

THE SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN LIBRARY.—No. 178.—THE LONELIEST GIRL AT MORCOVE!

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BY
MARJORIE
STANTON



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The Schoolgirls' Own Library No. 178

A ROUND *of* PLEASURE.



JUST OUT!

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THE LONELIEST GIRL AT MORCOVE!

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

By MARJORIE STANTON.

Author of "THE HUNDRED-GUINEA PRIZE,"
"THE MORCOVE TREASURE-HUNTERS," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

A Drubbing for the Fifth.

"GOAL!"
"Hurrah, yes! Goal again!
Bravo, the Fourth!"

For the third time this afternoon that jubilant shout was ringing across the playing-field at Morcove School.

The hockey-match was Fourth Form versus Fifth—one of a hundred tussles that had been waged in their time between teams made up of the pick of either form.

Ding-dong games they were, as a rule, these inter-form-matches. Between one team and another there would not be much to choose, and which side would pull off the victory was generally an open question until the last minute of play.

But this Wednesday afternoon's match chanced to be going all against the Fifth.

It was not that that team, for once, had gone to pieces. It was just a case of the Fourth Form being in invincible mood.

Betty Burton, the captain, Polly Linton, the captain's madcap chum, Madge Minden and Tess Trelawney, Trixie Hope and Dolly Delane, and all the rest of them—they were full of fire to-day.

Even Paula Creel, the rather languid aristocrat of the Fourth Form, had shaken off her lethargy for the time being, and was doing marvels.

So it had been, "Goal for the Fourth," just after the bully-off, and goal again and again for the same team as the game went on, whilst the Fifth Form, led by Violet Vane, their captain, could get a "look-in" nowhere.

And the Fifth Form were disgruntled! Violet Vane flung a passionate look at the various girls who were with her as she hurried away at the end of the match.

"What was the matter with you all?" she demanded bitterly. "We've often beaten the Fourth; why this awful come-down to-day?"

"I did my best—and I—and I!" protested various members of the vanquished team.

"Yes," commented the cynic, Dora Dean, drily. "Only Betty & Co. did better than our best. And they always will, now that Betty has got back the Fourth Form captaincy."

Whether victorious or beaten, it was the custom for the team to take tea in the captain's study after a home match, and so Violet, a few minutes later, was receiving all her fellow-players in her "den."

This den of Violet Vane's—it was a commodious one, quite lavishly furnished. She was the handsome daughter of a very wealthy but delicate lady—a widow—and Violet never wanted for money. It was

known, indeed, that her widowed mother was generosity itself.

Violet's cousin, Elsie Harper, would not have been here in this study to-day if it had not been for the wealthy aunt's adoption of her, twelve months ago.

For Elsie Harper was an orphan, and it would have been an orphanage for her, not Morcove School, had Violet's mother failed to become responsible for her upbringing.

Elsie looked an extremely nice girl of great character as she sat at tea with these other members of the Fifth Form, and a stranger might have wondered how it was that she seemed to be given a back seat, as it were.

She hardly ever spoke unless she was spoken to, and so far as her cousin was concerned, she was not spoken to at all.

"One imagines," grinned Dora, the cynic, passing up her cup, "the glee prevailing in Betty Barton's study at this moment! I can almost hear their Paula Creel drawing long-winded 'congratulatory remarks, hai Jove!' on the Fourth Form's triumph. And Polly Linton ready to dance a jig on the table."

"That will do," Violet had to say wearily. "Can't you think of something else to talk about. Dora, besides the beating we got to-day?"

"Oh, yes!" laughed Dora. "I can talk about the beating we are going to get to-morrow—or the next day—or the day after that! The watchword of Betty & Co. is 'Onward!' and so—"

"Put a spoke in their wheel; that will end the 'Onward!' business for them," suggested Ruby Maydew. "Girls, look here! I vote we go for the Fourth! Smite 'em, hip and thigh!"

"Admirable!" commented Dora, when approving murmurs had died away. "The question is—how?"

"You ask how?" Ruby Maydew cried at Dora. "It wants thinking out, of course—"

"It wants doing when it's thought out," smiled Dora. "At least, that is my idea!"

"By-and-bye, when I've knocked off prep," Ruby went on enthusiastically. "I shall sit down and think this out. And then, Violet, if I come along with some wheeze, will you, as captain, eh, will you?"

Violet Vano gave a peculiar sort of a nodding smile that showed she was quite disposed to give official recognition to any foud that might be set on foot. As for the other

girls, they were already talking like a lot of conspirators when they dispersed after tea to their various studies.

"Good-bye, and thank you so much for having me!" Dora, the cynic, smiled, after hanging about to the last in the Form captain's den. "It has been so charming," she said, adopting a mock Society tone, "to see how the Form, having been beaten in the open, is prepared to get revenge round the corner!"

She turned away from a sulky-looking Violet, and bestowed a parting smile upon Elsie.

"By-bye, Elsie! You have behaved almost well enough over your tea to please your loving cousin!"

"That girl!" Violet burst out, now that she was alone with her cousin. "She goes too far sometimes with her cutting tongue! But it is your fault, Elsie!"

"My fault?"

"Her saying that about you and me!" rushed on the Form captain. "You have been letting her see that we don't hit it off!"

"Violet, I have not let her see anything of the sort—at least, I hope not!" Elsie pleaded earnestly. "It is quite true that we—we don't get on as well as we might, and as your mother hoped we would, and where the fault is mine, I'm sorry! But I do try to hide it from the others," she finished sadly. "Is it likely one would want them to know—"

"Well, they do know! Oh, it's sickening!" fumed Violet, flinging herself into an easy-chair and staring resentfully at her cousin. "Your being in the same Form with me—being here at all! I wish to goodness—"

"Oh, Violet, won't you feel sorry presently for talking like that? You—"

"No, I shall not be sorry! More and more every day I do feel sorry that you ever came to Morcove! It's not very nice for me, having a wretched pauper always hanging about me—always trying to take the wind out of my sails, too!"

"Violet—"

"There, that will do! You know it is the truth!" snapped Violet, running a shapely hand down her silk stockings. She was a girl who could admire her clothes and appearance all the while she was carrying on a squabble. "Who was it topped me in the fortnightly list last Saturday? You!"

Elsie said very gently:

"Surely, Violet, it is up to me to do my best at the work, for the sake of your mother? We are neither of us so very brilliant at the work that we can afford not to try."

"Brilliant! No, you are not exactly that," sneered Violet. "If you were in the Fourth Form you would be more in your place, it strikes me! And that's where you would be to-day, if I could have my way!"

"Violet!"

"Because I hate you, and I hate having you in the Form with me, which means in this study!" the captain went on, jumping up passionately. "I know what it is going to be! If I'm not very careful you will—"

She broke off, swallowing back her torrent of envy as the door flashed open and Ruby Maydew came whirling in.

"Violet—such a lark! I've got a wheeze—you know! For scoring off the Fourth!" she cried gleefully. "Shall I tell you?"

"Yes—but wait," the Fifth Form captain said. And then, with the curtest of nods to her cousin, she exclaimed icily:

"Clear out, Elsie! You are in the way!"

CHAPTER 2.

Her Private Plot.

RUBY MAYDEW was in raptures over her "wheeze."

Hardly had Elsie submissively withdrawn from the study before Violet was having the idea whispered to her excitedly.

"I propose a downright campaign against the Fourth," Ruby said eagerly. "Give them no peace from morning to night! It will be a lark, japing them until their lives are not worth living! And it will make them feel small!"

"Oh, yes!" assented Violet. "But—" She paused. Her mind was wandering to her Cousin Elsie. That girl, not Betty & Co., was the thorn in Violet Vane's flesh.

"So, to begin with—and I vote we start this very evening," Ruby chattered on—"let's collar one of the Fourth Form girls and give her a trying time of it. That will rouse the Fourth, but we'll be down on them with another jape before they can get over the first!"

Ruby whipped round to the door, and opened it.

"Come on, you girls!" She took upon

herself to call to the half-dozen who appeared to be doubting whether Violet wanted to see them invading her study again. They came in rather hesitantly. But it was all right; Violet received them with quite good grace.

"Well," the Form captain began, "you know that Ruby here has some scheme on?"

"There's a shed—it's almost as dark as a coal-cellar—down in the shrubbery," said Ruby very quietly. "Get Paula in there, and keep her there until call-over!"

"It will be dark ages before that," said Millie. "She—she won't be frightened, I suppose?"

"Let her be frightened—all the more fun if she is!" chuckled one of the other schemers. "But, so as not to give her a real upset—"

"Yes, I know!" Violet struck in sharply. All at once she seemed to be very keen on the jape. "Someone must stay with Paula the whole time. My cousin—she'll do! Call her back; one of you find her!"

Perhaps Violet's sharp command would not have been obeyed so readily, only her companions were eager to get on with the conspiracy. Millie and another girl—Sybil Golding was her name—ran out to fetch Elsie back, and in a minute all three returned.

Then the door was shut, and Violet Vane was accorded deep silence so that she could explain matters to her cousin.

Even in front of these other girls there was a hostile coldness in the tone she adopted towards her orphan-cousin. She explained the plot much as some haughty people explain to a menial, finishing up with a curt:

"You're to be in the shed with Paula—see?"

"But I—my prep?" Elsie demurred gently. "I can't leave it until the morning, it is too much."

"Oh, I'll do your prep!" Violet said impatiently. "Bother that!"

"But—"

"Look here, are we going to get on with the jape or not?" asked Ruby. "Because we ought to hurry. This is just about the time Paula Creel gets out of her own easy-chair and drifts along to her other easy-chair in Betty and Polly's study."

Nothing could have been nearer the truth than that.

Paula was going along the otherwise deserted corridor to the Fourth Form

captain's study some five minutes later, when someone from the stairs end called:

"Oh, Paula—one moment!"

Paula turned about. She could see no one, and she had not recognised the voice. As she said afterwards, her "cuviosity was awoused, bai Jove!" and she sauntered up the corridor to the staircase landing.

Just as she emerged from the corridor—flop! fell something over and about her head and shoulders, and in that blindfolded, smothered fashion she was suddenly seized.

It was a thick blanket that had been drawn over her head and shoulders, and she could not even see the fading evening light through it, nor could she catch what was being said in excited whispers.

But all at once the captive girl knew that she was being rushed some distance across level ground in the open. She could feel the fresh air striking coldly upon her hands and her silk stockinged ankles.

Then with a jolt that was another indignity the aristocrat of the Fourth Form finished her flight through space, as it were. A shed door rattled open, and the hands that set her down flop! caught her up again.

Next moment Paula Creel was sent stumbling blindly into the shed, with the blanket still swathing her. At the same instant she heard and recognised a voice for the first time since her bewildering experience began.

"There you are, Elsie—keep her company!" the voice of Violet Vane said.

Paula gasped a feeble, "Bai Jove, haow extraordinary!" as she started to throw off the blanket. With a rattling bang the shed-door was shut, and a hasp outside made fast, and Paula, when she got clear of the blanket, was in deep gloom, with only one other girl for company.

"I—weally! Bai Jove!" Paula blurted out, recognising Violet Vane's cousin, Elsie Harper. "Er—do you realise that you have wumped my hair most dweadfully?"

"I'm sorry for you," Elsie could not help saying, although she knew that she must be careful not to show too much sympathy towards Paula or any other member of the Fourth Form. She belonged to the Fifth, and must be loyal to the Fifth.

"Sewwy, you say!" Paula naturally supposed that Elsie was mocking at her. "Ewvery one of your Fifth Form geals will be sowwy, I wather imagine, if I weport this—outwage to Betty and my fwieds. Howevah—"

Paula paused to get her breath back.

"If it is a jape, Elsie Hawper, I do not pwoposo to wush away and complain to my fwieds. Howevah, I shall feel gwreatly weliieved if you will permit me to withdwaw. Yes, wather!"

"You won't be let out until call-over."

"Gweat Scot! And you—"

The aristocrat of the Fourth Form broke off in horror. She put a hand to the back of her neck.

"Heah, help!" she yelled feebly. "Are you aweah that there are cweepy, cwawly cweatures dwopping fwom the wooof? Elsie, there's a monstrows spider, bai Jove, gone down my neck—yes, wather! I—I can feel him, the bwute!"

"Oh, that must be imagination!" Elsie soothed the agitated swell girl. "Anyhow, stick it out!"

"But there's nowhere to sit down!" was Paula's next cry of dismay. "And I was feeling downwright pwostwate after the match. What about my pwep., too? I suppose you have done yours already?"

Elsie winced then. She felt herself to be in a very mean position. If she had been free to please herself she would have kept out of this feud against the Fourth Form. But—ah, that was just the trouble—she was not free!

Free? What was her life, these days, but one of utter subjection to her Cousin Violet?

Nagged at, bullied even—at the best, continually asked to do this, that, and the other thing with less civility than is usually accorded a domestic servant. That was her life as it was being lived with Cousin Violet at Morcove School.

And the only thing was to endure it patiently. Elsie had made up her mind about that long ago. There were times when it seemed impossible to go on another day with Violet, but always there came a thought to make Elsie give a resigned sigh. She must not quarrel with Violet, must not even quietly avoid her society, for Violet's own good mother looked to her—Elsie—to influence a character that was anything but perfect.

Even at this moment, when Elsie found herself boxed up with Paula in a fashion that was ludicrous enough, the girl felt her whole mood to be one of deadly seriousness.

It was not that she was a joyless sort of girl—far from it. But she was nothing

If not sincere and level-headed, and to her it seemed a solemn duty—as indeed it was—that she should repay all her aunt's kindness in the one way that her aunt desired. Not to fall out with Violet, but to put up with all her "little ways," as the mother called them, and try to rid her of faults that were as deplorable as they were obvious.

"I am bound to remark," Paula broke out at last, with some dignity, "I regard this as a most insufferable indignity, Elsie Harper. I am going to wait a twifle longer, and then, bai Jove, if I am not released, I—I shall do something despoate! Yes, wather!"

Elsie made no answer. Again it seemed to her that to speak comfortingly would be to side against Violet and the others.

"No doubt you have got someone to do your pwep," Paula complained. "I have not, and I regard my position as most distwessing!"

The remark sent Elsie's thoughts back to her prep. She almost wished that Violet had not offered to do it for her. But perhaps Violet didn't mean to do it, after all?

So Elsie thought to herself, little dreaming with what eagerness Violet was even now undertaking that self-imposed task!

Little did Elsie suspect how it was all for the sake of doing her an ill turn that her cousin had got her out of the way like this. But that was the plain truth!

Violet, in fact, had only felt a half-hearted interest in the "kidnapping" of Paula until it flashed upon her that the jape could be made to help her own private scheme—a scheme to undermine Elsie's position in the Form.

No peace of mind for Violet until Elsie had been brought low in the school, if not expelled! Her cousin's expulsion was no easy thing to accomplish, Violet had decided, but how about getting her put down? Yes, put down into a lower Form—that was the thing!

Whilst the evening darkened out of doors, Violet sat alone in her study, working by lamplight at her cousin's prep. The two girls wrote very much alike, in the style taught at Morcove, so Violet never feared that the hour's work would be regarded suspiciously as not having been done by Elsie.

It would be regarded with great indignation by the mistress whose duty it would

be to revise it, and that was what Violet wanted.

The bit of "English composition" she did with deliberato carelessness, making as many mistakes in spelling as she dared do. The same with the arithmetic. Not one sum did she work out correctly.

With great cunning the base girl made just those stupid mistakes which she knew were most annoying to any mistress.

All this time it had been very quiet in the Fifth-Form quarters. Nor had a sound come up from the school grounds to suggest that Paula, the prisoner, was giving trouble. The evening was calm and warm, and Violet's window was open, and the blind still drawn up. Now and then she had listened, without hearing the least noise from the shrubbery below.

Suddenly, however, there came a scurry of feet along the corridor, and her door crashed open, revealing Millie Hopgood and Ruby Maydew.

"Violet—quick!" they panted. "Betty & Co.—they are on to the wheeze! Quick!"

"What do you mean?"

"They've found out where Paula is," Ruby answered excitedly. "They are going to get her out. So don't you see, we must—

Oh, come on!"

"Are we to let them rescue the prisoner?" added Millie. "We shall be a nice laughing-stock if we do! Violet, aren't you coming?"

"Oh, all right! You go on; I'll follow. I've something to do first," Violet said.

The two girls sped away, and then Violet showed what she had to do. A very simple thing, but from her point of view it was very important.

Collecting her own books and Elsie's along with them, she took the whole lot downstairs, and deposited them in the right place as being ready for correction.

So the first that Elsie would know of the disgraceful way her prep. had been done for her would be when she was called before an angry mistress!

CHAPTER 3.

Polly to the Fore.

THERE was intense excitement in the Fourth Form.

In Study 12, Paula Creel's failure to look in during the evening had been a matter of surprise for Betty and

Polly. Now, at late twilight, with only half an hour to go for call-over, the news had come in.

Paula was locked up in the shrubbery shed!

Paula, the aristocrat of the Form, their own spick-and-span Paula, most amiable and inoffensive of all girls—she had been “kidnapped” by the Fifth!

It was Dolly Delano who had made the astounding discovery. She came pelting into the schoolhouse and up to the studies with the news. Whilst taking a twilight saunter through the garden, she had heard voices in the shrubbery shed. One voice was Paula’s, and when Dolly had called out to know what the aristocrat was doing in here, there had been a dismal wail.

“Healp, Dolly! I am a pwisoner, w-educed to pwestvation! Wun for help, quick!”

Now a good half-dozen members of the Fourth Form were whirling down through the schoolhouse to make a rescue.

Reaching the open air, the chums simply streaked for the shrubbery. Betty and Polly drew a little ahead of the rest, but only by a few paces, for the eagerness to wipe out the insult was general.

The Fourth-Form captain and the mad-cap just had time to see that the padlock on the shed door was locked and the key taken away, when their chums gathered around, panting for breath.

“Paula, are you in there?” shouted Betty.

“Yes, wather! Bai Jove, and extremely wuffed, too! Geals, wescue me before I pewish! Healp!”

“All serene!” Polly Linton sang back, with rather grim enjoyment of the whole affair. “We’ll have you out in two ticks, if we have to smash down the shed!”

“Oh, pway don’t be despewate!” wailed Paula. “I am w-educed to the most fwightful extwemities. Howevah—”

“We must get a battering-ram!” Polly decided, with enthusiasm.

“Hallo, look who’s coming!” Betty remarked softly, as a whole mob of Fifth-Form girls suddenly appeared along the shrubbery path.

Never was there such a wild scrimmage between two rival packs of schoolgirls as that which took place in front of poor Paula’s prison. The Fifth Form meant to hold fast in front of the door; Betty &

Co. meant to get at that door and get it open—and sharp about it, too!

But it was Polly Linton who suddenly hit upon an even quicker method of dispersing the enemy than mere pushing and scuffling.

She suddenly vanished, and in the dim light and the general confusion no one noticed her withdrawal. Round the back of the shed nipped the madcap of Morcove. There was a water-butt there, as she had just remembered, and it was full of water caught from the shed roof. Beside the butt was a watering-can.

For such a young monkey as Polly was, to snatch up the watering-can, fill it, and then lift it on to the low shed roof was the work of an instant. Another moment found her getting on to the roof by way of the water-butt.

“Now, then!” was the sudden mirthful cry that came from above the scrimmaging girls, and in a startled way they ceased the conflict.

Betty, Madge, and the others looked up. So did Ruby Maydew and her allies, and there, on the shed roof, stood Polly, with the brimming watering-can!

“Hop it, you Fifth-Form duffers!”

“Duffers—oh!” burst out Ruby and the rest indignantly. “The cheek of her!”

“Let’s get her down!” suggested Millie Hapgood.

“Try!” Polly defied them, giving a swing to the watering-can that caused a shower to sprinkle the Fifth-Formers’ upturned faces. “Ha, ha, ha!”

“Oh!” exclaimed Millie wrathfully.

“Open that door for us!” demanded Polly.

“Never!”

“Then we will!” Betty cried, making a feint of dashing at the door again.

But it was only a feint, and it succeeded beautifully. Back to the door dashed the Fifth-Form girls, and then Polly got busy with the watering-can.

“Oh!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“What a nice evening shower!” Polly chuckled, as she shed the water with rain-like effect upon the discomfited enemy. “Hadn’t you better—”

“Polly, stop it!”

“Ha, ha, ha!” Betty and the others pealed. “Go it, Polly!”

“Hadn’t you girls better open the shed to get inside out of the shower?” Polly

asked the enemy. At present they were keeping around the locked door, and Polly was keeping on with the watering-can.

This was the state of things when Violet Vane suddenly came along, whilst after her strolled Dora Dean, the cynic of the Fifth.

"Hallo!" said Dora. "Ah, I see! A slight damping of the ardour!"

"Damping is right," chuckled Polly. "They'll be drenched to the skin at this rate. That door——"

"Open it for them!" cried Violet Vane suddenly. "We've had our fun——"

Ruby was searching her pockets for something, whilst the water still trickled down upon her defenceless head.

"The key! Bother it, I've not got it! I say, I've lost it! I——"

"What, lost it!" her allies cried at her disgustedly. "You are a nice one!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" Betty & Co. did not fail to laugh again. "Got enough water, Polly?"

"Heaps!"

Then the Fifth Form gave in—beaten! They suddenly bolted away, scurrying out of sight up the shrubby path as fast as they could, if only to put themselves beyond the reach of the Fourth Form's victorious cheers.

"Bravo, Polly!" that girl's mirthful chums applauded her, whilst they dashed at the door to make short work of the padlock. "All right, Paula! We'll soon have you out now."

And they did. It took Betty only a few seconds to prise one of the staples of the padlock out of the half-rotted woodwork, and then they dragged the door wide open and shouted:

"There, Paula, come out of it!"

"Bai Jove, what a welicf!" gasped Paula, promptly stepping to the doorway. "Geals, I have been a pwisoner for hours! Why, it's dark, and the stars are out, and—— Oh, healf!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Paula, as she looked up at the stars with all a released prisoner's joy, had felt a sprinkle of raindrops.

"Gwacious me, geals, I—— Heah, bai Jove, this is we-markable!" Paula exclaimed. "A clear sky, and yet, bai Jove, it's pouwing with wain!"

"Write to the papers about it!" cried teasing Polly from the shed roof. "He, he, he! And ask them to print your photograph."

"Polly, you—you—— Oh, Polly!" poor

Paula cried reproachfully, as she "wcalised" that the rain came from a watering-can. "How fwivolous you are! Not content with seeing me wuffed, you must go and dwench me!"

And she rushed for the schoolhouse, to make a toilette with all haste, whilst Betty and the rest would have followed, only they suddenly found another girl stepping out of the shed.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Betty. "Elsie Harper, isn't it?"

"Yes." That was all Elsie seemed to want to say. She would have gone on quickly, only Betty held her by the arm.

"So that was your part in the jape, was it? To be with Paula as a sort of gaoleress. Your friends don't seem to be very concerned about what we might do to you in revenge."

Elsie shrugged, as if she was sick of the whole business.

"Well, we are not that sort," said the captain of the Fourth Form. "We shan't make you pay for what your whole Form has done. But you can just tell Violet Vane that if it's war they want, they'll get it. And so, good-night!"

CHAPTER 4.

"I've no use for you at all!"

JUST before nine o'clock next morning Dora stopped Elsie Harper in the Fifth Form corridor.

"Everything comes to those who wait—even the thing that is least desired," smiled the cynic of the Form. "I condole with you, Elsie."

"Whatever do you mean?" asked the girl.

"I mean," smiled Dora, "a certain dragon is breathing your name with fire. In other words, that august personage, Miss Prosser, our esteemed Form-mistress, is anxious to interview you. My sympathies!"

And Dora sauntered away, leaving Elsie smitten with a vague misgiving.

What was Miss Prosser angry about?

She was soon to know.

No sooner had the girl presented herself in the Form-mistress' private room than that lady exclaimed indignantly:

"Elsie Harper, your prep. last evening—it was a positive disgrace!"

As a general rule, Miss Prosser was not

such a bad sort. The feeling in the Form was that she was "all right if you kept the right side of her." Elsie realised that she was on the wrong side—quite!

Still worse, she realised that all means of defence had been taken from her. Violet ought not to have done the prep. for her; such a thing was a grave breach of rules. So, whatever blame attached to the work in question, Elsie had got to shoulder it.

"Look at this—look at it!" Miss Prosser fairly stormed, flourishing one of the exercise-books. "The spelling! It would disgrace a Third Form girl! And this—"

She threw down the book and snatched up another.

"Twelve times nine, ninety-nine! Six and four, eight! Elsie, such disgraceful carelessness cannot be passed over. I know you can do better if you try. But you are not trying!"

"Miss Prosser! I—"

"There is no excuse! Apart from this sample of your gross carelessness, I have seen in class that you are not doing the work with your heart in it. I wonder you are not ashamed, Elsie—particularly ashamed, when you know that this must be a cruel disappointment to your aunt!"

Elsie winced. How she had wanted to get on, if only for the sake of pleasing the aunt who had been such a generous benefactress! And now—this!

"When you came to the school," Miss Prosser went on, with less temper but just as much indignation, "there was a question whether you were qualified to come into the Fifth Form. But your aunt wished you to be in the same Form with Violet, if possible, and so we stretched a point. Besides—"

Miss Prosser took a breath.

"At that time you gave every indication of being studious, Elsie. Your headmistress and I agreed that you would certainly catch up with the form in general, and even take a high position amongst them. But lately, as I say, you have been getting careless, and last night's prep. tells me that there must be a change. Well?" she asked; but Elsie had nothing to say.

Every word of reproach was being taken to heart by her. At the same time, she had a current of thought running in her mind that had started the moment she entered the room—in the first moment when Miss Prosser said said: "Your prep., Elsie!"

She was wondering, had Violet Vane deliberately done the work as badly as possible? Or was it just a case of rushing through a self-imposed task that had become a bore?

"Take the books and go! It is time for morning class," Miss Prosser said curtly. "Understand, though, Elsie; my patience is exhausted, and I am bound to consult the headmistress about you!"

Those last words left Elsie more sick at heart than ever. She could have burst into tears as soon as she was outside the room, so keenly she felt the disgrace she was in.

After going a few steps away from the door she halted and took a look at the books.

What she saw then left her in no doubt as to her cousin's deliberate intention yesterday evening to do the work as badly as possible.

The girl's spirit flamed within her. She spurted away to the Fifth Form quarters, and caught Violet in the study getting some things together for morning classes.

"Violet, that prep. you did for me last evening—"

"Oh, don't pester me!" Violet cut her short, and would have marched to the door; but Elsie suddenly put herself in front of her.

"You did it carelessly—on purpose! You wanted me to get into disgrace, you cruel girl!" Elsie panted.

"Stand aside; I'm not going to argue!" Violet said icily.

Elsie never moved.

"You know, too," she went on, with a sudden break in her voice, "that it would break your mother's heart if she had any inkling of this state of things. She is so delicate, the least upset—the doctor has told us. And yet— Oh, Violet, why can't we pull together?"

"Because I've no use for you at all!" the other girl hissed. "I hated you from the very hour that mother was foolish enough to adopt you! Here at Morcove you are a nuisance to me—making me work harder than I want to, so that I shan't be behind you in the class!"

"Violet, that's silly jealousy. You have no cause for—"

"Well, if it is jealousy, it is, and I don't care!" flamed out Violet. "Stand aside, Elsie! Get out of my way, I tell you!"

With a violent push she sent Elsie reeling and stormed on to the door, shutting it behind her—slam!

Elsie had fetched up with a crash against the wall, and now she looked pale with the shock. But it was more than the physical shock that was agitating her.

She had another thought of what her aunt, Violet's mother, would say if she knew all this, and she burst into tears.

CHAPTER 5.

Paula Gives Evidence.

AFTER school that afternoon the Fourth Form Common-room presented a strange spectacle.

At first sight anybody would have thought that the Form had assembled for a general meeting, such as was sometimes held in this big room. Then it would have been observed that there was more of a suggestion of a law-court about the way the girls had accommodated themselves.

At a long table sat four girls in a row, like a bench of magistrates. They were Betty, Madge, Tess and Trixie. Then there was a sort of witness-stand, made out of an orange-box which had been fetched in from the backyard. At present no one was standing behind the upturned orange-box; but Polly Linton, who was "addressing the court," had given a hint that she had at least one witness to call.

"Members of the committee of inquiry," Polly said with mock solemnity, whilst the girls who were looking on chuckled with huge delight, "I think I have shown that the Fifth Form did willfully and with malice aforethought commit this outrageous, unspeakable, humiliating, and—er—"

"Unprovoked?" suggested Ella Elgood.

"Thank you, Ella! This unprovoked offence against the Form to which we belong. I have one witness to call—Paula Creel!"

"Yes, wathah! Er—howevah—" "Go to the witness-box," ordered Polly, K.C., with a dramatic flourish.

"With pleasure, Polly! I pwesume, howevah, that I am not wequired to get inside the box?" Paula inquired blandly, as she crossed the floor to where the orange-box was up-ended. "It pwesents some difficulties, you will wealise!"

"Duffer, stand behind it!" bellowed Polly, causing another burst of merriment.

"Silence in court!" Polly cried sternly. She was counsel for the prosecution and usher all combined. "What happened when you were put in the shed, Miss Creel?"

"Er—weally—"

"What happened?" shouted Polly, banging the table with her fist. "Don't start combing your hair in court! Put that mirror away!"

"I—I was not meaning any offence to the court," apologised Paula, who had absent-mindedly pulled out her pocket vanity-case. "It is most distwessing to me to give evidence. After my pwostwating expwience, I ought to be in the infirmawy!"

"No impudence!" thundered Polly, whilst the girls standing around simply held their sides as they laughed. "Stand to attention! What happened then?"

"When I stood to attention like that?" Paula asked blandly. "Weally, nothing vewy weamkable happened. I felt a pain in my back, that's all. You will wealise that atah my extwemely twying ordeal last evening I feel weamkably stiff, bai Jove! Howevah—"

"Will you keep the witness in order?" Betty said with magisterial solemnity to Polly, who glared at Paula.

"Miss Creel, you will be sent to prison if you insult the court!"

"Gwacious! I—"

"What happened when you were put in the shed?"

"Ah," said Paula, remembering vividly, "I will tell you! A monstwous gweat eweepy ewawly eweature ewawled down my neck! Yes, wathah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence in court! What happened then, Miss Creel?"

"I will tell you," said the witness plaintively. "Under the most twying conditions—for you will wealise the extwemity I was in!—I twiced to pweswade the eweepy, ewawly eweature to come out. Howevah, my hwavest efforts—"

"Brave! You call yourself brave?"

"I was hwave enough not to shwiek out," pleaded poor Paula. "Twy to put yourself in my distwessing pwedicament. Theah was I, in the shed, and theah was that my back. And yet I did not shwiek out—dweadful eweepy, ewawly eweature down no!"

"Such valour deserves public recognition," said Polly. "I shall ask the newspaper reporters to put your photograph in the daily pap—"

"Now, Polly deah, pway wefwain fwom—"

"Tut, tut! How dare you address me as 'Polly dear'!" objected Polly. "Tell the court all about it!"

"Yes, wather! Howevah, all about what?"

"All about the Fifth Form's disgraceful treatment of you, of course!"

"As to that," said Paula, "I wish to be fair. I do not like to suggest that the Fifth Form introduced that cwoopy, cwawly sweature as part of the torture. Nol I wealise, geals, that in a garden shed one wuns the wisks of—"

"Haven't we heard enough of this witness?" Betty asked suddenly, with pretended weariness. "The case seems to be proved!"

"Therefore"—and Polly thumped the table again—"I ask, are we or are we not going to take it out of the Fifth Form?"

"We are!"

"Yes, wather! Geals, I twust—"

"That is my last word!" wound up Polly, with a great flourish. "There stands the victim of the Fifth Form's insults! One of our friends, remember! Look at her! See how she has hardly yet recovered from the ruffling she got yesterday! Behold—"

"Polly, you'll make me cw,," said Paula. "I can't be as bad as that!"

"Silence! Members of the court of inquiry, I have spoken!"

"You have," said Betty with mock gravity. "You've been speaking for seventeen minutes by the clock. Polly dear. So now for the verdict. We find the Fifth Form guilty. We condemn the Fifth Form to such punishment as we shall, in due course and so forth, deem fit to inflict upon them!"

"Hear, hear! Hoorah for the Fourth! Down with the Fifth—booh!" chorused the onlookers frenziedly.

"Weal, that's ovah!" remarked Paula, as if the whole proceedings had been quite serious. "Polly deah, you make a dweadful counsel for the pwosecution! Your cwose-examination of me was a most twying xpewience—yes, wather!"

"Rah, 'rah, 'rah!" Polly cried, changing from the lawyer into the madcap. She flung an arm about the late witness' waist. "My word, won't we wage war on the Fifth Form after this!"

With much joking and laughter, the whole Form had started to disperse when a sudden shout went up:

"A spy—a spy!"

Those nearest the door pelted forward into the corridor, and the rest dashed out after them.

They saw Millie Hapgood, of the Fifth Form, fleeing as for her life towards the stairs.

CHAPTER 6.

Into a Trap.

"SHE was listening at the keyhole all the time!" yelled Eva Merrick. "I caught her—"

"After her! After her!"

"Yes, wather!" agreed Paula Creel.

Millie Hapgood sent a "catch-me-if-you-can!" look behind her, then flew on again. Up the stairs she dashed, with Betty, Polly and half a dozen others in full cry.

The Fifth Form fugitive was still a few yards ahead of her pursuers when she reached the Fifth Form quarters. With a mild shriek she tore on to sanctuary in the first study that should come to hand. And after her tore Betty & Co.

Crash!

That was a study door being driven open by Millie. She dived into the room, whipped about, and—slam!—the door closed again.

But there was no key!

Millie was vaguely aware of having burst into Dora Dean's den. She was even aware, vaguely, of Dora Dean being in the room. But there was no time for apologies. Millie rushed an easy-chair against the door to keep out the enemy.

Outside in the corridor Betty & Co. came to the door, tried it, and found that it was unlocked. There was some resistance, but that they could easily overcome. And they did!

In a moment the door was forced open, the chair being pushed round with it. Betty & Co. burst into the den, to find Millie under the table.

"Is this the latest parlour game?" Dora inquired cynically. "I like to see the youth of the country manifesting the right amount of animal spirits. But in my study—thank you, no!"

"We want Millie Hapgood! Come out of it, Millie!"

"Sanctuary, sanctuary!" yelled Millie from under the table.

Now it was a long, long while since there

had been a feud between the Fourth Form and the Fifth, and so one rule governing the conduct of such feuds had been forgotten by the girls until Millie yelled that word. Then Betty & Co. remembered.

"Oh, all right!" Betty herself said, abandoning her share in the gentle task of pulling Millie from under the table. "It's the rule—yes! Any study belonging to her own Form is sanctuary."

"Wait till we catch you or any of your friends outside your sanctuary, that's all!" Polly said grimly. "You'll know what it means then to be at war with us!"

Millie came out from under the table and stood up grinning as she mopped her hair to rights.

"You are outside your own sanctuary at present," she remarked, "so hadn't you better remember to be polite?"

"The dignity characterising this feud is most refreshing!" Dora said drily. "I anticipate the making of history between now and the end of term. Meantime, may I point out that I personally am only concerned with the making of tea?"

She pointed to the laid cloth. Tea was set for one. Dora did not go in for entertaining, although she often went out to other studies to tea. Betty & Co. simply tossed their heads and went out.

The moment they had gone Millie Hapgood darted into the corridor and showed her head inside Violet Vane's study. The Fifth Form captain was there talking with Ruby Maydew. Millie made some whispered proposal which they seemed to approve, and next moment she whipped about and called after the departing Fourth-Formers:

"Hi, Betty!"

They all stopped and faced about, but Millie added quickly:

"It's only Betty who is wanted. As she is your captain, perhaps she would like to have a sort of parley with ours? Violet will see her."

"It's a trap," Polly suspected. "Don't go, Betty!"

"Oh, I'll see what Violet Vane wants to say. You be getting tea in Study 12, will you?" Betty answered cheerily, and then went back alone to where Millie was awaiting her.

"This is the study," Millie said, throwing open the Fifth Form captain's door. "Wipe your feet, and remember to be polite!"

Betty ignored this twitting. She felt

it had been wise to see what the Fifth Form captain wanted to say—only a lot of threatening warnings, possibly; still—

Slam! Click!

Millie had come in sharply behind Betty and had closed the door and turned the key.

"Now, then, what do you mean by doing that?" Betty demanded sharply. "What does it mean?"

Millie answered, while Violet and Ruby simply grinned.

"It means, Betty Barton, you are out of sanctuary and in the hands of the enemy—see?"

CHAPTER 7.

No Pity from Violet.

ALL the good humour that Betty Barton had preserved up to now was gone in an instant. This was not playing the game. It was downright trickery.

"Look here, I was told that there was to be a discussion—"

"So there is to be!" cut in Ruby Maydew. "As to what we shall do with you now we've caught you so beautifully!"

"O, most proud captain of the Fourth Form!" chimed in Millie, making a mocking bow. "He, he, he!"

Betty found herself standing with clenched hands, and she opened them, thinking to herself: "I must keep my temper!"

"Unlock that door, please," she said spiritedly.

"Take a seat, please!" Millie mocked back at her. "What a capture—the real live captain of the Fourth!"

"Yes, it's great!" chuckled Ruby Maydew, whilst Violet smiled in the moody way of hers. "Violet dear, it's tea-time; we might have a fag to wait on us for once. What a feather in our cap, to be able to say that Betty Barton was made to— Oh, look out!"

"I've got her!" cried Millie, grappling with Betty as that girl made a sudden desperato dash for the door. "Whoa, steady!"

It was three on to one, and so was it a wonder if Betty, in another moment, was quite overpowered?

She had turned about so much in her efforts to resist captivity, she was now quite giddy. And this gave Violet Vane a

sudden idea, one that appealed to some streak of savagery in her character.

"Turn her!" she suggested passionately. "Spin her until she drops!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Good wheeze!" Ruby laughed; and all three of them hustled the Fourth Form captain round and round until her senses were swimming.

When they paused and drew away from her, she simply dropped to the floor, half-swooning, so far had the giddy turning been carried.

"Get up!" Violet said, spurring her with one foot. "You're not as bad as that!"

"No—hold her down for a bit!" urged Ruby. She had darted to a cupboard and was rummaging about inside it. "I've got another idea—spiffing, Violet, those carnival things of yours! Here we are, and you don't mind their being used?"

"Oh, do as you like!" laughed Violet, throwing herself into a chair, whilst Millie Hapgood kept Betty from struggling up.

Ruby came darting back from the cupboard with all that she wanted for her purpose. There was a length of string. With this she tied Betty's arms behind her. Then, the helpless girl having been lifted to her feet, a black nigger-mask was tied about her face.

After that a white pierrot cap was jammed on the victim's head, the general effect being most absurd.

Then Ruby hastily wrote out a sort of placard on a sheet of white paper:

"Don't you know me?

I am the
Fourth Form captain!

So don't laugh,
It hurts my
pride!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Millie. "How good! Hold still, Betty!"

The label was tied across Betty's chest, and then she was forced towards the door and thrust out into the passage.

No one was about, so Millie coughed loudly:

"Hem, hem! Oh, dear, what a funny object! What's it doing down here in the Fifth Form quarters?"

That, of course, drew every inmate of other studies to the doors. Poor Betty! Through the eyelet-holes she could see all the Fifth Form lining the way for her as she had to march away, helpless to do anything

else, since her hands were tied behind her.

"How are the mighty fallen!" said Dora, the cynic.

"Yes, aren't they!" chuckled Ruby, who heard the remark.

"Fallen, indeed," the cynic added, "when the mighty are reduced to bullying!"

Ruby and a few others stopped laughing then. They had not expected the cynic to add that. But it was the sort of plain truth that Dora Dean revelled in wrapping up in caustic language.

Violet Vane turned back into her study and shut the door. She was alone now, for Millie and Ruby stayed outside to enjoy Betty's discomfiture. And now that she was alone, the Fifth Form captain did not look happy.

She realised that, as captain, she had instigated bullying; had given a turn to the feud that was very discreditable. And yet—

There it was; in her heart there had always been a lurking passion for spiteful, cruel conduct, and she knew that she was liable to break out like this at any time.

A good deal of mocking talk and laughter was audible from the corridor, when Violet saw her study door fly open in an unexpected way. A girl was entering swiftly and silently, and it was Elsie.

Shutting the door in an excited manner, Elsie took a couple of quick steps towards her cousin.

"Violet," she burst out, in great anguish, "I have just come away from the headmistress' study. I had to go there with Miss Prosser."

"Well?"

"Violet, you are not as ignorant as you pretend to be about what has happened!" Elsie rushed on, in great distress. "Miss Somerfield said that she had spoken to you about me!"

"Oh, yes! I had an interview with the headmistress at midday," was the cool reply.

"I am to be put down!" she cried out, in a heartbroken voice. "I am to be put in the Fourth Form! Oh, Violet, Violet dear, couldn't you have—pleaded for me?"

"I could have," Violet said, in an utterly heartless tone; "but I didn't mean to—no! I am glad you are going to be put down—yes, glad—glad!"

"Cruel of you!" sobbed Elsie, utterly broken-down. "My work has not been very good lately, but that was because—because I have been so worried, have slept

so badly at nights. You've made me unhappy, miserable—"

"Then you ought to be glad yourself that you are going where you won't be always under my feet!"

Elsie suddenly became a strung-up, quivering figure.

"Ah, shame on you!" she panted, stung into voicing her indignation. "How could I feel glad about a thing like this, even when it means disgrace for me? Disgrace, not merely in the eyes of the whole school, but—your mother, your poor mother, Violet! She—"

"Oh, that will do!"

Violet took a swishing turn about the room, then spoke again curtly:

"When do you go into the other form, Elsie?"

"At once. I have to report to Miss Redgrave immediately, and she will tell me whose study I am to be in."

"Then hadn't you better pack up at once?" suggested Violet.

She was smiling. Here was another thing that was pleasing to the girl's jealous, heartless nature. Her vendetta against this cousin of hers had succeeded! She had smashed Elsie down, as she had always wanted to do!

She subsided into a comfortable chair, and picked up a book, whilst Elsie, there and then, began to collect her own things.

Now and then the poor, anguish-stricken girl had to stand still, with her back to Violet, to wipe the tears away with a handkerchief. And every time she did that, Violet glanced up from the book—and smiled!

CHAPTER 8.

They Don't Want Elsie.

"NOW, there are as many cups and saucers as we can manage!" Polly Linton said gaily, as she finished laying for tea in Study 12. "So those girls who sit down first will get tea. The others will have to have it on the mat!"

She added mirthfully: "Go!" and there was a mock scramble for places, during which playful scrimmage poor Paula Creel got nowhere near the table.

"You're an 'also ran,'" chuckled Polly. "But we rather like you, Paula darling, so you may sit down in the best armchair, and we'll give you your tea on your lap."

"Oh, thanks, thanks!" beamed Paula. "There are times, Polly dear, when I wailise what a wipper you are! You do certainly lead me a dreadful life with your teasing; however—great goodness!" She broke off, as the door suddenly opened and a weird figure was propelled into the room.

The seated girls all jumped up with wild cries of astonishment.

"Betty!" they yelled. "Oh!"

For it was Betty. There, in front of her chums, she stood, with the black mask upon her face, the white fool's cap on her head, and with that label across her chest. Her hands were still tied behind her, and in a flash Polly was setting them free.

"Betty! Oh!"

"Bai Jovo! What ewuel cweatures are responsible for this?" squealed Paula. Never in her life had she looked so indignant.

"No need to ask!" burst out Polly fiercely. "The Fifth Form, of course! Their latest attempt to make us all feel small! Betty, I knew it was a trap!"

"But this is rank unfairness!" exclaimed Madge hotly. "It is not playing the game at all. Bullying, I call it!"

"Wank tweason—tweachery, bai Jovo!" agreed Paula. "If that's how they mean to canwy on the feud—"

"You may depend they do," said Tess grimly. "This happened in their captain's study, didn't it, Betty? There you are, then! It is the sort of thing their very captain has instigated!"

Polly persuaded Betty to sit down at once and have a cup of tea, and, indeed, the victim of the Fifth Form's bullying treatment needed pulling together. She said little, but the gleam in her eyes showed that she was not going to forget the indignities she had suffered.

Nor were her chums going to forget, either! That was evident enough as they proceeded with their tea. All the talk was of the need for countering the Fifth Form's hostile attitude with deadly earnestness now.

The Fifth Form had started the feud. Well, there should be no peace until they, the Fifth Form, sued for it!

That was the gist of all the excited talk that was going on in Study 12, when the door was tapped, and then Miss Redgrave entered. She was the exceedingly popular assistant-mistress of the Fourth Form, and the girls were going to hail her appear-

ance with joyful cries, when they noticed that she had brought someone with her—a Fifth Form girl!

Betty & Co. were astounded.

"Betty, all of you," Miss Redgrave said affably, "you know who this is, of course—Elsie Harper, a cousin of Violet Vane, the Fifth Form captain. The headmistress has decided that Elsie will be better, for a few weeks, at least, in the Fourth Form, and so—"

"Bai Jove!" Paula breathed faintly, from the background.

"The question is," went on Miss Redgrave, "which study can Elsie go into? Perhaps you can tell me, Betty, whether any girl is at present having a study to herself. If so, Elsie must share that one."

"There's Audrey Blain's study—that is the only one I can think of," Betty said, after pondering a moment. "Audrey is the only girl not sharing."

"Then Audrey must have Elsie in with her," decided the mistress promptly. "All right, girls, continue your tea! Elsie, you will come with me, but later on, no doubt, you will be a welcome visitor here in the Fourth Form captain's study!"

"Will she?" burst out Polly Linton, the moment the door had closed behind Elsie and Miss Redgrave. "A spy, welcome here—not likely!"

The words caused a profound silence to endure for several moments.

"Is it believable that a girl would get herself put down into a lower Form, just for the sake of picking up all our plans and reporting them to the enemy?" said Betty, at last.

"Violet Vane must have got round her to do it," argued Polly. "I've been told that Elsie has always been eager to do anything to please Violet."

"What do you think, Madge?" asked Betty.

"Really, it does begin to look as if we must be careful," agreed Madge; and that reply carried great weight with Betty.

"Very well," said the Fourth Form captain quietly. "Elsie Harper has become one of us to-day, then; but we will just be careful. It certainly is queer that Elsie should get herself put down like this, just at a time when this feud has come along."

Meanwhile, Miss Redgrave had conducted Elsie a few doors along to the study which, so far, Audrey Blain had enjoyed all to herself.

Audrey was there—Audrey, of the airs and graces—settled in a nice, comfortable chair, with a little table beside her on which her own tea was set in a sort of high society fashion.

"Audrey, this is Elsie Harper," the mistress said simply. "She is going to work with the Fourth Form for the present, and we have to find room for her. You are the only girl without a study-mate."

"I believe I am," Audrey had to own reluctantly. "But, Miss Redgrave—"

"Elsie will share with you," Miss Redgrave said, cutting short all attempts at argument. She knew Audrey, and could quite understand that the girl wished to continue in a state of "splendid isolation."

"There you are, then, Elsie," the mistress added genially. So far as she and her colleagues were concerned, Elsie's reduction to the lower Form was not to be attended with any unkindness. "I think you will be comfortable, and I hope and believe you will now get on better at the work."

She went out, and poor Elsie felt no better than a new girl at an entirely strange school as she stood facing Audrey Blain.

It was indeed worse than that for Elsie. A new girl, after all, is often received with great cordiality—put at her ease at once. But Audrey Blain was not going to be friendly; that was obvious.

"You are Violet Vane's cousin, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Violet—she is the girl with the very wealthy mother, isn't she? But you—aren't you a sort of adopted orphan?"

"I am—yes. My parents died, and I was left all alone."

"Very sad, no doubt!" Audrey said, resuming her seat and her cup of tea. "But I don't see that I am called upon to do the adopted stunt!"

"My things are ready for being brought in," Elsie said hesitantly.

"Are they, really? Well, bring them in! You don't expect me to do that for you, do you?"

Elsie suppressed a hard sigh, and turned to the door. She went out, and for a full minute she stood looking dully at the belongings she had dumped down in the passage.

Never, as long as she lived, Elsie felt, would she forget Violet's exultation just now. Violet knew that she—Elsie—had

only worked badly in the class-room because she had those miserable, sleepless nights, worrying about the unhappy relations that existed. Violet knew also that the disgraceful bit of prep., which had brought matters to a head, was her own deliberate achievement, and to Violet the whole thing was a sort of proud triumph.

But to Violet's mother—what would it all look like, if ever that good woman found out?

"She never must find out—never!" Elsie was resolving desperately at this moment. "It must be kept from her somehow, and I—I must try, try so hard to get back into the Fifth Form before the end of the term. Bad enough to be in disgrace amongst all the girls. But for me to have to go home to auntie at the end of the term like a girl who has failed—a girl who has done her worst instead of her best—"

She set her teeth, and her large eyes flashed. No, auntie must be kept in ignorance, and that could be done, if—if one managed to win back into the higher Form before the end of term. So, then, she must fight to get back—fight hard!

Meantime, had she any chance of finding a few friends here in the Fourth Form? They were such nice girls, lots of them. How were they going to treat her? What would they think of her?

Elsie pondered these points with a sudden sense of being comforted.

How little comforted she would have felt, though, how much more sick at heart than ever would she have been instead, had she known what Betty & Co. were going to think of her!

Poor Elsie Harper!

Her plight was bad enough, as it was. And it was to be now much harder to bear when she found herself cold-shouldered, mistrusted, by every girl in the Fourth Form, because that was their firm conviction—she was her Cousin Violet's own spy!

CHAPTER 9.

A Spy in Their Midst.

"ONE English grammar!" sang out Polly Linton, the madcap of the Fourth Form at Morcove School. "One French ditto! One Latin ditto! One—"

"What's the matter, Polly?"

"Nothing, Betty darling! Only I'll sell the lot for fourpence," was the laughing answer. "Classes again—burr!"

Betty Barton was on the other side of the study table getting her books together.

"Oh, come, it's Saturday morning," she pleaded, "so we'll be free by midday."

And Paula Creel, sailing into the room at that moment, said, with her beaming look:

"Yes, wather, bai Jove! What a wipping day for the halfer, too, geals!"

"Question is," said Polly Linton, taking a last moment upon the edge of the table before going down to classes, "are we to let that girl Elsie Harper into the thing or not?"

"You mean, Polly deah, the wipping picnic that we—"

"Hush, not a word!" Polly checked Paula, with a mock air of being in a great conspiracy. "The secret must be kept up to the last moment, or you know what will happen. Those Fifth Form girls—"

"Yes, wather, the wetches!" agreed Paula, not with any bitterness, however. Paula's was such an amiable nature she could bear no real ill-will towards even a declared enemy.

A few other girls appeared in the open doorway with books under their arms, and with the chummiest smiles for Betty, Polly, and Paula.

"Going down?" asked Madge Minden.

"Yes," said Polly dolefully. "Doomed to another period of slavery! Alas, that life should be so hard! Alas, my poor sisters, that we must waste our beauty upon the desert air of the class-room on a morning like this!"

"Oh, cheer up!" laughed Tess. "But really we have got a topping day for the pic—"

"Hush, not a word! I keep on saying so," said Polly wearily. "If it leaks out that we girls of the Fourth Form have planned an excursion to Big Tor—"

"With tea at the wuins, yes, wather!"

"You be quiet, Paula; I don't want any of your impudence!" Polly said, feeling she must tease the aristocrat somehow before going into classes. Teasing Paula was Polly's great pastime. "If you don't stop fiddling with your hair, you shan't come!"

"I twust I shall be able to walk the distance," said Paula. "I am, as you wealise, geals, a wather fwagile cweature."

The very thought of twamping to Big Tow makes me feel stwongly inclined to—to—"

Paula finished by gravitating towards the best armchair, but Polly promptly sang out:

"Whoa, there; no you don't! Disgraceful thinking of shirking classes! Have you no spirit of emulation, Paula, that you can think of hanging back when the bell is going for classes? See how eager I am! I have to be held back—almost!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The bell really had set up its clanging call to the class-rooms downstairs. The girls were all making a move for the door when someone came rushing along the corridor in a flutter of excitement, and fetched up breathlessly in front of the chums.

It was Dolly Delanc.

"Betty! All of you!" she panted. "Here is a nice thing! The Fifth Form have heard about our plans for the picnic!"

"Gweat goodness!"

"All is lost!" said Polly tragically. "We are undone! Some enemy hath betrayed us!"

"Yes, wather! Bai Jovo!"

"The Fifth are openly boasting that they are going to get to Big Tor in advance of us and keep us out of the tower!" said Dolly.

"Are they?" commented Betty spiritedly. "We shall see about that! But how did they get to know that we were going to picnic there?"

"Ah!" murmured Polly grimly. "How? It rather ends all idea of our inviting Elsie Harper to go with us, doesn't it?"

No one answered for a moment, but slight nods and frowns showed that the girls were in agreement with Polly.

"Yes," Betty broke out at last. "If it really is a case of Elsie's having informed the Fifth, then it is too bad of her!"

She frowned.

"Bother! I do hate having to suspect people. But this begins to bear out the theory we formed. The Fifth have made it clear that they mean to wage war on us for the rest of term, and it may be that the idea of having a spy in our midst occurred to their captain."

"Violet Vane is quite capable of a thing like that," allowed Madge Minden. "She doesn't play the game!"

"She does not!" agreed Polly bitterly. "And that's why I am certain Elsie Harper is really her own cousin's spy in our midst."

"No one else in our Form would have been so disloyal as to run to the Fifth with the news about our intended picnic," declared Dolly.

"Still, we'll see if we can't get proof before we do anything," Betty suggested, and even headstrong Polly agreed that this was best.

So with no more time to spare to debating the matter, they all trooped off down to classes.

It meant brushing shoulders with Violet Vane and other girls during the muster for morning work, and Betty & Co. did not feel less aggravated when they saw how many members of the enemy Form were smiling as if they had already scored off the Fourth.

By the loud, jovial remarks which girls like Milly Hapgood, Sybil Golding and Ruby Maydew made to fellow Fifth-Formers within hearing of Betty & Co., it was evident they wished those girls to treat their intended picnic to Big Tor as a complete "wash-out." All the plans had been betrayed, and if Betty & Co. did turn up at Big Tor they would do so at their peril!

No wonder the chums felt exasperated. If every bit of pleasure they planned for during the rest of term was to be counter-planned against by the Fifth, because the Fifth had a spy keeping them informed of the Fourth's intentions, it was a nice look out.

Was there indeed a spy, though? And was that spy Elsie Harper?

Betty, at any rate, managed to keep an open mind during that Saturday morning. But at midday, when classwork ended, belief in Elsie's culpability was established.

Betty and Polly were taking a turn out of doors when they heard Millie Hapgood call down from a Fifth Form study window to Violet Vane, who was sitting on a bench in the sunshine:

"Will there be time for me to scribble a note after dinner before we start, Violet? Of course, I don't want to hinder the start, but—"

"Oh, yes; you know what Elsie said!" Violet called back carelessly.

The cry and counter cry had been given loudly, for one girl was at the window and the other was down in the grounds. That was how Betty and Polly came to hear the words—words, they felt sure, would never have been voiced if either Millie Maydew or Violet Vane had thought there was a single Fourth Form scholar within hearing.

For they were words that simply proclaimed Elsie to be a spy, and was it credible that Violet did not care whether the Fourth Form knew her cousin was a spy in their midst or not?

Betty and Polly went straight indoors then and up to the Fourth Form studies, where Elsie Harper shared No. 8 with Audrey Blain.

"Elsie," Betty began very gently, "we had an idea about asking you to take part in our picnic to Big Top this afternoon. We cannot ask you now."

"I did not expect you to," was the husky answer. "During the three days I have been in the Fourth Form I have been made to see that you—you don't want me."

"I'll be quite frank," Betty said. "You have been mistrusted. We hated harbouring the suspicion, but everything seems to point to your having arranged with your cousin, Violet Vane, to do your best to get put down."

"For what reason?" Elsie jerked out sharply.

"For this reason!" Polly cried, unable to show the restraint that Betty had displayed. "Violet Vane wanted to put a spy in our midst, and she was able to make it worth your while! She—"

"No!" Elsie flashed out, turning very pale. "That is not true! I am not a—"

"Elsie"—Betty checked her sternly—"again I will be very frank. Someone in the Fourth Form has informed the Fifth of our plans for that picnic; plans that we all agreed to keep quiet about. And just now we heard your cousin call out to Millie Maydew certain words that as good as prove that you were the informer."

"I have not said a word."

"Violet Vane called out to Millie Maydew: 'You know what Elsie said! So you must have said something about the picnic—about our arrangements, the time for starting.'"

"Can you deny it, Elsie," Polly challenged hotly, interrupting Betty, "when your own cousin has been heard to say a thing like that?"

Elsie Harper seemed to go all to pieces then. A visible trembling came upon her. She turned paler than ever.

"Well?" Betty asked in that quiet, stern tone of hers.

For a long moment there was tense silence in the study. Then:

"If my Cousin Violet has done a thing

like that I cannot defend myself," Elsie said. "It's no use—oh, how can I?"

"Now we know, then!" Polly commented disgustedly. "And after this—"

"All I have to say at present is one thing, Elsie," broke out the Fourth Form captain. "You certainly will not come to the picnic this afternoon!"

And when the door had quietly closed and Elsie was all alone she suddenly burst into tears.

CHAPTER 10.

In Silence She Must Suffer.

ANOTHER burden for her to bear! That was what the lonely girl in Study 8 was thinking bitterly at this moment.

They thought her to be as bad as that—these girls in whose Form she had been placed only three days ago. A horrid informer against them—a despicable spy!

She was not given to weeping, but there are times when the firmest spirit must break down. It was such a time for Elsie Harper.

Cruel, the ordeal that her life at Morcove School had become just lately, and this—this thing that had been charged against her to-day; it was the last straw, she felt.

Full of bitterness was her very soul, but that bitterness was not directed against Betty and the other girls. She could even forgive them entirely for the way they were misjudging her, so evident it was that they were not to be blamed for the opinion they had arrived at.

But all this only intensified her anguish. Better if the wrong had been done to her by the Form in general than for her to know that she owed this, like all the rest of her unhappy plight, to her own cousin.

Yes, Violet had struck at her once again. There was not the least doubt about that. Violet had voiced certain words with the deliberate intention of getting her, Elsie, looked upon as a spy in the Fourth Form.

Not content with having schemed to bring about Elsie's reduction from the Fifth Form to the lower one, Violet had even taken steps to turn the Fourth Form against the victim of her malicious jealousy.

"And that is the girl I myself must never speak against, never complain of," Elsie's bitter thoughts ran on, whilst she tried to stem the flowing tears. "No matter how much harm she does me, I must never,

never retaliate. Oh, but can I go on like this? How can I?"

And then, with a hard sigh, she shook her drooping head. The answer had been given—not for the first time, by any means—by her better nature, that part of her which acknowledged gratitude to Violet's good mother, and was ready, for the mother's sake, to suffer Violet's cruel conduct still.

"For auntio's sake—yes," Elsie murmured resignedly, "I must—I must submit."

She heard a light stop pause outside the closed door, and she quite expected Audrey Blain to come in. But when the door suddenly opened it was Violet herself who stood revealed.

"You!" Elsie exclaimed, in surprise, not resentment.

"I suppose you think it risky for a Fifth Form girl to venture into the Fourth Form quarters now the feud is on?" Violet said, with a mirthless sort of smile. "Well, I took my chance. Once inside this room I knew I would be all right."

"But—"

"You share with Audrey Blain," the Fifth Form captain went on, "and we Fifth Form girls don't count Audrey as one of our enemies. She is—well, neutral."

Elsie suddenly gasped as an idea came to her.

"It was Audrey who gave you warning about what Betty and the rest were going to do to-day!" she burst out wildly.

"Audrey Blain, herself a Fourth Form girl!"

"But no friend of Betty & Co.'s—no!" Violet took her cousin up lightly. "Useful girl, Audrey! What are you glaring at me like that for?" she asked, adopting a hostile tone.

"Violet, how could you—oh, how could you get a Fourth Form girl to be a spy in her own camp!" Elsie said in a shocked voice. "And then, to give out that I am the spy, not Audrey! It's shameful of you—shameful!"

Elsie said, in a stifled manner:

"You are hitting me when I'm down, Violet! That any girl could be so cruel I would never have believed. Oh, Violet, when are you going to stop this—this bitter enmity, this cruel persecution?"

"Never!" was the vehement answer that the Fifth Form captain flashed back. "Never, Elsie, whilst you remain at Morcove School. I took a dislike to you the

moment I knew that mother was going to adopt you. When I found you were to come to the same school—be in the same Form with me—"

"I was to come to this school, Violet, to work with you and be a loyal friend as we'll as a cousin."

"A penniless cousin," corrected Violet jeeringly. "What nonsense it was of mother's to think that I would ever have anything in common with you, an orphan from the poor side of the family. Mother ought to have known that this wasn't the sort of school for you at all."

"Would you have liked me to go to an orphanage then—or the workhouse?" Elsie could not help asking bitterly; and Violet shrugged.

"I've never seen why you should be put on the same footing with me," she scowled.

"But there, mother is so—"

"Violet, don't! I can't bear it—that you should speak so derisively of all that makes your mother beloved by those who know her," Elsie pleaded earnestly. "Ah, it was not foolish of her, it was kindness itself when she took charge of me, sent me to this fine school. We were to pull together, Violet, and—"

"Well, that's enough! I don't want you to pull with me, as you ought to know by now. I won't even have you in the same boat, see?" Violet said, without the least restraint upon her animosity. "I'm not here to hear you argue and whine. This came for you this morning in a letter for me from mother, and so I had to look you up to let you have it."

So saying, the Fifth Form captain drew a folded note from her dress pocket and tossed it upon the table and swept out of the room.

Eagerly Elsie opened out the missive, and it proved to be just what she had expected—a special loving message for her, written at the same time as the one for Cousin Violet.

"Elsie dear," her aunt and generous benefactress had written, "I could not send off my letter for dear Violet without slipping in a word for you. Just to say, dear child, that as I lie upon my bed in the sick-room, still such a troublesome, helpless invalid, my thoughts are with you and Violet always."

"To think of you and my own dear

daughter as pulling together—ah, Elsie dear, it does me more good than all the medicine the doctors can ever give me. I feel very low at times—that's when I have one of my bothersome attacks, you know—but there! How often are there brighter moments when I feel that you and Violet together are going to make me quite well at last!"

The hand that held the letter began to tremble violently. Elsie could guess almost the very words that were coming now.

"It is only saying a thing that my Violet has heard me say to her when I tell you, Elsie dear, that in many ways she was falling short of expectations at the time you came along. But now she has you, a loving chum and a good influence, and so the hope of seeing an improvement in her grows stronger day by day.

"Without that hope I should feel the pain and the weariness of my state far, far more than I do, Elsie. So there it is, dear; always remember what you are doing for Violet is also done for me."

Yes, there it was; the one compelling reason for putting up with all Violet's bitter enmity!

How could one start fighting Violet when strife of any kind would mean almost a killing blow for her invalid mother? What else could one do but keep that mother in blissful ignorance of Violet's refusal to be friendly?

Be the cost what it might, Elsie was thinking as she folded up the letter, her one endeavour must be to tide along, hoping and praying for the hour when this cruel vendetta of Violet's would be at an end.

Audrey Blain came in, her head held high, and with a dainty hand giving the usual finicky touch to her fair hair.

"Are you going to be in this study from morning to night always?" Audrey asked curtly. "Can't you find a friend anywhere in the Form, that you must always be hanging about alone?"

She added, with a curl of the lip:

"Perhaps you expect me to chum with you!"

"I would not have you for a chum even if you wanted to be friendly," was the answer Elsie felt stung into giving. "I

will have the right sort of friends—or none!"

She went from the room, and Audrey stood staring at the closed door, quite taken aback.

"Huh!" Audrey said to herself at last. "I suppose she has found out, then, that I am her cousin's spy. So much the worse for her if ever she tells the girls!"

CHAPTER 11.

The Race for Big Tor.

BETTY & CO. had promised themselves some fun for that afternoon—they got it!

Before two o'clock had been dinned out by the school chimes they were off and away upon their jaunt—at least a dozen of them, each laden with a share of the picnic things.

Early as their start had been the enemy had got ahead of them. At least, the Fifth Form picnickers had quitted the school a few minutes sooner, although whether that really meant the certainty of being first at Big Tor was another matter altogether. Betty & Co., for a very good reason, thought not.

For Violet Vane and her cronies had set off along the moorland road to the Tor, quite imagining that Betty & Co. were sure to deem that the quickest route. And instead, Betty & Co. boldly carried out a daring plan they had hit upon, by which a good mile and a half could be cut off the journey.

By a quarter-past two the Fourth Form girls were gleefully, if gingerly, picking their way across a low-lying expanse of boggy moorland.

It was a fenny place that ran right up to the foot of Big Tor, from whose rocky slopes it received all the little rills of water that were continuously flowing there. The marshy ground was no place to go across carelessly. Long ago Betty & Co. had found that it was sheer disaster to lose touch with the stepping-stones and bits of planking which formed the only means of going dry-shod across such squashy land.

Carefully enough the merry picnickers kept to the stepping-stones this afternoon, and even so there were continual yells of mock dismay and shrieks of laughter. "I

"Dweadful!" wailed Paula Creel, as she came on last of all. "Bai Jove, geals, I can't jump across this howwid bwook! I must positively wefuse to impewil my life like this!"

"Good-bye then, and we shall eat your share of the spread," teased Polly. "Ta-ta!"

"Polly deah! One moment, all you geals, pway!" wailed poor Paula, standing unsteadily upon a stone no bigger than a loaf, with another small stone to get to somehow four feet away. "You weally must wealise that I am not endowed with wings, bai Jove!"

"We have all managed it," Tess said, with perfect truth, "so why can't you? Now, Paula, try! One, two, three, and over you come!"

"Pwovided I don't dwop short. And, bai Jove, I have a wemarkable pwesentiment that that is to be my fate," sighed Paula. "In my new shoes and stockings, too, bothah it!"

"Jump, Paula!"

And Paula jumped—plop into the running brook—a full foot short of the other stepping-stone. And after the loud splash there arose a dreadful wail of dismay.

"Ow, healp! Oh, geals, pway wescue me! My gwacious—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Polly deah, pway wefvain from laughing! Do you wealise I am ddowning?"

"Drowning! Duffer, it's only up to your ankles!"

"Only, gwreat Scot! My new shoes—my silk stockings, bai Jove! Wuined, uttably and iwetwievably wuined!" was Paula's dismal wail.

At that instant Polly herself lost her footing on a stepping-stone, and she, too, went in ankle-deep, all because she had been laughing so much that she had forgotten to be careful.

"Ha, ha, ha!" the others simply shrieked, and Paula joined in the merriment now.

"Are you laughing at me?" yelled Polly, addressing Paula.

"I can assure you, Polly deah, I am not laughing at my own pwedicament!" was the beaming answer. "You have my sympathies, howevah. This is twuly distwessing!"

It was whilst Polly and Paula alike were floundering to dry perching places that

their chums, waiting for them, suddenly stopped laughing and looked excited.

"Oh, I say!" Tess broke out, the first to find her tongue again. "Here comes the cucmy!"

Polly stood still in the middle of the brook, and yelped:

"Wha-t!"

"It's a fact—look!" grimaced Betty, pointing. "Violet Vane and the rest—they must have seen us leave the road and come this way, and now they are coming this way, too!"

"My gwacious!" gasped Paula. "And heah am I, stuck fast! Healp! Geals, pway extwicate me from this dweadful extwemity!"

"Come on!" Madge said, half laughing, as she gave a hand to poor Paula and pulled her from a very squashy spot. "Hurry!"

"We must run, yes!" urged Polly.

"Wun, gwreat Scott!" groaned Paula. "Geals, I wegwet to say I must wesign myself to my fate! You go on and leave me! I—"

"Come on!"

That was Polly, as she took hold of Paula by one arm and started rushing her along.

"Never mind the wet; you've been in once!"

"Yes, wather!" said Paula dismally.

"And weal I know it!"

The girls could just imagine the comical sight they presented, pelting over the last hundred yards or so of swampy land—now making flying leaps for the stepping-stones, and now "chancing it" on what looked like being some cushion of hard earth, only to find that it was as soft and wet as a soaked sponge!

But, if Betty & Co. cut amusing figures as they thus dashed along, so also did Violet Vane and her cronies.

"Ha, ha, ha, look at them!" chuckled Polly, after she and her chums had reached firm ground. "There goes Violet—splash! Oh, dear, how mad she is feeling. I know!"

"She'll be madder still in a jiffy!" was Betty's rejoinder, as an idea flashed upon her. "Here, Polly, lend a hand!"

"Oh, how spiffing!"

Thus Polly, as she saw that Betty meant to displace a stout plank which bridged a very wide brook. The piece of timber was

fas: at either end, but the two girls worked it free by a mighty effort, and then drew it in towards them.

Madge and Tess helped, whilst the others cheered them on. What cheers there were to be, too, for Violet Vane and her cronies, as they came bounding over the brooks and squelching through boggy places—only they were cheers of a different kind!

"Hooray, go it!" Polly led the derisive cries. "Two to one on Violet Vane. Oh, you poor mudlarks, what will Miss Prosser say?"

It was certain that Miss Prosser, if ever she saw the Fifth Form in the state they now were in, would say far from pleasant things. Betty & Co. had not come through unscathed. They, however, were hardly more muddled than they usually expected to get in a good cross-country jaunt over the moors.

But Violet and her cronies had, so to speak, gone in off the deep end!

They were spluttering ruefully at the state they had got themselves into, whilst they saw that the worst was yet to come.

Away scampered the Fourth Form girls, starting their breathless race up the steep hillside, whilst the enemy wailed amongst themselves now that they came to that wide brook and saw how the length of timber had been artfully removed.

There was no help for it! Either they must turn back, with Betty & Co.'s derisive cheers ringing in their ears, or they must plunge across, chancing a wetting to the knees!

"Oh, we can't!" fumed Violet Vane despairingly.

"We must!" urged Millie Hapgood. "And pay them out afterwards—come on!"

So in they went, breathing vengeance upon the so-far victorious Fourth.

Violet Vane was not the only one to show a face that flamed with anger. In fact, the only good-tempered member of the discomfited Fifth Form party was Dora Dean, the cynic.

It was just like her to find almost as much delight at her companions' humiliation as Betty & Co. were enjoying. Dora reminded Violet and the rest that the Fourth Form were certainly taking "Onward and Upward!" for their motto, and Dora was promptly told not to be funny!

Onward and upward went Betty & Co.,

in real earnest, whilst their crestfallen rivals were floundering to dry land. Poor Paula felt pretty nigh dead with exertion as she toiled and scrambled after her chums up the steep slope. It was all very well for Polly and the rest to cry out that once they reached the summit, they would be all right. The summit wanted some reaching!

But at last—"Hurrah!"—the chums reached those picturesque ruins which were all that remained of a noble building that had once crowned the hill.

Because it served as a fine look-out place for visitors to the romantic spot, a massive tower that was part of the ancient edifice had been kept in repair. It was this tower that the Fifth Form girls had openly boasted they would "bag" for their picnic; but Betty & Co. got there first after all!

Darting amongst the masses of fallen masonry that lay around, the chums of the Fourth Form surged towards the old oak door that gave admittance to the tower. It was standing ajar, and through the narrow aperture they squirmed, one after another, herding together at the foot of the stone stairway inside.

Then, with shoulders to the massive door, two or three of the girls heaved stalwartly.

Could it be closed against the enemy? That was what they meant to find out!

"Again—and again!" urged Polly. "Now—she's going! Hurrah!"

And all at once the bottom of the sagging door scraped clear of the uneven stone-work that had been jamming it open. The rusty hinges gave groans and creaks, and then:

Thud!

The door was shut against the enemy. In a flash Betty had wedged it on the inside with a bit of stone pavement, and with renewed cheers of triumph the chums swarmed on up the winding stairway to picnic on the battlements!

CHAPTER 12.

Tea on the Tower.

"H OORAY! Hurrah! Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Yes, wather! Bai Jove,
 geals, we have done wondahs—
 what?"
 "We! A fine lot you did!" Polly teased

the aristocrat of the Form. "But never mind—tea, tea! And we won't go home till morning, till daylight doth appear!"

Polly, in fact, had never been quite so jubilant.

She always had to be twice as merry as any of her chums, and they were elated enough just at present.

Good reason, too! They had only to take a peep over the parapet of the ancient tower to see the enemy down there amongst the ruins, tasting all the bitterness of defeat.

The fact that Violet Vane and her cronies had reached the ruins could be no comfort to them at all. Their hearts had been set upon their "bagging" the tower, so that they would be able to crow over the Fourth Form girls. Shut out from that tower, and with Betty & Co. in proud possession of it, the Fifth had a large slice of humble pie to eat indeed!

Polly was already on her knees, sorting out the mass of picnic-things which had been dumped down by the girls as soon as they gained the tower-top.

"One kettle, with no lid!" sang out Polly. "Two cups, one broken! One kettle-lid, with no kettle—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Tea—"

"Is it weedy, bai Jove!" Paula cried, becoming interested.

"Ready!" scoffed Polly. "Here, you make yourself useful, young lady! Somebody give Paula something to do! She gets on my nerves!"

Paula expressed herself as being most eager to help. It ended in her taking off her shoes and stockings, however, and setting them to dry in the strong sunshine and the warm breeze. That done, cut came her pocket and comb, and she started to restore her ruffled locks.

Meantime, the kettle of water was set to boil upon the methylated spirit-stove, and a nice clean cloth was laid upon the paved floor, to take cups and saucers, the bottle of milk, and paper bags crammed with eatables.

"Is life worth living?" asked Polly gaily, as the kettle began to sing.

"Yes, wather," agreed Paula heartily. "Geals, it is supising what a jolly time one gets, bai Jove, when one pulls with the west! Weally, I— Polly, stop!" she suddenly shrieked. "What are you going to do with—"

"Whose shoes and stockings are these?" Polly asked.

"Mine, Polly deah! Pway—pway be careful—"

"Good job you spoke! I was just going to drop them overboard!" chuckled the madcap. "I thought they must have been left behind by some old gipsy-woman!"

"My new shoes," sighed Paula, setting them out again. "My pwecious stockings—wained, quite wained!"

"Cheer up!" laughed Madge. "You came off better than the enemy, Paula darling! Hark to them—just hark!"

The chums found it well worth while to check their merriment for a moment, to listen to the squabbling amongst the crest-fallen "enemy."

Peering over, Betty & Co. could see that Violet Vane and her cronies were making the best of a bad job. They were collecting materials for lighting a fire amongst the ruins, to picnic down there.

Polly began some loud talk, specially intended for the enemy's ears.

"It must be a swindle to fag all the way to Big Tor, and then not get a look-in at the tower after all!"

"Yes, wather—"

"People who camp down below are liable to get things thrown upon them!" Polly went on, screwing up a greasy paper bag and taking aim. "There, you see—"

"Ha ha, ha!?"

They all peeled with laughter as the light missile whizzed down and caught one of the enemy on the back of her neck.

"Some duffers," went on Polly, "don't know how to light a brushwood fire. They lose their tempers awfully! Wise people, of course, bring a methylated spirit-stove!"

"Yes, wather! And that reminds me, Polly deah, the kettle is already boiling!"

"Half a sec, I must see those duffers get their fire going!" Polly shouted.

Such derisive cries as these were making Violet Vane & Co. madder than ever. Now that they had fixed upon their spot for the picnic, they did not like to shift; that would be another humiliation! All they could do was to get that fire going as quickly as possible.

"Oh, hurry up, some of you!" Violet Vane exclaimed irritably. "Can't you see we are a laughing stock, muffing about like this!"

"Well, you try!" snapped back Sybil Golding, getting up disgustedly from her crouching position close to the pile of brushwood.

She threw down the box of matches, and Violet Vane stooped and took them up. She struck one match—and the whole box caught fire, giving a mighty flare.

"Hooray!" cheered Polly, watching from the tower-top. "That's the way!"

Dora Dean gave her dry chuckle.

"We shall have a lot to crow about when we get back to school," she remarked dryly. "Gracious, what a smother of smoke!"

The box of matches, being all in flames, had been irritably thrust by Violet into the pile of sticks, and now there was, indeed, a huge cloud of smoke from the very damp wood.

Fanned by the wind, the bonfire sent up smoke to a perfectly alarming extent; and then it burst into flame. There was such a crackling and roaring, it quite scared the Fifth-Formers!

"Well, you wanted a fire," commented Dora cynically. "Now you've got one! Isn't somebody going to put the kettle on?"

Next moment there was a yell of laughter from the watchers on the tower. They saw Millie Hapgood try to place the kettle safely on the fire, only to let it fall over into the very heart of the blaze.

Hiss—ssh! spluttered the bonfire, now that it was drenched with all the water out of the overturned kettle.

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Betty & Co. "Bravo! That's the way!"

Violet and a few others stamped about, raging with anger. Thicker than ever the smoke billowed away, and their only consolation was that it made a smothering cloud for Betty & Co. to contend with.

"Hi, put that fire out, can't you?" shouted down Polly. "Do you want to set the ruins alight? You'll catch it, doing damage to public property!"

What Violet or any of her cronies answered, Polly did not pause to hear, for Madge was calling: "Tea, girls!" and now the moment had come for Betty & Co. to enjoy a really nice repast.

The smoke cleared off, and there was nothing whatever to spoil the chums' enjoyment of their picnic on the battlements. Taking their steaming cups in one hand, and helping themselves from the paper

bags with the other, they dispersed themselves around the weatherworn stone parapet. Violet and the others down below had only to glance up to see their rivals revelling in the dainty al-fresco meal.

"Isn't your kettle boiling yet? We've got ours!" Polly shouted down, knowing full well that by this time the Fifth Form's kettle had melted away in the fire. "It's jolly up here, you duffers!"

"Yes, wather!"

Millie Hapgood could contain herself no longer. She looked up, shaking a fist at Polly.

"You wait! We'll get even with you, over this!"

"Madge—Betty, come and look!" was Polly's response to this. "There are some awfully vulgar persons down there. It is a pity that such people come out here and spoil the beauty of the countryside!"

"Poor things," Betty said, just as loudly, peeping over. "They know no better!"

Polly went back to the laid cloth and set down her empty cup. She took up a lump of cake.

"This is a bit hefty," she said. "Didn't rise quite properly in the oven, I fancy. Does anyone want it?"

Receiving an encouraging assurance that it was superfluous to requirements, Polly wrapped up the lump of cake in a paper bag. Then she returned to the parapet.

"Hi! You poor kids down there! Aren't you hungry?"

"Give them a chance; they are waiting for the kettle to boil!" chuckled Betty.

"Here's something to go on with, anyhow!" Polly cried, and—whizz—the lump of cake went like a shot from a gun.

It just caught Millie Hapgood on the shoulder, as she dived aside to avoid it. Millie snatched it up, and then Polly shouted:

"Oh, greedy! Give some to your friends! You greedy child!"

That was the last straw for Millie! She really couldn't stand it any longer, and she said so. Dashing down the bag of cake, she stalked away, and after her drifted others.

One by one the Fifth-Formers slunk off, getting together again at a spot safely out of sight of the mocking enemy.

"We must do something!" Ruby Maydew said desperately.

"Why, I should have thought you felt like taking a rest cure," scoffed Dora Dean. "I came out with you to enjoy a picnic. I've seen you go halfway round by road, and then turn back and come across the marsh. I've seen you try to set fire to the ruins, and burn the kettle to bits, and now——"

"Don't be funny!" stormed Violet.

"On the contrary," protested Dora sweetly, "it is all you who are funny. I can't make you out! We were to have a picnic on—the tower. And instead——"

Millie silenced the cynic by pushing her aside.

"Here's my idea," she said, with returning enthusiasm for the feud. "They've shut themselves up in the tower. Let's see that they stop there!"

"Oh, good!" applauded her hearers. "You mean——"

"Make the tower door fast on the outside—yes!" Millie rushed on. "So secure that it will take them all the rest of the day to get away from the tower!"

The others almost fell on Millie's neck in gratitude for her timely suggestion. Something had got to be done to make Betty & Co sing small; and this was it.

What happened during the next five minutes need not be detailed. It is enough to say that the chums on the tower-top, although they looked out now and then, saw nothing more of the enemy. For only two girls—Millie Hapgood and Ruby Maydew—returned to the base of the tower, and did their work with great stealth.

It was fully an hour later when Betty & Co. packed up the picnic things and came down the winding stairway, intending to ramble slowly back to the school. And the first they knew of the trick that had been played upon them was when Betty gave a sudden cry:

"Here, we are locked in!"

CHAPTER 13.

Can Elsie Save Them?

"LOCKED in, Betty?"

"Yes!"

"Bai Jove, geals——"

"Those Fifth-Formers must have fastened the door somehow—wired it up!" Betty said, with a rueful laugh.

"Well, that's a nice thing!" Tess chuckled. "We are bowled out this time, no mistake! Caught napping, nicely!"

"Most distressing; most disagreeable!" Paula acknowledged. "Weally, geals, unless we waise a cwyr for healp——"

"The first duffer to cry for help has mo to reckon with!" Polly broke in. "Betty, you are the one. What do we do now?"

But Betty had to own that she was at a loss. There were no windows in the towers, only little slots here and there in the walls.

"And we certainly can't jump down from the tower—a matter of thirty feet," laughed Dolly.

"Ah!" Paula broke out, with a brilliant smile. "Geals, a gweat idea stwikes mo! I pwopose that we unwavel a woollen thwead, bai Jove, and lower it, like the man did when he was stwanded on the factory chimney, you wemember? Then, don't you know——"

"We just slide down the thread, eh? Thank you, no!" was Polly's withering comment. "We've no woollen threads to unravel. You can begin on your silk stockings, Paula, if you want to pass the time away!"

"Vewy well," murmured the aristocrat of the Form. "I shall make no further wemarks. Whatever I say, Polly deah, it only awouses your wicicule! There are times, Polly deah, when you are vewy twying. Yes, wathah!"

"My dear old duck of a Paula," Polly promptly smiled, winding an arm about the swell girl's waist. "You mustn't mind me; it's only that I hate getting bowled out by the Fifth, even just once!"

"Hear, hear to that!" agreed Betty. "But hadn't we better keep quiet for a bit. They may be listening outside!"

"Bai Jove, yes——"

"Meaning to set us free at last, after we have started howling for help?" suggested Trixie.

This belief took a strong hold on the imprisoned girls, and from that moment onwards they kept a guard upon their voices.

Now and then they kept silent in case sounds of the enemy's presence outside could be picked up. An hour passed, however, and still not a sound was heard.

"They must have gone," Dolly exclaimed at last. "Come to think of it, their picnic

was such a fiasco, they would be yearning to get back for a cup of tea."

And this was really the case.

Violet Vane and her cronies had set off back to the school directly the two who had secured the door were amongst them again.

Millie Hapgood and Ruby Maydew had gleefully reported that they didn't see how the prisoners could ever get the door open, it had been made so fast; but somehow this achievement did not cause much jubilation.

The girls were tired and thirsty, besides being wretchedly damp and muddy about the feet and ankles. And they could not blink the fact that the great triumph they had promised themselves had not been brought off.

Betty & Co. had picnicked at the tower, after all!

It was long past teatime when Violet and the rest got indoors. They were far too late for tea at the school tables, nor could they get a refreshing cup for themselves in the studies.

What with having to get themselves cleaned up, and then feeling so dead-beat, all they could do was to disperse to their various dens and flop back into easy chairs. Tumblers of cold water, and some smashed cakes that had borne the heat and burden of the day, so to speak, were the girls' "tea"—and what faces they made over it!

It was six o'clock when Millie Hapgood came round into Violet Vane's study, bringing another girl with her.

"Violet, here's our 'neutral,'" Millie said, as she stood aside to reveal Audrey Blain. "She came down from the Fourth Form quarters to make inquiries. You see, Betty & Co. are not back yet!"

"Bother Betty & Co!" exclaimed Violet, sullenly. "Don't pester me! But, Audrey," she added hastily softening her tone, "you can stay, and welcome. I just don't want to discuss to-day's doings, that's all."

Dora Dean drifted in at that instant. After an hour or more in the seclusion of her study, she was ripe for mischief with her tongue.

"To-day's doings will be writ large upon the pages of history," she said dryly. "that is certain. As long as the walls of Morcove still shelter the girlhood of Britain, of which our worthy captain here is such a fine example—"

"Oh, don't be funny! Who asked you to look in?" snapped Violet.

"Loyalty to my Form forbids my finding friends except in the Form," said Dora. Then she seemed to become aware of Audrey's presence.

"I beg your pardon, Audrey; you are mixing with friends outside your Form, of course. But then you are—neutral!"

Audrey gave the cynic an aloof look.

"I shall not say 'Don't be funny.' I don't think you could be, even if you tried," she said coldly.

"She's an idiot," exclaimed Violet impatiently.

"Possibly," allowed Dora, edging towards the door. "There must have been some reason like that for putting me in the Fifth Form."

And then she vanished, just in time to dodge the dictionary that Violet hurled at her—not playfully either.

"So," Audrey said then, "you did score over Betty & Co., after all?"

"In a way, yes," Violet mumbled. "But aren't they back yet? It is time—"

"Violet, Ruby, and I told you we had made it impossible for them to get out," Millie struck in proudly.

"Impossible! You didn't say impossible?" Violet said, getting up with a sudden expression of uneasiness. "I hope to goodness they do get out. If not—what will happen at call-over?"

Audrey shrugged lightly.

"Oh, don't worry!" she said soothingly. "Whatever happens, Betty & Co. won't put the blame on you Fifth Form girls. They wouldn't think that fair play."

"Well, they ought to be back by now," Violet could not help saying irritably. "You shouldn't have made the door quite so secure, Millie!"

"Oh!" stormed that girl disgustedly. "You are a fine captain, you are! You can always grumble and grouse, but as for helping—giving a lead—"

"Did I hear someone singing our worthy captain's praises?" Dora inquired, drifting back into the room. "If so, they are my sentiments, too! Violet—"

"You be off!" Violet fairly raved, and the cynic drifted out again, chuckling.

She was chuckling in her own way more than ever when eight o'clock had come and there was still no sign of the Fourth Form picnickers' return.

She found Violet and two or three others

watching from a study window that looked out towards Big Tor.

"Sister Anno—Sister Anne, do you see anyone coming?" Dora asked flippantly. "The sun has set, the night creeps on; Sister Anne—"

"She's mad!" said Sybil Golding, alluding to Dora.

"I am not mad, only rather anxious about Betty & Co.," Dora retorted blandly. "It will be a pretty serious business if they are locked up in that tower all night. At least, that is my feeling."

She strolled away, knowing full well that that was Violet Vane's feeling, too. And Millie's! And Ruby's! In short, Dora was quite sure that all who had been concerned in the locking up of Betty & Co. were secretly trembling with suspense.

It grew dark, and here and there in the schoolhouse rooms were lit up and blinds drawn against the night. Still, unbeknown to any of the mistresses, a certain section of the Fourth Form were absent from the school.

Dora was fairly in her element. She was here, there, and everywhere, twitting Violet and the rest whenever she came across them, so that those girls writhed.

Bad enough to have made a mess of things, without having to listen to the cynic's running comments on their "great achievement!"

"Ah, the one-time shining light of the Fifth!" Dora exclaimed sarcastically, chancing to meet Elsie Harper a few minutes before call-over. "How doth the busy bee, et cetera, now that she is a distinguished member of the Fourth? Where are your friends, Elsie?"

"I have no friends!"

"Elsie," Dora said genially, "aren't you glad you are not friends with Betty & Co.? You might have gone for the picnic with them, in which case, Elsie, you would have stood a very good chance of being gated for the rest of term!"

"Whatever do you mean?" Elsie gasped. "Do talk sense!"

"Things are not what they seem, Elsie. Trouble looms upon the house of Morcove! Woe betide Betty & Co., if they are not back before another ten minutes is out!"

Then Dora walked away, leaving Elsie full of sudden wild dismay.

Vaguely as Dora had talked, the situation had been revealed to the girl who had no friends.

Betty & Co., as the result of some trick

played upon them by Violet and her cronies, were in danger of being absent from call-over!

"What shall I do—what can I do for them?" Elsie wondered desperately. "They've misjudged me cruelly—have shunned me to-day. But is that any reason why I should not save them if I can?"

She ran upstairs, pausing at one of the windows to peer across the nightbound grounds. If only she could discern or hear them coming along it might be possible for her to slip down to a back door and unlock it for them. But no—

Yes! There they were! Vaguely in the darkness she could make out the belated picnickers keeping as much in cover as possible as they hurried for the schoolhouse.

Then there was a chance to save them, after all!

Elsie flashed about, and went racing down the stairs. Just as she reached a dim-lit passage the bell for call-over began to clang. Never mind! Still time, if only she could remain undetected for the next few minutes.

Silently she stole to the far end of the dim passage. There was a door there giving on to the school grounds. It was bolted at top and bottom, and the key had been turned.

Standing on tip-toe, Elsie softly worked back the top bolt, then stooped and undid the lower one. Now for the key!

She took hold of it with trembling nervousness, twisted it back, and then realised that she must open the door a few inches so that it would be a clear invitation for the girls to come darting through at the last moment. Just in time for them all to escape grave trouble. So, twisting the knob of the door, Elsie drew the door open a few inches, then turned to go away. She had done Betty & Co. a great good turn, but whether they would ever know that it was she who had saved them Elsie was not bothering about just at present.

With her back to the open door, she was retracing her way stealthily along the passage, when an alarming thing happened. A puff of night wind blew the door round against the passage wall.

Elsie's heart seemed to turn over in her breast. That crash of the open door—nothing could have been worse in the circumstances. A mistress hearing it would come running into the passage instantly. And, to Elsie's utter horror, another moment showed her somebody turning in, to

the passage with an excited step. Miss Massingham, the Fourth Form mistress!

"Who is there?" Miss Massingham demanded sharply, peering before her in the dim light as she came hurrying down the passage. "Elsie Harper! And that door!"

The mistress stood stock still.

"Elsie, what does it mean? Why do I catch you like this close to that open door? A door which I myself secured only a few minutes ago? Answer me!"

But what could Elsie answer?

"You are silent," Miss Massingham went on, with increasing sternness. "I am convinced that you have been into mischief. You opened that door, and——"

The speaker broke off with an excited "Ah!" She was looking towards the open door, and there, suddenly, she saw several other girls brought to a dead stop in the very act of slipping into the house.

CHAPTER 14. Beyond Belief.

"COME here!" Miss Massingham burst out furiously. "All of you—come here, this instant!"

Then she held her breath, standing in a drawn-up attitude whilst the belated picnickers came along in a crestfallen way to meet her fiery glance.

"Betty! Madge Minden! Polly Linton! Paula—nearly a dozen of you!" was Miss Massingham's scandalised cry at last. "All girls belonging to my form; and you have been—where have you been Betty?"

"For a picnic, please."

"A picnic! Is that sufficient explanation as to why you have only just got back? Does that excuse you?"

"I'm afraid it doesn't, Miss Massingham."

"Then what is the excuse?"

No answer from Betty! None from any of her chums, either!

The sound of voices in this remote passage had drawn a number of girls to the spot. They began to crowd together at the top end, shrewdly suppressing their excitement, whilst they saw that a dozen Fourth Form scholars appeared to have been nicely caught.

"Understand me," the mistress went on, with pardonable heat, "I do not wish to see you punished for this business if there is some genuine reason for your being in

so late. But you have nothing to say for yourselves. And besides——"

She gestured at Elsie.

"It is perfectly obvious to me; this girl slipped down to undo the door so that you could come creeping in after lock-up time. You arranged with her to do this, so you must have intended to be late."

"No!" said Betty, finding her tongue at last. "We made no arrangement with Elsie Harper."

"But she is the person who undid the door. She was giving you the chance to slip into the house, but—unluckily for herself as well as for you, girls—she made a noise, and I heard it."

"Oh, she made a noise, did she?" Polly Linton broke out, in such a tone that Miss Massingham stared.

"Polly!"

"What Betty says is the truth," Polly went on quickly. "We made no arrangement with Elsie Harper. If she opened the door and then made a noise that was on purpose to betray us!"

There came a hard gasp from Elsie. Once again she had the agony of knowing that these girls were going to misjudge her.

"Oh, how can you!" she cried out wildly. "How can you think such a thing of me?"

"But it's perfectly clear!" cried Tess, just as indignantly as Polly had spoken. "You banged the door on purpose to attract——"

"No, I did not!"

"I want to know one thing," Miss Massingham put in sharply. "Is Elsie friendly with you? You say not."

"She is no friend of ours," Polly exclaimed regretfully. "And, really, we cannot believe that she was wanting to do us any good turn."

"You mean, it is far more likely that she wanted me to catch you?"

"Yes, wather! Miss Massingham, may I make a remark?" pleaded Paula. "I wgwet to say that I must subswibe to the theowy which my fwinds have formed in wgwed to this wgwetttable affair, bai Jove! We all wealise——"

Miss Massingham checked Paula's fluent drawl with a raised hand.

"Elsie, it is for you to explain just why you opened the door, and whether or not you banged it on purpose for me to hear. Well?"

"I was hoping they would get into the

house unnoticed," Elsie declared hastily.

"The door banged—by accident."

"Very good; I shall accept that answer!" Miss Massingham exclaimed. "It means that you were doing one of those things for which no girl could be blamed. You will not be punished, for I can imagine that you acted on a good impulse—"

"Good impulse!" echoed Polly bitterly. "When she—"

"Silence!" the mistress said, stamping a foot. "Betty—all of you who have been caught like this; you will be gated for a week!"

"Miss Massingham—"

"Yes, weally and twuly—"

"No more!" the irate mistress silenced them all sternly. "It grieves me greatly that I should find the very captain of the Form involved in such a scrape, with no explanation to offer. Look at the state you are in!"

"Yes, bai Jove! We weally are wather bedwaggled!" Paula owned softly, as she looked down at herself. "Howevah, that is not pweicisely our f—"

"Not your fault, you say, and yet you can give no explanation!" Miss Massingham commented bitterly, turning away. "I have heard that sort of thing before, and I always know what it means. Quick, now! The school is mustering, so hurry to your places!"

She herself stalked off, looking as angry as ever, and all Betty & Co. could do was to go forward in a pack through a crowd which still hung about the passage.

They saw a good many Fifth Form girls, who, of course, were all chuckling gleefully. That was aggravating enough, but what pained the chums of the Fourth Form still more was the sight of other scholars, who plainly shared Miss Massingham's disappointment. There were seniors—Ethel Courtway, the head girl of the school, was one—who had always been very nice to Betty & Co. Now they had only stern looks for the culprits.

Still in a more or less bedwaggled state, the picnickers took their places in the muster, and answered to their names. Their Form was lined up behind the Fifth, and more than once Violet Vane, Millie Hapgood, and the rest looked round to bestow gloating smiles. And the mistress had something to say, too—with no smiles. So, altogether, as Paula said below her breath, it was a "pwofound welief" when a move was made for the dormitories.

"Yes, wather!" Paula exclaimed, as she set foot on the stairs along with her companions in disgrace. "And, wemember, gals, that under no circumstances will I evah take part in a picnic again! The state of pwostwation I'm in, after my desepwate efforts to bwreak down that doah—"

"What's that? What did you do to help our escape from the tower?" Polly wanted to know huffily. "Weren't we tugging and pulling for hours and hours, Betty and I and the rest—with you all the time putting your hair to rights!"

"How twying you are at times!" sighed Paula. "Pway wemember, if I didn't help in getting that doah dwaggled open, I at least made a cushion for you and Tess Twelawney to come tumbling back upon. It's nothing to laugh at, either!"

But Polly had to laugh, as she recalled the moment when at last the door had flown open, and she and Tess had tumbled back like that. Never would she or any of her chums forget Paula's squeals for "healp!"

Such talk as this, on the way upstairs was heard by Elsie Harper, and even now she could not help admiring Betty & Co. for the good grace in which they had accepted their hard luck.

There was another thing, too, which commanded Elsie's respect. How brickish of them it had been, she was thinking, not to draw Violet and the other Fifth Form girls into the trouble, when Miss Massingham was angry.

And yet how unjust these same Fourth Form girls had been to her!

Once again, the victim of cruel circumstances could not help asking herself, passionately, was she to make no further effort to vindicate herself?

She turned aside into the Fourth Form corridor whilst the others trooped on upstairs to the dormitory. A desperate mood was coming upon her, and she wanted to be somewhere alone for a few moments, to consider whether she should have done with all patient submission to her hard fate.

Study No. 8 was deserted, for Audrey had gone straight up to the dormitory with the rest of the Form. Elsie drifted into that room, and stood pondering the situation. The place was in darkness, and the darkness hid a face that was stricken with anguish.

If only she could set herself right in the eyes of Betty & Co.! They were such nice

girls—always there was that thought to make everything so much harder to endure. They were really nice girls, and it was not their fault that they were misjudging her so cruelly. Violet had been the cause of their being convinced that she was the Fifth Form's spy; and Fate had done the rest when it caused that door to bang.

The feeling grew stronger in the girl's troubled breast. She must vindicate herself to Betty & Co., even if it meant explaining to them what a bitter vendetta Violet was pursuing against her. Now, to-night, in the dormitory—

But no! Once again there came a sort of vision that caused Elsie to falter in her purpose. The vision of Violet's good mother, lying upon her bed of pain, the one great solace for her suffering the belief that Violet and her Cousin Elsie were pulling together at the school; that Elsie was putting up patiently with all Violet's "little ways," and slowly making a better girl of her.

When this was the position, how could one think of jeopardising the invalid mother's peace of mind by making revelations at the school which were bound to reach her ears in the end?

Brave, splendid Elsie! Once again she heaved a courageous sigh of resignation, and went quietly from the room, to rejoin the Fourth Form girls in their dormitory. Girls who despised her as an enemy in their midst, a spy on the look-out always for a chance to get them into trouble! But, never mind, better she should suffer like this than for such a blow to be struck at that good woman whose days and nights were being passed upon a bed of pain.

On one of the landings, Elsie came suddenly face to face with Dora Dean.

"Rejoicing over your latest achievement?" Dora asked, in cynical comment on Elsie's sad face. "Wonderful the way the distinguished member of the Fourth Form goes on distinguishing herself! Made any friends yet?"

Elsie said "Good-night, Dora!" very quietly, and passed on; and, after that, perhaps, Dora wished for once that she had kept a curb upon her cynical tongue.

Here was the dormitory, with all the Fourth Form girls dispersed about the room starting to disrobe. Elsie had settled that one thing with herself finally: on no account would she be drawn into saying anything that would lead to a disclosure of Violet's persecution of her. But—

Wistfully she began to wonder, could she not ask Betty and the rest whether they would not take her word of honour that she had not wilfully betrayed them to the mistress to-night?

She suddenly crossed to where Betty was standing.

"Betty Barton—"

"Well?"

"Before we go to bed," Elsie said steadily, and her low voice was audible all over the big room, because everybody else had suddenly stopped talking, "I want to ask you for the last time—do you really think I was capable of betraying you like that to Miss Massingham?"

"I'm afraid I am bound to think so," said Betty with a sigh. "It was a base thing to do, Elsie. We saw a door standing open, and we naturally concluded that some good friend had come to our aid, knowing we were in a pickle."

"And instead," said Polly bitterly, "it was all done to make sure that we would get caught. Even if all the rest of the Form could accept your word, I couldn't!"

"Not if I give you my—my word of honour?"

"No!"

The answer came from at least a dozen girls in unison.

Then Elsie said no more.

She went apart to her own corner of the dormitory and undressed. She got into bed, and then the last good-nights were exchanged; but no one said good-night to her.

Miss Redgrave made her "lights-out" visit, and went away. One by one the girls dropped off to sleep, until at last Elsie Harper must have been the only scholar still awake in that dormitory.

She was lying there sleepless in her anguish, asking herself over and over again, tragically, how long was this hard life to last? How long?

But, from first to last during all those wakeful hours of hers, she never shed a tear.

Something steeled her spirit and gave her fortitude. It was the thought that, for every hour of anguish which she herself must suffer, there would be an hour of less pain and anguish for that good woman without whose loving aid she herself would have been in the very work-house to-night.

CHAPTER 15.

Too Bad.

"THERE, girls, you may talk away now! I'm finished!"

And Polly Linton, the madcap of the Fourth Form at Morcove School, threw down her pen.

Then she sucked a blot of ink from one finger.

"Talk away!" she encouraged the half-dozen other girls, who looked more like bursting into laughter. "I just had to beg a minute's silence whilst I finished writing the— Hallo—"

Polly broke off, for at this moment she and her chums were amazed to see a note slipped under the study door.

Next moment, the door was rapped, to call attention to the mysterious message.

With a bound, Betty rushed forward and picked up the note. Then she opened the door and looked out, curious to know who had delivered the missive in such furtive fashion.

"Ah!" cried Betty, as she saw and recognised a girl who was speeding noiselessly for the stairs. "One of the Fifth! Ruby Maydew—"

"Wha-a-at!" Polly yelled. "Oh, after her!"

But it was too late, and the note in Betty's hand was a counter attraction to the chase in any case.

Betty tore a folded sheet of paper from the envelope, and every girl in the study found her eyes scanning these sinister words:

HAS ANYONE SEEN
BLUEBELL COURTNEY?

She does look a
Guy!

"Goodness!" exclaimed two or three of the puzzled girls. "Whatever—"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove! Geals, here is a mystwy, what? I left Bluebell weading quietly in my study, half an hour ago, so what does it all mean?"

"That's what we are going to find out!" Betty said grimly.

And the next instant she was leading the way out of Study No. 12.

One thing the jeering message had told the chums of the Fourth quite plainly.

This was the latest bit of work on the part of the Fifth!

Day by day the feud between the two Forms was waxing fiercer, and fiercer was the desire of either side to score off the other. With things in this state, it was not safe for a Fourth Form girl to venture alone into the Fifth Form quarters, nor would a Fifth Form girl have a very happy time if she was caught trespassing into the Fourth Form corridor!

Clearly, Bluebell Courtney had fallen into the enemy's hands, this evening; but how? And what had been done to her—where was she now?

The note from the enemy invited Betty & Co. to find out, and they set about doing so at once.

First they looked in at the study which Paula Creel shared with Bluebell; but that den was deserted, and there was no clue as to where or why Bluebell had abandoned her reading and gone off, to fall unsuspectingly into Violet Vane's clutches.

"Have you seen Bluebell Courtney?" the girls inquired at several of the other studies along the passage; but the answer was the same in every case: "No!"

"Then we must hunt the house for her, that's all," Betty suggested a minute later. "Poor Bluebell; she's in a pretty pickle, I'm sure."

Polly suddenly nipped back into Study No. 12, and returned with a couple of electric torches.

"Because, if you ask me," she said breathlessly, "we had better begin with the attics. Up there is just the sort of place where the enemy would feel they could do just as they pleased, without being dropped on by a mistress."

"Polly's right!" agreed Madge and two or three others, whilst Paula exclaimed:

"Yes, wather! Betty deah—"

"Right-ho!" Betty was only too ready to approve, and off they chased, instantly, swarming up the main staircase to the dormitory floor, and then up some ladder-like steps to the attic landing.

There two or three attic-doors confronted them. None of these rooms was in use at present; the domestics were too well cared for at Morcove School to be housed in dingy attics. Thus the dark and empty rooms were just right for any sort of hide and seek business, and Betty & Co. more than suspected that they would find Bluebell here.

Find her they did, when they threw

open one door and sent the torch beams into that room.

For just an instant the brilliant rays played upon a weird figure which the chums recognised as their poor Bluebell, after treatment by the enemy. Then they swarmed forward, voicing indignant cries.

Bluebell was standing there, writhing this way and that in the effort to free her bound hands and ankles. For she had had a linen bandage knotted about her feet, whilst her wrists had been tied behind her back.

But this was not all that the enemy had done to her.

By means of a box of water-colour paints, her pretty face had been "decorated" in the most appalling way. Her nose was bright vermilion; her forehead had been painted with black lines, to give her a frowning expression, whilst her mouth had been made to look inches wider than it was, by the use of black paint at either end.

"Great goodness!" Paula yelped. "Bluebell dead—"

"Oh, the wretches!" Polly gasped. "A joke's a joke; but—"

"Wait till we get hold of one of them!" Betty burst out fiercely. "It won't be the youngest member of their Form, either!"

Already the chums were crowding round the victim, and their resentment increased as they saw that Bluebell had been more than made a guy of. In binding her hands and feet, she had certainly been made to suffer a good deal of pain.

"Look at these knots!" Betty cried hotly. "They hurt you, Bluebell—"

"A little, I'm afraid they did," that girl owned, as cheerfully as she could. "But never mind—"

"Never mind!" echoed Polly, whilst she and the rest set the victim free. "This goes down in the official history—"

"Yes, wather!"

"And won't we take it out of the enemy, too!" Tess breathed grimly. "I say—"

"Bluebell, how was it that they came to catch you?" Betty asked eagerly. "Surely you didn't venture alone into their quarters!"

"No! I— Oh, but never mind!"

"That," said Betty, "is brickish of you, Bluebell; but we must have the whole story, otherwise the same trick will be played on other girls."

"Well, then," Bluebell said ruefully, "I

was reading in my study, when a girl looked in to say that she thought I was wanted by Miss Redgrave, downstairs. I went off, and as soon as I got out of the Fourth Form passage I fell into the enemy's hands."

"So the message was just a trick to entice you away from the study!" Polly exclaimed disgustedly. "Is that fair play, girls? To use a mistress' name as a means of—"

"Disgraceful!" Paula cried.

"Who gave you the message, Bluebell?" Madge asked gravely.

"Oh, but—"

"I think you are entitled to tell us," Betty said. "It is obvious that no Fifth Form girl came to your study. Who was it, then?"

"A Fourth Form girl—it must have been!" Polly conjectured. "Which means—oh, more treachery!"

"Was it Elsie Harper?"

That question came in a burst from Betty, Madge, Tess—nearly every one of the chums, in fact.

"Bluebell! Was it Elsie Harper?"

"I'm afraid it was!" grimaced Bluebell. "Rather shabby of her, wasn't it?"

"Shabby!"

"Bai Jove—"

"That girl!" Polly said, with a stamp of the foot. "All right; we'll have a word with her about this!"

"That we will!" Betty agreed grimly. "Abominable, for Elsie Harper to play this part of spy and traitress! You had better slip away and wash that poor face of yours, Bluebell, before anyone sees you. And then we'll interview Elsie!"

Bluebell Courtney hurried out of the attic and stole down the steep stairs, then made a silent rush for the Fourth Form dormitory. She could get a wash there, and could rejoin her chums before another minute was out.

So she was thinking; but matters did not go off as smoothly as that.

Just as she darted through the open doorway someone in the dormitory turned on a light.

"Girl, come here! What—how—who is it? Your face, girl!"

"Yes, Miss Massingham—"

"It looks like a nightmare. It looks—"
The mistress could not find language in which to do justice to that letter-scut mouth and the red nose. She gestured wildly.

"Tell me! Explain! What extraordinary impulse has made you paint your face like that?"

"Please, Miss Massingham, I—I didn't do it myself."

"Then who did it?"

But Bluebell had no answer to that question. It was a first principle of the Fourth Form chums that under no circumstances must they ever get the enemy into trouble with the authorities.

It was at this terribly awkward moment for the Fifth Form's victim that Betty and the others appeared in the doorway. They had heard an outcry from the dormitory, and with sinking hearts they had guessed that their hapless chum was "out of the frying-pan into the fire!"

"You girls!" Miss Massingham said sternly. "See—see the ridiculous object Bluebell Courtney presents. Did you ever see a face like that?"

It was one of those questions that are not expected to be answered. But Paula, model of politeness, felt that something must be said.

"I quite agree, Miss Massingham, it is wather on the reverse side of attractive!"

That made Polly laugh. And when Polly laughed, the others, too, exploded.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence!" the mistress stormed, with pardonable heat. "The impudence of you, to treat a serious matter of this sort with ribald merriment. Paula—"

"I merely remarked, Miss Massingham, that I agreed with you. I—"

"Fifty lines, Paula, for impudence! Betty Barton, are these the antics that the Fourth Form is to waste its leisure time over, under your captaincy? For shame!"

She added bitterly:

"I am not forgetting that it was only last Saturday I had to gate you girls for a week, for being out after dark on an alleged picnic. You had better be careful, all of you!"

Then she swept away, and the chums were just about as glum as Bluebell herself was "Very well!" Polly said, as if she were thirsting for revenge. "All this goes down to our account against the Fifth!"

"And it won't be long, either, before we have a full reckoning!" Betty put in grimly. "But first of all—Elsie!"

Down they went, accordingly, as soon as Bluebell had restored her face to its usual comely appearance. Straight to Study No.

8 they went, to have things out with Elsie Harper.

She was there, and to look at her one would have said at once that she was the last girl in the world to lend herself to underhand work. Her study mate, Audrey Blain, was away from the den, and Elsie Harper presented an air of quiet industry as she sat at her books at the table.

"Elsie—"

So Betty burst out, with little of the restraint that she usually showed when roused.

"Only last Saturday, Elsie, we came in here to have a talk with you about your goings on!" Betty said bitterly. "We let you see that we thought it disgraceful—"

"Yes, wather! Downright discreditable, bai Jove—"

"That you, whilst a member of the Fourth Form," Betty panted on, "should act as a spy and ally for the Fifth!"

"I am no spy—"

"You are! It has been proved over and over again!" Polly now shouted. "You told your cousin, Violet Vane, the captain of the Fifth, that we were going to picnic at Big Tor. You were the means of our being caught out of bounds by Miss Massingham after the picnic. And this evening—"

"This evening," cried Tess, "you lent your aid to the Fifth to get Bluebell Courtney victimised!"

"Bai Jove, yes—"

"No!" protested Elsie Harper, standing erect by the table. "That is not true—"

"Not true!" echoed Madge. "You will admit that you brought Bluebell a message that made her leave her study?"

"Yes; I was told to tell her that Miss Redgrave might be wanting her."

"A mere ruse to entice Bluebell into the enemy's hands!" Polly rejoined contemptuously. "Who gave you the message, we would like to know?"

"I—I prefer not to say," Elsie answered, suddenly flushing; and then the girls tossed their heads scornfully.

"You can screen the enemy, whilst you don't hesitate to help them in their feud against us!" Betty commented disgustedly.

"Violet Vane is my cousin. She—"

"Oh, so it was Violet Vane who got you to pass on the message to Bluebell!" Polly laughed harshly. "Quite so. There's no more to say after that."

"Except this," Betty cried, taking a stride towards Elsie: "It was a bad day for the

Fourth Form when you got yourself put down from the Fifth—on purpose, as we know you did, so as to be a spy for your cousin and her cronies. We reckon to play the game in the Fourth—and that's what you aren't prepared to do, evidently!"

With a look of disgust for the wincing Elsie, the Fourth Form captain said: "Come away, girls!" and they all trooped out of the room, leaving her alone once more.

The door snicked shut, and for a minute or so Elsie Harper stood quite still, looking on the verge of tears. But they did not flow.

Instead, she suddenly changed her expression to one of fierce resolve, rushed from the room and along the passage to the stairs, and whirled down them to the Fifth Form quarters.

A moment, and she had burst into one study there, and was quivering from head to foot as she confronted her Cousin Violet in a strung-up way.

CHAPTER 16.

Her Enemy—This Girl!

"VIOLET!"

"Now, what's the matter?"

"The matter is this," Elsie panted, as she shut the study door behind her: "You have got me into deeper disgrace than ever with the Fourth Form this evening!"

There was a most provoking smile upon Violet Vane's handsome face as she answered:

"Have I? Well, I can't help that!"

"You don't care, I know!" Elsie exclaimed reproachfully. "It is even a delight to you to make my life a hard one. But it has got to stop, this cruel persecution. I can't—I won't endure it! Why should I?"

"There is my side to the question," Violet said, eyeing her cousin sullenly. "Why should I show any special favour towards you? If I did pretend to care for you, it would only be a sham. I prefer to be quite open and candid, and let you see that I not only do not like you; I—yes, I detest you!"

Elsie's anguished state of mind betrayed itself by another sharp wince that her white face gave.

"You detest me, Violet—yes, you have never been slow to tell me that. We cannot always help our feelings, our likes and dislikes, I know. And so it is not for me

to complain, I suppose, because you bear me ill-will."

"You are complaining now, aren't you? Why are you here—?"

"To protest against your ruining me more and more in the eyes of the Form!" Elsie flashed back spiritedly. "That is a different matter altogether. You dislike me; that does not entitle you to persecute me—as you have been doing all along!"

"Oh, dry up!" Violet answered that just reproach sulkily. "Look here, Elsie; you had better go back to your own quarters. When you were in the Fifth Form, sharing this den with me, we only squabbled all the time. Now you are put down in the Fourth, I am hoping for a little peace and quietness!"

It was fine to see how Elsie, on the point of voicing some hot rejoinder, held herself in check until the gust of anger had left her.

"Violet," she said then, with sudden gentleness, "you are hitting a girl who cannot, dare not, hit back. Don't you realise that, and how mean and cruel it is? I came to this school as a cousin of yours—a penniless orphan cousin who had been adopted by your own dear mother. You and I—we were to pull together. On the day we left home it was your mother's last earnest word to us—"

"Oh, I know—"

"Every letter from her since then, Violet; it has always had the same entreaty! She, who lies day and night upon an invalid's bed of pain—she trusts us to pull together—to help each other. And instead— Oh, Violet, what would happen if your mother knew the true position?"

"I suppose," Violet answered with that sulky smile of hers, "mother would see what a silly she was to have taken you up and made you equal with me. I knew it wouldn't answer, trying to make a little lady out of you!"

"This will happen, if your mother ever knows," Elsie pursued, ignoring the cheap sneer; "the bitterness between us will tell upon your mother, in her present state of ill-health. It—it's painful for me to have to say so, Violet, but your mother—"

"Well?"

"She has a hope she is building on. You, her only child, have not done all you could to make her happy. She forgives you, loves you just as much still, although you have fallen short of expectations. And she

was kind enough to believe that I—I could

"You could make a model girl of me altogether; yes, I know!" sneered Violet. "You are the pattern I'm to copy. That's why you came to school with me. But I don't care; I prefer to do as I—"

"Violet, don't say it—oh, don't!" Elsie implored half tearfully. "To me it is as if you are without a true daughter's feelings when you talk like that. Think, if your mother should ever find out—"

"I am not a bit afraid of my mother knowing how things are with both of us here at Morcove School," Violet struck in coldly. "I am captain of my Form; not in bad favour with anyone who counts. It's you who are in disgrace. You've been put down—"

"Your doing that was!" Elsie was stung into saying.

Violet sniggered.

"I'd like to see you prove it, Elsie. Anyhow, you've been put down, and in the Fourth you are making no friends at all."

"Because you've led Betty and the rest to believe that I am your own spy in their midst."

"Do let me finish what I have to say, then go!" Violet blustered. "If my mother hears about all this she can only think one thing. That you are not the pattern girl that she thought you to be, and that I'm not such a hopeless case, not so much in need of an example to copy after all."

Even as she wound up in that triumphant way Violet switched to the door and threw it open, thus as good as ordering her cousin to be gone. But Elsie hung back, pale and tremulous—almost hysterical with the emotions that raged within her troubled breast. And all at once somebody passing the open door halted there.

It was Dora Dean, the cynic of the Fifth Form.

"Is this for me?" she asked, with her dry smile, nodding at the open door. "How nice to find one's own Form captain throwing wide the portals, so to speak, to welcome one."

"You go away!" sapped Violet. She had no liking for Dora and her cynicisms.

"Ah, then," smiled Dora, quite unruffled, "it means that I have merely interrupted a loving parting between the cousins! How affecting! Elsie, how could you be so cruel to your loving cousin as to go away from her into the Fourth Form?"

Elsie did not answer. At the same time she showed none of the fury that her Cousin Violet was displaying towards the cynical girl. Elsie had sometimes felt that the Fifth Form was all the better for having Dora Dean in their midst. It was Dora's caustic tongue that often succeeded in making the Fifth Form half ashamed of the poor part they were playing in the school. That is not to say, however, that Dora confined her ironical remarks to the girls whose Form she was in.

"Well, Elsie," she said genially, as the girl who had been "put down" came away from her cousin's study, "how are you going along? Made any friends yet. Not? Dear me! And you such a prodigy!"

After which, it may seem a strange thing to record—but it really happened—Dora Dean said, quite feelingly to herself as she slammed shut her study door:

"Poor Elsie! What a time she is having from one and another! What a cat that cousin of hers is. And what a sweet creature I am to twit Elsie as I do!"

Meanwhile Elsie was going almost blindly away from the Fifth Form quarters utterly sick at heart at the failure of her appeal to Violet, when a door she was passing suddenly opened, revealing two girls.

They were coming away from that study laughing and talking together; but at sight of Elsie one of them gave an exultant cry.

"A Fourth-Former in our camp! Oh, what a capture!"

It was Millie Haggood who voiced the gleeful words. At the same instant she made a rush at Elsie, caught her about the shoulders, and tried to drag her into the study.

"Be quiet—let me go!" Elsie said fiercely.

"I am not in the mood for—"

"We are, aren't we, Ruby?" Millie chuckled at her crosny. "Quick! In with her!"

And the next instant Elsie was at their mercy behind a locked door!

CHAPTER 17.

At Their Mercy.

"H A, ha, ha! How lovely!"

"Beautiful!" Ruby Maydew agreed, sharing Millie Haggood's merriment over their smart capture. "If Fourth Form kids will trespass they must be prosecuted."

"Why, of course! Any Fourth-Former is fair game."

"She used to be in the Fifth, it's true," said Ruby, "and she is Violet's own cousin. Still, will Violet mind?"

"Ask her!" grinned Millie, knowing full well the ill-will that the Form captain bore Elsie. "She may like to come along and see some fun."

"It's all serene?" Ruby came rushing back from the Form captain's study to announce. "We can do as we like with her."

"Oh!" chuckled Millie. "Do you hear that, you kid? Dear Cousin Violet washes her hands of you. He, he, he! On the knee then—on the knee to me and Ruby, sharp!"

"What do you mean?" Elsie gasped indignantly. "What nonsense—"

"No nonsense at all!" struck in Ruby. "It is the Fifth Form's intention to humble the pride of the Fourth. Every Fourth Form girl captured by us from now onwards has got to down on her knees and say she's sorry."

"Sorry—what for?"

"Oh, for having challenged the superior might of the Fifth, of course!" laughed Millie. "So, start away, my dear!"

Still Elsie did not move, and all at once Millie's self-control was gone. She and Ruby alike, they were glad Elsie was refusing to obey; they were glad there was going to be a chance to make her obey.

"You won't, is that it?"

"No, I won't!"

"Down on your knees!" Millie said, taking hold of Elsie again and shaking her. "Get down, I say, and—"

"Let me go! You dare—"

"Ruby, help me to tame this wild cat of the Fourth!" Millie appealed to her crony. "That's right; hold her fast—now!"

Smack!

That was Elsie's hand smiting Ruby upon the left cheek. Ruby gave a shrill "Oh, the monkey!" and Millie was just as much infuriated as if she had been slapped. Both girls simply hurled themselves upon the captive, and when her feet were hooked from under her she went down upon the carpet thump!

Millie and Ruby, on the contrary, quite enjoyed the scrimmage. Still more they enjoyed their victim's almost tearful indignation. They rolled her about, pulled her

this way and that, and finally when she was reduced to a gasping state of helplessness they grabbed cushions from the chairs and belaboured her with them.

Then, all at once, they heard the door being rapped, and they became very still, feeling scared.

"Who's that?" called out Millie at last.

"Only me—Violet!" came the answer.

"Is Elsie there?"

"Yes; do you want to see her? She's a pretty sight!" Millie began to chuckle again as she turned back the key and admitted Violet. "Get up, Elsie, and say how d'you do to your cousin!"

Elsie was already scrambling to her feet, panting for breath, whilst she mopped her tumbled hair to rights. Violet was right inside the room by now, and suddenly she laughed—laughed in sheer malicious enjoyment of her cousin's distressed state.

It was a dramatic moment. In Elsie's flaming face there was a look which said: "How can you, the Form captain, allow your friends to go on like this?" And in Violet's harsh laugh there was the answer: "I can, because it is a joy to me to see you suffer! You, the girl I would have got expelled from the school if it had been possible."

Ruby made a chuckling suggestion.

"Shall we guy her up like we did Bluebell Courtney only a little while ago? Then turn her adrift, eh?"

"No," said Violet. "That would be to let the Fourth Form know that she has been treated as one of them. We want them to go on thinking she is hand in glove with us—our own spy!"

Elsie bit her underlip. Once again she felt that she simply must have the whole situation disclosed to Betty and the others. Once again, however, she was held in check.

"No, impossible!" was her anguished thought. Let her remember that good woman, her aunt and Violet's mother, upon her bed of pain at home. Let her remember that any disclosure as to the state of strife that existed at the school would be a cruel blow to her, and that if once it was known in the school it was bound somehow to reach home.

The three Fifth Form girls were standing away from the study door. Elsie, without a word, went to it and passed out quietly. No use looking to Violet for any cessation of the persecution. Hopeless to bring it

to an end by confiding in others. But oh, it was hard—it was hard!

Just as she was clear of the Fifth Form corridor both Millie and Ruby called after her:

"See you again soon, Elsie! Ta-ta!"

It was not a mocking cry, but one voiced in friendly fashion. And as such it was heard by Betty and Polly, who happened to be going up the stairs. They exchanged glances, and then, by a mutual impulse, they waited for Elsie to overtake them.

"So you have been visiting the Fifth Form!" Polly exclaimed bitterly. "Not your cousin—that we could understand and make allowances for. But Ruby and Millie—two of the Fourth Form's worst opponents!"

"They are no friends of mine!" Elsie protested desperately.

"When we heard them calling after you like that! Bah!" was Betty's scornful rejoinder. "What an impostor you are, Elsie Harper!"

Again the wince of pain in Elsie's white face. Impostor! That was the name for her now. Informer—spy—impostor! So it was going on; and she—what could she say to vindicate herself? Not one word—she dare not!

She feil behind Betty and Polly as they ascended the stairs. All the way to the Fourth Form studies they never once took any more notice of her. How they despised her, shunned her, and what wonder! was poor Elsie's agonised thoughts.

So, a few moments later, she dejectedly entered the study which she shared with Audrey Blain, and instantly there was yet another indignity for the friendless girl to suffer.

Audrey was there ready with an aloof look and a haughty tone.

"Are you coming in to stay in?"

"Yes, at least—"

"Oh, all right, I can easily go out. I've got friends if you haven't!" Audrey sneered.

She mimed to the door, then suddenly came back, turned a key in the table drawer, and pocketed it.

"I only keep a few stamps there," she laughed unpleasantly, "but I should be sorry to put even that temptation in the way of a penniless orphan!"

Then she was gone, and Elsie was free to sink down in a chair on her side of the

table, and take her weary head between her hands.

Informer—spy—impostor—a possible thief! Was not the burden of her position becoming more than she could bear?

And yet—no; not whilst she had only to put her hand in her dress pocket, as she now did, to take out a letter from her aunt, the very latest that had come. Not whilst one's tear-blinded eyes could read that letter yet once again, lingering for a long while, as they always did, upon those words:

"Whatever you do for your cousin, Elsie, dear, is done for me as well. Bear with Violet's faults and failings. Let us hear only good news of your progress as a friend she has found the worth of at last, and so you will more than repay whatever has been done for you by your loving,

"AUNTIE."

By-and-by the letter was folded up and put away again, but until call-over bell was dinning through the school-house Elsie Harper sat alone in that study, and her one thought was:

"For auntie's sake it is the least I can do, in return for all her loving care for me!"

CHAPTER 18.

The Interrupted Rag!

THE chums of the Fourth Form did not forget what Bluebell Courtney had suffered at the hands of the enemy.

It was an agreed thing amongst Betty & Co. that "reparations" must be exacted. Some almost solemn debates were held in Study 12, and various novel schemes were propounded. But there were objections to all of them on the score of their being not quite fair play, and the result was that before anything had been done the enemy had struck again.

On Wednesday morning Paula Creel came down to her study, to find that it had been "ragged" during the night.

Then Betty & Co. knew exactly what to do.

Of course, they decided, they must have a counter "rag." And it should be the Fifth Form captain's den that should be turned topsy-turvy,

This time, the chums flattered themselves, there would be no chance for Elsie Harper to give timely information to the Fifth Form captain, whose spy they deemed her to be. The girls had to beg and implore Paula Creel to be very careful, for amiable Paula had a way of blurring out secrets without realising what a disastrous thing she was doing.

But Paula declared that she would be "extwa careful, bai Jove! Yes, wather!" And so far as Betty, Polly, and the others could judge, the secret was still a secret by two o'clock in the afternoon.

For Violet Vane and some of her cronies went off for a ramble, and it was known that they were going to return for a high tea in her study at four-thirty. Evidently, then, they had not the least suspicion that their study was to be "ragged."

At half-past three, all was just right for a start to be made.

The whole school had been enticed out of doors by the sunny afternoon, and Betty & Co. seemed to be the only girls who had returned thus early.

So, at three-thirty-five, a strange procession set forth from Study 12, proceeding at anything but a funeral pace down to the enemy's quarters.

Betty went first as a scout. Behind her came Polly and Madge, helping along a most appalling sort of guy. Its lack of a backbone gave a comical lolling appearance to a figure that was dressed in all the colours of the rainbow. Those large, mildeewy boots trailed along the floor, the straw legs being particularly lifeless.

At one moment the guy's head, consisting of the top end of the bolster, lolled forward; at another moment it lolled back, and then the staring eyes looked up into Polly's, as much as to say:

"What are you up to now? Who am I supposed to be?"

With much suppressed tittering the girls got to Violet Vane's study without a hitch, and there, for the present, the dummy was unfeelingly dumped on a chair.

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Polly. "It reminds me of you, Paula, dear, taking a rest after a hockey match."

"My deah Polly—"

"The way those straw arms hang down—"

"Haow fwivolous you are, Polly—at such a serious time, too!" Paula reproved the

madcap. "Pway wealise wheah you are, Polly!"

Polly realised that right enough.

"In the enemy's camp! Hurrah!" she exulted softly. "Their very G.H.Q.—the Form captain's den! It is a solemn thought."

"It is a pretty study," rejoined Madge. "It won't be pretty when we've finished with it!" chuckled Tess.

And it certainly was not!

Closing the door, there and then the chums of the Fourth Form set about their "counter-rag." Pictures were slung face towards the wall; ornaments were taken from the mantelpiece and put in the coal-box.

The table-cover was made to drape the mantelpiece. The table itself was stood upside down, with chairs to match.

In doing this, the chums were only getting "reparations" for what had been done to Paula's study. But there was also a "bit owing" on account of the enemy's heartless joke with Bluebell. Now was the time to have a reckoning for that item also!

Hence the guy.

Violet was known to be particularly sensitive to any reflection on her personal appearance. She was, in fact, a vain girl, and some of her experiences in frills and fripperies were not often in the best of taste. So it had seemed good to Betty & Co. to let Violet be confronted with an alleged effigy of herself when she should return to her topsy-turvy study.

Having done just about all they could to turn the place upside down, the girls bestowed proud attention upon the dummy once again. Polly hauled the smirking figure out of the chair, and proposed getting it to stand up in a corner opposite the door.

"And just to make Violet understand who it is supposed to be, we'll placard it!" the madcap suggested gleefully. "I know!"

"'The Belle of the Fifth!'" laughed Madge.

"Oui, oui! Yes, yes!" applauded Trixie. "C'est bon!" And she clapped her hands, quite in the excitable French way.

"Bai Jove, how wipping!" beamed Paula.

They all knew that Violet Vane fancied herself to be "the belle of the Fifth Form." Rummaging out a large sheet of foolscap, Polly lost no time in hand-printing the

placard in huge letters. The wording took a minute or so to dry, but after that it was the work of an instant to tie the placard apron-wise round the dummy's waist:

"THE BELLE OF THE FIFTH FORM.

"AT HOME ALWAYS TO SPIES
AND SNEAKS!"

"How perfectly delightful!" drawled Paula. "Weally, it's dwell to the extweme! Yes, wather!"

Polly had to kneel down to give an extra-comical twist to one big boot. She was just jumping away to admire this effect when there came a rush of light feet along the corridor.

"Hark!"

"Oh!"

But Betty, almost before those startled exclamations had been voiced, was across to the door and locking it.

Not an instant too soon, either.

The outer handle of the door was tried, and then Violet Vane could be heard saying savagely to some cronies of hers:

"Locked! But we've caught them, anyhow!"

Polly at once whispered to her chums:

"Did you hear? Violet is not a bit surprised at our being here. She and her cronies have come rushing back to catch us."

"Then they must have known, after all!"

There was no chance for further talk. The door shivered as at least two of the Fifth Form girls must have flung their full weight against it, trying to force the lock. But it held, and the chums heard Millie Maydew suggesting a hammer and chisel.

"They'll get in somehow," said Tess, grinning.

"Let them!" Polly remarked scornfully. "When they come in, we shall go out! There may be a scrap—"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove! Geals, I wather fancy there is going to be twoble," Paula said unasily. "It is vewy wegwttable that—"

"It's great!" chuckled Polly. "And, anyhow, how did the secret leak out if you didn't go gassing to girls who were not to be told?"

"My deah Polly—"

"Are you really sure you didn't tell anyone?" asked Madge.

"Geals, I never bweathed a word!" Paula declared. "All I did was to make a passing wemark to Audrey Blain that mine wasn't the only study that would be wagged by the end of the day."

"She said that to Audrey, who shares Elsie Harper's study!" Polly exclaimed, in horror. "No wonder Violet Vane had warning! Audrey wouldn't tell the Fifth—"

"But she may easily have made a remark to Elsie."

"And Elsie is the spy, we know! Oh!" Polly fumed. "How I hope that Elsie leaves at the end of term! She—"

Bang! came the first blow of hammer and chisel at this instant. Bang! bang! bang!

Snap! went the hasp of the lock; the door flew open, crashing round against the wall, and then into the ragged study tumbled Violet Vane, Millie Hapgood, Ruby Maydew, and several other girls.

"Hold them—seize them!" Violet cried out fiercely.

"If you can!" retorted Betty.

And next moment a battle royal was raging in the den!

CHAPTER 19.

What Does This Mean?

IN numbers, the rival factions were evenly matched. But the Fifth Form girls were, of course, rather older and bigger than the chums of the Fourth.

The wonder was, then, that another minute did not find Betty & Co. utterly vanquished—utterly at the mercy of the merciless foe!

What the Fourth Form girls lacked in size and strength, however, they made up for in spirit!

Even Paula Creel, famous for her languid ways, was "thowoughly woused, bai Jove!" It was Paula who achieved the honour of sending Millie Hapgood all asprawl on the floor, after a desperate tussle. As for Betty, Polly, and Madge—that they more than held their own goes without saying.

Violet and her cronies were spluttering and hissing with fury; but they were a laughing batch of Fourth Form girls who at last fought their way out of the study, slamming the door behind them.

At that moment, most of the Fifth Form belligerents were sprawling about the floor,

amongst overturned tables and chairs. They were only just starting to pick themselves up when the door opened again, disclosing Dora Dean.

"Aha——"
"You get on!" raved Violet. The sight of Dora, with her cynical smile, was quite the last straw.

"I must pause, my friends, to admire the taste and elegance of this tout ensemble," Dora said sweetly. "And what do I behold over there in the corner? Surely, a likeness—a speaking likeness—of our worthy captain!"

"Don't you be——"

"In the presence of Art, I would not wish to be anything but respectful," said Dora. "That is a great work. With what consummate skill have the makers of that effigy created the peculiar grace with which our worthy captain is endowed."

"Oh!" stormed Violet. She did not know whether to rush at Dora or the dummy. The one was as exasperating as the other!

"The Belle of the Fifth Form"—quite so. And it is discreetly left to our own judgment to observe that it is a cracked bell. My dear Violet——"

Dora got no further. In an enraged manner, Violet rushed to the corner, grabbed hold of the flabby dummy, and simply hurled it at the cynic.

"Get out, and take the wretched thing with you!" yelled Violet.

"But what have I done to deserve such an honour?" Dora blandly asked, promptly taking up the dummy to "escort" it from the room. "What will the other girls say when they see me taking in our worthy captain to tea in my study?"

She went out, with the dummy tucked under her right arm, and although Violet slammed the door, that girl and her cronies were bound to hear the merriment which Dora caused outside.

"Make way, please," Dora gravely entreated the amazed girls who chanced to be coming along the passage to their various studies. "I have the privilege of receiving a notable personage for company in my study."

"Gracious, Dora, whatever next——"

"It is true, wonders will never cease! You observe; 'the Belle of the Fifth!' In other words, our worthy captain, to the life. She shall sit opposite me during tea, and

when I gaze at her entrancing visage——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I shall try to believe that it is Violet herself who is my handsomest guest!" Dora wound up, soberly carting the awful dummy into her den.

Meanwhile, in Violet's study, the girls there were looking as furious as ever. The state of the study did not surprise them. Audrey Blain had whispered them, at dinner-time, that it was almost certain their Form captain's den was to be "ragged." What angered the girls was the fact that Betty & Co., after being caught in the act, had made good their escape!

And the measure of the Fifth-Formers' fury was, of course, the measure of the Fourth-Formers' jubilation.

Tea in Study No. 12, that afternoon, was one uproar of rejoicing! That they had exacted "reparations," with interest, the whole school knew by now.

"'Twas a famous victory,' and no mistake," Polly could not help remarking gleefully, at the end of a full half-hour's gossip and laughter over the teacups.

Paula gravitated towards her favourite armchair, and flopped down, bleating with merriment.

"Bai Jove, a most brilliant success; twuly gwent!" she chuckled. "It leaves me pwcstwate with laughing, goals. The Fifth Form must now realise that we have the wight to crow—yes, wather! We——"

"Hark! A tap at the door, was that?" Betty exclaimed. There was so much merriment in the study she could not be sure. She was stepping across to investigate, when the door opened and there stood—Violet Vane!

"White flag," she said, with a mirthless smile. "A parlay——"

"Oh, certainly! Come in," Betty at once assented, with due regard for the rules of warfare.

"Is it playing the game," Violet demanded, "to make the ragging of my study an opportunity for looting it?"

"What!" came in a great chorus of indignation from Betty & Co.

"Bai Jove——"

"You not only turned the place upside down. You stole——"

"Violet, how dare you!"

"I can prove it. All my friends know that I had a gold wrist-watch in the table-drawer. It was one I meant to take into

Barncombe to get cleaned, but I have kept on forgetting."

"We have not touched the watch," Betty declared hotly. "We ragged the study, just as you ragged Paula's. But as for looting—"

"One of you has that gold watch of mine," Violet insisted, backing out of the room, "and unless it is returned within an hour I shall report it as a theft!"

It was her last word to the chums. She pulled the door shut violently, and they heard her march away, whilst they stood and looked at one another in a horrified manner.

CHAPTER 20.

"Thief! Thief!"

"FOR her to accuse us of looting!" Betty said huskily at last. "Oh—"
 "Too bad," exclaimed Madge.
 "Just as if we would do anything so despicable!"

"Bai Jove, geals, it's sewious, what? A downright wfelection on our honour, bai Jove!"

"Is it a trick?" suspected Polly excitedly. "Because they can't beat us fairly, have Violet and her cronies— And yet, no! Surely no Morcove girls would ever fall back upon such a base scheme!"

"It is an ugly business—very," Betty frowned. "Violet spoke in a way that left no doubt about one thing; there was a gold watch, and it is gone!"

"She has no right to accuse us of taking it," insisted Tess. "She—"

"Hark! My gracious, some girl in one of the studies has had a smash!" Polly suddenly exclaimed, after hearing the splintering crash of breaking china. "Hard luck!"

It was like Polly to rush off at once to make inquiries, and even the other girls, although they were so worried about the missing watch, followed the madcap out of the room. It was no ordinary smash that they had heard, or they would not have given heed to it.

In the corridor they found other members of the Form appearing at doors which had been whipped open when the crash occurred. Everybody was mirthfully asking what all the noise was about.

Then matters turned serious. All the

girls heard a sudden clash of voices in Study No. 8. Audrey Blain and Elsie were having a big flare-up. For a few moments the two girls seemed to be trying to shout each other down; then that study door was whirled open by Audrey.

"Girls!" she appealed to them all in a tone of passionate indignation. "There is something here that requires explanation. I knocked one of my own beautiful Chinese jars off the mantelshelf by accident—and amongst the fragments I found this watch!"

"The watch!" gasped Betty and Polly together.

"Yes, wather!"

"The watch! What do you mean? You recognise it, then?" Audrey asked sharply. "Whose watch? That's what I want to know! Elsie Harper must have hidden it in that vase; yet when I asked her how it came to be there she couldn't say!"

"I didn't—oh, I didn't put it there!" Elsie came to the doorway to protest vehemently.

"You went red and white when I questioned you," Audrey said sternly. "That's what started my suspicions. Whose watch is it, since Elsie won't say?"

"Mine—mine!" answered one voice in the crowd about the doorway; and there was Violet Vane, pushing her way to the front.

"Yes, that's the watch—"

"The one you accused us of looting from your den!" Betty burst out fiercely. "So you see, Violet—"

"I'm sorry; I do appear to owe you an apology," Violet said, with becoming humility. "It was stolen, right enough, only—not by any of you, evidently!"

"By this girl, is that it?" Audrey said, turning a withering look upon Elsie. "Your own cousin—well!"

"Violet, I didn't, I didn't!" was all poor Elsie could cry out in a heartbroken tone. "Oh, Violet, I am not going to put up with this. I simply cannot. I—"

"Let us get the right hang of it all," Audrey cut in sharply, whilst the whole crowd seethed with excitement. "I suppose, Violet, your Cousin Elsie knew you had the watch?"

"Oh, yes! It was in the drawer, even before she cleared out of my study, because she was going into the Fourth," Violet answered. "It was taken away this afternoon; that I can prove. I suspected Betty

and the rest of looting it for a kind of a jape—"

"And you were wrong!" sang out Polly.

"I have apologised," Violet retorted curtly. "So I think you might be quiet."

"Had you told your Cousin Elsie to take the watch, if she is going into Barncombe, to get it mended?" was Betty's question. That Elsie had stooped to actual theft seemed an incredible thing!

"No, I had not!" answered Violet. "Still, I suppose Elsie can explain."

"Can you?" Audrey asked the agonised girl. "You couldn't explain just now—only shout at me that you were not a thief, and that it was a plot."

"So it is a plot!" Elsie protested, bursting into tears. "You—you and—oh, I don't want to say it! What shall I do—what shall I do?" she sobbed wildly.

In the sudden pause that followed that piteous outcry Madge pulled Betty by the sleeve.

"Betty," Madge whispered, "is that girl a thief? Would she rob her own cousin? Does it look as if she is as bad as that?"

Betty, with her eyes upon the sobbing girl, answered through tight lips:

"It is extraordinary, Madge. There's a lot I don't understand."

Audrey's haughty voice was heard again.

"You girls may think it a trifling matter for a scholar to be found hiding other people's missing property in her study. Personally, I have a great objection to being housed with a thief—made to share her study!"

"It is not very nice for me," Violet rejoined bitterly, "to have my own cousin figuring in this light. But it wasn't thieving. I'd rather you girls understood that Elsie, being my cousin, may have felt that—well, what was mine was hers."

"That's a way she has, perhaps!" Audrey sucked. And who, hearing her and Violet in talk like this, could imagine that they had hatched this plot between them? Was it likely that Betty & Co., or any of the others, could suspect that Audrey, by arrangement with Violet, had brought away the watch from the Fifth Form study, hidden it in the vase, and then deliberately smashed the vase "by accident."

No, Elsie alone could suspect, and did suspect, such a thing to have been planned. Only too well she realised how Violet and Audrey were helping each other. Audrey

wanted to get the study to herself again, not to have a "pauper orphan" sharing the lavishly furnished den. As for Violet, had she not declared that she would never be quite happy until Elsie was expelled?

But how—how disclose all this to the other girls, and prove it, too, without bringing about Violet's own downfall? It was the old, old perplexity for poor Elsie, and she was in greater distress than ever when Violet resumed.

"We had better leave it at that, girls. In justice to my cousin I may as well say that she has done me certain—favours—that perhaps made her feel entitled to a self-bestowed reward!"

The speaker was turning to go, but Betty checked her.

"One moment! Favours, you say. Do you mean the spying that your Cousin Elsie has done for you, as we know she has?"

"You must form your own conclusions; I have no wish to stay talking with you," was Violet's adroit answer.

She pushed past the number of girls who, for the time being, had forgotten that she was really the leader of the enemy faction, and she went unhindered back to her own quarters. Outside Audrey's study the crowd still lingered, with Elsie the object of their unfavouring stares.

"Well," Audrey broke out at last, with a grimace of displeasure: "I must say I think Violet Vane has behaved pretty decently, trying to gloss things over like that."

"It's her own cousin; she could hardly do less," Betty exclaimed sharply. "Elsie! The matter can't be left like this. Whether Violet is your cousin or not that doesn't entitle you to take—"

"I took nothing, I tell you!" the victim of the cunning plot protested vehemently. "You are not going to believe me, is that it?"

"How can they believe you—absurd to ask the question!" Audrey said, shrugging. "Unless they imagine that I took the watch. And even Betty Barton and her chums hardly think as badly of me as that. I have my own wrist watch, anyhow—one quite good enough for me," she laughed, giving a turn of the hand to display the really costly watch that she was wearing even then.

She moved back into her study, and

when Elsie would have done the same she cried out angrily:

"Don't come in here! I want a proper explanation before I have you in here again, and I am quite prepared to tell the headmistress so!"

Then Elsie, her face deathly pale, checked and turned back. The girls in the passage scattered as if to avoid coming in contact with her. They did not want to display such aversion, but their shocked feelings got the better of them.

"Elsie!"

That was Betty, suddenly turning about as she was going with her chums towards Study 12.

"If you care to, Elsie, you can come to Study 12 and say the best you can for yourself. We give you that chance—will you?"

"I— Oh, I must think—try to decide!" was the accused girl's husky answer. "I don't know what to do—I simply don't!" She dragged off in the other direction, and the other girls stood watching her until she was out of sight.

CHAPTER 21.

The Burden Must Be Borne.

AT that moment in the privacy of her own room the headmistress of Morcove School was tearing open a telegram. The moment she had scanned the message she touched a bell for one of the maids.

"Find Violet Vane for me, will you, please, and also Elsie Harper," was the request that sent the comely servant hastening away.

Two or three minutes elapsed, and during that interval of waiting Miss Somerfield gave more than one pained glance to the telegram, as if her ready sympathy had been deeply stirred.

Then the two scholars came in; the very two who should have been linked together by ties of cousinly love, and yet they were the very two who were set so far apart now.

"Ah, Violet—Elsie!" the headmistress greeted them gently. "I am sorry to say there is rather bad news from home. You will have to catch the first possible train, for this telegram asks me to let you go at once."

It was Elsie who, pale enough when she first appeared before the headmistress, turned whiter than ever. Violet was less agitated.

"Your dear mother, Violet, has had one of her bad attacks, and this time it appears to be a crisis."

"You mean, auntie may—may not live?" Elsie said in great distress. "That is why we are sent for."

"Let us hope and pray, my dear girls," was the fervent answer, "that all will yet be well. The message says she is asking for both of you. It may be that your very presence at her bedside will do much to revive her."

"Ah, yes!" Elsie exclaimed. "Violet—oh, Violet dear, when things are like this—"

"We must get home as quickly as possible, that's certain," Violet put in. She had to say something to check Elsie's impulsive talk, for she felt that the girl was going to end up by crying out: "Can't we pull together now?" And Violet did not want Miss Somerfield to know how the girl had been more than kept at arm's length.

"There is just one thing before you run away and prepare for the journey," Miss Somerfield said, attending them to the door. "Elsie, it was my painful duty to have you put down into the Fourth Form some days ago. Your aunt does not yet know about your reduction, and in the circumstances we are entitled to keep her in ignorance. It would only distress her."

"I know," poor Elsie assented sadly. "Auntie is so—"

"The monthly report has not gone off; it will be kept back," Miss Somerfield said. "So neither of you need say anything when you get home. And Elsie, I shall hope that when you return with Violet—bringing back only the best news of the sufferer—you will work hard and do your best to get back into Violet's form."

Her hand was on Elsie's shoulder as she said that. She bestowed an affectionate pat upon both girls, and set them off with a smile that bade them keep their hearts up, perhaps thinking it was haste to get packed for the journey that caused them to separate the instant they were outside the room.

The news that they were off home by the train that left Morcove Road Station in an

hour's time reached the scholars in general through Violet. She told a few cronies, who told others. As for Elsie, where were the friends that she had? There were none, she realised, whilst she was packing a small bag for the journey.

In the whole school there was not a scholar who was ready to say: "Elsie Harper is my friend." The name they had for her now was thief—thief!

And that name she must bear resignedly just as she had borne all the other epithets with which she had been stigmatised. Greater than ever this evening was the bar to any effort at self-vindication. For, if it had been out of the question to do or say anything that would prove her to be the victim of Violet's animosity, how utterly impossible it was now to declare that the supposed theft was a conspiracy between Violet and Audrey—a deliberate plot to involve her, Elsie, in deeper disgrace than ever.

No girl with such a conspiracy as that proved against her—and Elsie could prove it if she wished to, she was sure—would be allowed to stay at the school. In other words, to denounce Cousin Violet meant now not merely getting her severely censured, but expelled. That, too, at a time when the girl's own invalid mother was wavering between life and death.

Whilst Elsie was putting on her things for the journey she came upon the letter from her loving aunt. She did not need to read it again now. It had been superseded by the much more serious telegram.

That telegram! Thinking of it all the time, Elsie felt how thankful that she had had the courage to suffer in silence rather than complain. Not for nothing had she submitted to Cousin Violet's cruel persecution when she might have exposed it to the school. Supposing she had made a fight for herself, what happiness would any triumph have brought her when that was the state of things at home? No; the measure of her anguish was the measure of that invalid mother's peace of mind, and it was better so.

Swiftly the moment came when she and Violet together had to pass out to the waiting cab. Some of Violet's best friends mobbed about her saying sympathetic things up to the last, but Elsie, who belonged to the Fourth Form now, and it

was for members of that form to chum with her if they cared to.

With tear-dimmed eyes Elsie made her way through the school corridors towards the door. Just behind her came her cousin, Violet Vane, surrounded by her cronies, who, even under the present distressing circumstances, could not refrain from poking a jibe at the sorely distressed Elsie.

"Oh, dear, Violet, what a good thing Audrey Blain found your gold wristlet watch for you!" cried Millie Hapgood, loud enough to make quite sure her words were heard by Violet's cousin.

Violet laughed maliciously.

"Yes," she assented. "But it was only by accident—"

Millie Hapgood purposely misunderstood the captain of the Fifth's meaning.

"Accident? Do you really think that a gold wristlet watch could take wings and fly from your study into that of Audrey Blain's and hide itself in a Chinese vase—"

"Accidentally found, I meant to say," replied Violet, laughing mirthlessly.

"Oh!"

A spasm of pain shot across Elsie Harper's troubled face, but in no other way did she show that the bitter words had sorely bruised her heart.

And did none have a kind word for her, knowing the sort of errand that was taking her from the school?

Yes, there were a few girls at least who could sink all bitterness for the moment. Elsie had not got to the cab before she received a soft: "Good-bye, Elsie, we hope it will be all right," from Betty, Polly, Paula, Madge, and one or two others.

"Of course," said Ella Elgood, commenting on this, after the cab had bowled away, "we all feel sorry for her, the same as one would feel sorry for one's worst enemy. All the same, now she has gone I only hope she never comes back."

"Well," said Betty gently, "I don't know—"

"Neither do I," rejoined Polly.

And that night the talk in Study 12 was all of Elsie Harper and of how there was something about the girl that seemed to speak for her, although that ugly word "thief!" was the name they had been forced to find for her!

CHAPTER 22.

Ten Thousand Pounds.

"O H, this horrid dog of yours, Elsie! Shurr—get away! Get away from under my feet!"

And the girl who had spoken so viciously sent the little black spaniel yelping round the room, as she kicked out at him.

Elsie Harper laid aside the book she was reading and jumped to her feet, with the dog crouching and shivering about her in quest of sympathy. His sad eyes looked up into hers with a most pathetic expression, seeming to say:

"You won't hurt me, will you, my own dear mistress?"

As for the other girl, Violet Vano, she swished towards the door as if to quit the room in sullen silence; but suddenly she checked the impulse, and faced about.

"Are you still meaning to take the little nuisance back with you to Morcove School?" she asked.

"Yes, Violet. Now I wish I had had him with me all along—good little Rex!" Elsie said, going down upon her knees to stroke the sleek, black head and the dangling, glossy ears. "You darling!"

"Well," Violet said scornfully, opening the door to pass out, "all I can say is, I am gladder than ever that you are no longer in my study at Morcove. It was bad enough to have you to put up with. As for you and your dog—"

A slam of the door finished the remark; it would have been a much louder slam, too, only there was an invalid in the house—Violet's own widowed mother—and for several days those in and about the place had been as quiet as possible.

Such noise as Violet had made by her fits of passion she no doubt regretted instantly, for, whatever her faults and failings, she was not without a loving desire to see her mother make a quick recovery. As she walked away from that room in which she had flared up again at her Cousin Elsie, she must have been relieved to remember that the house was a very big one, and so nothing had been heard in the sick-room of either the dog's yelp of pain or the thud of the door.

"Rex darling—yes, I know, you are ever so happy because auntie is out of danger, now, aren't you?" Elsie murmured to the

dog, as he fawned before her, always answering her with his bright eyes. "And you want to go back with me to the school, don't you, doggie mine?"

Young Rex got up then, whirring his stumpy tail, ready enough to be off with the girl then and there.

Passionate attachment to his youthful mistress was in the dog's every look and action, and if there was an almost extravagant love for him on the part of Elsie Harper, there was a reason.

Ah, the sympathy and consolation that she had found in him during the critical days when auntie's life had been hanging on a thread! That terrible anxiety was all over now; but still, there was cause for making such a great friend of Rex.

Back at Morcove to-morrow, would he not be as much as ever a silent sympathiser, when there, at the great school, there was not a friend she had!

Not one!

The hard names her schoolfellows had for her—impostor, spy, thief—yes, even the cry of "Thief!" had been launched at her. But as for a friendly word, there had been none for many a day now, nor was there likely to be one.

At the time when she and her cousin alike were summoned home on account of the illness, feeling against her at the school had been at its bitterest. And to-morrow—to-morrow she was going back to it all, with how little hope of better days to come?

The door opened whilst the hapless girl was still kneeling upon the hearthrug, fondling her dear, dumb friend, and she stood up in slight embarrassment when she saw who it was had ended her solitude.

"All in the dark, young lady?" remarked the portly, professional-looking gentleman who was stepping quietly into the room. It was not quite as dark as his playful words suggested, but the rainy evening was closing in early, and only a sombre twilight lingered here.

This was Mr. Merriman, the invalid lady's lawyer. He, also, had been summoned to her side, when her condition was so critical, for she was very wealthy, and his presence was imperative.

"Shall I be in your way here, sir?" Elsie asked, with that pretty shyness which, though she little knew it, had pleased him

all along. "If you wish to write any letters, I can—"

"No—oh, no," he assured her blandly. "But I tell you what, my dear; I did want to have a little talk with you. Going back to school in the morning, aren't you?" he pursued, finding a seat for himself.

"Yes, sir, with Cousin Violet—"

"Quite, quite," he nodded. "And I, for my part, return to London, glad that my errand down here has ended so happily for us all, after all. Your dear aunt—ah, Elsie child, what a loss we would have had to mourn if things had gone differently!"

"I—I like to hear you talk so feelingly of auntie, sir," Elsie could not help exclaiming. Her own eyes were ashine with love for the one of whom the lawyer had spoken. "But then, sir, you have a kind word for everybody, I know. I shall never forget—"

"Thank you, my dear," he broke in genially. "Yes, I was the old buffer you stood in such awe of when you first came to my office as a poor little orphan, for your worthy aunt to arrange for your adoption. And we ended up by becoming great good friends—eh?"

He laughed comfortably.

"Of course, it's very amusing in a way," he said, "for an old buffer like myself to count himself amongst the host of friends that you have. I dare say, Elsie, you number them by the dozen at that fine school of yours!"

Elsie was glad that Rex was squatting close to her ankles so that she had an excuse for bending down and thus hiding her face from the gentleman. He saw her patting the dog, and beamed his approval, little knowing what a spasm of pain he had caused her.

Friends by the dozen, indeed!

"And now, to come to the point, my dear," he resumed quietly. "It need not upset you if I say that things were so bad with your dear aunt, when I first got here, her wishes in regards your future in the event of—of her not pulling through—had to be obtained. She is mending now, Elsie; all the same—"

He paused, whilst he stood up and laid a hand on either of the girl's shoulders, looking down into her pretty face with kind eyes.

"You will find, Elsie, that when you go to kiss your auntie good-bye, in the morn-

ing, she will have a word to say to you about your future."

"Oh, sir, am I to—leave school?" Elsie was going to ask, with quickened breathing; but he made haste to tell her just the contrary.

"Leave school. No, my dear," he smiled. "Your aunt, when she adopted you, always meant that you should have just as good an education as her own dear daughter. You will continue at Morcove until you have passed right through the school—with credit to yourself, as I trust will be the case. You are doing well at present—eh?"

Again she could not answer, and this time he thought her confused silence was merely due to becoming modesty.

"I am sure you are doing splendidly!" he declared heartily. "Your aunt has the same pride and confidence in you that I have, and she is going to tell you this, Elsie. If—"

The faintest sound over by the closed door made him glance in that direction. At the same instant Rex perked up, as if he, too, was curious to know what the sound meant. Elsie thought it might be a maid coming in to light up, but the door did not open.

"I'll just see," Mr. Merriman murmured, sauntering across to the door. "No—no one, so that's all right!"

But he was deceived.

Only an instant before there had been someone lurking outside the room door—Elsie's cousin, the youthful daughter of the house. Not only so; directly the lawyer shut the door and turned back to resume what was really a confidential talk, Violet Vane stole round from her hiding-place and resumed her listening at the keyhole!

Crouching there, in the dim-lit hall, she heard the lawyer's next words—words that made her catch her underlip between her teeth, whilst her face went paler than ever.

"Elsie," the lawyer was saying, "on condition that you do well at school, your aunt has arranged to bestow ten thousand pounds upon you, in trust, when your time comes to leave."

Ten thousand pounds!

Violet Vane was thinking what a fabulous sum it was, as she knelt with her ear to the keyhole.

She herself would be sure of being a

wealthy person in course of time, for she was her widowed mother's only child. All the same, ten thousand pounds sounded an astounding fortune for Elsie to be provided with—Elsie, the penniless orphan! As if enough had not been done for the girl when she was saved from the workhouse—ten thousand pounds!

"I am free to tell you of what is arranged for you," Mr. Merriman pursued, "because your aunt wants you to be encouraged by the thought of the great reward that good conduct will bring. Well, you are very silent about it all!"

"Oh, sir, I—of course, I feel it is wonderful kindness and generosity," Elsie stammered then. "Yet I feel, too, that I would almost rather not have been told. I—I—"

"Quite, my dear; you feel that it was up to you in any case, to do your best at the school, and so it was. But your aunt and benefactress wished you to be told; she will be asking you to-morrow morning if I have told you. Ten thousand pounds!" the lawyer repeated impressively.

"It is a large slice of your aunt's entire fortune, you know—a very large slice indeed to be coming to you, when it might have been all passed to your Cousin Violet some day! But there, you will deserve it, Elsie—we know you will!"

Outside the closed door, Violet's handsome face took on a fiercer scowl.

Movements inside the room warned her that the interview was at an end, and she sprang up quickly and darted away, dodging round into the deserted drawing-room.

"So I guessed, at the very start, it was going to be in the end!" she said to herself fiercely. "I knew—I knew she would be put more and more on a level with me! Ten thousand pounds! All very well, but—"

Only a schoolgirl though she was, she had that selfish, grasping nature which makes the mind utterly mercenary. It was perfectly true; from the very first hour of Elsie's adoption, Violet Vane had looked upon her as a rival in more ways than one. Indulging that rivalry, she had pursued a merciless vendetta against the girl. Was it a wonder, then, that resentment and jealousy were suddenly intensified by what the lawyer had just said?

"Ten thousand pounds! I hope she may get it!" Violet whispered, smiling sourly. "She won't if I can help it, that's certain!

After this—oh, when I am back at school with her, won't I lead her a life! The upstart minx!"

The lawyer's quiet footfall sounded across the hall. He entered one of the other rooms, and shut himself in there, and then Violet went with a moody step back to Elsie.

That girl was petting Rex again, as they shared the silence of the darkening room.

"You and Mr. Merriman have had a lot to say to each other!" Violet remarked sneeringly from the doorway.

"He hoped that I was going to do well at school, Violet—"

"And you didn't tell him, of course, that you've been already put down from my Form into the Fourth?"

"Violet, you know I dared not; you know that if it got to your mother's ears—"

"Nor that the Fourth Form shun you?" struck in the jealous girl gloatingly. "In fact, there's only one disgrace left for you to incur, and that's expulsion. You may come in for that yet, if you are not careful!"

Then the speaker stalked away, her animosity somehow gratified by the sneers and taunts she had voiced.

Elsie stood looking after her for an instant, and then in the deep silence of the gloomy room, she sighed hard and heavily.

"Rex, darling—"

She was kneeling again, suddenly to stroke the handsome head of her devoted dumb friend.

"You see how it is, Rex! Oh, doggie, darling, you'll have to be a help and comfort indeed, back there at Morcove, for I shall have only you!"

And Rex, with a black paw lifted on to the girl's knee, spoke with those eloquent eyes of his, saying: "I will, dear, I will!"

CHAPTER 23.

They Don't Want Elsie.

THE scene changes.

In an upper room of the Barncombe Tea-rooms, a dozen or more scholars belonging to Morcove School are taking tea. Incidentally, they are celebrating a great hockey victory over the rival school whose team they have been playing this Saturday afternoon.

If this were a play at the theatre, and

it was on such a scene as this that the curtain had suddenly risen, what a babel of tongues there would be to confuse the audience.

For all the girls seem to be talking at once, added to which there were frequent peals of laughter, and all the animation of a hungry tea-party—cups and saucers rattling back to be replenished by Betty Barton, who was pouring out for all; plates of cake and pastries, and cream buns going up and down the table in lively fashion.

"Now, your cup, Paula dear—Madge—Tess," invited the captain of the Form, as a froth brew was brought in by the waitress. "Polly darling, let me fill up yours, too! That must be almost cold!"

It was. Polly Linton, the madcap of the Form, had been chattering away so vivaciously she had hardly sipped her tea.

"After the others," cried Polly. "Paula darling—"

"Oh, thanks, bai Jove—thanks!" beamed Paula Creel, the elegant aristocrat of the Form. "I twust I am not gweedy. How-eh, my exewtions of this afternoon, bai Jove, have left me wemarkably thirsty."

"Hungry, too—"

"Weal, yes, wather—"

"Then try a doughnut!" suggested Polly, steering the plate quickly towards Paula—too quickly, alas! For a doughnut somehow shot off the plate and rolled off the table.

"Pick it up, Paula—pick it up," Polly said, with mock gravity, whilst the girls round the table laughed.

Paula gave one of her pathetic sighs. She hitched back her chair and made a graceful descent to her knees.

"Hooway!" she sang out at last. "Heah we aro, bai Jove!"

And next moment she came crawling forth, all smiles of triumph.

Unfortunately, elegant Paula caught hold of the tablecloth to help herself on to her feet. She pulled at it unthinkingly, and the next thing was that her own cup of tea went over the table's edge.

Then there was such a yelp from Paula!

"Heal! My gwacious!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Geals, I'm dwenched—drowned!"

"He, he, he! If you aren't the silliest duffer that ever was!" Polly chuckled.

"What did you want to do that for?"

"Do you weally imagine that I wanted to do it?" groaned Paula, appearing above the table in such a rumbled, splashed state

that perfect shrieks of laughter went up. "Look at me!"

"I do think, Paula, you ought to know how to behave!" said Polly, teasingly. "You don't see any of us getting under the table—"

"Polly deah—"

"And acting about so stupidly! And if you reckon to ride home with us looking like that—hair all over your eyes—"

"Will you dwop it!" wailed poor Paula frantically. "I wealise I am a weck! Weal, then, pway wefwain fwom aggwawating wemarks!"

There were several mirrors set round the tea-room walls. Paula turned to the nearest and began to restore her ruffled locks, whilst at the table talk switched back to the day's hockey match.

Presently Paula came back to her place at the festive board. With all the usual elegance, she drew in her chair behind her, and subsided into it with a sigh of relief.

So loud was the talk and laughter at that moment, the girls did not hear someone excitedly pounding up the stairs. It thus gave them all quite a start to see the door suddenly open and a member of their own Form burst in upon them with a breathless cry:

"I say, girls—"

"Hallo, Dolly! Room for you, yes—come on!" they exclaimed; whilst Betty, at the top of the table, instantly sought a spare cup and saucer.

"I say, they aro back," Dolly Delane rushed on, as if she knew that this bit of news would create a sensation.

"They? Who, Dolly?"

"Violet Vane, the captain of the Fifth Form, and her cousin, Elsie Harper!"

"Oh! Ugh! Um!"

"Bai Jove! Weal, geals, nevah mind!"

"What can't be cured, must be endured, I suppose!" said Tess Trelawney resignedly. "But it's a pity, all the same!"

"Oui, oui—yes, yes," agreed Trixie Hope, still as fond as ever of airing her French.

"Malheur—bad luck!"

Betty finished pouring out for the newcomer. Then, as she passed the cup she asked eagerly:

"You saw Violet and Elsie at the railway station, I take it?"

"Yes," Dolly answered. "I went to the bookstall to see if that mag. I had ordered had come from London. The train from

Exeter was in, and I saw the two girls."

"Didn't speak to them, of course?" someone suggested.

"Well, I felt I must ask how Mrs. Vane was. She's better——"

"That's good!" everybody commented. For although both Violet Vane and Elsie Harper were in great disfavour just at present, sympathy had been with them over the errand which had taken them from the school for a few days.

"Yes, Violet's mother is out of danger now," Dolly went on, drinking her tea, with great relish. "Elsie told me that. Violet—well, I suppose it's because she's in the Fifth Form; she sort of wouldn't deign to speak to me!"

"Dear me!" Polly commented drily. "Oh, all right. If Violet Vane has come back to the school to wage war to the knife against us, we don't mind!"

But the girls were not disposed to feel that that was Violet Vane's intention.

She, in fact, had only concerned herself in the feud when it suited her private purpose. There had been a kind of armistice, simply because the Fifth Form were just about "fod up" with getting the worst of the tussle!

In a few minutes Betty & Co. came away from the teashop and got out their bicycles, to ride the rest of the way back to Morcove. There was a good deal of merry-making along the lonely stretch of road between Barncombe town and the school; yet now and then even madcap Polly had a serious moment.

That was when some remark caused Elsie Harper's name to crop up again.

She had returned to school. Was it only to figure in the same bad light as before? Come back, to be her cousin's spy in the Fourth Form, and to give them, her Form companions, as much cause as ever, one way and another, for despising her?

So the chums of the Fourth—the very last girls to want to misjudge others—felt bound to ask themselves whenever Elsie Harper's name was brought to mind. No fault of theirs that she stood condemned to many a mean trick! Nor did Elsie herself deem it their fault.

That evening she was coming away from the Fourth Form quarters to seek a certain interview with Miss Redgrave on which much might turn. Betty, Polly, Paula,

and Madge were on their way up to the studies, after some fun out of doors. They had already done the nice thing by saying that they were glad her aunt was out of danger. Now, they simply passed her by, and she felt that it was only natural that they should.

Ignored!

What did they know of her true character, or of her longing to be deemed worthy of their friendship? Ah! And what chance would they have of knowing her better whilst her own cousin missed no opportunity of destroying her in the eyes of all the school?

For Elsie had come back to Morcove to-day, convinced that Violet was more her enemy than ever. And how ruthless that enmity really was, events were soon to show.

CHAPTER 24.

Wayward Steps.

MONDAY morning brought Violet Vane a letter that thrilled her with excitement.

As soon as she saw the handwriting, she exclaimed aloud to herself:

"Oh, it is from Beatrix—Beatrix Fairfax!"

The girl in question was rather a frivolous young person, with a couple of equally frivolous sisters, whom Violet had chummed up with during the winter holidays.

Beatrix Fairfax had just finished school, and, with a couple of senior sisters to set example to her, she was rapidly developing into a young person who was given up almost entirely to the quest of pleasure.

The letter to Violet bore the embossed address to the Fairfax town-house; but as soon as Violet began to read she realised, with sudden excitement, that a longed-for meeting with her dashing friend was not beyond the bounds of possibility.

"Violet, darling," Beatrix had scrawled, with the stubby nib that she always favoured, "just a line to let you know that I and my sisters are off in the car, and we are coming your way.

"Tilly is driving, and she is out for a record run—for us—from London to Cornwall. Just for the fun we are going to

take the North Devon coast, and we shall

Violet's reading of the letter was interrupted by the sudden entry of Millie Hapgood.

"I say, Violet—"

"Oh, don't bother me!" the Fifth Form captain exclaimed impatiently. "You see I'm busy!"

Millie Hapgood made a face at that. She reckoned herself to be one of Violet's particular cronies. This was not the first time, however, that Millie had been made to see how Violet's moods and favours wavered.

"Gracious, all right! I was only going to ask you whether now you are back at school, you feel like reviving the feud against the Fourth?"

"Hang the feud—and the Fourth, too!" Violet snapped out, and went to the window to continue reading the letter.

So Millie withdrew, with what feelings may be imagined.

"We shall go right by Morcove School, between eleven o'clock and midnight, Monday, because the moon is at the full, and our latest wheeze is to see the Devon coast by moonlight. Oh, won't it be spiffing! And, Violet, can't you slip out to have a how-do with me and my sisters? Do—do!"

The captain of the Fifth Form gasped at the audacity of such a proposal.

Slip out of the schoolhouse between eleven and twelve at night? Oh, impossible! And yet—

"You see, Violet, it's such a rare chance of our having five minutes together, isn't it? Pity my people have taken a cottage in Cornwall instead of in the neighbourhood of Morcove; what fun we could have had then! Of course, if I can slip up from Cornwall any old time I shall do so. Meanwhile, can't you creep out and cheer us on our way in the moonlight, so to speak? When I was at school—but, there, I must remember that I was never captain of the Form, and you are! I shall look out for you, all the same!"

Just as Violet got to this tempting part of the gay letter, another girl came into the study for a bit of talk.

"What do you think of the latest about your Cousin Elsie, Violet?"

"What do I think about what?" the

Fifth Form captain exclaimed sharply. "I have not heard—"

"Oh, hadn't you?" returned Ruby Maydew. "Elsie went to Miss Redgrave on Saturday evening, and asked to be allowed to get back into the Fifth Form before the end of the term."

"She did?" Violet cried. "The check of her!"

"So you may think; but it seems that her proposal met with quite a favourable reception," Ruby went on. "Miss Somerfield is willing—"

"Willing to do what? Am I to have her back in this study straight away?"

"How you do excite yourself over that unfortunate cousin of yours!" Ruby twitted the Form captain. "Don't worry, though; she won't be back in our Form for a few days at the least! She asked if she could be examined in the Fifth Form work, and she is to sit for it, as it were, and if her papers are all right, then—up she comes into the Fifth!"

"What utter nonsense—favouritism!" Violet fumed. "For a girl to be allowed to have an examination all on her own! Never heard of such a thing!"

"Oh, come! It has often been done before, you know," Ruby demurred. "Where a girl has not been moved up at the right time, and has since taken the trouble to swot up subjects she was poor at, she can always ask to be examined."

All Violet could say to that in her surly rage against Elsie, was:

"Oh, well, she'll have to swot, right enough, that's certain. Serve her right, if she swots all for nothing!"

Even as she said the words, the thought was in her mind:

"She really shall study up the subjects for nothing! I'll take good care, somehow, to keep her down!"

And all that day Violet's thoughts were alternating between this sudden development in regard to her cousin, and that temptation to steal out after bed-time to-night, and meet Betty Fairfax.

To Violet, the two things had no connection whatever, unless it was that, arising at the same time, they helped her to realise how hard her hated cousin was trying to retrieve the lost position in the school, whilst she herself was all inclined to chance getting into awful disgrace.

Looked at in this light it seemed to Violet now and then as if there was destiny in it all; that Cousin Elsie was bound to right herself at last, because of the inimitable spirit that was in her, whilst she, Violet—

No blinking the fact; she had this hankering after excitement and pleasures that school life did not provide; a hankering after girls like Beatrix Fairfax, with their love of indulging every whim that seized them. She always had found the routine of school life irksome, always had been more bored than amused by such "larks" as Millie and Ruby had got up to. And just at present there was so much that deepened Violet's longing for a spice of variety to the monotony of school life.

Should she slip out to-night, then, and meet Beatrix Fairfax? By prep-time she was not aware of having come to any decision, but she had. Some streak of waywardness in her had determined what she would do. Something was urging her on, silencing her scruples by reminding her that she had had a hard time of it lately.

There had been mother's illness to make one depressed, and anxious, and then, the presence of Cousin Elsie in the school had been an irritation. Oh, for a brief half-hour with Beatrix and her friends, when one could be really jolly again!

And so that night, when all the lights were out, and in every big dormitory the scholars of Morcove School were supposed to be fast asleep, one girl, at least, suddenly sneaked out of bed and began to put on her things.

It was Violet Vane.

She, the captain of her Form, was going to do this reckless, foolish thing. She was all of a dither with nervous dread of the consequences, should she be found out, and yet she simply had to go through with the escapade.

At this moment, whilst she was noiselessly donning her day clothes, the moonlight showed her all her Form companions and cronies, lying asleep in the various beds, and she felt that she really cared for none of them. An hour with Beatrix and that girl's kindred spirits was worth a whole term with Millie Hapgood and the rest!

In a few minutes her furtive toilette was complete, and then silently she crossed to

the dormitory door, conscious of every step being one along the wrong path, and yet lured on—lured on!

Now she was clear of the dormitory and going ever so cautiously down the stairs. The chimes dinned out eleven o'clock, the last stroke of the bell humming for several seconds upon the utter silence of the night. Step by step she descended the big staircase, looked anything but equipped for a journey out of doors.

For the cunning idea had occurred to her she had better put on her dressing-gown over the day clothes, and wear it all the way down to that back door by which she meant to slip out into the moonlit grounds. This plan she had carried out in case of a "scare."

If she had to dodge back suddenly because ill-luck had brought her almost face to face with some mistress who happened to be away from her bed-room at this late hour, it would be better to be caught in one's dressing-gown and slippers than in out-of-doors dress.

But no such scare or disaster occurred.

Only an unusual noise made in the night-time would bring any wakeful mistress roaming through the house, to set her mind at rest, and not one sound had attended Violet's stealthy progress downstairs.

She reached the rear passage, and prowled along it very cautiously, for there was no moonlight here. In groping darkness she got to the door at last, and there she slipped off the dressing-gown, and donned a warm, light, rainproof coat, which she had carried over her arm all this time.

A moment she listened intently, whilst her right hand was reached out to draw back the top bolt.

Not a sound!

That was really the case. From attic to cellar just at that time, there was not a sound to suggest that anyone, save this foolish, wayward girl, was astray from bedroom or dormitory. And yet—

And yet, at the fateful moment when Violet Vane was unbolting that back door, another Morcove scholar was stealing forth from a dormitory—and the girl was Elsie Harper!

Knowing nothing of this, Violet undid the house door and passed out into the beautiful moonlight night.

In a few minutes she was even on the far side of the school boundary hedge, waiting and listening for the motor-car.

It certainly had not gone by before she had reached the doorway, but whether it would come along after all was perhaps a doubtful—

No; there it was. And to Violet, this keeping to time on the part of the girl motorist was only another proof of the sort they were.

She was positive that if any time had been lost en route they had made up for it, if only out of sheer daredevilry.

Round a bend in the roadway a powerful touring-car swung, its head-lamps wavering fans of light before it. Violet advanced a step from her ambush close to the hedge and waved, with the strong light flooding upon her. Whir, whir! At lightning speed the motor hummed towards her, then pulled up sharply, and some muffled laughter took the place of the engine's droning noise.

"Vi, is that you? But of course it is! How are you, darling?" chuckled a girl who had put her head out of the window on that side, whilst the much older girl, who was driving, kept to her seat at the wheel, merely casting a roguish look at the errant schoolgirl.

"Oh, Bee, darling, I had to do it!" Violet exclaimed. "I have so longed to see you!"

"We did have some sprints together back in the winter, didn't we?" chuckled Beatrix Fairfax. "My sisters think it is very drefle of you to have slipped out like this—I don't think! Vi, how I wish you were coming with us down to Cornwall!"

"I wish—oh, I wish I could be with you all again! You are such sports!" Violet sighed wistfully. "Fancy you taking it into your heads to make this moonlight journey!"

"But it's ripping!" Beatrix declared. "Thrilling, too, because we don't know the road. It's all new to us. Vi, you must get back to your bedsy-wedsy like a nice, good, little girl! He, he, he, wait a minute though! Tilly, don't you start away yet!" This to the smiling sister at the wheel.

Then, throwing open the door on that side, Beatrix sprang out on to the white

roadway. She waltzed around, humming softly:

"Shine, shine, moon, whilst I dance with Dinah dear! Ha ha, ha! How perfectly lovely it is here down in the West Country! Oh, look at the see-co-ee!"

Violet cast a nervous glance in the direction of the school-house, then feasted her eyes again upon this dazzling, vivacious young Society girl.

"Am I getting you into danger? Oh, I must hope not!" chuckled Beatrix flippantly. "Mustn't make a noise, of course. Besides, I want to whisper the rest, Vi—a real, ripping wheeze!"

She came close to her fascinated school-girl friend and breathed some gleeful words into her ear. Violet gave a little start of delight, and then listened eagerly as the seductive voice whispered on.

When at last the car was going on its way again and the captain of the Fifth Form was sneaking back to the school-house, her moonlit face showed her to be all wrought up.

She looked as if she would have run even bigger risks than these to have those few brief minutes with Beatrix and her jolly sisters. And that, too, was exactly how she felt.

It had been worth it—worth the risk. And now to get back to bed, with no one any the wiser.

CHAPTER 25.

Visitors for Violet.

"WHO are they, Betty? Those three girls—"
"Bothered if I know, Polly! I was just watching them myself—"

"Yes, wather, geals! They attracted my attention, bai Jove, quite a minute ago. And," added Paula Creel, the amiable drawler of the Fourth Form at Moreove School, "for the whole of that time they must have been in pweccisely the same state of merriment!"

"It looks to me," said Polly, "as if it is some sort of jape they are up to. Only they don't belong to the school, that's certain."

"School! I'm sure two of them are almost out of their 'teens," remarked

Betty Barton. "And even the youngest has finished with school, I should say."

There was a brief lapse in the talk, the three chums of the Fourth Form still keeping their gaze upon the fair strangers who were in such a state of giggles, over by the school gateway.

As Paula Creel had remarked, for a full minute at least, the mirthful trio had been carrying on like that, acting just as if they had decided to visit the school for a lark, and yet were unable to come inside the gateway because of the laughter that filled them.

At last the youngest girl minced past the gateway, putting on an exaggerated air of decorum. This set the two other girls pealing with laughter, and then she turned back, unable to keep a straight face.

"Weal, geals," Paula Creel commented softly. "I usually enjoy seeing a friend or foe looking mowwy and bwight, yes, wather! Howevah—"

"There's something silly about that carry-on," said Polly Linton. "I'm a bit of a madcap myself—"

"You are, Polly; that's gwanted—"

"But," went on Polly, "that sort of giggling seems to me as if they are poking fun at the school!"

"Hear hear!" agreed Betty. "Well, let 'em alone." And she would have continued her saunter round the school grounds with her chums, but at this moment the three strangers not only advanced together through the gateway, but hailed the Fourth Form trio.

"You girls—just a moment!" called the youngest, who seemed to be the life and soul of the party.

So Betty & Co. diverted their steps, and half a minute later, they were close up with the visitors.

"We are not sure that this is one of the visiting days," the youngest girl said, with another bit of a giggle.

"This is not an asylum," Betty felt bound to reply curtly.

"Oh, isn't it?" came promptly, with another giggle.

"No. Although, of course," said Polly Linton, "anyone might take it for one seeing you three girls coming in at the gates."

"Haw, haw, haw! Yes, wather!" Paula chuckled. "How good, Polly!"

"You are pretty impertinent for your age!" remarked one of the older girls, resenting the Fourth Form's spirited retorts. "Bee darling"—this was to the youngest of seventeen, who appeared to be a sister—"we had better see if there's more civility to be had from the servants."

"All right, Till!" said "Bee darling" flippantly. "Let's forgive them, remembering that we were young ourselves once."

"Look here," said Betty, "if you really want any information, and will ask for it without trying to be funny—"

"Oh, much obliged!" the girl whose name was shortened to "Bee" answered loftily. "But there, your precious school is not such a big one that we can't ferret out the friend we have come to see. Violet Vane—"

"Violet Vane? Oh—"

"Bai Jove—"

"That girl!"

Thus the three chums of the Fourth Form, causing the three visitors to ask in a sort of chorus:

"And what's the matter with Violet Vane?"

Polly was unable to resist the temptation. She answered saucily:

"One thing the matter with Violet Vane is that she chooses such queer friends!"

Then Betty & Co. walked off, feeling that they had given as good as they got.

Perhaps they had; but this did not prevent the three visitors from taking credit for having been very smart when they were at last with Violet Vane.

"Yes, some kids—too young in be in your Form, surely, Vi?" the girl Bee said. "They tried to check us, and so we told them off. Oh, it was great fun! Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wonder which girls they were?" Violet Vane speculated. "If one had a drawl—"

"Yes, wather!" exclaimed Till. "Awful swagger, don't you know!"

"That would be Paula Creel," Violet decided, with a rather sour expression. "So I suppose the other two were Betty Barton and Polly Linton."

"Fourth Form?"

"And no friends of mine," nodded the Fifth Form captain. "I say, it was good of you to come. But what a surprise for me when you suddenly tapped at my study door just now! I thought you were down in Cornwall."

"Ah, thereby hangs a tale!" said one of the three. "You know we were going by car all the way from London to Cornwall, and actually went past this school the night before last—"

"At midnight," chimed in the youngest girl. "And lo and behold, there was a certain schoolgirl who slipped out to have a word with us! She—"

"Oh, Beatrix—sh!" Violet Vane struck in, with a nervous glance towards the study door. "I—I'd get into a most awful row if it got to be known that I slipped out on to the road at that time of night. Say no more about it, please."

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Beatrix. "It's on her conscience—a little thing like that! What's the use, then, of asking her to join us in that bit of fun we have planned?" she said to her two sisters. "And yet, Vi darling—oh, it would be jolly!"

The girl who was captain of the Fifth Form looked from one to another of her visitors excitedly. Her handsome face told of a craving for any sort of escapade that would vary what she called the "hateful humdrum" of school life.

"One of you explain," she pleaded eagerly. "First tell me how it is that you got no farther than Barncombe the other night. You were going to drive all—"

"Bang went a tyre outside the town hall at Barncombe," laughed Beatrix Fairfax, "and the car gave such a jump that it busted up the engine. So there we were—"

"Stranded in the middle of the night in that dead-and-alive town," Till took up the story gleefully. "An utter breakdown."

"Whatever did you do?" exclaimed Violet.

"What could we do but get the car towed to a garage, and then turn in at the Queen's Hotel—you know it!" rattled on Beatrix. "And there we are booked to stay until the car is fixed up for us."

It was now the turn of Peggy Fairfax to help with the explanation.

"We wired to the pater and mater in Cornwall, saying how we are placed, and they wired back to us to do that—stay at the Queen's until the repairs were complete."

"You lucky girls!" Violet exclaimed enviously. "Lucky to be old enough and to

have the chance of enjoying yourselves like this. Oh, Bee—Till—Peggy! Didn't you just hate it when you were at school? How I wish—"

"Cheer up, Vi!" laughed Beatrix. "Things are not so dusty, when I and my sisters have walked over on purpose to ask you to spend a day with us. Not in Barncombe—oh, dear, no—on the briny—"

"What!" Violet burst out, starting out of her chair excitedly. "Is that really your idea, you girls—to have a boat out from Barncombe, and spend a whole day rowing about? How lovely! Oh, if only—if only I could get permission!" she sighed, striking her hands together.

"Why not?" asked Till, the oldest of the three. "Miss Somerfield has only to see us, what responsible grown-ups we are—at least, Peggy and I are grown up—Beatrix is merely—"

"Come off it, Till!" Beatrix protested, grinning. "I'm seventeen and I can look as solemn as an owl when I like. How will this do for meeting the worthy head-mistress? Ahem!"

And she made a comical grimace that was "solemn" in the extreme.

Her sisters laughed softly. The Fairfax girls were ready to laugh at anything at any time. But Violet Vane rubbed her frowning forehead, pondering the question—could she get a day's leave from the school?

"Not for boating—I'm certain I couldn't. Miss Somerfield wouldn't hear of it!" she exclaimed at last. "But if—I mean, supposing—"

"The boat's ordered," remarked Beatrix. "So how about saying nothing about it, but going in it just the same?"

"That's just what I'll have to do," Violet said, still frowning. "Why not? Bother it, I'm no Fourth Form kid! And two of you are old enough to be mistresses at the school. If you can drive that big car, surely you can be trusted to handle a boat."

Till and Peggy laughed.

The Fairfaxes were a happy-go-lucky family, living in a whirl of pleasure. The father and mother were easy-going—too easy-going, lots of people thought—and the girls were so used to doing as they pleased that they thought every other girl should just do the same.

In the same thoughtless way had the schoolgirl been asked to slip out and meet

them the other night. And what would the consequences be? If Violet Vane had known, would she have accepted the invitation?

CHAPTER 26.
A Vain Plea.

EVENING after evening Elsie Harper was sticking to her preparation work for the individual examination which she had been told she might go in for. Any day now, when she felt herself ready for the ordeal, she had only to ask to be examined, and the papers would be set for her. If she passed, then she would be re-instated in the Fifth Form.

But it was hard—very hard to keep one's mind upon schoolwork, when all the time, Audrey, her study mate, was doing her best to handicap her. How often, too, between the desperate girl's lesson books and her mind there came thoughts about Violet.

How it worried Elsie, to know that the Fairfax girls were staying in the district; a harum-scarum trio who might very easily lead Violet into some fresh scrape! And next time, too, Violet might not be able to throw the blame on to somebody else, even if she wanted to!

In the night, a good deal of Elsie's wakefulness was due to her anxiety about her cousin.

It could not be said that Elsie returned love for hate; but she did yearn to see Violet free from all temptation to get into mischief, because if ever Violet went home to deep disgrace, that would be a crueler blow to her mother than any trouble that Elsie herself might have got into. It was natural; Violet was the good woman's only daughter, Elsie but a mere niece, adopted out of charity.

At last the troubled girl fell asleep, and then it seemed to be morning again at once, and she had not been up an hour before she heard a remark that changed grave anxiety to wild alarm.

She was out of doors before breakfast, grooming young Rex—giving him many a loving caress and whisper, too—when she heard two Fifth Form girls talking about Violet as they sauntered past.

Only a few lightly spoken words, but they were the cause of Elsie's suddenly rushing away to find Violet.

That girl was in her study in the Fifth Form quarters, and there Elsie found her, before a minute was out.

"Violet——"

"Hallo! So you are here to worry me again!" was Violet's sneering reception of the girl, who was always so ready to do anything for her. "No more peace for me to-day, now, I suppose!"

Elsie closed the door behind her and advanced close to her cousin, to speak in a low, restrained tone.

"Violet, I have just heard that you have obtained leave of absence for to-day!"

"Oh, yes. I get the morning off—for good behaviour! It is Saturday, so you and all the rest of the school have a halfer to play with."

Elsie asked very steadily, whilst she looked her cousin straight in the eyes:

"Are you going to spend the day with the Fairfax girls?"

"What the dickens has that got to do with you?" Violet flared up hotly. "I have Miss Somerfield's permission; must I ask yours as well?"

"I ask you this, Violet—does Miss Somerfield know what sort of girls they are?"

"She knows they are friends of mine; two of them older than me by years! That's good enough for Miss Somerfield, and it has got to be good enough for you!"

"It is not good enough," Elsie said sadly. "I know that Miss Somerfield would be very upset to hear that your own mother did not wish you to have too much to do with those girls. It is not that they are a bad lot; but they are inclined to lead others into danger without thinking."

"Oh, that will do!"

"All I want to do is to implore you——"

"Go away! I won't—I won't be talked to as if you were my keeper! You—only sent to this school out of common charity."

With a bitter sigh Elsie turned away to the door, and let herself out of the room. It was no use; with whatever gentleness she made these appeals to her cousin from time to time, as she felt bound to do, they only inflamed all Violet's rage against her.

The scene had interrupted Violet's preparations for an early start on the day's outing. Left to herself, the girl's deplorable attitude towards Elsie showed itself

in the way she ill-temperedly resumed what should have been such a pleasant task.

Scowling heavily, she slammed together the things that she was to take with her in a small satchel, and the end of it was she smashed her thermos flask.

"Bother! That's because of Elsie coming in here and upsetting me!" she fumed aloud. "Nagging at me about the Fairfax girls—the check of her! Oh, how I wish mother had never adopted the little prig!"

She had wished that from the very first hour when Elsie had been adopted, and with what a deepened intensity she wished it now—now, when she knew that it was her mother's generous intention to endow the penniless orphan with ten thousand pounds on leaving school, on condition that the girl did well at Morcove!

If anything had been needed to deepen Violet Vane's jealous hatred of her cousin, there it was—the knowledge that part of the family fortune was to be bestowed upon Elsie in a few years' time.

It was a thing that Violet was not supposed to know, and it certainly was no business of hers. But she had found out about it, and at the present time she felt she could go to any length to make the girl forfeit the gift.

The same in the train to Barncombe Station. Moodily Violet sat alone in her first-class compartment, feeling far less inclined to be away from school all day than to be doing something that would be a blow at Elsie—another blow, to spoil her in the eyes of all the world!

Only when the ill-natured girl got to Barncombe, and the Fairfax girls made a rush to meet her, did her ugly mood change.

Then, with these friends of hers in such a boisterous state over the coming "spree," she did at last remember that she was out to enjoy herself, and so—bother Elsie!

CHAPTER 27. On the Spree.

"ISN'T it a perfect, spiffing morning!" Beatrix Fairfax exclaimed joyously, on their way round to the Barncombe tea-rooms. They were going to begin with strawberry ices. "People

are saying that it is too fine to last, but I don't believe it!"

"Are you a good sailor, Vi?" asked Peggy Fairfax, when they were spooning their ices in the fine teashop that Violet was so familiar with. "Because— You tell her, Bee!"

"We fixed up everything yesterday," Beatrix promptly explained. "Over at Barncove there's a man who hires out a motor-boat. And we've booked it for today."

"That's good!" Violet commented. "Oh, yes, I'm all right on the sea. How nice that it will be in a motor-boat! They do skim along such a treat!"

Beatrix laughed softly over her last spoonful of ice.

"Ha, ha, ha! You should have seen his thunderstruck look when Till told him that she had been driving a car for years! Vi, darling, what a slow-minded lot they are down here in Devon."

"But we have been doing our best to startle the natives," rejoined Peggy. "You know Barncove, Vi?"

"Oh, yes—"

"It's ten thousand times worse than Barncombe for stupid country folk! Half of them are oldest inhabitants, with rings in their ears."

"And we've got to get there by the carrier's cart!" put in Till, laughing. "So for goodness' sake don't let's miss it! Ten o'clock from the town hall square, we were told!"

They need not have been in fear of missing the ancient form of conveyance. It was half-past ten, and they had sat for the half hour in the out-of-date wagonette, squeezed amongst buxom country dames and gaitered farmers, before the carrier himself appeared.

He was laden with a few parcels, which he proceeded to stow away amongst the passengers' feet, along with bundles with laundry that had got to be delivered—some of them en route.

The Fairfax girls, accustomed to dashing about at thirty miles an hour in the Fairfax car, pretended to be very disgusted at this archaic mode of travelling between the inland market town and the pretty seaside village of Barncove. In reality, however, they were highly amused.

There was nothing in their conduct that anybody could have frowned at, until they reached Barncove and were picnicking on the shore. Then cigarettes were produced, and Violet was persuaded, not for the first time it has to be admitted, to indulge in one.

But by this time, Beatrix in particular was showing what an altogether reckless mood she was in. Hers was very noisy laughter that was mingled with her flippant talk, and it secretly frightened Violet to hear the girl suddenly proposing that they should run right across to Gull Island, when they were going along to the motor boat.

"Shall us? Lets!" Beatrix urged again, whilst they were getting on board the natty little craft. "I say, Joe—I'm sure your name is Joe—we are thinking of going to Gull Island, and landing there—"

"Missy, don't you think any o' th' sort," counselled the bluff boatman gravely. "I durno; I'm not not altogether easy in my mind about your having the boat to yourselves. I'd rather not pick up the sovereign it means to me, than have you running into danger."

"Oh, that's quite all right," Till smiled reassuringly. "My youngest sister is so skittish, you mustn't pay the least attention to what she says. We shall cruise about —"

"Ay, miss! and don't ha' two minds about running for land, just hereabouts, if you find the water getting lumpy. The day is powerful bright," the old fellow allowed, screwing up his eyes to look at the sun. "But the wind freshens, a' the same."

"Hooray! Onco aboard the lugger!" chuckled Beatrix, taking a seat next to Violet. "Show all passports, please! No smoking, abaft the funnel!"

"Bee, behave yourself!" Peggy grinned; but Beatrix only took that as so much encouragement.

As the boat was pushed afloat by the wading man, with Till Fairfax in the stern, Beatrix imitated the noise of a ship's siren.

"Tzooooooooooooomph! Larboard there! Uhh-up she goes. Ha, ha, ha! Let her rax, Till!"

At that very instant they took on board a dash of spray from a wave that had slapped the gunwale, and there were yells of mock dismay, changing into peals of laughter.

"Ta-ta, old bean!" Beatrix waved to the boat's bluff owner as he stood up to his ankles in the swirl, watching this harum-scarum start with a dubious expression. "Till, darling, why don't you go full speed ahead?"

"I am!" Till laughed, giving a touch to a lever that made the tiny engine do all it could. "Look at that, girls!"

They certainly got up speed quickly. The whirring propeller sent the boat thrashing out into deep water, where the waves were sliding in, all crestless, towards the shore. Up and down the motor-raft glided, out over the heaving sea, and Violet felt a thrill of delight as she saw the tiny fishing village, flanked on either side with towering cliffs like those of Morcove, recede further and further until the coast was at least a mile away.

Then Till, who was certainly handling the boat very well, slewed her round so that they began to run level with the line of the coast.

"Avast there! I thought we were going to Gull Island!" protested Beatrix. "Larboard—larboard!"

"Don't be absurd!" laughed Till. "Just as if we could land on a coast we don't know! I'm not quite as mad as that!"

"Then I shall mutiny!" said Beatrix. "Oh, but what a lark! Yes, keep right on, Till; then we'll go right past Morcove School!"

Violet, herself, had already realised that this was what would happen, if they kept on this course long enough, but she was not exactly happy in her mind about it.

"What's the matter, Vi?" asked Peggy, noticing the girl's uneasy looks. "Not feeling—"

"Oh, no! But, if we could have gone the other way—"

"Not us; keep her at it, skipper!" urged Beatrix. "A life on the ocean waves, ta, ra! Oh, look at the be-yoo-tiful gee-ulls! I wonder if they would like a cigarette? They can have the picture-card, anyhow!" she said, tossing it overboard.

Next moment another cigarette was between her lips, and she lit up.

"Now, Vi, darling, point out all the famous landmarks to me, so I can write home and tell my lee-oving parents!" she rattled on, flippantly; but gave Violet no

time to start naming the giant headlands that frowned towards them over the grey sea. For, in the very next instant, she sat up with a yelp of dismay.

"Oh, help this old tub—what's her name, by the way?"

"The Three Graces," said Peggy.

"It should be the Four Scapegraces," Beatrix responded. "But look! Does she leak?"

There was indeed a little water washing about in the bottom of the boat that had not been there when they started; but Till and Peggy were of the opinion that it did not matter.

"She lets in a drop or two; they nearly always do," said Till, knowingly. "Sit still, sweet child, and don't fidget! Hallo, the sun's going in! Good-bye, King Sol. Good bye, good-bye—"

"He's not!" contradicted Beatrix flatly. "What rot you do talk, Till! There's not a cloud in the sky!"

"There's a haze," said Peggy, in a sobered tone. "Vi, you live at the seaside all the year round; doesn't that mean—"

"Yes, I—I'm afraid it does," Vi lost no time in assenting. "Just as you please, but—perhaps we had better work back to Barncove?"

"No!" Beatrix protested, taking aim with her half-finished cigarette at a passing gull. "We want our money's worth! Oh, Till, do run her another mile this way! Then we'll behold the illustrious abode of learning, Morcove School, in all its glory!"

"But—" Vi began.

"Good wheeze! If you've had enough, Vi, we can land you at Morcove!" Beatrix suggested gaily. "Is it a halfer at your school to-day, Vi? How lovely! We shall see the untamed savages lining the shore to greet the Three Graces! Till, darling, what are you doing now, turning back?"

"I am trying to," said Till, in a mirthless, flustered way, "but there's something gone wrong for the moment. The engine doesn't seem to—"

"No, she doesn't!" agreed Beatrix, with a chuckle, as the engine suddenly stopped altogether. "There, now you've done it. Oh, I say, what a lark!"

"It's no joke, Bee, so keep quiet a moment!" Till exclaimed in great concern. "Whatever shall we do?"

Beatrix stopped her nonsense then.

Not a word was spoken for several minutes, during which anxious period Till did her best to get the engine to start up again. But it would not respond.

In vain the girl tried all the tricks and devices that she knew as a motorist. The tiny engine remained lifeless, and the boat simply drifted, drifted, at the mercy of wind and wave.

"It's all the horrid water that's been washing about all this time!" the elder sister said sharply. "We have some oars, anyhow, Peggy—you and Beatrix get them going, will you?"

The two girls rummaged them out in an awkward fashion, but could do no good with them in the roughening sea. Violet took Beatrix's oar, and showed a good deal of skill, for all Morcove scholars were encouraged to learn how to row. But with Peggy still as useless as ever with her oar, Violet's efforts were not a bit of use; in fact, they made matters worse.

By pulling on her oar, when the other one was being so badly handled, she only turned the boat right round.

Somehow the scared girls felt the force of the wind to be stiffening. The sun had altogether vanished behind that ugly haze, and sullen indeed was the sea that now heaved around the helpless boat.

"Give me both oars," Violet exclaimed, looking very pale in spite of her exertions. "We can't go on like this! The tide will take us on to the rocks!"

"Is it a—a bad shore for landing?" Till asked.

"Awful!" was the frightened schoolgirl's shuddering answer. "The coast all along here is not safe except in settled weather. We—we shouldn't have come!"

"Oh, well—" sighed Beatrix. "That's better, Vi! You are managing all right now, if only you can keep it up!"

But Violet could not do that.

To row a boat weighted with four people besides the engine, in that sea, was beyond her strength, as it would have been beyond any girl's. She had to give up at last, leaning upon the oars' rocking ends as she gasped for breath.

Helplessly the boat still drifted, with all four passengers stricken to utter silence.

stricken with horror at their desperate plight.

The hazing of the sky had caused an even deeper gloom than the sudden gathering of rain-clouds might have done. It was an eerie half-light indeed in which the helpless girls saw the towering cliffs of Morcove looming ever nearer, nearer.

And below those cliffs there were the rocks!

All too soon the time came when Violet and the friends who had drawn her into this foolhardy outing, beheld the surf where the waves were bursting furiously. A sinister swirl of white waters, making the black rocks themselves stand out all the more clearly, like deadly fangs, waiting to claim their victims.

"I say," Beatrix suddenly broke out, in a panicky tone, "if we shout for help, wouldn't our voices carry?"

"Who will hear us?" was Peggy's despairing answer. "There's not a sign of life along the cliffs! Vi, do you think anybody is there?"

"With this storm coming up, any girls who were out on the cliffs or beach will surely have run for home," was Violet's cheerless answer. "It's going to rain in a minute. It will be awful for us! We—Oh! We shouldn't have come!" she said again, looking ready to hide her face in her hands, so as not to see the yeasty waters towards which the boat was drifting.

"Let's shout! We must!" Violet suddenly entreated, unable to bear the suspense. "Help! Help! Come on—all of us together! Help!"

With some idea of sending out a louder cry by standing up, she sprang erect in the boat, and yelled piercingly:

"Help! Help!"

At the same time she whipped out her handkerchief and began to wave it, in the hope of attracting attention. And then a dreadful thing happened.

A second too late with the others' "Look out, Violet! Steady—sit down, sit down!"

But the cry was too late!

A vicious wave struck the boat a slapping blow, and with the violent lurch Violet lost her balance and went headlong overboard.

Her shriek of terror as she stumbled into the wild waters was answered by her companions' groaning cries of frantic alarm.

With no thought of the peril with which such an action was fraught, they all three reached over the side to save her somehow—and then another wave struck the boat, and dire calamity was upon them all.

The helpless craft, broadside on to the waves, listed heavily, taking a flood of water over one gunwale, and she could not right herself again.

Too late the girls tried to restore its balance and their own.

The boat filled, and sank under their feet, then rose again, bottom upwards, whilst they themselves were now in the same deadly peril as Violet.

Four struggling figures in the deep water, battling for dear life now, with wave after wave dashing into their faces and smothering their heartrending cries of:

"Help! Help!"

CHAPTER 28.

Life or Death—Which?

ELSIE, spending her afternoon alone upon the picturesque stretch of shore below the cliffs of Morcove, had scarcely noticed the changing weather. Only when a spot of rain suddenly splashed down upon the lesson-book upon which her whole time was concentrated, did she glance up in surprise.

She knew then how absorbed she must have been in her studying up of one of the subjects in which she hoped to be examined before another week was out.

The sun had been gradually blotted out whilst she was sitting there, and out of the gloomy sky the rain was starting to fall, driving aslant on the freshening breeze.

She jumped to her feet and looked about her for Rex. He had been thoroughly enjoying himself for the last hour or so, nosing at the streamers of seaweed that littered the sands, and racing amongst the rocks.

"Rex! Rex! Come on, Rex!"

Her first affectionate cry was always sufficient to bring him galloping back to her, but for once he refused to budge from

the spot where she had now located him. It was a big ledge of rock, which the rising tide would soon be swirling about. Rex remained there, all of a quiver with excitement, barking back at her as if to say!

"No; you come to me!"

"Don't be silly, doggie! What's all the fuss about?" Elsie called to him, laughing. "Have you found some strange sea-shore creature that puzzles you? Come on, sir!"

He scrambled down to the sands then, and tore towards her, but, after receiving one pat as a reward for obedience, he was off again, dashing back excitedly to the same fascinating spot, looking back as if he wished her to follow him.

Elsie's curiosity was aroused. There must be something over yonder that her sagacious doggie wanted her to look at. Making light of the rain, she nipped across the smooth sands and then trod gently over the weedy rocks to where Rex was in such a state of excitement.

"Well, what is all the fuss about?" she asked, failing to see the reason for his agitation. "You mustn't bark like that for nothing!"

And then understanding came to her, and she knew what Rex was telling her.

She noticed that he was looking and barking out to sea, and in the instant that her roving gaze roamed the dark waters, she cried out in horror.

For there, drifting in with the brawling tide, was a capsized row-boat, and near to it, straggling for dear life in a riotous sea, were a number of girls!

In that first instant she counted three of them, and with a throb of relief she saw that they were all clinging as best they could to the wrecked boat. But her next glance showed her a fourth girl, who seemed to be entirely without support in the water.

Was that because she could swim? Or—the thought turned Elsie sick with horror—was it because that girl had become too exhausted to be able to cling on any longer to the overturned boat? If so—

"Oh, what shall I do? How can I save them! I must—I must!" Elsie almost screamed aloud to herself, whilst Rex barked away with all a dog's shrewd

understanding that here was a terrible calamity.

Run for help? No, that would be almost as much use as running away and leaving the imperilled girls to their fate. It would take time to find other people to help, and aid was wanted immediately.

She had only to look at the helpless victims of the boating disaster, and to see how far gone they appeared to be, whilst their feeble cries sounded faintly and pitifully through the noise of the tide, to feel sure that the next minute or so meant life or death for all of them!

Yet, so powerless for the moment did she feel herself to be, she had to glance in all directions wildly, yearning for a sight of someone whose aid she could enlist.

No one!

As far as she could see in both directions, the shore was deserted. And so—oh, how to succour all four girls, she did not know, but she would do her best!

In a flash her shoes were kicked off, and she was divesting herself of a part of her garments, so as to be hampered as little as possible in the swirling waters.

Then she was rushing farther out from the foot of the cliffs, plunging down into the water where it swirled amongst the rocks, and wading on waist-deep in it, to reach some other mass of rock as yet unsubmerged, and go scrambling over it.

In her ears now there was nothing but the noise of bursting waters, and she heard none of the wild cries that were being voiced at the moment—not by the victims of the disaster, but by a group of girls upon the cliff-top.

She suddenly knew of their presence, though, for whilst she was scrambling over a slippery ledge of rock, she looked towards the cliffs again, sent an almost despairing glance in that direction, and then knew that the whole catastrophe was being witnessed by four or five girls up there! They looked like Morcové girls, too!

Join her in the desperate work of rescue they could not for at least another ten minutes. That she realised instantly. Even if the girls flew like the wind, it would take them all that time to get to a path down from the cliff-top to the shore. But, at least, they could rush off with the news, and that might be an indirect means of help.

When she looked again they were all gone, which surely meant that they had dashed away to give the alarm. But that was not quite the case.

Of the five girls whose excited outcry had been ringing from the cliff's edge but a second or so ago, only one was running away to give the alarm.

That girl was Dolly DeJanc.

It had taken them but an instant to agree that one must rush for help, whilst the others rushed to give what help they could—if only they could be in time.

Oh, if only they could get down to the shore and join that brave, solitary girl in the attempt at a rescue!

The four girls who now tore along the cliff to where there was a zigzag path down to the shore were Betty, Polly, Paula and Madge. Desperately they raced on, and then charged down the steep path, dreading that their next sight of the hapless victims would be a sight that meant—too late!

But no!

Reaching the shore, Betty & Co. could still count four figures, floating in the sea.

They and the boat had drifted into rougher water now, where the effort of keeping afloat was surely more exhausting than ever. But they were still there! There, too, was that other girl, their would-be rescuer, beyond wading depth now, and swimming.

Dauntless girl! She had gone bravely in, to do her best to swim out and meet the overturned boat and rescue its victims as they came drifting in!

"And that's what we must do," Betty panted, as she and her chums tore on along the shore. "If only we can do it in time!"

"Who is she? And who are the girls who were in the boat?" gasped out Polly.

As to that second question, Elsie herself had found the answer by now.

Whilst she was starting to swim out amongst the deadly rocks like this, catching only fitful glimpses of the victims, her dread of any loss of life had been intensified by the sudden knowledge that one of them was Violet!

Violet and the Fairfax girls—they had planned to spend the afternoon upon the water, and this disaster was the tragic sequel to the outing—another escapade for which they might yet have to pay with their very lives!

Desperately she flogged along through the turmoil of the tide, drawing nearer, nearer to them. It seemed an age of frantic swimming to her, but it was only a minute or so before she was close enough to make a breathless cry audible.

"Hold on still!" she called. "There's other help coming! If I can get to you, I may be able to—"

"It's not us; it's Violet—it's Violet!" came the feeble, frantic cry from the Fairfax girls, as they clung to the wrecked boat. "She must be drowning—she has no support at all!"

This only confirmed the dreadful belief that Elsie had formed when she first saw the girls afloat in the water.

Somehow Violet had had less luck than her companions when the boat capsized. She must have come to the surface a little distance from it, and had never since been able to get to it. At this critical moment she was still a dozen yards from the others, and it was towards her that Elsie thrashed her way with what seemed the last ounce of strength.

"Violet—Violet, I'm coming," cried out the heroic girl, who had been the object of all Violet's animosity for months past. "I'll save you somehow—I will!"

Swimming on, Elsie was soon beyond the others and the boat. Perhaps they would cling on all right until they drifted in amongst the rocks and could then keep afloat until other help came. If not, this was what they would still have her do. Their cries had told her—devote all one's energies to the saving of Violet, who must be far, far more exhausted than they.

How Violet managed to keep afloat for so long Elsie could not imagine, for she had never heard that her cousin was a strong swimmer.

Not until a mere yard or two separated the two girls did the would-be rescuer discover that her cousin was clinging to one of the boat's oars. It was the merest bit of flotsam for a girl to be clutching as the only means of salvation. Elsie had not espied the oar before, for the simple reason that it was more often than not forced under water by the girl who clutched it.

All this time it had just managed to enable Violet to keep her head above water. She was at her last gasp now, how-

ever. Elsie got to the exhausted girl, whose face was grey and her gaze full of the horror of certain death. Another moment, and the rescuer would have been too late. Unhappy Violet would have gone under for the last time, and the oar would have floated inshore without her!

But Elsie was there! She was in time—in time, after all!

Just in time her saving grasp took hold of the girl who had been her relentless persecutor; and once she had hold of her she seemed to manage the rest easily.

Yet it was no easy thing in reality. If the struggle of getting to safety with her unconscious burden seemed of small account to Elsie, that was only because despair was changed to hope, and hope renewed her strength.

She herself had to be dragged from the water along with her cousin, when she had got her to where the chums of the Fourth Form were pulling out the Fairfax girls. She had fainted with exhaustion a moment after that, and so she never heard the murmurs of praise and admiration which her heroism had inspired.

There, by Elsie's side, on a slab of rock above the foaming tide, lay the girl who owed her life to the very victim of her jealous spite. There, too, stood Betty & Co.—the very girls, above all others, whom Elsie had longed to stand in good favour with, only there had always been so much to ruin her in their eyes.

But, ah! They knew her better now. They knew her worth at last, and what a happy moment it would be for Elsie Harper when she heard all Morcove echoing the admiring murmurs that were on the lips of those chums of the Fourth!

CHAPTER 29.

They Do Not Scorn Her Now.

THAT moment, the very happiest Elsie Harper had ever known, soon came.

Although there was a fear, when she was first taken along to the school with the victims of the disaster, that she would be laid up in the "san." for several days at least, it was her good fortune to suffer no after effects whatever from that deed of

sublime heroism which had saved Violet's life.

Violet herself was put to bed, and had to be kept there, receiving every care and attention; but, by the morning after the accident, Elsie was able to come away from the "san." looking and feeling quite herself again.

And then it was that all Morcove seemed to turn out to give cheer upon cheer for the blushing heroine of the hour!

To escape the embarrassing plaudits, Elsie took to her heels at last, with young Rex sprinting along with a pink tongue lolling from his grinning mouth, fairly crazy with excitement over all the great to-do. Sure enough, Rex understood that his own dear mistress was a happy girl to-day, and he could not contain himself.

He skipped here and there, and everywhere.

Elsie bolted into the school house, and Rex—against all standing orders—scurried in with her. Up the stairs sped Elsie, meaning to get to Study 8, and take refuge there from all the cheering scholars; but, at least a half-dozen members of the Fourth Form overtook her, and one pulled her to a standstill, crying:

"Where are you off to, Elsie? That's not the way!"

Not the way? What on earth did Betty Barton mean by saying that?

"Betty, it's awfully nice and kind of you, and the rest, to make such a fuss, but please—please let me have ten minutes alone in my study!" Elsie pleaded.

"Your study is not in this corridor. It's downstairs in the Fifth Form!"

"What!"

Elsie saw the girls who were mobbing round her look more elated than ever.

"Miss Somerfield would have told you, only we begged her to let it come from us," Betty exclaimed, in great good spirits. "You are back in the Fifth Form now—"

"Oh!" was all that Elsie could gasp.

"And the Fifth Form's gain is our loss—"

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove, seals—"

"All the same, Elsie," struck in Polly Linton, "we wouldn't, for worlds, have had you remain amongst us in the Fourth Form, when it meant a cruel injustice to

you! You never should have been put down

"What makes you say that?" Elsie panted excitedly. "How—how can I be back in the Fifth Form to-day, when I've never been for that exam.? I don't understand, unless—"

"That's exactly what has happened," Betty said, in a quieter tone. "All along you have known that nothing could clear you in our eyes, unless your Cousin Violet owned up to everything. And Violet has owned up!"

"Yes, wather! And, weally, geals, without wishing to use a strong expression, it would have been pweetty wotten of Violet not to own up, after having her life saved—her vevy life, bai Jove!"

"Tell me!" Elsie broke in anxiously. "Will they—is she to be expelled, then? Oh, but they mustn't expel her! It will be such a cruel blow to her mother!"

Then the clumps of the Fourth Form looked at one another, as if more than ever impressed with that one splendid motive which had inspired all Elsie's endurance and heroism. From first to last, that had been the girl's one noble thought—to keep all Violet Vano's spitefulness and waywardness from her mother.

Betty placed a hand gently upon Elsie's shoulder.

"You'll find that everything is all right, Elsie," said the captain of the Fourth Form. "You have only to hear what Miss Somerfield has to say."

All that Miss Somerfield had to say was known to the agitated girl before another ten minutes had sped, and she who had so bravely held back floods of tears in the past, because crying, then, had seemed more weakness at a time when one needed to be strong—she was not ashamed to weep now.

For they were tears that had nothing whatever to do with the thought of all that she had suffered during this never-to-be-forgotten term at Morcove School. They were tears of joy at knowing how truly her one-time enemy had repented, and how it was that genuine repentance which had weighed with the headmistress, as it was right that it should do.

Violet, perhaps, knowing that she owed her very life to her cousin, might have been

moved merely to confess the wrong that Elsie had suffered, and, in that case the culprit could hardly have hoped for mercy. But she had done more than confess. She had felt genuinely repentant.

There was this agony of remorse, this heartfelt repentance, and the earnest longing to make good; and, with a woman of Miss Somerfield's stamp, that counted every-thing!

"So, already, the merciful word had been spoken to that girl, who, alone in a ward of the school's "san," was suffering such mental torture. Already she had been calmed and heartened by the knowledge that nothing about it all would ever be known at home. She was not to be expelled, but would return to her former place in the school as soon as she was well enough to do so, there to let all Morcove see that her once detested orphan-cousin was her dearest friend.

The Fairfax girls, all luckily none the worse for their adventure, but taught by it a lesson that would last them their lifetime, had been packed off to their parents before that day was out. Violet Vano was the only occupant of the airy ward when Elsie came across to see her at sunset that evening.

Rex came, too, with his stumpy tail hoisted erect, as a sign of his high spirits; nor was he ordered to stay on the doorstep by spick-and-span nurse. Once again it was against all orders; but Rex asked so wistfully that he fairly won nurse's heart!

"Lift him on to my bed, the dear doggie—nurse isn't looking!" Violet pleaded wistfully. And when he was cuddling there, and her hand was caressing his glossy forehead:

"I thought of you, too, Rex, when I was in the water yesterday, with all my life and its misdeeds coming back to me! Oh, Elsie, do you think Rex can understand how sorry I am? I want him to know that he'll never get a rough word from me again. I want him to know—"

"He does know, Violet; he can read it in your looks, as all the world can," Elsie murmured softly.

Violet's eyes, ashine with tears, met Elsie's in a look that said. "You know, at any rate."

And Rex, as if sensing his young mis-

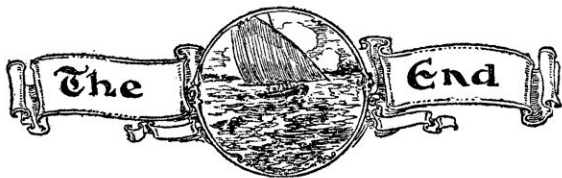
dress' forgiveness of the other, and anxious not to be bested, crept up the bed, and buried his nose in Violet's hand.

There was silence after that. No need for speech, indeed, when each understood the other's heart and mind so well.

On the speckless walls glowed the last red rays of the setting sun, promising a bright to-morrow. With Violet's hand—the

very hand that had once been turned against her, to do all the harm it could—now lying passively in hers, Elsie felt that the glory of light around them was a happy symbol.

To-morrow, and all the to-morrows that life had in store for her and this changed girl, they would be hand in hand like this, and she would no longer be "The Loneliest Girl at Morcove."



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.

Help to Make the Garden Gay.

For the girl who likes to be a "handyman" in the garden there is plenty of scope for her activities during the next few weeks. The spring and the autumn are the two busiest seasons for gardeners, both times when a little extra assistance would be greatly appreciated by father.

So much needs to be done, and the later some jobs are left the more chance there is of plants failing to survive the winter or not giving of their best the following season.

The latter applies particularly to bulbs. Tulips, snowdrops, crocuses, hyacinths, anemones, scillas, narcissi, daffodils, and other flowers which will make spring gay in the garden are best put in immediately. What a simple job it is, too!

When you have decided where they are to go, all you need to do is to dig a hole amply large for the reception of the bulb, put a quantity of sand at the bottom of the hole, rest the bulbs on the sand, and cover up. The bulbs should be covered with about twice their height of soil.

The tulips and hyacinths can be planted singly or in groups, but the smaller bulbs look best when planted in small groups. Snowdrops and scillas look very beautiful planted in the lawn, especially under trees.

A planned effect should be avoided. The best way is to take a handful of the bulbs and throw them over the lawn, and then plant just where they fall. No harm will be done to the grass if a hole is made, say, with a pencil when the ground is wet. After the bulb has been planted, the earth can be pressed together again so that no mark is left.

Another job that you should find a lot of interest in doing is the taking of cuttings. If you have a cold frame, cuttings of such plants as antirrhinums, calceolarias, and penstemons should be taken; it will save the expense of buying new plants the following season.

The cuttings can either be planted straight into the soil under the frame, or in boxes.

One thing is essential—plenty of sand should be mixed with the soil, to help the cuttings make root.

If you examine the old plants you will find that there are a lot of new shoots near the base of the plant. These should be stripped off, the bottom leaves removed, and planted firmly and deep into the soil. They will then grow roots during the winter.

The colours should be kept separate by planting them in different boxes or rows. Labels, preferably white-painted ones, with the names and colours written on in ink, should mark the positions of the various groups of cuttings.

That suggests another very useful job for you. Many of the plants in the garden which will come up again next year—perennials—will soon have died down and be lost sight of until they start sprouting in the spring. It is invaluable to know their positions, so as to avoid digging them up during the winter. It would be much appreciated if you took upon yourself the task of labelling them all. The best labels are those which are painted, as the rain will not wash off the writing as it does with plain wooden labels.

There is an awful lot of tidying up to be done, too, just now. Most of the summer blooming stuff has now died down, and is running to seed. What a job there will be with the hoe next year if those seeds are allowed to sow themselves. Well, why not offer to go round and cut down all the dead stuff and stack it on the rubbish heap ready for burning? Pick up all the dead leaves, apples, or other refuse that may have fallen; a tidy garden looks nice even when it is not in full bloom.

Well, these are just a few suggestions about jobs which you could tackle now. There are plenty more if they prove insufficient for your energies. No doubt the gardener-in-chief will make a few more suggestions if asked for them.

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