

"I never had any such letter," Betty declared solemnly. "I—"

"But you must have had it!" insisted Audrey. "I left it on your study table two days ago."

"I don't believe you!" Polly said bluntly. "No, I don't, so there! Betty would have had that letter if you had ever written it. But it's you who are fibbing—"

"Oh, oh!" Cora shouted, giving the cue for others.

Audrey stood very still for a moment, her handsome face as pale as a lily. Then, as if she were too disgusted and indignant to bandy further words, she flashed about and strode away.

"Cora!" she called along the corridor from her own doorway. "Grace—Ella!"

They scurried along to her, although they would have liked to stay and enjoy a wordy combat with Betty and her chums.

"Let us take away the seats we had set for those girls," Audrey said, with suppressed indignation. "We don't want any empty chairs to remind us of such—such contemptible tricksters!"

So the unwanted chairs were bundled out of the study, and the table was re-arranged with lightning speed. The eager guests were now ready to come in as soon as they should get a sign to do so, and on the stroke of four they got the word from Cora.

By that time Audrey had lost her ruffled look. Some of the more toadying girls had made up their minds to condole with her over the upset she had had, but they found her looking so serene and happy, they held their peace.

At the same time, the very fact that she could look like this seemed to prove that she was the injured innocent again, and so she went up higher still in the opinion of all.

"Now," she began gaily, when all her guests had been received and had taken their seats, "I hope we are all going to enjoy ourselves hugely! Does everyone

feel all right, and nice and hungry? I do!"

A laugh went round the table, and Grace Garfield said, with genuine admiration:

"You are wonderful, Audrey! To have got over that upset so quickly!"

"Oh, you mean that horrid business about Betty?" the queenly captain said, starting to pour out. "No doubt it was all done to upset me, but I would be a silly to fume about it. I have done my very best towards Betty, and there the matter ends, so far as I am concerned."

"So I should think!" applauded Cora. "We know what it means. Your election as captain was so fair and above board, Betty simply couldn't find any grievance to air. So she set about making one!"

"It really does look like that," said Etta Hargrove, and her words were significant, as coming from a girl who had never shown any real malice against the ex-captain.

With all her usual grace and charm, Audrey set the teacups going round the table, whilst the pretty plates became laden with various dainties—lobster patties, sandwiches, bread-and-butter and preserved ginger, cakes and tarts and cream-buns.

The pretty hostess was on her feet most of the time, seeing after her guests. Now and then she even walked round to the back of somebody's chair to ask, with an affectionate handclap on the shoulder:

"Are you having what you want, dear? Do make a good tea!"

And now the talk took on a gossipy, jovial character. There was a disposition to discuss dress, which just showed the influence Audrey was having upon the Form.

"What is that you are saying about me?" she asked sweetly, catching some remark from one girl to another at the far end of the table.

"We were just saying how perfectly charming you do look this afternoon," cried Elsie Drew.

"Oh, very nice of you, I'm sure!" Audrey laughed. "I am not aware of my being anything in particular to admire. Of course, when one is perfectly happy—"

"Ah, happy!" exclaimed Sybil Farlow, as if that word had caused a sudden thought to strike upon her. "Girls, has it ever occurred to any of you—the mysterious prize that is being offered, you know—"

Yes, they all knew.
In the headmistress's safe was the en-

velope, with one word written upon the slip of paper inside it. The word might easily be "cheerfulness," "studiousness," "amiability," or any other kind of the hundred different qualities that most people admire.

"Happiness—a happy disposition; it may be that!" Sybil went on, elated with her sudden notion. "I never thought of that before!"

"Gracious, don't tell me I am in the running for the hundred-guinea prize, as well as having the captaincy!" Audrey laughed. "But I have been awfully happy lately, thanks to the way you girls have all backed me up."

"Don't forget," put in Ella, "we were saying the other day that you would get the prize for fortitude, if that chanced to be the word."

"Oh, be quiet, all of you!" pleaded the queenly captain, pretending to be overcome by such flattering talk. "As regards fortitude; there is Betty Barton——"

"I don't see it at all!" demurred Ella quickly. "Not much fortitude about a girl when she takes the loss of the captaincy with such bad grace! Now, if she had——"

There was a sudden interruption.

The study door was tapped softly, and then it opened in front of a maid in cap and apron, who had some missive on a salver.

"If you please," the comely girl said, with all eyes upon her, "here is a telegram for Miss Grandways."

"Over here—thanks!" Cora said, starting up from her chair to seize the buff-coloured envelope. Her sister Judith was present, but Cora was senior to her, and so the message was rightly hers.

"And now," she muttered, starting to tear open the telegram, whilst the maid withdrew, "I wonder what this means!"

What, indeed?

CHAPTER 22.

Telegram and Telephone.

"WHAT about second cups?" inquired Audrey Blain sweetly. "Pass them up, girls! Cora dear, I do hope that telegram is nothing— Oh, what's the matter?"

For Cora, now that she had opened the message and scanned it, was going deathly pale.

"Cora!"

Almost every other girl at the festive table cried out like that, noticing the appalling change in Cora's face.

"From your people at home, is it? Tell us!"

But Cora crumpled up the flimsy paper with a shaking hand, and kept silent. In a distraught way she stirred her tea and drank it down. It was obvious that she was making every effort to restore her shaken nerve, but she could not do it.

"If you would like to go away to your own study, Cora, we will excuse you, of course," Audrey purred from the head of the table. "But can't we share your trouble, if there is one?"

"N-n-no!" Cora said roughly; she was not a polite speaker at the best of times.

Pushing back her chair she stood up, at the same time looking dazedly at her sister. Judith, too, was looking very upset, although she had no idea as to what the message was about.

"Yes, Judy, you—you come away with me to our study," Cora said huskily, and went in a blundering fashion round the table to the door.

"Pity!" murmured Audrey, with a suitable air of distress. "But come back presently, Cora. We shall not be dispersing for a good while yet, I hope."

Cora did not answer. She got outside the packed study, and then swept a shaking hand across her forehead. Judith followed, closing the door behind her, and then they went together down the corridor to their own study.

"Well?" panted Judith then. "Oh, Cora dear, what—what did the telegram say?"

"Read it!" the elder sister said hoarsely, thrusting the crumpled flimsy into Judith's hand. And these were the awful words that met the younger girl's dilating eyes:

"Your father has disappeared. Return home at once.—MOTHER."

A sharp cry of anguish broke from Judith.

"Oh, Cora—Cora dear! But why—why has he disappeared? What are we to do? What does it all mean? And yet I know. I—I seem to understand, Cora. It is because——"

"Hush! Hold your noise!" burst out the

elder sister excitedly. "Don't shout it all over the school!"

Then, after they had stood mute and still for a few moments, utterly stricken by this dramatic turn of events, a loud call went through the house that made Cora exclaim in great agitation:

"Hark! That's Betty Barton being called to the 'phone downstairs. It must be a trunk call, or the servant would have taken time to come up for Betty, instead of calling to her to come at once. Yes, there she goes!"

They heard Betty go racing by in the corridor, answering:

"All right—coming!"

Judith suddenly sank into a chair and moaned, with her hands before her eyes.

"Oh, how awful—how dreadful! It means—it means—"

"Quiet, I tell you!" hissed Cora. "Pull yourself together—start packing! I'll be back in a jiffy. I am going to see if I can overhear Betty's talk on the 'phone."

In a flash she was out of the room, and she drew a breath of relief at finding the corridor was otherwise deserted. By this time, Betty had whirled downstairs. Cora stole along the passage, and went down one or two flights, then stopped.

Betty was in the lobby at the back of the ground-floor, calling into the 'phone, and the stealthy listener could hear every word her schoolfellow was saying.

"Hallo, hallo! Yes—oh, mother, darling, is that you? What? I can't quite hear! That's better!"

A sudden silence. Betty was listening to the voice that was coming to her along hundreds of miles of wire.

Then, suddenly, the ex-captain cried out joyfully.

"Released? Released, you say? Oh, mother darling, how grand, how splendid! And they won't be—"

Another pause.

Cora gasped to herself. If only she could hear every word that was coming through the telephone. And yet—ah, she was like her sister Judith; she knew! In the very instant she read the telegram, she had realised what it all meant.

In the next few moments Betty began to call out breathlessly:

"Yes, mother darling—no, mother dear! Oh, yes, I understand! All right!"

They were phrases that conveyed little

to Cora, except that Betty's thrilled, joyful tone still witnessed to this one thing—that the whole situation was changed, and that it was no longer the Barton family that were in trouble, but the Grandways!

Then Betty rang off, and Cora took alarm and ran quietly back to her study before she should be seen.

Judith was still there, of course. She had pulled one or two portmanteaux from a cupboard and thrown them open on the floor. But, having done that, she seemed to have fallen into a sort of stupor.

"Yes, it was Mrs. Barton on the 'phone," Cora panted, after shutting the study door and turning the key to keep out intruders. "Betty's father has been set free! I heard that much, anyhow."

Judith's lips moved as if she was echoing the words to herself.

"Betty's father—free!"

"Well, come on!" Cora suddenly stormed at her, stamping a foot. "In a minute the headmistress will be sending for us, or we shall have to go to her, anyhow. Judith, we must catch the six o'clock to Exeter. We have simply got to catch that train, and get away from here before the news leaks out!"

But Judith still stood overwhelmed, dazed. If she roused herself at all, it was only to send a wild look around the room. And perhaps the tragic thought was in her chaotic mind—never again after to-day would she see this or any other school study.

If what she had guessed proved to be the case—then, for her and her sister alike, schooldays were over and done with for ever.

CHAPTER 23.

Just Like Betty.

"POLLY!"
"Hallo!"
"Paula! Madge! Yes, all of you!"

"Bai Jove, what—what? Eh?"

Free, free! He's free! They have set him free—my father!" Betty Barton simply yelled crazily, as she came dashing back into Study 12, after that visit to the telephone. "He's at home with mother now!"

"Oh!"

"Gweat Scott! Bai love—hoovay! Yes,

wather!" was Paula Creel's contribution to the jubilant cries that went up. "Fwce, bai Jove!"

"Which means," exclaimed Polly, looking as if she were ready to throw a somersault, "they must have found absolute proof of his innocence, of course! Something must have happened, or—"

"They would never let him out unless the whole case against him had absolutely collapsed," put in Madge Minden. "Even if evidence came to light in his favour, they would probably have decided to try the case, and—"

"You know something, Betty!" struck in Tess, gazing at the ex-captain's excited face. "Out with it—oh, please!"

"Oui—oui—yes, yes!" implored Trixie Hope. "I never knew anything so wonderful; jamais, jamais—never, never!"

"Jammy, jammy," echoed Polly, quite the madcap again already. "Keep away from me, Paula! I'm dangerous!"

Paula beamed.

"Bai Jove, this is weally most gwatifying, don't you know. Weally is! Betty deah, pway let me congatulate you in a few well-chosen remarks—"

"Whoa, there; no, you don't!" cried Polly, and she ran Paula backwards across the study, shunting her, as it were, into an armchair. "Now, Betty—let's have it! Explain!"

"If I do repeat what mother told me on the 'phone," Betty said in a lowered voice, "it must be under a pledge of secrecy. Girls, it is a fact that the case against dad has completely collapsed. It seems that some accountants have been going into certain books that were not destroyed by the fire at the Grandways mill, because they were in a fire-proof safe. They reported to the police. At the same time—"

"Well?"

"Mr. Grandways went away suddenly. He did not come back. No one could find out where he was. He—"

"You mean," Polly burst out, "he has bolted! Skeeedaddled—done a bunk, because—"

"The books had disclosed a bad state of affairs, is that it?" Madge questioned in her calmer way. "Was it he, then, who—oh, Betty! Supposing it was Grandways himself who fired the mill!"

Betty added in a deep whisper:

"That is just what has been proved,

girls. All of a sudden the case has been put together like this! Josiah Grandways was insolvent; he was heavily insured; he set fire to the mill himself!"

"Gweat goodness!" gasped Paula, from the depths of her chair.

"That bears out what one witness suggested at the police-court hearing; that the fire didn't start in the sheds at all," Betty went on. "But the absolute proof of Grandways' guilt is, of course, his bolting!"

"Then what about the Grandways girls?" exclaimed Tess. "I say—"

"Half a sec, Polly; where are you off to?" broke out Betty, as Polly took a sudden stride to the door.

"Don't you worry!" was the madcap's airy response. "I am not going to say anything you have asked me to keep a secret."

"But—"

But Polly was gone!

Along the corridor she went, with a hop, skip, and a run, and fetched up at Audrey's door.

Thump! went Polly's fist upon a panel, as a sort of "May I come in?" Then she entered.

The babel of tea-table talk ended abruptly. Cups were set down clumsily. In a sudden dead silence Polly said smilingly:

"I thought you might be interested to know—Betty's father is out of prison. The charge against him has broken down."

Some of the girls gaped. Others said, "Oh!" A few breathed an astounded "Phee-ew!"

"So that is what the telegram to Cora was about?" Audrey said at last, as serenely as ever. "They have decided, have they, that Betty only set the mill on fire by accident?"

"Betty did not set the mill on fire at all!" Polly retorted pertly. "You'll know who did some day!"

And she left them to make what they liked of that, backing out of the room and closing the door with a resounding slam.

One by one chairs were pushed back, and their occupants stood up. Cakes and cups of tea were left unfinished. When Audrey Blain moved towards the door, all followed. They trooped after her as she went out into the passage and along to the Grandways girls' study.

The sisters were in there, but when Audrey tried to open the door she found that the key was turned against her.

"Cora—Judith!" she called, receiving the savage response:

"What do you want? Go away! We are busy!"

The time soon came, however, when Cora simply had to unlock that door. That was when she and Judith were summoned to the headmistress' private room downstairs.

Then some of the other girls glimpsed the half-packed portmanteaux in the sisters' study, and all sorts of sensational things began to be whispered.

Mere conjecture, a lot of it, and yet how soon it got to be known that this was really the case. Cora and Judith were going off by the first possible train. They were never coming back—never! Fate had turned the tables in the most dramatic manner, and now it was the Grandways family that was in terrible trouble and disgrace, not the Bartons.

So the whisper went from lip to lip, and so it was known to be before another hour was out.

For when half-past five had come, and the two girls' belongings were being taken down to the waiting cab, and the moment had actually arrived for the sisters to say good-bye all round, Judith's own white lips voiced the frightful truth.

Cora, for her part, had put on a bold front by that time, and she had nerve enough to start saying a breezy good-bye to this girl and that, as if she would be back at Morcove before many days were out.

But Judith—she hung back in the old study after her sister had quitted it, and the girls had to come to her there if they wanted to get a last word with her.

"Why is it, Judith?" Grace Garfield did not scruple to ask. "Your sister won't say; she is pretending it is nothing very bad. But we all feel sure it is an awful upset of some sort over that business of the fire."

"And you are right—it is!" replied Judith.

Tears were glistening along her lashes, but she wiped them away, then faced the crowd about the door courageously.

"It means that we Grandways have all

been acting unjustly, cruelly, against the Bartons," she owned in a wrought-up manner. "It means that Cora and I have a father who is a— Oh, I feel I could die with shame, yet fairness to Betty compels me to say it. We have a father who is a fugitive from justice!"

"What!" gasped at least a dozen girls.

"My poor unhappy father!" Judith broke down hysterically. "Oh, why—why did he always put money before all else? What has it brought us to in the end but lifelong misery, when we might have been so happy if only he had been content with the fortune he made years ago? It is utter ruin now, disgrace for all of us—for my poor mother, left alone with us to face the world as best we can!"

"Judith—Judith dear!" several of the girls exclaimed compassionately, for their hearts were wrung by her wild state of grief and despair.

"I must go," she faltered between her sobs, taking a last look round the dismantled study. "I—I don't know what will become of us, but Cora and I—you'll never see us again. So"—she gulped back another sob—"good-bye. And when I'm gone, tell Betty I was glad for her sake, because that is true—oh, it is the real truth! Far, far better for all this disgrace to have come upon me and my own people than for Betty's father to have suffered unjust punishment!"

She walked a few paces between the girls, then turned about for an instant to plead:

"Will some of you tell Betty that, please? It is true. If I could have seen Betty I would have liked to tell her, but she is not here."

Polly Linton suddenly broke away from the crowd and dashed back to Study 12. No, Betty was not there, either—not back yet from the interview she had been called away to in the headmistress' room downstairs.

"By Jove, you know!" Paula breathed distressfully, as she wandered into the famous study behind Polly. "This is wather affecting, Polly deah. She's gone, poor Judith—yes, wather! Gone now, and I weally—"

"If only we could tell Betty in time!" Polly fumed. "I am sure she would want to say something generous to Judith—"

"Yes, wather!"

"Then why are you standing there, and

why am I standing here?" Polly wanted to know angrily. "Come on, what are we about?"

"I— Weally, Polly, I don't pweicely know! Howevah—"
"Oh!"

It was one of Polly's exasperated cries as she darted past poor bewildered Paula and went whirling up the corridor.

Down through the house rushed Polly. She bounced on to a mat at the foot of the stairs, then tore on round to the head-mistress' study.

"Betty! Oh, thank goodness!" the mad-cap gasped, as she met her chum just coming away from the sanctum. "Quick! The cab is just off, but you may catch them—Cora and Judith, yes. It is Judith—"

"Why, what—"

"Oh, Betty darling, if you only know how sorry she is, how finely she has spoken before all the girls about you!"

That was enough for Betty. Away she streaked, darting out through the porch door just as the cab was grinding away down the gravel drive.

"Stop—stop a minute! Whoa!"

The horse clopped to the standstill. Betty whipped open one of the cab doors and stood on the step to reach inside.

"Who's that?" snapped Cora. "You, Betty! Get away!"

Betty ignored the elder sister altogether. She saw Judith huddled there in the cab, weeping wildly.

"Judy, I mustn't detain you, but oh, try to believe how I feel for you! If I can do anything for you at any time, I will, Judy! Good-bye—good-bye!"

She reached farther into the cab to bestow one caressing touch upon the weeping girl's shoulders, then sprang away and slammed shut the carriage door.

"All right, driver!"

The horse clopped on again, and the wheels crunched over the gravel. Swiftly the laden vehicle rolled away down the long drive towards the old gateway, and so cut into the open roadway.

And Betty, as she stood looking after the cab, realised how that open road beyond the school gates symbolised the wide, wide world upon which Cora and Judith were soon to be adrift.

She had a vision, too, of that ruined

home to which the two girls were returning—a home that would soon be sold over their very heads. And, whatever she and her people had ever suffered at the hands of the Grandways family, it was all forgotten then, or at any rate, forgiven.

Never yet had it been Betty's way to hit at a person who was down. And the Grandways were down now, and where and by what means they would ever rise again—ah, who could say?

CHAPTER 24.

The Opening of the Envelope.

ALL next day the Fourth Form at Morcove saw very little of its queenly captain outside of school hours.

Audrey Blain was keeping to the privacy of her study viewing her own position in the light of yesterday's dramatic happenings.

Cora and Judith had gone from the school for good, and once again all the girls of Morcove were drawing breath, as it were, after a tremendous sensation.

Audrey could see that a good many members of her Form were very subdued, doing a lot of thinking, and this made her all the more disposed to ponder the situation.

Was it going to be suggested that she should resign the captaincy, so that that proud position could be restored to Betty Barton? Was she even expected to tender her resignation straight away?

It was a galling thing to Audrey to realise that the answer to those questions was "Yes."

Betty's father had been completely vindicated; the whole family had emerged from that terrible ordeal of suspicion in connection with the mill town fire with untarnished honour. And here at the school there was naturally a great swing of the pendulum once again; feeling was once more all in favour of Betty.

The fortitude with which she had endured so much anxiety and anguish was the talk of everybody in the school, except perhaps that weakling element whose opinions really counted for nothing at any time.

The headmistress and her colleagues, the seniors of the Sixth Form, and the girls of the Fifth and Lower Fourth—all were saying that if that hundred-guinea prize should prove to be intended for a scholar who had shown great fortitude, then Betty would get it.

And fortitude, as Audrey Blain knew—because she had managed to find out in the most cunning way—fortitude really was the word written on a slip of paper inside that envelope in the headmistress' safe.

Nor would it be long now before that envelope was publicly opened and the award made.

Already there was a notice on the board downstairs to the effect that the secret word would be revealed at the special muster on Wednesday next. And already Audrey could hear, in fancy, the whole school acclaiming Betty Barton as the deserving recipient of the great prize without one dissentient voice.

Well, Betty had beaten her there. But how about the captaincy? Was the girl to be given back that proud position, as well as given the prize?

The prize, both the prize! So Audrey was in the mood to say to herself, with a shrug. What did a paltry hundred guineas matter to her when her people were rolling in wealth? The captaincy, though—that was a different thing altogether.

It was the thing she had coveted from her very first day at Morcove School.

When had she not been striving, one way or another, but always in secret, always with great artfulness, for the captaincy? Now she had got the coveted post—had held it for just a fortnight or so—and she must give it up, must she?

In the solitude of her study, beautiful Audrey Blain began to feel that she could not give up the captaincy—no! Not even if it meant sinking one's pride a little.

Doubtless, if she did not offer to resign there would soon be hints that she ought to. Well, she must affect not to be aware of the desire to see Betty reinstated. She must appear to take it for granted that the Form wished her to remain in office—say, until the end of term. And all the time she would be as much their queen as ever, giving the girls more opportunities of seeing what a jolly, easy-going time

they could enjoy whilst they had a real Society girl for their "cap."

One thing she could count upon, and that was Betty's own refusal to set up any clamour to have the captaincy returned. Audrey was quite sure that Betty would never dream of making herself so "cheap" as to start agitating for reinstatement.

And so it proved.

During the next few days Audrey certainly did receive many looks and hints suggesting that the handsome thing would be for her to resign her coveted position, but not one of those looks or hints came from Betty.

As she had made up her mind to do, Audrey calmly ignored such hints, and she felt that if only the bestowal of the prize could be got over on Wednesday without any outright demand for Betty's reinstatement, all would yet be well.

So at last the hour for the opening of the fateful envelope came round.

In the great hall of Morcove School the girls lined up Form by Form, and how the whole place seethed with talk during the minute or so that elapsed between the calling of the roll and the appearance of Miss Somerfield on the dais.

Then—no need for mistresses and girl prefects to call for "Silence!" Breathless was the hush that fell upon that vast assembly as the headmistress stepped to the middle of the platform and looked out with smiling eyes upon the sea of faces before her.

"Well, girls," she began, whilst they saw her lay aside the vital envelope upon the rostrum, "you all know why we are met together like this. At the beginning of term I announced that a former scholar had written inside this sealed envelope one word describing the quality she most admires."

Miss Somerfield paused, and all over the hall voices were making whispered guesses at the word:

"Industry—love of home—keenness—tidiness—jollity!"

"That's me!" Polly Linton was heard to say with a laugh.

"Yes, wather! Howevah, it may be elegance, don't you know, in which case bai Jove—"

"Sh! Hush, girls!"

And so the excited outburst was quelled, and the headmistress resumed.

"I must own to being very thrilled myself," she smiled. "There are so very many qualities which are to be admired and encouraged. What I wonder is, how I am to decide which of you girls best deserves the prize if it proves to be for some quality which—"

"Open it—open it!" some of the scholars could not help crying out in their excitement; and Miss Somerfield's next action showed that she did not mean to prolong their suspense.

Amidst sudden renewed silence she took up the envelope, tore it open, and unfolded the sheet of paper that was inside.

"Ah!"

"Read it out! Oh, let us hear! Miss Somerfield—"

"FORTITUDE!" was the headmistress's ringing cry. "FORTITUDE!"

The word was taken up by everybody.

"Fortitude!"

"Then," came the absolutely overwhelming shout from Polly Linton, "is it Betty Barton—"

"Hurrah! Yes, Betty Barton! Betty has it! Miss Somerfield, Betty—Betty for the prize! Betty, who bore it all so bravely!"

"Yes, wather! Geals—"

Paula's amiable voice was heard for just that instant, then drowned in the general uproar. The girls were deciding for Miss Somerfield, or rather, they were endorsing the decision which she herself had come to in the very instant that she read the word. "Fortitude" meant—Betty!

And now, whilst the mad clamour changed to applause, and whilst Betty Barton was working her way towards the dais in response to a beckoning sign from her beaming headmistress, Audrey Blain was almost quaking in her shoes.

Would there be a sudden cry of "Betty for captain"? That was her fear.

"Brave, bravo! Well done, Betty!" cheered the girls, as the ex-captain shyly came forward to have her hand seized and held by Miss Somerfield. "You deserve it, Betty!"

"She does, indeed!" cried the headmistress, as soon as she could get a hearing. "I shall make a point of letting the donor of the prize know exactly under what

circumstances this scholar of ours bore herself with such splendid fortitude. The prize is yours, Betty dear, which means that you may choose for yourself what form it shall take. In the meantime, there is one thing we can all give you on the spot. Girls—"

"Three cheers for Betty Barton! Hip, hip," vociferated Polly, "hooray!"

"Yes, wather, bai Jovel! Hoowah, hooway! Hip, hip, hip, geals—"

"Give her another!" appealed Ethel Courtway, the head girl of the school.

"Give her the captaincy!" sang out two or three voices from the Fourth Form line, but the extra cheer that had been called for by Ethel drowned those words, and they were not heard again.

Polly, Paula, and a good many others were looking at Audrey to see if she had taken the hint; but Audrey pretended to be carried away by the general excitement. Standing on tiptoe, she joined in the cheering, and waved, as others were waving, towards the blushing, embarrassed Betty.

Five minutes later the girls had broken ranks and were scampering away, and Audrey was one of the quickest to get upstairs to the studies.

Well, that is over, thank goodness! she was saying to herself. There had only been that unheeded cry from just two or three girls, nothing more—no hint thrown out by the headmistress. And so—

Tap, tap, came a knock at Audrey's study door, and there were the very girls who had called out in the hall, "Give Betty the captaincy!"

"Audrey," began one, with significant gravity, "now that Betty is in higher favour than ever with the Form, don't you think—"

"Oh, would you mind speaking to me in the morning?" Audrey broke in, dabbing her forehead with a handkerchief that reeked of eau de Cologne. "I have started a nasty headache. So sorry, and all that. In the morning, yes!"

And so she closed the door upon them, and then laughed to herself at the ruse she had played.

"Well, Betty—well?" burst out Polly Linton an hour later, when the ex-captain came into Study 12 after another inter-

view with the headmistress. "What did you choose for the prize?"

"I chose money," said Betty calmly.

"Money!" echoed Polly. "My word, I wish I had a hundred pounds to play with, Betty! Whatever will you do with it?"

"I am afraid I have already done with it—spent it, yes," was the cool reply that left Betty's chums with jaws agape.

"Eh, what? A hundred pounds, Betty deah—spent already? You extwagant sweature, weally! And pway tell us, how have you spent it, deah?"

"Oh, that's my business!"

"What!" yelled Polly. "Mean to say, Betty darling, we aren't ever to know?"

"Never, if I can help it."

Paula turned then, in a giddy manner, to let herself collapse into an armchair.

"Bai Jove! she breathed. "There's some mystewy heah!"

"There's not," said Polly, as she stood

looking into Betty's inscrutable face. "Oh, Betty darling, you can't hide it from me! I know. I've guessed. You dear, darling Betty! Now, Paula, you duffer, don't you see?"

"Er—weally, no—at least——"

"Betty has sent that hundred pounds—every penny of it—to Judith Grandways!" Paula sat upright in the armchair.

"Betty deah, is that the twuth?" she demanded.

"What the dickens has it got to do with you?" Betty exploded, in great confusion.

"Oh, Polly—Paula! Don't be so ridiculous!"

"We are not!" declared madcap Polly, as she and the aristocrat of the Form almost tore their chum to pieces between them. "We are only showing how we admire you—love you, Betty!"

And Paula said:

"Yes, wather!"



Three more splendid numbers of "The Schoolgirls' Own" Library will be on sale on Thursday, June 7th.

See page iii of cover for further particulars.

THE GRIEVANCE THAT GREW.

To go or not to go?

That was the problem that perplexed Susan as she sat in the window seat at home gazing out into the sunlit street.

There shouldn't have been any doubt as to the answer to that question, for it was just an ideal day for the outing about which Susan was bothering her head.

The picnic had been well planned. There were to be two six-seater cars, and the party was to be composed of seven of her chums, four very nice elders who were not too old, and herself. The programme was to ride to Bentmere Heath, thirty miles away, partake of a nicely-prepared cold lunch, and then walk over the heath for miles and miles, have tea at a charming old-world cottage, and return by another route and drive back through the cool of the evening.

Not much to hesitate about in that, was there?

But Susan couldn't make up her mind. The more she thought about it the gloomier she became. At last a knock on the door broke into her thoughts. She dashed to the front door to find Patricia there.

"Hurry, up, Susan!" cried Pat. "Get your hat on! Mustn't keep them all waiting, you know. Why, what's the matter?" she finished, as she noticed the gloomy look on Susan's face.

"Afraid I can't come," answered Susan, making up her mind all in a hurry. "No, really it's impossible!" As though to check the protest of her friend: "Mother's not very well, and I shall have to stay and look after her."

"Oh, jolly hard luck," said Pat sympathetically. "Give her my love. Tell her I hope she'll soon be better. Well, I must run, now. Sorry you can't come."

Pat waved her hand as she ran down the path, and for the moment Susan hesitated as to whether she should call her back and tell her she could come, after all. It was not strictly true that she was staying at home on her mother's account. That had been a convenient excuse, for, though her mother was unwell, she had begged Susan to go on the trip.

The truth of the matter was that Susan was having a little "sulk." All over the picnic, too!

Only the previous evening she had, from her point of view, made an upsetting discovery. It had not originally been intended to ask her to go on the picnic. In fact, she had only

been invited to fill the last place when two other girls had been asked and had had to refuse for different reasons.

And ever since her discovery Susan had been thinking that her friends might not have waited until the last place had been refused twice before asking her. Why, she was much more friendly with the organisers of the party than several others who were going.

If they didn't think enough of her to invite her earlier, then she would show that she could be independent of their favours.

It wasn't at all fair, she thought. The more she thought, the unfairer it seemed. So Susan brooded over it, until she felt quite convinced that the other members of the party would look upon her as the "makeweight," the girl they had to ask because they could get no one else.

Having refused to go, Susan began almost to wish she had gone—just to spite them all. She could have shown them that she was not the kind of girl to be sat on.

All this and many other things, Susan thought, working her little grievance up to great proportions.

To make matters worse, she ran into the picnic party as they returned. They all crowded round her. "Oh, Susan, what a pity you couldn't come; we had such a lovely time!" said three of them in one breath.

"We're having another next month," said one of the elders, "and you must come to that. You're invited now, so you mustn't say you can't come. I should have invited you earlier to this one, but I didn't think your mother would be well enough to let you come."

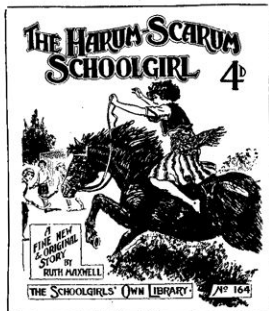
So that was the reason why she hadn't been asked earlier. Susan bit her lip and could hardly repress the tears as she recalled the horrid things she had attributed to her friends, and the fun she had missed through her own stupid fault.

She realised it now; it was all through her own rather sulky temperament that she had missed a great treat. Well, she wouldn't miss the next one through being such an utter little stupid. And, in future, she determined, she wouldn't nurse real or imaginary grievances. She would fight them out on the spot. Better to have a little "flare up" and get things over than to allow them to "smoulder" for hours on end.

Susan kept to her determination, and she is much better-liked nowadays.

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