

MORCOVE ON THE SEA!

An Early Adventure of
Betty Barton & Co



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MORCOVE ON THE SEA!

A magnificent long complete story of the early adventures of the girls of Morcove School.

By MARJORIE STANTON.

Author of "THE HUNDRED-GUINEA PRIZE!" "THE MORCOVE TREASURE-HUNTERS," "MADGE MINDEN'S SECRET," etc., etc.



CHAPTER 1.

Something Like a Treat.

FROM the depths of an armchair in Study No. 12, at Morcove School, Paula Creel drawled a question.

"And, pway," she said, "what time do we start, geals?"

"At two o'clock, dear—sharp," said Betty Barton, causing Paula to sit bolt upright in a galvanised way.

"Bai Jove, two—"

"Two pip-emmer—yes, and not two to-morrow morning, or two to-morrow afternoon, or the middle of next week, but this afternoon, Paula. Now!" yelled madcap Polly Linton, dinning that word in the swell girl's ears. "Instanter! See?"

"Yes, wather! But, bai Jove, I'm not weady, don't you know!"

"Then you jolly well ought to be!" said Polly breezily. "Tumble up, me hearties! Pipe the bo'sun's whistle, and heave the lead, yo-ho!" she went on, belabouring poor Paula with a cushion. "Up, ye lubber! Think I don't know how to talk like a sailor!"

"How frivolous you are, Polly deah!" sighed the long-suffering aristocrat of the Fourth Form, putting her ruffled hair to rights. "I am fully aweah that it is a great treat we have been pwomised. Howevah—"

"Ease her, stop her—let her go!" rattled on the madcap, suddenly getting behind Paula and propelling her towards the open door. "Cast off, there! Belay!"

"Polly, you wicidulous cweature, be quiet. Be qui—"

"Avast, stand by—"

"Oh, weally, help, Betty! Pway intercedo for me!" pleaded Paula, as the madcap continued to push her this way and that. "I want to go and dwess myself for the twip, don't you know! How can I go and dwess myself when—"

"I say, are you girls ready?" came the sudden high-spirited cry from Tess Trelawney, as she appeared in the doorway. "My Uncle John is here, so do let's go down with him to the beach."

"Yes, wather. Howevah—"

"Isn't it spiffing?" rattled on Tess breathlessly. "He has come ashore from the yacht in a lovely little motor-boat, and it will run us out there in half an hour, he says."

"Hooray! Any more for the Skylark?" chanted Polly. "Paula, if you take more than two minutes to get your things on you'll be left behind. Hallo, Trixie! Hallo, Madge dear!"

Those two girls were now entering the study, whilst Paula drifted away to make the best of that two-minute limit which she had been granted for her toilette. These chums of hers were dressed for out of doors, and it was the same with Bluebell Courtney and Dolly Delane when they romped in.

"Did you hear what I was saying, girls?" Tess broke out, buttoning a glove. "My Uncle John is waiting for us, and he says that there's a lovely sea on—just a nice swell."

"Urrr!" shuddered Polly. "I know that nice swell in a motor-boat. First you slide up—hoo-er!—then you slide down—uur-ah! Never mind, though!" And she swung on to the edge of the table and kicked her legs about. "Avast! I'm a born sailor, I am!"

"It has all happened so suddenly I can't believe it's true," said Bluebell Courtney. "Just fancy your uncle and aunt taking it into their heads to come and visit you, Tess!"

"It was decent of them," declared Tess, "for it meant their altering all the route of the cruise they had planned in the Meteor. When they left in that ocean-going yacht of theirs, they meant to make straight for the Mediterranean. But—"

"They saw Morcove School marked on the map of the world, and so they said 'Let's go there.' Cheers for Mr. and Mrs. Trelawney, of New York!" cried Polly. "They are darlings! Well, are we going to start?"

"How about Paula?" Betty chuckled, knowing that that would set Polly off again.

"Oh, Paula! If we wait for her we'll wait all day! Let's go, and give her a call as we go by her study."

This proposal being agreed to, the school-girl trippers marched away, looking as gay as any batch of Morcove scholars that had ever trooped along that Fourth-Form corridor on a Wednesday "halfer."

Outside Paula's closed door Polly Linton delivered a thump, thump! with her tiny fist.

"Avast, there! Heave ho! Now for the Skylark, Paula!"

"Yes, wather!" shrilled back a rather agitated Paula, who was doubtless fiddling with her hair in front of a glass. "How-evah, I must make myself respectable, don't you know!"

"I can see you looking respectable after half an hour on the rolling deep!" Polly opened the door to say teasingly. "When the stormy winds do blow, ho-ho! Put the comb down, duffer, and come along!"

Paula turned away from the mirror.

"Theah, Polly deah, I'm weady! Bai Jove, it is going to be a wipping tweat, what!"

"And it has come just at the right time," agreed Polly heartily, toeing her band-boxy chum into the passage. "It is true that dear old Betty's troubles at home were all ended a week ago, but—"

"Yes, wather!"

"It is sickening," Polly went on, in a lowered tone, "to see Audrey Blain sticking to the captaincy when she has had hints all round that the Form would like Betty

Barton to be re-instated. I tell you, Paula darling, my patience is nearly exhausted about that business of the captaincy. I shall— Yes, coming!" she broke off to shout boisterously, as a call came from below. "Avast! Stand by, there!"

And Polly, like the madcap she was, went down the last flight of stairs by sliding the banisters!

Thump! She landed on her feet in the hall, whilst her chums there pealed with laughter, and her genial headmistress could only pretend to be shocked.

A middle-aged gentleman, finely built and very handsome, was standing there in yachting attire, and there is no need to say that this was Mr. John Trelawney, of New York. By the way he rested an affectionate hand on Tess Trelawney's shoulders, it was obvious that he was greatly attached to this British-born niece of his. At the same time, he seemed to have plenty of affection left over for the other girls, for his eyes went from one to the other in a beaming way.

They had been introduced to him earlier in the day, taking to him at once as a gentleman who did not give himself airs just because he was one of New York's millionaires, but who had all the charm of a jovial, adventurous nature, plus a great deal of generosity towards his fellow-men.

"It is Polly who amuses me," he remarked, with a laugh, just after the madcap had slid down the banisters. "And which is the one who speaks French?"

Betty pushed Trixie Hopo to the front.

"Comment allez-vous, mademoiselle—how do you do, miss?" laughed Mr. Trelawney. "Il fait beau temps, n'est ce pas—it is going to be fine weather, is it not?"

"Let's hope and pray so," Polly was heard to remark in a stage whisper, whilst Trixie was making a suitable reply in her own alleged French. "Paula Creel has already got the wind-up!"

"My dear Polly, what stowies you do tell!" protested the aristocrat of the Fourth Form. "I am quite weady to bwave the elements, Mr. Trelawney, provided—er—there are no wollers!"

"I could not be taking you out to see the yacht on a better day," he assured them all. "Miss Somerfield, the girls will be absolutely all right—"

"Oh, I'm quite easy in my mind about that!" the headmistress made haste to say

affably. "Why, a motor-boat will be quite de-luxe travelling after the row-boat we keep for the use of the school, down on the shore."

"And if my wife and I give them tea on board, and keep them until fairly late in the evening—that will be all right?" he suggested, with that engaging smile of his.

"Oh, quite!" was the cordial answer. "I think it is very charming of you and Mrs. Trelawney to have devised this surprise treat for the girls, and I only wish I could come myself!"

"Do!" he pleaded promptly; but Miss Somerfield shook her head and laughed.

"No, I'm sorry, I have much to attend to to-day. But I shall certainly want to see over the yacht before you leave your present anchorage, and you and Mrs. Trelawney must come ashore and dine with me one evening this week."

As Miss Somerfield ended this gracious remark, she turned to look about her, as if expecting someone who was due to appear; and it was at this instance that Miss Redgrave, the youthful assistant-mistress of the Fourth Form, came up.

She was also dressed for out of doors, and a very trim, attractive figure she made as she returned Mr. Trelawney's smiling bow.

Miss Somerfield did the introductions, for, unlike the girls, Miss Redgrave had not met Mr. Trelawney before. He kept his approving eyes upon her as it was explained that she was the mistress who had been appointed to accompany the girls on their visit to the yacht, and it ended in his shaking hands with her.

"Pleased to meet you!" he said with simple heartiness. "Well, Miss Somerfield, the girls have a mistress with them, and you have seen what a motherly sort my wife is, although we aren't blessed with any youngsters of our own; and so if we take it into our hands to keep the whole party for the night—"

"What, sleep on board?" burst out Polly excitedly. "Oh—"

"Bai Jove!"

"See how that brightens their merry eyes!" Mr. Trelawney commented, with his hearty chuckle. "Miss Somerfield, I think I had better ask right away—may we keep them the night?"

"And take us for a trip out to sea in the morning!" came from Polly, with a hand-clap. "Oh—"

"Miss Somerfield—"

"Do—do! Please!"

"Where is it to end?" laughed Miss Somerfield. "We shall have you setting off to the Mediterranean before you are done! But there; run along! As we always say when we know the girls are in perfectly safe company," she added, giving her hand to Tess' uncle, "we shall expect them back when we see them!"

"That's fine of you!" he exclaimed, and wrung her hand as if the favour she was showing to the girls was a favour done to him. "They won't come to any harm, trust me, and so I think we'll fix it right away; they'll spend the night on board just for the sake of the experience."

Then Polly lost her head again. Whilst John Trelawney was lingering a moment to make a few final arrangements with the headmistress, the madcap felt she must go tearing off—out of the schoolhouse and down the drive to the gateway, woo-op! Hooray!

Nor did she check her prancing steps until she was down on the seashore, where the Metcor's saucy little motor-launch was moored to the small stone jetty.

After her, all the way, had hurried the other eager girls, and such a jabbering of tongues as there was when they were all getting aboard! The shrieks of laughter, too, as luckless Paula Creel nearly missed her footing in taking the one awkward step from the jetty on to the boat's gunwale!

"My word, if I hadn't caught you!" chuckled Polly, after she had grabbed the band-boxy girl just in time to steady her. "Have you brought your pocket-mirror and comb, dear?"

"Yes, wather, Polly. My gwacious, though, how the boat wocks! Polly, deah, I have a strong misgiving that there will be wollers out at sea."

"Roll on thou great and something—something deep, roll on!" Polly shouted, trying to remember the quotation. "My barquo is on the ocean, Paula darling! Avast, belay! Heave to!"

"Oh, pway don't; don't talk about heaving! That's just the trouble," sighed Paula, sinking weakly on the first available seat. "The boat is heaving all the time!"

But after the first "sinking sensation," Paula became as merry as any of them.

Mr. Trelawney had come alone in the easily-managed boat to fetch the girls, and

so there were no members of the crew to put the girls under sense of constraint. Joking and laughing, they accommodated themselves with lightning speed, with Miss Redgrave in their midst, and then Tess' jolly uncle skipped aboard, took his place in the stern, and cast off.

"Hurrah!" lead off madcap Polly, as a whole flock of gulls took to flight at the first roar of the powerful motor. "Hip, hip—"

"Hooway—yes, wather! Geals, is my hair quite stwaight? Then I'm quite alwight!"

Like an ex-naval hand did John Trelawney send the boat speeding away, the engines racing smoothly and softly, the exhaust blowing out behind with a soft toug! toug! and the bows eliciting through the waves in marvellous fashion.

There was a good sea on—it very seldom was a smooth sea off that rocky coast of North Devon, with its cross tides and water running many a fathom deep—but they never took a fleck of spray on board.

Out and away they went, swimming and bounding upon the heavy waters, and now the happy holiday-makers were smitten to silence simply by the enchantment of looking back towards the receding shore and seeing the old school from an unaccustomed point of view.

There it was, dear old Morcove, showing its stout walls to any wind that might blow, high up there on the great headland. The sun was shining—monster gulls were winging by—oh, the whole thing was topping.

Ah, and now all eyes were torn from the scene on the shore to what lay ahead—the wide, sunlit sea, and just one vessel riding at anchor some three miles out. That was the Meteor, dipping lazily and gracefully to the rise and fall of the waves rolling by her—a little floating palace, white as a snowflake from etem to stern, and with brace-work shining like gold.

Silent still were the girls, for all they were so happy and excited. There was a privately owned yacht that had come all across the Atlantic! It was an awe-inspiring thought. And was it strange if they imagined what a wonderful thing it would be if only they could be going on board now to up-anchor and steam away to other lands and climes.

Italy, India, Egypt, the South Seas even! Just fancy the romantic places one could visit with a yacht of one's own like that!

So each thrilled girl was thinking to herself, thinking of what could never possibly be, of course! And none had a thought—had not the faintest presentiment even—of what really was to be before ever they, the chums of Morcove School, should set foot on English soil again!

CHAPTER 2.

All at Sea.

"HOW perfectly topping!"

"Spiffing!"

"Yes, wather!"

Delighted cries of this sort were coming from the girls again and again, now that they were on board the Meteor.

They had been received at the hanging gangway by Mrs. Trelawney, whose cordial handclasp and winning smile told of a nature as charming as her husband's. She, too, was in yachting attire, but the chums felt that no other style of dress could have set off her handsome looks and her tall, graceful figure to greater advantage. Betty & Co. had yet to see this lady in evening dress!

She was a good deal younger than Mr. Trelawney, with his bluff face and iron-grey hair, and Tess had explained to her chums that the marriage had been a very romantic, happy one. Nor had the girls been on board five minutes before they realised that here was a case of "married sweethearts."

"Bai Jove, and I don't wonder, geals!" commented beaming Paula Creel, keeping her eyes upon the charming hostess of the yacht as they were all being shown round the vessel. Paula's voice, of course, was lowered to a discreet whisper.

"Betty dear, this is most gvatifying, what! I always had an idea, bai Jove, that American millionaires and their wives were such wauk outsiders, don't you know!"

"It is a mistake lots of people make," whispered back Betty. "My uncle, who was in Canada and the States for many years, has often told me that some of the richest people over there remain perfectly simple in their tastes, and awfully good hearted."

"The matewial of that dwess, don't you

know, Betty, it must have cost guineas a yard—yes, wather! And yet it looks so extremely plain and becoming. Bai Jove!"

But Paula's admiring criticism of Mrs. Trelawney's apparel had to come to an end as the girls were now brought by that lady to the mahogany door of a little room on the middle deck.

"Wireless!" two or three of the girls were exclaiming in an awed tone. "We are to see the wireless instruments!"

And eagerly they crowded closer as the door was opened by Mrs. Trelawney, to gaze at the wireless room's equipment.

"Yes, there you are!" John Trelawney remarked breezily, coming up behind the group of visitors, pipe in mouth. "We get the time from Paris here, and have no end of fun picking up messages. If you had a wireless at the school, you girls, my wife and I would speak to you from the Mediterranean in a month's time. Think of that!"

"Bai Jove!"

"But it is all wonderful—all a dream!" Madge Minden said, turning to survey the yacht from stem to stern again. "Like a liner in miniature!"

Madge had found the right phrase there. That was exactly what the Meteor was—a crack liner in miniature. The girls had imagined a pleasure boat with very limited accommodation, and a good deal of need for "making shift" during the life on board. They went below, however, and found quite a spacious saloon, a smaller apartment that was Mrs. Trelawney's own artistic boudoir, and quite a range of two-berth cabins, lavishly equipped.

Girls are not usually supposed to be interested in engines, but Betty & Co.'s visit to the engine-room of the Meteor was an experience that enchanted them as much as anything they had seen up to the present.

Paula Creel was the only girl in a hurry to get away from those hot regions, and that was not because the boiler and furnaces and the mass of oiled machinery failed to interest her.

Paula made her escape by the steel ladder because, as she afterwards explained, it gave her a turn to see those grimy-faced stokers and engine hands grinning at her.

"They weminded me of negwoes, bai

Jove!" she said rather palpitatingly to her chuckling chums. "Howwid fwights—yes, wather!"

"They are all right; they must be!" declared Polly. "I can't imagine Mr. and Mrs. Trelawney engaging anything but picked men to form the crew."

The chums were back on deck at this moment, standing to look out again upon the rolling sea, upon which the graceful yacht was riding so serenely. Paula still showed a desire to hang on to anything with a steady hand, whilst she made a comical grimace as the vessel seemed to sink under her feet in the hollow of a wave; but the others seemed quite to have found their "sea legs."

"Aren't you cold, you girls?" Mrs. Trelawney came out to them to ask, with that smile which showed how happy she was to have the schoolgirl party on board. "Most people always find it so very shivery in the open, when they first come on board. Paula Creel——"

"Thank you, Mrs. Trelawney, I—I am quite all wight! Yes, wather!" Paula declared. But just then the boat sank again after another horrid roller had slid by, and poor Paula turned rather pale.

"Tea will be ready in a second," the hostess said. "Your beautiful school!" she went on, perching herself on a locker to gaze out over the heaving waters towards the misty headland. "I don't wonder you are such a bright, bonny lot when you go to school in such a glorious part of old England! Stand over here, Paula! The middle of the deck is better."

"Thanks, thanks, I will!"

But she very nearly didn't.

She very nearly sat down on the deck, another dip of the boat giving her the staggers as she let go of the rail which she had been holding on to for dear life.

"Ha, ha, ha!" exploded Polly derisively. "Why, I could do a sailor's hornpipe, I do believe!"

"I am quite all wight, weally! It is only the howwid wollers!" said Paula sadly. "I wather wish they would leave off wolling, don't you know. If the sea would only wolle the other way, bai Jove, then——"

"Does anyone want to know the price of Consols on the London Stock Exchange this afternoon?" asked Mr. Trelawney with a laugh, coming away from the wireless-room.

"Or do you want to know the result of the latest political conference, or—"

"What the girls want is tea, and there's the gong for it!" cried Mrs. Trelawney gaily. "Come along!"

She rested a shapely hand lovingly upon her husband's shoulder and jumped down, and then there was a general move towards the saloon stairs.

"Are you all right, Paula?" Betty turned back to ask the aristocrat of the Form, who was following last.

"Quite—or—quite all wight, Betty, thanks! However, if you would not mind—"

Paula stopped. Oh, dear, there it was again—that nasty feeling that the boat was sinking under her! She was not feeling at all upset, but she did wish there was a moment when she could stand quite still.

Betty helped her to the top of the cabin-stairs. It was a slow business, so slow that by the time the two got there all the others had gone below.

And then a disaster happened to Paula.

Whether it was that she caught sight of one of the grimy stokers as he appeared on deck for a moment, or whether the anchored vessel gave an extra big roll, there is no telling. But Paula suddenly lost her balance, and went all down the cabin stairs like a mail-bag down a shute—clatter, bang, whallop!

CHAPTER 3.

Paula's Troubles Never Cease.

"O H, my gwacious!"

"It's Paula! Ha, ha, ha!"

Polly fairly shrieked with laughter as she and the others in the saloon saw their dressy chum lying all of a heap at the foot of the stairs. "Oh, my hat!"

"Bai Jove, wheah am I?" gasped poor Paula, looking about her in a dazed manner. "Have we stwuck a wock, or what?"

They helped her up, all of them in fits of laughter, and when Paula caught sight of her reflection in one of the mirrors, she nearly fainted.

"Gwacious, what a fwight I am. My haih, bai Jove!" she wailed, so distressfully that Mrs Trelawney did the nice thing and offered to take her to one of the private cabins, where she could set herself to rights.

"No, thanks; quite all wight!" Paula cried, fishing out the ever-ready pocket mirror and comb. "One moment, and I'm weady!"

Paula raised the comb to her hair; then the yacht rolled again, and she lowered the comb and waited. Another try, and another roll of the vessel in the opposite direction.

"Get on, duffer—get on with it!" Polly teased.

"Yes, wather! Quite all wight! How-evah—"

A third time Paula endeavoured to attend to her ruffled hair, and a third time she had to desist.

Altogether, it was a couple of minutes before she gave up in despair, and took her seat at the saloon table along with the rest of the company.

Mrs. Trelawney presided, of course, and at the lower end of the table was her jovial husband, eager to load the girls' plates with dainty eatables. The meal had been laid by a stewardess, who, the girls learned, was the wife of one of the members of the crew. In the ordinary course, no doubt, this woman remained in attendance during the meal, but Mrs. Trelawney dismissed her as soon as the tea was poured out, so that the girls would be more at ease.

"Well," exclaimed Tess' jovial uncle when the meal was coming to an end. "I am jolly glad I arranged with that nice head-mistress of yours for my wife to keep you for the night. My darling"—he spoke down the table to his handsome bride—"this is some treat for us, eh?"

"I'd like to take them all with us right round the world," laughed Mrs. Trelawney, passing somebody's cup. "Better than some of the tiresome people we shall be taking on board at Marseilles, I know."

"Say the word," he chuckled, "and I'll up-anchor and away with the girls, sending a wireless good-bye to their headmistress."

"Oh, if only you would!" sighed Polly, who was fairly off her head with happiness. "And then get us wrecked on a desert island! Hooray!"

"Cast away a boat that is worth a fortune, just to give you a bit of adventure, eh?" John Trelawney laughed, and pinched Polly's ear, because she was sitting near enough for him to do that. "No, young lady; the most I can promise to do is to give you a short cruise to-morrow

morning, and then dump you back on shore."

At this instant the door was tapped, and one of the officers of the ship came in to ask his master about something. The girls were not inclined to pay attention to what did not concern them; all the same, they could not help noticing that the man seemed to be rather moody, considering how affably John Trelawney conversed with him.

"That was Lucas, the engineer," Tess' uncle remarked, after the man had gone out. "A capital fellow, I have thought him to be; but, May darling—"

"Yes, John, dear," his wife responded from the other end of the long table, "he is another who seems to be in the sulks just at present. It is very queer—"

"It is pretty cool, I think," exclaimed the millionaire, with the first ruffled look that the girls had seen him assume. "It would surprise me to find that there was some un-aired grievance aboard, and yet they've all got the hump apparently."

"Well, that's funny, uncle," said Tess, setting down her cup. "I myself have been thinking, ever since we girls came on board, that the crew might look a little more agreeable."

"I put their moody looks down to the nature of their calling," said Betty. "After all, I suppose it is an anxious life."

"Yes, wathah!" came Paula's faint contribution to the talk. "Extremely twying for all in wough weathah, bai Jove! I am quite all wight myself, thanks, and I won't have have any, more of that wich cake, thank you, Mr. Trelawney! But as wegars being at sea in wough weathah, I wathah think I might turn downright disagweable!"

"It is not the sea, rough of otherwise," Mr. Trelawney said with a smile. "No; there is something going on amongst them all that beats me. I think you said, May darling, that even Mrs. Pallant, the stewardess, has got the complaint?"

"I thought she seemed to be a bit-changed," answered the yacht's handsome hostess. "In fact," she smiled ruefully, "the only paid person on board who is just as good-tempered as ever is my French maid, Jeanne Esterelle."

John Trelawney laughed, glad to have been reminded of someone who could only be thought of with amusement.

"Ah, your wonderful Jeanne! The girls

haven't met her yet, so they still have some fun to come. As for all the rest of our people, if they are not satisfied, I should like to know why—and I shall certainly find out!"

Mrs. Trelawney called for "cups," but her youthful guests had all made a good tea by now, and so her husband got up and set the gramophone going. It was a handsome rosewood cabinet instrument, and the most entrancing band music was soon giving a gayer note than ever to the gathering.

After playing a few records that the girls had selected, their affable host nipped the end of a good cigar, and went on deck to smoke, whilst May Trelawney thought this a suitable opportunity to show Miss Redgrave and the scholars to their quarters for the night.

Conducting them to a narrow, carpeted corridor, she threw open one cabin door after another, and in a few minutes the delighted guests were nicely parcelled off.

Betty, Polly, Paula and Madge came in for one beautiful four-berth cabin. Miss Redgrave and Tess Trelawney were next door, in a cabin that was just as luxurious, although it only slept two persons. Trixie, Dolly and Bluebell were next door to the larger cabin, on the other side.

"Oh, oh!" sighed Polly wistfully, taking stock of the four-berth cabin whilst she and her three companions were having a tidy-up. "If only we were going to sleep here every night for another month! I won't go back to school. I'll strike!"

"It would be wipping, weally!" Paula agreed, beaming at herself in one of the cabin mirrors. "Only I would want a few fwocks to wear, gae! Gweat Scott, what a fwight I shall look, not dwekking for dinner this evening, when it's like a swell hotel! As for going to bed later on, the question awises, what about— My gwacious, who is this?"

It was Jeanne, the French maid. Into the cabin she sailed, chattering away to herself in French at such a great rate that all four girls felt quite dazed.

"My gwacious!" palpitated Paula, when this had gone on for a minute or so. "Wather uncanny—what! Pway—pway address a wemark to her, one of you!"

"But we don't speak French!" whispered Betty helplessly. "We want Trixie here for that."

"Oui, oui!" grinned Polly, voicing the one French phrase she was sure of. "Exercise forty-two! Have you seen the gardener's umbrella?"

Then Polly wished she had not spoken, for suddenly Jeanne, the dramatic, flashed round upon her with a look that was quite alarming.

"Vat you say?" exclaimed the French girl, striking an attitude.

"Oh—er—"

"Yes, wather!" Paula said, coming to Polly's rescue. "Pwecisely! Wemarkably fine weatheah, bai Jove, for the time of yeah—what!"

Then Jeanne seemed to go off into hysterics. But they found that she always laughed like that—with much tossing her head about, and stamping of her feet.

"Ah, but how droll you are, you English mam'selles!" she informed them, laughing until the tears shone in her eyes. "I am amuse with you, and you are amuse with me, is it not?"

"Yes, wather!"

"Then it is that we amuse each other—yes?"

"Wather, bai Jove!" Paula agreed, afraid of disputing anything with such a fiery young female. "Pwecisely! My vey ideah, don't you know!"

Jeanne seemed to take a special fancy to Paula on the spot. It was only Jeanne's way of showing her friendly feelings when she made a sort of pounce and embraced Paula, but Paula gave a small scream, as if her last hour had come.

"I say, don't you know—geals! Help, she'll stwangle me!"

But it turned out that Jeanne only wanted to do Paula's hair for her, having discerned, no doubt, that Paula was fond of elaborate coiffures.

Betty, Polly, and Madge made off, bursting out laughing as soon as they were on the other side of the door. Nor did their merriment diminish when they listened and heard Jeanne jabbering away excitedly in French to Paula, and Paula interjecting a dazed: "Yes, wather—pwecisely!" in an overwhelmed way.

"Come and see my own cabin, girls," they heard Mrs. Trelawney calling, and so they stepped to the end of the narrow corridor, and found themselves in the threshold of an apartment which seemed to be the last thing in lavish furnishing.

A ceiling light, enclosed in cut crystal, was switched on, although plenty of daylight was penetrating through the half-dozen portholes. Madge, who knew something about such things, could tell that every bit of furniture was a gem that would make the eyes of a collector water with envy. The cabin's panelling was so polished that the girls saw their forms reflected everywhere. Chairs and lounges looked just too good ever to be sat upon!

"A spoilt, pampered creature, am I not?" she said prettily, setting down the comb with which she had been tidying her hair and turning away from the dressing-table.

"Is that a safe let into the wall?" asked Betty, and their wealthy hostess nodded.

"Yes, I keep my jewels there. One has to have a few with one when one travels, for special occasions. Would you like to see?"

She produced a small bunch of keys, did something to the combination lock, and then opened the massive steel door. All the other members of the Morcove party, excepting Paula, had by then come into the beautiful cabin, and they gathered round whilst Mrs. Trelawney took out one jewel-case after another to let them see the contents.

"A 'few' jewels, you were saying!" Betty almost gasped at last. "Why, what we have seen already are worth a king's ransom, surely!"

"They are some of my best things. My husband has been such a one for loading me with presents, dear, splendid fellow, that he is!" the fortunate lady said lightly. "These emeralds are believed to be rather special."

"Oh, la-la!" Trixie ejaculated, smacking her lips as the magnificent green jewels were exposed to the brilliant light.

"Well, I don't know how you can!" said Polly. "How you can have the nerve to carry such things on a voyage! Supposing they all went to the bottom of the sea?"

"Oh, I wouldn't break my heart!" was the laughing answer. "So long as John and I didn't go to the bottom, too, I'd be quite happy still. I think I hear your friend Paula. That drawl of hers, there is no mistaking it."

There was, in fact, a most distinct outcry from Paula Creel at this moment. She was coming along the narrow corridor, crying: "Geals! Geals! Look at me now, bai Jove!"

And so whilst Mrs. Trelawney quickly closed the safe and made it secure, Miss Redgrave and the girls faced towards the doorway.

And then Paula appeared.

"Geals! Bai Jove, that Fwench geal is a wipper! Look at the entwancing way she has done my hair for me, bai Jove! It suits me—what!"

There was a sort of stupefied gasp from Betty & Co. Then they all went off into peals of laughter.

"Bai Jove, you don't appreciate it?" Paula said, with a falling face. "And I thought it quite wearikable!"

"Oh, it is remarkable enough," chuckled Polly. "Extraordinary! Turn round, dear!"

Paula turned round, and the comments came fast and furious.

"All dragged up at the back—wonderful!"

"All twisted round at the sides—unspeakable!"

"Yes, wather! And, geals—"

"All twiddled about at the top—horrible!" said Polly. "Turn round, Paula darling!"

So Paula turned again.

"All combed back at the front—absurd!"

"My gwacious—then what am I to do?"

Paula palpitated, suddenly taking a dislike to the wonderful coiffure herself. "I say, bai Jove, I tipped her half a crown to do my hair like this!"

"Tip her half a crown to make you as you were," suggested Tess.

But Paula sighed despairingly.

"No, thanks, geals. I—weally, you know, I had a most distwessing time at the hands of that Fwench geal! Extwemely amiable and well-meaning—yes, wather! But nevah again—no! She—she fwightens me!"

"I can quite believe it," laughed Mrs. Trelawney. "All right, Paula dear; come over here, to my glass, and I'll do your hair for you!"

And so the others trooped away, making for the deck, where they found Tess' uncle pacing about and enjoying the falling breezes and the glorious sunset.

John Trelawney stepped up to a small barometer and tapped it.

"Quite steady," he remarked in a gratified tone. "A little fog is the very worst that can happen to-night."

He spoke the words just as one of the

ordinary seamen was going by, and Betty, chancing to be studying the man's face at that moment, saw the mouth widen and turn down at the corners, forming a peculiar sort of smirk.

A few seconds later she saw that sailor talking with another in low tones. The couple seemed to have a joke to share, for they ended up by separating with some quiet laughter.

How fast the night was falling now, and how sullen the sea had become under the darkening sky! Betty and her chums looked towards the distant shore again, but some evening mists had swathed the great headlands, and the lights of the school were no longer visible.

"I feel cold," Betty confessed suddenly, as a shudder ran through her. "Shall we go down?"

But that sudden coldness which had come over her—it was a kind of chilliness not to be dispelled by all the warmth and brilliance of the spacious saloon.

Even there, with the gramophone going again and all her chums looking as high-spirited as ever, Betty felt strangely oppressed. She could not tell why, but she would have described it as the feeling that something was going to happen.

And, somehow, she seemed to see again and again, with her mental vision, the face of that sailor and its peculiar smirk, and his falling into talk with that other man in an amused fashion.

There had been some strange joke to afford the pair such secret mirth—but what?

Betty wished she knew!

CHAPTER 4.

The Mystery of the Meteor.

DINNER, however—the sort of dinner they serve in a tip-top hotel—set Betty right again at last.

How she and the rest of the Morocco party just enjoyed the various courses that were set before them that evening! And how their tongues did rattle away, causing Tess' aunt and uncle to exchange a delighted glance again and again whilst the meal was in progress. If there were moments when Miss Redgrave was inclined to fear that the girls were almost too

merry, she had only to look at the host and hostess to feel quite re-assured.

There they were—John Trelawney in his nice evening clothes, and his "May darling," at the other end of the table, in her Paris gown and some of her diamonds; a childless couple who simply revelled in having such company as this!

"Ay, my dears," smiled their genial host at the end of the meal, "we'll go far, my wife and I, but I doubt if we'll ever get a jollier evening than this we are having now! I feel young again to-night. I'll be singing to you presently, you see!"

"Oh, do you sing, uncle?" cried Tess eagerly.

"When I sing, you'll think it's the ship's fog-horn going. But, never mind," he answered gaily, "we'll get up a concert presently. Yes, we will."

The stewardess brought in coffee, and whilst it was being handed round John Trelawney lit a cigarette. Then he got up to set the gramophone going, as he had done after tea.

The stewardess had withdrawn, and for perhaps a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes, the party in the saloon were alternately chatting and laughing and listening to the gramophone.

Paula had found a nice low armchair, and would have been perfectly happy if only she had been "pwooperly dswessed." She was still gazing enrapturedly at Mrs. Trelawney, who wore such lovely things without the least affectation, and the gramophone was in full blast again, when a thrilling thing happened.

From somewhere about the yacht there came a wild, piercing scream.

"By Jove, what's that? Who is it?" gasped John Trelawney, whilst he clapped a hand on the whirling disc of the instrument to stop the music. "Listen!"

No need for that entreaty. Every one of his companions was in the grip of a sudden, awful horror.

That scream—and now it came again!

"Jeanne—it's Jeanne!" panted Mrs. Trelawney, with a hand at her pounding breast. "Oh, John darling—"

"Yes, that's who it is," he jerked out. "But why—what—"

He flashed across the room to whip open the saloon door, but after laying hold of the handle and pulling, he fell back a step or two in an astounded fashion.

"Why, it is locked!" he said in a dumb-founded way. "Wo are locked in!"

"Oh!" came faintly from most of the girls.

They saw him draw a deep breath, whilst he drew down his brows in sudden anger.

"Some villainy here!" he muttered fiercely. "By Jove, though, I'll soon see to this!"

And he had caught up one of the unfixed chairs to use it as an object with which to smash open the door, when the panels were banged and rapped on the other side.

"Oh, m'sieur—oh, madame! Vite—vite! Quick—quick!" shrieked the hysterical voice of Jeanne Esterelle. "M'sieur—madame!"

"Is the key gone from the lock, Jeanne?" shouted John Trelawney.

"Oui, m'sieur—oui!"

"Stand aside, then—I'm coming out!"

He had hardly voiced that warning cry when—smash!—he shivered the door with a blow from the wielded chair.

Smash! Smash! Again and again he lifted the chair high above his head and sent it crashing and thudding against the beautiful woodwork of the saloon door. And at last the furious onslaught told.

The lock of the door burst with the snapping bang of a pistol shot, and he flung aside the chair.

At the same instant the splintered door was pushed open, and Jeanne burst in upon the millionaire and his companions.

"Oh, m'sieur—"

"Well, Jeanne—what?"

"Ah, it is too late!" panted the wrought-up girl, wringing her hands dramatically.

"They are gone—gone!"

"Gone! Who?"

"The men of the crew—all of them!" was her astounding cry. "But a minute since, m'sieur, I go to milady's room to put things so and so for the night, and there are men there at the safe, m'sieur—oui! At the safe—"

"Ah!" John Trelawney said through clenched teeth, and next instant he brushed the panic-stricken girls aside and rushed from the saloon.

The girls followed. In vain did Mrs. Trelawney and Miss Redgrave voice a warning. "Wait—be careful!" Betty and Co. were off. Hardly realising what they were about and the danger they might be

running into, they simply stormed after Tess' uncle, overtaking him in a few seconds in his wife's private room.

The lights were full on, and so they had the whole appalling scene revealed to them in an instant.

The safe had been opened—rifled!

All her valuables—the gold and platinum ornaments, the diamonds and emeralds which the girls had feasted their eyes upon a few hours since—they were gone.

"Gone!" John Trelawney said dazedly, whilst he stood staring at the looted safe. "Stolen, and by men who were actually in my pay! But—but—"

He swept a hand across his forehead.

"What does it mean?" he burst out again incredulously. "Which of the men were in the business? Where are the rest, eh?"

He turned back to the doorway, went past into the corridor, and shouted.

"Hi, there! Come along some of you—hustle! We are robbed! We have had some rascals of thieves amongst us ever since we left New York! Do you hear, there—do you hear?"

And there was no answer, not a sound.

All that happened was the appearance of Mrs. Trelawney, Miss Redgrave, and the girl Jeanno. The latter came along, still shaking from head to foot with the fright she had had.

"Ah, those monsters of men!" she quavered. "M'sieur!—milady, I thought they would kill me when I come here and take them by surprise! Those men—"

Mr. Trelawney silenced her with a gesture. Again he listened, and the deep silence made him exclaim in deep dismay:

"Were they all in the conspiracy, then? There's not one of them left—not one, surely!"

It was Betty who suddenly cried out:

"Can't we go after them? They've left the ship, but—"

"Ay, girl, that's the idea!" Tess' uncle struck in grimly. "They think to get away without a chase, do they?"

He dashed from the cabin once more, and now it was up to the deck that all the girls and their companions followed him. Breathlessly Betty & Co. mounted the cramped stairs and emerged upon the deck, which was all in darkness. The vessel's riding-lights were still burning overhead,

but they did nothing towards illuminating the scene below.

Nor was there any moonlight. The star-shine from cloudless heavens was all that kept the night from being groping dark. The wind had dropped, and a certain mistiness was upon the sea.

In a flash John Trelawney and all his fellow-occupants of the vessel were crowding to that side of the deck which lay towards land. Excitedly they peered through the mist, and could just discern two or three open boats laden with the rascally fugitives.

To the girls' listening ears came the soft *teuf! teuf! teuf!* of the motor-launch, whilst now and then there was the splash of an oar from one of the Meteor's open boats.

"Mr. Trelawney," panted Polly Linton, "where is another boat—one of the life-boats? We'll help you to get it launched."*

"Yes, wather! My gwacious—"

"We'll pull oars for you—yes!" volunteered all the girls, sharing the robbed man's furious anger to the full. "The villains—the wretches!"

John Trelawney did not answer. He took his excited eyes off the dimly seen fugitives and started to run from one end of the Meteor to the other to find out what boats were left.

And not one was to be seen!

CHAPTER 5.

There is Danger on the Deep.

NOT a boat anywhere in which the clums of Morcove School could have helped the victims of this astounding conspiracy to give chase to the thieves. All—all had been taken!

It was a discovery that brought home to John Trelawney and his companions the extreme gravity of the amazing situation. It was evidence not merely of great audacity on the part of the thieves, but of the care with which their plans had been laid.

"Well, John darling, don't let it grieve you," pleaded his loving wife. "So long as there has been no violence done to anybody—"

"Yes, May; but I am not going to take this thing sitting down. I am not the mar-

to stomach it!" he cried furiously, clenching up his hands.

And he spoke on through clenched teeth:

"Two or three of them must have begun plotting something like this from the time we left New York. Then I suppose others got to know, and had to be promised a share if they joined in. And so it spread to every man-jack of them. The whole lot. They have conspired like this to rob an employer who—well, ask anybody if my terms weren't generous ones. The low-down villains!"

"They've gone!" murmured one of the girls, whose peering gaze had remained upon the open boats until they had vanished in the misty darkness.

"Ay, and they've taken care that we'll be unable to follow!" Tess' uncle said furiously. "The wireless, though!"

"Oh, can you work it?" was Betty's eager cry.

For answer John Trelawney darted away towards the wireless-room, which was on the middle deck. Wrenching open the narrow door, he clicked on an electric light and stepped close to the instrument.

Then the girls, as they came crowding about the open doorway, saw him fall back in renewed dismay.

"The scoundrels!" he said huskily. "They have smashed the instrument—left it quite unworkable!"

"Oh!"

"But, Mr. Trelawney," burst out Polly again, "we are not done yet! What about rockets—signal rockets?"

"Bravo, Polly!"

"Yes, wather! Bai Jovô, what a great ideah—rockets!" applauded Paula. "Why didn't I think of that, bai Jovô?"

Another excited rush took place, this time from the wireless-room to the chart-house, where John Trelawney knew that all the rockets were kept in a locker.

The box was kept unlocked. He threw up the lid violently, ready to snatch eagerly at some of the coloured lights—and the locker was empty!

This, the latest example of the cunning precautions the conspirators had taken to frustrate both pursuit and alarm, was a thing that left all who were in that chart-house stricken to silence.

Clearer and clearer the plight they were in was being revealed to them.

Not only had they been left without the means of getting to land—they could not use the wireless, and they could not send up signals of distress.

What, then, were they to do? How long were they to be helpless prisoners aboard the yacht whilst the rascally conspirators gained time to get away with their loot? And how if the weather changed abruptly, as it so often did at this time of the year?

"Ships often signal by flags, don't they?" suggested Betty. "If we wait until daylight—"

"Flags!" John Trelawney echoed bitterly. "You are quite right, my girl. But have they left us any flags, I wonder?"

They had not. This was discovered before another minute was out. The locker that should have been packed with the tiny flags, each neatly rolled up, was as empty as the box in which the flare-lights should have been.

"No!" Tess' maddened uncle broke out at last, looking like a lion in a net. "There is only one thing I can think of—signalling—by an ordinary lantern in the hope of its flash being picked up. And that's out of the question at present, because—"

He looked about him in the darkness, and tossed his head despairingly.

"This mist—look at it!" he exclaimed bitterly. "Getting thicker every minute!"

Then he fell to pacing to and fro, whilst the girls held their tongues, guessing that he was puzzling how they could extricate themselves from their really terrible plight. But he found no solution to the problem, and he was looking as furiously helpless as ever when at last his wife laid a soothing hand upon his sleeve.

"Well, there, John darling," she said, and how Miss Redgrave and the girls admired her for her sublime composure! "Don't worry, dear—don't grieve. We are all right for to-night, that is certain. In the morning—"

"Ah, but the delay!" he exclaimed, unable to resign himself to the humiliating situation. "Supposing that this fog hangs about all to-morrow? We'll be just as helpless as we are to-night. And, meantime, those scamps will be scattering to different parts of the kingdom, each with his share of the spoils. Your diamonds—"

"Oh, bother diamonds!" She shrugged

prettily. "Now I wish you had given me stamp-albums and fountain-pens for presents; I would have valued them just as much, because they came from you," she said, bestowing a loving kiss as another means of soothing him. "That horrid frown, John darling—I don't like to see it."

And she passed her hand caressingly across his lined forehead.

Something happened to John Trelawney then. The frown really vanished, as if charmed away; he drew himself up and squared his shoulders.

"All right," he said in a voice from which all helpless fury had gone. "If you can take it calmly, May darling, so can I. And these girls of ours—"

"Oh, don't worry about us, please!" some of them cried spiritedly. "We are all right."

"Yes, wather! Bai Jovo, geals, we have much to be thankful for. Those piwates might have made us walk the plank—what!"

"And thank goodness no one at the school will be anxious," rejoined Betty with a big breath of relief. "We were staying the night on board in any case."

"So we were!" cried Polly. "So avast, bolay, and heavo-ho! Say the word, Mr. Trelawney, and we'll run the ship for you!"

"You'll all go to bed, that's what you'll do, young ladies," was their host's smiling answer. "As for me, I shall have to keep the fog-horn going all night; but don't let that worry you. For a certainty they have damped down the engine-room fires so that there's not a whiff of steam for the siren. But I'll pump away at the hand instrument."

"Turn and turn about, please," suggested Polly, and Miss Rodgrave was just as eager as the whole party of girls that they should relieve him, the one man on board, as the night went on.

But he was inflexible in his decree that they and his wife should all get some sleep.

"The only man on board," he commented with a grin. "That rather reminds me of the song in 'Treasure Island.'"

"Yes, I know!" cried Polly, and she began to chant in a piratical manner that set all the others laughing:

"But one man of the crew alive,
That put to sea with seventy-five!"

"With a yo, ho, ho and a bottle of rum!" she finished up, doing a caper on the deck. "Avast, bolay! 'The bearings of this observation lies in the application of it!'"

"That's a bit of Dickens," laughed John Trelawney. "Captain Bunsby, was it? There, run along with you, saucy!" he added, pulling Polly's hair. "It will be Captain Polly before we set foot on shore again, I fancy!"

And so before another minute was out Tess' uncle was the only person left on deck.

With the fog falling thicker and thicker upon the night-bound waters and the palatial yacht, which had been the scene of such a strange ocean drama, he fetched the hand-siren on to the bridge, and sent a warning "zoo-hoo, zoo-hoo!" far and wide over the sea, whilst in between the mournful blasts he listened with straining ears.

He listened, dreading to hear at any moment an answering whine from some other siren, telling him that some great ship was passing in the night and the fog—or not passing in safety, perhaps, but bearing down upon the Meteor, only to get her warning and make out, her riding-lights when it was too late!

CHAPTER 6.

In the Fog.

"PAULA!"

"Yes, Polly deah!"

"You awake up there, Paula?"

"My deah Polly, why do you ask such a frivolous question as that?" complained Paula Creel, heaving over once again in that bunk that she was occupying just above Polly's. "How could I be asleep, Polly deah, when I am answering you ewewy minute?"

"Well, I can't get to sleep myself, so let's talk," was Polly's cheerful suggestion.

"I say—"

"Well, deah?"

"Aren't you two girls going to sleep to-night?" Betty wanted to know from her bunk on the other side of the cabin. "If not, I'm not!"

"Oh, but don't let's wako Madgo!"

"Madge isn't asleep yet," said that young lady herself, with a chuckle, as she also gave a turn in her bunk. "But I'm comfortable—very!"

"Yes, wather! Howevah——"

"In this life, Paula dear," Polly said, turning playfully philosophical, "ono can't have everything ono wants."

"I reckon," put in Betty grimly, "those thieves have got everything they want, anyhow! About twenty thousand pounds' worth of jewellery!"

"They'll get what they deserve in the end," rejoined Madge dryly. "About ten years' penal servitude!"

"And serve 'em right! Avast, belay! I say," Polly said, "hark to the foghorn up there on deck. By and by I'm going to suggest that we girls take a turn at the buzzer. Great fun!"

"Yes, wather! Howevah, if I may make the pwoposal without appeahing to be disagwovable," said Paula, turning over again, "a twifle of sleep would be most wefweshing, most gwatifying—what?"

"Stand by!"

"Polly deah, I fail to see the welevancy of that expwession," said Paula drowsily. "I do not wish to stand at all. I wish to wecline heah for the pwesent, and good-nect once again!"

"Oh, goo'-ni!" Polly sang out, with mock grumpiness. "But I'm not going to sleep, anyhow. I'm a sailor bold, I am——"

"With a yo, heave-ho, and a bottle of rum!"

"Wum!" murmured Paula, as if she were sinking to sleep. "It's a wum business altogether—yes, wather!"

Polly, of course, had no real intention of keeping others awake if they wanted to get to sleep, and so became perfectly quiet after that last bit of levity. She heard Paula breathing steadily now that that girl was enjoying "sweet wepose," and in a few minutes the wakerful madcap had an idea that Betty and Madge were also fast asleep.

But she was wrong.

Half an hour had gone by without one sound except that monotonous zoo-hoo of the Meteor's siren—a noise made at such regular intervals that it had no effect upon the girls in their cabins, whether they were awake or fast asleep. Half an hour had gone by like this when, all at once, Polly heard a certain sound, which, for all her flighty disposition, she fully appreciated the significance of.

It was an answering bellow from some other ship's siren, and that ship was close at hand!

Polly sat up, and at the self-same instant Betty and Madge lifted themselves up in their bunks on the opposite side of the dim-lit cabin.

"Hark! You heard that, you girls?"

"Yes, Polly!" And the tone in which Betty and Madge whispered their answer showed how uneasy they felt.

Next second the three girls were out of their bunks. They had not undressed for the night, and all they had to do was to slip on their shoes and don their outdoor coats.

"We ought to warn Paula, perhaps?" considered Betty. "Or shall we wait and see if——"

Even as Betty was speaking thus, she and her chums heard John Trelawney come running down from the deck. He got to the cabin corridor, and started rapping at one door after another.

"Don't get windy," he said cheerily, "but I think you should all get up on deck. I'm going back there now."

The girls roused Paula then, and she almost fell out of the high bunk in her sudden alarm.

"My gwacious, aro we on the works—or what?" was her palpitating cry. "Wait, geals—wait! Half a sec., pway, whilst I put my hair to wights!"

But the others were already outside the cabin, to find Mrs. Trelawney, Miss Redgrave, and the rest of the girls hastening away from their sleeping quarters.

"Geals, geals! What's the twouble then? Bai Jove——"

Zoo-hoo! Zoo-hoo! The Meteor's fog-horn was trumpeting lustily, and louder than ever came the bellowing of another ship's siren.

Tzoooooo-oooh-oomph! Tzooooo-oomph!

"A big steamer! A liner, perhaps!" Betty exclaimed tensely. "Coming out of the Bristol Channel. Mind how we go!" she added, as she noticed how the fog had thickened. "What a night! My word!"

They seemed, indeed, hardly able to see a yard in front of them as they made their scrambling rush for the open deck.

What lights there were in the stairways were dimmed by the thick white sea-fog. Paula clattered and banged as she missed

one step after another, but no one laughed at antics that would have been amusing at any other time.

"Ah, we are lost—lost!" was Jeanne Esterelle's despairing cry, and she moaned and muttered crazily, for she was all gone to pieces again in this fresh crisis.

"Now, Jeanne—Jeanne, be calm!" coaxed Mrs. Trelawney. "See these girls, how calm they are!"

"Oui, milady—oui! But it is terrible! Ah, this unhappy country and its fogs! Pah! Misery, that I must die, perhaps!" wailed the excitable French girl, scrambling up the stairs with the rest.

Another moment and they were all on the upper deck, pausing to gaze around in a bewildered manner. Just above their heads the yacht's siren sent forth another loud note, but whether any of these warnings from the Meteor were being heard by the other vessel it was impossible to tell.

TZOOOO-OOOH! TZOOOO-OOOOMP! came a louder blast than ever from the unseen fog-bound steamer that was now so close at hand.

"She's very near," Betty said, below her breath.

"Ye-yes, wuw-wather! My gwacious, girls!"

"Ah, to think that we all perish!" moaned Jeanne, still wringing her hands. "Dear mademoiselle—"

"It's quite all wight!" Paula said, finding that the French girl was addressing the whimpering cry to her. "Be bwave—be a bwick, don't you know! Oh, quite all wight—quite!"

The sound burst again upon their singing ears:

TZZZZ-OOOH! TZOOOO-OOOOMP! "Keep away!" the other vessel was bellowing as it crawled over the fog-bound waters. And here was the Meteor's own fog-horn trying to bellow back:

"Keep away yourself! I'm anchored! I'm out of control! I haven't a sailor on board!"

Betty took the lead and raced up the iron ladder on to the bridge. In the blinding fog she and her chums found their way close to John Trelawney, who was working the small fog-horn for all that he was worth.

"Let us take a turn—oh, do!" implored Betty & Co., and the exhausted man really

was glad to leave them to manipulate the bellows.

TZZZZOOOO-OOOOMP! "Keep away—look out!" the other vessel was trumpeting, and suddenly she was looming into view out of the darkness and the fog!

A mammoth liner, feeling her way at a snail's pace, with all her lines of lights making a weird glow through the gloom: just the leviathan shape of her as she came crawling on, with her sirens buzzing and shrieking.

Jeanne Esterelle clutched hold of Paula Creol.

"Ah, see! We are in the way—"
"No!" John Trelawney suddenly shouted joyfully. "May, darling, she will miss us!"

And he was right.

The huge liner was going by. Almost at the last moment disaster had been avoided. There had been a twist of the wheel that turned her out of the way of the Meteor, and now, as she loomed past, the girls heard more shouting than ever, and they guessed there was a good deal of anger at the apparent careless handling of the private yacht on such a dreadful night.

The huge vessel was still broadside on, looking like a whole street of houses and shops in a fog, when John Trelawney was seized with an idea.

He whipped out his notebook and sent his pencil racing over one page, scribbling this message:

"Yacht Meteor—crew deserted; out of control until help is sent. S.O.S. Wireless gone.—J. T., owner, New York."

Poising himself, he sent the tiny book whizzing through the fog towards the liner. But whether it had landed on the liner's deck there could be no telling.

She drifted on, still keeping her siren on the boom, and the foggy darkness swallowed her up.

"Look—look!" they all heard Betty and Polly shouting suddenly, and to rush forward to these two girls was to find them at the yacht's rail, peering down at the moving waters.

Betty had provided herself with an electric torch, and she was shining its bright beams upon some tiny object floating near the yacht's bows.

It was Mr. Trelawney's pocket-book! And so they knew then that his shot had fallen short of the passing liner, and that they who had been left to their fate upon the Meteor might hope in vain for help!

CHAPTER 7.

All at Sea.

"I SAY, Betty, Paula—all of you!"

"Well, Polly?"

"I've got it—an idea!"

Out with it!"

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove, we can do with it—what?"

It was a strange place in which to find a party of seven or eight schoolgirls congregated. Neither a class-room or a study, nor yet some open-air haunt outside their schoolhouse, but—the main saloon of a palatial ocean-going yacht!

Polly Linton, however, was still the Polly Linton of Morcove School, that was evident. At this moment she swung herself on to the edge of the saloon table, quite in accordance with her madcap nature when in Study 12.

"Yes," she said, sticking out her feet to cross them at the ankles, "and my idea is this. Here we are on board the steam-yacht Meteor—"

"Yes, wather!" murmured Paula Creel, the swell girl of the Fourth.

"And with no steam in the boilers, don't forget!"

"Quite right, Betty dear!"

"And—one may as well mention it, since we are discussing the situation," said Madge Minden, with her quiet style of humour, "we have no crew either!"

"Bai Jove, the disgwaceful wascals!" Paula Creel said quite fiercely. "I only twust, geals—"

"I thought you were going to listen to my idea?" said Polly blandly.

"Why, of course, Polly, go on!"

"Well, then! The position is that when Tess Trelawney's uncle and aunt invited us on board yesterday, and arranged for us to spend the night on the Meteor whilst she lay at anchor—"

"They little dreamed," put in Dolly Delane, "that in the evening the whole crew would bunk off—"

"Don't say 'bunk,'" Polly reproved the last speaker with mock disdain. "You never hear me use words like that! The crew skedaddled—there's a word for you!—and with all Mrs. Trelawney's jewels from her safe, and left us girls and Mr. and Mrs. Trelawney to fend for ourselves."

"Pwecisely, Polly deah! And, bai Jove

"Oh," fumed Polly, "do—do let me get in at least a word now and then! Well, we got through the night all right—"

"Yes, wather! And we enjoyed some wefreshing sleep after daylight awwived. In fact, geals, speaking for myself, I slept like a log."

"It seems to me you are speaking for yourself and everybody else all the time, Paula darling. We shall never get to my idea at this rate which is— Ah—"

And with that impressive ejaculation she got down from the table.

"The wireless is dismantled, the flag-locker was left empty. In a word, girls," said Polly, "we can't get into touch with people on shore."

"Quite impossible!" murmured Paula affably. "Impwacticable, quite!"

"No it is not, so see!" retorted saucy Polly. "My idea—a message in a bottle! Now—now do you grasp it?"

There was the right amount of admiration that Polly was entitled to expect.

"Bravo, Polly! Yes, wather! Bai Jove, fancy thinking of that, Polly! You are a genius!"

"Me, I'm a sailor bold, I am," answered the madcap, swaggering about the saloon and thus causing another peal of laughter. "Avast! Belay, haul down the main jawbone—I mean, jibboom, or whatever it is!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Paula glanced from one smiling face to another, and then said:

"Weal, I declare, geals! Who would ever dream that we are in a weally pewilous position, bai Jove? It was fog last night, and now, pway wealise, the weather-glass is dwopping, and at any minute we may be having a weally wough time!"

"List, ye lubbers!" cried Polly. "We are only a few miles from the mainland. Write the message, cork it up in a bottle—not a bottle of rum, no; an empty bottle, of course!—and then over into the sea with it!"

"So that it will float to the shore and be picket up and read, and then help will come, and in next to no time," said Betty cheerily, "we shall all be safe indoors again."

"Yes, wather! Just in time for pwep."

Another ripple of laughter ended as Betty Barton found a slip of paper and took a stump of pencil from her pocket.

"Keep still—"

"Are you talking to us or the boat?" asked Polly flippantly, causing Paula to say softly:

"Bai Jove, I wather wish the boat would keep still! I wealise that Bwitannia wules the waves, galls, but how I wish she had wuled them stwaight! Howevah—"

"Here we are—listen!" Betty said, and spoke on slowly whilst she wrote the words upon the sheet of paper:

"On board the steam-yacht Meteor, off Morcove. The crew have committed a big theft and deserted the ship, taking all the boats with them so that we cannot land. Wireless broken; flags taken away. Any-one finding this—"

"Yes, wather!"

"Get help sent, and please inform Miss Somerfield, headmistress, Morcove School."

"Add S.O.S.," suggested Polly. "Now a bottle, someone!"

So up the stairs outside the saloon doorway the whole party of girls raced, emerging upon the forward deck. The fog had thinned now that a breeze was getting up; but although all risk of a collision with some other vessel was a thing of the past, it was still impossible to see the towering cliffs of Morcove.

"Stand by!" Polly said again, to some purpose this time, for the way she was swinging that bottle made it advisable for the other girls to stand well away from her.

"One—two—three!" she counted, "and away she goes! Hurrah!"

"Yes, wather!" Paula agreed heartily, watching the bottle falling with a bobbing splash into the foamless waters. "And now, don't you know, to get my hair to wights!"

But her chums, they were not bothering about their appearances just at present. As they took their eyes off the floating bottle they turned and saw John Trelawney—that big, bluff uncle of Tess'—still on watch on the yacht's bridge.

He, the only man on board, had not had a wink of sleep during the night. From eight o'clock in the evening, when the crew had brought off their astounding coup, he had made it his duty to be on deck. Now that the fog was thin enough for other vessels to see them, he would be able to go below, and the girls meant him to have a jolly good meal before he went to his cabin and rolled himself in a blanket for a couple of hours or so.

As they all scurried below deck again, the rolling of the anchored yacht caused a narrow door to swing open, and then Betty & Co. got a nice, appetising whiff from a kitchen range.

"Why, what's this, then?" Betty herself stepped to the open door to find out. "Oh, Miss Redgrave—Jeanne!"

Inside the quiet, roomy kitchen, where, under normal conditions, a chef in white cap and apron would have been fussing over an elaborate luncheon at this time of day, were Miss Redgrave, the girls' assistant-mistress at the school, and Mrs. Trelawney's own French maid, Jeanne Esterelle.

"Now this is too bad," pleaded Betty. "Isn't it, Madge, for these two to set to on the quiet and do all the cooking?"

"Something smells jolly nice, anyhow," said Tess Trelawney. "My word—"

But the excitable Jeanne cut them all short with a flourish of the hand.

"Allez, allez, go—go!" she dismissed them dramatically. "You spoil my omelettes! Allez!"

"Oh, dear, look out!" laughed Bluebell Courtney. "The way she brandishes that slicer thing, it rather frightens me!"

The girls could tell, anyhow, that they would be doing more good to see about laying that cloth, and so they passed on into the saloon, and bustled to with great goodwill.

Meanwhile, in front of a mirror in the cabin which she had been sharing with Betty, Polly and Madge, Paula Creel was "wealising" that her hair was more than "wuffed." The damp fog had made it very refractory.

So it was that Paula suddenly thought of Jeanne, the French maid. Jeanne had said that she could give Paula a wonderful preparation for the hair. It was a costly dressing that Mrs. Trelawney used whenever the sea air affected her rich tresses.

Paula went to the cabin door and called along the narrow passage:

"Jeanne, Jeanne! One moment pway! Are you theah, Jeanne?"

"Vhat is it that you vant, now, you?" came an answering yell from Jeanne.

"Jeanne, if it is not troubling you too much, my hair, bai Jove—"

"Vhat—vhat you say?"

"One moment, pway! Have you that pwepawation—that dwessing, Jeanne?"

In the yacht's kitchen it was the critical moment with Jeanne's wonderful omelettes. She heard Paula, however, clamouring pathetically for "dwessing," and, with only half her wits about her, the French maid caught up a bottle of salad-dressing from one of the spotless shelves.

"Jeanne——"

"Ah, when I must give all my mind to these omelettes!" the French girl raved, rushing out and round to Paula. "Voila—behold, then! There it is, that dressing!"

"Oh, thanks—thanks!" Paula beamed gratefully snatching at the bottle. "Now, bai Jove, we shall see a diffewence. Yes, wather!"

And the next moment she was applying a copious dose of salad-dressing to her unruly locks!

"Ah, that's bettah, bai Jove! Oh, wipping!" she murmured joyously. "And what a fwagwance it has, too! Quite a revelation! The sort of bwiliantine I always like to use. Yes, wather!"

And she combed and brushed away with smiles of real delight!

CHAPTER 8.

Danger Ahead!

JOHN TRELAWNEY came down the cabin stairs with a grave look on his handsome face that he had no intention of letting any of the girls see.

He even banished the frown from his brow as he went along to his wife's cabin and looked in upon her there.

"May, darling," he said, as she faced round to give him the usual loving smile. "I thought I ought to have just a word with you before—well, before I roll up in my bunk for a bit of a snooze, as I suppose I must."

She went past him to close the cabin door, thus shutting out all the laughter and the chatter of the girls. Evidently the fun of laying for luncheon on board the Meteor was appealing to Betty & Co.

"Take a spell! I should think you just will, John dear!" his wife said, coming back to him, and putting loving hands about his broad shoulders. "What a time you have had!"

"I don't mind! I don't care a farthing about the loss of the jewels, or the loss of

sleep, or the loss of the whole boat, so long as we get out of this pickle safely!" was his spirited rejoinder. "Only——"

"Yes, dear?"

"The glass is falling—rapidly. I gave it another tap just then, and it went back again. That means—you know, though, and I'm sure I don't want to harp upon it."

He stood looking upon his wife rather glumly, and she, for the moment looked back glumly at him. Then she made a pretty grimace and shrugged.

"Oh, well, hope for the best, and maybe, John dear, I and the girls can help you prepare for the worst. Meantime, there they are, beating the gong for luncheon, so come along!"

"Ah, May darling!" he said, and kissed her before they went together, arms round waists, from the cabin. "This is how you have helped me to pull through in some of the trying times we've known in the past. You and I—Hallo, though!" He broke off in an amused fashion. "It must be some joke, this time, that is going on amongst the girls!"

It was!

The cloth had been laid; Miss Redgrave and Jeanne, between them, had begun to dart in and out, carrying in the nice hot luncheon from the chef's elaborately equipped quarters. And this was the moment when Paula Creel made her appearance, after using that wonderful "bwiliantine."

"Now, geals!" cried Paula, floating in upon them all as steadily as the motion of the yacht would allow. "How do you like my hair, now? Bai Jove! Eh, what? Wather bettah—what?"

It was Polly Linton who broke the sort of astounded silence.

"What—on earth—have you been doing—to your hair?" she said, as if robbed of breath by the shock.

"Aha, you may well inquire!" Paula beamed, rubbing her hands proudly. "How-eh, I may remark, geals, that the cweddit for my pwesent extremely gwatifying appeawance is due to Jeanne Estewelle."

"Allez!" cried Jeanne warningly, as she sailed in with some soup. "Allez-vous—get away!"

"But, Jeanne, pway listen!" chuckled Paula. "What was that special dwessing that you gave me for thg hair, bai Jove. That bwiliantine—yes, wather!"

"Vhat!" shrilled Jeanne, dumping down the soup tureen. "Brilliantine! No, no! That was not der brilliantine!"

"Pway—pway keep calm, Jeanne!" entreated Paula. "It was a certain pwepawation for the hair, bai Jove!"

"Non, non, non!" shrieked Jeanne, striking a dramatic attitude. "Ah, dolt! That bottle, it was for the salad, oui! And you have used him for the hair?"

"Er—yes, wuw-wather!" Paula said, turning pale; her chums simply shrieked with merriment. "I—I wegvet to say, I have!"

Jeanne cast her eyes up to the ceiling.

"Impossible that I endure this English mademoiselle another hour! Allez, allez-vous!" she raved, pushing poor, flabbergasted Paula before her. "Brilliantine—oh, and it was for the salad!"

By this time Mr. and Mrs. Trelawney were enjoying the joke of it all just as much as Betty, Polly and the rest, including Miss Redgrave. Nor did the merriment decrease when all had sat down to table, for Paula and her plate of soup created roars of laughter.

The wind was certainly beating up very quickly, and now the anchored yacht was feeling the heave and fall of the sea. Paula took a nice spoonful of soup, raised it towards her lips just as the ship lifted on a wave, and then—

Urrr! That was Paula's sensation, as the yacht sank in the trough of the sea. She lowered the spoon and waited; then tried again.

No use! Every time the aristocrat of the Fourth Form tried to get a mouthful of soup, the ship either gave a heave or else a sudden dip.

"What lovely soup!" chuckled Polly.

"Yes, wather!" said Paula, who had not tasted it yet. "Howevah—"

"And I was so hungry," said Betty, spooning away at her plate. "It is a treat, this soup!"

"Yes, wather! Howevah—"

Paula did not speak after that. There was such a continual heaving and rolling of the yacht, she simply sat at table with a sort of frozen look on her face, taking mouthfuls of bread. She was not at all upset, only she just could not get used to seeing the saloon at different angles every other second.

As for her chums, they made a good meal in spite of the vessel's unruly behaviour, and they left off teasing the swell girl and persuaded her to eat something more substantial than a roll.

"After all," said Polly, "you can get a roll any old time on board this ship, dear."

"Yes, wather, so it seems!" faltered Paula, as she again felt the rolling of the boat. "Bai Jove, we are in for a wough time?"

That question was answered in no joking manner when the whole party returned on deck.

Coming up the saloon steps, one after another, the girls met the full force of the rising wind as they emerged into the open. The mist had thinned away, and they could look round upon a good expanse of sea; but that was not a very inspiring sight.

For the waves were running in a nasty, lumpy fashion. Under the lowering sky the deep waters were slate-coloured, with flecks of white where the breeze flicked the crest from some leaping wave.

Betty had brought some broken bread up from the luncheon table to throw overboard for the gulls, but none came swooping down with the old familiar screeching cry of delight.

"They've flown inland," was her grave comment on the absence of the birds. "Sure sign of bad weather, isn't it?"

Madge Minden was going to answer when—thump!—came a sort of terrific blow against the vessel's side, and then—his!—a huge fountain of spray came aboard, deluging the decks.

CHAPTER 9.

At the Mercy of the Storm.

"O H, goodness!"
"Oh, I say!"
"Oh!"

Even now there was a good deal of laughter in those cries of dismay from Betty & Co., for all that bursting wave was such a new and alarming experience.

Luckily none were the worse for the spray that had rained down upon them, for Mrs. Trelawney had routed out mackintoshes and oilskins for them all. Only, from

close to where Betty and a few others were grouped, there came a dismal wail from Paula.

That luckless girl had sat down flop on the deck when the wave came on board, and now she was yelling:

"Help, help! Bai Jove, geals, have we stwuck a wock—or what?"

"Look out, here's another!" sang out Polly. "Get up, Paula—quick!"

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove, though——"

Wumph! That was another monster wave, bursting against the anchored vessel's side. Once again the ship shook from stern to stern, whilst a hissing mass of foam came on board.

Paula fairly howled with discomfort as she grovelled about on the slippery deck.

"Oh, dear! Oh, bai Jove! Geals, I've had enough of this, don't you know!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"How can you be so frivolous? Stop it—stop it!" wailed Paula, as she saw another foam-crested wave rolling on towards the ship. "Oh, my gwacious!"

"Look out!"

Burr-umph! Hiss—shee-ish! And there was poor Paula, squealing in terror.

"Help, help! I'm overboard! Geals——"

"Ha, ha, ha! Get up, duffer!" chuckled Polly, helping her bewildered chum to rise. "You'll have to get used to this before you see Morcove School again."

Leaning to the hard wind, Betty and the others staggered to the middle deck and took a look at one of the weather-glasses. It was fixed in a sheltered place under the bridge.

The barometer's needle was pointing to "Stormy."

And stormy indeed was the word for this dark, foam-flecked sea that lay around them, and the ever-darkening clouds speeding overhead.

John Trelawney came battling back from some tour of inspection round the great yacht.

"Everything is all right?" Madge suggested cheerfully. "Anchored like this, we need not mind how hard it blows, surely?"

"But supposing the boat drags her anchors!" Betty suddenly speculated, and by the way John Trelawney shot a glance at her the other girls knew at once that

their ex-captain had voiced the misgivings that were in his own mind.

Then, when the girls had looked at one another with rather graver expressions, Polly Linton spoke.

"Mr. Trelawney," she said, in a tone that showed that the madcap of Morcove could be serious enough when the need arose, "we would like you to tell us. In weather of this sort, when a yacht like this is anchored, what does the captain do?"

"Nothing that we can do—and that's the worst of it I am afraid," he said glumly. "We ought to be under steam, and we haven't a single stoker—not an engine-room hand or a deckhand of any sort!"

Another look was exchanged amongst the girls. Then it was Betty who spoke.

"We'll get up steam for you," she said quietly.

John Trelawney stared.

"What! You—you stoke fires?"

"Yes!" they chorused; and even Paula Creel, although she was holding on for dear life, as it were, to a steady rail, chimed in eagerly:

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove, anything, Mr. Trelawney, to get us out of this!"

"Well, I'm jiggered!" was all John Trelawney could say for a moment. "May, darling, listen here! These youngsters—they are offering to get up steam in case of emergency. Ever hear anything like it, May?"

"For sheer grit—no," was Mrs. Trelawney's applauding answer.

"Grit—there'll be plenty of grit of a coal-dusty kind before the girls have finished!" laughed her husband. "Oh, but they don't realise——"

"Show us—only show us!" clamoured Betty & Co., with such earnestness that the vessel's millionaire owner could no longer retain his scruples about turning them into stokers.

Now, with the wind rising to a fiercer pitch every moment, shrilling through the bare rigging and lashing the sea into still bigger waves, was it a time to hesitate?

He had owned to feeling uneasy because there was no steam in the boilers; at heart he was more than uneasy—was full of grave anxiety.

Supposing the vessel did drag her anchors when the storm was at its height? Then—

then nothing less than grim death would be staring them all in the face!

The uncontrolled yacht would simply drive ashore, to be smashed to pieces on that rocky coast, and those on board would be lucky souls indeed who got washed up on the beach with a spark of life still left in them.

"Come and look, anyhow," he said, keeping all these dismaying thoughts to himself. "Hold tight, girls, down the ladder!"

He went first, rattling down the vertical steel ladder with the agility of a practised hand, whilst after him came Betty and the rest. A couple of minutes, and they were all in the bowels of the great yacht, gazing at the couple of huge boilers.

John Trelawney stepped forward and clanged open one of the furnace doors.

"How like a Lancashire boiler!" Betty remarked quietly, and John Trelawney at once pricked up his ears.

"Hallo, what do you know about Lancashire boilers, Betty?"

"Oh, my father used to be in a cotton mill once," was the smiling answer, "and he had to do with the power-house. There were Lancashire boilers—just like those, only ever so much bigger!"

"And you—"

"Yes, I often spent an hour with him at his work," Betty added. "He used to explain things to me—how he got the draught right and how the steam-gauges worked, and—"

"By gum, then you're quite a little engineer, after all!" John Trelawney shouted in huge delight. "You know as much as I do—a jolly sight more, perhaps! Betty Barton—"

"It simply means that we take our orders from her!" cried Polly, giving Betty an affectionate clap on the shoulders.

"Yes, wather!"

Tess' uncle did not waste time in further talk.

"I must get up on deck; I've simply got to stick to my post up there," he said, laying hold of the ladder. "Do your best, then, girls, and—by gum, when we get out of this pickle, I'll have a medal struck to commemorate your work, you see if I don't!"

With that he was gone, racing up the

step-ladder into the open air, whilst Betty set the example by whipping off her water-proof hat and coat.

"It's going to be warm work, I know!" she said. "So here goes!"

And, laying the outdoor things aside, she took a look at each of the tube-like furnaces.

The fires were not out, of course, but they were extremely low. So, instead of putting on coal at once, she clamoured for "wood—wood!"

Before another minute passed, Polly and others had found some old wooden cases and bits of planking, and were smashing these up to feed into the furnaces. Choppers smashed and splintered the wood, and soon there was a cheerful crackling of burning wood from the boiler fires.

Clang, clang! went the iron doors as Betty closed them to make the blaze grow fiercer. Then clang, clang! again, as she threw the doors open, and the firelight shone upon their faces.

"Now, girls!"

It was a shout from Betty as she whipped about and caught up a shovel.

"Fire away!"

"Hurrah!" cheered Polly. "Out of the way, Paula darling!"

"But I want to help!" squealed the aristocrat of the Fourth Form. "This shovel is a treat!"

"What about your clothes, Paula?" they asked.

"Oh, bothah clothes!"

"And your hair?"

"Oh, bothah my hair! I'm going to be of use for once—yes, wather, bai Jove!"

And that, it seemed to all Paula's loving chums, was about the finest thing they had heard her say.

CHAPTER 10.

Adrift.

AN hour had passed. There was only a sort of twilight upon the sea, so black were the storm-clouds that were driving before the gale.

On the bridge of the yacht Meteor, his burly figure buttoned to the chin in glistening oilskins, stood John Trelawney, keeping an anxious watch upon the surrounding turmoil of foaming waves.

In the last few minutes the barometer had fallen another point when he tapped it, and so he knew that this was only the beginning of the gale—such a hurricane of wind as he was afterwards to learn had not been experienced before, even by the oldest inhabitant along the coast.

No other boats in sight! Nor could John Trelawney cherish the hope that some passing steamer would be seen before dark night shut down. He did not know this coast, and he did not pretend to know much about navigation, but common sense told him that all vessels would keep well out to sea whilst the storm was raging.

True it was deep water in which the Meteor had let down anchor some days ago, but the anchorage was off a dangerous coast—that rugged coast of North Devon, with its towering cliffs and its boulder-strewn shore below.

But there was at least one comforting thing for John Trelawney to see in this perilous hour. Time after time he looked up to watch the black smoke billowing from the yacht's funnels and blowing away in the wind.

That belching smoke—it told him how well Betty and her chums were sticking to their onerous task down there in the stokehold.

He had been to the top of the ladder more than once to shout down a word of praise and encouragement, and at one such time had suggested that they should divide into two "gangs," so that one section might rest whilst the other worked.

It had been another proof of the girls' shrewdness when he found that they had already put such a plan into operation. The first shift was now at work, and consisted of Betty, Polly, Paula and Madge.

As for Tess Trelawney, Trixie Hope, Dolly Delaney and Bluebell Courtney, they were supposed to be off duty. But were they?

Not likely!

After leaving the stokehold, before there had been time for them to get badly grimed, these girls had staggered through the pitching vessel to offer their services to Mrs. Trelawney and Miss Redgrave.

No doubt they had found plenty of useful work to do, but, whatever their tasks, they could not have been slaving harder than that first "shift" of schoolgirl stokers!

Again and again, down there in the hot

stokehold, were the steel shovels clattering upon the steel floor and delving into the pile of coal. Again and again there was the clang of a furnace door being opened and shut.

More coal, and still more! That was the watchword now that the boiler fires were in full blast!

Nor was it quite such a simple job as some people might imagine.

It was Betty herself who surprised her chums by explaining that it was not sufficient to dump the coal in "all anyhow." One had to try and spread the coal all over each raging furnace, so as to get the most heat out of the fire.

So there they were, the four of them, hard at it, and meaning to keep at it until their shift was finished!

Rattle, rattle—clang, clang! It was something to wield one of those mighty shovels in the bowels of a storm-tossed vessel, but they carried on pluckily, cheerfully.

Even Paula, famous for her languid disposition, her inclination to loll about in armchairs whenever she got the chance, even she was slogging away.

She was getting smothered with coal-dust. Pah, the stuff was in one's hair and down one's neck, and choking one's voice. Never mind!

"Another, Betty dear! Heah you are, then!" was Paula's breathless cry, as she pulled out another shovelful from the mound of fuel.

"Anywhere you like, Paula darling."

So Paula stepped for the twentieth time close to an open furnace door and shot the coals into it, whilst the lurid light shone upon her grimed face.

Betty now took another glance at the steam-gauge, and what she read there made her cast aside her own shovel and dart to the engine-room steps.

"Mr. Trelawney!" she halloed, when she had got to the top of the ladder.

"Hallo!" came back the answering hail from the bridge.

"Sixty pounds of steam already, by the gauge."

"By gum, capital! Bravo! I would come down, Betty, but—"

"Oh, we are all right, thanks! We shall stick at it!"

And then Betty nipped down the ladder to rejoin her chums.

"Pouf!" said Polly, blowing coaldust from her lips. It was a moment when the furnaces were stoked sufficiently, and so a pause in the labour could be enjoyed.

"Spell-oh, eh?"

"Yes, wather! Anywhoah to sit down, geals? Appawcently not!" Paula said, looking round.

"They don't provide armchairs in the stokehold," chuckled Betty. "I can draw you off some warm water to wash in, though, if you like."

"I—I pvesume I am wather gwimy!" grinned Paula.

"Gwimy! Ha, ha, ha!" And they all exploded with laughter.

"You look just like one of those stokers who frightened you so the first hour we were on board!" chuckled Polly. "And your hair—"

"Oh, bothah my hair! Howevah—"

However, Paula could not resist the temptation to spend this quiet moment in looking at herself. Out came her pocket-mirror and comb, and then—

"Oh, help!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My gwacious!" gasped Paula, gazing at herself in horror. "Am I weally like that? I'm all stweaked with black! I—Gweat goodness, geals, I'll nevah get myself clean again!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Oh, how I would love Jeanne to see you!" pealed Polly.

As it chanced, at that very moment Jeanne came to the top of the ladder to call down a message from Mrs. Trelawney. "Are you there, you?" she demanded.

"Oui, oui!" sang out Polly gaily. "What's the trouble?"

Jeanne shouted something, but her voice was almost lost in the hurly-burly of the storm. All that Betty & Co. could make out was that some tea had been made.

"Tea, bai Jove! Oh, wather!"

"Ici, ici—here, here!" called Jeanne, and so Polly nipped up the ladder to find Jeanne waiting to hand her a steaming jug of browed tea and some metal mugs.

"Oh, I say! Thanks! Thirsty work, stoking! How goes it, Jeanne?"

But that excitable girl did not stay to answer. Looking terrified out of her life by the sight of Polly's sweep's face, as she rushed away, gasping to herself.

The four were still standing drinking the refreshing tea, when—

Bang—thump! went a sudden tremendous noise all through the ship.

Paula, in fact, sat down flop once more, this time on the stokehold floor, with a mug clattering about her feet.

"Help! My gwacious! Has the boiler burst—or what?" she squealed. "Betty deah, Madge, Polly—help!"

"Whatever was that?" Betty gasped, looking anything but amused. "Has something drifted into us—or what?"

She dashed to the ladder as she spoke, and raced up the steel rungs.

Directly her head and shoulders were above deck, so that she could look around, some alarming change in the yacht's condition impressed itself upon her.

The vessel seemed to be more broadside on to the great waves, and so it was rolling about with greater violence than ever.

Betty saw Tess, Trixie, and the two other girls struggling out to the open deck, as if they, too, had been suddenly alarmed.

"What's wrong? What's happened, then?" they began to cry excitedly.

Then from the bridge John Trelawney shouted down to them all hoarsely:

"We've lost one anchor and the other has dragged! Did you feel the shock?"

"Yes, yes—"

"Back to the stokehold, then!" he shouted imploringly. "We must either steam out against the gale, or we shall drift in and go to pieces on a lee shore!"

CHAPTER 11.

Life or Death Now.

BETTY simply tore down the ladder, crying the warning to her chums in the stokehold.

"All the steam we can raise—at once!" was her panted order to her gaping chums. "We are adrift!"

Adrift! In a gale of this sort, and with that rocky shore only three miles off!

No need for Betty to say more. Her chums understood the peril, and how they set those furnace fires roaring now, whilst they watched the steam-gauge at every other moment.

Meanwhile, up on deck, John Trelawney was putting into action the desperate plan which he had resolved to put in hand should such an emergency as this arrive.

"May," he said quickly to his wife, "you

must carry on here now, with Miss Redgrave and the girls. As for me, I must get below and do my best to keep the engines at it steadily!"

The howling gale and the surge of the darkened sea seemed to overwhelm his shouted words, and he resorted to expressive gestures.

In this desperate fashion, rather than by talk, he gave his companions to understand what their task must be. Up here on the navigation bridge they must try to keep the Meteor's bows facing the gale from the west. If she remained broadside on to the gigantic waves disaster was inevitable.

So he left them to do their best and scrambled below, to hear the shovels clattering industriously in the stokehold.

The girl-stokers had just a glimpse of him as he darted amongst them to look at the steam-gauge. Then he was gone, and all at once they felt a tremor run through the tossing vessel, and they knew that he had set the beautiful engines going.

"Hurrah!"

It was no flippant cheer, but one of wild triumph. The yacht's propeller was at work at last—not a moment too soon, either.

For in the last minute or so it had been almost impossible for the girl stokers to keep their balance, such was the tremendous rolling of the ship from side to side.

Torn from her anchorage, she was at the mercy of wind and waves. Unless she could be brought round to ride the gale more or less under control, to-morrow's daylight would show a stately vessel all smashed to pieces on the rocks below Morcove's headland, and not one soul left alive to tell the tale.

But, oh, joy! The engines had been started, and surely that meant some chance of handling the great vessel.

With that hopeful thought running in their minds, the girls in the stokehold fed those furnace fires with unflagging energy, whilst up there on the bridge were their chums with Miss Redgrave and Tess Trelawney.

Their faces lashed with flying spume, Tess and her companions were doing their best, too, hanging on to the wheel, all four together sometimes, to give it a needed turn.

And so slowly the vessel's wave-thrashed bows came round to face the gale, whilst fiercer than ever raged the furnace fires

below, sending the needle of the steam-gauge creeping up.

John Trelawney rushed round to set the feed-pumps going for the boilers, then ran up to give an eye as to how the yacht was faring now.

"Hang on, girls—keep her so!" was his applauding shout, and then, as he came running down a steel ladder once again: "More steam, girls! By gum, but what a splendid lot you are!"

At that moment, from almost every window of Morcove School that looked out upon the sea, there were scholars and mistresses watching the gale-ridden waters with excited eyes.

It was but a short distance—they could see, for the flying spray made a mist of its own. In her mind's eye, however, each watcher could picture a stately, palatial yacht hard put to it to weather the gale that was growing every minute fiercer.

"How sorry I am that the fog early this morning must have prevented Mr. Trelawney from bringing back the girls!" muttered Miss Somerfield, as she stood watching with some of the scholars about her. "Now, of course, we cannot hope to hear any news of them, let alone see them, until this storm is past."

"Well, they will be quite all right, that is certain," murmured Ethel Courtway, the school's head girl. "It is an ocean-going yacht."

"And they have a fine crew on board, of course," said someone else.

"Oh, yes, I am sure there is no need to worry," Miss Somerfield rejoined, although her looks hardly tallied with her words. "They have the wireless, too, so that even if they should need help, they can easily call it up."

"Poor Betty, though, and all her chums!" said Ethel feelingly. "Think of Paula Creel, trying to keep her hair to rights all this time!"

So they talked on, whilst they still watched the storm-ridden sea that looked so black and swollen under the lowering sky.

By and by, when it seemed as if van daylight was already giving place to the black darkness of a stormy night, Miss Somerfield phoned through to Barncombe town and asked had there been any news

of vessels in trouble—any "wireless" from the yacht Meteor?

No, nothing.

"Then that shows," she said consolingly to herself as she rang off, "the yacht is quite all right, and all on board are safe and well, so I really must not worry."

But with the fall of night, the wind thundered and boomed louder than ever about the great schoolhouse on the headland, and there came the hiss of rain against many a window-pane, whilst always from the shore below there could be heard the roar, roar of breakers. And many were the hearts that really ached with anxiety there in the old school, which Betty & Co. were perhaps fated, indeed, never to see again!

CHAPTER 12.

The Woman on the Seashore.

THE stormy night had worn away. Another day had dawned, and how was it now with all aboard the Meteor?

That was what every inmate of Morcov School was eager to know.

Morning had come, but it had not brought news of any sort.

From the headmistress downwards, all were owing to having lain awake half the night, listening to the howling gale.

They were Fourth Form girls who had had the bad luck to get caught on board the Meteor by such a violent storm, and so the Fourth Form felt particularly concerned.

And so, too, it behoved Audrey Blain, as captain of that Form, to seem quite as sorry for Betty & Co. as anybody was, although her real feeling was one of envy.

Audrey could not believe that the storm-bound schoolgirls had come to any harm. The Meteor was known to be a powerful ocean-going yacht that must have weathered many a big gale in its time, and it was ably manned and fitted with wireless.

What Audrey believed was that Betty and the rest would return to school safe and sound, after some very thrilling experiences, which meant that, once again, Betty & Co. would be the heroines of the hour!

And this at a time when there was a distinct feeling in the school that Audrey, who had only been a stop-gap captain, should yield up that proud position to Betty.

In the privacy of her study, Audrey was moodily saying to herself that it was a "sickening business." But in front of her schoolfellows she took care to proclaim nothing but concern for the absent girls' welfare.

Classes were dismissed at break, for the simple reason that it was impossible to resume work until something was known about the yacht.

By that time the storm-clouds had broken up, and were letting through some gleams of watery sunshine, and if the yacht had been at its anchorage it could have been seen from twenty different windows of the school. But the whole vast expanse of heaving waters was scanned by many an anxious eye, and not a vessel could be seen.

On went the girls' outdoor things, and away they hurried down to the shore. For permission had been given them to scout round and see if anything had come in with the roaring tide that would be evidence of the yacht having been in bad straits.

Ethel Courtway was nominally in charge. Miss Massingham, the Fifth Form mistress, had put on her things to go with the girls, but she decided to do a more useful thing in the end. The gale had upset all telephonic communication between the school and Barncombe town, and so she cycled into Barncombe to glean the latest news.

Down there on the rugged seashore, where the tide had risen so high in the night as to flood some of the numerous caves in the great cliffs, the raging sea was still an impressive sight.

Hard after each other rolled in the mountainous breakers, changing to boiling surf as they boomed and swirled among the rocks that strewed the dangerous shore.

Here and there the girls, as they dispersed along the beach, came upon bits of flotsam, but nothing had been washed up, apparently, that belonged to the Meteor or any other yacht. What the girls found was mostly deck cargo that had been washed overboard from trading vessels.

Before Audrey had been five minutes down there on the shore with the other

girls, she had drifted apart from them. With the better element in the Form she was not in high favour just at present. They had come to the conclusion that her captaincy was not for the good of the Form, but was simply giving her the chance to queen it over them all.

- As for her toadies, she often had times when she felt in an aloof mood. Grace Garfield, Ella Elgood, and girls like them, to put it in a nutshell, they rather palled upon her now and then.

So this morning she was sauntering on along the storm-washed shore, picking her way amongst the mounds of fresh and glistening seaweed, and had quite lost touch with her schoolfellows, when a strange thing happened.

With a sudden start she noticed a strange figure moving quickly amongst the great boulders of rock, darting away as if the person were afraid to be seen by Audrey.

It was the way in which this stranger—a woman—dodged out of sight that set Audrey really wondering who she could be. Instead of turning back, as the girl had meant to do, Audrey sauntered on, pretending not to be the least bit curious. She did not glimpse the woman again—there were such opportunities for hiding amongst the great rocks—but all at once the girl had a distinct feeling that she in turn was being watched.

That made her drift on with apparent aimlessness for another hundred yards or more. Then, getting round to the other side of a jutting wall of cliff, she knew that it was physically impossible for her to be still under observation.

"Now then!" she thought to herself, with the natural cunning that was hers. "It is my turn to spy around! I can't think why a Morcove scholar should throw anybody into a panic, as the sight of me threw that woman. But perhaps she has found something washed up by the tide that she doesn't want anybody to know about."

That seemed the plausible explanation of the woman's furtive conduct. As Audrey knew, during a gale valuable material very often was washed ashore, and by rights it should be handed over as salvage to Government officials. But local people often keep a find dark, taking the view that findings are keepings. Only, was this a local woman?

Holding close to the face of the cliff, Audrey picked her way cautiously to its outer extremity, and then peered round the corner, as it were.

Next second her heart was beating fast.

Strange, but just where the woman had been skulking around there was one of those old caves which were such a feature of this part of the coast. And there, at the mouth of the great cavern, the woman could be seen—talking with a man!

What thrilled Audrey, however, was this: Whilst the woman was talking softly to the man, and making gestures which showed that Audrey herself was the topic, the strong wind swooped amongst the rocks, and some eddy lifted the man's hat from his head. He was a bearded man, and as he clapped a hand to his head to save his hat from being whipped away, his beard fell off!

Yes, with her own eyes Audrey had seen the thing happen. For just a second or so the false beard was off the man's face, and he was hurriedly refixing it.

"A false beard—part of a disguise—which means that they are hiding, the pair of them!" Audrey reasoned instantly. "A man and wife, living a secret life in that cave!"

She was so excited, she knew she would have to take time to steady up before going by the way she had come, for most likely they would be on the watch for her, expecting her return.

They went into the cave without having seen her peering round the cliff, but it was certain that they would remain near the cavern's entrance—a sinister couple, lurking there in the deep gloom, not to be seen by her, but able to see her easily!

Audrey went a little way along the shore on this side of the jutting cliff, then came sauntering back in a very airy way, winding amongst the boulders well away from the cliff.

She hummed aloud as she was going by the cavern mouth, and peered about as if looking for shells or other little finds after the storm.

There were no eyes better than Audrey's, however, for looking out of their corners, and she did not quit that lonely bit of shore without many a stealthy glance in quest of the man and woman.

Not another glimpse did she get of them.

and she had no intention of loitering around until they showed themselves. Audrey knew a game worth two of that!

Her mind was already made up. It was most unlikely that classes would be resumed to-day. So after dinner she could come out again alone, not to go along the shore to that cavern, but to watch from the top of the cliff.

There was some mystery, and Audrey meant to keep it to herself. She would have done better, however—far better—to report the matter to Miss Somerfield, or at least take other girls into her confidence. For Audrey, had she known it, was to have dangerous people to deal with in the persons of that man with the false beard and his wife.

She was to find out—when it was too late, perhaps—that the man was no other than Luke Pallant, and that in him was the master mind that had organised the whole great coup on board the yacht Meteor; that it was Luke Pallant who had planned the whole daring scheme for looting twenty thousand pounds' worth of jewels from the yacht's safe!

CHAPTER 13.

The Master Mind.

"SHE'S gone, Luke!"

"Ay!"

The words passed between the man with the false beard and his tall, powerful-looking wife, a couple of minutes after Audrey Blain had gone past the cavern mouth to rejoin her school-fellows.

"Gone, and thank goodness for that, Meg!" the husband muttered, as he motioned his wife to go with him further into the cavern. It was one that the storm had invaded during the night, but the way in which the floor of the cavern sloped upwards had prevented the swirling waters from encroaching very far.

After twenty or thirty paces, the couple were on dry rock. They were also in pitch darkness, for the tunnel had a twist in it that served to cut off the daylight. Pallant drew a torch from his overcoat pocket and switched it on.

"It's a thing we didn't take into account—the chance of all those schoolgirls

being let loose to scamper about the sea-shore," he resumed in a disquieted way.

"Meg, you know what I think? You and I, and the stuff we have been left to guard, are in the wrong hiding-place altogether."

"Can we change now?" she asked him uneasily. "If it's not to be that inner cave opening out from this one, Luke, then where shall it be?"

He did not answer, but, with the electric ray to guide him, proceeded along the winding tunnel for another twenty paces, then suddenly stopped, flashing the light upon the left-hand wall.

There was a sort of fissure there, and his next action proved that this was the way to that inner cave which his wife had referred to. Taking off his great-coat, Luke Pallant squeezed between the cleft in the rocky wall, and his wife followed him through. The couple were singularly tall and powerfully built, but neither of them were stout, or getting through the narrow opening would have been an impossibility.

"She saw you, you think?" Pallant now resumed. "The schoolgirl, I mean. Well, no harm in that, perhaps, though you did just the wrong thing, Meg, to get panicky."

"I—I sort of lost my nerve for the moment," she owned. "That girl was the first person I had set eyes upon since—since —"

"Ay, we've had a lonely enough time of it since we settled here," he broke in. "I was going to say, lucky thing she didn't see me when my hat blew off. This beard of mine —"

He paused to feel it now.

"I thought it such a good fit, so life-like."

"So 'tis, Luke, and that was just an accident that won't occur again," his wife soothed him. "To look at you, I can hardly believe that you are my own husband."

His grim face relaxed a little then.

"Well, I was flattering myself that I could walk down Barncombe High Street, and even if the police were on the look-out for me and all the rest of the crew, they'd never give me a second glance."

The woman's straying glance told the direction in which her thoughts were turning.

"What a haul it was!" she whispered in an awed tone, looking down at a certain

spert in the sandy floor of this inner cavern, as if treasure were buried there. "She had some diamonds, Mrs. Trelawney had!"

Once again there was an assenting "Ay" from Luke Pallant.

"Twenty thousand pounds' worth," he breathed. "And mind you, Meg, I know the way to get the real value for them when the time comes to realise the things for cash. A few of them who were in the coup with us, they grumbled a bit, didn't they, at having to leave everything to me. They would soon have been in Queer Street if they had split up the stuff right away."

"Well, well, they trusted you in the end, Luke."

"Oh, ay; I got them to trust me," he said, with a leer. "And I suppose my own wife is kind enough to fancy that I shall prove worthy of their trust—eh?"

The leer became a broad grin, which conveyed some startling meaning to Mrs. Pallant. Her dark brow went up.

"Why, then," she exclaimed excitedly, "isn't it to be what was agreed, Luke? Share and share alike?"

"Share and share alike—no fear!" he broke in, with a flash of the eye that told what sort of man he was. "I planned the coup. Some of them would never have been in it at all, only they got wind from others and wanted to share. And a fine lot of help they were when the time came! Meg—"

He dropped his voice to an impressive whisper.

"It would have been a better business if there had been fewer in it. It is going to be a dashed sight better business for you and me if we just stick to the lot—ay, the whole lot of it!"

"And dodge the others, Luke? Oh, but—"

"Let 'em whistle for their shares—eh?" Meg Pallant laid a hand upon his sleeve.

"Luke, dearie, don't be rash! Think how mad the others will be if you play fast and loose. They'll never rest until they've settled scores. There'll be some knives out—"

"Tush! I know them, what they are in their different ways," he shrugged. "The point is that they don't quite know what I am. If they knew that Luke Pallant is only an alias for New York's master

criminal, they'd feel a bit foolish. Ha, ha, ha!"

This way and that Luke Pallant sent the sand flying as he dug with his hands, and then suddenly he ceased his breathless labour and fished out a jewel-case which he had just uncovered.

"Here, come here, Meg!" he said, starting to his feet and throwing the lid of the case open. "See how you look, wearing some of Mrs. Millionaire Trelawney's jewels! What is this particular lot—emeralds, eh? My word—"

"Oh, Luke, don't! Be careful!" the woman quavered nervously, and yet her eyes glistened covetously as he decked her with the jewels just in play. It was evident that she yearned to go on wearing them.

"Twenty thousand pounds' worth! And, listen to my plan, Meg," he chuckled softly, starting to take back the jewels. "To-night, you and I are going to find a different hiding-place from this. Where, you say? Meg, there's wild, loneliness moorland country back of the shore and the cliffs. We'll get the stuff away from here, hide it on the moor, mark the spot, and then—"

"To-night, Luke?"

"Ay. As soon as we can venture out after nightfall. Then we'll disguise ourselves altogether differently, so that the others won't know us any more than the police will. And so we'll have, not a paltry share of the loot, Meg, my girl, but every single cent's worth!"

She was going to make some applauding remark, feeling what a clever fellow he was to mean to cheat the others out of their shares, when her lips suddenly fell apart in a startled:

"Hush! Listen!"

But he would not stand still. The instant he heard what she had heard—an outcry of excited voices from the open air—he plunged that jewel-case back into the hole from which it had been taken and swept the sand over it again.

Then he trod towards the inlet and listened. Whether it was that he could not hear well enough, or did not mean to be caught in the inner cave, if he was to be caught at all, there is no saying. But he squeezed through into the outer cavern, and his wife followed him.

After that they both stood quite still, listening.

"Run—run and tell the rest!" some girl on the seashore was crying out in the wildest state of excitement. "Fetch Ethel Courtway! Run up to the school, some of you! Tell everybody we have found a message—a message in a bottle!"

Luke Pallant echoed those last words hoarsely under his breath.

"A message in a bottle! I never thought of that! Meg—"

"It may not be a message from the Meteor," she struck in nervously. But her attempt to soothe the man, who looked mad with rage, was baffled by what now flew from lip to lip out there on the storm-washed seashore.

"It's from Betty and the others, on board the Meteor—"

"A message sealed up in a bottle that has floated ashore in the night."

"And it says—"

"Read it—read it!" This was from a number of girls who must have come dashing up at top speed. "Let us see, Norah!"

To the listeners in the cave one scholar's name meant no more than another's, but it was, in fact, Norah Nugent, of the Fourth Form, who had found the bottle and broken it open.

"Here—look!" she cried, evidently refusing to part with the sensational missive. "It says the crew have deserted after looting the yacht's safe. It says—"

"S.O.S.—S.O.S.!" cried half a dozen girls, as their eager gaze picked out these significant letters in the message. "Oh, come on!"

And away they rushed, all of them, making Luke Pallant and his wife lose all dread of the girls entering the cave by chance.

Even so, the pair of wrongdoers were far from feeling at ease. In the gloom of that outer cavern they stood eyeing each other in absolute dismay.

"That message!" Pallant said huskily at last. "It will be all over the place in no time! Wireless could hardly work faster than these girls' tongues, confound them!"

"And there was that girl who saw me," his wife rejoined, beating her hands together desperately. "The one just now, before the bottle was found!"

"Yes. Confound her worst of all!" he fumed, biting a thumb-nail. "If anything you did made her suspicious, then this news her pals have got will set her talking perhaps. They'll guess that 'crew' in the message means the stewardess and all—every paid hand on the boat!"

He fished his watch from his pocket and made a face as he saw the time.

"Twelve noon! If it were twelve midnight," he muttered sullenly, "there might be a chance for us. That's what we want now, Meg—darkness, and the chance to get away from this place, where you, at any rate, have been seen. I begin to feel," he finished, looking about him savagely, "like a rat in a trap!"

CHAPTER 14.

Audrey Wants Her Share.

AND like rats in a trap would man and wife have been caught before another hour was out, no doubt, if it had been any other girl but Audrey Blain who had had that glimpse of the couple.

She was talking with Ethel Courtway when several of the girls came rushing up with the thrilling news of Norah Nugent's find. Like Ethel, it took Audrey a moment or two to grasp the full import of the message found in the bottle, but as soon as she had that one fact fixed in her brain—the fact that all the paid hands had deserted the ship after committing a daring robbery—she knew that only half an hour ago she had seen two of "the rascally fugitives."

All, it seemed to Audrey, was explained. The thieves had got ashore, and whilst some made off inland, others were remaining in hiding along the shore. And why?

For what other reason was it likely to be except that those in hiding were those who had to guard the loot?

Audrey did feel the same impulse that any other girl in her position must have felt—a desire to burst out with the news that she herself had seen two of the fugitives. It would be a feather in one's own cap, that was certain, to be able to give information that would lead to the arrest of the culprits. And yet—she kept silent!

So, although it was soon known all over the school that the message had been found, not a word came from Audrey about the suspicious couple. At dinner it was announced that there would be no classes that afternoon, the general anxiety about the Meteor being greater than ever. The girls talked about going down to the shore again, but this did not worry Audrey in the least.

"The tide will be up, so none of them can get along to that part of the shore where I saw the couple," she told herself comfortingly. "It is a question whether the man and woman themselves are not imprisoned in the cave during high tide."

That question she decided to settle in an adventurous way. Mingling with the other girls as they trooped away from the school gates, she presently gave them all the slip, and then struck off alone along the top of the cliffs.

A few other girls were promenading the cliffs this afternoon, but Audrey made a detour, and got well in advance of them. Clumps of gorse gave her plenty of cover, and she reached the desired spot without being seen.

Dropping on all fours, she crept warily to the very edge of the cliff and peered over.

Immediately below her, at a dizzy depth of two hundred feet, was the cavern mouth. She could not see it, but she could locate the spot by recognising the shape of various rocks that were now partly submerged by the high tide.

Yes, the tide was up, and the surf was seething in and out of the cave itself, and Audrey wondered how her suspects felt, bottled up for the time being by the waters.

And then, suddenly she got a shock.

Whilst she was still lying prone and still at the cliff's edge, with bushes to hide her from any passers-by, she twisted round to peer through the low-growing branches. She was thinking of getting up to walk away, but wanted to be sure that there was no one to see her. And there was someone! There were two people—her suspects, up here on the cliff-top!

That was Audrey's shock—to discover that the very couple whom she had been thinking of as cooped up in the cave down there, instead up here!

Audrey "froze"—kept as still and as invisible as a frightened rabbit when the farmer is not five paces off with his gun. By peering along under the bushes she could just keep her excited gaze upon the man and the woman. They must have left the cave before the tide rose, and come up the shore by one of thecombe pathways. But what for?

Audrey wondered if they were in need of food, and had got to venture into the town to buy some. If so, they would be gone several hours, getting back to the cave long after the tide had ebbed away from the foot of the cliffs.

Another minute, however, and the watchful girl was certain that they had not come in quest of food. They were not striking away across the rolling moors in a direction that would take them to the town. It seemed as if they had done with the cave for the present, and were actually seeking some fresh hiding-place on the wild moorland.

They dodged off out of sight, and presently Audrey got to her feet and moved on. The ground dropped away before her, for she was working down into acombe that would bring her to the seashore. She was very pale and shaky with excitement, for there had come to her such a tempting thought as kept her in a tremble.

Why not wait about on the seashore until the tide fell, and then enter the cave? The treasure was there for a certainty. All the valuables stolen from the yacht's safe—priceless jewels bought by a millionaire for his wife—they were to be found in what had become a very robbers' cave, like the one in Ali Baba!

Audrey's was not a dishonest disposition. But the thought of being able to find those hidden jewels had overwhelmed her. Wads of stolen notes would not have been the magnet that jewels were. Audrey, who loved finery and jewellery, yearned to get hold of just one of those cases of jewellery and keep it!

Why not? a tempting voice within her was whispering. Just one of the cases—only one! They were jewels that she, for all she was the daughter of such wealthy people, would never have given to her. Why not, then, keep one set of trinkets as a self-bestowed reward for finding all the rest?

So the current of her thoughts ran on, whilst she zig-zagged down through the combe and came out on to the shore.

The tide was falling, and already she could go a little way towards the cave. Having got as far as possible for the present, she waited, gazing with trembling eagerness, towards that projection of cliff that screened the cave from her view.

She looked at her watch. Only half-past two, so she could afford to wait. Nor need she be uneasy about the man and the woman. They would not return before nightfall, it was certain. Most likely they were going to leave the jewels safely hidden until a week or so had passed, and the hue-and-cry had died down.

She knew what to look for—a dry, likely spot where the loot had been buried in the easily-worked sand. So she hastened over that part of the floor that had been washed by the high tide, the light failing her more and more as she followed the snaking of the rocky passage.

At last she was almost in groping darkness—baffled. Oh, why had she started out without her little silver torch? If only she had had that with her now, its brilliant ray would soon show her where to dig with her hands. The place must be full of tell-tale footprints. But there it was—without a light she was baffled!

Fuming with disappointment, she turned about and went sulkily towards the cave entrance, and then all at once she quickened her steps. The sulky frown vanished. Reaching the open air, she simply sped off along the shore to reach the path through the combe, and all the time her eyes were aflame with determination.

Breathless enough she was by the time she got to the school, and her exhausted state might have caused surprise, only every other girl was in a wrought-up condition—why, Audrey had explained to her as she was going up to her study to get the torch.

"Hallo, Audrey!" cried Ella Elgood, meeting her in the passage. "Have you heard—?"

"No—what?" Audrey asked.

"Miss Massingham has just come back from Barncombe with extraordinary news," Ella rushed on. "About one o'clock a wireless message was picked up from a steamer.

She reported she had taken the Meteor in tow, because the crew had deserted the yacht, and it was only being kept from being wrecked by—"

"Not by the girls?" cried Audrey.

"Yes. They have had a fearful time, and all Britain will be talking about them for days to come! They were stoking the ship all through the storm, and helping with the steering, too! Betty, Paula, Madge, Polly—"

"They are all safe, anyhow?" Audrey asked impatiently. She wanted to get away.

"Oh, yes! They are being landed, along with Mr. and Mrs. Trelawney, and the yacht has been manned and is being brought into port. There's some talk of the girls reaching the school this evening by car."

"I see."

"More of the heroine business, eh?" put in Grace Garfield, coming up to join in the talk. "I'm afraid you can't stick to the captaincy now, Audrey, worse luck!"

"Bother the captaincy! Betty can have it back when she wants it," Audrey said.

Then she passed on to her study, found the torch, and made her way unnoticed out of the school without a minute's delay.

She was going back to the cave!

CHAPTER 15.

Survivors All.

"A ND to think," cried Polly Linton, "that in an hour or two we'll be safe back at school!"

"It's wonderful!" agreed Betty Barton heartily.

"Bai Jove, goals, yes, wather! Down-wight wemarkable!" came Paula Creel's amiable drawl. "After all our thlwing expwieneces, we have scwaped through, after all!"

Madge Minden, the quiet girl of the party, remarked softly:

"How anxious Miss Somerfield and the whole school must have been!"

"Never mind," said Tess Trelawney gaily, "they know now that we are all right. My Uncle John has sent a telegram to say that we were landed safely."

Three other girls who belonged to the party of scholars did not join in the talk.

If they had done so, their remarks would have been in cordial agreement with the others. The three in question were silent, simply because they chanced to be watching the rough sea from the old-fashioned bow-window of this dingy dining-room in the Drake Hotel, Seacove.

Paula Creel sought an easy-chair for herself, and flopped into it with a sigh of relief. The others drifted towards the window and gazed out.

"Until we got caught in the gale on board your Uncle John's yacht," Betty said to Tess, "I would have called that a rough sea. But after what we went through yesterday afternoon until this morning, when that steamer took us in tow—"

"And, my word, wasn't I thankful when that steamer did come to the rescue!" struck in Polly Linton. "I don't think I could have stood another hour on the rolling deep!"

"That was the twouble—the wolling!" came from the depths of Paula's easy-chair. "Nevah, nevah, geals, shall I forget how the Meteor wolloed about when she got out of control, bai Jove!"

"I say," cried Dolly Delane, who had remained standing at the window, "the yard down there seems to be filling up with heaps of people, so I wonder if they have come to give us a send off?"

"Gracious, let's hope not!" grimaced Madge.

"Aha!" chuckled Polly. "The penalty of fame, you see. I quite expect we shall all be interviewed by reporters for the papers. Is your hair quite straight, Paula darling, in case they want to take your photograph?"

"My hair, bai Jove—it's wuined!" sighed Paula. "My photogwaph, geals, will not be available for the public pweess—no, bai Jove! Apart from the fact that I look a weck, I pwefer to wemain in modest wetirement!"

"Bravo, Paula! My feeling exactly!" applauded Betty, laughing.

As a matter of fact, every one of these girls was extremely averse from being made a fuss of on account of their thrilling exploits.

"The newspapers," said Tess, "had much better publish photographs of those wretches, the crew of the Meteor, who deserted the ship after looting my Aunt

May's safe. How I hope they are all laid by the heels, from the ringleader downwards, men and women together!"

"Yes, wather! And let us twust," said Paula, "that all the stolen jewellery is wecovered. Your uncle and aunt are millionaires, we know, Tess deah. Howevah —"

"It must rile even a millionaire and his wife to lose twenty thousand pounds worth of jewellery," put in Dolly. "Hallo, look! Two cars have turned into the yard!"

"Hooray!" Polly did a caper. "They are for us, so now we shan't be long! What beauties!"

"They ought to do the run along the coast road to Morcove in an hour and a half, easy," conjectured Betty.

"So, out of that chair, Paula darling!" Polly, the madcap of Morcove School, rattled on, making a playful skirmish round her languid chum. "Up, ye lubbers! With a yo, ho, ho, and a bottle of rum!"

"Dwop it!" appealed Paula shrilly. "We have had enough of that wefwain, Polly darling. Now that we are done with the wolling deep, pway wefwain from all wefawence to wum and gwog. We are not sailors—"

"Some of us were stokers, anyhow, during the gale," put in Betty, with a grin. "Ha, ha, ha! Shall I ever forget Paula's pretty face, after she had been down in stokehold for three hours on end, shovelling coal!"

"Shame to tease our Paula!" laughed Madge. "She was jolly brickish, anyhow. You are not so black as you are painted, Paula, dear!"

"Not even when you are black with coal-dust—no," agreed Betty, going across to the languid one to give her a loving pat.

At this moment the dining-room door opened, and three persons came into the room. One was a gentleman—no other than John Trelawney, the American millionaire, on whose yacht the girls had been through such a hair-raising time. The two others were Mr. Trelawney's handsome young wife, May Trelawney, and Miss Redgrave, of Morcove School.

When the girls had been invited to spend a whole day and night on board the Meteor, whilst it was anchored off Morcove, Miss Redgrave had been deputed to go with them; so she also had lived

through all the deadly perils that had befallen Betty & Co.

"Well, young ladies," John Trelawney broke out, in his genial way, "the cars are at the door, and so, if you are quite ready, we will be off!"

"Yes, wather——"

"Hooray!" Polly cheered again. "With a yo, ho ho, and a——"

"Dwop it, Polly deah! How fwivolous you are!" squealed Paula, dodging aside to escape having her hair pulled. "When I have been to such twouble to make myself look at least pwsentable!"

Tess' Aunt May glanced smilingly from one to the other of the girls.

"I think you all look splendid!" she declared. "And, oh, how glad I am that there will be no one on the sick list when you get back to the school! Come along, then!"

And out they went, accordingly, into the cobbled yard of the hotel, to take their seats in the hired cars.

They just filled the two motors nicely. The first took Mr. Trelawney, and his niece, Tess, together with Miss Redgrave, Dolly and Bluebell. In the second, Mrs. Trelawney squeezed herself in amongst Betty, Polly, Madge and Trixie.

The hotel yard was thronged, for this little coast town of Seacove had been greatly excited when the "survivors," as they might be called, were set ashore by a steamer's lifeboat a few hours ago. Swarms of very young children set up a great deal of excited shouting whilst Betty & Co. were getting into the cars, but the grown-up Seacovians seemed to be too overawed to make any demonstration.

Jerseyed men from the harbour, men and women from shop and parlour—they all stood around, gaping aduringly. Could it be true? Was it really possible that these girls—youngsters not yet done with school—had actually turned to, and manned the Meteor during the gale, because every paid hand on board had deserted it?

That it was true could never be questioned seriously. All on board the steamer that had come to the Meteor's aid had declared that at the time of the rescue the fine ocean-going yacht had been under steam, holding her own against the gale, and all thanks to the heroic conduct of these girls!

Just as Paula and some of her chums were getting into the second car, a man with a camera came bustling up, with an ingratiating smile.

"Er—excuse me!" he said, doffing his hat to them all. "Would you mind letting me have a snapshot of you all for the Daily——"

"Gweat goodness, no!" gasped Paula, turning pale with fright. "Heah, help, geah! As if I'm going to be photographed, looking such a week!"

And she made a dart into the car, and flopped down as if on the verge of a swoon. She did not realise that the man had taken his chance, and clicked off a plate whilst she was in flight! Nor did Betty, Madge Polly and Trixie, as they also scattered, dream that they might figure in tomorrow's Daily whatever-it-was, in various stages of skedaddling!

The car doors were slammed shut, and then—with a rush, the crowd that had been so shy up till now let loose its feelings.

Some of those harbour men—lusty toilers, all of them—gave the first "Hurroooh!" The women joined in with shriller plaudits, whilst a great round of handclapping began, and rapidly swelled into a roar of applause.

It was all such a scene of hearty excitement, inspired by admiration for the pluck which the girls had shown, there was no getting the two cars out of the yard for a minute or two.

Time after time they made a jolting start, only to pull up sharply because, presumably, the crowd was in the way. And, at last, in her impatience to get away from the cheering crowd, Paula put her head out of the window.

"What's the mattah, bai Jovo? Why don't we——"

Click!

That was the camera fiend again, and Paula simply yelped as she found that she had been snapped beautifully, looking out of the window.

"Ha, ha, ha! Serve you right, duffer!" chuckled Polly Linton, as poor Paula drew in her head and came flopping back into her seat. "He got you nicely that time!"

"And I do look such a week!" wailed Paula, pulling out her pocket comb and mirror. "Oh, heah—oh, my gwacious! If only he had caught me when my hair was stwaight!"

CHAPTER 16.

The Man from the Meteor.

THAT same afternoon, a certain man and woman were standing to look about them in a most wild and lonely part of the Devonshire moorland not far from Morcove School.

Somehow they made a rather sinister couple.

Not that their appearance was much out of the ordinary; but their presence at such an unfrequented spot as this, and the way they seemed to be casting about, as if in search of greater solitude—all this suggested that their bona-fides were not of the best.

Who were they? And why were they here?

"Meg," the man said softly, after taking a look at his watch, "time's getting on! I don't see that we shall do much better if we scout round over another thousand acres of this moor—we'll only get dead beat. And then you, for one, will hardly know how to drag back to the cave."

"I could remain on the moor," she suggested, in a voice as soft as his. "Thou you could go alone to the cave on the seashore, dig up the stuff, and—"

"No!" He spoke with sharp decision. "No separating, Meg! You and I were left behind by the others to look after the stuff from the yacht's safe, and we are going to keep together. Else we may come a cropper!"

Under the lowering sky he spent another minute silently gazing around, appearing to be confirmed in his opinion that this was the spot for his purpose. For he nodded twice or thrice to himself as his roving gaze searched the rough, bushy ground that was close at hand, and then all the undulating moorland that rolled away in every direction.

"Ay, we'll go back and fetch along the stuff, and our bit o' food with it," he decided aloud at last. "O' course, Meg, we can't camp in the open; that's not the idea at all. But we can vory well make this here spot the one where to hide the jewels."

"I quite understand," the woman nodded, and she braced herself up, as if to impress him with her readiness to meet any demands upon her energies.

She looked, indeed, a woman capable of

endurance—a tall, powerfully-built woman, just as he, her husband, was almost a giant of a fellow, with a certain looseness of the limbs, as if he had always followed an open-air life.

Treading warily, and always keeping plenty of stunted trees and large furze-bushes on either side of them for cover, they wound their way across the gloomy moor in the direction of the sea. It was only a little distance off, although he and she had no glimpse of it during the stealthy tramp, for they were taking care to keep low down amongst the little hills that were everywhere.

So it was all of a sudden that the sinister couple viewed the sea once more, as they came off the wild moor into the wooded valley, or "coomb," the lower end of which ended at the seashore.

They were warier than ever now; and yet the coomb proved to be just as desolate as the romantic stretch of ground that they had been reconnoitring. The man's relief at getting along like this, without the least bit of a scare, showed itself in the satisfied grin that came to his usually stern face.

"What do you think of things, Meg?" he asked with a chuckle presently. "Isn't this being in luck, eh?"

"Ay, if we get along like this—"

"Why, it simply means that we shall be set up for life, Meg! Twenty thousand pounds' worth of stuff, remember! And I told you I know how to sell it for almost as much as that. We'll be rich, Meg—rich enough to turn honest folk at last."

"Ah, I doubt if ever you'll settle down to a straight life," she answered with more pride than reproach in her tone. "You've been at one game and another ever since I married you, and that's fifteen years ago come July."

Their difficult progress along the wet, boulder-strewn seashore under the giant cliffs prevented further talk for a while. But presently, when he and she were finding an easier footing, he resumed with another chuckle.

"Ay, I've brought off a few coups in my time, Meg, but never a bigger one than this, nor a cleverer one either. The beauty of it is, o' course, that all the rest of the Meteor's hands were in the conspiracy, and we are just going to deceive 'em nicely."

"Too bad o' you!" she commented; but again her tone proclaimed pride in his roguery. "When it was to be share and share alike, with a bit extra for you because you arranged the whole business."

"Those others—they can whistle for their shares!" he exclaimed derisively. "There's only one party I mean to share the loot with, and that's my Meg. The cave, Meg—it's just round this bit of cliff, isn't it?"

"I think so—yes, I'm sure," she said after a keener glance. "I recognise some of these rocks that are lying about the shore. The big one out yonder; it's where I was standing when I first glimpsed that school-girl this morning."

A gloomy look suddenly came into the man's face.

"That school-girl! It's when I think of her, Meg, I feel a bit uneasy. It's all over the place, we know, the news about the robbery on the Meteor, and that girl may give information. It all depends, o' course, whether you aroused her suspicion in any way, or whether—ah, here we are! Our cave right enough."

He broke off with a brightening face as he and his wife now rounded the projection of cliff and beheld the gloomy mouth of a sea-shore cavern. It was not surprising that he had been rather uneasy about finding the right cavern, for there were so many along the shore, and he was practically a stranger to the district.

The tide was out now, or he and his wife would never have been able to enter the cave—unless indeed they had waded through the surfy waters that swirled in and out of the place at high tide. Falling silent, he and she proceeded a dozen paces into the ragged tunnel before they had dry sand under their feet.

Then the man fished something from his jacket pocket. It was an electric torch, and he certainly needed one. The twistings of the tunnel as it advanced into the heart of the cliff soon shut off all daylight.

He was wavering the ray of light over the floor of the dark cavern when he suddenly stood stock still, his jaw dropping with dismay.

"Meg! Why, look!" he gasped at last. "Footprints!"

She had already discerned the cause of his dismay, and a frightened look was in her eyes.

"Then someone's been here, and what shall we do?" she jerked out in great alarm.

"Oh—"

"Hist! Quiet! Only a school-girl's footprints, see?" he said with returning composure. "Why, it may have been only some girl running in and out of the cave for the fun of it."

"There was that school-girl!"

"Ay, I'm not forgetting her!" she scowled. "But even then she can't have gone into the inner cave. Come on, Meg—but quietly, quietly!"

He gestured her to get behind him whilst he trod the soft, dry sand another half dozen yards with the electric light kept well down so as merely to light the way without lighting up the place.

In this stealthy fashion he came to a sort of fissure in one side of the cave, a cleft in the solid rock, just wide enough for him to squeeze through. He switched off the torch, and then—

Dimly the cleft in the rock gave forth an illumination, as if there were a lighted chamber beyond it from which light was flowing forth.

Someone was in there even now.

It could not be doubted, and the man's bearded face assumed a furious look. Holding away from the entrance to the inner chamber, he whispered through a curved hand into his wife's ear:

"It's the girl—that school-girl! She's twigged the whole thing, Meg. She's in there, because she knows that it's there we've buried all the loot from Mrs. Trelawney's safe."

His wife could only return a panicky look.

"What shall we do—oh, what shall we do now then?" she was plainly asking with her wild eyes.

And for answer the man stole right up to the fissure in the rock and began to squeeze through, keeping the torch in his right hand.

A sharp wriggling movement and he was halfway through the opening. He switched on the torch—click!—and sent the ray in front of him.

There in the centre of the inner cave, standing white and terrified, was a school-girl, and in utter silence she and he met each other's gaze.

CHAPTER 17.

At Their Mercy.

THE man burst out furiously: "What are you doing here?" But it was only said so that his gruff voice might complete the girl's wild alarm. He knew what she was doing there. She had switched off her own electric torch, but the light of his showed the sandy floor of the cavern all dug aside. And she was actually holding in her shaking hands at least one of the jewel-cases that had been buried by the robbers.

With another sudden wriggle the man scrambled right inside the inner cave, and after him came his wife. A brace of seconds the man and women were standing together surveying the still speechless girl by the light of their torch.

"Who are you?" he thundered at her in that terrifying way. "What's your name, hey?"

"I—please——"

"Out with it—and give me that to go on with!" he added, making a snatch at the jewel-case. "Now then, my lady—your name?"

"I—I am Audrey Blain——"

"From the school on the headland, eh?"

She answered faintly:

"Yes. I will go away and——"

"Will you go away? Not if I know it!" he said with a jeering laugh. "It seems to me, young lady, you're a pretty cute one. Meg——"

"Ay, she's the same one as saw me this morning!" the woman broke out, regarding Audrey Blain with menacing eyes. "You little silly; you young hussy to poke your nose into other folk's business!"

"I'm sorry——"

"No use being sorry!" the woman snapped out sullenly. "What's going to happen to you, I don't know. My husband is an ugly customer, girl, when folk cross his path."

"Ay, that I am!" he said, his terrible voice rumbling through the cavern. "And this girl has crossed my path, Meg, with a vengeance. Why, it simply means that if we let her go, she'll trot home to the school, and in a jiffy the police will know all!"

He held the jewel-case at arm's-length and looked at it, then glared down at the hole which Audrey must have dug in the sandy floor with her hands,

"When did you get here, girl—in the cave, eh?"

"I—I came about half an hour ago," was the faltered answer. Audrey was not a strong-nerved girl, and in any case this was a plight, desperate enough to make the bravest girl shake in her shoes.

"Straight from the school did you come?"

"Yes. I——"

"Then tell us—the truth, mind! How much is known up there about the whole business?"

Trying to appear calm, whilst all the time her heart was pounding wildly, the girl began her faltered answer:

"They—they know that the yacht Meteor was deserted by all its crew, and the two or three stewardesses——"

"This is one—my wife!" he struck in, with a grim sort of smile. "And you say, 'sir' to me, my lady, if you please! My name is Pallant—at least, that's the name just now! Well?"

Steadying her breath as best she could, the terrified girl spoke on:

"The people who were left on the Meteor—they've been rescued at sea, and have been landed by this time. When I came away from the school the news was that—that they were being brought back by the car from Seacove."

"They mean—you mean the schoolgirls that were on board the yacht, of course. But how about Mr. and Mrs. Trelawncy?" Pallant asked, with eager interest.

"I don't know, sir. But I expect they will come to the school, too!"

"Ah! Anyway, Mr. and Mrs. Trelawncy landed with the girls, did they? And mebbe Mr. Trelawncy has given descriptions of the wanted men—me amongst them—to the police? Did you hear any talk of that sort, now?" he asked, with a kindling eye.

"Nun—no, sir!"

Audrey was glad to be able to answer in the negative. She saw how relieved he looked. With a nod, he swung round upon his wife.

"That's summat to be thankful for, anyhow," he commented. "Not that the police will ever spot you or me, Meg; we're too cleverly disguised, I reckon. But there were the others. The more time they have to scatter to different parts of the kingdom, the better!"

Then he faced Audrey again.

"And so, my lady, you had the cheek to come nosing around in this cave, to find the loot if you could! And you've found it, too, just as I and the missis turned up. Well?"

"I—please, sir, if you will let me go——"

"You must know very well," he cut her short grimly, "we durstn't let you go. Why, this jewel-case was in your very hands at the time!"

"I had just dug it up. I—I thought to have a look at one case——"

"A look at it," sneered the woman. "To stick to it, that was your game! And I say it's a precious pity for your sake that you ever interfered! What are we to do with her?"

"Ay, that's the question!" he muttered.

CHAPTER 18.

Bribed to Silence.

AUDREY saw Pallant's face, and the crafty look in it did not lessen her dread. He had come to some decision about her—but what was it?

"Ay, it's the only way!" he broke out, with grim decision. "Meg, you and I can't be saddled with the girl, that's certain!"

"Just what I was thinking," agreed the woman.

"Why, except for this here cave," he went on, "we don't know where to shelter for the night, let alone make a prisoner of this girl. She'll have to go!"

Audrey turned faint as that word was said. It sounded so like—oh, like a sentence of death upon her!

"D'ye hear, missy?" He turned to growl at her. "If we had a safe hiding-place, then I'd precious soon see that you were kept under my wife's eye every moment of the day and night. But you're a millstone about our necks, that's what you are, and there's only the one way out of it. I give you this chance——"

Ah, a chance! Her heart throbbed with wild relief.

"I'm quite sure in my mind, missy, you meant to stick to those jewels, if only you could get hold of 'em. Well, then, here's my offer in a nutshell. Suppose we make

you a present of that one case of jewels that you had in your hands just now—this one! Will you go back to the school and hold your tongue?"

She almost groaned her eager answer:

"Oh, yes, yes! I don't want any bribe.

At least—I mean——"

"You shall have that case of jewels; you've got to have it," he insisted. "Then, mind you, it makes you one of us. Ay, if we get into trouble with the police, you will, too. Here's the jewel-case"—and he thrust it into her trembling hands. "Half a sec. Now, promise solemnly, my girl, you'll do nothing and say nothing to put anyone on our track!"

"I do promise—yes, oh, yes! Anything to get away!" Audrey gulped out desperately. "The jewels, though—I don't want them——"

"You must take them, and keep them—that's part of the bargain!" he said craftily. "Where will you hide 'em, I want to know? In your study?"

"Yes, sir. I shall try to——"

"What number is the study?"

She told him; it was No. 8, in the Fourth Form passage upstairs.

"Ay, all right, then!" he nodded. "You can go, then, my lady; but remember, if you break that solemn promise of yours, you'll live to regret it!"

"Can I go now—now?" she panted, clasping the jewel-case in her shaking hands.

"One word more," he added. "There were a whole pack of us in this business with the Meteor—you know that. Well, mind you; in a few days maybe some of them will be sneaking back to this neighbourhood to share out the spoil. It won't be here and neither will I nor my wife be here. The others will be mad——"

"That they will, I lay," put in the woman darkly.

"So," Pallant wound up, with a final glare at the trembling Audrey, "you be careful what dealings you have with those other members of the crew. You give them a wide berth, my girl. Let this teach you a lesson for life!"

And then, to her unbounded relief, he motioned her to go.

She almost swooned with relief even as she took the first tottering steps towards the way out into the first cavern. She dropped the jewel-case in her great agitation, and the woman snarled.

"Clumsy! Is that how you are going to behave, when you've been shown such mercy!"

Gulping out that she was sorry, Audrey snatched up the case again, and then made all haste to get away. To a person of her slight build the cleft in the rock offered no difficulties whatever, and in a few moments she was in the outer cave, rushing blindly along, with the feeling that all the fiends of darkness were after her.

"Well, she's gone, Meg!" Pallant barked out, remaining behind in the second cavern with his wifely ally. "You thought it was a mistake, mebbe, giving her the jewels as a bribe?"

"Oh, well," the woman shrugged; "after all, that one case is but a trifle. What are you laughing at, Luke?"

"At you, old gal," he chuckled, "for thinking that I mean her to keep the jewels! Ha, ha, ha! No, my dear! Didn't you hear me ask her for the number of her study? It won't be long afore we get that odd case of jewels back—and little she'll dream who's got them!"

"You mean—"

"I'll tell you my idea by-and-by!" he cut his wife short. "Well?"

"I'm only thinking; if the girl loses the jewels, won't she feel inclined to—to blab?"

"Not her!" he said, with conviction. "Bribe or no bribe, she's had a lesson to-day. You saw how she was trembling for her very life just now. Ay, she'll hold her tongue, Meg, trust her. So now—"

He played the light of the torch upon the partly-dug floor of the cave.

"Now to get the whole pile of loot out!" he continued, with a gloating smile. "To be ready for darkness, Meg! After to-night, all the world of Morcove can come digging here if they want to. But never a jewel will they find—I'll see to that!"

His wife murmured admiringly:

"You're a wunnerful fellow, Luke!"

"All I know is," he answered, with a chuckle, "we've made a wunnerful coup. Twenty thousand pounds, and it is all ours—ours, my dear!"

Then there was silence again, whilst Meg Pallant held the torch, and he, the master-mind in the whole conspiracy aboard the Meteor, got down upon his knees and dug out one jewel-case after another from the cavern's sandy floor.

CHAPTER 19.

At the Dead of Night.

"BED!" said Paula Creel round about call-over time that evening. "My gwacious, geals, I should think I am just about weady for bed, yes, wather!"

"Yah, rah, coo!" came an exaggerated yawn from Madcap Polly.

"I shall curl up in my old bed in the dormi," said Betty, "and be asleep in two ticks. And don't let anybody wake me before first bell in the morning, or there'll be ructions!"

The three girls were in Study No. 12, where they had been lolling about half asleep almost ever since they and their chums got back to the school in the cars.

"Paula darling—" yawned Polly.

The response was a deep sigh from the depths of an armchair.

"Wake up, Paula; it's call-over at last!"

Another long sigh.

"There, she's gone again!" grinned Polly, pointing at the dozing aristocrat of the Fourth Form. "And I doubt if we'll be able to wake her now. Paula! Hi! Wake up!"

"Yes, wather!" Paula said, lolling sideways into a more comfortable attitude. "Bai Jove, geals, how the ship wocks!"

"She's dreaming she's on board the Meteor still," chuckled Betty.

"I'll give her a rocking," said teasing Polly; and with a dart to the easy-chair, she started heaving it this way and that to the great discomfiture of Paula. That girl, however, still dozed on.

"Another bigger wave!" chuckled Polly. "Whoo-op she goes! He, he, he!"

"Bai Jove! Weally, this wolling of the ship—"

"Look out, here's another wave! Breakers ahead! All hands on deck!" yelled Polly, pushing and pulling at the chair.

"Healp!" Paula said, in a semi-conscious manner. "Oh, dear! Most disagweable!"

"Rule, Britannia, Britannia rules the waves!" chanted Polly.

"Pwecisely! Wule—wule the waves, geals; but pway wule them stwaighter! I— Oh, dear! Oh, healp!"

For the chair had suddenly capsized, and poor Paula was "shipwrecked" on the study floor.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Heal! We are on the wocks!" wailed Paula, as she opened her eyes, but still had to get back her senses. "Wescue me, somebody—heal!"

"Come out of it!" chuckled the madcap, hauling up Paula, as if from the stormy deep. "There you are—saved! Only put your hair straight, dear, and then you can go down to call-over. Yaroop, I feel better now!" she announced gaily, and capered away, drawing Betty with her.

Paula followed listlessly, fiddling her hair to rights. The bell for prayers was going, and now all the rest of the Form came flouncing forth from the various studies to attend the evening muster.

Betty & Co. fell into company with a number of girls, who simply would not leave off asking questions about the terrible experiences of the night before. And, with mingling with those whose admiration of the whole exploit was perfectly genuine, there was at least one Fourth Form girl whose sincerity the chums were always bound to doubt.

Audrey Blain!

She had paid them a special visit during the evening to express her admiration of the courage they had shown, and every word from her had been a honeyed one. Now she started out again, in the same sweet strain, whilst all the time Betty & Co. felt they could hardly be civil to her.

"All her talk about the school being so proud of us—bah!" Polly could not help exclaiming disgustedly, when she and Betty were next to each other in the lined up Form in Hall. "If she is sincere, then why doesn't she do the obvious thing?"

"Oh, Polly, I wouldn't bother about that—"

"But I do bother—I must!" Polly said fiercely, under her breath, for the mustered girls were hushing their talk now. "The whole school knows that Audrey only grabbed the captaincy because you had to go home for a bit. Now you are back, Betty dear, the girl ought to do the decent thing, and see you reinstated."

"I don't mean to encourage any agitation for reinstatement," Betty said, sticking to the resolve she had made days ago. "Let things work themselves out, Polly. By the look of her, anyhow, Audrey doesn't seem to be having much fun out of the captaincy after all!"

This evening, certainly, Audrey did not

look up to the mark. If anybody had sent a critical glance all along the line of Fourth Form girls, Audrey's pretty face would have seemed to be in striking contrast with the others.

One would have imagined, indeed, that it was Audrey, not Betty & Co., who had been through terrible experiences, so washed-out she looked. If Betty and her chums were ready to tumble into bed as soon as they could get undressed up in the dormi, so was Audrey.

She usually disrobed herself in a leisurely manner, being a girl who took a great pride in her appearance. But it did not take her long to do her hair that night. In a moody fashion she got to bed as quickly as possible, and not a word came from her after that.

"Well, good-night all!" Polly sang out, with all her usual boisterousness, although she was so dead tired. "I hope I jolly well dream where those thieves have buried all the things they took from the yacht's safe."

She added, pummelling her pillow to rights:

"Fancy making a find of twenty thousand pounds' worth of jewels! And I suppose they have hidden the stuff somewhere, to wait for the huc and cry to die down. What do you say, Betty dear?"

"I think I'll say good-night, too!" answered the ex-captain with a drowsy laugh. "Night—night, everybody!"

"Good-night, Betty!"

In that cordial response there was another sign, if one was needed, of how restored to general favour the ex-captain was. And so, what with being utterly fagged out, and with the pleasant feeling that she had recovered so much good will from the Form, Betty was soon asleep.

Neither she nor her chums could know it, but never a movement did they make after lights-out. Hour after hour they lay upon their beds in full enjoyment of all the sleep that was owing to them.

Midnight came and went; time after time the school chimes beat out the passing hours of the night—one, two, three! Still the heroines of the Meteor were like so many dummies in that dormitory. But when daylight was almost at hand, there went through the whole great building such a sound as awakened even the heaviest sleepers.

Cr-r-rash!

What was it—that noise?

In the Fourth Dormitory, as in every other sleeping apartment of the great school, the startling commotion had hardly died away before there was a babel of excited cries.

"I say—that noise—"

"Yes, what was it? Oh!"

"Hark!"

"All's quiet now; but—"

"Bai Jove, geals, are we on the wocks, or what?"

Paula, it seems, had been roused out of dreams in which she felt herself to be back on board the Meteor.

"I heard a cwash, geals. My gwacious, I— Why, bai Jove, this is the school!"

"Yes, duffer; and that was burglars, I know!" came from Polly Linton, one of the first to scramble out of bed and into some day clothes. "Betty!"

"What a dark night!" Betty spoke up, amidst all the turmoil caused by a score or so of girls all dressing quickly. "What's the time, does anyone know?"

"Getting on for morning," answered Madge, who had taken her illuminated wrist-watch from under a pillow.

"Who's going down to see?" appealed Polly, the reckless. "I'm game!"

"And I—and I!" was the excited chorus that filled the groping dark room.

"Light—light!" suggested Betty. "Who's got an electric torch? Surely someone has!"

"Audrey has," suggested Tess Trelawney. "Audrey!"

"No, I haven't!" sang out Audrey irritably.

"Why, I thought you always brought that swagger electric torch up to bed with you?" someone said.

"Well, I didn't last night," was the impatient answer. "I—I've lost it! I mean—"

At that instant one of the girls struck a match, and its feeble light would have shown Audrey biting her lip if anyone had had time to give a glance to that girl. The one thought, however, was to investigate the cause of that strange commotion downstairs.

Out of the dormitory teemed the startled girls to mingle with the equally startled members of other Forms as they got to the stairs. It was a complete turn-out of the whole school, attended with the flicker-

ing of badly-held candles, and a wild confusion of talk.

"Gently—gently!" pleaded Ethel Courtway, the head girl of the school, rising to the occasion. "It was only some stray cat in the house, I dare say!"

And Miss Somerfield and her colleagues were just as eager to advance simple explanations of the disturbance, so as to allay the girls' excitement.

All the same it ended in a general advance down the great staircase of the house, the mistresses going first, flashing electric torches in all directions.

Nothing!

Closely the ground floor of the school house was hunted through, and everything seemed to be in order. Miss Somerfield insisted, more than once, upon dead silence, so that she might listen for any sound made by a midnight intruder; but when all the babel of talk was held in check there was absolutely not a sound.

"We shall find out what it was in the morning, that's all," Miss Somerfield said at last. "Back to bed now, girls, and don't let the upset keep you awake talking."

So they all turned to the right-about, and a straggling return to the dormitories set in. The chums of the Fourth Form had kept together all the time, and when Betty, for one, took it into her head to scout along the Fourth Form corridor, the others followed.

As a rule all the study doors were left closed at night, but one was ajar now. Without noticing whose study it was, Betty peeped inside, and then—

"Hallo!" she shouted. "I say—oh!"

"What—what?"

"Someone's been in here! Quick!" Betty cried excitedly. "Toll the rest! The place is upside down. There's a revolving book-case been knocked clean over, books and all!"

"Then that was the crash!" guessed Polly. "My word, it's Audrey's study! Audrey!"

"So it is! Audrey's den!" other girls exclaimed. "How strange! Where is Audrey?"

She was, in fact, close at hand in the corridor, and it was rather surprising that she had not come rushing forward when the first outcry went up. The whole school, mistresses and scholars alike,

wanted to get to the study, but Audrey, she hardly knew what to do, apparently. Lucky for her that the wavering light of candles and torches was a tricky one, or the pallor and dismay in her face would have been noticed instantly.

Betty, having stepped right into the study, was drawing up the window blind to peer out upon the night-bound grounds. It had occurred to her that the mysterious visitant might be glimpsed—and now she gave a violent start.

"What now, Betty?" panted Polly eagerly. "You have seen—"

"Yes, someone! Oh, there he goes—no, it's a woman! Look, look! Just fancy! A woman—"

"Oh, after her—after her!"
That was Polly, the madcap!

She flashed about, and in another instant she had simply cleft a way for herself through the crowd thronging the corridor and was pelting on to the stairs.

CHAPTER 20.

Flight and Pursuit.

"COME back, come back, Polly!"

Again and again, in the short space of four or five seconds, that appeal was voiced by Miss Somerfield and others who felt responsible for all the scholars' safety. But Polly did not stop.

It was not that she was flouting authority, in her characteristic eagerness to give chase to the mysterious woman, she simply did not hear those warning cries.

Down through the dark school house she raced, and tugged back the bolts of a side-door. And then suddenly, just as she was ready to dash on out in the night-bound grounds, she found Betty and Madge catching her up.

"It's no use—I'm going!" she panted, thinking they had come to fetch her back.

"We are going, too!" was the breathless answer from the two other girls. "It's a woman—we three can easily tackle a woman!"

Had they hesitated for a moment, they would have found that almost the whole school was trooping down to join in the chase. But the three were off there and then, with sufficient day-clothes upon them to make the dash out of doors possible.

Their shoes were only light ones, but, as Polly was thinking, as long as they "stuck on," that was good enough.

"Now, which way, Betty; you saw her!"

The ex-captain answered by heading along a hard, dry path that skirted the house walls, and then plunging off into the winding walks of a shrubbery.

"All I know is," she panted, "the woman was getting away as fast as she could. If she prowled around for a way into the school grounds, I expect she found that gap in the hedge where—"

"Look, there she goes!"

Polly was shouting the thrilling news as she pelted on faster than ever. Out here in the open the very first glimmerings of the dawn had crept on, and Betty and Madge thought that they, too, had glimpsed a ghostly figure moving rapidly straight ahead of them.

So, with gathered breath and a roused spirit, they all three dashed on. The shrubbery was left behind, and now it was a race across open ground, with the fugitive clearly in view. Perhaps the girls' eyes were growing accustomed to the dawn light; be that as it may, they had the woman in full sight now—a very giant of a woman, they thought her, or was it that the gloom enlarged her appearance, as a bad light often does make distant objects seem bigger than they are?

Now she was making a straight dash for it across the playing field to the boundary hedge. Faster, faster tore on the girls, never looking back, or they would have seen the reinforcements that were coming on. Miss Somerfield, two or three of the senior girls, Miss Redgrave, and then dozens of excited scholars—they had burst from the house and were also giving chase.

But Betty and her two chums had taken the lead and they kept it.

"She shan't—she shan't give us the slip!" vowed Betty, sprinting along even faster than ever. "Who is she, though? Why—"

The breathless girl did not finish the question, nor did her excited companions respond. They were sure they were slowly overtaking the fugitive, and this was not the time to talk.

And now the mysterious woman was but twenty paces from the privet hedge. She

was running with steps as silent as they were feet, and so Betty and her chums plainly heard a significant sound as they tore on in pursuit.

It was the sound of the hedge being rustled violently, before the woman had reached it.

"Then there's someone else to reckon with—someone waiting!" jerked out Betty. "Never mind; go for her!"

"Got her!"

Thus said Polly, as she caught up with the woman and made a grab to seize her. The girl's reaching hand gripped the fugitive's fluttering cloak, and next instant Betty and Madge had hold of her, too, and a wild struggle to overpower her began.

Ere that moment was sped, however, a hand that was not the woman's grabbed at Polly Linton, then followed up this by seizing the girl and simply tearing her from the woman.

It was the person who had been rustling the hedge as a signal to the fugitive woman where to make for in the darkness. All three girls had a vague vision of him—for it was a man, a big fellow with a bearded face. They saw him for an instant, heard him urge the woman hoarsely: "Come on!" and then he went crashing through the weak part in the hedge, making it easy for the woman to follow him through.

For a second or so the furious rustling of the hedge continued, then the mysterious couple were dashing away, with Betty, Polly, Madge—aye, and fifty other girls besides—ready to go on with the desperate chase, only there came a commanding cry from Miss Somerfield.

"Stop, stop, I cannot allow it!" was the headmistress' firm word to the excited mob of girls. "The risk is too great! We don't know who they are, or how many more there may be!"

But one girl who heard those words could have said with certainty who the desperate couple were.

She pretended to be as puzzled as the rest, but only too well Audrey Blain knew that it was the man Pallant and his wife who had broken into the school to-night.

And she knew that her study in the school no longer held what had been hidden there, as soon as she got back from the cave!

That case of precious jewels—she had made up her mind to retain it. Apart from being too terrified to speak out about all that she knew, she had been tempted to

treasure the jewels, because they were so lovely. But they had been taken away by the very couple who had bestowed them, and she would never see them again!

So she was thinking, ruefully, and she was in error.

Audrey was to see that case of jewels again—under what dramatic conditions will soon be disclosed!

CHAPTER 21.

Audrey is in This.

AFTER breakfast next morning there was a rush for the daily papers, which never reached the school until about half-past eight o'clock.

All Morcove wanted to see what sort of a story the Press had to tell about the strange case of the Meteor, and Betty & Co.'s part in it.

In the next minute or two some of those newspapers were almost torn to pieces, as each one had to do service for some half-dozen girls, all impatient to get hold of it.

Betty & Co. had the luck to secure a picture paper to themselves, and they were all putting their heads together over it in the school library when—

"Oh, help!" yelled Polly. "What's this?"

Then there was a sort of dismal groan from Paula.

"My gwacious! Oh, deah, this is dweadful!"

Betty began to laugh. So did Madge and Tess and the rest of them. Only Paula, with her horrified eyes glued to a certain news-picture on the middle sheet, remained utterly agast.

"Downwight disgwaceful!" she wailed.

"So I should think, dear!" chuckled Polly, seeing a fine chance to tease. "Just fancy a girl like you not knowing better than to get your photograph put in a daily paper!"

"Polly deah, you are aweah I—I—"

"Look at yourself!" teased Polly. "Putting your head out of that car-window, to return thanks to all the crowd for cheering you! Oh, Paula—"

"No, Polly! I—weally, I pwotest! I must remark that I did not—"

"How could the photograph have been taken if you weren't there, doing what the picture shows you to be doing?" demanded merciless Polly. "Vanity, Paula—vanity!"

"I'm surprised at you," chimed in Tess.
 "There is a mistake," wailed Paula.
 "I—"

"There is no mistake," insisted Polly.
 "That is your face, right enough. Certainly, it does look like a carved turnip—"

"Polly—"
 "Or, again, anybody might mistake the portrait for that of a prize potato—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "You geebs, look here—"
 "I'm looking at your pretty photograph," said Polly sweetly. "So very charming, so modest! You don't really squint like that, we know, dear; the camera moved, I suppose. But—"

"Dwop it! Be quiet!" shrilled Paula dismally. "Teah the wetches thing up!"

"Perish the thought!" grinned Polly. Then she flung an arm about the aristocrat's neck, and hugged her.

"It's all right, Paula; we must tease you sometimes!"

"Sometimes, bai Jove!" sighed Paula; but the amiable smile was already returning to her pretty face. "I'm teased from morning to night, bai Jove! I'm dwiven crazy with your teasing!"

"But you don't mind it! You know you rather like it!"

"Yes, wather—I mean—oh, weal!" And Paula shrugged resignedly.

"Jolly morning! Let's have one run round before classes!" Betty proposed, starting off as she spoke. "As far as we chased that woman last night, and back again, Polly!"

It was no use expecting Paula to join in the run; she was not given to violent exercise after breakfast! But Polly fell in with the idea eagerly, thinking it nothing to gallop off with Betty and at the same time keep up a gabble of talk.

"I wonder if Mr. and Mrs. Trelawney will come over to the school to-day?" she remarked, as they started off. "I should think Mrs. Trelawney will, although her husband may be kept busy with the police in Barncombe. I say—"

"Well?" from Betty.

"Do you think that the thieves who took the jewels are hiding in the neighbourhood, Betty? That couple we saw last night—they may have been two of them, you know!"

"Yes, breaking into the school for food

—eh?" agreed Betty. "Though why they should raid one of the studies—"

"Oh, the woman only took refuge in that study of Audrey's, surely!" threw out Polly. "She made a row downstairs that roused the whole house, and—"

"Whoa, steady! That theory won't work at all, Polly," her chum said, giving up the run so that they could argue the thing out. "It is known this morning that that woman got into the house by a ground-floor window. Perhaps the man who was with her opened it for her. Now then, think; there was only one crash, and that must have been the revolving bookstand going over in Audrey's den."

"Why, yes," agreed Polly. "In that case the woman was in Audrey's den before ever the alarm went up! But how curious. Why ever should a burglar ransack Audrey's or any other girl's study?"

Betty did not answer. She had hardly paid any heed to her chum's puzzled cry, for all at once her whole attention had become fixed upon something she had glimpsed beside the path.

The two girls had dropped to a walking pace just as they got clear of the shrubbery, and were going along the last bit of path on to the open playing-field. There were clumps of bushes here and there, arranged in ornamental groups, and it was something that Betty had caught sight of, lying on the ground in the heart of one laurel clump, that made her stop dead.

"Look! What's that?" she said, with suppressed excitement.

Then Polly, sending her gaze in the same direction as Betty's, gave a whistle.

"Phew—ew! Why, Betty, it's a—! it's a—jewel case!"

And she was right!

Rushing in amongst the foliage of the laurels, the two chums caught up their find in a twinkling. Another moment, and they had thrown open the lid of the small, leather-bound case, and a blaze of rich jewels simply dazzled them!

"Some of the stolen trinkets!" Betty exclaimed at once. "Why, Mrs. Trelawney actually showed us these very emeralds, on the yacht, before the robbery took place. Besides—"

"Yes, they are part of the stolen treasures," Polly broke in, breathing

quickly. "But—great goodness, how do they come to be here?"

Then Betty's face showed that a light had flashed upon her mind.

"Don't you see?" she answered in a whisper. "That woman, last night—she was running off in this direction. She had the jewel-case with her! She—"

"Threw it amongst the bushes when she thought she was going to get caught! Yes, I see!" Polly rushed on excitedly. "But how did she come to have the jewel-case with her?"

Betty made a response that left her chum with mouth agape.

"Supposing," said Betty very softly, "supposing that the woman got the jewel-case from Audrey's study? Supposing that the woman knew it was there, and that was why the house was entered last night—what then, Polly?"

The madcap of Morcove looked just as shrewd and serious as the ex-captain now.

"Come along!" she said simply. "We will just ask Audrey what it all means!"

CHAPTER 22.

Polly's Ultimatum.

IN Study No. 8, Audrey Blain was just getting her things together for the morning's classes, when her door was tapped, and then Betty Barton and Polly Linton came in.

"Hallo!" Audrey greeted them demurely. "I see the newspapers have a lot to say about your adventures on the Mo—"

"Never mind the newspapers now," Betty said, shutting the door behind her. "Polly and I want a word with you, Audrey!"

"But the time—"

"It's all right; we asked Miss Massingham if we three could be excused until break, and she gave permission. Audrey—look at this!"

And with the word Betty held out the jewel-case, which she had been keeping behind her back up till now.

Audrey recoiled as if struck a blow in the face. She went deathly pale; her hands, hanging loosely, suddenly began to pluck nervously at her skirt.

"Why, that must be—one of the jewel-cases!" she faltered in affected surprise at last.

"You know perfectly well that it is part of the Meteor robbery," Betty said, keeping her eyes upon the flustered captain of the Form. "You could say exactly what sort of jewellery is inside this case—because the case was in your possession last night!"

"No!"

"Audrey, that won't do!" Betty said gravely. "Polly and I know too much. Last night the school house was entered by a woman, who was helped by her husband. It is obvious that they are two of the Meteor robbers, and that they broke into the school to get hold of one particular object—this!"

"The woman ransacked your den, here!" Polly took up the accusation in a steady voice. "That means that she knew that you had got hold of the jewel-case; she even knew the number of your study, it appears! She found the case, and only threw it away when she was hard pressed by our pursuit!"

"So," Betty resumed, still looking Audrey straight in the eyes, "you must, please, tell us how you came to be in possession of part of the loot from the Meteor!"

"I—oh, I can't tell you! No!"

"Then you will have to tell Miss Somerfield," was the blunt rejoinder. "Of course, Polly and I have got to take this jewel-case to the headmistress, because it is part of the proceeds of the robbery. She will want to know where we found it."

Audrey turned aside with a great lift and fall of the shoulders. She passed a hand across her forehead as if feeling utterly distraught.

"We hate involving another girl in trouble and disgrace," Betty went on in an even tone. "Polly and I—we would prefer to hand over the case, say we found it in the shrubbery, and leave Miss Somerfield to infer that the woman did not get it from your study at all, but had it on her when she broke in last night."

"But," said Polly, with more sternness than Betty was showing, "I have a certain feeling in this matter that Betty may not be sharing. I feel, Audrey, that it is not

good enough for the Form to have a captain who—"

"Oh, don't bother about that, now!" Betty broke in hastily. "I don't want to appear anxious to—"

"No, I know you don't, dear," said Polly. "But I'm in a different position to you. As an ordinary member of the Form, I don't feel like letting the captaincy remain in the hands of Audrey Blain. You hear me, Audrey?"

That girl, her pretty face all mottled with red and white, had no answer to make.

"If you can account in a satisfactory way for how you got hold of that jewel-case, and failed to give it up, then, of course, it's all right," Polly went on. "Can you do that, Audrey—can you?"

"I—I found it—by chance!" the shame-stricken girl faltered at last. "That's all I can say!"

"But you know that it was something that should be handed at once to the head-mistress!" Polly insisted. "And yet you stuck to it! Audrey, it is enough to get you expelled!"

The culprit winced. Only too well she knew that Polly was not exaggerating.

"Well, anyway," said Betty quietly, "Polly and I are not going to be the means of getting you expelled. We shall have to take the jewels to Miss Somerfield, and do our best to screen you. I suppose you found this odd case, which the thieves must have dropped somewhere, and you were tempted to keep it. You— Well, Polly?"

"I am not going to let the Form have a captain who—"

But Betty struck in:

"Don't talk like that, Polly. It sounds like driving a bargain, and that makes me feel uncomfortable!"

"I am going to drive a bargain!" was Polly's downright answer. "It is a perfectly fair one, and, as a girl with the good of the Form to think of, I am entitled to do it. Audrey, you will sit down and write out your resignation of the captaincy at once!"

Whilst Audrey was regarding Polly with an at-bay sort of look, Betty turned to the door and opened it.

"Come along, Polly. Please—"

"No, you wait outside if you wish, Betty! This girl doesn't seem to understand that

I mean what I say. Audrey, you will write out your resignation, or I, for one, shall not screen you; Betty feels she must, because she hates to appear as if she were using this affair as a means of getting back the captaincy. I'm different. So, what's it to be?"

Betty had gone. Left to themselves, the two girls were facing each other—Polly, with the resolute air that could come upon her at times, for all that she was the reputed madcap of the Form; and Audrey, looking driven to desperation by her plight.

"Well?"

"It's not fair!" burst out Audrey fiercely. "I couldn't help finding the jewel-case! I'm not free to say how I came by it! Polly, that's the position, it is indeed! I'm not at liberty to say—"

"Which means, you did not come by the jewels honestly. No, Audrey, you can't get away from it. In sticking to the jewel-case you became no better than a confederate of those thieves. And I'm not going to let you retain the captaincy."

On her way to the door, Polly paused to say one word more.

"Think it over, Audrey! Better to resign the captaincy, surely, than have Miss Somerfield expel you altogether!"

Then she was gone. She found Betty waiting for her outside, and together they went at once to Miss Somerfield, in her private room downstairs.

As for Audrey, she stood alone in her study, stricken with dismay.

Must she really give in to Polly to that extent? Resign the captaincy—the queenly position that had been so flattering to her love of pomp and power! Oh, maddening to have to give it up! The humiliation, too, for her, Audrey Blain, to have to submit to the dictates of a mere Polly Linton!

And yet—what else could one do?

There was no hope of being saved by bluster. She had tried it on Polly just now, and it had been no use. Polly had summed up the whole thing crisply when she said: "You did not come by the jewels honestly!"

"No better than a thief!"

It was Polly's view of the case, and that showed how right Polly was in demanding that some other girl should have the captaincy—not a girl whose intention had been to keep quiet about a find of stolen jewels!

On the table Audrey saw a sheet of writing paper spread out upon the pad, and a pen beside it. Bitterly she realised that she had been going to use that paper for writing out a dignified notice which she would sign as "Audrey Blain, Captain, Fourth Form." And now—

Was that same sheet of paper to be put to quite another use? There seemed no help for it. Instead of a notice that was so much airing of authority—her formal resignation!

She clenched her hands, raging inwardly at the way she had been "bowled out." The captaincy! She had never intended to yield it up, but had meant to retain it by fair means or foul. But now—

With a bitter sigh she sank into a chair, and how long she had remained in a drooping state of utter dejection she did not know, when the door opened and Polly came in. Only Polly this time.

"Audrey—"

"Well, what?"

"I have come to tell you," Polly said, casting a glance at the blank sheet of paper on the blotting-pad, "we have handed in the jewel-case. Mrs. Trelawney was with Miss Somerfield, and they were both too overjoyed at first to ask awkward questions."

Audrey sprang up.

"You mean—"

"It does not look as if they are going to imagine that you could ever have been in possession of the jewels. They think that the woman last night was carrying the case about with her all the time, because it was her share of the loot. Mrs. Trelawney suggests that the woman got into the house to get hold of food, and only went upstairs to find some upper window from which, perhaps, a signal could be given."

"Then I—I'm not to be questioned!" Audrey burst out, unable to disguise her wild relief, "I shall not be sent for?"

"Not unless you refuse to write out what I said!" was Polly's inflexible answer. "If you do refuse, Audrey, then I shall go back to the headmistress' study and put her on the right track. I've screened you up to now, the same as Betty has. But I'm not going to screen you unless you resign."

"You—you—"

"Sit down now, Audrey. I'll wait and see you write it."

There was a moment or so whilst a battle

of looks raged between the two girls. Then, with tight-set lips and eyes full of helpless fury, Audrey Blain walked to the table, sat down, and took up the pen.

Polly stood by, watching.

The fateful note completed, Audrey blotted it, then jumped to her feet. She took the sheet of paper in her hand, and marched to the door, her lovely face as white as a lily.

"Very well!" she paused to say, on her way out of the room. "This notice is going on the board at once. You've held the whip-hand to-day, Polly, and you've let me feel it. But the time may come when I shall have a chance to get my own back, and then—look out, that's all!"

And the door closed behind her with a violent slam.

Tremendous was the sensation amongst the girls of the Fourth Form, when they came out of the class-room, at break, and saw that absolutely unexpected announcement on the board.

Audrey had resigned!

Audrey, the captain, who had simply gloried in the position, as everybody knew, had suddenly given it up.

"It's a great relief, bai Jove—that's my opinion!" Paula said, lolling back in the chair. "But what evah made her do it? All the goals are asking. Audwey won't say. She pwefers to hold her tongue!"

A very dry sort of laugh came from Polly.

"Audrey knows how to hold her tongue!" she remarked, with a wink at Betty. "And so do I—when it's a bargain!"

CHAPTER 23.

Oh, What a Surprise!

"WHILST there is just a moment's peace and quietness," said Betty Barton, sitting at her table in Study No. 12 at Morcove School, "I'll get this letter off to my people at home."

She must have intended the remark for Paula Creel, because that aristocratic young lady was the only other occupant of the den at present.

But Paula made no answer. She was

lolling back in her favourite armchair, and her eyes were closed.

"Peace and quietness—we don't get much of it, do we, Paula darling?" Betty murmured on, gumming down the envelope. "Now for a stamp, if I've got one!"

She pulled open a table drawer and began to rummage about.

"When Polly is out of the room for five minutes, the old den is as quiet as a cathedral, isn't it, Paula darling?"

"Er— Bai Jove! Betty deah, were you addressing a remark to me?" Paula suddenly exclaimed, starting out of a doze. "I beg your pardon!"

"Oh, don't mention it, dear! I was only saying—"

"It is a womarkable thing, but twue," said Paula Creel, in her most amiable tone. "I can always wepose more comfowtably in this study, bai Jove, than in my own. I have fwrequently womarked, Betty deah, there is a special pwoperty about this particular cheah that wenders it conducive to wepose. Yes, wathah!"

"Oh, Paula dear, the speeches you make!" laughed Betty, thumping the stamp on her letter. "You ought to stand for Parliament when you grow up."

"I am afraid I would not be stwong enough," sighed Paula. "It takes me all my time to keep up my stwength, Betty dear. I weally have not yet wecovered from the tewwible pwivations we suffered on board the Meteor."

Paula shook up a cushion.

"You wemember, Betty deah, we were adwift in the gale, and the waves were wough, horribly wough! Howewah—"

"Hark!" cut in Betty, looking towards the door. "I fancy that is Polly's fairy footstep. So good-bye to all hope of another snooze, Paula. When Polly is— Oh, Polly darling, whatever have you got there?"

"Hextry! All the nos! Hextry speshul!" bawled Polly Linton, the mad-cap of the school, as she came thumping into the study.

She held a newspaper placard apron-wise, and with a hand at her cheek, went on bawling:

"All the latest! 'Ero y'are lidies! Hextry!"

"Haow fwivolous you are!" Paula re-

buked the madcap, sitting bolt upright to stare at Polly as an imitation newsboy.

"Weally, Polly!"

"Latest about the great jewel robbery! Hextry! Great reward offered! Hextry!"

So Polly bawled, and indeed the placard actually bore these startling words:

MISSING JEWELS,
£1,000 REWARD!

"I say, where did you get the placard from?" laughed Betty. "And have you got a copy of the paper? That's the point!"

"Sorry, sold out!" chuckled Polly. "As for the placard, Mr. Trelawney let me have it because I said I could have a lark with it. Look, though, there's the news right enough! One thousand pounds reward!"

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove—"

"Mr. Trelawney himself offers that, of course!" conjectured Betty. "They were his wife's jewels that were stolen from the Meteor, by all the crew—"

"Yes, wather, the wascals!" chimed in Paula. "The wetches deserted the vessel in mid-ocean, bai Jove, and we geals—"

"Not exactly in mid-ocean, Paula dear," corrected Betty. "We were only a few miles out at sea, you know!"

"The sea was wough, anyhow, howwibly wough. I have a distinct wecollection of twying to stand stwaight, and of sitting down ewewywhere, bai Jove. Howewah, are you geals goin' out this afternoon?"

"When you are ready, yes," said Betty serenely. "The others will be waiting for us, that's certain, Paula."

"In two ticks, pwecisely, I shall be weady!" the aristocrat of the Form declared, mining to the door; and she passed out, whilst Polly, in some sudden access of high spirits, suddenly flung her arms about Betty's neck and hugged her.

"What's this for?" laughed Betty.

"Oh, I dunno! Except that it is so jolly, Betty dear, your being captain again."

"Geals, pway excuse this intwusion on my part, but—" said Paula, putting her head in at the door.

"Oh!" shouted Polly, hopping off the table. "Paula, if you don't hurry up, we'll go without you!"

"Pway be weasonable," pleaded the

affable Paula. "I merely wish to make a most gwatifying announcement. Miss Wedgwave is convinced that it will not rain this afternoon."

"Paula, dear, do hurry——"

"Or if it does wain, it will only be an Apwil shower," Paula went on, in her fatuous way. "Theahfore, geals, there is no gweat wisk, is there?"

"There's a risk of my coming for you with this hockey-stick!" Polly said grimly, brandishing the weapon in question. "Hop it!"

Paula was much too ladylike to do such a thing as that. But she minced off again, which amounted to the same thing, and this time she really did set about getting her outdoor things on.

They all started away at last, quitting the school grounds by a side gateway, because they wished to get out on to the rolling moorland without loss of time.

A nice varied company of good chums they made, too, as they roamed off. All were in high spirits, but none was really so boisterous as their famous madcap Polly. She, as usual, was the life and soul of the party, just as Paula Creel, with her bandboxy appearance, was the butt.

It was a windy afternoon, with lumpy clouds coming up every now and then to blot out the warm spring sunshine. When the sun was shining, Paula frequently expressed a fear that it was strong enough to cause "fweckles." When the sun went in she was afraid it was going to "wain."

Nor were the girls to be without a taste of the weather's capriciousness during their afternoon ramble. All at once two or three blobs of dark cloud merged into one, and the wild moorland darkened, causing even careless Polly to join with a will in the race for shelter.

They could even see a downward smear in the cloudy sky, telling of the squall of rain that was coming their way; and they thought themselves lucky at having a really good shelter to make for.

It was a tumbledown sort of cattle-shelter that Betty & Co. came racing up to, just as the first drops of rain were pelting down. Although it was all bushy moorland round about this district, cattle were often turned out to pick up a living from what grass

thero was, and the lonely shed was there in case they ever needed to be rounded up.

For the first minute or so after the chums got under cover, they stood just inside the wide doorway watching the heavy downpour. Then they began to examine the shed's interior, making grimaces when they found that it offered no kind of resting-place. The floor of caked earth was strewn with dry bracken for litter, and that was all.

But there was a big loft overhead with a makeshift ladder leading up to it, and it was not long before Polly, of course, had to start exploring.

Climbing that home-made ladder with its wide apart rungs was just the sort of acrobatic performance that the madcap of Morcove might be expected to revel in.

"Naow, Polly deah!" Paula said, in some alarm for her chum's safety. "Do take care, Polly, or you'll come a cwopper!"

"It's great fun!" was the chuckling answer. "And there's all clean, dry bracken up there, I expect, so I shall just make a nest for myself and curl up. I'll let you know what it's like, you girls," she added, still working her way up the steep ladder.

In a few moments her head and shoulders had risen above the level of the loft floor and she was peering around. No startled cry came from her at what she saw, but it would be true to say that she almost fell off the ladder in her sudden great surprise.

In round-eyed amazement she stared for a second or so; then she started to climb down the ladder in a very subdued manner.

The storm of rain was still lashing across the gloomy moor, and her chums were in the shed doorway watching the deluge. Polly came close to Betty Barton, nudged her, then whispered:

"Betty, don't look up and don't speak loudly. There are two people up there in the loft—a man and a woman."

"Well, what about it?" Betty answered, not in the least amazed. "They are some man and wife belonging to a moorland farm, I suppose. We often see people of that sort——"

"Betty," Polly broke out in a deeper whisper than ever, "the couple I have seen are two of the robbers from the Metecr!"

CHAPTER 24.

The Robbers' Lair.

BETTY looked amazed enough now. "You—you don't mean it, Polly? Two of the crew—"

"I'm positive! You remember that man Pallant, and his wife who was a stewardess? They're there—up there!" Polly insisted, jerking a thumb towards the loft.

Such secret whisperings had not gone unnoticed by the other girls. They would have left off all their joking and laughing, only Polly made signs to them to keep the talking going. At the same time she passed the astounding news around in the faintest of whispers.

"Up there in the loft—two of the Meteor robbers—hiding!"

The girls were staggered. Paula looked ready to swoon with horror. There was a moment when all the ordinary talk was in great danger of breaking down, thus giving a hint to the hidden couple that they had not only been seen but that their identity was known. But Betty and Polly kept some sort of chatter going, and then the others resumed the general talk.

"The rain is almost over now," Polly said gaily. "Give it another minute, and then we might start back for the school."

"Why, yes, the sun will be shining again in a jiffy—"

"And we'll see a rainbow—"

"Yes, watah! What a relief, geals!"

Such remarks as these flew around, whilst the girls were exchanging the most eloquent winks and gestures. Presently Polly noisily ran out into the open to see if the rain had quite stopped.

"Almost," she called out. "Oh, look—come and look! There's the rainbow!"

By such an artful artifice did wily Polly get her chums to quit the shed in the most innocent way.

A few paces from the doorway they bunched together, pretending to watch the rainbow; and now some thrilling talk went on in whispers.

"I say—"

"Well, Polly?"

"My idea is this. We must lead the couple to think we've all gone off, whilst all the time two of us will stay behind."

"Yes, watah!"

"To listen, see? They are bound to talk when they think they are alone," Polly whispered on excitedly. "They know that one of us saw them, because they were only lying down and pretending to be asleep, I'm sure!"

"But supposing—"

"Polly's right," Madge urged approvingly. "If we go off talking just as usual, they won't know that two of us have stayed behind."

"I'll stay with Polly," Betty suggested. "Is that all right?"

Eagerly the girls assented; and next moment they went back to the shed, "just to make sure that they had left nothing behind," as two or three of them remarked out loud.

"Hooray, here's the sun out again, so come on!" Tess Trelawney cried gaily, making a rush into the open. "Who's for a race home?"

"Oh, if it's a race you want—" shouted Trixie, darting away, and, with similar cries to that, the others pelted after her—all save Betty and Polly.

Those two, left behind just outside the shed, nipped round to the back of it without making a sound. And then they listened, holding their breath in suspense.

For as long as the laughter and mirthful cries of the departing girls could still be heard, there was dead silence inside the shed. But at last Betty and Polly heard the rustle of dry litter up in the loft, and then a man's voice spoke quite audibly:

"They've gone, Meg!"

"All of 'em, Luke—you're sure!"

"Ay! They were only sheltering from that shower o' rain. And the young imp of mischief that climbed up and saw us—she only took us for a couple of tramps, that's certain."

Polly gave Betty a nudge, and grinned.

"All the same, Luke," the girls heard the woman say in an uneasy tone, "it's the sort of thing that shouldn't have happened."

The man said again:

"Ay! It's taught me a lesson, this. When we struck this forsaken sort of place, right in the middle of the moor, I did think we could hide safely enough. But we must do better, seemingly. Meg—"

"Well, Luke?"

But the man was evidently pondering the situation, and would have nothing to say

until he had made his decision. The school-girls heard the bracken rustle again, as if he were crawling back to a corner of the loft, after having spied down from the top of the ladder.

"There's so much of the loot to be got away," he muttered at last, "or we might have been at the other end of the kingdom by this time. Meg, we'll have to get the stuff out of that hiding-place after dark and simply lump the jewels into one bag, leaving the cases behind."

"Why not leave the stuff where it is for the present, Luke, and go away just as we are without it?"

"No," he answered glumly; "that won't do at all. If I go, the jewels go with me. We might get away, and not be able to venture back to this district, and supposing some of the others who were in the coup come nosing around?"

In a moody tone that showed he was recognising a very ugly factor in the case, he continued:

"That's what we are up against, Meg. Every paid hand aboard the Meteor was in the affair, and was promised a share. It's certain that they'll be sneaking back to this part of the world to get in touch with you and me and have the share out."

"They'll be fools to be in any hurry," the woman said.

"They are fools," her husband rejoined grimly, "or they would never have left you and me to have sole charge of the stuff!"

All this time Betty and Polly, listening at the back of the shed, were nudging each other in the most excited way, and exchanging meaning smiles and looks.

"After dark, then, Luke—"

"Ay, we must wait for dark, that's certain. But—say, about nine to-night—we'll slip away from here, dig up the stuff, and lump it all together. Then—why then," (the man wound up stolidly, "we must just tramp for all we're worth across country.")

Silence fell after that. With breathless interest the two school-girls waited and listened for more of this incriminating talk, but none came. Evidently the man had lapsed into a brooding state, and his wife, for she was an able ally in so many ways, did not like to pester him with suggestions.

One thing more the girls felt they would give anything to overhear—a thousand pounds, at least, for it was worth that to them to know it. Where were the jewels hidden?

But no; it was a vital point about which the man and his wife had kept silent, and the two school-girls were to wait and listen in vain for any enlightening word.

"The only thing we can do now," Betty broke out eagerly, after she and her chum had stolen away from the back of the shed, "is to have the couple followed when they go to the hiding-place to-night."

"Have them followed!" Polly exclaimed, grimacing. "Follow them ourselves, you mean! Oh, Betty darling, have we girls found out all this to-day only to leave the rest to the police? What a shame!"

"You'd like to arrest the couple yourself, would you?" smiled Betty.

"Well, have a hand in the arrest, anyhow!"

"Oh, we'll get a hand in it; I think that's our duo!" agreed Betty, as keen for adventure as Polly or any other Morcove scholar. "We'll see what Miss Somerfield says!"

Meantime, they had to work round over the moor to rejoin their chums, taking care all the time not to risk being seen by Pallant and his wife, should either the man or woman venture from the lair.

Fortunately, the nature of the moorland was all in favour of anybody's "going to cover" in case of need. That was why Luke Pallant and his wife had kept to the moor since they parted company with the rest of the gang. The ground was not merely undulating, but full of little dips and hummocks, and everywhere there grew a tangle of brambles, clumps of gorse, and many a stunted tree.

So, by dodging in and out amongst the bushes, and keeping to low-ground as much as possible, Betty and Polly worked round from behind the lonely cattle-shed, and then scurried on to catch up with their chums. That the others were waiting for them not far off was certain. Madge, Paula, Tess, Trixie—all would be yearning to know what had come about as the result of that artful trick which had been played upon the thieves.

Before ever Betty and Polly had caught up with their chums, however, there was to be another thrill for them.

For, suddenly, as they were going warily through the tangle of gorse and brambles, they burst full upon two men who were lying low there.

The girls stopped, then backed away feeling scared. Yet the men seemed just as frightened, too. Up they jumped, and dashed away, crashing desperately through the low bushes to put themselves out of sight of the youngsters.

So, before either Betty or Polly had drawn breath after the first shock of this strange encounter, they were alone again. In a stupefied manner they stared at each other. Why—why should a couple of men like that, even supposing they were utter vagrants, bolt off in such haste?

Even if they were up to no good, why should they be put to flight by a couple of mere schoolgirls?

The answer came to Betty in a flash, and she exclaimed excitedly:

"Two more of them, Polly! Don't you see—"

"Two more of the Meteor's rascally crew—come back to the district to get their share of the loot!"

"Oh, my word!" gasped Polly. "Yes, you are right. That's why they bolted—for fear we should recognise them!"

Betty stood on tiptoe to peer around over the tops of the low bushes. Nothing could she see of the two fugitives, however. They were lying low again.

To Polly, the obvious thing seemed to be to go on again, and rejoin the other girls; but Betty hung back, and by a sudden knitting of her brows she showed that her brain was working swiftly.

"Yes, I've got it!" she exclaimed softly at last. "Polly, say what you think of this. We know that the man and his wife at the cattle-shed are hiding there, not only to avoid the police, but to avoid the rest of the gang. So the two men we saw just now—"

"They are hunting the moor for that couple. Oh, yes, that's right enough!" agreed Polly. "The Meteor's whole crew may have come dribbling back to this district—"

"As likely, as not," put in Betty softly. "And what a lark—what a feather in our cap, Polly, if we can catch the whole jolly lot of them!"

"As well as get back the jewels? Oh, I say—"

"Sh! We can do it, Polly," whispered the Form captain. "In two ticks I'll show you how!"

CHAPTER 25.

The Bait to the Trap.

WHAT happened, after Betty and Polly had for a minute or so been talking softly together, seemed to be very indiscreet conduct on their part.

But they knew what they were about. It was all in the plan of campaign.

They moved on again, zig-zagging among the clumps of furze and going up and down over the uneven ground, and all the time they kept up a stream of talk concerning the missing jewels.

For Betty's theory was that those two men who had bolted off just now would certainly try to stalk them as soon as they resumed their ramble, on purpose to overhear any talk. The guilty-minded rascals would be anxious to know what they, the two schoolgirls, had thought of their taking alarm like that.

So this was one remark which Betty threw out, in the hope that it would reach the men's ears.

"They might have been poachers, Polly! In that case, one would expect them to get up and run."

And Polly said:

"Something like that, no doubt. Anyhow, we needn't bother about them any more. It is that other couple—the man and his wife—we want to follow up!"

"Yes." Betty paused to free herself from a trailing bramble-branch. "You are right, Polly. My belief is that that man and woman had something to do with the robbery on the yacht. They know where the jewels are—"

"And most likely they are going to visit the place where the loot is hidden to-night," Polly rejoined, putting no restraint on her excited voice. It was just as if the two girls had not the faintest suspicion that anybody might overhear.

"That's my suggestion, anyhow," Betty said, throwing out more verbal "bait" for chance eavesdroppers. "We'll come out on to the moor after dark, and track that man and woman when they set out to visit the spot where the loot is hidden."

"Good wheeze! Then, when they are gone, we can dig up the jewels—and there you are!" crowed Polly. "But come on now!"

Betty was quite willing to go on a little faster. The pair of them were certain that

it what they had said had been overheard, then it was bait that had been greedily swallowed. The two men were mad to find out where Luke Pallant and his wife were in hiding, and where the jewels were hidden. If only they had overheard the talk intended for them, they would certainly be on the look-out to-night for two girls who were going to track the Pallants.

"And so," Betty chuckled, as she and Polly talked over the whole ruse when they had got to a barren part of the moor where nobody could possibly be in ambush, "we shall not only get the Pallants caught, but this couple as well. And if this couple have passed the word to all the rest, why

"Oh, it's spiffing!" said Polly gleefully. "I'm bursting to tell Paula and the others!"

The jubilant pair caught up with their chums a few minutes later, and in a breathless manner they explained the whole thrilling situation.

Whilst Madge, Paula, Tess, and Trixie were listening to the story that was being unfolded, they simply stood utterly bewildered. But that was not because they were failing to understand the situation, for it was perfectly simple.

The girls listened in a dazed manner, being utterly astounded at what this afternoon's ramble for exercise had brought forth.

At a time when Mr. Trelawney was offering that stupendous reward of one thousand pounds for the recovery of the jewels, and when all the police were quite baffled, they, the chums of Morcove, had made this great discovery.

They had found the lair in which the apparent ringleaders of the thieving crew were in hiding. And to-night, if all went well, the ringleaders would lead the girls to the spot where the jewels were hidden. One thousand pounds reward!

Betty & Co. laughed at the idea of their coming in for such a huge windfall. Not that the reward was a fantastic one by any means. The stolen jewels were worth at least twenty thousand pounds, and Mr. Trelawney would have been not only foolish but very mean to offer a trumpety reward for the recovery of stolen property valued at such a figure.

But—no, it was a thing Betty & Co. had to chuckle about, this idea of their ever coming in for the reward. Of course, they

said amongst themselves, it would not apply to them. Mr. Trelawney was Tess' uncle, and they were all personal friends of his and Mrs. Trelawney's, so it was not to be imagined that he would write out that monster cheque for them. Nor would they wish him to.

To the girls it was going to be quite enough reward if they had the glory of bringing to book as shameless a lot of rascals as ever deserved penal servitude.

"There they were; a well-paid, trusted lot of men and women, on board the Meteor," Betty remarked, as she and her chums trudged on to the school. "And yet they could not remain honest. What's more—"

"Yes, wather!" broke in Paula indignantly. "I cannot forget how they deserted the vessel, after the wobbery, leaving us and Mr. and Mrs. Trelawney to our fate. The wough waves, geals; the cwuel gale—"

"And you, you poor old darling," put in Polly, flinging an arm about Paula's waist; "there were you having to turn to at stoking the fires in the stokehold! Ha, ha, ha!"

"It was no laughing matter at the time, Polly dear!"

"Wasn't it, though! When you had a face like a sweep's! And your hair—"

"Pway, don't wemind me, Polly—"

"That was when you should have had your photograph taken for the daily papers," teased Polly. "With all those streaks of coal dust across your cheeks, and a black smudge on your nose, and—oh, dear, ha, ha, ha!"

"There are times, Polly, dear," Paula said sadly, whilst all the others could not help giving vent to a peal of laughter, "there are times when you are pawticularly aggwavating, weally. Wealising as you do that I am a geal who likes to appeah we-spectable, bai Jove, you wegard it as a gweat joke—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"A cause of wibald laughter; yes, wibald, Polly. That's the word!"

"He, he, he!"

"Because I twied to do my best under pawticularly tying conditions—wough waves—cwuel gale—dwenched to the skin, yes, wather—"

"Poor Paula; we know all about it," Betty struck in comfortingly. "It is a shame to tease you! But, there, your

revenge is coming, dear, as regards all you suffered at the hands of those villainous rascals. To-night—"

"What-ho!" exclaimed Polly. "It's going to be about the biggest thing we have ever been mixed up in—and that's saying something!"

It was. Somehow or other, if ever there was anything in the way of adventure or mystery going at Morcove School the chums of the Fourth were always in it!

Into the school house they trooped, and a few minutes later the girls were with their headmistress in her private room, telling her all that they had found out, and how they had planned a great "round-up" of the Meteor robbers for that evening.

Mr. and Mrs. Trelawney chanced to be there, and their delight and admiration when they also heard the news can be imagined.

Miss Somerfield did not demonstrate her pride in the girls' achievement too much. She was so calm about the whole thing, indeed, that Tess' uncle was frankly surprised.

"Miss Somerfield," he exclaimed, himself in the most wrought-up state of excitement, "you don't seem to take it all in! These girls of yours—they look like being the means of getting my wife back all her jewellery, and bringing the whole villainous gang to book!"

"It is because they are girls of mine, that I am—what shall I say?" smiled the beloved headmistress of Morcove. "Used to them! They are so much girls of mine, I feel that to praise them is to seem to trumpet the school's fame in your ears."

"I am sure of this at any rate: they'll want their achievement to be put to the credit of Morcove School!"

"And the cheque as well?" laughed Mrs. Trelawney. "One thousand pounds! You girls will be in clover! A few new frocks for you, then, Paula!"

"Yes, wather!" beamed that stylish young lady. "Howevah—"

"Oh, don't talk about the cheque; that's only a joke, of course!" exclaimed Polly. "If only we may be allowed to join in the thief-hunt to-night—Miss Somerfield, do, do say we may!"

John Trelawney interposed with a dry chuckle.

"It seems to me that we shall not be able to do without you," he said. "Two of

you, at least, will have to go with us—a bit in advance of us, too—so as to set those two men creeping after you. But it will be all right," he hastened to add, as Miss Somerfield looked rather uneasy. "I and the police will answer for it that the girls come to no harm!"

"My beautiful jewels!" broke out Mrs. Trelawney wistfully. "Everyone of them had some sentimental interest, and oh, I have felt sad about their loss! But now—now—"

"Yes, May darling, it's all serene!" her husband agreed heartily. "Miss Somerfield, may I use your telephone?"

He stepped across to the table and took the receiver off its hook, and Betty & Co., as they felt it was time for them to withdraw, heard him making a significant call to the Barncombe exchange.

"Hallo, there—hallo!" John Trelawney was calling softly, as the girls were passing from the room. "Give me the police-station, will you, please? The inspector in charge—yes!"

Out in the passage Polly did a caper. "Spiffing!" she exulted. "Isn't it topping, girls? Betty! Madge! Paula—"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove! But pway don't demonstrate your exuberance in such a wiculous fashion," pleaded the aristocrat of the Form. "If there's one thing I like to do, Polly, deah—and you are well aweah of it—it is to keep my hair to wights!"

CHAPTER 26.

Night on the Moor.

DARK night had settled upon the romantic world of Morcove.

In the great school house—that great lonely range of imposing buildings standing high upon a headland facing the sea, and with wild moorland to right and left and behind it—the time was passing for most of the girls in quite the usual fashion.

In the various studies some scholars were still slogging away at prep. Others were writing letters for home, or sitting about in gossipy groups. One Fourth Form scholar—and her name was Audrey Blain—was quite alone, doubtless pretending that she enjoyed the solitude, but in reality sulking in secret over her loss of the Form captaincy.

In Study No. 12, however, there was neither a thought for prep., nor could any letter-writing be taken on this evening.

Betty and Polly were there, and with them were Paula, Madge, Tess and Trixie—waiting for the time to start!

Their excitement was intense. It was having quite an alarming effect upon mad-cap Polly. She wanted to break out into the most riotous state of mirthfulness, and yet she felt she must bottle up her feelings for the present. The result was that she looked as if at any moment she must, so to speak, explode!

And Paula—Paula was loling in her favourite armchair; but she was not as restless as usual. Her hair was slightly disarrayed, and she never even gave it a thought!

"Hark!" Betty said suddenly.

Ding-dong, ding-dong, went the school chimes, and then bong, bong, the great iron tongue of the big bell dinned out the hour with ponderous strokes.

Eight o'clock.

Before the last stroke of the bell was vibrating on the silence of the outer world, Betty & Co. were all on their feet, putting on hats and coats.

The moment had come!

They had been told, when eight o'clock struck, to make for a certain part of the school grounds, where Mr. Trelawney and all the police would be waiting for them.

So, in a few moments, they were slipping off downstairs, and it was their good luck not to come under the notice of girls who would naturally wonder what was in the wind.

One girl the chums did encounter as they were slipping softly along the Fourth Form corridor, and that was Audrey Blain. She did not allow herself to appear inquisitive, and in a moment the girls were gone past her. But by the way she stood just outside her own study door afterwards, staring in the direction in which the girls had passed from sight, it was evident that they were in her thoughts. It was evident, too, that it had galled her pride afresh to know that Betty and her chums were figuring in some secret affair this evening, with the headmistress' full approval.

Always to the fore, those girls! Such was her thought, no doubt, as she returned to the solitude of her own study, and sat

down to brood again over her lost throne. What a queenly time she had had of it whilst she was stop-gap captain of the Form. And now—now she was only one of the rank and file again. It hurt. It hurt all the more because she knew quite well that she had only herself to blame for the humiliating come-down!

Meantime, the chums had got away from the house, after a word from Miss Somerfield wishing them good luck and a safe return. Each girl had an electric torch in her pocket, in case of need; but the arrangement was: "No lights of any sort!" So, in groping darkness, they felt their way round into one of the shrubberies.

Softly though they approached the rendezvous, their coming was heard, and all at once John Trelawney met them on a winding path.

"All present? Good!" he commented, in a whisper. "The police are here, too; quite an army of them! Now, Betty and Polly—where are you two?"

"Here, sir!" the couple in question answered softly, standing forward.

John Trelawney leant towards them to speak again in a safe whisper.

"You two girls must take the lead, as arranged," he said. "Your chums will go with you, but you must pretend to be doing everything. As for myself and the police—"

He made an impressive pause.

"I want you to understand quite clearly. We shall have to keep a little distance behind you; but we'll get to you in a jiffy, if you shout for help."

"We shan't be attacked," Betty said with conviction. "Those two men, if they took the bait this afternoon, will want to leave us alone and just track us, so that we can lead them to where the Pallants are hiding."

"That's right enough," Tess' uncle agreed. "But if you should chance to betray yourselves to the Pallants, then they will go for you! You are not afraid?"

"Afraid!"

The way in which Betty & Co. echoed that word gave John Trelawney a thrill of delight. In the darkness he distributed admiring pats of the hand.

"You have some grit, you girls," he said. "Well, we are ready when you are!"

And that was the last word to be spoken just then.

Betty and Polly set off resolutely, and after them stole the other girls. They were in a wilderness part of the school grounds, and as they groped along they were aware of passing all the police who had assembled there, with a police-inspector in charge.

The burly, uniformed fellows remained mute and still until the girls had taken the lead; then they all moved out from amongst the bushes and crept on after them.

At the same time, they were careful to let the girls draw farther and farther ahead. Nothing of the police was to be seen, of course, by anybody who might be lying in wait to see a few daring schoolgirls slip out of bounds!

"This way, all!" Betty said in a stage whisper, as she led on towards a certain remote part of the school boundary hedge. "Then we can go straight out on to the moor!"

When the girls got to the hedge, they purposely made a good deal of rustling and scuffling. This was to make sure of their movements being detected by anybody who had been on watch for them since nightfall.

Were either of those two men, or both of them, lurking around in the darkness? That was what the chums were wondering anxiously, as they scrambled one by one through the hedge-gap. Had they really had the luck to decoy that pair of rascals close to the school? Were the pair on the look-out now—getting ready to track the schoolgirls across the moor? If they were, then the adventure was going to be a great success!

It was very trying for Betty & Co.; there was just this horrid doubt. Had the "bait" been swallowed that afternoon?

With more of a pretence at stealth, than the real thing, the daring schoolgirls moved out on to the nightbound moor, eyes and ears all on the alert. For all they could see or hear, they might have been the only persons within a quarter-mile radius of that wild spot. And this showed how well the police were doing their part at present—making after the girls without the slightest sound of any sort. There was to be no pretence about the stealth shown by Mr. Trelawney and the police.

Then, suddenly, the girls got a shock!

To the right of them, as they prowled forward over the moor, there was a faint

rustling of some undergrowth, and they wondered—was that one of the two men? This was certain, it could not be any of the police or Mr. Trelawney, for they were well back in the rear.

"Come on; don't take any notice of that! Have you never heard a rabbit scampering about before?" Betty exclaimed, with make-believe impatience. "We shall never get on at this rate!"

"I hope it's all right!" Polly said, in one of her stage whispers.

"Of course it is!" Betty answered—quite snappishly. "We'll get to the Pallants' hiding-place quite easily, and then—just think, if we can follow them and see where the jewels are hidden!"

As if these exciting words had filled all Betty's companions with the desire to make haste, they hurried on much faster, making just sufficient noise to enable anybody to find it easy to follow at a safe distance.

That they were being followed—and not by Mr. Trelawney and the police only—the girls were soon convinced.

Again and again they heard the tell-tale sounds, not from behind, but always from the right of them. And so they knew that someone was there keeping pace with them across the nightbound moor.

Even better; when Betty & Co. had gone half the distance to the cattle-shed, they picked up other tell-tale sounds from the surrounding moor.

So then the bait had surely been swallowed, and it was to be as Betty had hoped. Word had gone round amongst the whole crew of the Meteor, and every man and woman entitled to a share in the lot was lurking on the moor to-night, grateful to Betty & Co. for guiding them to where the Pallants' were in hiding.

And now the excited girls saw the ugly cattle-shelter looming blackly before them on the lonely moor. It was a case of being as stealthy as possible after this. They had wanted those other rogues to hear them, but the Pallants—no! That couple must never suspect that they were being spied upon, or they would simply bolt off, instead of paying a visit to the secret spot where the loot was hidden.

So, from this moment onwards, the girls became as stealthy as they knew how to be when there was the need. Like Redskins on the trail, they snaked along towards the ramshackle shed. From a great way off in

the darkness came the faint ding-dong of the school chimes again.

A quarter to nine. It was at nine o'clock Pallant had proposed setting forth to visit the secret spot, so the girls felt they were in time!

And so they were—but only just in time! All was silence now, and they imagined that the man and woman were hanging back inside the shed for some reason or other. Was it because they had begun to suspect that the moor held its prowlers to-night, on the look-out for them?

Then, all at once, Polly gave a whisper of warning to her chums.

"Great Scott, the Pallants have already left the shed, and we didn't see them go!" she said excitedly, under her breath. "Look, there they are—making off across the moor!"

"Oh, I say; after them!" panted Betty, in just as great alarm as Polly was. "If we don't look out we'll lose them, and then—"

She did not finish the remark, but her chums knew what she had meant to say.

If the Pallants gave them the slip like this, it would be sheer disaster to the whole plan.

It would mean that the secret spot where the jewels were hidden would never be found.

CHAPTER 27.

When Rogues Fall Out.

"HIST, Meg! Half a sec! Listen!" Luke Pallant voiced the nervous entreaty in a hissing whisper, and instantly his wife was standing very still with him amongst the gorse and brambles.

"I don't know," he muttered uneasily, after listening for several seconds without hearing a sound. "My nerves—they are all of a dither to-night, Meg! It's easy to fancy that the place is swarming with spies!"

"But you have been on watch for hours, Luke!" the woman said encouragingly. "And not a sound all the time!"

"No, that's a fact there weren't. Only, you see, it would never surprise me if the others that were in the conspiracy have come skulking back. It's only natural they should start itching for their shares of the loot."

He said again "Hark!" and again they both listened intently.

Not a sound.

"Oh, it must be all right!" he rallied himself at last. "So come on. You've got that bit of a sack, Meg?"

"Here, over my arm!"

"Don't you go letting it drop unawares," he cautioned her. "We've got to empty all those jewel-cases, and put the jewellery itself in that sack. 'T would be fatal for us to try and take the stuff away in the cases, they bulk so much."

Then he lapsed into silence, feeling his way over the nightbound moor with extreme caution. And all the time Betty & Co. were creeping in pursuit.

It had been almost a panicky moment for the girls when they feared that the darkness had let the couple slip away from the shed unseen. Betty and her companions had had to make a desperate rush to get the pair in sight again, and yet that rush had had to be a soundless one.

A false step in the darkness, then; the least sound betraying their presence, and the whole daring exploit would have been ruined.

But no mishap had occurred. They now had the Pallants in sight again, and were following step for step—following with the thrilling certainty that this villainous pair were making tracks for the hidden jewels.

It was an adventure that the girls would never forget. The wild moorland under cover of night; their tracking this sinister couple across the jungly waste, whilst others were tracking them. How strange and thrilling it all was!

For a good half-hour the man and his wife prowled on over the undulating moor, pausing frequently to listen, but never picking up a sound from round about. This freedom from all scares, and perhaps the freshness of the night air, must have had a bracing effect upon Pallant, for when he spoke again it was in a self-confident tone.

"Ay, we've diddled 'em, Meg!" he exulted, checking to a standstill in the centre of a grassy plot that was surrounded by bushes. "Whether the others that were in the coup have come back to this district or not, they'll never get their shares now!"

And then something happened that must have made him and his wife sit to drop with dismay.

"Won't we get our shares!" barked out a gruff voice savagely. "That's where you're mistaken, Luke Pallant! Come on, chaps; we've got 'em!"

Betty and her chums were close at hand amongst the scrub when the furious cry broke forth. At first, they felt it must be the police-inspector's way of giving the signal for his men to close in upon the rascally pair. Then they knew better.

The cry had hardly been voiced before a number of men who were not policemen sprang erect from the various points where they had been hiding, and rush in upon the Pallants, crashing through bushes and bramble in the fury of their onset.

"Hold 'em—hold 'em fast!" urged one man, whose burly figure the girls could see looming in the darkness. "Luke Pallant, you tricky scoundrel, we'll take it out of you for this!"

"Ay, ay, that we will!" chorused others. "You and your missus both—"

"Mortimer! Hendricks! Williard! Stop, all of you!" the girls heard Pallant himself gasping out imploringly. "It's all right, I tell you!"

"It's all wrong, you mean!" retorted the spokesman of the rest of the Meteor's crew. "You shifted the jewels out of the cave! You and your missus meant to stick to the whole lot!"

"No, Mortimer! Listen—"

"Gurr, you cheat!" the man Mortimer silenced the blustering Pallant, in an awful voice. "You're a nice one, you are! We were all in the robbery, and 'twas to be share and share alike. And you made up your mind to get away with all the stuff yourself!"

A medley of angry tones came to the girls as they still lay low, not twenty yards from where this wild scene was taking place. Then they heard Mortimer's voice booming over the rest:

"If Williard and I hadn't been spying around the moor to-day, and if we hadn't heard two girls talking about having seen you, we'd have been swindled right enough. But we're here, d'ye see, Pallant? And this is where the jewels are hid—we know it is!"

"Let's have the stuff—let's have it!" clamoured the rest excitedly.

"Ay, we'll have it!" thundered Mortimer. "Luke here will either tell us the exact spot where to dig, or I'll smash him,

I will! We'll have the stuff in no time; and I'll watch he doesn't have his share now—"

"Ay, ay, pay him out, that's the way!" applauded the others. "The low-down cheat!"

The listening girls heard a whimpering cry come from Meg Pallant; but the men were furious, and no wonder. They almost shouted her down by calling upon her husband to say exactly where the jewels could be found.

At this instant Betty got a nudge from Polly, who in turn had been nudged by Paula. The Form captain twisted about as she crouched amongst the gorse, and she saw why she had been cautioned.

John Trelawney was amongst them, at the head of a long line of crouching figures—the police!

—All this time Mortimer was storming at the wretched Pallant.

"Come on, tell us where to dig! There were those girls following you, and you bet what you like, Pallant, they've scuttled off now, scared out of their lives! But they'll blab when they get to the school—"

"Ay, so look sharp!" broke in two or three of the other ruffians. "No time to waste!"

Betty and her chums were peering at John Trelawney now. They saw the triumphant grin on his handsome face broaden, whilst he slewed round to exchange a look with the inspector.

Next instant all the quarrelsome voices of the Meteor's rascally crew were overwhelmed by a burst of honest cheering.

"Hurrah! At 'em, you men! You've got them nicely! Hurrah!"

"Yes, wathah! Bai Jove, goals—"

"Hooray!" Polly, needless to say, was doing her share of the cheering, as she and her chums saw the sturdy police charge forward into the very midst of the thieving gang. "Bravo, the police!"

"Bravo, the school, too, I'm thinking!" sang out John Trelawney, dashing away from the excited group of girls to take his fair share in the tussle.

Then in the darkness there raged a sudden fierce conflict between the officers of the law and the whole rascally gang who had once been John Trelawney's trusted crew on board his palatial yacht.

Some of the thieves would have been only too glad to bolt for liberty, but they were

not given a chance. Others, mad with rage at the way they had been trapped, began to put up a stiff fight. By the time the schoolgirls had thought to get out their electric torches and switch them on, the police were having to show the stout stuff they were made of.

From first to last Betty & Co. wisely held away from the exciting mix-up of tough policeman and rascally thieves. But no sooner had the whole gang been overpowered than the girls went rushing forward to give another ringing cheer for the victors.

The torches were kept going, and it was a never-to-be-forgotten spectacle that was lit up by a criss-cross of electric rays. Luke Pallant and his wife; the man—Mortimer and all whom he had fetched along this evening for the purpose of claiming a fair "share out"—they were in handcuffs. With clothes dishevelled and torn by the desperate affray, a nice lot of scarecrows they looked.

Nor had the police come off without what Paula Creel would call a "wuffling." Battered helmets were lying all over the ground, and when Polly picked up one, the inspector said with a laugh:

"You can keep that, missy, as a sort of souvenir!"

"Hooray, so I will!" chuckled Polly. And she did.

There was but this one moment of levity on Polly's part, however, and then she was serious again as any. For she heard John Trelawney address a certain question to Luke Pallant that meant another thrill of excitement.

"Where are the jewels, Pallant?" demanded the millionaire owner of the Meteor sternly. "Answer me! Whereabouts round here are they hidden?"

Pallant, with the handcuffs at his wrists, and with a sturdy policeman keeping a grip on his collar, was the very picture of sullen

rage. If he did not answer at once, it was not because he had any hope of being able to keep the secret of the hiding-place. He was simply choking with anger.

"Oh, I don't mind telling you!" he said at last thickly. "They're under your feet at this moment! You won't need a spade, either. My wife and I——"

Mortimer, also in handcuffs, broke out wildly:

"It's gaol for the lot of us now, Pallant, thanks to you not playing the straight game with us! Look out for yourself, then, when I've done my time in prison. I'll hunt you down! I'll——"

"Ay, ay, so I will!" cried others, looking as if they would like to fly at Pallant and tear him to pieces. "You—you——"

"There, that will do; take 'em away, my men!" the inspector cut in cheerily; and next moment the whole band of prisoners was being marched away.

"Half a sec, inspector!" John Trelawney called after the officer, so that that worthy turned back. "You can stay around, perhaps, to help me get the jewels out. And perhaps these girls will help me!"

Tess' uncle spoke laughingly; and, indeed, there was not the least doubt that the girls were simply yearning to get at those jewels. Torches were already playing upon the turf, which showed signs of having been cut away at a certain spot and then replaced. So down on their knees flopped Betty, Polly, all of them, and like a lot of young terriers they whisked up the loose lumps of turf and then pawed away at the earth itself.

A few seconds of this eager work, and there was a gleeful shout from Polly.

"Hurrah! Here's one!"

Her hand flew up, brandishing the jewel-case which she had unearthed. Her chums gave it a lightning glance, then worked on faster than ever, and now it was Betty who made a find.

"Hurrah, here's another!"

"And another!" chimed in Tess. "Oh, I say——"

"Bai Jove, geals, I've got the gwreatest treasure of all—Mrs. Twelawney's emeralds!"

So the thrilling task went on, case after case of precious jewels being brought out of the cache that had been dug for them on this wild and lonely moor. At last Mr. Trelawney plied his own torch upon the recovered loot, and by counting up the cases he was able to inform the girls that every item was accounted for.

"Then we've got the lot—hurrah!" Polly exploded again, scrambling out of the hole. "The whole jolly lot, and won't your aunt be pleased, Tess, darling!"

They each took some of the cases, and started back for the school, with John Trelawney and the inspector exclaiming again and again:

"Fancy, we've got the lot!"

They got to the school porch at last, and burst into the house, shouting the joyful news from end to end of it:

"Hurrah, hooray! Miss Somerfield—everybody! We've got all the jewels back. We've got them all—hurrah!"

CHAPTER 22.

Bravo, the Fourth!

NO school for Betty & Co. next morning.

They had to be at Barncombe police-court, there to give evidence in the case against Luke Pallant and all his fellow-prisoners.

All Barncombe would have liked to squeeze itself into the little court-house whilst the case was on. For never before had that sleepy little Devonshire town known such a big sensation.

The accused were charged with robbery

on the high seas and desertion from their ship, and on those grave counts they were committed for trial at the next assizes.

At the moment when the presiding magistrate pronounced the finding of the court, and ordered the prisoners to be taken away by the warders, Luke Pallant became once more the object of the others' angry gaze. Once again Mortimer and the rest looked as if they would like to have Pallant at their mercy for a couple of minutes!

As for Pallant himself, just as the warder was tapping him on the shoulder, he sent a glance at the schoolgirls. They met the look, and full well they knew its meaning. Pallant was saying to himself just then:

"But for you girls I would never have been here to-day! If it hadn't been for you, my wife and I would have had the loot all to ourselves!"

Nor was there any disputing the fact. Betty & Co. had been the direct means of bringing to justice the whole band of desperate villains. The police had done their part with great credit to themselves; but that part had only begun after the drums of Morcove School had paved the way to the arrest by some very clever detective work.

And so, that same afternoon, when John Trelawney had ended some very pleasant talk with Miss Somerfield, in that lady's private room at the school, he took his seat at her desk and began to write something upon a slip of paper.

At the same time, Miss Somerfield touched the bell to summon one of the maids, who was told to find Betty and her chums and ask them to "report."

Classes had ended ten minutes previously, and in that brief period Paula Creed had found time to drop in at Study No. 12, and, finding nobody there, had dropped off to sleep! But there was an excuse for Paula, to-day. It had been a late hour,

indeed, last night, when the Fourth Form dormitory had stopped talking.

Betty and Polly came sauntering into their own study, to find their aristocratic friend more at home than ever in the favourite armchair. Betty grinned, and Polly grimaced.

"Check!" fumed Polly, with the usual make-believe wrath. And she began to think out some novel means of giving the slumbering aristocrat a startling awakening.

Madge and a few of the other girls came along, and they, too, said, "Oh, dear!" when they saw Paula soundly reposing in the armchair.

"It has been too much for her," smiled Madge Minden. "She was only just recovering from all the adventures on the yacht, and you knew we did go on talking until an unearthly hour last night!"

"Talking! Paula was talking the whole night long, I do believe—in her sleep!" chuckled Tess. "I woke up about three a.m., and I heard a voice saying how 'weugh' the waves were!"

"Yes, wather," Paula sighed softly in her sleep at this moment.

"Ha, ha, ha!" Polly chortled. "Duffer, don't you know where you are?" she asked, shaking Paula gently.

"On the wocks, Polly, deah! Bai Jove, yes, wather! Bwitannia wules the waves!"

"She's kidding us!" said Betty.

"No, she really is asleep," declared Polly. "Right off to sleep! But I know how to wake her—he, he, he!"

So saying, the mischievous one made a dart across the room and picked up the "souvenir" helmet from a corner.

"Oh, la-la!" Trixie exclaimed, fond as ever of airing her alleged French. "Un tres joli chapcau, oui!—a very nice hat—"

"Yes, wather!" Paula sighed again in her sleep. She sank a little more comfortably in the easy chair. "Goals—"

"Whoa, steady!" Polly said to herself, starting to fit the battered bobby's helmet on the aristocrat's pretty head. "How's that, umpire?"

The others gave a peal of merriment. Paula, asleep in the chair, with the helmet squashed over her head and coming half-way down her nose, was a strange spectacle!

"Great pains should be taken to adjust the strap," went on Polly, suiting the action to the word. "That's better; tucked nicely under the chin—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Sh! You'll wake her! Shall we wake her now?" chuckled Polly, "and tell her the press photographer is here?"

"Oui, oui!" applauded Trixie. "I never saw anything so droll! Jamais, jamais—never, never!"

"Don't talk to me about jam; it makes me want to jam the helmet on harder than ever!" laughed Polly. "Hi, wake up, Paula—wake up!" she shouted, giving a sudden playful tap to the helmet.

Then Paula gave a start and opened her pretty eyes.

"Bai Jove, goals! I vewy nearly dwopped to sleep just then! I—er—hallo? What's wong with my head? Gweat goodness—"

"Paula, sit still! Leave the helmet alone!"

"Healmeat, bai Jove? But what—why—"

"You are to have your photograph taken for the daily papers!"

"Wha—a—a—at!" screeched Paula, struggling up in horror.

As she did this the helmet fell forward over her face, and the rest of what she had to say became a series of gurgles and gasps.

"Take it off!" she managed to wail at last, whilst the chums fairly flopped about

the room, doubled up with merriment. "Betty, deah—Madge! Heapl!"

"Have a good look at yourself," Polly advised, holding out a hand-mirror that she had snatched from the mantelpiece. "Oh, it's a pretty hat, that one! Only it should be worn—"

"You silly cweatures—"

"It should be worn farther back. Like that," Polly said, giving the helmet a tilt that sent it clean off Paula's head. But it still hung about her neck by reason of the strap, and then Paula, for once in her amiable life, "saw red."

"You cwazy lot of fwivolous cweatures!" she shrieked. "Pway understand, I will not be tweated with such downright diswpect! I—bai Jove; oh, gweat goodness, what a life it is!" she broke off, flopping back into the armchair, with the helmet still dangling round her neck.

It was at this moment that the parlour-maid opened the door and looked in with her message from Miss Somerfield.

"If you please," she began, then stopped. She started to titter.

"And what are you gwinning at?" glared Paula.

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled the others, whilst the maid, afraid of exploding with laughter before them all, simply bolted out of the room.

Betty ran out to her, and came back with the news that they were to go to Miss Somerfield's room at once.

"My patience, what's wong now?" groaned poor Paula. "Tell me geals," she added, tearing off the helmet at last and hurling it across the room, "am I pwsentable? Is my haih vevy dweadfully wuffed?"

They all assured Paula that she looked so very charming, her mere appearance was enough to ensure her "getting off lightly!" Not that they could feel they

had done anything just lately deserving of a lecture and "lines."

"Come in, girls—and toe the line," their headmistress greeted them, a couple of minutes later, and this began to look serious after all.

"I expect you are wondering what you have done, girls—"

"We are, indeed—yes, wather!" they blurted out.

"May I have the pleasure of telling them?" said John Trelawncy then, startling the girls by coming from behind a screen. "Young ladies, what you have done is to earn my wife's and my own undying gratitude—and a thousand pounds cheque!"

There was a noise in the room like rockets going up. That was Polly whistling "phee-ew!" over and over again.

Paula held on to Betty, gasping feebly: "Bai Jove! Did I heah awight, geals?"

A thousand pounds cheque—widelous—weally—I must be dweaming, what?"

"Oh, Mr. Trelawncy!" began Madge, whilst Tess cut in:

"Yes, uncle! It's absurd, really! That reward you offered—"

"Has been earned by you girls," he insisted stoutly. "Hasn't it, May darling?" he added as Mrs. Trelawncy suddenly made her timely appearance in the room. "Am I to go back on my word, just because it happens to be a party of schoolgirls who brought about the arrest of those scoundrels and the recovery of the jewels?"

"If you make the reward a penny less than what you offered," said Mrs. Trelawncy, coming to her husband's side and squeezing his arm affectionately, "I—I'll never speak to you again, so there!"

John Trelawncy held out the cheque with a laugh.

"Take it quick, Betty! You are captain, and so I hand it to you, although, of course, this is only a formality, and you'll each

want your right share by-and-by. Take it, so that my wife will know I really am a fellow who stands by his word!"

"But—but—a thousand pounds——"

"Gweat goodness, yes! Bai Jove, geals——"

"What shall we do with it?" cried Polly, as much overwhelmed as any. "Unless we keep it, and don't divide it, but——"

"Give it to some deserving cause," said Madge. "Ah, yes——"

"Yes, wather! Wipping notion, that!"

"Well, then, on that understanding we take the cheque, Mr. Trelawney, and I am sure, sir—I'm sure we—we——"

"Yes, wather!"

"We—we—we think it awfully good and sporting of you, Mr. Trelawney, and all that——"

"Heah, heah, bai Jove! I am sure, dear Mr. and Mrs. Trelawney, when we all started out on our visit to the yacht, the other day, we never dreamed of all the remarkable adventures that we were to have! Howrah——"

"The Meteor may see you on board again some day—who knows?" said Mr. Trelawney cheerily. "And I can promise you this, young ladies, you'll have a better crew next time!"

Miss Somerfield, beaming with pleasure at the way her girls had acquitted themselves, and at the golden opinions they had won from the millionaire and his wife, went to the door and threw it open. And then Betty & Co. found that word must have been passed through the school for the scholars to gather there to give them a cheer.

"Bravo, Betty & Co.—bravo, the Fourth!" chorused all Morcove, as it pursued the fleeing heroines of the hour upstairs to the studies. "Bravo, the captain and her chums!"

Along in Study No. 8, Audrey Blain heard all the applauding shouts for Betty Barton and the others, and once again a sort of spasm of pain twisted her handsome face.

So, one way and another, Betty with her loyal chums still maintained the old reputation throughout the school. Whilst she, Audrey—what was she to-day?

With a hard sigh she subsided into a chair at the table, thumped her elbows upon the table-edge, and with her fierce face framed between her hands she sat thus—thinking!



Three more splendid numbers of "The Schoolgirls' Own" Library will be on sale on Thursday, August 2nd. See page iii of cover for further particulars.

Long Distance Swimming.

Are you going to try to swim the Channel this year? No? Excuse the question then, but it seems that almost everybody is setting out to do it nowadays.

One of the latest aspirants, as you know, is almost a schoolgirl. Certainly she is not beyond school age. Sixteen, that's all! Well, I'm sure we all wish her luck, and may she add her name to the growing list of ladies who have swum the water dividing England from France.

Have you noticed the tremendous vogue that now exists for long-distance swimming? At one time, speed was the one thing that mattered, and most swimming events were sprints of one hundred yards upwards. The half-mile was almost considered a distance event.

It has often been asked if these long swims do not impose too great a strain on girls of a young age, but provided a proper course of training is indulged in before the event, there is no reason why it should.

Swimming is really the perfect exercise, developing the muscles of the whole body almost equally and not imposing a big strain upon any particular part.

Those of you who are novices at the swimming game will probably wonder however any girl can stand the strain of hour upon hour of swimming, when you feel thoroughly done up after two or three lengths of the baths.

The answer is that such feats of endurance require to be worked up to gradually. You need to indulge in almost daily swims throughout the season if you hope to succeed at long distance work. Distance should be added gradually to your swims, and you will find that you are able to work up to the mile in surprisingly quick time.

Somehow, once the first mile has been swum, any distance seems within the bounds of possibility.

At one time most of the distance swimmers used the breast stroke continuously. The first Channel swimmer, Captain Webb,

used it from Dover to Calais with very infrequent and short intervals of the side stroke.

But what an awful strain! No wonder the stroke has been displaced by the side, overarm, trudgeon, and crawl. The last-named is the most popular of all, and though originally regarded as a racing stroke, it has gradually come into favour for long-distance swimming. Miss Ederle used it on her Channel swim.

A good many swimmers to-day regard it as necessary to have two particular strokes for fast distance swimming. These are the crawl and the back stroke. There are some very speedy styles of the latter nowadays, and they provide a good variation from the monotony and stiffness brought on by continuous swimming face downwards.

If you have the ambition to become a long-distance swimmer you cannot start too early. The reason why the Australian girls of Sydney provide so many experts is because sea-bathing is one of their favourite sports.

Many of them actually learn to swim before they can walk. And they specialise in a stroke called the Australian crawl, which is only slightly different from the American crawl.

The stroke is easily learnt. The leg action is almost the same as that used in walking, and the arm movements are equally simple. Better than trying to learn it from a book is to watch a good swimmer in action, and then to copy her actions. Much better still, of course, to have a few lessons from an instructor.

The same applies to the back stroke. It is the easiest thing possible to cultivate some kind of back stroke, but it is better to start right at the beginning by mastering a stylish stroke. It can only be acquired by expert tuition. That, indeed, is necessary to all who wish to excel in swimming—long distance or otherwise.

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