

THE SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN LIBRARY—No. 176—THE GIRL WHO PUZZLED CLIFF HOUSE!

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4th

*Hilda
Carter.*

*A
New & Original
School Story
by
Hilda Richards*

The Schoolgirls' Own Library No. 176



DO YOU KNOW THESE GIRLS?

THEY are Barbara Redfern, Mabel Lynn, Jemima Carstairs, Bessie Bunter, Marjorie Hazeldene, Dolly Jobling, and Clara Trevlyn, and they appear each week, together with many other splendid characters, in a grand long complete tale of Cliff House School. You will simply love reading of their adventures every week in that magnificent school story-paper—

THE
SCHOOL FRIEND
Every Thursday **2**



The GIRL who PUZZLED CLIFF HOUSE



A Superb NEW Story of BARBARA REDFERN & Co.

Specially written for "THE SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN" LIBRARY.

By **HILDA RICHARDS.**

Author of "THE SCHOOL FRIEND" Stories.

CHAPTER 1.

A Question She Resented!

"THAT'S the third burglary this week," said Clara Trevlyn, and she seemed quite pleased about it.

The small crowd of juniors gathered in the Common-room of Cliff House School, looked at the speaker, who was none other than the tomboy of the Fourth Form of the celebrated girls' school.

"The third," echoed Barbara Redfern, the captain of the Fourth Form, as she put down her book. "I've only heard of two."

"The one at the Grange," pointed out Clara.

"Yes, and Colonel Morgan's place was broken into," supplemented a third girl, named Dolly Jobling. "Now there's this affair at the Manor House. It's getting rather too thick."

"Be here next," grinned Clara. "Don't take all the fire, Alice!"

As a gentle hint of what she expected, Clara edged up closer to Alice King, who, being a member of the Upper Third Form, had really no right to be sitting on the broad fender—that being a place specially

reserved by the Fourth Form for the Fourth Form alone.

Alice, a somewhat timid girl, moved off the fender altogether, and would have sought a place far away, had not Barbara Redfern called her back.

"Don't be a goose!" said Barbara genially. "Clara's only ragging. You'll freeze over there."

"No, really. I shall be all right, Barbara."

"Well, of course, if you want to freeze —"

"She can get a chair in here. Come on, Alice!" And Dolly Jobling made way by pulling her chair round a bit more so that there was space for another.

Most of the girls were still finishing their preparation in the Form-room, the Cliff House coal supply having suddenly run extremely short for some reason. Whatever the cause, the girls felt somewhat piqued, and the few who were in the Junior Common-room kept as close to the fire as possible.

"Anyway, if the burglars are after coal, they won't get any here," giggled Dolly

Jobling. "I say, though, it is a bit serious if there are burglars about."

"There wouldn't be burglaries without burglars, chump!" pointed out Clara. "I think it rather fun, you know. We shall have to double-lock all the doors and that sort of thing—"

"Yes, rather; and perhaps—perhaps we might wait up for one."

Dolly seemed to like that idea; and, of course, Clara was thrilled. She would be.

"Much safer to keep in bed," advised Marjorie Hazeldene, the Fourth Form "cautious" girl. "Not that I really think a burglar would come here—do you?" she asked anxiously, addressing the question to Barbara, who, as captain of the Form, had to know everything.

"Quite likely," replied Barbara in all seriousness, although her gay eyes twinkled. "They'd make a special mark of this place."

"Oh, Babs, you don't think so really?" protested Marjorie.

"Why—have you got any jewels or valuables?" teased Dolly. "They won't take that wonderful crocheted table centre—"

"It's not a table centre. It's a night-dress top!" chuckled Clara.

In point of fact it was neither; but Marjorie only smiled, and did not argue.

"If they do come," decided Barbara Redfern, "we ought to get ready for them. Suppose a dozen of us waited up at the top of the stairs?"

"With hockey-sticks," nodded Clara, her eyes shining in delight. "I say, how perfectly rip—gorgeous, you know! I'd love to catch a burglar."

"Rather!"

"Only," demurred Barbara, "I don't see that we can spend the whole night and every night at the top of the stairs on the off-chance that they might come. Now, if we could get inside information as they call it—"

"Katie!" cried Clara. "Of course, she might know. Isn't her father a detective, or an inquiry agent or something?"

"Katie's coming down in a minute," said Alice King. "I looked into your Form-room—"

"Like your cheek, that was!" remarked Clara by the way; but Alice only smiled.

"Not that she will know anything."

Dolly shrugged. "No one ever does know anything exciting."

All the same, when some twenty minutes later Katie Smith, of the Fourth Form, entered the room they did not forget to ask her. Katie, who took upon her own behalf some of the credit that was her father's, was eager enough to give information. She was the youngest of the Form, and the greater part of her spare time was spent in reading detective stories.

"I'm reading a story now," she said, "about a man—"

"But we want the truth," said Clara, wagging her finger. "Bother the stories! Truth is a stranger to fiction or whatever they say."

"Stranger than," murmured Marjorie gently, crocheting away.

"The truth—about these mysteries? How should I know?" asked Katie in surprise.

"Hasn't your father told you?"

It was hard to admit, but Katie could not conceal the fact then that her father did not always confide in her. She liked to think, however, that he was engaged in the solving of these mysteries.

"Not that they'll worry him unless it's something special," she said. "You see, daddy is interested in criminals. He's written heaps and heaps of books about them, and he knows so many."

"Nice!" chuckled Clara.

"Oh, well, he learns a lot from them—about their types, I mean. I don't suppose he would be interested in such a trivial thing as burglary."

"Not very trivial," corrected Dolly. "By all accounts the colonel lost thousands of pounds' worth of stuff—and now the Manor House has been broken into. One of the school servants told me."

"Oh, well, then perhaps my father will come down!" Katie's eyes gleamed at the thought. "I shall hear all about it then. Perhaps I shall have to help."

"Lucky kid!" Clara looked at her, and thought that there was at least one person in the Fourth Form better able to give such assistance as a detective required; but out of modesty she could not very well mention the fact.

"Wish my father were a detective," sighed Dolly. "Most fathers have silly jobs."

"Awful," agreed Clara. "My pater's a specialist."

"And mine directs companies," sighed Barbara.

"Marjorie's father is a vicar," said Dolly.

"And what's yours, Alice?"

Alice King put down her book, and shook her head.

"I don't know."

Before that she may have been inconspicuous enough; but a girl who did not know what her father was by profession could only hope to be notorious.

"Now, don't be a chump," implored Clara. "My dear kid, you must know what your father is. He doesn't sweep the roads?"

"My hat! That's likely!" struck in Marcia Loftus, and everyone looked round. Marcia, Gwen Cook, and Nancy Bell were the three most unpleasant girls of the Fourth Form at Cliff House.

At the moment they were sitting in a group a few yards away from the rest of the juniors in the Common-room, but they had listened to the conversation, and now, Marcia Loftus' ill-natured voice could not be kept out of it.

"I think my father's—cr—something in the City," said Alice King vaguely, and went very red.

She was a shy girl, and plainly did not like being the centre of attraction. Marcia probably knew that, and, in her spiteful way, intended to make the most of it.

"You know, all right!" she said. "But you're ashamed to say!"

"That's what it is!" sniggered Nancy Bell. "I say, does he come in late with a sack?"

Gwen Cook shrieked at that idea, and one or two of the other girls smiled.

Alice, however, went red, and did not say a word. She looked at Marcia, and her look was not kindly. That look only made Marcia laugh the more.

"Hark at the girl!" she jeered. "Pretends she doesn't know what her father is! My word, I'll find out—"

"Just for fun!" agreed Nancy Bell.

"What a rag if he pushes a street organ round. I've heard they make a lot of money!"

"Perhaps he sells matches," grinned Gwen Cook.

Clara moved restlessly, and waved her hand.

"For goodness' sake, dry up!" she added. "You weren't asked to interfere."

"Interfere!" said Marcia innocently. "Who's interfering? I'm only going to help Alice find out what her father is."

Alice frowned at Marcia, and then shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't particularly want to know," she said.

"How nice," said Clara, and then added hurriedly: "I mean, who would be interested in business without having to be? I'd like to have a father who was famous as a politician, or a film actor, something like that, you know—"

"Nelly Smythe's father is a film actor," said Dolly. "But I don't think that she gets much out of it. My uncle's a politician, and no one in the house ever gets a chance of talking unless he happens to go out. I suppose it's practice."

"That's where you get it from," Clara grinned. "Shows it runs in the family. Your bottom jaw will fall off one day, Dolly."

"He's only my uncle," retorted Dolly. "My father's a lawyer. But fancy your not knowing what your father is in business, Alice. That's awfully queer."

"Yes; don't you really?" asked Katie. "How funny. I always know what people are by the look of them. One can always tell."

"Hear, hear!" agreed Marcia.

"Oh, I dare say he directs companies—whatever that means," said Alice, looking down at her book. "Whatever he is, he's a darling daddy to me."

She snapped her book to, and leaned back in her chair, looking into the fire, reflectively wondering for the first time what her father was by profession, and trying to recall any word that he had said which might give a clue.

Katie was interested, too; for she had made friends with Alice lately. So friendly, indeed, were they that already they had agreed to share a study should Alice be moved into the Fourth next term. It was likely that she would be, and Katie had no girl with whom she was more friendly in the Form than any other.

"Does he buy financial papers regularly?" she asked. "You know, those silly papers that tell you about how tin mines are getting on and how much stock and shares

are worth at close of play, or whatever it is."

"I really don't know."

"Well, does he spend a lot of time at the telephone talking about selling out and buying in, and holding on to shares for a fall or rise?"

"Goodness knows!" And Alice laughed. "Why ever should he? I know he isn't mad."

"That's not madness—that's stockbroking," reproved Katie. "What a funny kid you are not to know." And she looked at Alice rather queerly. Katie's manner, Alice felt, was perhaps a little patronising considering that in their ages there was scarcely any difference at all; but as a Fourth Former Katie had an advantage, while being the daughter of a famous man gave her a reflected prestige. And Alice's own father—

It looked then as though the matter would be dropped; a fact for which Alice was truly grateful; but she had reckoned without Gwen, Marcia, and Nancy, who had been whispering in the corner.

"I've just remembered," said Marcia suddenly. "Your father is the man named King who had just come out of prison!"

Alice went white, and gave a sudden look at all the girls, and she could not fail to notice that they, too, were startled by that accusation.

"That isn't true," said the badgered girl sharply. "My father has never been in prison. You have no right to say such a thing! My goodness! I—I—"

She stood up, and the colour came back to her cheeks, leaving them crimson.

"How can you say, if you don't know what he is," jeered Gwen. "I suppose he was a convict. That's about the truth of it!"

Alice, her hands clenched, glared at them, but Barbara and Clara made protest.

"Leave her alone, Marcia!"

"Yes; mind your own business."

Furiously Alice looked at the little group.

"I'll find out what my father is," she said quietly. "I don't think it matters, but you are not going to talk about him like that and tell such lies. I'll find out, and then you shall know, even though it isn't any business of yours."

She looked at them all, trying to probe what they were thinking. Barbara, Mar-

jorie, and Dolly felt sorry for her, others were suspicious, and the rest perplexed. She looked down at her book.

How grateful she was to Barbara Redfern, who turned the conversation into another channel; and when, some minutes later, other girls came hurrying into the room from preparation, Alice took the opportunity to go out quite unnoticed amidst the general babel of talk.

Where to go Alice did not know. She no longer wanted to cry, but her temper had not quite cooled off, and she was in no mood to mix with other girls. For that reason she shunned the Upper Third Form-room.

Instead she made for the staircase.

Her destination, although she had no right to go there, was the Fourth Form corridor. In one study, at least, however, she could go as she pleased, and that study, Katie Smith's, she now went.

It was cold and unwelcoming without a fire, but as she wished to be alone she did not mind that.

She flung herself into the arm-chair, but she did not, as she had intended, write a letter home. Instead, she felt queerly afraid. What was the matter she could not quite be sure, but she had a queer feeling as though someone else were in the room.

Nervously she looked round, her mind filled immediately with thoughts of burglary. Suppose someone had entered that room; suppose that, knowing the studies to be deserted, some criminal was lurking there waiting his opportunity?

Alice's first impulse was to go out into the corridor, to slam the door and think afterwards; but the door was on the far side of the table—and the table moved slightly.

"Oh, my goodness!"

Alice, her face pale, drew back against the window as she stared down to where, under the long overhanging tablecloth that nearly reached the floor, she could see finger-tips.

In terror she watched those fingers cautiously withdrawn, and her heart pumped madly. At that moment even if she had wanted to cry out she could not have done so, for all the power to act or to move seemed gone.

Her back hard against the curtains that covered the window, she stared wide-eyed as the table of its own volition moved to

the door, the thin stubby fingers with their short nails appearing and disappearing.

Then was the time to call out; but the table was blocking the door, and she all but fainted with fright.

But all of a sudden the table stopped; a hand groped out for a second; then with a click of the turned-off switch the room was plunged into darkness.

Crash went the table on to its back, and the door of the study was flung open to close again violently.

Too late by many seconds Alice King found her voice.

She screamed—she screamed again, and the sound went shrilling out into the night to cause many a face to blanch, and many a heart to pump at alarming speed.

But the owner of those thin fingers and short nails had vanished unrecognised and unheard.

CHAPTER 2.

A Clue!

"DID you hear that?"

"My goodness!"

At the foot of the large staircase leading up from the hall Barbara Redfern, Clara Trevlyn, and Katie Smith stopped, pale of face, anxious and alarmed.

Study doors were opening everywhere and voices were heard exclaiming. Miss Matthews, the mistress of the Fourth, could be heard at the head of the stairs, and Stella Stone, the head monitor, was hurrying across the hall.

Then in the midst of it all a frightened servant girl came scampering down the stairs.

"Burglars! Burglars!" she cried. "Oh, help—"

In a minute she was surrounded; but she could not speak. Either she ran too much or she was too badly frightened, for she held her hand to her side and gasped.

"What was he like? Where did you see him?"

"Oh dear——" said the girl.

Stella Stone, trying to calm excited juniors, endeavoured to get the girl to speak; while Miss Matthews, hurrying juniors, endeavoured to get the girl to avoid any semblance of panic.

"What is it, Stella?" she cried. "For

goodness' sake, what was the cause of that shriek?"

"Was it you who shrieked?" Stella asked the frightened servant girl.

"No, miss. I couldn't have shrieked—not for nothing—not to save my life!"

"Then who did?" asked Stella.

"I dunno. But I see a man come out of the Fourth Form corridor. He saw me and stopped. Then I ran. You bet I did!"

"A man! Here, in the school——"

"Yes; a burglar, ma'am."

What a buzz of excitement there was then; and Miss Matthews herself went rather pale. As for Marjorie Hazeldene, she went closer to the centre of the group and looked anxiously down the far, badly lit end of the Hall.

"We'd better keep together," she suggested.

"Rather—in a crowd—hockey sticks forward," chortled Clara. "The cheek, you know! I said they'd come here——"

"Burglars, by Jove!"

"Where—how many?"

The crowd increased in size every moment, and those who came were loth to disperse and return to their rooms. For where might a burglar not be hiding! At Cliff House there were so many corridors and such a number of rooms that really there was no telling where a man might not hide.

"But the girl who screamed?" said Miss Matthews. "Is she in the Fourth Form corridor?"

That question was answered, by the pattering of feet above. Half a dozen girls immensely excited were coming down the staircase with Alice King in their midst.

"Seen him?" asked Augusta Anstruther-Browne, an aristocratic-looking girl.

"Billy Sikes," added Jemima Carstairs, the most blase girl in the Fourth, looking less moved than any of them. "Scared poor old Alice into fits——"

That sent the attention to Alice King at once, who flushed and looked uncomfortable.

"Was it you, Alice, who shrieked?" asked Miss Matthews.

"Yes, Miss Matthews, I was in Katie Smith's room, and—and someone was under the table. They crawled with the table to the door, then put out the light and bolted——"

"We heard the crash of the table," added Augusta, "and rushed to the door; but someone had put out the light in the corridor."

"Bulb as well," supplemented Phyllis Howell. "Not a person saw him."

But they were mistaken; for the frightened servant girl, whose name was Susie, was now well to the fore.

"He was a big feller," she said. "Powerful as anything. And he gave me such a look through his mask."

"Mask?"

"A dirty bit of stuff it was," said the girl. "You could have knocked me down with a feather. You could straight! It gave me the creeps. You don't mind thieves on the films, but when they comes into the house it gets a bit horf—"

One or two girls giggled, and Miss Matthews dismissed the girl hurriedly.

"Yes, yes. You had better report to the housekeeper. One moment though—in which direction did he go?"

That of course was a most important question, but the servant, conscious perhaps that she had every eye upon her and was a central figure, hesitated.

"Well, now, I don't rightly know," she said. "It might have been upstairs and it might have been along the corridor. Fact is, I didn't stop to look. I ups with me dust-pan and bolted—"

"Well we must search, or rather Piper, the school porter, must search. You girls had better go to your rooms."

There was not a great deal of movement discernible however, the majority of the girls seeming to prefer the Hall. As Marjorie Hazeldene said, unity was in this case strength, and it was altogether unlikely that the burglar would descend the stairs.

"If he's got any sense," said Jemima Carstairs, "he'll nip out of the window, you know, drop lightly to the grass and leap away like billy-oh, what?"

Jemima polished her monocle and adjusted it to her satisfaction.

"He's bound to have escaped," said Barbara. "Although there's no harm in looking, with a hockey stick apiece and a cricket stump."

"What-oh!" Jemima agreed. "I don't mind taking charge of the proceedings and directing operations from headquarters. My tireless spirit and what-not

can cope with the present emergency like anything."

"What we really want," suggested Katie Smith, "is a clue of some sort. Didn't you see him at all, Alice?"

"Well, I saw his hand," Alice said. "It was a thin hand and small—"

"Pickpocket," nodded Jemima. "They have to have small hands to put into people's pockets, you know. Clue number one. I suppose no one has seen a strange pickpocket about?"

Alice laughed.

"I don't know if that's a clue," she said, "but the third finger nail was bruised."

"Tall man with a limp to starboard," nodded Jemima. "We are getting on. My brain's getting the hang of the thing at last. Which hand was it—right or left?"

Barbara Redfern gave Jemima a gentle push.

"Don't be a chump!" she said. "How can you possibly tell?"

"Easy," protested Jemima. "The thumbs are different. We're made like that for some odd reason, you know. Thumbs inside and fingers outside, pointing downwards, or something."

"It was the left hand!" exclaimed Alice. "It was resting on the ground, pointing towards me, and the thumb was on my left."

That was a clue of some sort, and Katie Smith looked quite excited; although on the surface it was difficult to see what was to be gained by the information, and Barbara said so.

"Well, well, if we capture the fellow we can see if he's the same one," explained Jemima.

Further conversation was interrupted then at the appearance of Piper, the school porter, with a good big stick and a dog that looked as if it lived on burglars.

"Jock, Jock!" called Clara, and patted her knee; but the dog only followed Piper on the chain as the porter went upstairs.

No one at that moment envied the burglar his lot, and there was quite a rush up the stairs to see what would happen, and whether the dog would rout out the man. According to the porter, the dog was a marvel at routing out people; he was supposed to have a keen nose, and he certainly had a most unpleasant set of teeth.

Katie Smith, when the rush to the stairs began, looked round for the servant girl, who, instead of obeying Miss Matthews' order, had hung about to hear what was going on. From that girl Katie hoped to get some clue by a little judicious questioning. Provided she remembered what she had read, Katie should have been able to ask questions in a most scientific way. Whether or not she could remember, she now determined to try.

But the servant girl was for the moment lost, and Katie, standing on tiptoe, had difficulty in finding her. At last, however, she did see her on the far side of the Hall, and, by running, managed to catch her up as she was walking towards the mistress' room.

"Oh, what a start you gave me!" exclaimed the girl. "I thought he was at it again."

"I want to ask you a few questions," said Katie. "You may have noticed one or two things that didn't seem important, but which may be. It's the way you look at things, you know. To a detective—"

"Yes, miss—but I just heard the telephone-bell a-ringing, and it might be important—"

They were close to the door of the mistress' room, where there was a telephone-bell; but Katie had not heard it ring.

"They've probably given it up," she said lightly. "It hasn't rung for the last second or so."

Just then, however, the telephone did ring, being almost drowned by the clock striking eight.

Buz-z-z-z-z!

CHAPTER 3.

A Strange Message!

BUZ-Z-Z-Z-Z!

As that insistent ring sounded again, the servant stepped quickly to the door.

"I'd better answer it, miss," she said.

But Katie had her hand on the knob of the door, and, turning it, walked in. At that hour there was never anyone in the mistress' room, so the bell would have rung without being heeded had not Katie or the servant attended to it.

"No, I'll answer it," Katie said, snatching at the light as she crossed to the instrument.

She hooked off the receiver, and at the same time called "Hallo!"

"Hallo!" came the reply. "Is that Cliff House School?"

"Yes. Whom do you want to speak to, please?"

"I want to speak to Miss Tree."

"Miss who?" asked Katie, in amazement. "I don't think there's a girl here of that name. I believe, though, that there is a Jenny Free—"

"No—Tree the name is. She's there all right," said the voice, and it was gruff.

"You might take her a message, anyway. Say that I've been looking over the place, and, to my way of thinking, there's a window needs attention. I've measured it up—say eleven by thirty. One in the back."

Katie, at that queer message, could not help frowning, for it certainly was rather out of the common. It was a message, moreover, far from easy to memorise when there seemed so little sense in it.

"One moment, please," she exclaimed. "I'd better have that again, although I'm sure there's some mistake."

"No, ma'am, there's no mistake. This was the number I was given. A window wants seeing to—eleven by thirty—one at the back, you know."

"Yes, but where?" asked Katie.

"Oh, she'll know. She's an elderly lady. She asked me to look over the place. The servants ought to know."

"Oh, but I say—Hallo!"

The caller cut off, and Katie, having no alternative, hung up the receiver without the vaguest idea what it all could mean, and totally unable to decide whom the caller meant by Miss Tree.

"I suppose you don't know a Miss Tree here?" she asked the servant.

"No, miss; I don't. Now there's Miss Matthews and Miss Bullivant, and—"

"Oh, I know all the mistresses," Katie said, and puckered her brow. "There doesn't seem to be any mistake. The man asked for Cliff House."

"What sort of man did he seem, miss?"

"A workman. I suppose he has measured up some place, and there's a window broken eleven by thirty."

"Ah, that would be the size of the window most likely."

"I suppose it would. One at the back. But who here wants a window seen to?" asked the servant. "I don't know of no one, and there ain't many things as goes

on here as I don't get to hear of. Now, only the other day—"

"I suppose I'd better tell Stella," decided Katie. "That's the only thing to do. But it seems an awful lot of nonsense, really it does."

"Likely as not it's the wrong number," agreed the servant. "You know what these 'ere telephones are. You can't never get no number you want, and when you do get it, it ain't the one you want. I don't know what things are coming to."

"No."

"And only the other day—"

"I'll go and tell Stella," said Katie hurriedly.

She went across the Hall, and soon found Stella, who had been leading a hunt on the ground floor. There had been no sign of the intruder, and at first Stella imagined that Katie had some news. When, however, she gave the message, it was dismissed as it apparently deserved.

"Oh, it was the wrong number," said Stella. "I've a good mind to ask Miss Primrose to have the telephone cut off. It's a positive nuisance being rung up, and if not up, off. Thank you for telling me, though, Katie. I heard the bell ringing—Well, Ida?"

Little Ida Jackson, of the Second Form, had come scurrying across the Hall, looking as though she had news.

"Hear anything—seen anyone?"

"No, Stella; but we don't like going up to the dormitory until the man's found. Please can we stay up?"

Stella laughed.

"You haven't got to go to bed yet for over half an hour. But I'll see Miss Primrose. I shouldn't be at all surprised if the man's gone. We're sure to find an open window somewhere."

Piper was returning from his search, and the Fourth-Formers who had managed to form a party of their own, came back, too, all of them looking disappointed.

"No luck," grimaced Clara. "Not a thing."

"Then he's got right away," decided Stella.

"He has, unfortunately; but I have communicated with the police, who will soon be here. A search will probably be made. I cannot see how the man could enter the place, however."

"Come through the door," suggested the servant girl. "Likely as not. You can't

tell with them fellers. They're that cunning."

"Didn't I tell you to report to the house-keeper?"

"I'm going to. Only it ain't nice going down them back stairs—I!"

"Piper will accompany you. The man may have slipped down the back staircase."

The man had done nothing of the sort, however, for there was no sign of him, nor was there any discoverable means whereby he could have reached the back staircase swiftly.

The more they thought of the affair, indeed, the more difficult was it to understand how he had managed to escape at all. To get out of the upper window was risky, although he could perhaps have descended by some of the creeper and ivy.

Or—he could have got on to the roof. Clara Trevlyn thought of that, and suggested that they might take an expedition up.

"No, Clara." Miss Matthews shook her head with great firmness. "Nothing more need be done until the police arrive. Probably they will find clues. They may even know the man. At any rate, for to-night, I fancy we have nothing more to fear."

Miss Matthews, to set a good example that she wanted followed, went back to her room; but many of the girls decided that they would be happier and safer in the Hall, round the fire, little enough room though there was.

A few of them even went to the length of bringing out chairs and grouping them round the fireplace; a practice to be frowned on at any time; but, in the present crisis, monitresses and mistresses closed their eyes to many things.

"I shan't sleep a wink to-night," said Marjorie Hazeldene. "I wish we could have the door locked."

Locked doors, on account of the risk of fire, were not allowed, however.

"Pooh! We shall be all right," scoffed Clara Trevlyn. "I'm going to take a hockey-stick up."

"Rather! So am I."

"Well, I'm going to take a book," decided Dolly Jobling, "in case we have to sit up. It's better to read than to lie awake, you know."

It was, of course, much better so far as Dolly was concerned; but whether or not it would be tolerated, remained to be seen.

"That isn't a bad idea," said Katie Smith. "I've got a book I want to finish."

"Shall I get it?" offered Alice King.

"Goodness! Aren't you afraid to go back?"

"Afraid?" Alice blushed. "I was a duffer to shriek. I'm not at all afraid. I'll go."

"Then you can get me one if you will," said Dolly ingratiatingly. "Not that I'm afraid, but it will save trouble."

To that Alice agreed, and she went upstairs to the Fourth Form corridor, which was, as before, deserted, leaving Katie Smith and the others by the fireside.

Then it was that Katie Smith remembered about the telephone call; but no one there knew of a Miss Tree. Nor was there, apparently, any new girl of that name in any other Form. Girls of the Fourth could hardly be expected, of course, to know the names of all such small fry as new girls in the Third; but Madge Stevens, being captain of that Form, knew them all; there was none of the name of Tree.

"Mystery about Miss Tree," said Freda Foote, and there was a chuckle.

"Who ever saw a window eleven by thirty, anyway?" asked Dolly Jobling.

"Someone's been pulling your leg, Katie."

"Perhaps it was the burglar ringing up," said Clara. "Sort of cheeky thing he would do."

Katie Smith then gave a slight start.

"Miss Tree—mystery," she said.

"My hat!" cried Freda. "She's seen it! And only five minutes afterwards, too! Hooray!"

Katie was not in the least perturbed by the general laughter, however; but she was quite excited by a discovery that she had made.

"Goodness! Mystery! Don't you see?" she cried. "Window wants attention—wants leaving open at the back—and eleven by thirty—eleven-thirty."

They looked at Katie in surprise; but her eyes shone, and there was a flush of excitement in her cheeks.

"Goodness, don't you see?" she said eagerly.

"Blessed if I do!" said Clara frankly.

"Unless— You don't mean that some burglar rang up to say that he wanted a window open?" frowned Dolly Jobling, utterly puzzled. For Dolly was not really a girl of the brightest intellect, and she did not see what Katie was driving at at

all. "How would he know anyone would understand him?"

Katie laughed and clicked her tongue; Barbara Redfern laughed, too.

"Katie means, if she means anything," said Barbara, "that he had a confederate here."

"That's precisely what I do mean," said Katie excitedly. "The message would get about, and the person would hear, of course, in some way. Besides, I dare say they arranged to go to the 'phone—"

"And forgot in the excitement."

"Rather—thought he'd come in person," agreed Clara Trevlyn. "I wonder if that's the right solution. Of course, you're only guessing."

"Oh, it's right!" Katie declared with unwarranted conviction. "The question is— which girl is his confederate?"

"Yes—that's so."

"Wouldn't be any of the girls; but it might be a servant," Barbara said.

Katie started, and then shook her head.

"Too risky," she said. "Besides, there's a 'phone in the housekeeper's room. That would be heaps handier, wouldn't it? The mistress' extension is practically bordering on the Hall. My opinion is—"

But she did not say what her opinion was. She kept it to herself; for the very good reason that she had none yet. She was not even quite sure that her guess at the reason for the call was correct.

Of course a servant had been near to the telephone; but she had merely gone to answer it, hearing the bell—so she said.

There was another reason, however, why Katie kept the opinion to herself. If there was a mystery to solve, she meant to solve it alone and unaided, so that the credit, too, should be unshared.

To capture a burglar or to track down his confederate would be a great triumph; a triumph, the consideration of which caused Katie's eyes to gleam.

It could be solved, this little mystery, and, what is more, she would solve it.

CHAPTER 4.

Could It Be True?

ALICE KING was in Katie's study, looking for the desired book, when the door suddenly opened. She had been standing motionless in front of the bookcase, glancing through the pages

of a red-bound book, and had momentarily forgotten all about the burglar and everything connected with him.

At the movement of the door, however, she wheeled round in alarm. For whatever she had said to the contrary in the Hall, she was frightened; and she had only returned to the Fourth Form corridor to prove to them and to herself that she was not. Instead of which she had only proved to herself that she was really afraid.

And now— But the door opened and revealed nothing more harmful than a servant, who grinned cheerfully.

"Oh, I thought it was Miss Katie!"

"No. I think she's in the Hall," said Alice, her relief at that moment immeasurable.

"Oh! Only a telephone call came through, and I bin asking some of the other servants about this 'ere Miss Tree what was mentioned." She closed the door suddenly, and then winked.

That wink bewildered Alice completely. She had heard nothing about the telephone message, and she knew of no confidences with this girl.

"You're on, of course," said the servant confidently.

"On?"

"Yes—you know what I mean."

That, however, was the very last thing that Alice was likely to know, and she gave the servant a puzzled frown.

"I'm afraid I don't; but if you want Katie—"

"Oh, her—she can rip!" said the servant. "Here, I say—" She walked across the study, and Alice frowned wonderingly.

"All right. No kid. Mum's the word!"

The girl put her hand to her lips, and Alice could have jumped clear off the ground. Her eyes at that moment almost started out of her head, for she found herself looking at a hand that was vaguely reminiscent—at slim, ugly fingers with short nails—and the third finger of that hand was encased in a finger-stall.

"Smart dodge of yours," commented the servant, Susie Johnson, with easy familiarity, not noticing apparently the intensity of Alice's look, although she did put her hand in the pocket of her dress behind the apron. "Getting in with 'er, I mean."

"Getting in with—"

"With Katie. On the safe side. Of course, in my position I can't do it."

Alice King looked at her steadily, then nodded.

"You could try," she said sarcastically.

"Oh, come off it! Don't pretend. Sink or swim together. I know who you are—Alice King."

"Yes; but—but what of that?"

"I know your father."

Alice gave a violent start as the question was jerked out of her.

"How can you know my father—unless—unless he employed you once; but I don't remember your face."

"Oh, you've never seen me, and I ain't seen him; but I know him. Who don't, eh? Who don't know the Bunty Boss?"

All Alice's reassurance seemed to fade then. She had been relieved when the servant-girl had entered; amazed when she had noticed the strange similarity between her hand and that hand of the intruder in the study; and but now—what could it be that the girl meant?

Alice regarded her steadfastly. The servant had shining, bright eyes, rather like monkey-orbs, a wide mouth. Her nose, broad and tip-tilted, was unredeemably ugly.

"The Bunty Boss?" echoed Alice.

"Yes; of course, you know what your pa is, don't you? Don't tell me you're out in the cold?"

A horrible fear gripped Alice, and she stared wide-eyed at this unprepossessing girl. What could it all mean? What was she driving at?

"Go on! Don't kid!" said the servant.

"You're on the game like the rest of us, and you pulling the high fandalgo."

What on earth a "high fandalgo" was, and why it should be pulled, Alice had really not the slightest notion.

"But don't you fret. I shan't give you away, nor him either. Nothing can't ever be proved against him. He's one of the clever ones." She gave Alice a long, searching look then. "And it strikes me pretty hard that it runs in the family. You ain't going to give nothing away, eh?"

"Oh, is that what you want?"

The girl waved her hand impatiently.

"Oh, cut that out!" she urged. "Let's pull together. You're doing the wise thing; getting in with Katie. Her pa's the big noise on t'other side. Not that I'll say he can pull even with the Bunty Boss. He's s'pry, eh?" And she winked again in a knowing way.

Alice King's face became suddenly inflamed, and her eyes smouldered with temper.

"Are you trying to make out that my father is a criminal?"

Susie Johnson looked at her, winked, and then, putting her hands on her hips, threw back her head and laughed.

"Oh, ain't that beautiful?" Then she mimicked Alice's words and tone. "Mean to say you don't know where the money comes from to keep you at school—and to keep up that fine 'ouse and let your mother play the lady?"

"Play the lady?" said Alice sharply.

"Yes—play! Not many crooks' wives can play the lady, I can tell you. But he gets the big end of the take every time, your old father; and you might put in a word for me to the gang. I'd like a job higher up. My, he's on the right way, you know!"

Alice clenched her hands, and she really looked as though she were going to hit out. The servant apparently feared the same, for she drew back, a puzzled look in her eyes now.

"Don't cut up rough!" she said. "No harm, I say! I didn't mean to annoy you. Don't go splitting on me to the boss, now, I say, will yer?"

There was a genuine whine in her tone, and supplication that no one could have doubted her sincerity. Clearly she was under the delusion that Alice could in some way report her to her father and get her into trouble.

"They can get me put in at any time," said the servant, and her face paled. "But you ain't going to play the dirty?" She was silent. "I don't want you to tell me nothing. I don't blame yer for keeping mum. It makes me wish I didn't talk so much. I shall open me mouf once too often one of these days. I'm not supposed to know who pulls the strings. 'Cept it's Bunt the Boss. I found out—"

"How?" asked Alice, curiously and eagerly, before she realised that that would seem full proof that she knew herself that her father was the great Bunt Boss.

"It leaked out," said the servant. "It weren't my fault. I was told. Live in Park Lane, don't 'e? Got black 'air and a short moustache, and 'e's abroad a lot—"

"Yes; but it's all wrong," said Alice huskily. "You've no right to say such things, and I won't—"

"Shush! Talk naturally—quickly—"

There was a step in the corridor, and the door was opened.

"Then I'll have to look downstairs for Miss Katie," said the servant.

Alice, unable to control her features as ably as the servant, looked guiltily at Katie as that girl entered.

"Looking for me?" said Katie, surprised to find the servant in the study.

"Yes; I just looked in, seeing the light, miss. I thought it was you—"

"You've been here some time, then," said Katie, "because I've been at the end of the corridor some time, talking."

"I was telling Miss What's-her-Name about the telephone call what come."

"Oh, were you?"

"Yes. They say in the servants' 'all as there is a Miss Tree here somewhere. I thought I'd tell you."

Katie Smith, interested and surprised, wanted to know all about it, of course. It dashed her hopes and rather spoiled her theory.

"An elderly woman what's bin 'ere occasionally," said the servant. "She lives in the village, so they say."

Katie nodded her head, but was extremely puzzled.

"Oh, well, I'll pass the message on," she said. "I wondered who it was. Thanks for coming up."

"No trouble, miss."

The servant departed, and Katie closed the door.

"Funny business about this call, isn't it, Alice?"

"Yes." It was more than Alice dared to say that she knew nothing about the call; nor did she feel inclined to tell Katie Smith the gist of the girl's conversation.

"I was beginning to suspect that servant of being mixed up in it; only she's such a fool," added Katie. "Of course, one has to suspect everyone. And this Miss Tree isn't above suspicion, perhaps. Why should she want messages sent to the school?"

"I don't know."

Katie had not really expected Alice to know, and the remark seemed to her to be unnecessarily stupid.

"Well, of course you don't. But can't you think?"

"Well, why shouldn't she?" asked Alice.

Katie gave a shrug of her shoulders.

"My goodness!" she exclaimed. "Don't wonder crimes are committed—the little interest people take in mysteries! No one

cares anything about anything here. But I'm going to find out. You see! I'm going to keep my eyes open, and if the confederate of the burglars isn't caught soon—"

"But—but how do you know that there is one?"

"How do I know?" said Katie. She wagged her forefinger. "By instinct, my dear. The man was hiding in this room—because he knew the corridor was deserted at this time. But that's only lately, and it shows that he has a confederate somewhere inside the school. He got in and intended to wait. If only that servant weren't a fool, she'd have taken a look at him instead of screaming."

"I suppose she would. But she was too frightened, apparently. I know I was frightened."

Then was her chance to tell Katie of her suspicions; to acquaint her with the fact that she had recognised the servant's hand as the hand that she had seen under the table. But she did not do so.

"The fact that the girl was frightened," mused Katie, "seems proof enough that she isn't a confederate—or she'd have helped the man to escape and put us off the track, wouldn't she?"

"Of course," said Alice; but she was at that moment admiring the servant's presence of mind. Fool though she might be, according to Katie, she had wit enough to pretend that she had seen the burglar, although he was plainly only a figment of her imagination.

Suppose she told Katie what she suspected; suppose she let Katie know that the burglar was the servant-girl? In a very few minutes Katie would go to Miss Primrose and have the whole thing thrashed out. In self-defence the girl might mention the Bunty Boss.

Alice did not think twice about it.

"Here's your book, Katie. My goodness, isn't it cold here?"

"Awful," said Katie. "But I don't think I shall read. I'm going to keep an eye on those windows."

"Wish I had your nerves," said Alice wistfully.

She really did mean that. She wished she had Katie's nerves in many ways; but she lacked nerve, and she was rather afraid she lacked moral courage.

Her father, the Bunty Boss—her own father a master criminal! The idea was absurd—mad! And yet—yet she had no

proof. The servant had seemed so confident, and suppose, by some strange circumstance, it was true?

The thought of what would happen made her shudder. The shame, the disgrace, and the ruin of her whole life seemed spread out before her in imagination, so that the risk was more than she dared take.

"I'm going to the Common-room," said Katie. "Coming?"

And Alice went, trembling, not with fear but with nervous excitement, conscious that she now knew more than the rest of the whole school about the burglary. She was thrilled, but she was horrified.

Her father a criminal—her schooling paid for by stolen money, and her mother dressed on stolen money!

No wonder that she could not reconcile herself to that strange dream-like story; no wonder that she gave herself time to think it over before she took any action that might affect not only her life but the life of her father and mother!

Was it true—or was it some hideous mistake?

CHAPTER 5.

Bessie's S.O.S.

"LISTEN to this, you girls," said Clara Trevlyn.

She lifted a flushed face and excitedly shining eyes from the book she had been reading. It was Katie's book; she had laid it aside and Clara had picked it up.

It was an enthralling book, all about cat burglars and mysterious signs on doors, and Clara felt that it was most appropriate reading for that particular time.

Not many of the girls would have agreed with her on this point. The majority would have chosen something light, calculated to divert their thoughts from recent happenings, but Clara was made of sterner stuff.

Now there were groans as Clara made that announcement. Clara had read out one or two extracts already, of a sufficiently thrilling nature to make the listeners feel heartily glad that they were many and gathered about a cheerful fire. This latest one, judging by Clara's expression, was sufficient to make their hair stand on end.

"Must you really?" smiled Barbara

Redfern. Barbara was making out a team list, and knitting her usually serene brow over it quite a lot. The truth was that Barbara, like everyone else this evening, found it hard to concentrate.

"Spare us," begged Freda Foote. "Not another one, Clara!"

"Don't you want to hear it?" Clara seemed quite surprised. "But it's such a ripping piece, really. About the best I've found, so far."

"Say no more," Jemima yawned delicately. "We know all about it already. The jolly old Purple Rat sends the hero the Black Spot, but the hero, being one of the bull-dog breed, refuses to be dismayed, what? So, girding on the jolly old paternal sword, he sets out to track the Rat down to his dark and dismal hole. Stout fellow! How these heroes do keep up the good old Spartan traditions!"

"There were laughs then. Jemima's cool banter came as a welcome relief in an atmosphere that had grown a little tense.

"It isn't that at all, Jemima," disclaimed Clara. "Listen." She began to read in an appropriately hushed and awe-inspiring voice:

"Sitting there in the chair by the fire, John became conscious of a strange feeling as of some other presence in the room besides his own. Cautiously, hardly turning his head, he looked about him.

"The window curtains moved sinisterly. With a single stride he was out of his chair and over to them. Pulling them aside, expecting to see he knew not what, he saw something flutter eerily past the window. At the same moment, the light went out, and, as he swung round into the room again, the cupboard door began to open slowly, noiselessly—"

"Ow, du-don't ru-read any mu-more, Kik-Clara," gasped a reedy voice from the right-hand side of the fireplace.

Clara turned scornfully on the shivering Bessie.

"You don't mean to say you're frightened?" she said scathingly. "Well, what a duffer! I think it's a jolly good story, myself!"

"Oh, r-really," stuttered Bessie in self-defence. "Fuf-fancy thinking I'm fuf-frightened, Clara. Why, you know what a ju-jolly brave girl I am. It runs in our family. All the Bunters are courageous.

I was just afraid you might get a su-sore throat, reading so much."

There was a yell of laughter at that, but nevertheless, no one seemed anxious to press Clara to resume. Even Clara could see that none of her hearers was particularly eager to hear what came out of the cupboard. She snorted and resumed the narrative silently.

There were a few sighs of relief at this, and silence, broken only by an occasional murmur from one or another of the little group, descended upon them.

Bessie, in the sudden hush, looked around cautiously. One might have thought this due to nervousness as a result of Clara's thrilling anecdote, but there was a gleam in Bessie's eye that seemed to augur otherwise.

The point was settled beyond all dispute when Bessie, with a last glance around, slipped silently away from the fireside circle. No one noticed her go; all were absorbed in their own particular occupations, and Bessie, moreover, contrived her exit in a manner that was, for her, marvellously adroit and unostentatious.

The casual observer might have been surprised, too, to see Bessie slip out from the cheerful light of the Common-room to the comparative gloom of the corridor outside. There were girls round the fireside who would not have relished the idea of forsaking that companionable circle for a trip upstairs on their own, but apparently Bessie intended doing so.

The truth of the matter was that Bessie was feeling hungry! It was some hours since tea, and Bessie happened to know that there yet remained half a tin of extremely delicately flavoured sardines in the study cupboard. It seemed foolish, to Bessie, to go hungry when such a tasty snack could be had.

In the ordinary way, Bessie, in spite of her vaunted ancestral courage, was far from being the most daring of girls, but now she was feeling a call that would not be denied. And, though she sped along the corridor and up the stairs with unwonted swiftness, that might have been due equally to the desire to sample the sardines as to a nervous dislike of the shadows that clung around the angles of the walls.

Panting and breathless she was when

she reached Study No. 4 Bessie breathed a sigh of relief. In another moment she would be inside, with the light switched on, and the sardines before her.

The prospect was a pleasant one, and Bessie smiled a fat smile of satisfaction as her hand closed round the knob of the door.

In another moment it was open, and Bessie, stepping inside, groped with one hand for the electric light switch. But the light was not switched on.

Even as Bessie's fat fingers encountered the button, a shaft of moonlight struck through the study window into the darkness of the room, and what it revealed caused Bessie's hand to fall nerveless to her side.

The study cupboard was directly opposite to the window, and the pale radiance fell full upon it. Even as Bessie's glance went that way, the door began to open slowly, noiselessly.

For a moment that seemed an eternity of horror, Bessie's terrified eyes goggled at the eerie sight. Her knees trembled, a queer pricking sensation assailed her scalp, as though every separate hair were rising on end. For that one moment Bessie seemed rooted to the spot. The next, with a yell of terror, she was out of the study and flying along the corridor as fast as her fat legs would take her.

It was a white-faced, shivering Bessie, with no thought of sardines in her terrified mind, who dashed into the Common-room five seconds later, which was surely the shortest time she had ever taken over that journey.

Every head was turned as she made her dramatic entry.

"Hallo, what's wrong, Bessie?"

"My hat, Bessie's seen the burglar!"

Bessie sank limply in to the nearest chair and gasped very much like a goldfish that has been spilled from its bowl.

"The kik-cupboard," she stuttered feebly.

Jemima looked interested. She screwed her famous monocle into her eye and regarded Bessie encouragingly.

"Ah, yes, I think I have heard of this before," she murmured, nodding her sleek head knowingly. "When you got there the cupboard was bare, what, Bess, my charmer? Too bad, oh, most distinctly too bad, y'know. However, Bess, we must keep a stiff upper lip, what? The good

old Spartan spirit, and all that sort of thing!"

Bessie recovered sufficiently to give Jemima an indignant look.

"Oh, r-really," she gasped, "it wasn't that at all. I didn't go to the cupboard because of the sardines; I—I'd scorn to do such a thing."

"Then it was the cherry-tart," nodded Clara sagely. "Same thing."

"It wasn't!" declared Bessie. "I just went to—to see if everything was all right, you know. And as soon as I opened the door, the kik-cupboard—"

"Began to open slowly, noiselessly," supplemented Mabs, with a sly smile at Clara.

"Y-yes, that's ju-just what it dud-did!" panted Bessie. "The burglar, you know. He was inside, after the s-sardines!"

This was too much for most of the girls. They shrieked as with one voice.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But Babs looked closely at Bessie and saw her obvious agitation.

"Look here, Bessie, what's this all about?" she demanded. "Are you trying to be funny, or was there really something?"

"The kik-cupboard," Bessie repeated. "The dud-door opened—"

"Bessie's got Clara's book on the brain," chuckled Freda Foote. "She'll be seeing eerie things fluttering past the window next."

"Well, there must be something in it, unless Bessie's pulling our legs very hard," Jemima said casually.

"Cupboard doors can't open by themselves. I think I'll go up and have a look round," Babs remarked.

There were glances of admiration for Babs, then. Not many girls would have made that calm statement in the circumstances. However much they might laugh at Bessie's story, down here with all the other girls in the firelit room, it was quite another thing to go upstairs and prove the truth or otherwise of the matter.

"I'll come too," Mabs said, getting up also.

Clara said she would, and Jemima remarked that she wouldn't be left out of it for anything. So eventually the whole crowd of them went, with a shivering Bessie in their midst.

There was a breathless silence as Barbara laid her hand upon the knob of the study

door and turned it; a craning forward of heads on the part of some, and a hanging-back of others as she flung wide the door.

Once more the study was in darkness. A cloud had obscured the moon, and not a thing was discernible inside the room.

With a steady hand, Barbara reached up to the switch, and suddenly the room was flooded with light.

Imbued with courage now that the darkness was dispelled, the girls clustered around her in the doorway. All in the same moment they looked into the study, and then a peal of laughter went up.

The cupboard door was wide open, certainly, bearing out Bessie's creepy story, but right in the middle of the hearthrug sat the school cat, performing an industrious toilet, as if after a satisfying meal.

Bessie gazed at it dumbfounded, the explanation not then occurring to her, but Babs crossed the room boldly to the cupboard, and looked inside.

She turned round almost immediately, a smile upon her face, and an empty sardine tin, dry and shining, in her hand.

"The result of the cat-burglar's visit," she announced. "You weren't the only one who fancied sardines for supper, Bessie!"

Clara gurgled at the stupefied expression on Bessie's fat face.

"You must have been coming in when the burglar was coming out of the cupboard," she choked. "Oh, hold me up, someone. What a scream—what a yell!"

But Bessie, apparently, did not appreciate the joke.

Whether it was the fact of having been made to look so foolish before the rest of the Form, or the irretrievable loss of the sardines, cannot be said, but Bessie went back to the Common-room fire with anything but a smile of amusement on her face, and spoke not another word about burglars—of the cat variety or otherwise—until Stella Stone came in to tell them it was time to go to bed.

CHAPTER 6.

Katie Smith Arouses Envy.

"YAW—awa—awa!" Barbara Redfern's yawn sounded through the dormitory next morning as she sat up in bed and stretched. The rising-bell had gone some

minutes ago; but very few of the girls were awake, and those who were awake had not soon fit yet to get out of bed.

For the fact was that the Fourth Form had gone to sleep very late the night before.

The knowledge that there was a police officer inside the building, that burglars were expected, and that at any time of the night there might be an alarm had not, of course, been conducive to sleep. Some of the girls had read. Some hockey sticks close at hand, had sat keeping sleep at a distance with difficulty. Even those who had slept had done so but fitfully on account of the many candles that had been alight.

Small wonder then that there were heavy eyes and many yawns.

"I don't think that we ought to get up," grumbled Mabel Lynn. "Nothing happened either—"

"If anything had, that would be some excuse," said Barbara Redfern. "But what could you expect with police on the place? What silly burglar would come then?"

Clara Trevlyn, rubbing her eyes, sat up. Usually she was first out of bed in the morning; but now she seemed to like her bed too much to leave it.

"Gracious," she said. "It's morning." "Moonlight, perhaps," sighed Jemima Carstairs. "Who's going to bring my breakfast to bed?"

There was a chuckle, but no one offered.

"May as well see it through," urged Jemima. "I'll keep watch all the morning, you know. I don't mind roughing it in bed. One of my ancestors was at Agincourt. We're a tough crowd in every way."

"Then you can be tough enough to bring my breakfast up," said Clara. "Oh, crumbs! I'm still tired. Are you sure rising bell has gone?"

Jemima turned over. "Let's wait for it to go again."

"I say, you girls—"
"Miss Matthews ought to let us have lessons in bed," said Freda Foote.

"I say, you girls—"
"Anyway, we're all suffering from shock," decided Barbara. "And can't get up."

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"I say, you girls—"
Then, at last, did fat Bessie Bunter, her round face showing over the edge of the sheets, get attention.

"Have they gone?" she quavered.

"Who?"

"The burglars?"

"They went just now," said Clara.

"Oh, really. I'm all trembling," said Bessie. "Not that I'm frightened, of course."

"Of course not; see how brave you were last night," said Clara seriously; and there was a giggle.

"I think I'll have bacon and eggs—"

"Oh, my word! What a hope—"

"And some porridge and toast and marmalade," said Bessie. "My pulse is beating like anything, and my nerves are all anyhow."

She sighed and turned over.

"You're suffering from shock over that cat-burglar you discovered," said Freda Foote. "That's what's the matter, Bessie."

"I know. It's fearful. I shall have to have breakfast in bed," said Bessie in a weak tone. "Perhaps you'd better ring for Miss Primrose."

The idea of ringing for Miss Primrose sent them into fits of laughter; but Freda Foote, instead of doing it, stepped out of bed and soaked a sponge in water. At times Freda was a thoughtful girl, and now her thought was concerned entirely with Bessie Bunter.

It was, of course, very sad that Bessie should suffer from shock, and that her pulse should go at a fearful rate, so Freda went kindly across to her bed.

With a most sympathetic look on her face she placed the cold wet sponge on to Bessie's forehead—a treatment that was both wise and beneficial.

Its action was certainly swift, and the result was entirely beneficial; for all the girls who could open their eyes were sitting up in bed and watching.

"Yoop!"

Bessie leaped at least a foot into the air, and there was a resounding echoing crash.

"Woa!" cried Freda. "Oh, you duffer!"

"What—what was that?" stammered Bessie. "Oh, I'm wet—my head!" She clasped her head where it had met Freda's, and groaned.

Freda Foote was in no mood for laughing. She was clasping her own head and groaning; but the other girls laughed heartily enough. They could see the joke, having witnessed it at sufficient distance to appreciate it.

Their yells of laughter, however, were interrupted by the door being flung open and Stella Stone appearing.

"Hallo—not up?" said Stella. "The bell's gone. You're only allowed ten minutes' extra grace."

"Oh, Stella, we're tired!"

"And the burglar didn't come," added Clara Trevlyn. "I call that mean after our watching up."

That remark was followed by a general chuckle that showed that all the girls who had their heads under the covers were not necessarily asleep.

"The burglar did come." Stella's tone was as steady as usual, but her remark caused a general cry, and those girls who had hidden their heads quickly came to light.

"The burglar's been!"

"Yes—no need to shout," reproved Stella. "Miss Primrose's safe has been opened and several things of value have been taken."

"What—with—the policeman on the premises?" cried Katie Smith.

"With the policeman on the premises," nodded Stella. "He walked about the place in indiarubber shoes and didn't hear a sound the whole night. But the safe has been robbed all the same, and pictures and valuable books taken."

That was news indeed. Perhaps Stella with her knowledge of them had thought its effect might be useful in arousing them, and she was right enough there, for the girls who had no thought of rising suddenly leaped out of bed.

What a scurry there was with splashing of water and their chatter then!

"With the policeman here! To think I didn't get up!"

"Of all the chumps!" said Clara.

It was really annoying to think that they had missed the fun, and especially irritating to think that a policeman, or detective as he might prefer to be called, had been on the premises the whole night. It really was too bad!

Bad or not, the girls found the situation of great interest, and the excitement was intense when they reached the hall and found a crowd of girls gathered there.

Everyone naturally wanted to see the burgled safe, but a policeman was on guard, and even though he might not be able to capture a burglar, he was not at all likely to let any of the girls pass him against orders.

There were, however, the blank spaces where the pictures had been to be inspected, and Katie Smith was amongst the first to "do the rounds."

"No clues," she said in disappointment. "Of course, dozens of people have been here since. If only I could get into Miss Primrose's room—"

"No such luck! They won't let us. I hear that they used an oxy-acetylene blow-lamp," said Nancy Bell.

"And the safe's absolutely a ruin," nodded Vivienne Leigh.

A thousand pities it was that they could not see it; but their attention was diverted a moment later by the entrance of a most important-looking man.

"Detective-inspector Stewart," said Katie in thrilled tones. "From the Yard."

Katie always talked like that, and they knew by now that she meant Scotland Yard, where all the really important people in the detective world were stationed.

Every eye was upon him at once, and the man gave a quick look about him as he crossed the hall, obviously bound for the headmistress' room.

Before he could reach it, however, Katie had stepped forward, and, to the amazement of everyone, she was quickly recognised.

"Why, Katie!" exclaimed the great man, and held out his hand.

How many girls there would have given half a term's pocket-money to have stood in the centre of the hall and been recognised by so great a personage!

Katie, however, was the only one, but she revelled in it.

"I didn't know you were in this part of the world, Mr. Stewart," she said.

"Important work," he smiled. "Perhaps your keen eyes have gathered a few clues, eh? You've been of service to us more than once, and not for the last time, I hope."

"Oh! Only there don't seem to be many clues. All the same—" Katie contrived to look very mysterious then, and the rest of the girls looked extremely jealous when they saw her say something in a low tone to the man, but did not hear one word of what she actually said.

"Very well. That's worth looking into," he commented, and they could all of them see by his expression that he meant it—that Katie had told him something of importance.

But he left Katie and went towards Miss

Primrose's room where the headmistress, in a state of great anxiety, was awaiting him. Meanwhile, Katie had returned to her friends, her eyes shining like stars.

"Goodness, what was that mighty consultation about?" asked Clara Trevlyn.

"Yes, do let us into the secret!" urged many voices.

But, of course, Katie wanted to gather some more importance to herself, and she shook her head.

"It wouldn't do," she said seriously.

"Oh, cheese it!" said Clara in her breezy way. "Don't be funny, you know. You can tell us what it is. You haven't seen any more than the rest of us."

"Of course she hasn't," jeered Marcia Loftus. "She's just kidding, that's all it is. Showing off, and nothing more."

"It isn't showing off," retorted Katie. "But you don't think the inspector wants everyone in the school to know the clues?"

"Oh!"

"Have you got a clue then?" asked Alice King.

Until that moment none of them had noticed Alice's presence, but now she strolled up to the group and asked that question just in advance of a dozen others. It was the very question they all wanted to ask naturally.

"I may have," Katie answered in her most mysterious manner. "Perhaps. But I shall talk to the detective afterwards."

"Ahem!" coughed Clara.

"Wish I knew a detective," sighed Barbara. "I don't know any."

"I say, you girls, my father was really well known at Pentonville," put in Bessie Bunter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"So he was," said the fat girl indignantly. "You needn't jolly well think he went to prison, because he didn't. There was a silly mistake about some money. That's all."

"Oh, only that!" murmured Mabel Lynn with a laugh.

"Yes, and he got off all right," added Bessie. "I mum-mean he wasn't tried at all. He always had detectives following him about when he was on bail, you know, in case—"

"In case he tried to scoot?" asked Clara innocently.

"Not at all. In case someone tried to get at him," said Bessie Bunter in retort. "They always try to get at important witnesses."

"Well, he was important enough," agreed Jemima. "What you might call the star rôle."

"Yes, rather," agreed the fat girl. "The detectives got to know him well. I dare say if I mentioned his name—"

"I shouldn't do that," urged Phyllis Howell with a grin.

"Too risky," nodded Mabel Lynn.

"Oh, really! They might think I know something about it, you know."

"They probably would."

There was a shriek of laughter at the expression that came over Bossio's face when she realised what they meant, but Stella Stone approaching them at the moment prevented any further discussion.

"Now, you girls," she admonished, "you really mustn't stand about in the hall any more. Go into the fresh air, for goodness' sake. The breakfast-bell will ring soon, and you won't have any appetite."

"Oh, really, my appetite—"

"Well, on second thoughts perhaps Bessie had better stay in," smiled Stella. "Her appetite doesn't want enlarging. And Katie—"

"Me?" asked Katie, surprised to be mentioned in the same breath as the fat girl. Only Stella didn't mean quite that.

"I didn't mean that you had better stay in, but I want you to be at hand in case you are wanted. Mr. Stewart mentioned you."

What a thrill there was then, and how Katie endeavoured to assume a natural pose!

"Oh, I'll be on hand," she said, and took up a position near to the fire, Alice walking across with her.

The rest of the girls were shepherded out by Stella, and perhaps it was the best thing for them. Alice she did not notice, and, anyway, she might not have commented upon just one girl remaining with Katie.

"Katie," said Alice, after a pause.

"Yes?"

"Have you got any clues really?"

"Oh, so so," said Katie. "One thing I know—she looked at her mysteriously—someone inside this school is an accomplice."

"Oh! But do you know who?"

Alice looked so concerned and so near to guilt that Katie Smith was genuinely surprised, for she could see no reason why Alice should be alarmed.

"Who?" Katie had not the faintest idea, but she wanted to maintain the impression that she was very wise in the affair, and she smiled in a most enigmatical way. "I don't think I'd better say; but I keep my eyes open, don't forget, and the onlooker sees most of the game."

Then, before Alice had time to ask more questions, before she was able to still her doubts, Stella came across the hall, beckoning, and Katie vanished.

Worried in mind, Alice remained frowning into the fire until, some five minutes later, Katie, looking excited, returned.

She was bursting to tell someone what she had heard, and she caught Alice by the arm.

"We can't talk here," she said. "I want you to help me."

"Oh! I will, of course."

"I should think so—in the name of the King," said Katie, in thrilled and rather melodramatic tones. "This is official, you know. My goodness! Fancy being asked to help— But there, it's because my father is so well known."

She cast a look over her shoulder, and then led the way to the large staircase, Alice following willingly enough, but with some of her fears allayed.

"We're on the track," said Katie as they reached the deserted upper landing, unable to keep it back any longer. "And the detective says he recognises the mark of the master mind."

"Yes. The master mind?"

"Yes. It's a gang, too, and the best organised gang in the world!"

"Good gracious!"

"Yes. I don't wonder you're surprised. I suppose you haven't ever heard of the Buntzy Boss?"

Alice went as pale as a sheet, and the use seemed gone from her limbs. Had Katie looked at her at that moment, what a string of conjectures that guilty look would have caused! But Katie, for all her vaunted observation, was then more interested in her own remarks.

"I don't suppose you have. But I have—from my father, of course. He's the master mind in this sort of thing. They have fast cars, and spend money like water. They're just a giant syndicate—you know what that is!—like a company, with a president and so on, and they make the biggest dividend or profit ever made."

"Well, fuf-fancy that!"

"Yes. Staggering, isn't it?" agreed Katie. "Fancy Cliff House being raked into it, of all places! But there you are. They've as big an organisation as the detective service—and richer, too. But no one can find out who this Bunty Boss is."

The look of relief that overcame Alice King then might certainly have betrayed her had not the breakfast-bell clanged. Her words as she spoke sounded joyously in tune with the bell.

"They can't find out who it is. Do you think they ever will?"

"My goodness, brekker! I'm hungry," said Katie. "Come on! Find him?" she asked as they ran down the stairs. "That's the thing! In less than two days, the inspector says, if things go right here."

"Right?"

"Well, if they can find out who is at this end of the gang—that's what I mean. If they can do that, then the man who is Bunty Boss will be in prison, and practically for the rest of his life, I should say."

Alice said nothing.

"Thrilling, isn't it?" said Katie.

"Yes."

"What's more, we've got to help. You and I together. But hush! Here come the others! Not a word!"

Not a word! Just as if at that moment Alice King could have uttered a sound! It was only because Katie clung to her arm that she was able to descend the stairs!

In two or three days, Bunty Boss would be in prison—perhaps for life. And Bunty Boss—who was he? Was he her father? Was it to put her father into prison that she must help Katie? Or had that servant-girl made some awful mistake?

If only she could find that—if only there were some method of finding out who the Bunty Boss was! But if Scotland Yard so far had failed, how could she succeed?

Yet find out she must—for good or evil.

CHAPTER 7.

A Turbulent Morning.

MORNING school was a trial to everyone that day.

With such an under-current of excitement running through the whole school, girls could not be expected to

apply their minds with proper zest to such subjects as Maths, and English History.

Miss Bullivant, the Maths. mistress, felt the unrest as well as the girls she had to teach, and breathed an inward sigh. The Fourth Form was not the easiest to deal with at any time, and this morning Miss Bullivant foresaw breakers ahead, so to speak.

It began with a queer sound of sibilant hissing, not fifteen minutes after the Form had embarked on the first lesson.

"Hss-s-s!"

Miss Bullivant looked up sharply, sending a swift glance around the class.

Every head was dutifully bent, every eye conning text-books. There was no indication of the culprit responsible for the unwonted sound.

Baffled, the mistress returned her attention to the papers she was marking, and three minutes of peaceful silence ensued, broken only by the scratching of pens and an occasional sigh from someone who was finding the Maths. problems not at all to her taste.

Then:

"Hss-s-s-sss!"

Miss Bullivant sighed. She put down her pen and looked up again. Once more every girl appeared absorbed in her work. But Miss Bullivant looked more closely this time. The unusually deep and devoted interest that one particular girl was displaying in her copybook caught her vigilant eye.

"Clara Trevlyn!"

"Yes, Miss Bullivant?" Clara's voice was innocence itself, but there was a little more colour than usual in her healthy cheeks.

"Were you responsible for that—er—noise, Clara?"

The colour in Clara's cheeks deepened a trifle more, but there was no hesitation in her reply.

"Yes, Miss Bullivant."

"And for what purpose did you—er—produce it?"

A little hesitation this time.

"I was—trying to attract someone's attention, Miss Bullivant."

Miss Bullivant knew better than to ask who the someone was. She knew Clara and her unswerving loyalty too well to expect her to involve another girl.

"Oh! Then you will kindly remember,

Clara, that every girl's attention in lesson-time is the property of her mistress and her work. You will take fifty lines."

Clara groaned inwardly. As a matter of fact, it was Babs whose attention she had been trying to attract. Clara had just thought of something in connection with the great burglar mystery, and she was feeling unable to contain it herself. But now, it seemed, she would have to do so until after morning lessons.

With grim resolution, she returned her wandering thoughts to the comparatively unexciting subject of Maths., and the class settled down to peace once more.

In fact, so peaceful was the atmosphere that Bessie Bunter, having come up against a problem that it seemed simply impossible to grapple with, gave up the unequal struggle, and drifted peacefully off to sleep.

Dolly Jobling, sitting immediately behind her, saw her head tilt back, and guessed the reason. Craning anxiously to one side to get a view of Bessie's face, she was horrified to see Bessie's lips part and the lower jaw drop, threatening a snore!

Swiftly leaning forward, Dolly poked the back of Bessie's fat neck with the handle of her pen.

The result was instantaneous.

Bessie sat up with a jerk as though she had been actuated by wires, and an ear-splitting yell rent the silence.

"Oww, help! Bur—burglars! Oh-h!"

Every head in the room jerked round to Bessie, who, not yet fully awake, caressed the back of her neck tenderly with a podgy hand.

Miss Bullivant frowned heavily.

"Bessie Bunter, you ridiculous girl, whatever is the matter? How dare you make such a commotion in class time?"

Bessie had been dreaming about the burglar, and, to her muddled brain, this seemed a continuation of her dream. She leapt to her feet and gazed wildly round the room.

"The bi-burglar! He was here ju-just now, M-Miss Bullivant. He crept behind my du-desk and st-stabbed me in the back of the neck.

The wail of fear and anguish that followed this remarkable statement was drowned in the roar of merriment that came from every girl in the form.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The class rocked with mirth. Clara

Trevlyn, for one, held her sides and almost wept.

Bessie blinked indignantly round upon them through her big glasses, forgetting momentarily the pain of her "wound."

"Oh, really, you gu-girls, fuf-fancy laughing at such a serious thing! I—I think I'm going to fu-faint! I fu-feel awfully queer!"

But so little did Bessie's appearance bear out her pathetic words that the girls seemed to find this funnier than ever. They mopped their streaming eyes and laughed afresh.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, dear!" sobbed Freda Footo, weakly. "Water, someone, poor dear, Bessie," she reached a hand suggestively towards her inkwell.

Then Miss Bullivant made herself heard.

"Girls, girls—silence, at once! Now, Bessie Bunter, you utterly foolish girl—what do you mean by this behaviour?"

Bessie trembled at that note in Miss Bullivant's voice.

"Oh, ru-really M-Miss Bullivant," she stammered. "I thought it was the burglar, you know. Something hit the back of my n-neck, and I've been dud-dream—I mean th-thinking about the burglar—"

"There is no burglar here," broke in Miss Bullivant cuttingly. "If you would only fix your attention on your work, where it ought to be, Bessie, you would not imagine such ridiculously impossible things. Do so at once—the whole Form, please—and not another word from any of you!"

Reluctantly, and with many lingering smiles, the Form dutifully obeyed. Once again, silence, broken only by the scratching of pens settled upon the room. Then a reedy voice broke it abruptly.

"Pup-please, Miss Bullivant—"

"What is the matter now, Bessie?"

"I've ju-just thought of su-something."
"Well?"

The Form sat back and prepared to take an interest, scenting fresh amusement.

"Pup-perhaps it was a—a bub-bee, Miss Bullivant. Or—or a sus-scorpion. I—I'm sure it's cu-coming up in a bump!"

Smothered titters greeted this alarming news.

Miss Bullivant frowned.

"Come out to me, Bessie—at once. I have no further time to waste on your

foolish fancies. There, as I thought—"after a cursory glance at the fat neck, "there is no sign or mark of any sort whatever. Go back to your seat, Bessie and write me fifty lines after class for interrupting the lesson!"

With an aggrieved look on her features, Bessie obeyed, to the accompaniment of subdued giggles. Though she could not possibly have felt anything of the poke that Dolly had given her, by this time, it was obvious that she could not forget it. Several times she felt the back of her neck with an anxious hand, as though expecting some drastic result to materialise.

Dolly noted it, and it irritated her. It was so stupid of Bessie to make such a fuss over a silly little thing.

She tore a leaf out of her rough work book and scrawled on it hurriedly. Then she let it flutter down over the back of Bessie's seat into her lap.

Bessie Bunter blinked at it through her thick glasses uncomprehendingly.

"I did it, silly, with my penholder. You were going to sleep. It's all right."

Whether it was the fact of having so recently been roused from sleep, or whether it was due to the absent-mindedness that prevailed in the Form generally on account of the burglar, Bessie seemed even more than usually dull this morning.

Having read Dolly's note, she seemed utterly at a loss to account for it. She blinked round at the girls on either side of her. They were deep in their work, and, obviously not responsible. Then she blinked up at the ceiling, as though fancying it might have fluttered down from there.

Dolly felt exasperated. Reaching out her hand, she caught hold of Bessie's cable-like plait and gave it a little tug.

Even as she did it, she realised what a rash act it was. Bessie would be certain to yell.

But she didn't. The tug caught Bessie in the act of gazing ceilingwards, in open-mouthed wonder, and instead of jerking a yell from her, it brought her teeth together with a little snap upon her tongue.

Then at last Bessie realised, and the glare she bestowed upon Dolly as she turned round, nearly cracked her thick glasses. Apparently Bessie was not a bit

grateful for having been awakened from her slumbers before she could give herself away by snoring.

On the contrary, as Bessie turned round again, her fat face glowed with indignation. Reaching for a pen, she turned over the page on which she had been laboriously working out a sum in compound interest that, seemingly, never would come to an end, and commenced to write, in her characteristically sprawling hand.

When it was done, she took up her book in both hands and held it over her shoulder for Dolly to read.

Dolly perused it with a grin.

"YOU ARE A MEEN CAT!! I THINK THE WAI YOU HAVE TREETED ME IS DISGRASEFULL!! I WOOD TELL YOU WHAT I THINK OF YOU OWNLY YOU NO I CARNT!!

Dolly had just got to the end of this remarkable screed when Miss Bullivant, suddenly looking up from her work, caught Bessie in the act of waving her book in the air.

"What are you doing, Bessie?" she demanded in utter exasperation.

Bessie hastily withdrew her book and blinked at the mistress in alarm. For the first time that morning, her lazy brain worked quickly.

"I'm just dud-drying what I've written, Mum-Miss," she explained, which, for Bessie Bunter, was certainly quite a neat excuse, since the writing was not yet properly dry.

Had it been earlier in the lesson, Miss Bullivant might have inquired further into the matter, but as it was, it was nearly time for her to relinquish the Form to another mistress, and by this time she was heartily tired of bandying words with Bessie Bunter.

So she merely said:

"Go out to the cupboard and get yourself a piece of blotting-paper, and for goodness' sake remember you're in the Fourth Form and not in a kindergarten, Bessie," and returned her attention to her papers.

Bessie did so, with feelings of relief, but it struck even Bessie's slow brain that it had been rather a foolish act to write that note to Dolly in her Maths. book.

She spent the rest of her lesson wonder-

ing whether it would be better to tear the leaf out and risk another fifty lines for defacing her book, or to leave it in and risk Miss Bullivant's noticing it.

She had a vague idea that she might hide it up by working a sum over it, but in the end she decided it would be better to tear it right out, especially as there was certainly something drastically wrong with the compound interest problem on the other side.

So she did, thus earning herself the expected fifty lines, but that was not until the morning after, when Miss Bullivant had been through the books.

But it was not only the Fourth Form who found it hard to concentrate on work that morning. Not far away, in the Upper Third class-room, Alice King was finding it impossible to think of anything but the amazing thing she had heard concerning her father.

The more she thought of the matter the more amazing it seemed, and the more unlikely that it could have any foundation of truth in it at all.

How could her father possibly be a thief—had he ever given an impression that he might be a burglar?

Of course he had not; and the whole thing was therefore absurd. But—was it? Doubts persisted despite her efforts to shake them off.

CHAPTER 8.

The Loiterer Near the School.

SMALL wonder then that during the morning Alice felt ill at ease and looked just as she felt. The mistress of the Upper Third indeed thought she looked so ill that she urged her to take a walk round the quadrangle.

Of course, many girls in the school were not feeling their best that morning after the restless and exciting night; but there were envious looks at Alice when she managed to escape lessons and quite a buzz when she left the Form-room.

This morning, though, she was not in any mood to appreciate her unwonted freedom. At any other time she would have gone with delight into the sunshine, enjoying every minute there. How could a girl enjoy sunshine, however, with so black a shadow on her, threatening not only her present happiness but that of the future?

It seemed to Alice that her whole life had been topsy-turvy, and she wanted just to sit down and cry. She wanted to turn the clock back to those days when she had known nothing of this worrying uneasiness and suspicion.

If only that servant had never talked to her; if only she could have remained aloof and detached from all this mystery, how smooth and pleasant life would have been. Never again could it be smooth for her.

Worst of all, bad luck it was then that she encountered in the Fourth Form corridor Susie Johnson, the servant girl who had been the cause of her misery.

The girl was sweeping the floor and humming light-heartedly to herself, as though the fact that she was mixed up in crime and in danger of being imprisoned mattered not at all to her.

That girl Alice should have reported, and should have had her put in prison. But she was not a girl of strong courage, and she hated sensationalism. From such a drastic course she naturally hesitated.

If ever she did decide to mention the matter it would be to Katie Smith, and not to the police.

"Good-morning, miss!" grinned Susie Johnson amiably. "Nice, ain't it, in the sunshine? Thought you'd 'a' been at lessons—"

"Yes, I was; but—"

"Come up to have a look round," added the girl, and winked. "You're a deep 'un all right! Runs in the fam'bly."

What to say Alice did not know. She had not the mind that was able to think of ready retorts, and retorting, anyway, would not have the slightest effect upon the girl.

"I came for my coat," she answered, because it was best to say something.

"Oh! Going out?"

"Yes."

"Lucky you! My word, what wouldn't I give to go out, eh? But not me. Mo for slaving all day. I say—"

"Yes?"

The girl had followed Alice to Katie's study, where the coat had been left, and now she lowered her voice and gave an artful wink.

"I want to go out this afternoon," she said. "My young man— But I ain't got much money, and he's out of a job."

"I'm sorry about that."

"So I thought—between friends, like—you might manage a few bob."

Alice looked at her in surprise.

"You want me to lend you money?"

"That's it. Aren't you quick? Wonder how you managed to think that? Still, it's kind of you to suggest it. I suppose five bob wouldn't hurt you?"

Alice looked at her in extreme surprise, for she had never known any other servant start borrowing from one of the girls. But, then, this girl was not an ordinary servant. Alice hardly knew what to make of her.

"I'm afraid I can't," she said somewhat abruptly.

"Can't! Oh, don't say that! You're well off enough. Your father doesn't 'arf splash you some dubs now and then! By the look of you——"

"I can't manage it. I'm sorry," said Alice firmly, and there was a pink spot of colour in either cheek.

"Well, fancy!" Susie Johnson leaned on the edge of her broom, and the look that came into her small, beady eyes was not really pleasant. "And you so well provided for, in a manner of speaking. I'd be ashamed not to share out. I would, in your position. You're getting what they calls the big end of the purse."

"I'm doing nothing of the sort. I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, you don't?" said the girl nastily. "Well, I'll tell you, so you will. My mouth's big enough to open wide, and it only needs to flap a few words for a certain girl what I won't mention, for fear of harming a person I like, for her to go hoop-la out of this 'ere school. See?"

Alice made but weak protest, try as she would to be strong.

"Are you threatening me?"

"Threatening? Me? I've got a fat lot to threaten with, I 'ave! I'm one of the under-dogs. But look 'ere. You know what friendship is?"

"I do. But, really, I can't stay here talking. Please let me go."

"Not so high and mighty, 'mongst friends, I say! You know what friendship is." And the girl raised her unpleasant voice more unpleasantly than ever. "Well, we're friends. You and me. See? Yes, hus. I keeps your secret like a friend, and you—like a true-born friend—you 'elps me. See? Share and share alike!"

Alice looked at her fixedly, and she saw

quite clearly what the girl meant. Whether the servant would dare to expose the truth she did not know. She did not really think that she would.

"I haven't got five shillings," she said desperately.

"Well, hasn't Katie Smith?"

Alice recoiled as the full purport of that dawned upon her.

"Katie— Are—are you suggesting that I should—should steal?"

The girl laughed.

"Oh, just 'ark at you!" she said. "Steal— you? No, of course not. You wouldn't steal. But stop being funny now. Five bob I must have, and five bob, my dear, I will have! And now—eh?"

And then Alice did the strongest thing that she had ever done. It came to her in a flash, and her joy was great when she saw the effect upon the girl.

"I'll mention it to my father," she said, "directly I see him. What is your name?"

Susie Johnson suddenly blanched, all the wind, as it were, going from her sails.

"Here, I say, don't be—don't be spiteful! I didn't mean anything. I say——"

But Alice had walked on, hurrying down to the fresh air of the quadrangle, where she stood dizzily. She was free for the moment of the servant, and free of her threats; but in her mind there still lingered the memory of what the girl had said.

There was no bluff in that! The girl believed every word of her statement, for how and why should she have made it up?

If what she said were not true, why had she admitted to Alice that she had been the "burglar" of the previous evening?

For all she could know to the contrary, Alice might know quite well what her father was, and all about his movements.

The risk in that case would have been foolish.

No, the girl knew she was speaking the truth, and Mr. King and Bunty the Boss were one and the same person.

It would take more than the fresh air of the quadrangle to settle her world again; it would take all the comfort that her mother could give her. She wanted to go home; she wanted to ask question after question and to be reassured.

If her father laughed at the idea, she wouldn't care what evidence there was. And her mother? Did her mother know?

How absurd! Of course her mother

would know what her father was by occupation.

Oh, if only she could speak to her mother—just for one moment! That would be enough. To hear her mother's comforting voice, and to be assured that all was as it had been—the beautiful house, the smooth, comfortable life.

She had a wild desire to run away, but knew that she would be caught before she got to London, and that it would draw attention to her.

At all costs now she must not be seen or noticed more than usual. For, suppose it were all true—then she would be the one to bring the pointer of truth against her father.

The police knew now—or were near to knowing at any time the Boss might be caught—and then, when the information of the captured Boss appeared in the newspapers, with full headlines and a photograph, not only she would know, but the whole school.

Alice turned back into the school-house, pausing in the grand old hall, with its high old beamed ceiling, its air of serenity and quiet.

No stranger standing there would have guessed that there had been a burglary the previous night. It would have been quite impossible to guess that. Utterly impossible, even though there were spaces on the wall whence pictures had been removed.

Alice did not stay in the Hall long, however, but crossed without hesitation to the mistress' room, where she knew there would be no one, but where she could use the telephone undetected.

In that quiet, orderly room, with its cosy chairs and dainty look, she felt strangely ill at ease and guilty.

It was wrong to be using the telephone and it was foolish. She could not help feeling that all would come right in the end, that she would wake up and find it was all a dream.

And besides, what could she possibly say to her mother?

How could she ask if her father were a master criminal? Her mother would not say yes; in any case, she was sure to deny everything.

Her hand went to the instrument and then was drawn back.

Another second and she would have unlocked the instrument, but just then she

heard footsteps crossing the Hall—approaching the door.

Alice sprang to her feet, and it was only a moment that she took in deciding what to do. There were thick curtains across a corner of the room, arranged to form a cupboard, and they seemed as though they had been specially arranged for her purpose.

Behind them she darted, so that she was quite hidden from view when the door opened.

"Ah," said a voice that she recognised as that of Inspector Stewart, "so this is the room! Um, I see—and this is where the bell rang?"

"Yes, Mr. Stewart."

Katie Smith—Katie and the inspector together—talking—

"What sort of a voice had the man?"

"Oh, a rough voice," said Katie, with certainty. "He sounded as though he might easily be a burglar, you know."

Peering through the slit that was made by the curtains meeting, Alice had a view of them; although she was frightened that she might be seen—yes, and heard, too—for her heart seemed to be making a deafening noise.

"Well, well, this room shall be watched," said the inspector. "I'll see to that. They may try to use the instrument again. And now, Katie, of one thing I am certain: they'll be trying to get a message of some sort through. My opinion is that they'll try to make use of one of you girls. When you're out of lessons, if you can manage to hang about the gates, do so; and if you get that note, read it; and then pass it on. It'll be important. If they don't get that note or message through, all our scheming will be spoiled. We're giving them rope—see?"

"I see, Mr. Stewart."

"Right-ho, and I can't say how pleased I am to get your help."

The door closed, and they were gone. But Alice remained in her hiding-place for some seconds, thoughts flying furiously through her head.

The room was to be watched; they would keep a look-out for the unauthorised people using the telephone, and she—what was she but unauthorised?

What right had a Fourth-Former to go to that room? Might they not suspect easily that she had faked illness to get

leave from lessons in order that she might use that instrument.

Terrified, she thought of all manner of possibilities. If ever it came out that her father was the head of the gang, they would suspect her of complicity; and how could she suppose otherwise?

With the urgency of the situation making her think quicker, she thought out all the possibilities, and decided that leaving the room by the normal way would be no good at all. She must get out of the window.

The window was only a matter of two feet from the ground, and to step out of it presented no difficulties at all. Alice was not an athlete, but athleticism was not required.

Without hesitation, but anxious and nervous, she alighted on the lawn and pulled the window to. Now she was at the back of the school, and under full view of those windows that looked out on to the grass there.

Had anyone seen her, or had she been lucky? At that time of the day no one should have been at those windows to keep watch; but there was no telling whether there was anyone there or not.

She could see no one, and her mind partly eased, she walked boldly across the open space and down to where the kitchen gardens lay.

She could make her way through there, which would be better than re-entering the school, and so get round to the playing-fields.

She had crossed the kitchen gardens, and had scrambled over the low fence covered by the branches of a tree, when she became aware that she was watched.

Not far away someone was standing quite close to the fence—a shabbily dressed man, with a beard and a cap.

"Oh!" she gasped, and looked at him in dismay.

He, too, seemed startled, but he took off his cap, then replaced it on his head at such an angle that his eyes were almost obscured.

"Skuse me, miss," he said huskily. "Is this 'ere Cliff House Skule?"

"Yes. It is—why?"

She became suspicious of the man at once: He looked just like the sort of man who might be the confederate of burglars, and she wished that she were safely back in the school.

"I suppose I can go this way? My

gel's a servant 'ere," he explained, indicating the school with his thumb. His hands were grimy, and his clothes all stained with dirt—a most unrepresentable figure; and yet—something about him was feminine.

"The servants go in this way, I think," said Alice, with a nod. "Do you want to see her?"

"I would like to. But dessey she's busy. I was awonderin' if I could send 'er a note. I ain't"—he indicated his shabby coat—"I ain't exactly in trim to go avisting, 'cos I'm a poor man. But I'd like to see 'er. I would—"

"I'm sure they wouldn't mind," said Alice, anxious to get away.

"Perhaps if I was to write a little note—"

"Yes."

Her heart beat quicker then. A note! Was this the expected note, then?

"Which of the servants is your daughter?" she inquired.

"Susie. She's a nice-looking girl. Susie Johnson. I know it ain't usual for the likes of you to go taking messages for servants, but I'm an old man—"

"Yes, yes. I'll take it."

"Then I'll write it."

He took out a piece of dirty paper and a pencil, and jotted down a few words in a clumsy, shaky hand. Then he handed the note to Alice, after sticking it down.

Then she saw that it was on the back of an old envelope he had written, folding and gumming it carefully.

"There, miss. And I really do thank 'ee!"

"Not at all."

How she got those words out Alice did not know, for her heart suddenly seemed to stand still. She was momentarily paralysed; for, being closer to the man, she was able to take stock of him.

No wonder he had seemed familiar—no wonder she thought she recognised that voice!

But it was not that that had betrayed him. It was the movement of his arm as he thanked her, a mannerism she could not forget.

But he had turned, and was stumbling off to vanish amongst the bushes, and Alice was left staring, staring after the old man and not seeing him at all—but seeing her own father!

Yes, her own father it had been, cleverly disguised, but not cleverly enough

to deceive her. No disguise in the world could have deceived her.

But not a sign had he given—not a movement that he had recognised her; but he had trusted her.

She looked at the small note in her hand, dirty and badly written—thought of the dirty, dishevelled old tramp, and then of her father!

The same man—her father in disguise, pretending that he was the father of Susan Johnson, a Cliff House servant! Was that the work of an honest man?

In her hand was the all-important message that had to be read and then passed on; but most important it was that it should be passed on.

If that were not interrupted, then the inspector's plans would be ruined! Their plans must be ruined, then! The note must never be passed on.

She stuffed it into her pocket as she heard a voice, and then turned, to find herself face to face with Susie Johnson.

CHAPTER 9.

Asked to Help!

THE servant, staggered to see anyone out there at that time of the day, looked at Alice blankly; but she was off her guard for only the shortest possible space of time.

"Oh, fancy you 'ere!" she cried, and laughed. "We do seem to be follering each other!" She looked up and down the field, a puzzled expression on her face.

"Haven't seen my father pass, have you?" she asked. "Old man with a beard."

"Well there was an old man here a few minutes ago who asked for you."

"Me?" said the girl briefly. "Meanter say he's gone?"

"Yes."

"The old idiot!" said Susie furiously. "Just like him. I suppose he didn't say anything about coming back?"

"Nothing."

"Oh, well——" And Susie turned back; but Alice, who went off a moment afterwards, knew that she would return, and when she herself looked back round the corner of the fencing, sure enough, there was Susie looking anxiously up and down.

Alice did not loiter any more, however. She ran and ran until she could have

dropped for want of breath. Then under one of the trees at the edge of the playing-fields she sat down.

Her brain was in a whirl, and her blood seemed to be on fire.

What could it mean—what could it all mean?

Her father—in disguise! It was her father—of that she had no doubt at all! How could any girl mistake her father, whatever disguise he had—however skillfully it were applied?

But he had apparently wanted to test the efficiency of it, and probably believed that she did not know.

What a fool she was. If only she had recognised him, called him father! Then the hideous truth would have been known; but it was too late now.

She got up from the seat at last, aware that she had missed two lessons, and that if she stayed out any longer she would be severely dealt with by the mistress. So she returned slowly across the quadrangle with dragging steps.

The daughter of a criminal. Her father whom she had loved; her father, who had always seemed so kind and so understanding, had ignored her, was nothing more than a rogue. He couldn't be, it was incredible! Somewhere there was a mistake. But where?

It would take her days fully to understand that, and in the meantime—in the meantime that wretched note was in her pocket.

Consumed with a curiosity to know its contents, she went up to Katie's study, where a fire was laid but not lit, and there she opened the slip of paper.

Badly written though it was, the message was easy to read, and the few words seemed to jump out of the paper at her.

"Don't think ill of your pore old dad," it said. "He's doing his best."

That was all, and Alice blinked and stared at it, wondering if she were dreaming.

Was that message intended for Susie, or was it for herself? Did her father believe that she suspected him, and that she would open the note and read it?

It might be either. It might be for Susie, and it might be for her. Anyway, it would not matter if the message got through. How could it? For her it must be—and for Susie, too!

Not that Susie was the sort of girl to be affected by it, from what Alice already knew of her. Such a thing as sentiment would not be found in her make-up.

But what was to be done?
To be burnt, or not to be burned?

That was a problem as difficult as any that was likely to confront her, but Alice solved it quickly enough in her own way. For her or for Susie it was incriminating. And if it were for her, where was the sense in passing it on to Susie?

She put the note on to the fire and then applied a match.

Anxiously she watched the flames mount until they touched the paper; and then—

"My goodness! Alice—"

Alice twisted round as though she had been struck, to find Katie Smith standing in the doorway staring at her.

"What on earth have you lighted the fire for?"

"It's cold."

"But what are you doing here, anyway?"

"I was told I could have time off. I—I'm not feeling particularly well."

"No," admitted Katie, after a searching glance, "you certainly don't look well. Of course, if you have to have a fire—"

She was crossing the room, and Alice bent down so hurriedly to the fire that her action naturally caused suspicion.

"Here, what's that? You're burning something!"

Alice, her nerves strung to tension, answered that quickly enough, parrying quite skillfully.

"Yes, the paper. Paper usually does burn when the fire's lit."

"Oh, don't be smart! You've burnt something you didn't want me to see. I can tell by your face. What is it?"

"Nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"Well, the paper, yes; and now the wood."

"Oh, well—it looks mighty suspicious to me, that's all!"

Then Katie stooped down to the fire and raked it about, but the flames had utterly consumed that old envelope, so that there was not a trace of it left; and the push that Alice had given the fire had utterly smothered the ashes of the paper down to the bottom.

"I'm glad you're here, though," Katie said, rising. "I was going down to your

Form-room. Mr. Stewart wants to see you."

Alice clutched at the table for support.

"To see me?"

"Yes. I don't know what it's about. My goodness, how white you've gone!"

"Have—have I?"

"Yes, you have. Look here, if you are not feeling well I'll tell Mr. Stewart. I'll get someone else to help."

"No. I'd like to help. I didn't know, though—"

"Well, you'd better run along. He doesn't like to be kept waiting, you know. He's in Miss Primrose's room, and you've got her permission."

All the time she spoke Katie was giving her the strangest looks, looks that made Alice feel extremely uncomfortable. For Katie was really an observant girl. She did see more things than most people did; and had she not already shown that she was suspicious?

"I'll go at once," Alice said; and out in the corridor she patted her cheeks furiously to bring some trace of colour to them; and smiled at least a hundred times, because she had heard that if you smile quickly and often it gives the face a pleasant expression.

Nevertheless, her face was not wearing a bright, smiling expression when she entered the headmistress' study for the interview with Mr. Stewart.

The detective was genial enough, and he smiled upon her, pushing a chair for her.

"Ah! So here's another help," he remarked. "Your name is Alice?"

"Alice King."

"Well, and mine is Stewart."

"Yes, Mr. Stewart. Everyone has heard of you."

"Have they—I wonder? King's a well-known name, too. Your father must be one of the richest men in London."

"My father? Oh, yes."

"I say in London," added the detective with a smile. "But that's a figure of speech. He's abroad now, I suppose?"

"I—I don't really know."

"Oh, I thought he was!" said the detective; and how dangerously casual he was. How extremely careless—as though it did not matter.

"Daddy is often abroad," said Alice.

"Ah, the calls of business!" returned the detective. "You're too young to be worried by business, and you can think your-

self lucky. In your father's line of business there is no such thing as spare time—"

Alice held her breath; she hardly dared to breathe. In her father's line of business. Did he know, then, what it was? Was he one of the people who knew?

It was on the very tip of her tongue to ask that question; and, in an unguarded moment might have done so, had not she been warned by the feeling of insecurity and distrust that assailed her.

She was being pumped—he was talking at her, and what she had to do was not to look guilty.

He suspected her father, and he suspected that she was an ally of her father's. Ch, yes; that was surely it! If at mention of her father's business she betrayed uneasiness—

But he gave her little time for thinking, although she was grateful that he looked down at his papers and not at her.

He was toying with a mirror on the table, turning it in his hands.

A mirror! A mirror to reflect her expression so that he could watch her without appearing to do so.

"Ah!" gasped Alice, and sat back in her chair.

"Hallo! Anything the matter?" asked Mr. Stewart.

"No, no!" And she put her hand down to her ankle as though she had been stung by an insect or had hurt herself in some way.

"Well, now—and now, I suppose, you want to know how you can help us?"

"Yes, I do, please," said Alice.

"Miss Primrose has given me permission to utilise your services, provided I don't give you any dangerous work. It won't be dangerous, only demanding a little common sense."

"I see."
"About lunch-time," he continued, "the gang will try to get some kind of message through to their confederate here. It will be a harmless enough message to all appearances; but we happen to know the code."

"Yes?"
"An old man will bring a message to his daughter: "Do you think ill of me—or don't think ill of me"—something to that effect; but the important thing is—whether it is affirmative or negative. Do—or don't. Once we know that, we have a sufficient knowledge of the code to trap them."

"I see."

One word, and she could have told him all that he wanted to know; one word, and the old man—her own father—would be arrested. His purpose was innocent, it must be, since he was her father—but they did not understand.

Alice's head swam and she gripped the chair edge to keep control of herself, for she knew that if she kept silent she would become an accessory, she would be aiding and abetting the criminals.

In other words, she would be a criminal. Yet to speak, was not that more awful? Dared she risk her father's happiness and her mother's?

Perhaps she could give her father warning, and perhaps he would realise that he was doing something terribly foolish and wrong.

Alice was not at that moment in full control of herself, and was more than half dazed by the rapidity with which things had been happening since the previous evening.

"I see. Very well, Mr. Stewart," was all that she said, and the detective nodded his head.

"Then that's all right. All you have to do is to keep your eyes open. You'll be given special facilities. That clear?"

"Oh, yes, thanks!"
But she wondered if this were a trap. If she were being watched and spied upon so that she should betray her father. Perhaps Katie knew who the Boss was, and perhaps that was why Katie had been friendly to her.

"Hallo, there's a bell!" exclaimed the detective. "What's that for?"

"The end of morning lessons. I'd better go."

Out in the Hall there was a crowd of girls—Fourth-Formers, Fifth, and some of her own Form.

"Hallo, there's Alice!"
"Where have you been?"
"Not with the great man?" asked Clara in awe.

"Yes. I—I'm going to help."
"Well, of all the lucky kids!" said Clara enviously. "Wish I had your luck."
"Now things will happen," laughed Mabel. "But there's a rumour that they know who's who and may arrest someone at any moment."

"Perhaps they will," agreed Alice.

She did not stay to discuss the affair, but ran off to her Form-mistress to whom she reported. But the mistress, seeing how flushed she was, and what a strange sparkle there was in her eyes, suspected a bad chill and urged her to go to the matron.

The matron, not having a guide to the real cause for the girl's feverishness, packed her off to the school sanatorium at once, and there it was that Katie Smith later on found her.

"Oh, bad luck!" said Katie, sitting by the bedside. "Just when you were going to help. But Barbara's helping instead, and I shouldn't be surprised if I bring you some cheerful news soon."

"Cheerful?"

"Yes. They'll be caught all right. Never fear," said Katie confidently. "I can't stay long now; but I'll look you up later. If this gang is rounded up it will mean peace and quiet for everyone. As it is, no one knows what crime they're going to commit next."

Katie did not stay long; but when she was gone Alice, in the little white bed, stared with wide eyes at the wall opposite.

What ought she to do? Oh, if only there were some confidant she could trust, someone who could guide her. But there was not. Alone her decision had to be made. It was to be her own unaided decision, and it meant so much.

To betray her father, or to place herself on the side of the criminals. Which? Her father, she knew, was no criminal; but if she told what she knew he would be arrested.

But try though she would, she could not alter her original decision. Whatever happened, her father came first. He came before everyone and everything. He was innocent, and the police were blundering. Her father was not the Bunty Boss.

That was Alice King's decision, and when later she heard the news that the detective's scheme had failed she could have clapped her hands with joy. She was so much better that the matron was half inclined to send her off to her Form at once.

But in the sanatorium Alice remained, while in the Fourth Form Common-room the greatest excitement reigned.

The detective had failed. The Bunty

Boss had pulled the strings once more, and now—now what?

But no one knew what was to follow, and certainly none of them could guess the strange happenings that were to befall them at Cliff House during the next few days, despite all the suggestions and decisions made.

CHAPTER 10.

When the Court Was Caught!

THERE was quite a lot of noise going on in the dormitory.

Not that this was anything unusual. The dormitory of the Fourth Form at Cliff House never was a haven of peace and quietness, except when its occupants were asleep, and even then Bessie Bunter snored sometimes.

This particular half-hour before lights-out was always a more or less boisterous one. It was a sort of tradition that there should be a last burst of chatter and high spirits before the girls were forced to get into bed and settle down for the night.

On occasions when Clara Trevlyn and other tomboyish spirits felt the need for "letting off steam" a little, there were such things as moulting pillows and spilt water in the morning to tell of more than usually hectic doings overnight.

But to-night, though the noise was, as remarked, considerable, Clara Trevlyn had nothing to do with it.

Clara was, in fact, at the far end of the dormitory, well removed from whatever happenings were going forward. She was standing by Barbara's bed, with Mabs and Jimima and the rest, discussing plans for the next halfer, while undressing.

Babs was sitting on the bed, peeling off her stockings and listening to the various suggestions put forward, in the quiet, attentive way that Babs always did listen to others.

None of them were taking any notice of the noise at the other end of the dormitory; they were too engrossed in their own little conversation. But the noise filtered through nevertheless.

"A spin on the bikes to Barnfield Woods," Clara thought. "And then a picnic tea with—"

"Go on, Gwen. Speak up. Ha, ha, ha!"

"With a little tracking to follow," finished Clara, frowning a little.

"Jolly good idea if it's fine," nodded Babs. "What's yours, Jemima?"

"Tennis, I think," yawned Jemima, brushing her sleek Eton crop. "The jolly old spectator part, y'know. Nothing fatiguing, this weather. A look-in at the county finals, via train and grandstand. And—er—oh, yes, tea, of course, at which I shall be delighted to do the honours and—"

Another yell of laughter from the other end of the dormitory cut her short. Babs frowned then, but Clara, thinking of where Jemima had broken off, grinned.

"Do the honours and—the teashop proprietors?" she suggested.

Jemima reached for her monocle, and screwing it in her eye, gave Clara a reproachful look through it.

"As I was about to remark," she began, "do the honours and—"

"Go on, your turn now, Marcia! Ha, ha! What a scream!"

"And what-not in the tough old Spartan way," finished Jemima doggedly.

"Go on. Good old counsel for the prosecution. Let her have it, Gwen!"

Then Babs turned and directed a puzzled and faintly displeased glance over her shoulder towards the noisy corner.

"Whatever are they up to, over there?" she murmured. "They'll have Stella after them if they're not careful."

The others turned then and looked also.

There was certainly something unusual going on. A small crowd was grouped round a particular bed at the far end of the dorm. that belonged to Marcia Loftus.

Upon this sat Marcia herself, raised high upon a sort of throne of pillows. There was a dressing-table runner over Marcia's head, perhaps meant to represent a judge's white wig; this was borne out by the stern and judicial look upon Marcia's never very attractive face.

Slightly to one side of her stood Gwen Cook, another smaller runner over her thin hair, a roll of paper in her hand.

She was addressing Marcia as M'Lud, and gesturing energetically with the paper roll, now at her and now at Nancy Bell, who stood, a cringing figure, at the foot of Marcia's bed, grasping its rail as at the rail of a dock.

There was a girl at either side of Nancy, standing with folded arms,

apparently constables in charge of the prisoner.

The others grouped around formed a highly interested audience.

Clara drew her brows together as she took in the scene.

"What's the giddy idea?" she muttered.

"It's a trial," guessed Mabs. "But a trial of, and for, what?"

"That's what I feel I ought to find out," said Babs, and they all looked at her quickly. There was something strange in Babs' voice.

Though she could not have heard any of the chums, in the noise her own little group was making, Marcia turned her head just then and saw Babs and the rest looking at her. She grinned instantly, the tight-lipped, sneering grin that always meant Marcia was up to mischief. Then she turned her head with a little toss back to Nancy Bell and spoke in a loud, perfectly audible voice, obviously for Babs' benefit.

"What has the prisoner at the bar to say?" she demanded. "Does she plead guilty to having a father who's a burglar?"

Nancy, assuming a look of terror, covered back between the two "constables."

"Oh, p please, your lordship," she whimpered, "I c-couldn't say. I d-don't know what my f-father is, please, your lordship. He's never t-told me."

That stammering response seemed to cause Marcia & Co. tremendous amusement. Once more the "court" rocked with laughter.

But Babs did not laugh. Nor did Mabs and Jemima and Clara and the rest. It was plain to them now what was the object of Marcia's little entertainment. That reference of Nancy Bell's to being ignorant of what her father "was" would have made the whole thing clear, even if she had not spoken in tones that cleverly simulated Alice King's rather timid way of speaking.

It was a spiteful jibe at Alice King's expense, and what made it all the more despicable, from Barbara's point of view, was the fact that Alice was not present, and was, moreover, laid up in the "san."

Babs turned to the rest, a grim look on her pretty face.

"Can't stick this," she said. "Wait here, you girls! I'm going to tackle Marcia!"

"No jolly fear," said Clara. "We'll come, too. We'll put Marcia on the floor and sit on her if she gives any trouble."

"What-ho!" chimed in Jemima. "Lead on, MacBabs! We're with you to a man-girl. Watch the jolly old court adjourn when they see us! Shoulder to shoulder, and—er—pillow to pillow, what?"

"Yu-yes, rather! I'm with you, B-Babs," stammered Bessie, evidently fired by Jemima's valiant example. "Dud-don't be frightened, Babs. Cu-count on me, you know." And she swung her pillow bravely. Babs smiled, but it was a grim smile. She was still watching the "court" with frowning eyes.

"All right, then! Come if you like," she said. "But I don't think we'll need the pillows."

Clara, however, insisted on retaining hers, and so did Bessie—for rather different reasons. Clara's tomboy nature made her relish the idea of a "scrap" with pillows, while Bessie felt it was best, for reasons of discretion, to go "armed."

Meanwhile, the "court" carried merrily on.

"Of course, as the prisoner doesn't know what her father is, the case is practically decided against her," Marcia was saying. "I may say I have always felt she was a suspicious character, capable of— Well, what do you want?"

The judicial speech merged into an insolent query as Babs came up with the group. Marcia's small eyes regarded Babs with a stare as insolent as her words.

Babs returned the stare with a steady gaze that forced a tinge of colour into Marcia's sallow cheeks despite herself.

"You can't go on with this, Marcia, as you must realise," the Form captain said steadily. "Everyone appreciates a joke, but not your sort of joke. I think it's gone quite far enough."

"Oh, listen to the Form captain!" sneered Marcia, the presence of so many apparent friends around her making her bold. "Our dear, sweet little captain, who's such a goody-goody! Listen to her talking, you girls!"

But somehow Marcia's sneer didn't get the support she expected. Several of her supporters shifted uneasily farther away from the bed, as though not wishing to be connected with her.

Clara took advantage of the little space in the group to step forward, still grasping her pillow in one hand.

"Look here, Marcia!" she burst out, seething with resentment for the aspersion

on Babs. "You jolly well take back what you've said about Babs, or I'll—"

Marcia backed uncomfortably from the roused girl, but Babs put a hand on Clara's arm and drew her back.

"It's all right, Clara," she said quietly. "We've not come here to talk about me. Marcia must realise that it's a despicable, low-down thing to rag a girl behind her back—especially in such a way. It's just got to stop, that's all! Now then, Marcia!"

Marcia Loftus scowled. "I don't see what it's got to do with you," she retorted. "Surely we can have a bit of fun in our own part of the dorm, without asking your permission, Babs Redfern?"

"Fun—as much as you like," Babs gave back. "But this wasn't fun, Marcia, and you know it. It's got to stop at once."

Marcia looked at Nancy Bell and Gwen Cook, and the other girls who were yet ranged round her, and tossed her head.

"My goodness, aren't we getting high-handed!" she sneered. "Stop at once, oh? I'd like to see you try to stop it!"

That was more than Clara could bear.

"All right, you're going to see us do it now!" she chuckled.

And next minute, before Marcia could dodge, her "wig" was seriously disarranged by the tomboy's pillow. It slid to the floor, while its late wearer, forsaking her judicial seat, sprawled on the bed on all fours.

Meanwhile, the "prisoner" and "counsel for the prosecution," seeing this example made of their leader, discreetly faded away in the direction of their respective beds.

Jemima chuckled appreciatively.

"The court adjourns," she announced. "It's adjourning like anything. Frightfully interesting and all that, you know."

And she polished her monocle, and favoured Nancy and Gwen with a glance of minute interest that made them squirm.

Marcia scrambled up and faced Clara, breathing heavily, two spots of furious colour in her cheeks.

"You—you—" she stuttered, too angry to find words in which to express her feelings.

"Oh, yes, it's me, all right!" Clara grinned back. "Would you like me to give you some more evidence of my presence, your worship, just to make sure?"

But Marcia, it seemed, was not anxious for anything like that.

She backed to the floor, on the side farther

away from Clara, and looked round her erstwhile audience for sympathy.

But there had been a strange falling-off of interest in the judicial proceedings in the last few moments. Now Marcia found that the spectators had sought their beds, along with the "prisoner" and "counsel for the prosecution."

"Well, well," beamed Jemima, "they've all adjourned very nicely and quietly, haven't they? And now, what about our little friend here, what?"

The "little friend" gave her a glare that a basilisk might have envied.

Clara grinned.

"I think we'd better see her safely to bed," she suggested. "I'm longing to tuck her up warm and cosy."

Marcia backed beyond the look in Clara's eye.

"Look here——" she began.

"I'm looking," Clara nodded. "And I can't stand the strain much longer. The sooner you let us see you to bed the better for all concerned. Come on, now."

Marcia gave a howl of apprehension, but Clara was not to be deterred. With the help of Dolly Jobling, she picked up the erstwhile "judge" and deposited her none too gently in her bed.

"That's better! Now, now, don't struggle," admonished Clara, "when we're going to make you nice and comfy. Just tuck her in that side, Dolly, and then we'll get Babs to tell her a nice little bed-time story. I'm sure the poor child would like that."

There were chuckles from other beds in the dorm. Marcia's late audience were quick to see the funny side of the proceedings. Even Nancy Bell and Gwen Cook sniggered.

Meanwhile, Dolly and Clara tucked up Marcia with an energy that tossed her from side to side very much as though she were in a small rowing-boat on a rough sea. Then Clara punched a pillow with fearful gusto and slammed it under Marcia's head.

That done, she stood back and regarded the fuming sneak with an expression of fond pride that sent the onlookers off into fits of laughter.

"Doesn't she look sweet and tender, the little dear?" she crooned. "Now, Auntie Babs, come and tell the cherub a pretty story."

"Auntie" Babs grinned. But as Clara

took her hand and drew her to the side of the bed, her face grew stern.

"I only want to warn you to be careful what you say about people, Marcia," she said. "Apart from its being a most spiteful and horrid thing to speak of Alice King's father as you did, it's likely to be dangerous for you if anyone else heard you. You've absolutely no reason to make such a statement, and other people might be inclined to call it—libel!"

"Oh, shut up!" growled Marcia furiously. "How are you to know her father's not the burglar? It's jolly suspicious, and I think the kid ought to be——"

"Hush, hush!" Clara clapped a hand over Marcia's mouth. "That's not the way for a little girl to speak. You should say: 'Thank you, auntie, dear, for telling me such a nice story.' And it's got such a good moral, dear. Shall I tell it you? It's: 'I must always remember to be a nice, kind little girl!' There! And now you must go to sleep. Good night, darling!"

With a last "tuck-in" that made Marcia's bed rock, Clara turned and stole softly away in the wake of her chums.

She paused several times on her way down the long room to turn back and blow kisses at Marcia's bed, but Marcia did not seem to appreciate them. She flounced over on her side with a violence that made her bed groan, turning her back on Clara, and the dorm. heard no more of her that night.

But there were many chuckles from the others before Stella Stone came in to put out the lights!

CHAPTER 11.

The Fourth is Curie

"I SAY, you girls!"

"Shush!"

"Run away, Bessie."

But Bessie Bunter did not run away. She was in an excited frame of mind, and it was quite clear that she had something to say. When Bessie had something to say, she invariably said it; so the best thing for them to have done was to listen to her.

But they were talking amongst themselves, the girls of the Fourth Form at Cliff House School, and they had no time to listen to Bessie.

"They'll get them before long," Phyllis

Howell was saying when Bessie rolled along. "I'm sure they will."

"Perhaps," agreed Clara Trevlyn, "but they haven't had much luck so far. Now, if they'd only let us help—"

"Well, Katie is helping."

Of course, all eyes turned upon Katie Smith then, for it was not often that a schoolgirl had a chance of helping detectives to unravel mysteries. But the fact that Katie's father was interested in criminology, and had more than once given the police valuable assistance, altered the case.

So Katie came in for a good deal of interest.

"Youngest girl in the Form, too," said Clara.

"Babs is helping as well."

That, again, was not surprising, for Barbara Redfern was the captain of the Fourth Form, and was a girl who could be relied upon to keep her head in emergencies, and to act with judgment.

"I'm not doing much," said Babs, with a smile. "There's not much to do, that I can see. They don't appear to be any nearer to catching the thieves than they were before."

"I wish they'd let my father come down and investigate," sighed Katie. "He—"

"I sus-say, you girls."

Bessie Bunter blinked at them indignantly through her large, thick glasses, and at last commanded attention.

"No!" said Freda Foote decidedly.

"Nun-no what?" asked fat Bessie, in surprise.

"No, we can't cash a remittance in advance," said Freda, good-humouredly.

"I wasn't going to ask you if you could," said Bessie. "Though, as a matter of fact, Freda, I am expecting a remittance, I don't mind telling you."

"Oh, my hat! I've heard about your remittances ever since you came to the school," sighed Freda. "It won't do, Bessie. No remittances cashed in advance, and we haven't any chocolate or toffee."

"I don't want any chocolate or toffee," shrieked Bessie, in desperation.

"What?" It was a perfect yell.

"You don't want any chocolate or toffee?"

"Come, come," said Jemima Carstairs, shaking her head sadly. "Wherefore this peculiar attitude? Aren't you well? Do

you really mean you couldn't manage a slab of extra-specially good chocolate?"

There was a general smile as Jemima jammed her monocle in her eye and surveyed the fat girl with considerable, though perhaps not very real, anxiety.

Bessie's face was a study.

"Oh, well, if you've got some chocolates I won't say no, Jemima," she said. "It's very n-nice of you."

"Oh, I haven't any chocolate," said Jemima. "I was only just wondering, that's all. I don't like to think of our beloved little Bessie becoming eccentric, you know."

There was a chuckle from several of the girls, though Bessie frowned indignantly.

"Well, if you think that's funny I j-jolly well don't, so there! What I came to tell you was that we're going to be searched."

"What?"

At last she had their attention, and she had it in earnest, for they all stared at her unbelievably.

"Oh, draw it mild!" said Clara, who always spoke slangily. "My dear kid, you can't mean they're going to search us for all those giddy things that were stolen?"

"They're going to search the studies for clues," said Bessie keenly. "As a matter of fact I've always suspected that there might be a clue in the studies, you know, a footprint, or something."

"Heaps of them on the ground, if that's what they want," said Jemima. "But why 'search'? Of course, I approve of it; gives a dramatic flavour to the situation, and what not! I am innocent! I shall protest my innocence till I die. I did not burgle the safe, daddy, and so on!"

Jemima never could be taken seriously, and there was a twinkle in her grey eyes as she vehemently protested her innocence of the burglary. Not that anyone suspected her. It would have been too much trouble for Jemima, even if she had criminal tendencies, which she had not. Jemima's greatest claim to distinction was her pose of masculinity, her severely cut clothes, her monocle; when all the time she was essentially girlish.

But, lightly though Jemima and her friends took the search, there were others who treated it very seriously.

"I can't see any point in it at all," frowned Barbara. "Personally, I think you've got hold of the wrong end of the stick, Bessie."

"As usual!" grinned Clara.

"I haven't," protested the fat girl indignantly. "They're j-jolly well going to make a search. Marcia told me. She listened at the door. I wouldn't do a thing like that myself. Besides, Stella Stone was quite near, and she might have thought I was listening if I'd stopped to tie my shoelace."

"She might," agreed Barbara, "knowing you. But is it a fact, really?"

The answer to that question came in the form of a visit to the Fourth Form corridor, by Miss Primrose, the headmistress. The girls had gone there after collecting their books for morning lessons, but they did not expect Miss Primrose to appear on the scene.

Miss Primrose, tall and stately, seemed very worried, as indeed she had every reason to be when there had been a burglary at the school. Many valuables had been taken, and the police were intervening. They, however, were interested in the crime as apart from recovering the stolen goods, for they suspected that the criminals were members of a powerful gang.

"Girls," said the headmistress, "Mr. Stewart wishes to make a search of the studios. I hope everything is in order?"

"Oh!"

"I'm afraid mine's rather untidy, Miss Primrose."

Augusta Anstruther-Browne made a dash for the door of her study, but Miss Primrose stopped her; and there was an exchange of glances between the girls who saw the incident.

Practically everyone in the Fourth knew that Augusta kept a packet of cigarettes in the drawer in her room. She rarely smoked them, but knew that they impressed some girls with her daring and up-to-dateness. That pleased Augusta immensely.

"Augusta, do not move!" said Miss Primrose sharply. "Nothing is to be touched."

Augusta rejoined the group of girls in the corridor, feeling that she had committed herself unduly. For she had no guilty conscience about the burglary.

Mr. Stewart, the detective-officer, was a good-looking man with eyes that gave promise of the early clearing-up of the mystery; for so keen were they that it did not seem possible for a clue to escape them.

What, however, Mr. Stewart hoped to find by searching their studios was a complete mystery to the girls. It did not seem at all likely that a Fourth-Former could be

implicated, and certainly no girl would be foolish enough to hide the stolen property in her study.

"You will all remain here in the corridor," said Miss Primrose, before following the detective into the end study. "As you all know, there is some person in the school in league with the criminals. Fortunately, a clue has been found—"

She looked at their faces as she spoke, as though she hoped that there might be a girl who would betray herself. No one looked unusually embarrassed, however; and there was no reason to suppose that any of the girls present knew more of the burglary than her friends.

In rotation the studios were entered, whilst the girls waited the result. Although, when the search had begun, only a small part of the Fourth were present, by the time it had ended there was not an absentee.

The news spread quickly, and it was not long before members of the other Forms had arrived upon the scene.

"Now you, Katie," whispered Babs.

The headmistress and the detective now went into Katie Smith's study, and a crowd gathered round the doorway whilst the search was made.

There was the sound of chairs being moved, of books being drawn from their shelves, and then—then they heard the detective give an exclamation.

"This is what I wanted!"

What that was no one knew, though every head was craned in the direction of the study. Every girl leaned forward anxiously, some of them even standing on tiptoe.

Most anxious of them all, and most astonished, was Katie Smith. Katie had a study to herself, so that if anything compromising were found, the blame could not be levied upon any other girl.

But what had the detective found?

"A jemmy," said Jemima. "Possibly a jemmy. I am rather surprised, Katie, that in these high-speed, scientific, tough days, you should descend to the use of a jemmy."

"Yes, you might have made it a blow-lamp," grinned Clara.

No one took the discovery, whatever it was, at all seriously, and Katie's brows were puckered.

She had not long to wait, however, for a minute afterwards the detective and Miss Primrose appeared in the doorway. It

was not at the former that the girls stared, but at Miss Primrose.

The headmistress was looking very worried, and carried a pair of light gym shoes.

"Katie Smith, are these shoes yours?"

"Yes, Miss Primrose."

Then the detective intervened.

"Does any girl share this study with you?"

"No, Mr. Stewart."

"Um! You have not lent these shoes to anyone?"

"Not knowingly," said Katie, going pink under his close scrutiny.

"And no other girl uses the room, or—"

Then Katie gave a sharp exclamation.

"Alice King does, but—but—"

"But what?"

"Alice is in the sanatorium."

There was a buzz of excited murmuring then, which Miss Primrose stilled by a gesture of the hand. Katie, feeling extremely uncomfortable, met the detective's eyes as they gazed keenly at her.

"I think I had better speak to this girl, Alice King. Is she ill, Miss Primrose? I thought that was the girl who was going to assist us in this business."

"She was, but she had a chill. She is certainly not ill. Indeed, I believe," murmured Miss Primrose, "that the matron suggested her getting up."

"Then if she will do so I should like to see her."

"You do not wish to search the other studies?"

Mr. Stewart shook his head.

"No, it is not necessary now. I have found what I wanted, thank you."

Mr. Stewart turned and walked down the corridor. The eyes of all the girls were upon him wonderingly. What had he discovered, what did he surmise? But those questions were not to be answered then.

"I do not want a crowd to collect in the hall," said Miss Primrose. "You will return to your studies and get your books. You will remain in your studies until the bell rings for lessons."

"But, Miss Primrose—" began Katie.

But Miss Primrose did not hear, or she did not heed, for she had already gone after the detective, leaving Katie Smith very white and very troubled in mind.

For Katie, who was to have helped clear up the mystery, was herself indirectly in-

involved, though she knew no more than the others what was the matter.

But one thing she did know—she wanted to see Alice King and to ask her questions. In that desire she was not alone; but, like the rest of them, Katie would have to wait!

CHAPTER 12.

An Important "Clue"!

"GETTING near the end!" said Phyllis Howell excitedly. "Fancy Alice King—"

"Yes. She's so quiet!"

"Um, and so inoffensive," added Clara. "She couldn't say 'boo!' to a goose. Surely they don't think she burgled the safe?"

"Or let the thieves in," mused Mabel Lynn. "I wonder."

Despite Miss Primrose's command, they did not return to their studies immediately. Augusta Anstruther-Browne, who had been so anxious about her cigarettes, was smiling with relief, glad indeed that the search had ended before her study was reached.

The others were more excited than relieved.

"I—I can't understand it," frowned Katie Smith, "Alice, of all girls! She couldn't! She's not that sort of girl at all. Why, I know she's been most anxious to clear up the whole mystery."

"Still waters run deep," Gwen Cook reminded her. "I thought it was funny, her making friends with you."

"Why funny?" demanded Clara.

Gwen, who always liked to make unpleasant remarks, smiled.

"Well, my dear," she said to Katie. "you're not the sort of friend everyone wants. If you ask me, she know your father was a detective. You don't exactly keep that quiet, and she thought yours was the best study to be in."

"I see, you mean she could keep in touch with everything," said Clara. "How frightfully deep!"

"I don't think that at all," said Katie, with a defiant toss of her head.

But the others were inclined to believe it. "She's in the Upper Third, so she's really no right to use the studies at all," pointed out Phyllis Howell. "Of course, being friendly with you, she has the run of the place. And another thing I've remembered—"

"Alice was the one who raised the scare

about a burglar," nodded Barbara. "So she was!"

"Rather! Perhaps there wasn't one at all. No one else saw him."

"Oh, don't be absurd! Alice couldn't have acted that part—she was frightened out of her life," said Katie Smith shortly. "Besides, there was a servant who said she saw him—you must remember that."

They did remember, and it quietened their enthusiasm for the new idea rather.

"It's pretty obvious," said Mabel Lynn, "what the shoes were wanted for. There was some peculiar marking on them that the detective must have noticed near the room. I shouldn't be at all surprised if that's what it is."

"But why Alice?" persisted Katie. "It isn't sense, is it? Why should a girl of her age get mixed up with such people? Things like that don't usually happen."

"Her father might be in with them," pointed out Barbara quietly.

"Oh, nonsense! Her father is——" began Katie, then went suddenly red and broke off, knowing what they would say.

"Well, what is her father?" mocked Gwen Cook.

Katie did not reply.

"She didn't know," said Dolly Jobling excitedly. "She didn't know what her father was. We all thought it jolly queer at the time, and so it was."

"Yes, rather! Fancy a girl not knowing what her father did for a living!"

"Or whom!" chuckled Gwen Cook, looking round for approbation. "I must say it seems very fishy. Perhaps her father was the burglar."

Further discussion and conjecture was, however, rendered impossible by the clanging of the bell, and the girls hurried down to the Form-room, none too pleased at the interruption. Not, of course, that they were ever very pleased to hear the ringing of the bell for lessons!

"If she had anything to do with it," remarked Katie finally, as she walked down the stairs with her books, "I can jolly soon find out by questioning her."

"If she's here after lessons," put in Gwen Cook sincerely, "Perhaps she won't be."

"Oh, crumbs!"

"Expelled?"

That word was uttered with awe, for expulsion was a rare punishment, and the most drastic possible. Of course, if Alice King had helped the criminals, she deserved such

punishment, and Miss Primrose would quickly send her away from the school.

The whole thing seemed so fantastic that they really could not make head or tail of it.

"Jolly good job, too, if she's guilty," growled Clara. "I think that's about the meanest thing a girl can do."

"Hear, hear!"

Their sympathy was, naturally enough, all with the detective, for to have a thief in the school was not pleasant, and to have for a fellow-member of the school someone who was capable of assisting a burglar in his work was too awful for words.

In the Form-room Miss Bullivant, looking more serious and stern than usual, was waiting for them. Miss Bullivant was an understanding woman, for all her sternness, and she realised that the girls could not be expected calmly to settle to their work when such things were happening.

"I sus-say, you girls," said Bessie Bunter in a whisper that could be heard all over the Form-room. "I knew it all along. I was going to make a final coup."

"Hen-coop?" asked Freda Foote, and there was a general giggle.

"Now, girls, please!" said Miss Bullivant. "Bessie, get out your book."

"Yes, Miss Bullivant. B-but I've just thought of a clue."

"A what?" asked Miss Bullivant in surprise.

"A clue," explained the fat girl. "I think I ought to go and tell the detective, you know."

Miss Bullivant regarded Bessie intently. The fat girl blinked so seriously through her glasses that the mistress was half-inclined to believe her, though as a general rule it did not do to believe half of what Bessie said.

"What is this clue?" asked the mistress.

"Oh, it's c-confidential," said Bessie.

"About Alice, you know."

"Really? Then why did you not tell Mr. Stewart before?"

"I didn't think of the clue then—er—I mum-mean, I didn't like to."

The other girls began to grin.

"Where is the detective?" asked Miss Bullivant rather suspiciously.

"I think he's over in the tuckshop questioning Mrs. Jones, Miss Bullivant."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Miss Bullivant held up her hand for

silence, and gave Bessie Bunter a stern look.

"I am quite well aware, Bessie, that the detective is not at the tuckshop, and I shall certainly not let you go there."

"Oh, really, Miss Bullivant!"

"I am not inclined to believe your story about having a clue. If it is as confidential as you say, it can probably wait. Unless you tell it to me now I shall have no alternative but to give you fifty lines."

"Oh, e-crums! I mum-mean I can prove that Alice is a suspicious character!"

There was quite a buzz amongst the others then, for there were times when fat Bessie Bunter heard things that were not intended for her ears, and, stupid though she undoubtedly was, she might unwittingly have tumbled across a most important clue. The importance of it might not have dawned upon her until Alice was under suspicion.

When, therefore, Miss Bullivant condescended to take the remark seriously, there was general satisfaction.

"How can you prove anything against Alice?"

"Because she refused to cash a remittance of mine that I expected," said Bessie indignantly. "That shows she's a suspicious character, because she said she'd wait and see it first."

What a peal of laughter rang out then! But Miss Bullivant's eyes gleamed.

"We will get on with the lesson," she said austere. "And you will write me fifty lines, Bessie Bunter. If I were not so convinced of your stupidity—"

"Oh, dud-dear, but—"

"I should imagine you were being intentionally impertinent. One more word and your imposition will be doubled."

Bessie Bunter sat and blinked, but wisely remained silent. The important clue was not conveyed to Mr. Stewart, but it must not be supposed that this caused any hindrance to his case.

For ten minutes or so work progressed smoothly, though every one, naturally enough, was anxious to know what had happened, and there was a general tendency to peep out of the windows.

When, a little later, there came a firm step in the corridor outside, there was a little buzz of excited anticipation. The door opened and the school page-boy entered.

"Well," said Miss Bullivant, "what is it, Boker?"

"Miss Primrose would like to see Miss Katie in her study at once," said Boker.

Katie Smith stood up, all eyes upon her.

"You may go," said Miss Bullivant.

Katie went with eyes gleaming with excitement, the envy of every other girl in the room.

CHAPTER 13.

Forced to Give Evidence!

"YOU'RE quite well enough to get up," said the matron tersely, and really Alice King did not look ill.

"I'm feeling much better, thank you," said Alice King.

"I don't believe you've been ill at all."

"I said I wasn't," protested Alice, "but they made me come to bed."

The matron looked at her sternly for a moment, and then relented, for Alice was a nice-looking girl, and had not given any trouble since she had been in the sanatorium. It was really rather unusual.

Girls like Clara, for instance, were not altogether a pleasure to look after, for immediately the matron went out of the room Clara would be up and out of bed; and if there were any other girls there she would, as likely as not, organise a pillow-fight or some other form of riot.

Alice had been unusually quiet. But then she was a quiet girl. True, if there were any fun going, Alice would join in readily enough.

But in the sanatorium there had been no fun. Besides, she had been busy with her thoughts.

"Though I must say you looked feverish when you came in," pursued the matron.

"Had you anything on your mind?"

Alice gave a start.

"Anything on my mind?" she asked darting a keen look at the matron. "Why—why should I have?"

She tried to laugh it off, but her looks gave her away completely. It was so very obvious that she had something worrying her.

Certainly she looked better than when she had entered the sanatorium, but even now there was a strange, almost feverish brightness about her eyes.

"I'd better get up now," she decided suddenly, feeling that something ought to be said.

"Yes. I think you had better get on."

The matron, who in spite of her somewhat stern demeanour was a kindly woman, regarded her somewhat anxiously.

"Is it lessons?" she asked. "More than one girl has managed to get in here to avoid an examination. But there aren't any examinations just now. Have you managed your school work all right?"

"All I had to do. But I am all right," said Alice. "Really I am, matron."

"H'm!"

She walked away, and Alice slid out of bed and started to dress. She was really quite anxious to get up, for though in the sanatorium she was away from the general excitement in the school, she felt that she wanted to know what was going on. Indeed, she had to know at any cost what was happening.

She had just finished dressing when Stella Stone, the head monitress, entered the room.

"Hallo, Stella!"

"Hallo!" smiled Stella in reply. "You're wanted in the school. As you're dressed I suppose you're better?"

"I haven't really had anything wrong with me, Stella. They thought I looked ill—"

"Well, I must say you don't look any too well now," commented Stella. "But Miss Primrose wants you at once, so I think you'd better hurry."

"Coming now, Stella!"

The monitress had started to walk away when Alice called to her.

"I say, Stella, what—what's it all about?"

She was obviously anxious, and Stella gave her a curious look, for she liked Alice. That Alice reciprocated the feeling was natural. Who did not like Stella Stone, the head monitress, for she was the leader of the girls, and the idol of all.

"The matter? Surely you ought to know."

There was something so ominous in Stella's tone that Alice put down the hair-brush, her cheeks white, her lips quivering.

"Stella! What is it?"

"You're wanted to explain why certain gym. shoes have been found in Katie Smith's study, and what purpose they were used for."

"Gym. shoes? But how should I know? I haven't touched them." And of a sudden Alice became less afraid, and her eyes quite sparkled. "I haven't touched any

silly gym. shoes. I haven't done gym. this week. Perhaps they're Katie's."

"Katie and you will have to fight this out between you," said Stella quietly. "Apparently it's a serious question. Mr. Stewart wants to know all about it."

"Mr. Stewart! Oh, but—Stella, what can this have to do with the mystery?"

"They want you to explain something. Now be a good kid and hurry up. It won't help to keep them waiting."

Stella sighed then, and Alice turned back to her mirror. Her eyes were bright, far brighter than they should have been, and her hands were trembling, making her knock the hairbrush clumsily against her forehead.

"Oh, my goodness!" she murmured to her reflection in the mirror. "Now, what?"

But, as always in such cases, the best thing to do was to get it over, to go and find out just what was the matter, so she hurriedly finished her toilet, and in a few minutes was ready.

One had to look spick and span to interview Miss Primrose, and Alice did her best, but she had something so serious on her mind that dressing couldn't really hold her attention.

The fresh air of the quadrangle acted as a tonic to her, so that she felt quite braced as she reached the school, and it seemed, indeed, that there could not be any real unpleasantness in such a pleasant world.

With the sun shining so brightly above, why could there not be more sunshine in her heart.

At the school entrance, however, she hesitated; then, forcing herself by a great effort of will, she entered. Seeing Katie Smith, she hurried up to her.

Katie and she were nearly the same age, so that the friendship that had sprung up between them was not surprising. Probably soon Alice would get her remove into the Fourth, and she and Katie had planned so many things to do when they really shared a study.

"My goodness, Alice, so you're up, then," said Katie. "Haven't you been to see Miss Primrose yet?"

"I'm just going. You're—you're not going, too, Katie?"

"Yes, I am."

They both halted, and Alice realised that Katie was looking at her closely, and rather suspiciously.

"It's about some silly shoes," said Alice.

"Do you know what it is all about, Katie?"

"I only know they found them in my study. I haven't used them."

Something in Katie's tone made the other girl turn sharply and look at her.

"But—but you don't think I have?" cried Alice, in surprise. "Why should I, Katie? I haven't done gym. this week."

She looked at Katie in such genuine surprise that that girl was impressed, and Alice could not fail to note with relief the alteration in her friend's expression.

"This isn't anything to do with gym," said Katie, after a second's pause. "You haven't used them for gym., but—don't be such a duffer, Alice. You must know what it's all about as well as I do."

Alice's heart beat wildly.

"Do—do you mean about the burglary?" she said, trembling. "Haven't—haven't they found out about that yet?"

"You seem jolly anxious that they shouldn't find out," retorted Katie, rather sharply.

"Oh, Katie, that isn't fair," said Alice, and tried her hardest to look indignant; but she wasn't a very good actress, and anyone could see that she was worried and perturbed.

A door-handle clicked across the hall, and the next minute Miss Primrose appeared at the door of her study, and clapped her hands angrily as she saw the two girls standing talking.

"Alice—Katie! Come here at once! How dare you stand there talking when you know we are waiting?"

Both girls hurried forward then, and both felt guilty in causing Miss Primrose to wait; thus they found it difficult to meet the mistress' eye.

"One might almost imagine that you were exchanging notes," said Miss Primrose grimly. "That is not what is wanted. Your stories need not be made to tally."

"Oh, Miss Primrose, we weren't doing that!" protested Katie.

The headmistress did not reply, but led the way into her study, where Mr. Stewart stood looking out of the window. He turned at their entrance, and smiled disarmingly at the girls. He did not look in the least as though he were going to conduct a fierce cross-examination.

"Good-morning!" he said. "I just wanted to clear up this little mystery. These shoes—"

He held up a pair of rubber shoes, and both girls took a good look at them. One of the soles was rather worn, and at the toe there was a slight cut-mark.

"They are mine," said Katie. "But I haven't worn them lately, Mr. Stewart."

"No, I know that," answered the detective quietly. "But you, Alice, have you any suggestion to make? Have you used these shoes at all lately?"

"I have never used them, Mr. Stewart." The detective stroked his chin thoughtfully, and looked at her with those eyes that seemed to miss nothing.

"Then you cannot give an explanation as to how they were used the night before last?" he pursued.

"Oh, no! I haven't any idea at all!"

"Um!"

There was a silence, and Alice's heart beat very quickly indeed. It seemed to her years before Mr. Stewart spoke again, though it could not have been many minutes.

"Now, Alice," he said, quite gently. "I want to ask you a few more questions. You know that we are trying to round up a gang that has been making itself rather a nuisance lately, and that we are on the track of the leader of this gang?"

"Yes, Mr. Stewart."

"You were the person who saw the burglar hiding in the study. I want you to describe the man, Alice."

"I can't describe the man," she answered, biting her lip over this attempt at literal honesty.

Mr. Stewart sat up.

"Oh, I see," he said. "I take it, then, that it wasn't a man. A woman, eh?"

Miss Primrose looked at Mr. Stewart with some irritation, but Alice went scarlet.

"Yes, it—it seemed to be a woman's hand I saw," she admitted.

"And you can describe the hand?"

"I—I don't know."

"Come, come," said Mr. Stewart, a little more sternly. "Let's have no concealment of evidence, Alice. You can describe that hand; I know you can. But why won't you?"

"I'll try."

"Yes, I think you'd better," said the detective. "Describe that hand as closely as you can, please."

"It—it was a thin hand, with—with stubbly sort of fingers—" She paused.

"Yes, go on."

"And—and the third nail was bruised," stumbled on Alice.

"Thank you, Alice. That coincides with the evidence I have."

"Evidence you have!" gasped Alice.

"Then—then you know?"

There was a silence that could be felt in the room, and it seemed to Alice King that all of them must be able to hear the awful beating of her heart.

"I know that you saw this, because you told other girls so," said the detective quietly. "Now, what I want to know is, why have you tried to conceal this evidence?"

"But I haven't. I've just told you, Mr. Stewart," Alice protested, tears not far off.

Mr. Stewart leaned back in his chair, holding Miss Primrose's ebony ruler between his hands. He stared at it reflectively for a few minutes, then darted a sudden glance at Alice.

"Who is this person?" he asked. Alice had such a lump in her throat that she could hardly speak.

"Tell me, please," said the detective impatiently.

Miss Primrose snapped her fingers imperatively, and Katie stared with wide, round eyes at Alice.

"I—I think it may have been a servant," she gulped.

"Which servant was it? Now we are getting nearer. Come, Alice, you know quite well, don't you? First you admit that it was a woman, then that it was a servant. If you know all this you must know which one, since you have looked at her hands."

"Yes, but—but—"

"Then we will bring up the servants, and you shall examine their hands," said Miss Primrose to Mr. Stewart.

The detective nodded, but he did not take his eyes from Alice's face.

"Come, Alice!" he persisted.

Like a trapped rabbit, Alice King looked about her; but only Miss Primrose's stern face, Katie's astonished gaze, and the faintly-smiling eyes of the detective met hers.

There was no escape. A sob caught in her throat, her hands shook.

"I think—I think," she panted at last, "it is the one called Susie!"

CHAPTER 14.

A Trying Ordeal!

MR. STEWART leaned back in his chair.

"I am beginning to think," he said, "that we are nearing the end of this affair. You are quite a help to us, Alice. I think that finishes this little interlude."

He was in a very good humour, and hummed softly to himself as he jotted down some notes on a pad.

And all the time Alice stared fixedly down at the inkwell on the desk. It wasn't a particularly interesting inkwell, but even if it had been Alice could not have seen it. Tears misted her eyes, and her teeth were biting fiercely into her lip to stay its quivering.

"You have finished with Alice?" asked Miss Primrose.

"I think so, for the moment. Although—stay, there is another question."

"What is it?" asked Alice, raising her head. "I don't mind your asking questions. I have nothing to fear."

She said it so valiantly that the detective half-smiled, but checked himself as he saw the tears in her eyes.

"I want you to see that you have been a very silly girl," he said. "You have concealed evidence, and that places you in a very awkward position. In law, if you conceal evidence, that is regarded as making yourself an accomplice. Accomplices suffer the same punishment as the criminals themselves, sometimes—"

"Ye-es!" murmured Alice.

"I am glad you see," went on the detective softly. "You must think what this would mean to your father, how he would be disgraced in his profession. A lawyer, isn't he?"

Alice gave him a frightened look.

"I—I don't know," she said in a low voice.

"Come, Alice," said Miss Primrose sharply. "Do not be foolish. Of course you know your father's profession."

Again Alice looked wildly round.

"I don't," she choked. "Really I don't, Miss Primrose!"

Then, for the first time, Katie intervened.

"She told us she didn't some days ago, Miss Primrose. We were talking about fathers and their professions, and that sort of thing, and—"

"I know he's a gentleman," said Alice, with a proud toss of the head.

"But not what kind of gentleman, eh?" murmured Mr. Stewart.

"He's not a criminal!" cried Alice fiercely. "It isn't fair to say he is just because—"

"Because what?"

Alice drew back, and knew that she had said too much, knew it when it was too late.

"Just because I—I don't know what he is," she faltered. "Some girls said that, and—and—it isn't fair."

Then she dropped her face into her hands, too worn-out to control herself any longer. She began to sob, so bitterly that it seemed she would never cease.

Mr. Stewart jumped up and put an arm on her shoulders.

"My dear little girl," he said gently, "don't you worry. There's nothing at all for you to fear if you tell the truth. Cheer up!"

Through her tears Alice looked at the headmistress and saw her look of amazement, saw Katie Smith staring at her with a puzzled, astonished gaze.

"My father is not a burglar," Alice choked. "It isn't fair!"

"No, no!" said Mr. Stewart, kindly. "You mustn't take this to heart. I shan't ask you any more questions. You dry your eyes and run along, there's a good girl!"

Alice turned hesitatingly, looking at Katie.

"Alice," said the headmistress sternly, "tell Boker to find the maid, Susie, and send her here immediately. Then go to your study, and stay there."

Alice walked out of the study, bumping against the doorpost as a fresh rush of tears clouded her eyes. Outside, she leaned against the wall of the corridor.

"Oh, my goodness! If she tells!" she sobbed. "If she tells!"

But she dared not face further impatience on Miss Primrose's part, so, stifling her sobs, she walked into the hall.

She called to Boker, standing in the shadow of a screen in an endeavour to hide her reddened eyes.

"Miss Primrose wants to see Susie, the housemaid," she said. "Will you find her, please, Boker? At once."

The page-boy hurried off at once, and a few minutes later Susie appeared.

Alice looked doubtfully at Boker. She

must speak to the maid, yet how could she, with Boker standing staring at them. A bright thought struck her.

"And will you go down to the gates, please," she said eagerly, "and ask Pipor if he has seen a tall, dark man near here?"

Boker, whose chief ambition at the moment was to become a celebrated detective, sped off on this fresh errand willingly.

Then Alice faced the servant.

She was a most unprepossessing-looking girl. She had a wide mouth, a broad, tip-tilted nose, and astonishingly bright, monkey-like little eyes.

"She wants me?" she queried, jerking her thumb in the direction of Miss Primrose's study. "My! You've had the water-taps on, haven't you?"

She looked alarmed, and Alice nodded her head.

"Yes. Miss Primrose wants to see you," she said in a low tone.

"You given me away?" cried the girl sharply. "My stars, have you given me away?"

"They—they knew," said Alice. "I couldn't help—"

The girl looked at her in horror, then clenched her hands.

"Well, here goes. We're all in this together," she said meaningly.

"Together! I'm not in it at all, you know that!"

"Oh!" sneered the servant. "And how about your father, eh? How about the Bunty Boss. The man who pulls the strings, eh? The clever crook. How about him? If I goes down I pulls him with me. I know who he is all right. I ain't supposed to, but I do. He's your father!"

"He is not!" Alice turned furiously, and her eyes blazed their hatred and anger. "You know that isn't true. My father is a gentleman—"

"Gentleman crook, you mean. He's the Mr. King that lives in a swell house—the swell mobsman. What's the use of you pretending, eh? What's the use? I know, and I'm going to give him away if they get me."

Alice's face showed fear.

"You needn't mention his name."

"Then you do know," cried the girl sharply. "You do know, my fine little miss, or it wouldn't matter if I did state his name, eh? That's got you!"

"It has not. You can mention my

father's name. He can't be the man you mean, but they may think he is, and—and if he were arrested, think what it would mean—to my mother, and—"

The girl threw back her head and laughed coarsely.

"Oh, my! Worried because he's arrested. Reely now! Oh, my! He, he, he!"

The cackle of laughter was quite uncontrolled, and could be heard along the corridor, so that it was not surprising, a moment later, that the headmistress' door was whipped open, and Miss Primrose herself appeared.

"Was that you laughing, Susie?"

"Me, mum? No, mum," said Susie. "I know me place better'n to laugh, I hope, mum."

"I hope so, too. Come here at once. Didn't you know that I had sent for you?"

"For me?" said Susie, in well-feigned surprise. "No, mum."

"I certainly did. Come here at once. Mr. Stewart wishes to ask you a few questions."

"Right-ho, mum!" said Susie airily. "I don't mind."

Alice King, from the shelter of the screen, looked after the servant, and her heart was in her mouth. How she envied the other's self-control, yet how she loathed her! How she had loathed her ever since that evening when the girl had walked into the study, and taken it for granted that Alice was "one of the gang"! And now she was hinting that Alice's father was also "one of the gang," and the head, at that.

It was not true, it could not be true! Nothing would make Alice believe that her father was a criminal, and yet—how strange it all was!

She felt she could not go away from that spot; she felt she wanted to hear what passed in that study, just what the girl said; and when Miss Primrose opened the door and beckoned to her she started nervously and would have run away. When she re-entered the study, Mr. Stewart was not looking nearly so kindly, though the girl, Susie, was not looking at all nonplussed.

"This girl says she was not in your study, and that you are making all this up because she accidentally tore a dress of yours," said Mr. Stewart.

"A dress of mine? She has not been near my dresses!" gasped Alice.

"I see! And this is the same girl?"

"Yes, Mr. Stewart."

"The other day I asked you to keep your eyes open for a message that might be passed into the school, Alice. The message, I think, was to this girl. It might have said: 'Do you think ill of your old father, or don't?' You understand?"

"Yes, Mr. Stewart. You—you told me."

"I did. And what did the message say?"

"Oh, dear. I—I don't know."

"Come now, Alice. Did you see an old man near the school?"

"Yes, but—"

"There is no but. You saw the old man, and he handed you the message. What did that message say?"

How he knew all that she could not guess, but he did, and Alice's eyes widened in fright.

"It said 'Don't think ill of your dad,'"

she muttered.

"For whom was this message intended?"

Alice hesitated, but she realised that the only way was to tell all she knew.

"It was for Susie. Susie asked me if I had seen her father near the school, or an old man."

"Me?" said Susie. "What a whopper! I never said such a thing. Me old man's dead."

The detective frowned, and waved his hand.

"That is enough," he said. "It is useless for you to argue, Susie, because it is quite right. I had a man watching everything."

Alice's heart leaped.

"You knew I received the message, and—and—I—"

"And destroyed it? Oh, yes. I knew that. But tell me, why did you burn it?"

"I thought—er—I—didn't know—"

"Was the old man's face familiar to you?"

Alice's eyes gleamed, and she shook her head fiercely.

"No, no! I didn't recognise him. I didn't, I swear I didn't!"

"Then you shall have the chance," smiled the detective. "It so happens that he is under arrest. What do you say to that?"

But Alice King said nothing at all.

She had fainted!

CHAPTER 15.

Bessie Again!

"MUM-MY gug-goodness!" gasped Bessie Bunter.

Bessie Bunter's tone expressed utmost astonishment, and her little eyes gleamed behind their thick glasses.

Bessie had been en route to the tuck-shop to get a little snack in the shape of a doughnut or two before dinner, and the mere fact that she had been stopped in her progress in that direction was sufficient to show that something more than ordinarily interesting was holding her attention.

Her gaze was riveted on the figure of a girl—perhaps eight or nine years of age—which hovered about the school gates.

She was sketchily dressed in an old-plaid skirt and a vivid green blouse, and her shock head bore a straw hat with half the brim torn off.

Surprising as the appearance of such a character at Cliff House was, her behaviour, thought Bessie Bunter, was even more surprising.

She was darting about from side to side of the gates, peering through them into the school grounds from every angle. Occasionally she would stand still and take a long, keen look from one point; then she would make a swift gesture with her arms and dart to another place.

Bessie watched her, fascinated, all sorts of thoughts working round in her none too quick brain.

Who was this strange girl, and what was the meaning for her more than strange behaviour?

It struck Bessie suddenly that there could only be one explanation. She turned quite dizzy at the thought.

"A—a confederation of the bib-burglars!" breathed Bessie. "Spying out the lul-land! Mum-my goodness!"

If anyone else had been there to hear, it might have struck them as humorous to think of a "confederation" of burglars spying round Cliff House, but Bessie was quite alone, and too flustered to bother about a little difference in words.

Even as the thought occurred to the fat girl of the Fourth, it became a foregone conclusion. There was no question in Bessie's mind that this girl really was a

confederate of the burglar, or burglars, finding out how the land lay.

"And such a kik-kid, too!" she stammered excitedly. "But that's their artfulness, of course. Mum-my wuw-word, what ought I to do now?"

Even as Bessie put the question to herself, the girl at the gate turned and saw her standing there regarding her with deep interest.

The sight of the fat girl had a strange effect upon the younger one. Throwing up both hands and slapping them down upon her knees, she burst into a loud and hearty laugh.

Bessie started as though she had received a pinch on her fat arm.

"Mum-my goodness!" she spluttered. "Is she lul-laughing at me?"

There being nothing else, so far as Bessie could ascertain, to laugh at, it seemed fairly obvious that such was the case.

Bessie drew herself up to her full height, stuck her glasses more firmly upon her podgy nose, and rolled down to the gates.

That laugh had decided her. She must detain this girl until she could be handed over to Mr. Stewart. Her capture might mean a lot to the detective. Bessie saw herself being warmly commended, perhaps even rewarded before all the other girls for her astuteness in furnishing such a valuable source of information. That laugh at her expense, too, should not be overlooked. Due mention should be made of that!

Bessie bore down upon the girl who was still laughing, with an appearance of portentous importance. But, somehow, it did not seem to strike the right impression on the younger girl. The nearer Bessie approached, in fact, the more the girl at the gates seemed to laugh.

She paused when Bessie came right up to her, and looked up, the tears streaming from her very blue, long-lashed eyes.

There was something about her face, for all it was so pinched and thin, that would have made almost anyone join in that laugh with her. But Bessie was filled with suspicion, and moreover her dignity was wounded, so she only frowned the more heavily.

"W-what are you dud-doing here?" demanded Bessie sternly. "And why dud-did you start laughing when you saw me? Were you lul-laughing at me?"

The girl wiped her eyes and nodded, the battered brim of her straw hat bobbing up and down with the vigorous motion of her head.

"Shure," she said, in a soft, husky brogue, "an' whoi not? Is ut burstin' ye'd have me be, entoiroy? Shure, an' it's always laugh I have to whin I see some-one loike yerself!"

That struck Bessie as being distinctly rude, though the younger girl's eyes sparkled in a frank, disarming way that showed she did not see it in that light herself.

"Du-don't you be so juj-jolly cheeky!" stuttered Bessie in righteous indignation.

"Cheeky?" The younger girl took hold of her own freckled cheek between two brown fingers. "Is ut manin' ye are that me face is too fat, begorrah?"

"No!" howled Bessie, and it certainly was not. One would not have expected to see so thin a face in conjunction with such merry eyes. "You know jolly well what I mean. How dare you laugh at my fuffiguro?"

The light of mischief danced back into the bright eyes.

"Ochone, now, an' it's better Oi should be doin' that than cryin' about ut," said the delicious brogue. "Ut's kind of cheerin' to see someone like yerself whin one's afther feeling a bit in nado of a square meal. Ut's easy ut is to see you're not hungry, anyways."

"That's all you know about it," said Bessie, forgetting for the moment her suspicions of the girl. "As a mum-matter of fuf-fact I'm starving at this very minute. They don't give a growing girl half enough to eat at this school."

"Shure, thin, let's shake," the other girl thrust out a thin hand. "For ut's shtarvin' Oi am meself."

Then Betty remembered, and peered at her with short-sighted suspicion through her thick glasses.

"I don't believe you're half so hungry as I am," she said. "You pup-people always tut-try to get sympathy by saying you're starving. I know-know all about you."

The result of those last words was as Bessie expected.

The girl seemed utterly dismayed. She fell back a pace, her face paling under its freckles, catching her breath in sharply

Bessie nodded triumphantly.

"You can't bub-bluff me," she said importantly. "I know what you're after, mum-my girl."

The younger girl seemed to pull herself together.

"Well, an' what if ye do?" she said spiritedly. "Is ut afther bein' a croime, intoiroy? Yo'd be afther doin' the same, beloike if ye were as hungry as meself."

There was something pathetic in the way the girl said this. At any other time it might have touched Bessie's by no means hard heart, but she had not yet forgotten that laugh at her expense! Bessie was very much on her dignity.

"It's nun-no good trying to look innocent," she returned. "I know you're a con-confederation of the bib-burglars. I knew it as soon as I saw you. What were you lul-looking at through the gug-gate, eh?"

"Shure, an' Oi don't understand ye at all, at all," said the girl, shaking her head with its battered headgear bewilderedly. "It's only knowin' Oi am that Oi couldn't be a con-what ye said yerself. Oi niver heard of ut before. Me name's Bridie O'Rourke, an' ut was watchin' the kitchen door Oi was, intoiroy."

Then, as if she felt she had said too much, she broke off, and bit her lip.

Bessie took this for another sign of guilt.

"Look here," she stuttered excitedly. "Dud-don't you think you can p-pull the wool over my eyes, because you juj-jolly well can't! And it's no use giving any assumed names, either. Bridie—who ever heard of such a name! I shu-shouldn't be at all surprised if you weren't working out a pup-plan for robbing the kik kitchen."

That, to Bessie, was a terrible thought, and she went on, before the other girl could reply:

"I suppose you know that Mrs. Pickles has been making juj-jellies and jam to-day? I caught her at it myself, only she wouldn't give me any, mean old thing. But I'm not going to let you bring the bub-burglars in after them, so sec. I'll tut-take you to Mr. Stewart straight away!"

She put out a fat hand to catch the other girl by the arm and lead her away to the detective, but that girl, apparently, was not eager for any such proceeding.

With a suddenness that startled Bessie, she leaped forward and twined both thin arms about her body. Bessie found herself

in a grip that, even if it did not reach right round her, was surprisingly strong.

"Ow-wow-oh!" she yelled, half in alarm, and half in surprise. "Leggo! What do you think you're doing?"

"Ochone! Ut's secin' Oi am that ye don't fetch any Mr. Stewart, alannah!" panted her small captor. "Ut's not me that's longin' to meet him, whoever the gentleman may be, begorrah!"

"You let me go!" howled Bessie, struggling with such desperation that the younger girl panted and gasped with the effort of holding her. "You let me go, you little bub-bully. I'll have you locked up if you don't!"

Exactly how Bessie was going to manage this she did not say, but, in any case, it made no difference. The surprisingly wiry young arms did not relax their grip for a moment.

Bessie cast an eye wildly around in search of assistance. There was no one in sight. Most of the girls were on the playing-fields at the back of the school, since there was yet another twenty minutes or so before the dinner-bell went.

At that very moment, however, Babs, Mabs, Clara and Jemima were strolling round towards the front, talking among themselves of Alice King, and wondering what was going on there behind the locked door of Miss Primrose's study.

Mabs, going upstairs to collect a forgotten handkerchief from the study, had seen Alice and Katie enter the head-mistress' sanctum, and had duly conveyed the news to the others.

That had been just after the commencement of morning school, and now it was nearly dinner-time, and she was still there.

"She looked so pale, too," Mabs was saying at this moment as they rounded the corner of the school building, "and Katie's face was as solemn as a judge—"

And then they caught sight of Bessie!

"Great Scott!" gasped Clara, Trevely weakly. "Whatever's Bessie doing?"

"Exhibition of the newest dance from the Fijis," hazarded Jemima, peering interestedly through her monocle.

"It's a long-lost relation come to see Bessie," Mabs differed. "See how tenderly they're embracing."

"More like the long-lost remittance turned up at last and someone making a counter-claim," smiled Barbara.

"Anyhow," proclaimed Jemima, "it

wants looking into, what? Forward the Light Brigade, and all that sort of rot, you know."

The situation certainly seemed to call for investigation, and accordingly they bore down upon Bessie and her unknown companion.

Bessie caught sight of them when they were half-way across the grass, and, wrenching free one fat arm with a desperate effort, waved it urgently.

"Help!" she yelled. "Bub-Babs, Kik-Clara, Rescue!"

This put a new complexion on matters, and the "rescue party" put on speed.

But even as Bessie gave that shout, the younger girl had turned and seen them also, and, releasing her fat captive with a suddenness that left Bessie collapsed upon the grass, she flashed about and made for the gates.

"Here, hi, stop!" called Clara, but the strange girl only ran the faster. As they came up with Bessie she had reached the gates and flashed through them out of view.

Clara went on after her, while Babs and the others helped Bessie to her feet and endeavoured to get the facts from her.

"What's it all about, Bessie?" said Babs. "Who was that girl, and what did she want?"

"Ochone! I mum-mean oh!" wailed Bessie flusteredly. "She said she'd see I didn't fetch Mr. Stewart, begorrah. Sh-she said she was Bub-Bridie O'Rourke, and it wasn't she was wantin' to meet him intiroly."

"Bessie dear, what are you saying?" Babs exclaimed, half bewildered and half amused. "You're talking Irish, you funny girl."

"Shure," said Bessie, "thuth-that is—well, that's what she said. She said it's shtarving she was, but they all say that. I think she was a confederation of the bib-burglars!"

"A confederate of the burglars?" Babs corrected. "That little thing! But why, Bessie dear?"

"She was peeping in through the gates, spying about," Bessie said, beginning to feel quite important now that she was recovering herself somewhat. "She said she was watching the kitchen door, and I'm sus-certain she was after the juj-jollies and things that Mrs. Pup-Pickle has been making."

The idea of anyone stealing into the school to burgle Mrs. Pickles' pantry, excellent though its contents usually were, was too much for Mabs. She went off into a peal of laughter, while Bessie blinked at her indignantly. Babs and Jemima smiled in spite of a mutual effort to keep serious.

"That's right, laugh, Mabs!" said Bessie indignantly. "You juj-jolly well wouldn't have laughed when you fuf-found no jam for tea."

"I'm sure we shouldn't," Babs said soothingly. "But, anyway;"—as she caught sight of Clara returning through the gates with the strange girl—"we'll soon know all about it. Here's Clara with the girl."

Clara had a hand of the younger girl in her own, and the glance she gave Bessie as she approached the little group was withering.

"What yarns have you been pitching, you fat spoofer?" she demanded. "Bridie here says you were going to take her to Mr. Stewart, and goodness knows what. Why?"

"Why? She's a con-federate of the bib-burglars!" howled Bessie, getting it right at last.

"Shure, an' that's what she's been calling me all along," nodded the Irish girl. "An' I was only watching the kitchen door intairyly."

"That's what I told you," hooted Bessie indignantly. "Watching the kitchen door intairyly. And the juj-jams and juj-jellies—"

"Someone gag Bessie and let me speak for a minute," requested Clara desperately. "This is Bridie O'Rourke, who's got no parents and precious little to live on. And she's been coming along to do odd jobs for cook, in exchange for a meal now and then. She was watching for cook when Bessie saw her."

"An' ut's thinking she was going to give me in charge for hanging round the school Oi was," nodded Bridie, in her soft Irish brogue. "So could you be wonderin' that Oi struggled a bit?"

"Of course not," Babs said sympathetically. "But, you see, Bessie made a big mistake. She thought you were someone else. But, of course, it's all right now she knows. Isn't it, Bessie?"

Bessie looked uncertainly at the Irish girl.

"I sus-suppose so," she said slowly. "Only how could I know who she was, you

girls? She only said she was watching the kuk-kitchen door, and I thought—"

"That's right," the Irish girl nodded. "'Twas lookin' for ye're cook, Oi was. She's glad of an extra hand to help wash the dishes, sometimes, or peel the praties—"

"Pup-praties?" gasped Bessie weakly.

"Shure—'taters ye're cook calls 'em. An' then ut's havin' me sthay to dinner or tay, she'll be aither doin'. An' it's mighty grateful Oi am for the invitation!"

And then Bessie suddenly remembered. "Haven't you had any dinner yet?" she inquired. "You sus-said you were hungry, and I didn't believe you."

The Irish girl laid a hand on the front of her shabby frock suggestively.

"Shure, and 'tis ating a house Oi could be," she said whimsically. "Ye'd never believe what a wonderful appetite ye get for dinner if ye go without ye're breakfast, till you try!"

Bessie's really tender heart was touched instantly. She could imagine nothing more dreadful than a case of genuine hunger.

"Oh, I sus-say!" she gasped in dismay. "Haven't you had any breakfast either? Oh, Bub-Babs, Mabs, dud-did you hear what she said?"

Babs nodded. She had been holding a little consultation with Jemima, Mabs and Clara, and now she turned and smiled at the Irish girl.

"Look here, Bridie," she said, "we're going across to the school tuckshop. Would you like to come and see what Mrs. Jones has got?"

Bridie's sparkling eyes conveyed her answer beyond any need of words. Bessie turned to her eagerly and linked a fat arm through hers.

"Yes, come along, Bub-Bridie!" she urged in kindly, if reedy, tones. "Mun-Mrs. Jones sells the best doughnuts you ever saw. I'll stand you one or tut-two if the gug-girls will advance me a little money on a remittance I'm expecting."

And, moving at a really remarkable speed for her, Bessie led the way, with Bridie in tow.

Having reached the tuckshop some seconds in advance of the rest, Bessie was having a heated argument with Mrs. Jones when the other girls came up.

"Oh, rur-really, Mrs. Jones," she was protesting indignantly, "I thuth-think

that's very mean and sus-suspicious of you, I do really, when I'm buying some dough-nuts for my fuf-friend."

"Can't help that, Miss Bunter," Mrs. Jones returned uncompromisingly. "When you show me that there remittance of yours, you can have anything you like. But I'm not a-going—"

And then Babs put her head round the door, and Mrs. Jones thawed magically.

Within two minutes the girls were seated round one of the tables in Mrs. Jones' hospitable tuckshop, regaling Bridie with such delicacies as she had never before experienced.

The girls themselves ate little, it being nearly dinner-time, but Bessie was quite willing to bear the Irish girl company.

In between bites, she plied Bridie with anything that happened to come to hand, and even attempted to couch her persuasions in Irish, that Bridie might feel more at home!

"Just tut-try one of these ham-rolls, Bridie, bub-bogorrah!" she urged once. "Or these sus-sausage ones are jolly good, too, hoots, och-aye!"

That was Scotch, of course, but it was all one to Bessie. It sounded all right, anyway, and Bridie wasn't troubling, apparently.

By the time dinner-bell rang, both Bessie and Bridie had had all they seemed to want, and Babs took Bridie's address and promised they would all go and see her later on.

"We ought to be able to do something for the poor little thing," she told the others as, having seen Bridie off at the gates, they went in to dinner. "I think I know someone in Friardale who wants a maid."

For the next half-hour or so, their thoughts strayed away from Bridie, though. The talk at dinner was all of Alice King and the detective, and the theories advanced to account for the prolonged visit of Alice to the headmistress' room, were many and various, not to say, in some cases, remarkable.

Gwen Cook, Nancy Bell, and Marcia Loftus, of course, were making no secret of their conviction that there could be no doubt whatever now that it was Alice's own father who was the burglar. Alice herself might even be the accomplice.

So they gossiped, and not all the frowns and black looks of Barbara and Clara

Trevlyn could quiet them. Marcia & Co. meant to get their own back now for the "court" scene in the dormitory.

The worst of it was, however much they might be on Alice's side, there was nothing definite Babs and the rest could say, nothing that would form a crushing counter-argument to the accusation.

When at last they all rose, Barbara and her chums felt anything but happy. Barbara, in fact, put back her chair with a thump of quite unnecessary and unwanted violence, and the frown hovered over her usually serene brow until Marjorie reminded her of her intention to ring up the lady she knew in Friardale, on Bridie's behalf. Marjorie, of course, had heard all about Bridie immediately her chums came in, and her always ready sympathies were warmly aroused.

So Babs went off to ask permission to use the telephone in the seniors' room, while the rest of the girls drifted off to the studios.

The result of the 'phone call was as Babs expected. Mrs. Franklyn would go along and see the girl that very afternoon, and if she was all Babs had described her to be, she would have no hesitation in employing her.

Barbara rang off with a lighter heart.

CHAPTER 16.

The Tormentors!

"BETTER?" asked Katie Smith.

It was the first time she had spoken, although she and Alice had been alone in the study at least a quarter of an hour. All that time Alice King had lain humped in the armchair, her head in her hands, whilst Katie looked out of the window.

But now she had turned, and Alice was watching her through her fingers as she sat there dry-eyed, too weary and ill to cry.

"Oh, Katie," she moaned, "what's going to happen?"

"I don't know," admitted Katie; but she looked at her friend compassionately.

"Alice, why didn't you tell me about it? Why didn't you let me know. I could have helped you."

Alice shrank back.

"About what?" she gasped.

"About—your father, of course."

How grimly Alice's hands clenched then, and how strangely her eyes shone.

"Because I didn't believe it. I don't believe it now! Katie, you—you don't believe it? Tell me you don't believe it, either?"

Katie Smith frowned, and shrugged her shoulders.

"What else can one believe? You know it was your father who gave the message for Susie?"

"It—it looked like him."

"It was. You gave that away by fainting," said Katie. "Oh dear, what a mess it all is. I think your father must be the boss, Susie——"

"He is not, Katie! He is not!"

Alice's voice rose almost to a shriek in its vehemence, but Katie did not heed.

"You know he is. He must be," she said.

"Of course you can't well admit it exactly. But he must be. Otherwise, why does he disguise and bring messages to Susie."

"I don't know."

"There can't be any other explanation, can there? But it must be an awful shock to you."

Alice got up, and moved about restlessly.

"It isn't a shock, because I don't believe it. I shall never believe that my father is dishonest. You don't know him, or you couldn't think it, either, Katie. He is not, he is not, he is not!" And she stamped her foot furiously.

Katie did not answer, but it was quite clear what she thought. Alice came across the study and faced her friend, her eyes flaming, a bright red spot in either cheek.

"Oh, Katie, he is not a thief. You must believe that! You are my friend. You must help me and him."

"Help you—help him," Katie stared. "What do you mean?"

"Why, help to get him free, of course," said Alice, overwrought and excited. "We could do it, together, I'm sure we could. There must be a way."

Katie Smith regarded her intently.

"To get free? You don't know what you're suggesting, Alice. Even if we could, why, my goodness, it'd be criminal. He's been arrested. How could we do it, anyway? It's a wonder they aren't more strict with you, considering the way you intercepted that message."

Alice's face fell.

"I was such a duffer," she said. "I fell

into their trap. They knew that the message was coming, and they meant me to intercept it. They must have suspected that—that it was my father, and now they know!"

"Well," cried Katie. "That proves it!"

"Proves what?"

"About your father, said Katie, rather awkwardly. "If he's got a really good motive, why should he go about in disguise, I'd like to know."

Alice's lip quivered, and she gave Katie a piteous, appealing look. She admired Katie intensely, and thought her clever beyond her years, with a level head. Surely Katie, she had reasoned, would understand.

But Katie did not seem to be understanding at all. She was taking it for granted that Mr. King was a criminal. Yet what else could she do, not knowing him. What other explanation was there?

Even Alice, who had thought and thought it out until her brain seemed on fire, could find no solution.

"Poor old Alice," said Katie softly.

"I wish I could do something to help you. But I can't! He's arrested, and it will all be over soon. What I'm afraid of is——"

She did not finish the sentence, but the look in her eyes gave Alice the clue to what her friend had been about to say.

"You mean—you mean that I'll have to leave the school?" she gasped.

Katie nodded.

"I don't see what else Miss Primrose could do. It won't be pleasant for you here, will it, and the other girls——"

Even as she mentioned the other girls they came into earshot. Dinner was over, and they were free for a little while.

Down the corridor they came, talking loudly, and some snatches of their conversation reached Katie's study. Quickly she sprang toward the door to shut it. But it was too late!

"Where's the young criminal?" they heard Gwen Cook ask.

"Yes, where is she?"

"Katie's study most likely."

The door was burst open before Katie could reach it, and Gwen Cook, a queer, excited look on her face, halted there. Marcia Loftus, and Nancy Bell were with her.

"My hat! Haven't they thrown you out yet?" sneered Gwen.

"And Katie, too—a pair of them."

"Oh, go away!" said Katie shortly. "Shut the door and run away, Gwen."

"I'm staying," said Gwen coolly. "I've never had a really good look at a burglar, and I like to know what they look like. How much swag did your father get, Alice? I hope that's the right word."

"That's right—swag!" nodded Marcia Loftus. "How much is your share?"

Alice did not reply. She was trying hard not to notice them.

"Oh, do go away. Alice had nothing to do with it!" stormed Katie furiously.

"Tell that where it will be believed," sneered Marcia. "We've had it from Boker—"

"Ho heard it somewhere."

"Yes, at the door," snapped Katie, and realised her mistake too late.

"Oh, then it's true," said Gwen quickly. "Thanks for telling us. Poker says Alice was in league with that ugly-looking servant, Susie. Her sort, I suppose."

"And probably that burglar business first time was a fake," added Marcia.

"Yes, rather!"

"Anyway, she knows what her father is now," mocked Gwen. "No wonder she didn't like to say. I suppose he calls himself an expert in crime, or something highfalutin. It must be nice to live in a mansion—"

"On stolen money," put in Nancy Bell. "Splendid."

But Alice could control herself no longer.

"My father is not a burglar. It is all a wicked mistake. His money is not stolen money. You dare say that!"

"He lives on stolen money," said Gwen, with a nasty grin.

Alice picked up the nearest object, a large cushion, and hurled it at the girl in the doorway. Gwen Cook turned her side to meet the cushion, caught her foot in the mat, and over-balanced.

Crash! into Marcia she went, and crash! into Nancy they both went, falling in a huddled heap on the floor.

"Oh, dear!"

"The little cat!"

"I'll throw something harder than that if you don't go," screamed Alice, but Katie caught her arm.

"Alice, for goodness' sake!"

"Then they shouldn't come in and torment me," said Alice her breath coming

in short gasps. "It isn't fair. I hate them!"

Marcia, Gwen, and Nancy picked themselves up, as another relay of girls arrived on the scene. But the relay was of friends, not of enemies.

"Marcia, come away!" said Barbara Redfern.

"Yes, clear off!" cried Clara warningly. But Marcia & Co. did not clear off as they were bidden; they just stood there, bruised and resentful.

"The little thief!" exclaimed Gwen. "We might have expected her to behave like a hooligan."

"Come, come, my dear beloved Gwen," said Jemima Carstairs, "hardly a hooligan, surely. Merely a little playful. Didn't she like your calling her a thief?"

"It's the truth!" interrupted Marcia.

Jemima gave a faint cheer.

"Girls," she said. "The millenium is here! Our dear friend Marcia says that truth—"

"Fat lot she knows about it," growled Clara. "She can clear off with all she knows about truth."

"I'm staying here," snapped Marcia. "Suppose she started to burgle the studies, what then?"

"Suppose you tried to mind your own business," retorted Katie.

The argument might have gone on indefinitely had not an interruption come almost immediately. Stella Stone came along the corridor.

As she approached, the angry talking died away for, being a monitress, Stella had the power of "handing out" lines, a fact that had to be considered. But even though they were suddenly silent, Stella did not seem very pleased.

"What in the world is all this noise about?" she asked sternly. "Why are all you girls looking like ravenous birds?"

"I think there's a little argument in progress," smiled Babs.

"Well, for goodness' sake let us try to keep order when there are strangers about. We don't want that detective man to think we keep an aviary here."

Some of the girls smiled sheepishly at that.

"Is Alice here?" went on Stella.

"She's in Katie's study."

"How long has she been there?"

But as Barbara could not say that Stella

went to find out for herself. But at the door of the study she paused, for inside the room Alice was crying bitterly, and Katie Smith glared furiously at the door, thinking it was Marcia & Co. about to make a fresh attack.

It did not take Stella long to realise what had happened.

"Gwen Cook, Marcia, go back to the Form-room at once," she said sternly.

"But it's not time yet, Stella—"

"Go back to the Form-room!"

They went then, and the mistress entered the study, closing the door behind her.

"Katie, how long has Alice been here?" she asked.

"Ever since we came here from Miss Primrose's study, Stella."

"I see. Well, Mr. Stewart wishes to speak to you both again. He said something about someone's having escaped, and he wanted to know if either of you have been out of the gates."

"Oh, no, Stella. We have neither of us been out of this room."

"Then you'd better go and tell Mr. Stewart that, Katie. Alice, you must really try to stop crying."

Alice made a great endeavour to pull herself together, and really it was not so hard after that gleam of hope in Stella's news.

"He's escaped," whispered Katie. "Oh, dear, do you know I feel almost glad."

"I know I do," Alice smiled tearfully. "I could cheer about it."

"But we mustn't," protested Katie, who had an ingrained sense of law and order. "We mustn't go against the police."

"I'd go against anyone for daddy," said Alice valiantly, "but it won't be necessary. I know he's innocent."

Katie wisely made no reply to that, and in silence they made their way once more to Miss Primrose's study.

CHAPTER 17.

A Tense Moment!

A CROWD of girls were gathered round the wood-shed in the school grounds, and there was a buzz of excitement in the air as Alice and Katie reached it.

They had been directed there by Miss Matthews, who followed them across the

quadrangle, and, full of wonderment, they joined the fringe of the crowd.

"Here they are!" yelled someone.

"Make way for Miss Billie Sykes."

But Alice, with her arm linked in Katie's, forced her way through until she had reached Mr. Stewart, where he stood talking to a young assistant. The assistant was obviously wildly excited about something, and so was Piper, the school porter.

"Come and took 'im, they did, afore I could do anything," said Piper. "I ses, 'You can't come 'ere, I ses! Then they jumps the walls. So I ses, 'You've no right here,' I ses. 'Clear off!' Then they went to this 'ere shed. Of course, I told 'em about it. I ses, 'This is private property, and you'll be trospassed for proscutin'—er—I mean—'"

"What I gather from all this," said Mr. Stewart, none too patiently, "is that they came in here, and no effort was made to stop them."

"I did my best, sir," said the assistant, and the girls felt rather sorry for him.

"The fact remains, he got away," said Mr. Stewart, curtly. "How many men are there here?"

"Three, sir."

The detective nodded, then turned to Alice and Katie.

"Well, what do you know about this?" he asked.

"Nothing," replied Katie, at once. "We have neither of us been out of my study since we were with you."

"H'm! He's got away, nevertheless, and I think he was helped by someone who knew the place. Fortunately the servant is under observation. I wish I had kept you two girls under observation, too."

"Us?" gasped Katie. "Surely you don't think we—"

"I don't know what to think," said the detective, turning to his assistant.

Katie's face flamed, and she turned away, staring at the wrecked door of the wood-shed, where Alice's father had been a prisoner.

He had escaped, and Alice could not help being thrilled by the fact, though she had little hope that he could remain free for long.

As for Katie, she was worried and anxious. Her father being a man of some importance in the world of detectives, she felt she had in some vague way stained the family

escutcheon, though she was quite innocent of having aided in Mr. King's escape.

"Can't we do anything?" she faltered to the man who now stood by the woodshed.

"If you can tell me where they've gone

"But we can't. How can we know?"

"Then there's nothing you can do. I've telephoned everywhere, and they'll be caught, sure as fate, if they keep in the car. But I'm afraid they won't."

A group of girls were already standing in the gateway, looking up and down the road in the greatest possible excitement. That the rescue of the burglar should have taken place whilst they were at morning lessons was really too bad, and when the bell went for the resumption of study, there was a chorus of protests and groans.

It was the second time the bell had gone, too, and presently a mistress appeared at the hall doorway, and clapped her hands impatiently.

"We shall have to get back to the Form-room," said Katie.

"Unless we're wanted here," said Alice. "My Form-mistress doesn't expect me, and I couldn't work if I tried, so I shan't go."

Katie, who was torn between a desire to see this mystery through, and anxiety as to what would happen if she stayed, came to a sudden decision.

"I've got to try to help here, too," she said. "My father would be simply furious if he thought I'd been helping criminals

"My father is not a criminal, Katie. You need not stay—there is really nothing we can do. I am going to see Susie."

"Yes, that's an idea. Come on!"

Susie, for some reason that Mr. Stewart had not explained, was still "at large" in the school. Probably she was being closely watched, in the hope that she would try to communicate with some of her allies.

All the girls had resumed lessons, so that the school was quite quiet when Alice and Katie found Susie cleaning some stairs at the top of the school.

"Hallo!" said Katie. "We want a word with you."

The servant put down her scrubbing-brush and regarded them warily.

"What d'ye want with me?" she said surlily.

"Do you know anything about this escape?" whispered Alice breathlessly. "The man's escaped."

"What, the old man," said the girl eagerly. "Not your pa, the Bunty Boss. You don't say."

Alice did not reply.

"Never mind who he was," said Katie, curtly. "Do you know anything about it?"

Susie put a hand on her hips, her eyes narrowing.

"So they got him, did they?" she said. "Well, he won't like that."

"Like it?"

Something in the servant-girl's tone made Alice catch her breath and regard the narrow eyes anxiously.

"Wh-what do you mean?" she faltered.

Susie laughed harshly.

"He's got what's coming to him for double-crossin'," she said. "That's what I mean. I didn't know he was the Bunty Boss, till you let it out to the 'tec. My word, eh? Fancy him doing his own jobs, eh? That means he's a double-crosser."

"I don't understand," frowned Alice.

"But I do," said Katie. "You mean, Susie, he's been letting you down?"

"I should say he is, and all," said Susie.

"He's letting the whole gang down, selling them all to the police; that's what he's doing."

Her voice rose shrilly, and her eyes blazed.

"How do you know?" asked Katie. "I—I don't believe it."

"Oh, don't you? Well, I know. I had the straight tip."

Katie looked at her measuringly, then smiled.

"They've got evidence enough against you, then, and against the people who gave you that what you call the tip. But where have they taken him to, if not to rescue him?"

"I'm sure I don't know, and I'm sure I don't care. But they'll get their revenge all right."

Alice went white.

"They've taken him away, but—but—not to rescue him?" she gasped.

"Just understood me, eh?" asked the girl, with a sneer. "Yes, that's it, if you want to know. He's getting it in the neck; He's had the lion's share, and now he's getting cold feet, and trying to betray the gang."

"My father a traitor!" cried Alice. "He's not. He wouldn't betray anyone."

"Oh, wouldn't he? Well, I'm telling you he has!"

"Then he's on the side of the law," pro-

tested Katie. "He's only pretended to be a criminal, perhaps, to help the detectives."

Susie winked.

"That's a good 'un," she jeered. "I've heard that one before, and so have the police. Guess they won't let him off so lightly this time, though."

Alice gulped.

"I don't believe it! My father's not a criminal, but if he were he wouldn't let his friends down."

Susie shrugged her shoulders, then knelt down and started vigorously to scrub the stairs. As far as she was concerned the interview was obviously finished, so the two girls walked off. But when they had gone a little way, Katie put her fingers to her lips.

"Run downstairs," she whispered, "and make as much noise as you can. Pretend to be talking to me—"

Alice looked puzzled, but she did as she was told. A few seconds later, she crept back, and together she and Katie stood silently, listening.

"Right-ho!" they heard Susie's voice say. "The ivy's strong and you can manage it."

Both girls cautiously peeped round a corner just in time to see an old man get through the window, which led out on to some leads of an outhouse.

He had a beard, and there was no doubt in Katie's mind as to who he was. She sprang forward, her lips opening to give a yell, her eyes gleaming excitedly.

But that yell never came. For behind her, Alice had seen, too, and she clapped a hand fiercely over the Fourth-Former's mouth.

A second later the old man had escaped!

CHAPTER 13.

Face to Face!

"ALICE, how could you?"

Katie turned furiously upon her friend, who stood regarding her, wild-eyed and fearfully.

"I—I just had to. I—I couldn't let him be caught. Oh, Katie, I just couldn't!"

But Katie could not wait to hear any explanations. The man was a criminal first and her friend's father afterwards. For her own father's sake she must do

everything in her power to see that he was recaptured. Down the stairs she flew, with Alice King close at her heels, and they simply raced out of the hall into the quad.

The man, however, was nowhere to be seen at all, and they looked for him in vain.

"He's gone—he's gone!" cried Alice, and could not keep the joy out of her voice. "Oh, thank goodness!"

But Katie did not answer. She turned and walked towards the school, and entering made her way straight to the head-mistress' study. She found Miss Primrose alone.

"Oh, Miss Primrose," she cried. "Where is Mr. Stewart? I have just seen the prisoner in the school."

"In the school? Goodness gracious, girl—where?"

Katie hurriedly explained, omitting to fill in, however, any details of Alice's part in the adventure. Miss Primrose went to the window.

"Mr. Stewart is down by the gates. Run down to him as fast as you can, Katie," she urged, and Katie ran off.

She had needed no second bidding, and she fairly streaked across the quadrangle, waving her hand and calling so excitedly that she had no difficulty in attracting the attention of the man who stood by the school-gates.

He walked towards her.

"Hallo! What have you discovered?" he asked.

"The man—the prisoner!" gasped Katie, quite out of breath. "He got out of the top window—Susie helped him. At the back of the school."

Mr. Stewart looked hard at her, then turned to his assistant. Then he blew a whistle and ran off across the quadrangle. That hesitation on his part Katie managed to interpret correctly. He intended to make sure that she was telling the truth before taking the guard from the gates.

It was quite hard work for Katie to keep up with him, but she succeeded, looking round every now and then for Alice.

But Alice King was nowhere in sight. She was at the top of the school, peering out of a little window, keeping watch. Susie had gone she knew not where.

A minute later, however, she heard a gasp, and running out into the narrow corridor and looking up the stairs, she saw the servant girl, with a thin, plain-clothes detective.

Susie was captured!

But Alice could not care much what happened to Susie. She went back to her post at the window, staring out, hoping that she might see the arrival of Mr. Stewart, and warn her father. But she could not see where he lay concealed.

She saw, presently, Mr. Stewart and his assistant arrive, and beneath her window they both halted.

"Nowhere in sight," she heard the detective say sharply. "My word! He's shifted pretty quickly. You didn't see anyone?"

"No one, sir."

And then, behind Alice, came the tall, thin, plain-clothes man, and he leant out of an adjoining window.

"I have locked the servant in a room, sir," he said. "I heard someone call, and she was darting about—"

"Have you seen a man—chap with a beard?" asked Mr. Stewart quickly.

"No, sir."

Alice's heart leapt. She wanted to clap her hands and laugh.

How clever her father was! How easily he tricked them!

But her pleasure was not very long-lived; for she could not forget that he was not acting like an innocent person. Innocent people had no need to behave in this way, and why was he in league with Susie?

Alice's mind was in a whirl. She tried to think out all the details of the case. Susie, who had said that "the Boss" was betraying the gang, that she wanted to see him arrested, had helped him to escape.

Her duplicity was obvious, now; Alice knew that Susie had deliberately tricked them. Katie fortunately, or unfortunately from Alice's point of view, had suspected that.

And now—where was her father?

Staying up here was of no use to anyone, so she hurried down to join in the search. She found Mr. Stewart and the plain-clothes officer in conversation, and they both regarded her suspiciously.

But they did not stop her, or even speak to her at all; though she got the impression that she would be watched, and that they imagined she would go and speak to her father, that she knew where he was hiding.

Her first impulse had been to seek him out. Now wisdom made her refrain. She would stay where she was. Nothing she would do should help them to find him, whatever his reason for behaving like this might be.

She had wandered about in the school aimlessly for some time when Katie called to her, and she went over to her.

"Do you know where your father is, Alice?" she asked. Her voice was stern, and Alice's lips quivered as she shook her head.

"I don't—really, I don't!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am. But if I did know I wouldn't tell you," she returned defiantly.

"Alice, you've got to help. It's best for everyone. You'll only put yourself in the wrong if you go on like this. Perhaps your father is a detective—or—or—p'raps he's helping the police."

"He must be doing something like that, though."

"Shall we tell Mr. Stewart what Susie said?" queried Katie anxiously.

Alice hesitated, then nodded her head.

"P'raps we'd better."

They sought out Mr. Stewart and told him of their talk with the servant girl. He regarded them thoughtfully, then scratched his head.

"It doesn't sound very likely," he said. "And, anyway, Katie, this girl Susie isn't to be believed, is she?"

"She seemed very angry," said Katie.

"And then helped the man to get away. Doesn't quite tally, does it?"

"But was he the same man?" asked Katie quickly.

She looked at Alice, and that girl nodded her head.

"It was the same bearded man," she had to admit.

"Your father in disguise," nodded the detective. "I haven't a doubt about that, nor that Miss Susie is in the game. I am sorry to say, Alice, that your father is wanted by the police as there is every

evidence to prove that he has been engaged in crime for some years—"

Every ounce of colour drained from the girl's face.

"Oh, but he couldn't. He couldn't—he's my father. He's a darling—you don't know."

"I know of him," came the retort. "And I must warn you, Alice, that if you don't want to help in the capture of your father, and this is quite understandable, you will be well advised to take no part in the affair at all." He spoke quite kindly and laid a hand on her shoulders. "It is a sad piece of news for you, very sad, and I am very sorry for you. But—the law must be adhered to and justice must be done. The law is no respecter of persons."

"I know—but—it isn't daddy."

Mr. Stewart patted her shoulder again.

"Do you think you had better go home?" he asked.

But Alice certainly did not want to do that.

"No. I won't desert daddy. I won't desert him. If I can, I'll help him!" she said fiercely.

The detective shook his head.

"You must do nothing," he said. "I will not ask you to betray your father. It is natural that you should believe him to be innocent. But he must stand his trial, and if he is innocent he has nothing to fear."

"That is quite true, Alice," put in Katie.

"But think of the disgrace," burst out Alice wildly. "And the shock it would be to mummy. She'd never get over it. Oh, it can't be true—it just can't!"

A kindly gleam shone in the detective's eyes.

"I like your faith in your father," he said. "If I had a daughter I should like just such loyalty. But since you are so fond of him, Alice, you must see that the best thing is for him to come to justice."

They walked round to the front of the school, still trying to convince her, whilst Katie, who had linked arms with her, whispered what consolation she could.

But a sudden commotion at the gates stopped them from entering the school. They saw the assistant step forward hurriedly and clap a man on the shoulder.

The man was well-dressed, and of good carriage, and upon being touched, he turned round with an astonished exclamation.

But their attention was soon taken off

the man, for Alice King gave a sudden cry and started forward.

"Oh, gracious—daddy!"

"Your father!"

Mr. Stewart quickened his steps and Katie had to run to keep up with them. The stranger turned toward them, an angry look on his face.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded. Katie looked at him, and liked him immediately.

"Mr. King?" asked the detective, very quietly.

"Yes, and who are you? I should like some explanation. I came to see my daughter—Why, Alice! I came here to see you, dear!"

He caught up Alice and kissed her, looking down into her face.

"Why, child, you've been crying."

"I'm not, daddy—really."

He put her down, and turned to the detective.

"I don't understand this at all," he said.

"I came down to visit my daughter, here, and I am told I am under arrest."

"I am afraid you are," said Mr. Stewart coolly. "Here is my card."

Mr. King examined the card.

"You are a detective?" he said. "I still do not understand. What have I to do with this? Why am I to be arrested?" His bewildered gaze wandered over them.

The detective regarded him quizzically.

"I admire your nerve," he said. "You're a clever actor, but it won't pass."

Mr. King frowned now.

"I don't know what you are talking about. There is some mistake," he said shortly.

"Oh, daddy, there is—there is. They think you're a criminal, a burglar," cried Alice, almost hysterical with relief at her father's look of surprise. Oh! how could she ever have doubted his innocence! "Isn't it absurd?"

"H'm!" The detective looked down his nose. "There is such a thing as law and order, Mr. King."

"Law and order? Why, naturally." Mr. King looked more and more puzzled; he also seemed to be getting angry.

"Oh, daddy—I was so frightened, though I knew—I knew—" Alice choked. "I don't care what they say."

Mr. Stewart pursed his lips.

"We had better discuss this inside, I think," he said. "You change very quickly, Mr. King. Though I suppose to discard a beard is not a difficult matter."

"A beard? What on earth are you raving about?"

Mr. Stewart, however, had turned toward the school-house and, with Alice hanging upon her father's arm, they walked across the quadrangle.

As they reached the school the thin, plain-clothes man emerged, his hand firmly grasping the arm of Susie, the servant-girl, who was dressed in her outdoor clothes. She started as she saw Mr. King, then looked away, but she smiled queerly, and the detective looked at her keenly.

"One minute, there!" he called. "I want that girl inside here a moment. We must get this thrashed out."

He walked ahead with Alice's father and Susie, whilst Alice and Katie brought up the rear. Alice was simply dancing with excitement, but Katie was very serious.

"You'll have to give your evidence soon," she said, looking sideways at Alice.

"I don't care, I know daddy's innocent," answered Alice happily. "You saw he knew nothing about it."

"But you saw him disguised."

Alice stopped and blushed.

"Oh, but daddy'll explain that easily."

Katie Smith, however, did not think so. She was not so overcome with joy that she could not see it was going to be a very difficult matter for Mr. King. However much he might protest that he had nothing whatever to do with the bearded man, it would be hard to prove it to the satisfaction of Mr. Stewart and his assistants.

Even his own daughter had seen him, had blanched with horror and fear. How could he explain that?

Suppose he pleaded ignorance of the whole affair? Only too clearly could Katie see the end of it all. Mr. Stewart would call Alice as a witness—she would have to give her evidence, and in that way, all unwittingly, would seal her father's doom.

But not a word did Katie say to Alice, though her heart ached for her friend. Alice was so happy now, and in a moment—misery would take the place of that happiness, tears chase away all the laughter in her dancing eyes.

CHAPTER 19.

When Her Faith Was Justified.

"THEY'VE got him!" said Gwen Cook excitedly. "I've heard all about it."

"Who hasn't?" asked Clara. "It's all over the school. But fancy his walking into the trap like that."

"Phew! What a nerve!"

"But Alice gave him away," said Gwen Cook. "I know she gave him away."

"Poor kid—not for the purpose!"

But Gwen Cook shrugged her shoulders.

"The detective has been talking to her for hours and hours, and Katie's hanging about in the hall," she said. "It's pretty well over by now."

The excitement had spread round the school very quickly, for there were girls who had seen the arrest from the Form-room windows.

Lessons that day had not progressed very much, and mistresses had had much ado to keep the girls from jumping up and peering out of the windows.

"Poor Alice," sighed Barbara. "I'm jolly sorry for her. Fancy finding out your father's a criminal."

"She refuses to believe it," said Phyllis Howell. "Katie told me all about it—she was with them."

"Oh, what does she say?"

"She says there's no chance for him. Alice recognised him as the bearded man, and she can't go back on what she's said before. Her father denies it all, of course."

"Oh, crumbs!"

They foregathered in the hall, then, despite the monitresses' warning. The crowd was too large to be ordered about by monitresses, and the hall was quite packed.

Katie Smith soon found herself the centre of an eager group, all of whom seemed to be talking at once.

"They've rounded him up, then," said Gwen Cook loudly. "I always knew they would. And a jolly good job, too. If you ask me—"

"We don't," said Freda Foote coolly. "Why ever should we?"

"If you ask me," went on Gwen unabashed, "Alice has been in with him all the time."

"Then why did she give him away as she did?" retorted Katie, bridling. "Not that she meant to, but she couldn't avoid it. She was so worried—"

It was only a few minutes later that the door of Miss Primrose's study opened, and Alice walked out, her face ghastly white. The girls all looked at her, some compassionately, some merely interestedly, as she walked toward the hall.

But Stella Stone came forward to clear away the curious crowd.

"Don't stand there, gaping and staring!" she said. "Have a little feeling!"

"Yes, come on," said Barbara, in a low voice.

And the better-natured of the girls forbore staring at Alice, although the urge to do so was very great. No girl could have suffered more than Alice did as she walked through the crowd of girls, knowing what thought was in every mind.

They thought her father a master-criminal, disgraced, shamed, and condemned.

But her mother held her thoughts chiefly. What would her mother feel, she who had always worshipped Alice's father, and held him up as the most splendid man alive?

What a fall it would be, the wreck of all their life and happiness. Their idol had failed them, and in his hour of need Alice had failed him, too!

Katie Smith was beside her as they went up to the dormitory, where, too worn out to cry, too tired to talk, Alice just sat on the edge of the bed, her mouth parched, her nerves on edge.

"Alice! Alice, I'm so awfully sorry!"

"They trapped me," Alice said wearily. "Oh, Katie, they made me give him away! It was cruel—cruel! You should have seen his face when I said I recognised him. I denied it at first, but the detective had my other evidence all written down. And Miss Primrose heard it, and—and that horrid girl, Susie."

"Did she give him away, too?" asked Katie.

"No, she didn't. She denied everything, and that made it worse, because they knew she wasn't telling the truth. She said she hadn't climbed out of the window, that she had never seen him before," Alice gabbled, quite overwrought. "And it wasn't true. She broke down afterwards, and cried, and admitted it."

"My goodness!"

"And he'll go to prison! My daddy'll

go to prison," she sobbed. "Oh, Katie, whatever can I do?"

Katie Smith clenched and unclenched her hands. There was a lump in her throat, and it seemed as though little, sharp spears were pricking her eyes. But she wouldn't cry, even though she wanted to.

"Alice, there might just be a way out," she said.

"A way out! How—how could there be now?"

Katie was pacing up and down restlessly. "He must be innocent," she muttered. "He seemed so genuinely surprised. He must be innocent."

"I know. And he couldn't understand it when I gave him away, Katie. You should have seen how he looked at me. Oh, Katie, I feel as if I had sent him to prison. If only I had denied everything," she gasped. "Why didn't he tell me? Why didn't he let me know?"

"Isn't there any chance at all? Couldn't he have been pretending to help them, to round up the gang?" broke in Katie eagerly. "It's happened before, with my father. Oh, dear, I wish he were here! I've a good mind to send for him."

"You couldn't. Miss Primrose wouldn't allow it, Katie. Mr. Stewart would be insulted."

Katie knew that, and she nodded her head despondently, knowing that there was no hope that way.

"Daddy proved that he had come in by train," went on Alice. "They could confirm that at the station. But Mr. Stewart said he had got out of the car at Courtfield, and come on from there. He had time to take off the disguise, and come here again as himself. That's what Mr. Stewart said."

Katie nodded absently. She had guessed all that herself, and was puzzling and worrying to find a way out. But there seemed none. Mr. King seemed guilty, and that guilt must be punished. The law, as Mr. Stewart had said, was no respecter of persons.

What she could do, Katie did not know; but suddenly she stopped her restless pacing up and down, and Alice looked up at her hopefully.

"Katie, you've thought of something?" she asked eagerly.

"Oh, I—I wonder!" said Katie, with a faint smile.

"What? Oh, do tell me!"

Kate, however, shook her head.

"I don't want to raise your hopes," she said. "I have thought of something, but"

"Some way of proving daddy's innocence?" breathed Alice.

"Yes, I think so."

"But how? Oh, Katie, you must tell me!"

But Katie would not.

"It is only an idea," she said, and a minute later ran out of the room so suddenly and so quickly that Alice was too surprised to follow her.

Down the stairs Katie ran and into the crowded hall, where she stood, looking to right and left of her. She was looking for one of the detective's assistants, but though she hunted everywhere, upstairs and down, she could not find them.

She eventually found three of them at the gates, and called to them excitedly. The tall, thin man came forward.

"You wanted us?" he asked.

"I wanted to speak to you," said Katie breathlessly. "I wanted to ask you a question about that girl Susie. I think I've got a clue."

"A clue?" said the man, in some surprise. "But they've got the man all right now."

"I want to know if you had an assistant with you upstairs?" persisted Katie, ignoring his last remark completely.

"Well, Johnson was with me," said the tall man, looking at her intently. "But he went downstairs again. Why?"

"I just wondered," said Katie easily.

But the man did not intend to leave it at that.

"You've got on to something, I can see. What is it?" he asked sharply.

"Oh, nothing!" said Katie, and ran off before he could question her further.

She ran off as fast as she could then to the back of the school, and made a hurried search of the ground, but she had been there only a minute or so when Alice joined her. Alice was greatly excited, but obviously puzzled by Katie's manner.

"Katie, do tell me! What are you looking for?" she cried.

"Clothes," she said briefly. "And a beard—the disguise."

"But why?" Alice's face fell immediately. "I thought you wanted to help daddy."

"Yes, so I do. Now, please don't waste

time asking a lot of questions. I can't tell you now, Alice, but I do want to help your father."

Alice caught her arm, her eyes gleaming. "Oh, Katie, if only you could!"

Katie returned the pressure of Alice's arm.

"I'd like you to go up to the window we watched from," Katie said.

"But why?"

"Never mind now. Just go up there, but don't let anyone see you looking out. Just watch everything."

Alice, who could not make any sense out of this remark, just stared at her, but Katie spoke so urgently that she ran off and entered the school by a back entrance not far from them and mounted the staircase.

She reached the window and stood there, in such a position that she could see without being seen.

It could only have been a few seconds later that the shorter of the detective's assistants rounded the corner and approached Katie Smith.

"What are you doing here?" he exclaimed.

Katie jumped and faced him.

"Oh, I—I was just searching for something," she said.

"You have no right to be searching for anything," he said. "Report to Mr. Stewart at once. I have had my eye on you for a long time."

Katie hesitated, then obeyed the man. Alice watched wonderingly from the window.

The detective took a good look up at all the windows, then commenced to search in a thorough way. First he went to the corner to make sure that Katie had really gone, then he took another keen glance at the windows.

This done, he darted to a certain part of the wall, where the ivy grew thickest, and brought out a bundle. It was as much as the girl watching could do to restrain her cry of amazement, for hanging from the bundle was a grey beard!

The detective probably had a right to collect that bundle, but his manner of doing so was furtive in the extreme, and his actions were altogether suspicious.

When he was gone, Alice ran downstairs as quickly as she could, nearly colliding with Katie, who was running up.

"What did he do?" asked Katie.

"Found that bundle."

Katie clapped her hands, and without a word turned and hurried downstairs, with Alice in close pursuit. Obedient to the short detective's instructions she went straight to Miss Primrose's room, and Alice went with her.

Mr. King, looking very white and angry, was sitting in an armchair, whilst Miss Primrose sat at her desk, frowning worriedly as she had every reason to do. Only Mr. Stewart seemed at all pleased with life.

All three stared in surprise as Katie entered the room.

"I've been sent to report to you, Mr. Stewart," she said.

Almost before the words were out of her mouth the other detective entered the room, carrying the bundle.

Mr. Stewart looked over Katie's shoulder at the man.

"Ah! so you've found the bundle, Johnson, good man. Where?"

"In the ditch, sir at the bottom of the field, where we thought it would be. Probably he crawled along the ditch and got away."

"Just what I thought happened," nodded Mr. Stewart. "But what about this girl?"

"I found her acting in a suspicious manner, sir."

"I was looking for the bundle amongst the ivy," explained Katie.

Then Alice broke in.

"And I saw the detective find it," she said.

"You did. Well?"

The man Johnson turned and looked sternly at Katie.

"I saw him find it in the ivy, not in the ditch," went on Alice, quickly and triumphantly. "He looked all round, ever so carefully, to make sure that no one was looking, then he went straight to a

certain place in the ivy and brought it out. He knew where that bundle was!"

Johnson laughed.

"Oh, very clever," he sneered. "A put-up job, of course. Mr. Stewart is likely to accept your evidence."

Mr. Stewart leaned back in his chair and looked, not at Alice, but at Katie.

"Why did you look amongst the ivy?" he asked.

"Because I guessed that Mr. Johnson had hidden it there."

At that moment Mr. Johnson made an effort to intervene, but Mr. Stewart silenced him imperatively.

"Why did you think that he should?"

"Because he must have put it somewhere near there when he took it off. You see, we were in the corridor when Susie let him out of the window."

The man went suddenly pale, and Mr. Stewart fixed him with a piercing glance.

"So ho!" said Mr. Stewart. "This is getting interesting, Katie. I have some admiration of your father's work, and apparently you are following in his footsteps. Tell me all you know, what you suspect."

"Mr. King is innocent, Mr. Stewart. I thought he was all along and I worked on that assumption. Then I soon found out."

Mr. King sat up, and Alice looked at her friend admiringly.

"Then what?" asked the detective. "You're not going to suggest again that Mr. King was acting with some chivalrous motive—"

"I don't think it was Mr. King at all," said Katie quickly; and her simple statement made Mr. Stewart blink, and the other detective visibly tremble.

"How do you mean, not Mr. King at all? Alice recognised her own father!"

"She recognised someone who was very like him," smiled Katie. "They planned

to put the blame on him so that you should think you had got the real man, that's all."

"All!"

"Yes," went on Katie, excitedly. "they found out that his profession was not known, they probably laid all sorts of traps——"

"I was kept a prisoner last night," broke in Mr. King, grimly. "I have already told you that, Mr. Stewart, although you did not choose to believe me."

Mr. Stewart wiped his forehead, and looked rather dazed.

"All this seems merely guesswork," he said. "Have you any proof?"

Katie drew back. She was simply shaking with excitement and it was hard not to let the whole truth out. But she remembered that she must keep calm and collected.

"Yes, Mr. Stewart. Your man, Johnson is in league with them. When he went upstairs on guard he put on the disguise and went out, knowing that we were watching or knowing that the other detective would be warned by Susie, and made to see the man. Then he took off the disguise and joined in the search."

"H'm. Risky!"

"But he took the risk, as I can prove," said Katie, quietly.

She looked at the man, Johnson, but he, instead of laughing her assertion to scorn, leant to the door, pulled it open and made to escape.

He might, even at the eleventh hour, have succeeded, had not the thin detective been standing there. Seeing Johnson's hurried exit, he laid a hand on his arm. But the very manner in which Johnson flung it off and turned fiercely towards him made the thin man realise that all was not well. He grappled with him and in a moment had brought him to the ground.

When Johnson rose again he was hand-

cuffed, but there was such a crowd of girls on the spot that he could not have escaped even if he had not had the unequal struggle with the thin detective.

"That," said Mr. Stewart, "is as good as a confession."

"I turn King's evidence, sir," said the man. "I was only doing it to find out their plans, sir. I swear that's true, sir, and so's what this girl says. Mr. King is not the man you want, it's someone quite different. I can give you his name, sir, the name of Mr. King's double——"

But Mr. Stewart only smiled.

"Don't let him out of your sight for a minute," he urged the thin man. "I think we've arrived at our journey's end, thanks entirely to this girl, Katie Smith."

"Not to me, to Alice," smiled Katie. "I should never have thought of it if she hadn't been so convinced of her father's innocence that she convinced me, too. Then I knew that there simply must be some way out. It's all thanks to Alice."

But Alice was not worrying about who had earned the credit. She was sitting on her father's knees, hugging him and crying out of sheer happiness.

"I knew you were innocent, daddy. I knew—I knew. Oh! I'm so awfully happy."

And Mr. King, whose own eyes were not entirely devoid of moisture, kissed her tenderly, and smiled gratefully at Katie Smith.

Katie Smith was the heroine of the Fourth Form for many days after that, and she told the whole story a good deal more than twice.

Gwen Cook, for once, sang small when the Fourth Form gave a special banquet in Katie Smith's and Alice King's honour. Gwen was not as much in evidence as usual. Indeed, she was not there at all.

Bessie Bunter was, however, and she rose, her fat face shining, to propose a toast to Alice and Katie.

"And I wish it would happen all over again," she said amidst laughter. "I sus-say, is there any more fruit blanc-mango left?"

"Once is enough for me," sighed Alice. "But I'm so happy, and I'm going to have a holiday with daddy and mummy."

"Good!"

"Hear, hear!"

"But there's one thing I'd like to say, girls—one thing you must know——"

"Your father's profession," said Katie, with a teasing laugh.

"Yes. He writes detective stories, and he doesn't want his friends to know,"

smiled Alice. "He didn't even want me to know his pen-name. That's how he got mixed up with these criminals. He wrote a story that led to some of them being captured, and, this is how they got their revenge on him."

"My hat!"

"How frightfully thrilling," said Clara.

"I say, what has he written? What is his pen-name? You must tell us."

But Alice said not a word. She did not know.

"But I'm jolly proud of him, anyway," she said. "I always shall be."

But they had no reason to doubt that. Who could have proved more loyal than Alice King; when, as many of the girls were ready to admit, she had been the girl who had puzzled Cliff House.



Three more splendid numbers of "The Schoolgirls' Own" Library will be on sale on Thursday, Nov. 1st.

See page iii of cover for further particulars.

The CLIFF HOUSE NOTEBOOK.

An issue of the Cliff House Notebook appears frequently in the "SCHOOL FRIEND," on Sale Every Thursday, Price 2d.

Items for this issue have been specially collected for this number of "THE SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN" LIBRARY.

Interesting Points About CLIFF HOUSE.

There are at present six Forms at Cliff House, known as Sixth, Fifth, Fourth, Upper Third, Third, and Second. There is no First Form.

* * *

The number of pupils at the school is approximately 150.

* * *

Girls are not eligible to enter the school until nine years of age, and they may not stay after eighteen without special permission.

* * *

The subjects taught in the four junior Forms—i.e., Fourth to Second—are approximately the same. In the Fifth and Sixth special requirements are studied. Special tuition for all examinations is given, and a Commercial Room exists for lessons in business subjects.

* * *

All girls above the Second Form learn science. Those above the Third do practical experiments themselves.

* * *

Singing and dancing, together with the domestic arts of cookery and needlework, are on the general curriculum. Further instruction in music, singing, and dancing can be obtained as

"extras" during certain evenings of the week, and special fees are charged for these.

* * *

The girls of the Sixth Form are all mistresses by virtue of their position in the school.

* * *

Every Sixth-Form girl has a study to herself, and has a cubicle to sleep in.

* * *

Fifth and Fourth Form girls have studies, which are shared by two or three girls.

* * *

The Upper Third, Third, and Second do not have studies, and have to spend their spare time in their Common Rooms.

* * *

Cliff House School is housed in an old Tudor building, and is quite one of the prettiest mansions in the district.

* * *

The grounds also are most attractive, especially when filled with girls playing cricket and tennis in summer, or hockey and netball in winter.

CLIFF HOUSE "SHOW" ROOMS.

The Library.—A well-equipped and very old room on the second floor. Contains, in addition to a number of modern books, some very old volumes, which are almost as old as the building. The library is in the charge of a mistress, and is only opened at certain hours.

The Model Kitchen.—Model in every respect. Complete with fire, gas, and electric ovens, well provided with every kind of cooking utensil. The model kitchen is used for the instruction of all Forms in cookery.

The Needlework Room.—Another very useful place. The girls are given very valuable instruction. Contains ironing-boards, good tables for cutting-out, electric irons, and everything which appreciably helps in instruction. The walls are adorned with charts, showing practical points in the art of dressmaking.

The Chemical Laboratory.—Situated on the ground floor, and divided into two parts—for physics and chemistry. Each portion of the laboratory is provided with six benches, each capable of holding four independent experiments. Bunsen burners, sinks and taps, and all the latest apparatus, are provided. Each girl is given a basket of "gear"—i.e., glass and porcelain apparatus for experiments—at the beginning of term, and keeps it in a special locker. Careless breakages and neglect in cleaning articles have to be paid for.

The Studio.—A converted attic used for drawing instruction.

The Gymnasium.—A well-fitted-up and lofty building situated in the grounds, containing plenty of apparatus, and used by all Forms above the Second.

Languages Room.—This is really a spare room, used two or three times during the week for special classes in languages. The distinguishing feature is the large number of wall charts used in conversational lessons.

The Music Room.—A quiet and very pleasant room, at the back of the building, used for a few of the day music lessons, but chiefly in use at night for special lessons. Is lent to girls who wish to practise musical items, and also, when not otherwise engaged, for the rehearsal of plays. Next door to it is

The Detention Room, a gloomy and forbidding apartment, devoid of pictures or maps, and liked by nobody.

The Commercial Room.—Situated next to the Sixth-Form class-room. Contains two typewriters, an adding machine, two duplicators, and various other office contrivances. Not used by members of the Fourth at present.

Great Hall.—Prayers are said in this lofty structure morning and evening. It is also the scene of concerts, dances, and, of course, prize-givings and similar occasions. Great Hall is worthy of its name. The lofty ceiling is crossed with great oaken beams, and the walls are panelled to the height of eight feet. Portraits of old inhabitants of Cliff House adorn the walls. A number of oaken panels, lettered in gold, commemorate the successes of past students of the school.

A magnificent organ, the gift of one of the governors of the school, can at times fill the building with its splendid tones.

There is a very good stage at one end, and underneath it is a very large stock of stage scenery.

Lower or Dining Hall.—Beneath Great Hall, but not of such imposing dimensions, and considerably less lofty. Once used as the servants' hall in the old days. Still possesses an immense open hearth, but this is seldom used now for fires.

All meals are taken in Lower Hall. Junior and senior school meetings are held there. Swedish drill is taken in Lower Hall by Miss Bullivant.

THE MISTRESSES.

Miss Penelope Primrose.—Headmistress; loved by all her pupils. Teaches the Sixth in languages, and gives a few lessons to the Fifth. A warm supporter of everything which adds to the welfare and happiness of her pupils.

Miss Mary Evelyn Bullivant.—Upper Third-Form mistress; also mistress in charge of mathematics and drill. A stern disciplinarian.

Miss Mabel Nellie Chantrey is a visiting mistress, and takes singing and dancing at Cliff House for all Forms. A very accomplished young lady, and acknowledged to be the most graceful mistress at the school.

Miss Miriam Drake.—Third-Form mistress, and quite a good sort.

Miss Fane, the Chemistry mistress. Small and frail, she does not enjoy the best of health, but she is most clever at her subject.

Miss Jane Matthews.—Fourth-Form mistress, affectionately called "Janey" by her pupils. The youngest mistress at Cliff House. Very fond of sports, and always most pleased when the Fourth succeeds in that direction.

WHO'S WHO IN THE FOURTH.

A Brief Biography of the Chief Characters in that Form.

Augusta Anstruther-Browne, a pleasure-loving girl, always dresses in the height of fashion.

Annie Joyce Bell, a friend of Marcia Loftus and Gwen Cook. Bobbed hair and dark brown eyes. Deceitful.

Elizabeth Gertrude Bunter, the fattest girl in the Form. Has dark brown hair, in a cable-like plait, thick round glasses, and a sallow complexion. Good at cookery.

Jemima Carstairs; has not been as long at Cliff House as most of the others. One of the most popular girls in the Fourth. Jemima's hair is dark and Eton-cropped, and she affects a monocle.

Clissy Clare.—A frail girl, with flaxen hair and bluish-grey eyes. Her parents are exceptionally well-to-do.

Gwendoline Cook.—Bobbed brown hair and hazel eyes. A friend of Marcia Loftus, and consequently not popular. She is the most superstitious girl in the Fourth Form.

Philippa Beatrice Derwent, usually known as "Flap." Hails from sunny Tasmania. Good at every game, and rides a horse well.

Freda Florence Foote, the most humorous girl in the Form. Auburn hair and blue eyes. A good, but not a brilliant sportswoman.

Gillian Foster.—A newcomer to Cliff House. Plays in goal for the Fourth-Form hockey team. Very popular.

Claudia Frazer.—Another new girl. A friend of Augusta's, and very fond of dancing.

Marjorie Alice Hazeldene, the sweetest-tempered girl in the Fourth. Light brown hair and soft blue eyes.

Annabel Sarah Hichens, the most old-fashioned girl in the Form.

Phyllis Howell, probably the best athlete the Form possesses. She and Philippa Derwent are the greatest of chums.

Dorothy Kathleen Jobling, whose chief hobby is cookery. A great chum of Marjorie and Clara Trevlyn. Has a name for being clumsy.

Vivienne May Ida Leigh, the best dancer in the Fourth. Has curly, almost golden hair, and light grey eyes.

Marcia Ursula Loftus, the least popular girl in the Form. Has a bad influence on Nancy Bell and Gwen Cook, who are her chief cronies.

Mabel Elsie Lynn, Bab's greatest chum. A splendid actress, and a good all-round sportswoman.

Lucy Morgan hails from the mountains of Wales. Very popular, and a good sportswoman.

Bridget Meira O'Toole, an Irish girl, and very likeable, and a great chum of Lucy's.

Peggy Ermintrude Preston, considered by many to be the prettiest girl in the Fourth, and the only scholarship girl in that Form. Possesses any amount of courage, plays games well, and sings charmingly. A Lancashire lassie.

Barbara Hilda Redfern, nicknamed "Babs." The most popular girl in the Fourth, and the Form captain. Dark, shingled, wavy-brown hair, olive complexion, deep blue eyes.

Catherine Smith, the youngest girl in the Fourth. Her father is a detective, and Katie would like to follow in his footsteps when she grows up.

Clara Marian Trevlyn, the most bolterous girl in the school. Marjorie's great chum. Good at most sports, and always ready for a good-natured romp. Very popular in the Fourth.

The Badge of the Clasped Hands.

Clasped hands stand for friendship, so it is appropriate that they should be the emblem of the Interpreter's Badge, which is awarded to the Guide who, by the knowledge of some language other than her own, is able to help visitors from abroad.

To win the badge it is essential that she should know the language so well that she will be able to act as interpreter to a foreigner who understands no English. Also, she must be able to write a simple letter in Esperanto, or any foreign language, and be able to read and translate a passage in a newspaper or book in that language.

It is a matter for reproach that English folk do not willingly take to foreign languages; most Continental people learn at least one other than their own, whilst in Switzerland it is quite common to meet young girls who can speak, write and read four languages quite well.

You see, they have so many foreign visitors to their country—French, German, Italian and English mostly—that they make it their business to make each race feel welcome to their country and at home in it.

French and German is taught in a good number of our schools, but it is surprising how many girls are content to drop languages once they have left. Perhaps it brings painful memories of hours of hard work spent in swotting French verbs, but as you have spent so much time in conquering the ground-work, it is a pity not to go further and master the less difficult and far more interesting part of language-learning.

A very great incentive to learn is to decide that one day, and as soon as possible, you will pay a visit to the country whose language you are acquiring. Once you have set your mind on it, you won't find difficulty in discovering the means.

So set about the task as if you were going, say, to France next year. If you

have the means it is very advisable to attend a class where French only is spoken. You may flounder a bit at first, but you will be surprising yourself at your quick progress.

If such means are not available, then a course of reading and writing must be taken. There are plenty of easy French books to be bought cheaply, and a French-English dictionary should be one of your earliest purchases.

To help pronunciation, read aloud for a certain period every day. This is valuable practice, as it will help you to speak quickly and fluently. You must practice writing the language also, and it should not be difficult to find another girl who is equally anxious to pick up the language who will write to you once a week or more often.

Better still if you can find a French girl who is willing to correspond, and, if you could only meet for an hour or two every week for French conversation, you would find your knowledge of the language increasing by leaps and bounds.

You will learn that French is not spoken exactly as it is written any more than our own language is. Furthermore, different provinces of France vary their speech even as the different counties of England do. Just as Sussex and Lancashire have their brogues, so Normandy and Brittany have their patois.

But if you politely ask your foreigner to speak slowly and distinctly, she will understand your difficulty and try to help you out.

French people are proverbially polite, and you will always find them ready to help you in their country. That is a compliment which you should be anxious to return and, as a Girl Guide, you would find great satisfaction in being able to put a stranger from abroad on the right road.

That is the kind of good turn which gives as much pleasure to you as it does to the recipient.

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