

MORCOVE'S CHRISTMAS PROBLEM!

AN EARLY
ADVENTURE OF
BETTY BARTON & Co

J. Nelson
by MARJORIE
STANTON



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MORCOVE'S CHRISTMAS PROBLEM!



A Fine Story of the Early Adventures of BETTY BARTON & Co.

By MARJORIE STANTON.

Author of "WHEN MORCOVE CAME TO STORMWOOD," "MORCOVE'S GIPSY SCHOOLGIRL," "WHILST MORCOVE SLEPT," etc., etc.

CHAPTER 1.

"Breaking-up" Day.

"FOUR-FIFTY!"

Madge Minden rubbed her nose thoughtfully and looked up from the railway time-table.

But Madge was not heard, and was certainly not heeded.

In Study Q at Stormwood, where certain of the girls from Morcove were temporarily installed, there was chaos, for Betty Barton & Co. were packing. It was not Betty, the captain of the Fourth Form, who was causing all the commotion. Polly, her friend, was doing that.

"Here's your hat, Paula!" Polly, the madcap, said. "Coming over!"

"Gwacious, Polly! Pway be careful, deah geal!"

Polly was never careful, though, and the girls gave a merry peal of laughter as the hat plomped on to Paula Cree's head.

"Oh, ripping!" said Polly gleefully, as she trod on one of Betty's hand-mirrors. "Spiffing! Why don't you always wear your hats like that?"

"Yes, why not?" Betty asked. Then she saw the hand-mirror and made a dive for it.

"Sorry!" grinned Polly. "It isn't broken—only scratched a bit. Don't show it to Paula. It's in too weak a state to stand that!"

But Betty, smiling, decided to risk the

harm to the mirror, and held it just under Paula's nose.

Paula Cree, aristocratic and languid, blinked rather sleepily in the glass.

"Bai Jovo!"

As she saw the reflection of her face and the hat that so peculiarly crowned it, Paula sat bolt upright.

"There! Who says I shouldn't make a good milliner?" asked Polly. "That dent rather improves it, you know!"

And she cocked her head on one side the better to survey the result of her accidental venture into the art of millinery.

"The dent!" murmured Paula. Then she saw it, and the expression on her face was alarming.

Slowly she recovered that once precious hat, and the chums watched her, smiling broadly.

"It improves it!" Paula gasped. "Oh, cwumbs! It's ruined!"

"Ruined?" echoed Polly, in pained tones. "I reckon I trod on it—I mean, put that dent into it—very neatly."

"Splendidly!" Betty Barton agreed.

And then it was that Madge Minden spoke again.

"Four-fifty, Betty," she said.

"Hallo! What's four-fifty?" Betty asked. "Oh, you're grovelling in the time-table!"

"Yes, dear, I've found the only train," Madge said, in her serious way. "The four-fifty from Barncombe will get us to the junction, and we can then get a con-

nection that will take us right down to Hillchurch."

Then Paula's hat was forgotten. Even Paula put it aside, although with a regretful sigh and compassionate look, for Paula was fond of her clothes, and had a special weakness for hats in particular.

However, even Paula realised that the time of the train was more important at the moment than the hat.

"Where?" asked Polly, puckering her brow as she looked at the time-table. "Goodness, what a mass of figures! Sure it is a time-table, and not a set of logarithms or square roots of something?"

"Silly, of course not!" Madge said, with superior wisdom. "Time-tables are simple things to understand."

But it did not seem so, judging by the faces of the three girls who crowded round her.

"Bai Jove!" said Paula, smoothing her dress. "There's wather a wipping twain at three o'clock. It doesn't stop anywhere—"

"Fat lot of good, then!" said Polly.

"Yes, wather! I mean, no, wather not!" Paula corrected herself hastily. "As a mattah of fact, it does stop, you know—"

"Bristol, or somewhere," said Madge. "You are a duffer when it comes to time-tables. Now, this is the one!"

And she pointed to a list of times that ran across the page.

"I suppose it is," nodded Polly. "I found one like that once, but it was the square root of fourteen or something."

Betty, however, was taking the matter more seriously.

"Four-fifty!" she mused. "Then we've got heaps of time to spare."

"Heaps of time!" Paula echoed, and her aristocratic face brightened. "That's wippin'! I can go into Barncombe and get those shoes I ordered."

"It's four-fifty to-day!" Polly teased. "We know what you are with shoes. Madge's aunt is expecting us to-night."

"Besides look at the weather," said Betty. "My word, it's beginning to snow!"

They all glanced out of the window then, whence they had a view of the school grounds. At the present moment girls were making their way to the gates, and cabmen and their assistants were carrying luggage to their vehicles.

A drizzle of snow was falling, and lightly flecking the figures with white.

"Hallo, there goes Monica Munro!" said Betty.

And she waved her hand to a member of her Form who was walking cheerily down to the gates, accompanied by a trunk that the school porter was carrying.

Stormwood was breaking-up for Christmas!

That was the explanation. That was why there were so many girls hurrying across the quadrangle, and why the corridors echoed so strangely the voices of a few remaining girls.

What a bustle and hurry there was! Every one of the girls was busy. Some ran upstairs with parcels, and some ran down.

"Fancy, it's past lunch-time, and we haven't packed yet!" sighed Betty.

Madge Minden looked up from the time-table, in which she was again absorbed.

"I wonder if I'd better wire my aunt?" she said.

"May as well as we're going into Barncombe," said Polly. "We shall be passing the telegraph office as we go to the station."

"She'll have a shock when she sees the crowd of us!" Betty smiled.

But Madge Minden shook her head.

"Oh, no! Auntie said bring a few friends."

"A few—"

Polly grinned cheerily.

"Well, we are a few. There are only seven of us, including Naomer Nakara."

"Naomer, by the way, is going to meet us later," said Madge Minden. "It's a pity Zonia couldn't come also."

"She has gone up north to see my parents," said Betty. "They thought it would be better for her to go up there as soon as possible. And we were out when she and Naomer went."

"Naomer left me a message," Madge nodded. "She is coming. Isn't that jolly?"

They were all glad that little Naomer Nakara, the daughter of an Eastern potentate, was accompanying them, for she was bright and happy, just the very girl for a Christmas holiday party. She was picturesque and exhaled an Eastern air that was wholly attractive.

"Wish she were coming with us now!" said Polly. "But it can't be helped. I

am glad that Trixie Hope is making one of the party. Isn't it about time that she was here?"

Trixie Hope opened the door of Study Q at that moment. Tess Trelawney, who had gone to meet her, was with her.

"Nous voici! Here we are!" said Trixie Hope, who fancied herself a linguist. She had come over from Morcove School that morning, having finished her packing early and left her trunk at Barncombe Station on the way over.

"Goo wussi! Here we are!" said Polly, with a bow. "Je suis—er—er—obilgray—er—j'ai de la plume de mon ami! What-ho, but I have not the box of Cousin Jack!"

"Oui, oui," smiled Trixie, who was in such high spirits that she didn't even mind Polly's teasing. "J'ai la plume!"

"La plume," said Polly seriously. "Oui, mais je n'ai pas les bananas. Yes, we have no bananas."

Madge Minden brought a cushion forcibly down on Polly's head.

"There! I said I'd do that next time you repeated that silly saying!" she said.

But Polly only laughed. Tess laughed, too, even though Polly, in throwing back the cushion, accidentally hit her.

No one ever was cross on "breaking-up" day.

And there was much fun when they sat down to have a picnic on the trunk, for the trunk and the bags were packed at last, and somehow or other the things were crammed in. How they managed to get everything in the girls could not say, but they did; and that, after all, was all that mattered.

Betty Barton & Co. were going to catch the four-fifty. As their holidays were going to be spent at Madge Minden's aunt's, they left her to fix the times.

"Better give ourselves plenty of time," observed Madge Minden when the picnic lunch was finished and they were chatting gaily of the holidays that were to come, and of the holidays they had spent in various places.

"Yes, Paula's got to get some shoes," Polly agreed. "I can see our spending Christmas Day in the shoe-shop if she's got to try some slippers on!"

"Weafly, Polly, I twust that I am not such a wowwy as you pwetend," Paula said gently. "But a geal must be par-

ticular about her shoes. Judge a lady by her shoes, you know."

"But suppose she wears boots?" said Polly. "Football boots, for instance!"

"Football boots? Good gwacious! Surely no lady— Oh, you were jokin' again!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Never mind, Paula!" Betty laughed. "Come along and take your choice at the boot and shoe department! We'll fix a time limit, and then, whether you've got your shoes or not, you'll have to come bundling out of the shop!"

That was how they decided it, and when, some minutes later, they dressed themselves ready for the journey to Barncombe Town, Paula was quite elated. The trunks and bags had been despatched to Barncombe already, and the girls were following at their leisure.

The school looked so lonely and forlorn that the girls were glad to walk down the steps into the quadrangle.

Snow was falling lightly, and, by the look of the dark sky, it seemed as though more were to follow. Already the daylight was fading fast, and by the time they took their departure it would be dark.

"Better hurry!" Betty advised. "We may just catch a local to Barncombe, and then hurry on with the shopping."

Betty was right, and they managed to get a seat in the local as far as Barncombe Town. The girls who had missed the earlier train were on the platform; but whilst they took trains to various parts of the country from Barncombe, Betty & Co. walked through the barriers into the town.

It was dark and cold, and the snow fell incessantly, covering their shoulders with a thin film of white. There seemed every probability, too, of there being a severe snowstorm.

They soon neared the shoe-shop, which was lit up, as most of the shops were, and Paula halted.

Polly halted, too, but Polly was not looking at the shoe-shop. She was staring at a placard exhibited outside the news-agent's next door:

**"CONVICT AT LARGE!
DARING ESCAPE!"**

CHAPTER 2.

A Surprise for the Chums.

"A CONVICT!"
 "My word!"
 The six girls stood and stared at the placard. Convicts did not often escape, but they had heard of one escaping before now. The prison, dark and gloomy, was several miles away across the moors, yet near enough to make the escape of a prisoner something of very special interest.

"Ugh! Poor wretch! Fancy, out on the moors to-day!"

And Polly Linton shivered sympathetically.

"In thin clothes, perhaps," said Betty seriously.

It was certainly not a day that one would choose for a visit to the moors. The cold wind would be biting, and the snow and the wet would be treacherous in the extreme.

"I think I'd rather be a prisoner," said Madge Minden, frowning slightly, "or, at least, choose a better day for escape."

"Yes, wather," Paula nodded. "But perhaps, you know, he's escaping for Christmas!"

"For Christmas?"

The girls were silent again. Sympathetically minded, there was not one who could not realise the awful penalty of imprisonment, the loneliness, the shame, and the slowness of passing time.

A prisoner at Christmas! Was not Christmas time for forgiveness?

"Perhaps they won't try to capture him," said Polly Linton. "People are usually more lax at Christmas. If I were the authorities, I'd let him get off until after Christmas."

"Yes, wather," said Paula. "I've wead, y'know, that they don't have turkey in prison. They have skilly, or something."

"Skilly," smiled Betty. "Perhaps so. I don't know. I don't suppose they have luxuries. Still, what about shoes?"

And into the shop they went, to forget for a while about the convict on the moors and the miseries of less fortunate folk.

Paula was rather difficult to please, and a vast stock of shoes had been produced and tried on before she announced herself satisfied. At last the girls left the shoe-shop.

"Hallo!"

Madge Minden caught sight of a clock in a shop window and pulled a face.

"We shall miss the train. Look!"

"Great Scott!"

How the time had flown they could not imagine. Paula had taken a long time, but it did not seem as long as it had actually been.

"We can't do it, even running! And look at the crowds!"

Betty spoke quite helplessly now, for Barncombe Town was crowded with visitors from the neighbouring villages.

"Is there a quicker way?" Madge asked anxiously. "We simply must catch that train!"

But no one could think of a short way through the town.

"There's the wood," said Betty. "We can take this side turning into the wood and then branch out again at the other end. That would do it all right."

It was a bright idea, and the girls lost no time in adopting it.

"I don't want my aunt to get annoyed," Madge said. "She's a good little sort and awfully nice and sweet—but her daughter!"

Madge's tone was self-explanatory, and the girls understood by it that her cousin was not everything to be desired.

"She's all right in her way," Madge hastened to add. "But Cousin Kyra and I have never hit it off. Still, you judge for yourselves."

Madge was never a girl to run anyone down, and, although she had not spoken very encouragingly of her cousin, she did not intend to open the girls' eyes to her shortcomings. Doubtless they would be only too patently visible when they saw her.

"My word—it's dark!"

It certainly was dark. In the town they had not noticed the dark sky above the bright lights of the shops, so that they were not prepared for this inky blackness.

"Ugh! Not at all cheerful," said Polly.

"Never mind! It won't take us long, and there's nothing to fear," Betty said.

"We must catch that train!"

But they did not look very cheerful as they entered the dark and silent woods.

"Lucky I brought my torch," Madge Minden smiled. And she flashed it on the bushes.

"Trust Madge for remembering things," Tess said admiringly. "Good job there aren't any footpads here!"

"Yes, wather, y' know. Bai Jove!"

Paula jerked suddenly to a standstill, and the girls turned to her anxiously.

"Hallo! What's wrong with the works?" Polly asked.

"Nothing," Paula said. "Only, I was thinking, what about the convict?"

"The convict!"

"Oh!"

The girls exchanged serious glances, and in more than one pair of eyes there was a look of alarm.

The convict! It was quite likely that he would be in the dark, lonely wood. It was true that the police might be patrolling, but they could not patrol everywhere at once, and most people were far too intent upon their Christmas shopping and preparations to give much thought to convicts.

"I—I say," Trixie Hope murmured. "Ought we to risk it?"

There was another pause then, a pause that Polly Linton broke with a laugh.

"There are six of us! What does it matter? The man's probably far more afraid of our seeing him," she urged.

"I dare say that's true," Betty agreed slowly.

But she looked rather uneasily over her shoulder into the darkness of the wood. Somewhere, quite close to them, a twig cracked, and they all started quickly.

"What about the train?" Madge asked.

It was enough. Convict or no convict, they had to go, and go on they did. They walked quickly keeping together in a compact group.

Madge led the way, with Betty by her side, picking the way by the rays of a torch.

Polly Linton, bringing up the rear, looked many times over her shoulder, although probably she would not have admitted as much for worlds.

It was not pleasant in the woods.

"It isn't that we are afraid," Tess said for the tenth time at least.

"But we're frightened," Polly grinned.

"I'm not," Tess said indignantly. "Oh, what was that?"

"A twig, silly."

"Bai, Jove! Look out! Something touched me! Bai Jove!" exclaimed Paula tremulously.

"Yes—I did," Madge laughed. "Don't be so nerry! Remember the Creels—the whole line of Creels, who started life at Brighton."

"The Battle of Hastings! Oh, cwumbs!"

"Now what's the matter?"

Paula peered through the darkness, and Madge swivelled the torch round. Suddenly she stayed her hand, and the beam was, for a moment, fixed.

It shone across the path, lighting up a bush—a thin, sparsely-clad bush that was transparent.

And the girls stood stock-still, their eyes fixed and their breath coming in gasps.

For, through the twigs of the dead bush was discernible the figure of a man. Clearly in the light of the torch they could see his clothes—a simple suit with a large herring-bone pattern—very large.

"It's the broad arrow!" they whispered.

And Betty Barton huskily murmured:

"The convict!"

"The convict! Oh crumbs!"

"My word!" gasped Tess. "I say, run for it—quick!"

In a bunch the Morcove girls turned and ran swiftly and madly down the path towards the station, nor did they pause once for breath until they had the welcome view of the station lights.

CHAPTER 3.

The Face at the Carriage Window.

"OFF at last! Thank goodness we've left Barncombe behind!"

Tess Trelawney sank back on to her seat and heaved a sigh of relief, then she glanced round at her friends in the compartment. Whatever they cared to pretend, there was no mistaking their real feelings.

"Barncombe and the convict!" nodded Madge Minden. "Poor wretch!"

"Poor wretch! Yes, wather!" said Paula softly. "How wotten to be out on such a night! I wondah what he had done to be impwisoned?"

There was silence again, and a cloud seemed to have settled over the small party that had once been so gay.

"That's about the place!" Betty said suddenly, and pointed out into the darkness.

The train had waited for a moment outside the station, and now was steaming slowly past the steep embankment the other side of which was the wood.

It was there, right enough, that they had seen the convict, and the girls craned their necks to see.

The darkness was too deep to see much, but the lights from the carriage window lit up a portion of the embankment, and now into one small patch of light there rolled a dark figure.

"What was that—"

"That figure!"

In an instant they were on their feet and crowding to the window.

But the dark face had vanished. Only for a moment had they seen it, but the looks they exchanged were mystified and not a little alarmed.

"It—it looks like the convict," said Madge, voicing the general thought.

Polly leaned right out of the window and then regained her seat.

"No, we fancied it," she said.

"What—all of us?" Tess asked.

That, however, seemed rather impossible. They could not all have imagined that they had seen a figure. But then, as Betty said, it must have been something or someone else. They had not been able to see it clearly. It might have been a dog.

"I feel vewy sowwy for the convict, howevah," sighed Paula. "It must be tewwible being a convict, you know. I should wewuse to go to pwison."

Polly grinned.

"They'd take a lot of notice of you," she said.

The girls were not serious for long. Soon Polly was making her usual quips and jokes, and the carriage rang to the girls' laughter. Doubtless people in the neighbouring compartment smiled tolerantly at the girlish laughter.

For at Christmas-time there should be goodwill amongst all.

What fun there was in the Morcove compartment—laughter and joking and teasing. But no one minded, and Paula, who was naturally recipient of the teasing, minded least of all.

Paula looked very charming in her smart hat and well-cut coat, and when she looked charming she felt happy.

"Snow—and more snow!" sighed Madge.

"How really like Christmas! I wonder if there'll be a log fire?"

"Yes, wather! And a Chwistmas-twee, y' know!"

"Oh, yes! And a Santa Claus," smiled Polly, and the wink that she gave Betty Barton suggested that perhaps on that particular Christmas there would be some sort of Santa Claus.

"But there isn't a Santa Claus, y' know!"

"Not really?"

"Are you sure?"

And there was more laughter then, until Madge Minden said she thought it was time that they were at the junction. She went to the window and leaned out.

Next moment she brought her head in—and so sharply that she bumped it.

But Madge, although she must have hurt herself, did not even gasp.

Her eyes were staring, and her cheeks were pale.

Betty sprang to her feet.

"Madge—Madge, what is it?"

"Hurt yourself?" asked Tess, slipping her arm around Madge's waist.

But Madge slowly shook her head.

"No, no! I'm all right, but—"

She turned to the window, backing away from it, and pointed.

But there was no need to point.

Still as a tableau of stone, the girls stood staring at the window, staring fixedly at a face that was pressed against it.

For scarcely a minute the face remained there, but so intense was their gaze that they took in every detail of it. It was a strong face, a stern face, with grey, thoughtful eyes, a face that was kindly, sad, and care-worn.

But it was not so much the face that drew their attention, it was the close-cropped hair and the suit, emblazoned clearly with—a broad arrow.

"The convict!"

"Oh, quick!"

"Hold the door!"

"Pull the cord!"

But there was no need for that. As quickly as it had appeared, the face vanished, leaving only the black darkness, and fast, fleeting, drifting snow.

"Gone!" said Tess, sinking down on to the seat. "Oh goodness!"

Tess was quivering, and the others were no better; their faces were chulky, and their hearts were pumping fast.

"Ought—ought we to pull the cord?" Madge asked huskily. "I saw him crouching when I looked out."

"He may have fallen," Polly said. "I'm going to look!"

"No, Polly—don't!"

Betty clutched her vainly; but Polly, the madcap of the Form, did not pause to consider risks.

She had put her head out of the window before they could stop her.

"No, Polly! Come back, Polly!"

Polly turned.

"He's in a compartment, and the door's closed," said Polly.

Then followed a tense moment when every mind debated the same worrying question. What was the proper line of action?

"Pooah wretch!" said Paula. "We can't betway him!"

"But we ought to! It's our duty! He may be desperate!"

"He didn't look desperate," Madge Minden said quietly; "except desperately cold and hungry!"

Sympathy or duty—which?

For if the man had been imprisoned, he was by law regarded as unsafe to be abroad. Who knew of what crime he had been guilty? Who knew his character or his intention?

For all that they knew, he might have escaped in order to seek vengeance, and their duty was clear.

"We shall have to report it," said Betty, at last. "I—I hate doing it, in a way, and yet it's only right!"

"It's justice, I suppose," said Madge Minden.

But her voice was heavy. She wished, and they all wished, that the man was not guilty, that he might honestly find his freedom and fight his battles again without transgressing the written laws.

And they had scarcely made their decision when the train drew in at the junction.

They waited until the train drew to a standstill, and then Betty—it was always Betty who took the lead—went to find the stationmaster.

The others followed her, and he listened in amazement to their story.

He was a practical man, and he acted quickly.

First the indicated compartment was searched, and then the whole train. People,

startled and frightened, were turned out of compartments, while the floors beneath the seats were searched.

But the convict had vanished!

"He must have jumped off before he got to the station," said the stationmaster.

"He was too cute to get out here. They will have to search the line."

He turned then to the schoolgirls, and patted Betty's arm.

"But never mind, missy! You won't see him again to-night. He'll lie in hiding!"

"I suppose he will," Betty said. "We're catching a train in a minute's time, and he won't be in that one."

"No fear! He'll lie low!"

And then, thanked by many people and questioned by many, they had to force their way to the train that was to take them to Madge's aunt's house.

This time they found a compartment with other people, and it took many minutes for them to thaw out again.

"We've seen the last of him now!" Polly said with a sigh.

"Yes, he's not likely to come across our path again," Madge nodded.

But they were both wrong. They were destined to see the convict again, and before much time had passed!

CHAPTER 4.

Madge Minden's Cousin.

"HERE we are!"

"At last!"

They smoothed out their dresses, and looked about them on the small platform.

Snow now covered it an inch thick, and more snow was falling. Overhead the sky loomed dark, and the oil-lamps on the quaint station pierced the gloom for but a few yards.

The platform was illumined for a moment, however, by the windows of the train, and the scene was cheery.

At the other end their luggage was being turned out, and Paula ran to see that her things were all right.

Everything was there—hat-boxes, suit-cases, dressing-cases, and everything.

"Leave that to the man," Madge said. "My aunt has probably sent the car. It may be here by now."

"There's a man there," said Polly.

The train was steaming out of the

station, and the light had left the platform. But before the last carriage had left the station they caught sight of a sturdily-built man standing near the entrance.

Into the darkness of the night the train rumbled, and the girls watched its departure—watched the line of lights get faint, until only the red tail-lamp could be seen. But that vanished round a bend in the line, and then they were left with only the dim oil-lamps.

"He's coming towards us," said Madge. "I'll ask him."

"Excuse me, but have you come from Mrs. Moore?" Madge asked.

The man raised his hat and bowed rather stiffly, smiling in a slow, grim way.

"No, I have not that pleasure. However, I believe that you are the girls who saw the escaped convict on the train—just before Maudley Junction?"

"Yes, we are," Madge replied, greatly puzzled.

The girls looked at the man with renewed interest now, and in a hushed and audible whisper Polly confided that he was a detective.

"Correct," he said, with the same slow smile. "I am a detective. I want you to give me a description of the man or his clothes—if he had effected any disguise or any change in his clothes. Describe him closely, please."

He got out a note-book, and Madge, with much unrequired assistance from the others, described him.

"H'm! He hasn't found a change of clothing," the detective said. He looked up at the sky. "I fancy he'll come back to roost of his own accord on a night like this."

"My goodness, yes!" Madge said. "He looked frozen and hungry then!"

"He'll remain so, unless he finds a change of clothes, or is captured," the detective observed grimly.

He snapped the book, and the girls prepared to walk off, but with a gesture he stopped them.

"Did I understand that you were expecting a man from Mrs. Moore?" he asked.

"Yes; she is my aunt!" Madge said simply.

"Ah!" He looked at her intently, and then at the others. Next, he added, as though he was answering a question in his own mind. "There's a car outside—perhaps

that's for you. Good-night. Thanks for your assistance—and a merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas!" said the girls.

But even then he was not finished. He turned back for a second, and handed to Madge Minden a small card.

"In case you should gain any more information about this man, in case you should see him again, I should be obliged if you would communicate to me at the address given there."

Then, raising his hat, he vanished into the darkness, leaving the girls to crowd round the small pasteboard under the dim light of the oil-lamp.

"Fergus Dormayne," read Madge. "Boar Hotel, Hillchurch."

"There's an old London address scratched out," observed Tess Trelawney. "My word! A real detective!"

They looked at one another, and Polly Linton smiled faintly. The idea of anything mysterious or dramatic appealed to Polly, and the introduction into the affairs of a detective did not displease her in the least.

"Yes, rather!" Madge smiled. "I wonder—Hallo!"

She uttered that last exclamation as, turning, she found herself face to face with a girl of her own age, but a girl whose face was not so pleasant and not nearly so interesting as Madge Minden's.

The expression of that face was petulant, and her voice, when she spoke, did not belie it.

"So you're here!"

"Yes, we are here," Madge said cheerily.

Kyra Moore looked at Madge and then at the girls.

"You've brought a few friends," she remarked.

After that remark there was a short and rather painful silence. Perhaps Kyra had not meant to accentuate the "few," but it was equally possible that she may have meant to. The fact remained that she did.

"Auntie asked me to bring a few friends," Madge said, giving her cousin a sharp look. "Is the car outside?"

"It is," said Kyra shortly, "although I don't know if you'll manage to get into it."

"Oh, we'll try!" said Madge, giving her cousin a very dark, eloquent look.

Kyra certainly would not take medals for hospitality.

"We can walk," said Betty embarrassedly.

"Easily," Polly Linton agreed.

For they would have walked miles and miles in order to avoid any unpleasantness, and they felt keenly for Madge. Madge Minden was the personification of hospitality, and, judging from the invitation she had received from her aunt, Mrs. Moore was, too.

The car was outside the station, and Kyra led the way towards it, leaving the solitary porter to bring on the luggage.

"I say, Madge!"

Betty tugged Madge Minden's sleeve, and that girl turned. Poor Madge looked worried and concerned, and Betty was naturally sympathetic.

"I—I don't mind walking if the car's likely to be full," she said.

"No, no, Betty—don't! It's Kyra. At times she's—she's—oh, well, you can see for yourself!" Madge said hopelessly.

And indeed, explanations on Kyra's character were not needed. Excuses might have been more to the point, but there were none to be found.

Kyra had had every possible opportunity of becoming a charming girl. No expense had been spared in her education, and her governesses had always been the best procurable.

Yet here she was, ill-mannered, ill-graced, a girl whom Madge Minden was not at all proud to introduce as a relation.

"My word—freezing!" said Polly cheerily.

"Yes, wather—wippin'!" said Paula, who intended to make the absolute best of everything for Madge's sake.

"You'll have to pack in any old how," said Kyra, with ill grace.

"Oh, that's all wight! We don't mind! Although I hope we shan't prevent youah having a good seat," said Paula graciously.

"You needn't worry about that," Kyra assured her. "I'll see that I get a good seat!"

"Trust you!" Madge said scornfully.

Kyra shrugged her shoulders, and it was evidenced at once that the dislike was not all on Madge Minden's side.

"Jones!" Kyra said authoritatively.

The chauffeur, who had just started the engine, ran forward, touching his cap.

"Yes, Miss Kyra?"

"Don't gape about, you old duffer!"

Kyra exclaimed angrily. "There's piles of luggage to get in! We don't want to be out here all night!"

The old man touched his cap and moved off.

The other girls were frowning their displeasure, and casting sympathetic glances at the old chauffeur. Obviously Kyra was "showing off" for their benefit. But they did not intend to encourage her by giving her their approbation.

"Wather a charming old chauffeur, bai Jove!" Paula murmured.

"Poof! Lazy old goat!" said Kyra. "I don't know what servants are coming to!"

"Ahem!"

There was a slight silence then, as the girls bent their chins down more deeply in the high, warm collars of their coats.

All around was dark, and only the faint, vague, shadowy forms of the trees showed up. They looked like ghostly figures, and Paula shivered slightly.

"Hope we shan't be long in getting theah," she murmured. "A fire would be welcome."

"Yes, rather—jolly welcome!" Polly Linton agreed. "My word, look at the luggage! Phew!"

"My word!"

"We can't take all that lot!" said Kyra.

And for once she was right. It would be as much as the girls could do to pack themselves into the car, let alone the luggage. Some would have to be taken, but the trunks would have to remain.

"Bai Jove! But my twunks—"

Paula broke off in the middle of her sentence and sighed. She was torn between a desire to take all the beautiful possessions that were stored in the trunks, and a counter-desire to be obliging under all circumstances.

Polly nudged her and made a grimace.

"Weally, Polly, what a tewwible face! I do hope youah not in pain— Oh, bai Jove! Weally—" Paula backed away, hopping on one foot.

"Br-r-r!" said Polly. "Duffer! Now ask me why I stood on your foot?"

But Paula had guessed. Kyra was looking at the luggage, and she was talking quite loudly. At every word Madge Minden's cheeks seemed to grow redder and redder.

"Bai Jove! How wotched, y'know! Poor old Madgel!"

Paula crossed to the two, and Betty, not being sure of her intention, tried to intervene. Paula often had the best possible intentions, but the worst possible way of putting them into operation. However, on this particular occasion, Paula did not live up to her usual reputation.

"Pewwaps we'd bettah take only the suit-cases, y'know. The other things can come along in the morning."

"They'll have to!" Kyra said.

"Kyra!" Madge exclaimed sternly in rebuke.

"Well, so they will! Goodness gracious! The mater doesn't want the springs of the car broken. I'll send Sands down in the morning."

"Sands! She's still here?" Madge said, trying to steer the conversation into quieter channels.

"Yes—both'er her!" Kyra said. "I've tried to get her sacked—the old duffer! I don't want a governess! I can look after myself!"

"Oh, my word!" said Polly faintly.

"Poor old Sands, if she's a governess to this!" Tess Trelawney murmured.

And Paula said:

"Yes, wather!"

But at last the luggage affair was settled. The porter was tipped to take the luggage back into the cloak-room, whilst the chauffeur bundled the suit-cases on to the top of the car.

The lights of the landaulette gleamed feebly, and the engines "ticked over" none too quietly. But inside it was warm, and the girls soon found that the more there were of them the warmer it would be.

Madge decided to go in front with the chauffeur, without asking anyone. Of course, they would all have dutifully offered, but Madge was a hostess in the true sense of the word and was trying to make them all comfortable.

Kyra it was who took a comfortable position in the corner seat, and wrapped the rug about her. Polly plomped down next and took Betty on her knees. Paula squeezed in next to Polly, and Trixie and Tess made themselves comfortable in the small spare seats. But as there were two suit-cases inside, there was not too much room or comfort—except, of course, for Kyra.

At last the car moved forward, and the headlights were switched on, their reflec-

tion in the snow-covered road being almost blinding.

"Soon be there!" said Polly.

"Yes, wather! Wippin'!"

And Paula gasped for breath in her corner, but she did not grumble. They would soon be there.

CHAPTER 5.

Miss Sands' Secret.

CLANG! Clang!

The bell rang noisily from the turret of the old Manor House.

It was an eerie bell, and echoed far across the countryside. In the years gone by it had been a fire bell, but now it had been humbled to announce visitors.

Perhaps not humbled on this particular occasion, for it announced the arrival of the Morcove girls.

Out of the landaulette they jumped, to commence darting about and leaping to warm themselves.

"What a spiffing place!" Polly said ecstatically. "Oh, how ripping!"

Polly was the less poetical of girls, but even she was entranced by the quaint, old-fashioned beauty of the Manor.

Snow covered the ground in front of it, and snow covered the old gabled roof, whilst snow was festooned also in the leaded windows.

From those same windows came a cheerful, yellowish light that shone down cheerfully on the snow.

Through one large window was visible an old staircase dimly lighted, and through that window came sudden flickering shafts of red light that told of a brightly-burning fire.

Clang! Clang!

Now they craned their necks to see that bell. Polly said that she could see it, but Kyra laughed scoffingly at the idea, pointing out the fact that it was hidden by the eaves, which interrupted the view.

Faintly the snow fluttered down, covering their coats, hats and faces.

How Christmassy it was, that old house! How splendid the snow looked as it dripped on to the old ivy-covered walls.

"Oh, for a canvas!" sighed Tess Trelawney. "Wouldn't I just love to paint that picture!"

"Wouldn't be much painting to do,"

Polly pointed out. "It's chiefly black and white."

Then, as though struck by a brilliant idea, Polly stooped and gathered up some snow.

"Who says a dance?" she asked.

"Bai Jove, wippin'! With lanterns, y'know! Yes, wather!"

"A ball? You'd like one?" Polly inquired.

"Yes, deah geal. I— Ooooooooh! Gug! Ooooh!" as something soft came whizzing through the air. It was something cold as well as soft, and it broke on her elegant, aristocratic nose with a slight plomp!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, deah! Ugh! Sus-snow!" wailed Paula. "Polly, you little imp!"

Paula gouged the snow from her face, and Polly, doubled up with laughter, dodged round Betty.

"You said that you wanted a ball!" chuckled Polly. "That's it—a snow ball!"

"What? You ticked me! Stand still, deah geal—"

"Mind!" shrieked Polly. "The window—you'll smash it!"

Paula lowered the hastily-made snowball in surprise.

"The window's nowhere near you!" she said.

"I know. That's why it's in danger of being hit!" said Polly.

The girls gave a peal of laughter as they saw Paula's expression, and in their merriment they entirely failed to notice that the door of the house had been opened.

A maid stood in the doorway, and behind her was an elderly woman with a pleasant, smiling face.

"Oh, help! Stop her!" Polly gasped, as she dodged out of Paula's way.

She dodged into the light from the open doorway, and Paula took careful aim, but as the snowball left her hand Polly ducked. Whiz!

The snowball hurtled through the open doorway, and from the elderly woman there came a smothered gasp. Every bullet is supposed to have a billet, and the same rule applies to snowballs. The billet of the one Paula threw was the shoulder of the elderly woman.

Horrified, the girls stood quite still and stared.

"Oh!"

"Bub-bub-bai Jove! Oh, deah!"

But there was one girl who was not horrified. That girl was Kyra. She pointed to the elderly woman, then threw back her head and laughed.

"Oh, ripping! Ha, ha, ha! Good shot!"

Paula gave her a ferocious look and stepped quickly forward, her cheeks burning red.

In the doorway, the amazed woman was wiping the snow from her face. The maid, backing behind the doorway, tittered in merriment.

"Bai Jove! I—er—pway excuse me, madam. I assuah you that it was entirely an accident, y'know. Allow me to wipe the snow. I—I was throwing it at my fwiend."

"Yes, it was an accident," said Polly hastily. "It was my fault, I ducked!"

And Polly was quite contrite.

Paula, with great care, used one of her most exclusive handkerchiefs to wipe the snow from the woman's dress.

"Oh, my word, she can look after herself!" said Kyra. "It's only Sands, my governess!"

"I suppose a governess is human," said Betty, rather tartly, forgetting momentarily that Kyra was the daughter of her hostess.

"Poof! A governess!" said Kyra. "You don't take notice of them! I'd throw a ton of snow at her if I had the chance!"

Betty set her lip and said no more. It was evidently useless to say anything to Kyra.

Miss Sands was apparently used to such treatment, for she smiled faintly as she cleaned her face.

"It was no matter," she said. "I can take a joke."

"But—but it wasn't a joke—weally!" Paula exclaimed worriedly. "Gwacious! I hope that I should never be guilty of playing jokes upon my eldahs!"

Kyra simpered.

"Oh, no, y'know! Not on my eldahs! Good gwacious! De-ah, de-ah! Always be kind to your nice tee-chars! What would mothah say?"

Paula's cheeks became redder than ever, and Madge looked as though she were about to fling herself on Kyra.

"I quite understand," said Miss Sands hastily. "It was an accident! These things will happen!"

"Yes, wather!" Paula nodded in great

relief. "I couldn't help it! It was most unfortunate."

"Very! But all is well," Miss Sands smiled, and her smile was sufficiently warm in itself to thaw the remaining snow.

At once Paula liked her, and smiled back.

"She's a brick!" vowed Polly. "I shouldn't mind her as a governess! Fancy slinging snow at Miss Massingham—even by accident!"

And there was a breathless hush even at the bare idea, for Miss Massingham, their Form-mistress, was strict—very strict. The result of such an accident at Morcove might have ended differently from this.

Kyra did not fail to notice the impression that the governess had made, and she frowned slightly.

"You're all right now, Sands," she said. "You'd better help Jones in with the trunks whilst I take my guests to see mother."

"Yes, Kyra dear!"

"All right, Sands dear!" Kyra retorted, and grinned slightly, as though she had said something clever.

Miss Sands, however, pretended not to notice the mimicry of her tone, and went down to the chauffeur.

"I say, we'll lend a hand," said Polly quickly. "We can't let Miss Sands go out there in the cold without a coat!"

"Rather not!" Madge agreed. "If you wouldn't mind lending a hand."

As if they would mind!

Readily they gave the aid, and Kyra stood watching them.

"You go in, Miss Sands," Madge said. "We can see to this."

Miss Sands, smiling, thanked her.

"I could do it," she said. "But it is cold! Thank you very much!"

She went back into the house, and Kyra, her face black with rage, jumped down the steps.

"Here! I told Sands to do that, Madge! Madge, I was speaking to you!"

Madge did not answer. Perhaps she did not hear, for she was clambering on to the roof of the landaulette. But, anyway, she did not heed.

"Madge!"

Kyra ran forward and clutched fiercely at her cousin's leg.

Madge gave a gasp, clutched at the rail of the roof, and then landed heavily in the snow.

"My word!"

Polly Linton simply stared. She had never seen quite such a girl before, and the others shared her feeling. Betty quickly gave Madge a hand, and Madge's cheeks told their own story. She limped slightly when she stood up, and winced.

"Hurt yourself?" Tess asked.

"No, not much!" Then she turned to Kyra. "I suppose you did that! Why?"

"Because I did!"

And Kyra turned on her heel and strode off.

Polly Linton regarded her retreating figure, and whistled softly to herself.

"Phew! My word—what a nice girl!"

Then, realising that Kyra was Madge's cousin, she coloured slightly.

"Oh, don't mind me!" Madge said. "I don't hold any brief for Kyra. My own feeling is one of sorrow for anyone who comes near her. I—I didn't realise, though, that I was letting you all in for this!"

"It's not your fault," Betty assured her. "Perhaps she will quieten down."

"She's always the same. None of her governesses can do anything with her. Sands"—Madge sighed—"I'm awfully sorry for Miss Sands. She seems so miserable, so lonely, and Kyra is simply horrid to her!"

"Doesn't your aunt stop her?" Betty asked.

"Well, I think that auntie doesn't notice it. She's rather wrapped up in her own interests, and thinks that Kyra is awfully clever and forward for her age."

"Oh!"

Thus were they prepared for Mrs. Moore. She was a quiet woman, pale-faced, obviously away with her own thoughts, even when she was entering quite brightly into general conversation.

"Miss Sands will show you your rooms, dear," she said to Madge. "Dinner will be ready soon, but you will hear the gong for dressing."

"Yes, auntie dear. You'll be down to dinner, of course?"

"Perhaps, dear. I do hope you won't think it awfully rude of me, but I am in the middle of an article I am writing for the geological review, and it must be finished to-night. You shall read it."

"Thank you, aunt!" Madge said dutifully.

"Yes, I think, after all, that I will have dinner on my own, if you will excuse me. You won't be missing much," she added,

with a faint smile. "I'm not a very bright companion at table, am I?"

Then she strolled off, and left them to capable Miss Sands.

They were shown their delightful rooms, cosy and comfortable, and then they washed.

"Shall I have time to change this dress?" Paula wanted to know.

So Madge ran along to Miss Sands' room to ask what time the dinner would be ready. She was gone several minutes, and when she re-entered the room her face was serious.

Betty noticed it at once, and so did Paula.

"Hallo! What's wrong, dear?" Betty asked sympathetically. "Not Kyra again?"

Madge shook her head.

"No, it's not Kyra. Dinner's at eight to-night—rather late—so you'll have time, Paula. And our trunks have arrived. Miss Sands expected there to be more than would go in the landaulette, and arranged for a farm vehicle to fetch them."

And the conversation passed into other channels, without Betty's learning the cause of those worried lines on Madge's face.

But when they were going down to dinner Madge hung back until she and Betty were alone, then she said quietly:

"Betty dear, something is amiss. I went into Miss Sands' room just now, and found her crying!"

CHAPTER 6.

Footsteps in the Snow.

"WHERE'S Sands?"

Kyra automatically asked that question as the girls took their places at the table.

Miss Sands had not yet put in an appearance, and Kyra, as hostess in her mother's stead, was making the most of her position.

"In her room," said Madge. "I don't suppose she'll be more than a minute."

The parlourmaid sighed slightly, and then looked the other way as Kyra glanced towards her.

Below stairs, the opinion of Kyra was not a flattering one, although the knowledge of that would have surprised the autocratic daughter of the house.

Kyra was quite under the impression that she was highly praised and admired every-

where. There could not have possibly been a more mistaken impression.

"Shall I go and tell her?" Betty asked.

"Yes. Tell her to hurry up—the old slow-coach!" Kyra said without thanks or grace.

Betty smiled tolerantly, and went from the room. Already she had learned her way about the old rambling house, and without hesitation she went to the governess' room.

It was dark in the corridor, and it seemed that there was no light under Miss Sands' door.

At first Betty thought that the room must be deserted, but that idea was instantly dispelled when she heard the sound of voices within.

Miss Sands was there, and apparently she was not alone. For a moment Betty paused, and a floor-board creaked. From the small room came the sound of shuffling, and then the voices ceased. Then, it seemed to Betty, a window opened and shut.

She waited a moment, puzzled, wondering what was amiss.

Why had the voices ceased at the sound of her approach? And why had the window opened and shut?

And now was silence, and she wondered if she had imagined those sounds, but even as the doubt entered her mind she banished it. This was no case for doubting.

Someone had been in the room—two persons. And now it was silent. One thought jumped into her mind. There was an explanation of the darkness, of the hushed voices, of the opening and shutting of the window.

"Burglars!"

She muttered the word half aloud, and quick as thought hurried forward.

Her hand was upon the knob, and the door was open in a second.

The electric light switch, she knew, was just inside the doorway on the right, and she groped for it.

Flick!

The room was flooded with light, and she stared about her.

But presently her gaze fixed upon the one occupant of the room, the figure at the table.

"Miss Sands!" she murmured.

But the governess did not move. Her shoulders were shaking, and her head was buried in her arms.

Betty, uncertain what to do or what to say for the best, hesitated, standing there in the doorway, staring.

The room had not been empty. Miss Sands was alone. What, then, of the voices—the other voice that could have belonged to a man?

"Miss Sands."

She stepped forward as the head was raised. She had half a mind to turn and go away without letting anyone know what she had seen, but she was not sure that Miss Sands was well.

Now the governess slowly raised her head, and fixed upon Betty amazed, tear-brimmed eyes.

"Oh, how did you come in? I didn't hear—"

Betty coloured slightly.

"I'm sorry, Miss Sands. I—I didn't mean to intrude, but—but I heard voices." "Voices!"

Gone then was Miss Sands' listlessness. At once she was on the alert, and her eyes seemed bright and piercing through the tears.

"Yes, I—perhaps I was mistaken," Betty said, staring in amazement at the governess' expression.

"I was talking to myself," Miss Sands said slowly.

"I thought I heard a voice—a burglar, I thought."

"Ah!"

Was it relief that crossed her face then?

Betty could not say, but she was more than ever puzzled when Miss Sands dropped her head back into her hands and renewed her tears.

"Miss Sands, don't—please don't. What is the matter? Please tell me."

Betty, all sympathy, was upon her knees at once beside the governess, putting her arms comfortingly about her shoulders.

"It's nothing! Do—don't worry, please."

"But I hate to see you miserable, to see you crying. Is it Kyra?"

"No, no! You wouldn't understand. It's quite different!"

The woman braced herself as though to throw off her grief, but although no tears fell the lips trembled, and the eyes were heavily sad.

"I'm silly! I suppose," she said softly, "it—it is sentiment. To think that it is Christmas-time—the time when all hatchets are buried, when—when—"

"You're—you're thinking of someone you've lost? I understand," Betty said. "I'm sorry that I butted in like this, only I thought that I heard voices."

Miss Sands nodded her head.

"You did the right thing. It might have been a burglar. Perhaps there was a burglar—in the next room!"

Her voice was low, and as she rose from her chair she tottered slightly. Betty put out a strong, protecting arm, and held the frail figure tightly.

How thin the old lady was! Old to Betty, yet only middle-aged. Care it was that had turned her hair white, that had lined her face beyond her years.

And as Betty stood there, there came in the corridor the sound of other steps.

"Sands! Sands!"

The governess tried to straighten herself and reply, but Betty it was who called out:

"Here we are!"

And in a second peevish, angry Kyra was standing in the doorway.

"Oh, you're here! What a time you've been! We've been waiting ages and ages! Goodness! What on earth—"

Kyra stared at the sight of the governess in Betty's arms.

"Here! Hi, Madge, and you lot!" she called over her shoulder. "Look at them cuddling each other!"

Madge Minden was there in a second, with Polly Linton only just behind her.

"Betty, what is it?"

"It is nothing," said the governess. "I felt faint."

"You always are!" sneered Kyra. "Goodness, I never come across you but you're snivelling about something, Sands! Fancy a woman of your age—"

"Shame on you!" said Polly Linton quickly. "You ought to be jolly well slapped!"

Kyra simply had no reply ready. She was not used to being spoken to in that manner. She blinked at Polly and dropped her jaw.

"Don't you feel fit for dinner?" Betty asked the governess.

"Yes, yes. I am well."

"I frightened her," Betty said to Madge. "I thought I heard burglars."

"There may have been burglars. It would be as well to look," the governess said.

"Burglars!" Polly cried. "My word! Here?"

"In the next room," Betty exclaimed, anxious to get them out of the way so that Miss Sands could have the room to herself.

Into the next room the girls went readily enough, all excitement and keenness. A burglar was indeed something about which to get excited.

"Poof! Stupid nonsense!" Kyra said, crossing to the window, out of which Polly leaped. "Let me look!"

Polly drew back, and her face was bright with excitement.

"Footsteps in the snow! Goodness! Look!"

"Where?"

"Bai Jove!"

Snow was falling rapidly, but even so footsteps were seen below. Someone had been down there recently, and not many minutes ago, for already the imprints were getting blurred. As they watched they could detect their growing faintness.

"A burglar!" Polly said. "My word! We'd better catch him!"

"Rather!"

And downstairs they tumbled, with Kyra well in front, ready to take the lead as far as the door. But out in the darkness she drew back, and the leadership was left to Polly.

They traced the footsteps for yards, but presently found that they ended in blurred confusion.

There they halted, and it was whilst they were discussing the strangeness of it that Betty arrived. She had left Miss Sands in her bed-room, and, being assured of the old lady's safety, had descended to join her friends.

"See? This is where they end!" Polly exclaimed. "What do you make of it?"

"What do you make of it, anyway?" Kyra asked. "The footsteps started under the old guy's window."

"The old guy! Bai Jove, whom do you mean?" Paula asked.

"Why, Sands!" Kyra sniffed. "Likely as not she lets in burglars to steal the plate!" Her eyes gleamed. "That's it! Where did you hear the sounds?" she asked Betty.

Betty Barton hesitated only for a fraction of a second. Her mind worked quickly, and she realised at once that with only a suspicion of proof Kyra would be prepared

to blacken the governess' name, and make all sorts of unsupported or unsupportable accusations.

"I couldn't say," she answered.

"Well, I wouldn't mind betting that that's her game," Kyra exclaimed. "I'd —"

She broke off as Polly Linton clutched her arm.

"Shush! Someone moved in the bushes!"

"In the bushes!"

In an instant they ran forward, and commenced a rapid search. From bush to bush they went under the giant trees, in and out.

"Oh!"

"Hallo! Seen him?"

"I—I fancy so. I saw a face," Betty said haltingly. "But he's gone now!"

The others gathered round her, talking excitedly, but she could apparently give them no description. Her face was rather white, and she seemed shaky.

"Poor old Betty!" Polly said. "It made you jump!"

"It did," Betty confessed. "My goodness! What a night to be at large!"

"He pleases himself!" Kyra shrugged.

"I wonder——"

That was all Betty said, and she was silent as they wandered back to dinner. Dinner, of course, was ruined, and cook, below stairs, was giving her private opinion of catering for schoolgirls.

But, cold though it was, the girls found it enjoyable, and under the influence of the food, they brightened, and even Kyra became cheery and cracked jokes.

The fun waxed fast and furious, yet Betty Barton smiled rarely, and her smile and her look were far away.

For Betty Barton was thinking of something else—of the face that she had seen in the bushes.

But Betty's air of gloom was charmed away by Polly, and she laughed with the rest right merrily until it was the hour for bed.

Then, with the others, yawning, she went to bed. Quite a time they lay awake, talking until the clock struck midnight, and then, thoroughly tired, they went off to sleep.

The snow had ceased, and through the window Betty Barton, wide awake, looked out on to the dark night and the cheery sky above.

A sad smile crossed her face. Two pic-

tures were clearly in her mind—one of Miss Sands crying in her room in the darkness, and the second of the face she had seen in the bushes. Poor Miss Sands! It required no great cleverness to realise that she was the prey to some secret sorrow. "What could this sorrow be?" wondered Betty. And as she thought she wished—oh, how she wished she could help her!

Then her mind switched to the convict, and he, too, partook of her pity.

Little did she know how Fate was going to grant her wish!

CHAPTER 7.

A Telegram from Naomer.

TAP!

Betty Barton opened her eyes sleepily, and blinked about her in the attractive bed-room.

For a moment she was rather lost imagining herself in her usual surroundings at Morcove School; for Betty was still half asleep.

"Ya-awa-aw!"

She sat up against the pillows, blinked, and looked at the bed beside her.

"Polly," she said sleepily. "there's someone at the door."

"Um—um——" mumbled Polly Linton.

Tap!

"Come in," said Betty rather briskly, considering how sleepy she was.

The door opened, and into the room came a servant.

"Miss Barton?" she asked.

"All right," Betty answered promptly.

"I mean, I'm here. Oh, gracious! I'd forgotten this wasn't Morcove——"

The servant smiled, and handed her an orange-coloured envelope.

"A telegram, just arrived," she said. "It came by the postman; they don't deliver after seven in the evening, and it came last night."

Betty smiled her thanks, took the telegram, and slit the envelope.

To read it was but the work of a moment, and then she looked up at the servant.

"No answer, thanks. Polly—Polly," she cried excitedly, jumping out of bed, "it's a wire from Naomer. She's coming to-day."

Now, of course, Polly Linton was thoroughly awake.

"Naomer—oh, good!" she exclaimed. "I'm so glad. That just completes the party. My word! With Naomer here we shall wake up the old Manor House, eh?"

"We shall," Betty agreed. "I'd forgotten we weren't at Morcove."

It was cold, and Betty, after a preliminary shiver, put on her dressing-gown and slippers.

"Snow!" she called excitedly as she looked out of the window.

That brought Polly Linton out of bed in a single leap. Polly had not earned the name of the Madcap of the Fourth Form at Morcove for nothing; and snow appealed to her sense of fun.

Betty was just as merry; though, as captain of the Fourth Form, it befitted her to appear more staid, even though she felt as exuberant as her chums.

For a while the two stood side by side, looking out of the window.

All across the grounds below was snow. It covered the trees and bushes as though one immense white mantle had cloaked the whole scene.

"Hooray! Christmas!" Polly cheered. "I say! What fun! Where's Paula, Madge, and the others?"

"Paula's in there—asleep I suppose," Betty smiled. "Let her sleep on——"

"What? On a morning such as this?" Polly exclaimed.

And she dashed to the communicating door, bursting it open violently. In that room, which was a small one, there was only one bed, and in that bed lay Paula Creel.

Paula's aristocratic eyes were closed in slumber, and her breathing was deep and regular.

"What a picture!" Polly laughed. "Oh, Betty, just look! What's she dreaming of—ancestral halls?"

"The Battle of Hastings," Betty smiled. "Don't wake her, dear!"

But Polly, with dancing fun in her eyes, stopped towards the bed. Polly never could resist teasing Paula—often and often Paula had said that her life was made almost unbearable. Yet, somehow, she seemed to survive, and even enjoy life!

For a moment Polly paused, and Betty, who knew her chum very well, could see that she was thinking out mischief of some sort. But it was useless to think of trying

to prevent any action of Polly's! The mad-cap usually had her own way!

Gently Polly opened one of the sunlit, old-fashioned windows that helped to make Hillchurch Manor House so attractive, and, with it propped open, she scooped with her hands some of the glistening snow.

It was wonderfully crisp, and was easily made into a snowball. At that part Polly Linton was skilled—and judging by the smile on her cheery face, it was an occupation that gave her unbounded pleasure.

"Have mercy on a slumberer, dear," Betty laughed.

But Polly hushed her to silence, and tiptoed towards Paula's bed.

Now Paula turned for a moment in her sleep and lay on her back. That was Polly's chance.

With a deft, skilled movement she planted the ball of snow firmly on Paula's nose, so that it balanced there. Then, with a giggle of sheer joy, she ran to the communicating-door, bustling Betty into their own room, and waiting with the door partly ajar.

It was only a second before a movement came from Paula's bed—and small wonder!

"Oh, bai Jove! Ugh!"

Paula blinked and gasped as the snow, melting slightly, trickled down her face.

"Oh, heal! Heal!—geals! A glacier, bai Jove!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The others could restrain their laughter no longer; and Paula, blinking her eyes hard and clutching frantically at the air, had a glimpse of two heads peering round the door.

At that precise moment the snowball tumbled from Paula's nose, and she gazed at it blankly. The expression on her face was so comical that it proved too much for Madge Minden and Tess Trelawney, who at this moment had joined Betty and Polly, and they simply doubled up with laughter.

"Merry Christmas!" gurgled Tess Trelawney. "Oh, Paula dear, you'll be the death of me!"

"But—but—" Paula gasped. "Weally, Polly—you were joking—"

"Oh, no," Polly said, "not really—"

"Weally, Polly dear, I do wish that you would not be so fivoolous." Paula touched her nose tenderly. "I'm fwozen, y'know. My nose—"

"Oh, it still looks a bit Norman," Polly

said consolingly. "I suppose it's snow joke, but your nose has a patriotic glow—a red, white and blue look—"

That was enough for Paula. Out of bed she skipped in her dainty nightdress, and regarded herself in the mirror.

"Never mind your old nose," said Betty. "I've had a telegram from Naomer."

And then even Paula's nose was forgotten.

"Naomer—bai Jove! She is coming!" "Yes, and to-day!" Betty said. Then she cleared her throat to read the telegram aloud. "Listen!"

"Hallo! Present! Shall come by train; get to Hillchurch nine o'clock morning. Hooray!

"NAOMER."

There were many smiles as that telegram was read aloud. Naomer Nakara, the Morcove girl from the East, had never quite assimilated the niceties of the English language, and even on a telegram she allowed herself what Polly termed "poet's licence."

"We'll have to meet her at the station," Madge Minden said. "Auntie won't be up yet, but we can get the car all right!"

"Good biz!"

Madge Minden's aunt was a kind hostess and they all liked her immensely.

"Then we'd better get dressed at once," Betty remarked. "Is your aunt an early riser, Madge?" she asked.

"Auntie—no. She usually has breakfast in bed," Madge replied. "But my cousin, Kyra, will be up, and Sands—"

"I'm wather fond of Miss Sands, y'know," Paula remarked. "I wegard her as a wippin' governess for Kywa, and my only wegwet is that Kywa tweats her with such gwoss wudeness."

As a rule, Paula's little speeches, as Polly Linton was pleased to call them, were not popular; but, on this particular occasion, Paula was but voicing the opinion of them all.

Kyra Moore, Madge Minden's cousin, did not make any effort to hide her contempt for her governess—a contempt that was wholly undeserved—and out of sympathy the Morcove girls had made themselves extra nice to the unfortunate recipient of Kyra's rudeness.

"I dare say Kyra will be up," Madge mused as she paused in the doorway. "But we don't want her with us—"

"Don't want me?"

It was a sharp, unmusical voice that interrupted Madge's remark, and Madge went quite red.

"Oh, I—I didn't know that you were there, Kyra!"

"I didn't suppose that you did!"

There was something altogether unpleasant in Kyra's tone, and the girls in the room were silent when she entered.

"So you're going out?" she asked.

She wore a smart dress, and Paula eyed it not without envy. Indeed, but for the unpleasantness of her expression, Kyra Moore might have been regarded as very pretty indeed.

That expression—how it ruined her appearance! If only she were to smile instead of sneer; if only she were to be prepared for pleasantness instead of unpleasantness! But if she were different she would not be Kyra. Not, however, that that would matter much.

Of all her household, only her mother had affection for her; and Madge's aunt was far too engrossed with her books and her writing to pay much heed to the development of her daughter's character.

It was Mrs. Moore's great ambition to avoid worry and trouble of every description, and to that end she placed the governing of her daughter entirely in the hands of Miss Sands.

That would have been all right if Miss Sands had been given an entirely free hand. She had not, however. To begin with, Kyra had gone to her mother with complaints, and then, solely because she did not wish to be troubled with them, the mother insisted that her daughter should do exactly as she chose.

So perhaps there was some little excuse for Kyra's ways. The laxity of a mother engrossed in other interests contributed to quite ninety per cent of her unpleasant manner.

Now Kyra stood regarding the girls with an unveiled sneer.

"You do not want me?" she asked.

"I don't suppose you want to be dragged down to the station to meet someone," Madge said, trying hard to smile. "I suppose we can have the car?"

Kyra looked at her.

"I suppose you can't. If you want to go to the station you must walk. I want the car to go shopping."

And with that Kyra slammed the door.

In the room there was quite a painful silence whilst Madge Minden fought for words to express her shame.

"I—I'm sorry. I—I didn't mean to let you in for this. Kyra has got worse and worse. She—she's unbearable!"

"Yes, wather," frowned Paula; then added hastily: "I mean wather not, not at all, bai Jove!"

"We can stand her," said Polly, "if we try hard. But, anyway, it isn't your fault, Madge. Don't look so glum."

"Well, I feel glum, having a cousin like that," Madge said. "Still"—she shrugged her shoulders—"I suppose it can't be helped."

"Of course it can't, dear," Betty said. "If we can't have the car, we must walk. A trot to the station will do us good."

"It's snowing!"

"All the more fun!"

And that is how the girls intended to take the affair. So that, after a hurried breakfast, the party set off in gay spirits, with coat and mufflers and warm gloves.

As Betty said:

"We'll manage!"

CHAPTER 8.

A Clue to the Convict.

"OOOOH! Paula—Polly—Betty! 'Ello! Present!"

The train had scarcely jerked to a standstill, when the door opened, and from the train tumbled a lithe figure.

Naomer had calculated without the momentum of the train, and she twirled slightly as she landed. Her feet shot from under her, and she skidded along on the slippery path.

"Ooooh! I like 'im not! Help!"

Bump!

Before any of them could reach her, Naomer had landed lightly on the platform; and there she sat in the snow, her merry face aglow with fun, and her dark eyes sparkling.

"Bai Jove! Are you hurt, Naomer, deah geal?"

"Hurt! Ooo, no! I like 'im, the slide! Ha, ha, ha!"

And Naomer rolled in the snow, and then sprang up.

"Cold?" laughed Polly. "You Easterners don't like snow!"

"I like 'im," Naomer said, in her peculiar English. And then she caught sight of Paula again, and a positive beam of joy radiated her face.

"Oooo, Paula! I love you!"

She jumped forward, and spread out her arms. Paula backed away, but she was not destined to resist the embrace of Naomer.

With tight, vice-like arms, Naomer gripped her, and held.

"Merry Christmas—yees! We slide, eh?"

She laughed exhilaratingly, and the others, infected with her laughter, joined in without quite knowing why they did so.

"It's good to hear your laughter again, Naomer," Betty said.

"Yes—Christmas, he is very good, eh?" Naomer cried, dancing round.

She seemed to have forgotten her luggage, and Betty it was who dived into the compartment just before the train started, and retrieved the bag and rug. The trunk had already been dumped on to the platform, and the solitary porter was waiting by it.

"Goodness! However shall we get the trunk to the house?" Madge asked.

"Leave it until we can find a conveyance," Polly said. "I suppose there's a trap or something in Hillchurch?"

Madge smiled.

"I'm afraid you don't know Hillchurch, Polly," she said. "Still, we can try. I'll take the bag."

But Polly already had hold of it, so Madge took the rug, also the lead.

Naomer, talking quickly and excitedly of her journey during the night, was between Paula and Betty, and their constant smiles showed that Naomer was in her usual good spirits.

"And you—you tell me about 'im—this holiday!" Naomer said.

"Lots has happened," Betty said. "Hallo—someone else for Hillchurch!"

Someone had alighted from the train just before it had started, and it was at him that Betty was looking.

He was an old man, stooping slightly, and his white beard gave him a distinct and reverent appearance; he was in all a person once seen, not easily forgotten. But he turned to look at them, and Betty glanced away.

"That man's walk seems vaguely familiar," she said. "I thought he might be the convict in disguise."

"Convict? What is a convict? Is it good? Oooo, tell me!" And Naomer rolled her eyes up in the drollest way imaginable.

"Well, I'll tell you outside," Betty promised.

And, true to her word, as they walked through the village, she told Naomer the story.

"It all started in Barncombe," she said. "We did a little shopping there before we caught the train here, and we heard that a convict had escaped from prison. A prisoner, you know," she exclaimed. "And—we saw him in the wood!"

"Ooo! How jolly! What was he like!"

"He was quite harmless, and very cold," said Betty, laughing. "But we ran—"

"Purely strategical," Polly interposed hastily.

"Strateg—" Naomer frowned. "I not know 'im!"

"That means," Madge explained, "that we don't want you to know that we were a bit afraid—"

"Ah-h-h!" said Naomer. "Polly afraid—"

"I wasn't!" denied Polly indignantly. "Only—only we had to catch our train, you know—"

"Yes, and when we did catch it," Betty went on, to save Polly, "whom should we see but the convict—"

"Again! He follow you?" Naomer asked.

"Well, hardly," Betty smiled. "Not purposely, anyway. You see, he was trying to escape. Anyway, we told the station-master, and the train was searched. But the convict had gone. Next thing, when we arrived here, a detective was waiting for us—"

"Oooo—to catch the convict, yes? How excitable—"

"Exciting!" Betty corrected gently.

"Yes, the detective gave you a card, didn't he?" she finished, turning to Madge Minton.

But Madge had already taken the visiting-card from her coat.

"Mr. Ferguson Dormayne, Detective,
The Boar Hotel, Hillchurch."

"Oooo! A real detective!" Naomer said excitedly.

In Hillchurch, they looked about for the man who had alighted from the train, but he had vanished; and they hunted for a

place where it might be possible to hire a trap.

They tried everywhere, but without success. The roads, indeed, were not tempting, and possibly many of the people thought that the walk would not harm the girls.

Moreover, at such an hour the town was not fully awake.

At one place they were ready to hire out a vehicle, only—and the man was very apologetic—it had just gone.

He pointed down the road, and the girls, in great disappointment, looked in the direction indicated.

A Ford car was bumping along the road, and its sole occupant was visible to them.

The man with the beard.

"You say that you wanted to go to Mrs. Moore's?" he asked. "To the Manor House."

"Yes," Madge nodded eagerly. "It isn't far!"

"No, you will walk it quickly. But it is strange, for that is the destination of that man. He, too, is bound for the Manor House!"

"Oh!"

But they made no further comment until they were out of earshot; then they paused, and commenced talking excitedly.

"It isn't the convict, then?" smiled Betty.

"No, fear, but—" Madge hesitated.

"Suppose—could it be the detective?"

"The detective! Why should he go to the Manor House—and in disguise?" said Tess Trelawney, greatly puzzled.

"C'est vraiment mysterieuse," Trixie Hope agreed, airing her French, as usual.

"If it is the detective," Madge murmured doubtfully.

But Polly waved her hand excitedly.

"Yes, yes. Of course it is the detective; and I know why he has gone there, too!"

"Why?"

Polly smiled.

"Don't you remember the burglar last night?"

"Burglar!" Noamer exclaimed. "What is he?"

"There was an alarm," Betty said quickly. "We didn't see a burglar—"

"You heard someone talking in Miss Sands' room—or the room next to hers, though," Polly remarked. "And we found footprints in the snow."

Betty Barton was strangely silent. She it was who had given the alarm; for on

her way to Miss Sands' room had she not heard a strange voice? It had seemed to come from the governess' own room, but that room was in darkness; and, fearful that there really should be burglars there, had she not entered—to find Miss Sands crying?

Miss Sands, who always looked miserable, had actually been weeping, and Betty, her heart always kindly, had endeavoured to console the woman.

But of the reason of her grief, Miss Sands had said not a word, only muttered again and again that phrase: "Ah, if only you knew!"

What that had meant, Betty could not tell, and she had joined in the burglar hunt with the others. Footsteps had been found and traced. But they had ended suddenly, as though the owner of the feet had vanished into thin air.

Not satisfied with such a conclusion, they had searched the bushes, and there, unbeknown to the others, Betty had seen a face peering out—the face of the convict!

That, then, was why Betty was silent—why a worried frown had settled on her brow.

Miss Sands—the convict—the detective. Somehow the three were linked in her mind, and she felt uneasy.

Why she should connect the convict with Miss Sands she did not know, and yet that idea had jumped into her mind.

If the convict were there, it was natural that the detective would follow him.

But why in disguise? Why not with an escort of police? Unless—

Unless, if it were possible, he had reason to suspect that the convict would make for the Manor House. And why, if he had not some good reason?

That was how Betty worked it out, and although she could not have given a definite reason for her feelings, she felt some slight uneasiness on Miss Sands' account.

"Hallo—what are you moping about?" Polly asked.

"Moping!" Betty smiled. "I was thinking."

Polly commenced making a snowball.

"When we get back—a snowball fight. Who says yes?"

"Oh, yes. I like him, the snowballs!"

"If we go through the wood, we can cut off half a mile," Madge said. "I dare say it's slushy—but so's the road!"

But the wood, as it happened, was not

half as slushy as the road, and they enjoyed the walking more. Polly made snowball after snowball until her arms were full, and they walked on, leaving her making some more. This was unwise, for suddenly—whiz—whiz!

Snowballs quickly hurtled through the air, and there was a succession of frantic yelps and wails from the recipients of them.

"Here—chuck it!" gasped Madge Minden.

And Polly took the advice literally. The snowballs whizzed fiercely, and this time Madge ducked. On went the snowball it's course unchecked.

Over the top of the bush it landed, and then there came a sharp cry in a masculine voice.

"Oh!"

The girls stopped, silent and amazed.

"Who—who's there?" cried Betty.

But the silence of the wood was almost painful. Presently a twig snapped with a loud report, and they knew that the mysterious person was escaping.

"Quick—snowballs!" said Betty. "They're better than nothing."

And then, out into the open sprang a man, a soft felt hat on his head, and a large cloak wrapped about him.

"Fire!" cried Betty.

The snowballs whizzed through the air and broke about the man. One aimed by Polly caught him on the back of the neck.

He paused, then gasped, collapsed and rolled over. The hat rolled off, and the girls had a glimpse for a moment of a cropped head.

"The convict!"

"After him!"

"No, no!"

As Polly made a wild run forward, Betty caught her sleeve. But that cry of Polly's had been sufficient to alarm the man and to cause him to run off, leaving his hat behind.

"A clue!" Madge exclaimed, pouncing upon it.

"Yes, wather! Pway let me look! I am wather good at deduction!"

But, of course, it was not a clue, as Betty pointed out. The hat was the property of someone he had robbed in order to obtain clothing.

Yet, all the same, Betty gave that hat a close scrutiny. She even turned back the lining; but when she saw the initials she said nothing.

For the initials were L. S.—and the hat was a woman's.

She kept the hat, and it was not until they had walked a few more yards that she said quietly to Madge Minden:

"Madge, what is Miss Sands' Christian name?"

"Miss Sands. I forget. Norah, I think."

Madge said. "No—wait a minute. I do know—Lilian!"

"Lilian—oh!"

And Betty Barton's face became very grave.

L. S., then, was Lilian Sands, and she knew now where the convict had obtained his head covering.

CHAPTER 9.

"If only I could tell you!"

"SANDS!"

Kyra opened the door of her bedroom, and yelled out the name.

There was no reply, and she yelled it again.

Kyra was perhaps the most impatient girl imaginable, and she never once paused to consider whether it was exactly right to open her door and yell for the governess in that manner. Such a thought was not likely to enter her head. She did open the door and that was enough for anyone. It was not that she did the right thing; but everything that she did must of necessity be right. Which was one way of looking at things.

"Sands, oh, where is she?"

Angrily she clapped her hands, and a servant appeared as though Kyra had rubbed a magic lamp.

"Miss Sands?" the maid inquired. "I think she is in her room, Miss Kyra."

For once Kyra did not order the maid to fetch her governess. Instead, she tossed her head, and slammed the door of her room behind her.

Sadly the maid watched her as she walked with fierce steps down the corridor.

"Ah, me! How tempestuous she is! Poor Miss Sands—so lonely, so miserable, and then—this!"

Had she know that, in the servants' hall, she was referred to as "this" or "that," Kyra would not perhaps have been

flattered. However, she did not know, so all was well.

In blissful ignorance of her true status, she stalked along to Miss Sands' room, the complete picture of indignation and rightful rage.

Outside the governess' door she halted. It did not occur to her to knock, so she seized the handle and thrust the door open. "Oh!"

As the door opened, the frail, white woman in the room spun round and hid something behind her back. Tears were in her eyes.

Kyra sighed with impatience.

"Oh, dear, crying again! What a water-works you are, Sands! Goodness, you ought to have kept a handkerchief shop instead of being a governess!"

Miss Sands wiped the tears from her sad eyes, and sought to smile.

"I—I am sorry, Kyra. You don't understand."

"I don't, and neither does anyone else! You make me tired with your perpetual snivelling."

"I try to conceal it; I did not know that you were coming!"

"Did not know!" flashed Kyra crossly. "I suppose you pretend that I was sneaking in—"

"You did not knock," the governess said in gentle reproof.

Kyra drew herself up, and her expression was volcanic. Indeed, she seemed on the point of eruption.

"Knock! Knock! I knock at your door! And who, pray, do you think that you are, that I should bow to you—an empress?"

"There are many less than empresses to whom you should bow, Kyra—"

"Perhaps! But not to servants!"

Miss Sands sighed sadly and shook her head.

"Very well. It is useless to argue. You wanted to see me, why?"

"Never mind that now. I want to know why you're snivelling. What did you hide when I came in?"

"Kyra!"

Miss Sands was dignified now, and Kyra seemed abashed, but not for long.

"Now, don't try to start dictating to me!" she sneered. "It was a photograph you had! Whose photograph? Answer me at once."

"That, Kyra, is not a concern of yours."

"Everything that happens in this house is my concern. When mother is in bed I am mistress of the house. She said so."

"She did not mean in that broad, sweeping sense, Kyra, as you must understand."

"Oh, I understand well enough," the girl returned. And she seated herself coolly on the edge of the table and folded her arms.

Miss Sands, her hands still behind her back, regarded her steadily, without a tremor.

"You've crawled round those girls with your snivelling," Kyra sneered. "I suppose you told them how ill-treated you are? I wonder you don't get out of it, if that's the case. But you can't," she ended triumphantly. "You daren't, because you're a pauper. I heard mother say that you had nowhere else to go—that you had no people—that your brother—"

"Stop!"

Hoarsely Miss Sands cried the word, with an imperious gesture—yet a gesture of concern and of alarm.

Blankly Kyra stared at her.

"It's true," she said, with a toss of the head. "You are alone in the world since your brother died."

It seemed that a shudder passed through Miss Sands.

"Do not speak of my brother, Kyra, if you have any pity, any human feeling. Spare me that. My brother—he—" The words seemed to choke her, preventing their utterance; but Kyra, save for a feeling of surprise, remained unmoved.

"Well, if he is dead, he's gone," she said brutally. "Perhaps that is a photo of your brother?" she exclaimed.

"What?" Miss Sands' hands clenched hard, and for a moment she swayed.

Then, grasping a chair for support, she steadied herself.

"A photograph of my brother. Kyra, you do not understand. There are some things—some emotions, some finer feelings, that you will never understand, unless you become completely changed."

"Oh, I'm not a fool!" said Kyra easily. "But I don't mope about silly things like that. Goodness, all the crying can't bring him to life, can it?"

"We will not discuss my brother," trembled the woman.

And for once her voice was firm and steady. Kyra looked at her hesitatingly, and shrugged her shoulders.

"All right. But let me tell you this, Sands: You can't keep secrets from me! Why can't you show me that photograph? There's no harm in it—"

"I will not show you. I do not choose to show you; that is sufficient," the governess said in low tones.

And Kyra, who was not half as keen as she imagined herself to be, was slightly puzzled by the governess' attitude. She had seen Miss Sands with tears in her eyes; she had heard the servants saying that, passing her room, they had heard her crying. But this was her first actual experience of strong emotion in Miss Sands.

Hitherto she had regarded her governess as being rather weak and rather silly. She had thought that the tears were due to her inability to control her pupil; and Kyra, believing that, had thought herself rather clever and rather forceful of character. That there was anything despicable in her actions she did not pause to consider.

So now Kyra was rather at a loss; and, not knowing quite which course to adopt, she shrugged her shoulders carelessly and took her departure.

Inside the room the governess waited, motionless as a figure carved from stone.

"Oh, so close, so close!" she whispered. "If she had entered a second sooner—if she had seen the photograph! It is too dangerous—too dangerous—"

But she brought the photograph from behind her back, and sadly regarded the sad, handsome face portrayed there.

"Oh, to see you once again, Arthur! Oh, to hear your dear voice! Never once down the long years have I forgotten its charm; never once have I deserted you in my thoughts. Always you have lived, you poor dear, you victim of another's wrong!"

And the strong face looked back at her, and the steady eyes seemed eloquent, as though they glowed with life.

"Last night—last night—how you have altered! How grey, how cold, how miserable! But now—free!"

And then her eyes sparkled as the sunshine lit the way through the tears. Slowly she sank into a chair, and stared through the window.

Next she drew from a secret pocket in her dress a key, and with it unlocked a small writing-case that stood on the table beneath the window.

It was an old writing-case that had

evidently done service for many years, and now she replaced the photograph with great care. But she was not finished. From one of the almost innumerable pigeon-holes she drew forth a sheet of paper, and by the way in which she looked round, it was evidently a paper of great importance.

Very slowly, and with great care, she unfolded it, glancing over her shoulder every second, and with such sudden starts of alarm that showed how the least sound jarred on her troubled nerves.

It was a dirty piece of paper, and the message that was on it had been marked there clumsily with a stump of charcoal from an end of a burnt match.

It was a message composed of figures in an almost meaningless way. But to Miss Sands they had a very poignant meaning. Each letter she ticked off slowly, making a mental note of it.

So slow was she that the decoding took some time, and it was many minutes before she had sketched on a spare piece of paper the meaning of that message.

Then she stared at it, her lips trembling, her eyes sad. A more dramatic message there could not have been. It was a cry for help, for mercy, for relief.

"For mercy's sake, food. I'm starving. Bring it, if your movements are not watched, to the old hollow oak in the wood. Burn this. Love.—ARTHUR."

Transfixed, she stared at the paper, then she snatched it up and threw it, a crumpled ball, into the fire. Not until it had become dusty ashes did she turn away, and even then, a moment later, she pulverised the ashes fiercely with a poker.

"There must be no trace—no trace," she muttered. "This is the last desperate attempt, and it shall not fail through any fault of mine!"

Assured at last of that message being lost for ever to the curious eyes of Kyra, she turned from the fire back to her writing-case, and withdrew from it the photograph.

Whilst it was still in her hand there came from outside the sound of heavy crunching in the snow. Glancing out of the window, she saw a car halted down the drive, and now from it walked an old man with a long, flowing white beard.

Who he was she did not know, but at that moment all things spelled danger. Closely, and even fearfully, she regarded his face, thinking, perhaps, from it she could learn his mission. But, if that were her intention, she was sadly disappointed.

Without even glancing up at the house, he entered it, and Miss Sands stood at the window staring down at his footsteps in the snow.

She had feared, first of all, the girls; but she had now learnt that they were friends, and not enemies. But this stranger!

He might be quite a different person—he might be an enemy. He did not look like a friend; but, despite his age, he did not appear to be very benevolent. His eyes were too keen for that. They seemed to stare right out of his beard, and gave him an unusual air of youth that his appearance generally belied.

So absorbed was Miss Sands in the contemplation of the stranger that she failed to notice that the door of her room had opened, and that someone had entered.

That someone was Kyra!

As Miss Sands was half-concealed by the curtain that hung from the window, the girl did not at once see her. Now Miss Sands opened the window, and then Kyra, noticing her for the first time, gave a sharp exclamation.

"Oh, goodness!"

"Kyra!"

The photograph in her hand, Miss Sands swept round to face the girl, and at the same moment Kyra made a snatch.

"Ah! There's the photo!" she exclaimed. "So it is your brother—"

"Kyra, be silent—"

But Kyra made another snatch at the photograph, and Miss Sands, to hold it out of her way, extended her arm out of the window.

"Kyra, how dare you! You must not! Oh!"

The girl, thoroughly excited, caught her governess' arm and gave it so sharp a bang against the window-ledge that the photograph dropped into the snow below.

Kyra, with a sudden exclamation, darted from the room, and the sharp click told that she had locked the door after her.

Her intention was obvious. With Miss Sands in the room, it would be easy to secure the photograph and gratify the

burning, but unreasonable, curiosity regarding it.

Miss Sands clenched and unclenched her hands in feverish desperation and turned from the door to the window. For one mad moment it seemed that she would hurl herself into the soft snow below.

In a minute Kyra would be there, and then—

But at that moment there came through the gate a second car, which sped swiftly up the drive, bearing a heavy load. Not far from the window the girls alighted, and Betty, seeing Miss Sands at the window, waved her hand.

By good chance, a passing car had given the girls a lift when they had emerged from the wood, and now they were back at the Manor in excellent time.

"Quick, please, I have dropped something!" Miss Sands cried frantically. And her pleading was not in vain.

Betty Barton ran swiftly forward and picked up the photograph just as Kyra emerged from the doorway of the house.

"Here, that's mine! Leave it!" Kyra called.

Betty, the photograph in her hand, looked from one to the other—from the excited, angry face of Kyra to the white, careworn face of the governess, and Betty knew then that something was amiss.

There was no chance of handing the photograph back to the governess, and Kyra was almost at hand now, breathing hard in anger.

"Don't let her see it—please don't!"

It was pleading so low, so desperate, that Betty at once resolved that, whatever happened, Kyra should not see the photograph. She did not stop to ask questions; there was no time for that.

Of the two, she knew quite well that the governess was more likely to speak the truth than was Kyra; and so when Kyra arrived upon the scene it was to find Betty placing her hands behind her back.

"Give it to me!"

Kyra spoke with abrupt fierceness, and Betty only smiled.

"Is it yours?" she asked.

"Yes; give it to me—don't play the silly!"

Betty handed it the wrong way about to Kyra. Immediately that girl turned it over, and then her face was suffused with rage.

"The photograph—where is it?"

"Photograph—which?" asked Betty, in all innocence.

And, try though she did, Kyra could get no reply. In high dudgeon she stalked off, without a word of greeting to any of them, without even looking at Naomer.

"What is it, Betty?" Madge asked.

"Oh, Kyra is playing the goose!" Betty said. "Phew! Isn't it cold? Time we got in."

And she led the way towards the house, as though nothing had happened. But when they were all in Naomer's room, listening to a description of that girl's journey, Betty stole along to Miss Sands.

"Your photograph," she smiled. "She did not see it!"

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" The governess coloured slightly. "It may seem strange; perhaps it is strange. But I have a reason. Some day you may understand. If only I could tell you—if—" She sighed and turned away as Betty silently stole back along the corridor.

But in the alcove Betty halted, and sank heavily on to the couch there.

"Phew! My word! I didn't mean to look at the silly thing, but couldn't help it. It's the same face—the same, but younger. But it's an old photo."

No wonder that her face was pale and anxious for the one short glimpse she had obtained of the photograph had told her why Miss Sands did not want Kyra to see it—why she kept it so secret.

For the face of the photograph was the face that Betty had seen peering through the snow-covered bushes—the face of the convict!

CHAPTER 10.

Christmas Day.

"MERRY Whistmas!"

"Yes, rather—merry it is!" agreed Polly.

The girls shivered slightly as they dressed, for the morning was cold. But it was just such a Christmas morning as they had hoped to see.

Outside, a mantle of snow seemed to have enveloped the country-side whilst the sky, which before had been heavy, now was lightened, as though glad to have disposed of its weight.

"Wonderful!" sighed Betty. "Oh, but isn't it cold?"

"Yes, wather—very cold, y'know; but I don't mind it!"

"Nor do I!"

Nor did any of them, it seemed. Coldness in season, they did not mind—and, after all, Christmas was the time for snow and coldness.

"Merry Christmas—merry Christmas!" chanted Polly, dancing round in circles. "Oh, my word, turkey and Christmas pudding!"

"Yes, wather. Wippin'!"

"Ooo—yes—Christmas pudding! What is eet?" asked Naomer delightedly.

And Polly from memory, told her practically all the ingredients.

Then, of course, Naomer's mouth watered, and she wanted the Christmas dinner to hurry along. But there were still some hours before dinner, and all the hurrying in the world would not shorten the hours; it might, on the other hand, lengthen them.

But the girls found that there was plenty to do.

First there was the present for Madge's aunt. They had bought her a beautiful silver brush and comb.

Paula, who had received a rather large money present from her father, had contributed the biggest share; but Paula was always generous like that. And they had all contributed according to their means.

There was a present for Kyra, too—a very attractive handbag that Paula had chosen; and Paula's choice could always be relied upon.

But there was also another present; something quite small that Betty had bought, and which they now all wanted to help towards paying—a present for Miss Sands.

"She seems so very lonely," said Betty sadly. "And on Christmas day surely everyone should be happy!"

"She certainly doesn't look very happy, poor dear!" Madge agreed.

And there was extra care taken in sealing that package for Miss Sands. It was a writing-case, a well-made leather case, well-filled with writing-paper and envelopes, and amongst the writing-paper they hid a card.

Tess, the artist of the party, quickly found pen and ink, and, in a delightful manner, drew holly and robins all round the edge of the card. Then with great

care she printed a really Christmas message from the Morcove girls.

Then Paula began to tell a funny story. Paula always forgot the funny points of her stories, and she lost the point of this entirely.

She paused in the act of sealing a parcel to tell it, and the wax dropped down on to her dress unheeded.

"It was about a man, you know," she said. "It was awfully funny. I've forgotten it now: but it made me laugh frightfully at the time! Y'know! It was about some leggings or gaiters—or something that a man bought in a back yard or an alley or something—and he said he—ha, ha, ha!" she laughed. "He—he said he'd bought some ewocodiles, y'know!"

Polly frowned.
"Did he, then? Ha, ha, ha! Very funny!"

"Yes, carry on, dear," said Madge. "This funny story—what about it!"

"Bai Jove! That is it!" said Paula, rather puzzled. "It—it doesn't seem so very funny, y'know. Yet I laughed like anything when dad told it to me—"

"Perhaps he said that the man had bought some alligators," said Polly suddenly.

"Yes, wather—ewocodiles—"
"Alligators, silly—bought some gaiters down an alley," laughed Polly.

"Oh, bai Jove! That's so. Funny I forgot. I wead lots of widdles at Morcove, y'know. Widdles are very funny, y'know at Christmas—"

"Yes, well, get on with the sealing, dear," said Betty.

"Yes, wather! Howevah, hero's a wip-pin' widdle, y'know. What is gwoccer than a gwoccer?"

They looked at her and thought for a moment. Paula giggled joyously, and they gave it up.

"Why?" asked Polly.
"Because, deah geal, there's a league between the first and last letters, bai Jove! Ha, ha, ha! Wather funny, eh? And there's anothat—"

"Here, wait a minute," said Madge. "I haven't seen that yet. What is grocer than a grocer? Because there's a league between the first and last letters?"

Paula looked surprised.
"Pai Jove! That's wong. That isn't

the answer, now I come to think of it. Vewy stwange, bai Jove! It was an awfully good answer, y'know. Howevah—there's anothat. Oa, bai Jove!"

She gave a sharp yelp as a deftly thrown pillow bowled her over backwards.

"There's a riddle for you," laughed Polly. "What's the difference between Paula and a silly donkey?"

And in chorus the girls gave an emphatic answer:

"None!"

And that, at least, Polly declared was a correct answer to the correct riddle, however Paula cared to argue. If there were no league between the first and last letters, there was a league—a veritable conspiracy—between the girls.

After that riddle they went downstairs, wishing a merry Christmas to everyone.

Kyra they met, and gave her the present. She smiled, opened the packet, and looked at the handbag.

"Oh, I've got one," she said ungraciously. "Besides, I don't care much for them. I thought it would be something exciting!"

Madge Minden coloured for shame. If anyone had to colour for Kyra's shameful method of receiving a present, it was not likely to be Kyra. That was certain.

But the girls made no comment as they strolled away, although the same thought was in every mind, and momentarily the cheeriness of the party was damped.

"I—I can't say how sorry I am," murmured Madge.

But Betty squeezed her arm. It wasn't poor Madge's fault. For could she be blamed for her cousin's ungracious manners?

"Better put Miss Sands' present in her room," said Betty.

The room was empty, and it was easy to put the parcel down and steal away.

Then they took Mrs. Moore's present, and her delight was sheer joy to them, and once again the sunshine returned to their hearts, and their faces wore all smiles.

After a merry breakfast, they went out into the snow and had great fun. Poor Paula was an unfortunate target, and it seemed that every time Polly and Naomer threw a snowball it hit Paula.

Once they had sides and a mimic battle, Paula was allowed to captain her side, and she led the attack, whilst Naomer and

Polly were close behind with an armful of snowballs.

"Bai Jove! Now, deah geals—quick! Fiah!"

And "fiah" those two mischievous ones did. A whole volley of snowballs whizzed through the air, and they were well aimed.

Biff! Biff! Biff!

Betty and the other attackers aimed at Paula with all their might, and from behind came the excellent firing that Paula had ordered.

She had not intended that her army should use her as a target. But they did, all the same!

"Ooh! Oh, dear! Bai Jove—ooh!"

"Oooo-ooo!" cried Naomer. "Paula, she is funny, eh?"

Paula was on her knees, and Polly rolled her over and over, so that the aristocratic girl gathered snow as she rolled. The more she rolled the more snow she gathered.

And when Paula had scraped the snow off, it was nearing the time for the Christmas dinner—time, at least, to start dressing!

Betty hurried along the corridor first, and as she passed the door of the governess' room, it opened.

"Oh, Betty!"

There were tears in the governess' eyes, and she gripped the girl's arm warmly.

"Yes, Miss Sands?" Betty answered.

"Thank you for the present—thank you a thousand times. If you knew what it means to me. You girls—what a spirit of happiness you bring into the house. I can almost imagine myself to be happy when I see your faces. Please, please convey my thanks to the girls. I—I shall never forget—"

"It was nothing very much," said Betty.

"The thought is the most wonderful thing in the world, Betty. And the writing-case—it is what I have always yearned for, but could never afford. I shall keep it always, and if I should by mischance never see you again, it will serve as a memory of your happy faces!"

Betty felt a lump rising in her throat. Unhappiness was written largely on the governess' face. And was it surprising that, with such a charge as Kyra, she should be unhappy?

"I shall never forget," said Miss Sands. "A very merry Christmas to you all. And—and if I seem miserable, don't let it

dampen your feelings. I shall be more cheerful soon. I will be merry with you all to-day—I mean to be brave!"

And a rare smile played on her lips—a smile that was seldom seen there. But Betty did not know how that smile vanished when she went away, or how the governess tenderly raised the blotter and kissed it.

She, whose life had been so full of bitterness and unhappiness, what a great deal this kindness meant to her, what hope it brought into her life!

True to her word, she was merrier that day. And, indeed, who would not have made an effort to be merry when they all gathered round the table for the splendid dinner?

Mrs. Moore was there, and the strange visitor, the bearded man. And perhaps he was the least merry of them all. His look was so searching all the time. He seemed to be watching and listening as though for a purpose.

Yet even he warmed up when the meal began.

What cries of delight there were when the turkey was brought into the room, and when the candles were lit on the table.

It was dark enough for them, and they added such a quaint festive air, augmented with the light of the fire that flickered so brightly in the grate.

"Christmas!" said Polly. "Just like Dickens—"

"Christmas is going off," said the old man. "It is not the Christmas of the good old days. When I was young, it was different—very different—"

"Yes, wather," said Paula politely. "I suppose so. I can remember when I was young—quite a geal, y'know—"

And at that there was a peal of laughter. For Paula spoke as though she were old and haggard, and had a past century to look back upon, instead of only her fourteen years.

But it was to the Christmas pudding course that they were looking forward; and Naomer could not refrain from clapping her hands in sheer delight as the smiling maid entered the room, bearing a huge Christmas pudding held high upon a dish. In the centre of that pudding was holly, and beneath it was a circle of blue flames that danced merrily, as though controlled by sprites and goblins.

"Oooo!" cooed Naomer. "I like him, the pudding!"

And she did like the pudding. They all did justice to it.

Outside the snow fell incessantly, and inside there was a huge wood fire, and the candles. When the pudding at last disappeared, there were nuts to follow, and bon-bons.

Naomer wanted to pull one with Paula. She did, too!

She tugged at it with all her considerable strength, and then at the last moment released her hold. What a shriek of mirth she gave as Paula toppled back into her chair!

But when they pulled again, the luck was with Paula. A mighty crack, that made the elegant girl jump nearly out of her skin, announced that the cracker was broken, and that its treasures were laid bare.

The treasure of that particular cracker was a hat—a peculiarly pointed, old-shaped affair. And for quite five minutes after Paula had donned it there was laughter.

"My word!" said Polly, suddenly remembering something that hitherto she had forgotten. "I've got a hat for you—a Christmas present. Santa Claus will bring it."

"Bai Jove! You don't believe in Santa Claus, Polly?"

"Don't I!" said Polly. "You haven't seen Santa Claus yet this season, but perhaps he'll come to-night—"

"What!"

But Polly winked across at Madge Minden. Polly had a great idea in mind, for she had learned from Madge that in a cupboard upstairs there was a Santa Claus rig-out that Mrs. Moore had once used when Kyra was a little girl—and that had given Polly her great idea.

"You don't believe in Santa Claus?" she asked.

"No, wather not, bai Jove!"

"Not if you were to see him?"

"I shall nevah see him!"

It was only natural that after Santa Claus the talk should turn to ghosts, and then to the eeriness of the house. Polly, of course, wanted to explore, and when Madge Minden suggested a game of hide-and-seek, Polly was all enthusiasm.

They had the room to themselves, Mrs. Moore, the old gentleman, and the

governess having departed to the drawing-room.

Hide-and-seek received a fine show of hands, and Paula was the one selected to stay behind.

In the old, rambling house there was plenty of scope for hiding, and, with no lights, seeking would be a difficult matter.

Paula, however felt quite confident, and she smiled slightly to herself as she buried her head in a cushion and counted the requisite number.

Kyra, with a faint sneer, watched her, not caring to join in the fun, much though she would have liked to. Baiting the governess or nothing had been her dictum, and the girls had not minded at all when she had defiantly announced her intention of "not playing."

"Bai Jove! Now I'm going to catch them, y'know, Kyra!"

"Are you? Then you'll play peep-bo, I suppose, or hunt the slipper?"

"Yes, wather!" Paula agreed, determined to be polite under every conceivable circumstance.

Then she dashed from the room, and crept along cautiously on tip-toe.

Her great idea was that, if she moved with exceeding caution, her presence would not be known, and she would therefore be able to pounce upon the girls whilst they, in their unpreparedness, made some movement. It was what Paula would have called "stwategy," and Polly "stupidity."

"Bai Jove! I can heah a sound," Paula murmured softly to herself. "I hope Polly isn't playing a silly joke. Pewhaps—"

She stopped short, and tiptoed forward, for a slight sound in the darkness had caught her ears.

A board moved slightly, but noisily, and Paula gave a short, sharp exclamation.

But from the darkness there came no movement. She knew that she was near a small alcove, however, and guessed that probably in that alcove a girl was waiting.

Now her groping hand caught a curtain, and she searched it carefully with her hand. It was always a shock to come in contact with a face.

"Oh!"

Her hand had touched an ear, and Tess Trelawney's voice yelped out as Paula gripped her ear.

"Discovahed, Bai Jove! Discovahed!"

"Goodness, yes! But you needn't pull my ear off," grumbled Tess.

"Sowwy! All's faiah, y'know. But pway don't think that you can escape me—Hallo, what's that?"

A figure fled by in the darkness, and a laugh told that Betty Barton had slid to "home," whilst Paula was making a "speech."

"Bai Jove! Betty, deah geal, come back, I wasn't pwepahed."

"All's fair!" said Tess, rubbing her ear, but grinning slightly now. "This is hide-and-seek, not hide-and-speak, Paula."

"Yes, wather. Still, I must say that Betty was wather pwevious in her escape. I have scarcely—Goodness, who's that?"

"That's Trixie," said Tess. "If you wait here you'll have a splendid view of the procession."

But Paula had realised that fact, too, and now hurried on, moving carefully on tiptoe. It had not occurred to her that Naomer and Madge Minden, at the other end of the corridor, had already got home, and, considering that there was no one near, her caution was over elaborate.

Down the next dark corridor she crept, and then halted, her eyes gleaming as she heard a faint sound.

"Twapped!" she murmured, and the noise ceased. "Wondah who this is? Madge, pwhaps, Bai Jove! I'll make her jump. Or, pwehaps, Polly."

It was someone, for a curtain moved slightly, and Paula stepped towards it with silent steps.

There she remained, listening to the steady breathing. Then she stretched out her hand, and it closed upon hair. Then her hand slid down to the ear, and then

"Oh, bai Jove! Healp!"

For the hand had rested, not on the smooth cheek of one of her friends, but on the rough, unshaven cheek of a man!

CHAPTER 11. Who Was It?

"HEALP!"

There was the sound of rustling in the darkness, and then of quick, running footsteps that died suddenly away.

But fresh footsteps, light and pattering, told of approaching help, and Paula breathed more freely.

"Switch on the light," said Betty's voice. "Paula, Paula, where are you?"

There was a click as Madge Minden operated the electric light switch, but no light came, and Betty, who lit a light, glanced up momentarily at the lamp-holder; the bulb had been removed.

"Paula, oh, there you are!"

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove! I'm all wight, y'know."

"All right! You look scared," said Tess Trelawney. "What's the matter?"

And Paula told of her dramatic discovery.

"A man—a burglar!" exclaimed Betty; and just as she was about to voice an alternative, she hesitated.

But Madge voiced it.

"The convict, perhaps. Likely as not, he'd get into a house such as this for warmth and food."

"Yes, rather. That's probable. Where did he go, Paula?"

"I don't know. He wan, y'know—like anything—"

"Didn't you try to stop him?" Tess demanded.

"Yes, wather, y'know. But he was off like—like a flash, y'know. Yes, wather. Just like a flash of lightning."

Betty and Madge searched up and down the corridor, whilst Trixie and Tess glanced out of the window.

No one, however, was in sight.

"We mustn't leave him at large," Betty said seriously. "He may lock himself in some room. What shall we do—hunt first, or report?"

"Oh, hunt, I suppose!"

"Or give the alarm to the servants. Someone may go into a room, and it would be rather a shock to find him there," Madge said.

And they hurried to give the alarm. Down the long corridors they went to the staircase, and it was there that Betty gave a sharp exclamation, and halted.

"What's that?" she gasped.

Madge Minden peered into the darkness, and then laughed.

"Oh, my word! Santa Claus!" she exclaimed.

"Bai Jove! Wheah!"

"There—look!"

Now the strange figure came into the bright light, and hesitated.

It was Santa Claus to the life, with a long, red cloak touching the ground nearly, a mask and moustache, and beard, with red hood and cap complete.

"Bai Jove! It is wather like Santa Claus y'know!"

"Santa Claus!"

It was Naomer. She had seen the girls, and, on hearing the name of Santa Claus, had bobbed from her hiding-place, forgetful of the game.

"Hallo, Naomer, here's old Santa Claus for you!" said Madge, pointing to the stationary figure.

The figure bowed, and then, still bowing, retreated step by step into the darkness.

"Who—who?" asked Betty. "Sure it isn't Mr. Good-old-days dressing up?"

"Ha, ha! No," Madge said. "Not likely!"

"But it is someone dressing up!"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove! Wheach's Polly?" Paula asked suspiciously. "We're all heah except Polly. Gwacious! It must be a joke!"

"Not really!" teased Madge. "Don't say that it isn't really Santa Claus——"

"No, it's Polly."

"Polly!"

And then came the familiar voice of the madcap of the Form.

"Hallo!"

And Polly Linton stepped into the light.

"What's the game?" she asked indignantly. "I've been crouching in a corner until I'm stiff. Why didn't you say you'd finished, you duffers?"

"Sorry, dear," Betty apologised. "But Paula saw the convict."

"Oh!"

"And we've just seen you as Santa Claus," smiled Madge. "It was a quick change."

"Yes, wather. But it didn't take me in——"

"Didn't take you in!" Polly frowned and looked at Paula in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"Why, your Santa Claus' disguise. We saw you over there, on the other landing."

Polly Linton's jaw dropped.

"You—you saw me as Santa Claus?" she exclaimed in measured tones. "Why, I've been hiding in a corner for ages."

Then there was a sharp, painful silence.

"But—but it must have been you!" said Betty.

"You said that you were going to!" exclaimed Madge.

"But I didn't. I was hiding. Besides, if I were there a minute ago, how could I possibly get back here in this time? The only way is to cross the hall!"

"Bai Jove!"

"That's so!"

Polly frowned.

"I looked for the things a minute ago, and they were gone. Perhaps it is Kyra?"

"Kyra—of course it is!"

But Madge Minden, without speaking, pointed down to the hall, where from a room emerged Mr. Good-old-days and Kyra.

"They could not possibly have got down there without being observed. That puts them out of the reckoning," said Madge.

"Then—then who is it?" asked Polly.

Madge Minden gave a long, low whistle. "I tell you who might have used the things," she said excitedly. "A mask—a cloak—what better disguises——"

And then they all cried together:

"The convict!"

"My goodness—after him!"

Down the stairs they went, leading to one side of the hall, and then up the others.

At the top they were confronted by Miss Sands, pale-faced, but smiling.

"Why the hurry?" she asked.

"The convict!" said Polly excitedly.

"He's just disguised as Santa Claus—over here he was——"

The governess started.

"The convict—as Santa Claus. But—but that could not be——"

"But it must have been! Who else would have done it?" asked Polly.

And then Miss Sands, in the most strained and awkward manner possible, laughed.

"It was not the convict—it was I!"

CHAPTER 12.

Hommed In.

"LILIAN, where are you?"

By the light of the fire, the man in the red cloak peered at the governess as she entered. The mask, beard, and moustache had been removed, and the hood pushed back re-

vealed the close-cropped head of the convict!

"I have put them off the scent, Arthur; they are looking elsewhere. And yet—yet I am afraid that they may suspect—"

The convict buried his face in his hands, swayed slightly, and groaned.

"Suspect—suspect! I am hunted like a fox, with the hounds everywhere! My word! Prison is not worse than this—"

"Arthur—Arthur, don't talk like that—"

There was agony in the governess' tones as she flung herself on her knees beside her brother.

"Arthur, you are free—free to start life again—free to prove your innocence of the crime for which you were imprisoned—"

"Yes, free—if only I can remain so. But I am hemmed in on all sides; I dare not even move! But, come what may," he said, and there was a fierceness in his eyes—"come what may, I must be free to-day! I must spend to-day with you—Christmas Day!" He seemed to choke slightly, and Miss Sands, looking up, saw that his eyes were glistening.

Then together they looked into the fire, remembering the Christmas Days they had spent together—the Christmas Days in the old home, when mother had been alive.

"Do I remember!" he echoed. "Ah, Lillian," said the man, "if only we could live those happy days again—oh, to be a child, Lillian, care-free and happy! I'm Santa Claus now! How I wish I were really! If only one could be a small, happy child again, waiting at night for the stocking to be filled! Once Christmas Day was the most wonderful day of the year. Now—what will to-night bring? I shall dream of a stocking—a stocking filled with warders and policemen—a stocking that is really a cell!"

"Arthur!"

But, try to dissuade him though she did, though she tried to protest that all would be well, Miss Sands knew that he spoke the truth.

To-morrow—what would it bring?

CHAPTER 13.

A Present for Paula.

"HOORAY!"

Polly Linton sat up in bed, and out of sheer joy threw up her arms. The madcap of the Fourth Form at Morcove School was

smiling cheerily and happily, and she danced out of bed to look at the snow, which surrounded the fine old mansion belonging to the aunt of Madge Minden, their schoolfellow, where the Morcove girls were spending their Christmas vacation.

Betty Barton, the captain of the Fourth Form at Morcove, was awake, too, and she crawled across to Polly.

"My word! Topping! Ripping!" Polly exclaimed in elated tones. "Just look at the snow! I'm going to roll Paula Creel in it."

At that, there came a murmur from the adjoining room, a faint murmur of anxiety and alarm from Paula Creel, known as the aristocrat of the Fourth.

"Bai Jove! Weally, Polly, deah geal!" she cried. "Pway wemembah that it is the season of good cheah and forgiveness, y'know!"

"Forgiveness?" said Polly. "Hear, hear! I forgive you, Paula, for being such a duffer!"

She opened the door of the adjoining room and peeped in. Betty Barton, putting on her dressing-gown, followed her.

It had been arranged the night before that they were all to go into Paula's room directly they awoke. Betty and Polly were the first there, but a moment later Madge Minden entered, then Tess Trelawney and Trixie Hope.

"Bon jour!" said Trixie, who hoped some day to speak French fluently.

"Bon-bon—and Christmas-pudding yourself!" said Polly. "Hallo! Hero's Naomer!"

They all turned then as the door opened and a dusky-faced, smiling girl entered. Naomer Nakara hailed from the East, and her dressing-gown certainly brought with it an Eastern savour, being very silky and attractive—so much so that Paula Creel, a great authority about clothes, declared it to be "extremely fetching, bai Jove!"

"Ello, present! You like him, Paula, the New Year's Day, yes?" cooed Naomer.

Naomer seemed to be concealing something behind her back.

"Eet ces the present for Paula," she said.

"How I love Paula!"

And she flung her arms round the aristocratic figure of Paula, and gave her such an immense hug that Paula squealed.

Naomer, like Polly Linton, loved to tease Paula.

"A pwoent, bai Jove!" said Paula. "This is vewy nice of you, deah geal!"

"I've one for you, too," said Polly, her eyes twinkling. "Christmas has gone, but why shouldn't we have New Year presents?"

"Bai Jove! Why not?"

Paula put down the parcel that Naomer had given her, and looked at the foot of the bed, where another parcel was lying. She sat up at once, beaming and bowing.

"Thank you, deah geals! It is kind of you, deah geals!" she murmured.

Then she turned to the first parcel. Naomer and the girls gathered round with great interest.

It was a happy party that Madge Minden's aunt entertained at Hillchurch Manor, and there was no doubt that the holidays would be a great success. If it lacked fun, it would not be through any fault of the Morcove girls!

Three layers of paper, with many wrinkles and crackling, were opened, and then there was yet another wad. When that was removed there was yet another.

By this time the parcel had considerably diminished in size, and the girls gave vent to spasmodic giggles. Paula frowned seriously, and unfolded another wrapper.

"Most remarkable!" she muttered.

Three more layers were removed, and then, right in the centre, was a solitary caramel!

Dazedly Paula stared at it, blinking, and from the other girls came a peal of merriment.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! Weally——"

"Too bad!" said Polly. "Try the other parcel!"

This time Polly was not joking. She had bought Paula a very useful present—a hat!

"I spent a long time choosing this," she said seriously.

"Yes, she did," said Betty, as the parcel was being undone. "It is a very charming hat, and ought to suit you splendidly."

"Bai Jove, that is vewy nice of you, Polly, deah geal—vewy nice indeed—and I appreciate it immensely. But——" Paula hesitated then.

Polly's choice of hats was not exactly tasteful to her mind, and, indeed, Paula, if she could help it, would not have been seen in the hats that Polly wore.

But a present was a present.

"I shall be very hurt if you don't like it," Polly said, casting a glance at Betty.

But Betty could not help smiling, for that hat was a huge, red, floppy affair, of a

most glaring and offensive colour, which was not aided by the green ribbon that Polly had sewn on it. Nor, indeed, could the yellow feather that curled from it be considered an advantage.

The others who knew the hat smiled broadly, but Paula was not looking at them. She was waiting for the parcel to be undone.

At last the string was torn apart and the paper unrbbled.

"Here we are!" said Polly. "Here! Why—what——"

And the article that she had pulled from the parcel tumbled from her hands, for instead of the hat they had all expected to see there was a coat, a man's coat of a peculiar colour and design, a coat stamped clearly with the broad arrow!

It was the coat of the convict!

CHAPTER 14.

Paula's Hat.

"GOOD gracious!"

"The convict's coat!"

Well did the girls know that a convict was at large in these parts, and the discovery of the coat seemed to suggest that he was actually in this very house!

"Bai Jove! How evah did it get there? Pway—pway, did you put it there as a joke, Polly?"

"I—I——" said Polly, her face rather pale. "No; of course not! As if I should! Goodness knows how it got there! I put that hat in this parcel, and put it in the cupboard in the corridor."

"Which cupboard?" asked Madge quickly.

Madge knew the old Manor House well—knew every nook and cranny of it, and she was interested at once to know the exact spot.

"Why, where the Santa Claus outfit was!" said Polly. "You remember that I was going to dress up as Santa Claus, and the clothes were taken!"

"Yes, yes," Madge nodded. "Someone else had them. Someone—we thought it was you. Then we thought it might be the convict. Then we——"

"Well, this is proof," said Polly, in serious tones.

They exchanged glances of alarm. A convict at large in the house—for he must

be here somewhere! Outside in the cold and snow—that was no place to hide when it was possible to get into the warmth of the house.

But Betty Barton said nothing. Betty Barton, perhaps, looked more worried than any of them, for keen, cute Betty had suspected what had not occurred to any of them—that the escaped convict had found refuge in the house because he had a friend on the premises.

"Fancy leaving the clothes about!" said Polly. "What had we better do?"

"Take them back," Madge said, "and watch!"

"I will take them back," Betty said softly, "Now!"

Leaving her chums still discussing the discovery, she hurried down the stairs, going quickly yet cautiously to the cupboard where the Santa Claus things had been stored.

On the floor below she paused and hid the parcel behind her as she saw, a few yards away, Miss Sands, the governess of Madge Minden's unpleasant cousin, Kyra.

Miss Sands turned, and Betty noticed how drawn and white was her face, just as if she were undergoing some great anxiety.

"Good-morning! A real, old-fashioned winter's day!" said the governess, twitching her features into a smile.

"Good-morning," returned Betty softly. Her keen eyes surveyed the other's face, noting the distress and agitation. Miss Sands was not far from the cupboard from where the clothes had vanished, and Betty waited for her to pass by.

"It is a splendid morning," observed Miss Sands, and continued on her way down the passage.

Only when the governess was out of sight did Betty hasten towards the small cupboard that stood open.

No sooner did Betty pause and bring the parcel before her than the governess' head re-appeared round the corner.

"Oh!" So sharp was the exclamation that Betty, completely surprised, let fall the parcel, and out on to the floor dropped the convict's clothes!

Betty, flabbergasted, stared at the coat. As for Miss Sands, she seemed absolutely paralysed.

Then quickly the governess sprang to life

and hurried forward, her face white as a sheet.

"That coat!" she gasped. And the tone of her voice told Betty what for some while she had suspected, that the governess was the convict's secret friend!

For quite a while Betty and she stood looking at each other, and whilst they stood thus a figure appeared at the top of the stairs, the figure of a girl about Betty's own age. It was Madge Minden's cousin, Kyra Moore.

It was Betty who saw her, and quickly stooping, she wrapped the paper round the coat.

"Quick! Take it—before she sees!" she whispered to Miss Sands.

All pretence was gone then. No use for Betty to pretend that she did not understand—useless for the governess to pretend that she did not know whose clothes they were!

Like lightning, Miss Sands grabbed at the coat, folded it, and hurled it along the corridor. Only just in time, too, for Kyra Moore came quickly down the staircase, with ill-disguised curiosity to know what her governess and Betty Barton were doing together.

"Miss Sands and I were saying how reasonable the weather is," Betty said in reply to Kyra's question.

How Betty hated such curiosity and prying! What business was it of Kyra's if she cared to speak to the governess?

"Oh, is that all?" snapped Kyra. "What was that parcel? Have you been giving my governess another Christmas present?"

"Mayn't I?" Betty parried. "Oh, if you're silly enough to do so, there's no more to be said," scoffed the other, who treated poor Miss Sands more like a servant than a governess.

Betty shrugged her shoulders. "Well, I didn't give Miss Sands a present, so don't get ruffled, Kyra. I came to get a present for Paula."

Betty opened the cupboard, and quickly her fingers encountered a parcel. It was the right one this time, containing the hat for Paula. Betty understood what had happened. Miss Sands had put her parcel here, and Polly had seized the wrong one—that is the one containing the convict's coat, which the governess had hidden.

Taking no more notice of Kyra, Betty hurried away to rejoin her friends.

"Here's the hat, Paula!"

Paula was dressed by now, and she turned from the mirror, where she was doing her hair, to regard the hat.

"Bai—bai Jove! Weally?"

Polly came into the room and gave a chirrup of delight.

"There! That's it!" she said. "Don't you think it's topping?"

Paula grasped the dressing-table for support.

"Toppin'!" she murmured. "Oh, bai Jove!"

"I trimmed it myself," said Polly, looking at it with one eye. "Some day I shall be a milliner!"

"Good gwacious! Surely not! You must be joking?"

Polly looked terribly offended.

"Joking!" she said. "Goodness—no! I do like that! After—after all my labours!" Her lips trembled.

Paula, contrite at once, hastened forward.

"Oh, deah, weally! I didn't mean it. I think it's wippin', only—ahem!—the colour!"

"Don't you think that they tone well?" asked Polly anxiously. "I thought that they were your exact colours."

"Yes, only— Oh, deah!"

Polly called out to Tess Trelawney.

Tess came in.

"Look, Tess!" cried Polly. "Isn't it lov-er-lee?"

Tess looked and gasped.

"Oh, splendid!" she said. Tess was an artist—a quite clever one, too—and what Tess did not know about the combination of colours was, as Polly declared, not worth troubling about. "I didn't know that you were an artist, Paula. You'll have to come on a painting expedition with me. Fancy your being able to design hats!"

"Me!" Paula almost shrieked. "Gwacious! You don't think that I pewpetwated—" Then she caught sight of Polly's eyes and coloured. "Ahem! I must wefuse to sail under false colours—vewy false! Polly did it!"

"Polly!" said Tess. "Good for you, Polly! They harmonise beautifully, like a beautiful sunset. Don't you think it is like a sunset, Paula?"

"Oh, deah! Yes, wather! Like a wain-

bow, too, y'know. But I don't like wearin' sunsets or wainbows!"

Polly lowered the hat and flashed a glance in pretended anger at her elegant chum.

"You don't mean to say," she said in steady tones, "that after my labour of love, after the way in which I have managed this sunset effect, the vory latest Parisian effect, that—that you refuse to wear that hat?"

Paula looked at the girls and gulped. Every eye that was fixed upon her was serious and disapproving.

"Think of the noble lines of Creels!" said Madge Minden sternly. "Did your great-grandfather three hundred times removed refuse to wear his Norman head-gear?"

"Gwacious! Oh, deah!" The struggle went on in Paula's noble breast, and she sighed heavily. "Bai Jove! Natuwally I will wear it! I thank you vewy much for it, Polly."

"Good! Don't mention it—a pleasure!" said Polly.

Madge Minden went into the next room to smother her laughter in the bedclothes, and Betty had to turn away as Paula, with great seriousness, placed the awful hat on her head.

She shuddered visibly, and her face paled.

"Nice!" said Polly.

"Sweet!" said Tess.

"Tres chio!" agreed Trixie Hope.

Whilst Naomer Nakara put her dusky head on one side, and said in her softened way:

"O-o-oh! Eet ees—what you say?—ducky!"

"It is making Paula go goosey," said Polly sotto voce, and added aloud: "Even though it does look ducky, it wasn't made by a quack milliner. I fancy myself as a milliner. Do you like it, Paula?"

"Ye-es, but—"

"Good! Then I'll alter all your other hats," said Polly.

"What! Polly, you mustn't. Goodness gwacious!" shrieked Paula, almost paralysed at the bare idea.

And then the girls could keep up the deception no longer. They let forth a perfect peal of laughter that rang merrily through the whole house.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And Paula, amazed at first, laughed herself—laughed with true relief and joy. Teasing—what did that matter as long as she didn't have to wear that awful hat?

So when, a moment later, they trooped down to breakfast, Paula's was the most radiant face of all, and she didn't seem to mind in the least the chuckles of the others.

"Oh, dear, I wish I could have kept it up!" Polly gurgled. "How I wish you had worn it!"

"Wats, deah geals! Wubbish! You didn't deceive me."

"What—"

"I'm wather smart, y'know. I would have bowled you out. Natuawally, I was not taking it weally seriously!"

But that would not wash, and there was another peal of laughter.

CHAPTER 15.

A Visitor for Miss Sands.

"BETTY!"

Betty Barton halted as she heard her name called, and turned.

Down in the hall her school chums were waiting for her, yet the moment the voice hailed her she stopped, and all thoughts of her friends went from her head.

"Miss Sands!"

The governess was in the doorway of her room, and it was evidently she who had called.

"You called me?" whispered Betty.

"Yes. If you could spare a minute? I shall not keep you long."

Betty entered the quiet little room, and the door closed.

Miss Sands made no effort to break the silence. Well did Betty understand her feelings, guessing what an agony of indecision and doubt and hesitation there was in the governess' mind.

And then, as though answering the question that she felt was being asked in Miss Sands' mind, Betty exclaimed:

"You can trust me. I—I have guessed that the convict—"

"You know?"

The governess spun round and clutched Betty's arm.

"Yes, I guessed," said Betty simply.

It seemed almost as though a weight had been lifted from Miss Sands' mind, as

though she were glad of being saved the necessity of explaining all to Betty.

She bowed her head

"Then you know that—that he is my brother?" Her voice trembled. "The convict. But although a convict, he is innocent! On my word of honour, he is not guilty of the crime for which he was convicted. He escaped from prison. He hopes to find something that will prove to the world that he is innocent. You will keep silent? Oh, I know you will be silent for my sake, Betty dear. Not even to your friends, will you say a word! Oh, promise me!"

Betty looked into the other's eyes, and if ever truth was written it was written there.

"I promise," she whispered. "Perhaps I could help!"

"How noble of you!" the governess exclaimed. "But—but I cannot ask that."

"Oh, but I want to help you!" said Betty. "Surely it is only right that one should help to prevent an innocent man's return to prison?"

Miss Sands placed her hands on the girl's shoulders.

"It is right—it is right!" she cried.

"But you have only my word that he is innocent."

"That is enough for me, Miss Sands."

The governess smiled gently through her misty eyes.

"You are a sweet girl, Betty, and I do not wonder that your friends love you. Oh, if only my pupil, Kyra, were like you!"

Betty flushed uncomfortably.

"What can I do?" she asked quickly. "Is there anything to do now? Is your brother hiding in these clothes?"

"He took off that coat when he adopted the Santa Claus disguise," said Miss Sands. "He put the coat in the cupboard; but when I took the parcel from the cupboard I found, instead of the coat, a hat. The coat had vanished. Oh, my agony of mind! I—you know—"

She shuddered at the remembrance.

"My brother is hidden in the house!"

"Here?"

Betty pursed her lips. To her it seemed that a hiding-place in the house was fraught with great danger.

"Yes," muttered the governess. "But what else was I to do? Outside it is too cold, and in the snow tracks are left. It

is difficult—terribly difficult; yet there was no other course to take.”

“But Kyra! She is very keen sometimes,” said Betty anxiously.

“Yes, and Mrs. Moore’s other guest—Mr. Hampden. I fear him greatly, owing to the keen look he gives me at times and the strange way he has of roaming about the house.”

“I—we suspect him to be a detective,” said Betty. “But I may as well tell you all from the beginning. We first saw your brother, Miss Sands, at Barncombe, in Devonshire, where the school is. We heard that a convict had escaped, and then we saw him in the woods. Next we saw him on the running-board of the train—or Polly did. Naturally we reported it. We didn’t know that he was your brother, then.”

“You did rightly,” Miss Sands agreed. “But he was not captured.”

“No; they could not find him again, or hear of him. But directly we got to the station a detective was waiting. He asked us many questions, and then gave us his card. He was a Mr. Ferguson Dormayne.”

“I have not heard of him,” Miss Sands said in great agitation. “I did not know that they were so closely on the trail.”

“It is rather puzzling,” frowned Betty. “If they suspect that your brother is here, why don’t they make more effort? There has been no detective of any sort—unless this man, Hampden, is a detective in disguise.”

“In disguise! A detective!”

Miss Sands was as white as a sheet, and she swayed slightly.

“Of course, it may not be,” Betty said quickly. “We only wondered. He hadn’t done anything at all to justify the suspicion, really. He seems just to sit about and do nothing.”

“Yes, that—that is what is strange,” the governess agreed in a low tone. “I could not understand his presence. Kyra said that he edited some paper, but I know she was not telling the truth. I know that she was speaking without knowledge. He is as much a mystery to her as he is to me. But thank you for putting me on my guard, Betty. I will be careful.”

“And I will, too. I will watch him. He will not suspect me,” Betty murmured. “We had better not speak too much, lest we appear to be in league.”

“Yes, yes.” Then the governess paused. “Betty, I hate to make you an accomplice!”

“I was one before I had your confidence,” Betty smiled. “I have promised not to say a word. I will keep my promise. But if I could have some clue, something to guide me, to help in my attempt to prove your brother innocent?”

“Yes, I will try. I will get some proof of some sort,” the governess said. “Perhaps I may find some old cuttings; they will tell you all.”

She was about to say more, but Betty raised her hand. Footsteps sounded in the passage, and they halted outside the door. There was a rap on the panelling.

“Miss Sands!”

Betty stood aside, and Miss Sands crossed to the door. Outside in the corridor was a servant.

“There is someone to see you, Miss Sands,” said the girl.

“To see me? Who is it?” Miss Sands asked, gathering control of herself.

Betty eagerly listened for a reply.

“A police-inspector.”

CHAPTER 16.

Her First Real Friend.

“A POLICE-INSPECTOR? Oh!” Miss Sands pulled herself together with a great effort. Betty kept out of sight, not wishing the maid to know she was there.

“Are you sure that he wanted to see me?” the governess asked. “Did he say what for?”

“He didn’t say. But he said that he wanted to see you,” the servant replied.

“He’s waiting. Shall I show him up?”

“No, no. I will see him downstairs,” Miss Sands said. “I shall not be a moment. Tell him so.”

Then, the maid gone and the door half-closed, she turned to Betty.

“Quick Betty—for my sake! That coat—burn it! No, there is not time! Wait, though! Behind that bookcase, behind the screen, is a small panel that lifts up. There is a recess behind it. You open it by pushing the knob in the left of the panel.”

“Yes, yes, I understand.”

When the governess had gone, Betty

darted behind the screen. It was not difficult to move the bookcase or to find the secret panel; but scarcely had she moved the bookcase into place than the door of the room opened, and someone entered.

The step was firm, and at once Betty jumped to the conclusion that it was the police-inspector's. To make quite sure, she peeped through a small hole in the screen.

Standing in the centre of the room, stroking his beard, was the old gentleman, the strange visitor, Mr. Hampden!

"Where—where I wonder——" Betty heard him murmur to himself fretfully, and she saw his dark eyes wander round the room.

Betty was crouching down in such a position that she was able to watch his actions. He straightened himself, and thrust his hand into his pocket. Gone was the bent back of the old gentleman, gone was his sluggish movement.

The man was alert, active, and quick to move. He was certainly no longer the old, decrepit person who had wandered about the house the last day or so! Suspicious, this!

Betty Barton's heart beat more quickly as she watched. That he was the detective she could not now doubt. Quite unwittingly he had given himself away, for he was not to suspect that there was another occupant of the room.

At once Betty suspected that the visit of the inspector had been arranged by him to keep Miss Sands occupied below whilst her room was carefully searched.

And certainly she was right regarding the search, for, with a success that told of practice, Mr. Hampden went to Miss Sands' desk. From his pocket he brought a bunch of keys, tried three, the last of which opened the desk. He rummaged inside.

He was there for a considerable time, looking through the papers; but, judging by the exclamation when he slammed down the lid, and closed the desk, Betty knew that he had found nothing.

But he had not yet finished his searchings. He made a tour of the wall, examining the old panel closely, tapping each in turn, and listening intently.

Betty held her breath, whilst her brain worked like lightning to devise some scheme to prevent his searching her side of the room.

But he was slow and sure, waiting several minutes at each panel.

And Betty knew then that sooner or later, to-day or some other day, he would reach that panel behind the book-case, and then—then, indeed, there would be developments.

But where there was life there was hope, and in Betty there was plenty of life and plenty of good sense.

The man was now by the window, and his back was turned to her. He was so absorbed in the occupation of testing the panels that he did not hear the slight movement at the end of the screen, but what he did hear a moment later caused him to wheel round.

Tap, tap!

It was a tap on the panelling of the door, and the man uttered a sharp exclamation of annoyance. The interruption was unforeseen, and it did not for a moment occur to him that the door panels had been rapped from the inside.

His gimlet-like eyes shot round the room, and in a minute he had adopted a line of action that Betty had not in the least expected.

He made a quick step in the direction of the screen, with the obvious intention of hiding behind it; but, before he could do so, the door of the room opened.

So amazed was Betty that she gasped aloud, but she was not heard.

"Why, I—I—— Hallo, Mr. Hampden!"

It was Kyra, and Betty set her lips as she realised that probably Kyra had come on the same mission as Mr. Hampden.

"Ah, Miss Kyra," he said, stooping into the adopted attitude of the guise of an elderly man, "where is your excellent governess? I wanted to ask her a question."

"You'll find her downstairs," said Kyra, "if you hurry."

"Oh, but she will return here!"

"Well, I want to see her," said Kyra abruptly, making it clear that she didn't study other people. "We cannot both see her at once. My business is private. If you go downstairs, I daresay you'll find her."

Mr. Hampden gave her a look that no one could have described as benevolent, and then departed.

"Silly old guy!" muttered Kyra, slamming the door.

She stood in the centre of the room, looking about her as if wondering where to

begin, whilst Betty, behind the screen, tried to think what she herself should do.

Kyra might be as dangerous even as the detective. She might start at the other end of the room, and, moreover, it was possible that Kyra was aware of that secret panel. If that were so, it would be the very first place she would search.

Through the screen Betty peeped at the girl, watching her as she moved towards the desk.

This time Betty decided not to tap on the other door. She had a better scheme in her mind.

Kyra was trying to force the lock of the desk, and she was far too engrossed in what she was doing to notice the slight movement of the screen.

In a second, Betty was standing in the room by the door, and with it half-open she coughed.

"Ahem!"

Kyra wheeled round. Her face coloured slightly with anger at being discovered, as she thought, by the governess; but seeing that it was not the governess, she scowled.

"Sands isn't here!" she snapped. "She's downstairs."

Betty smiled.

"Good! I'll wait!" She took a seat in the armchair and eyed Kyra curiously.

"Can I help you?" she asked. "Were you trying to break that lock? If so, a poker might help."

"Break the lock? Why should I want to break the lock?" Kyra asked furiously.

"I don't know; curiosity, I suppose," Betty said easily.

Kyra looked at her angrily.

"That's why you're staying here," she returned, "to burgle?"

"Yes, I have often thought of becoming a burglar!" Betty smiled. "And one ought to start learning and get practice young. Perhaps you could give me a few hints?"

"I don't want any impudence from you, Betty Barton! I suppose you'll tell Sands! Well, I don't care if you do!" she mumbled. "Why should Sands have secrets—unless there is something she is ashamed of?"

"Ah! Why?" Betty agreed. "Tell you what, Kyra—if we read her letters as they came, we might be able to find out."

Betty kept her face so straight that Kyra was not at all sure that the suggestion was not made in real seriousness. She did not

know Betty's code of honour. Reading another person's letters was just such a thing as Kyra would delight in!

"There is something funny about her!" Kyra agreed. "Have you noticed anything?"

"How, funny?"

"Well, mysterious," Kyra said. "I have noticed it, and I mean to solve the mystery. I want to know what her secret is. It isn't right for mother to employ a governess whose past isn't everything that it should be!" she added with a virtuous air.

And Betty nodded her head, glad to know that Kyra had not discovered a great deal.

But Kyra had admitted her object in entering the room, though, indeed, she could not very well disguise it. However, when she heard the governess' returning footsteps, Kyra hurried quickly from the room, leaving Betty alone.

Miss Sands sighed in relief as she entered and closed the door of her room.

"Well?" asked Betty anxiously.

"He asked me questions, but I managed to evade direct answers. I don't think that he suspects."

Then Betty told her of Mr. Hampden's search, and the governess' alarm increased.

"Those things must be burnt at once!" she said. "You hid them there?"

"Better not burn them now," Betty advised. "Better wait until night-time. They will not burn in bulk. They ought to be burnt separately. Suppose the inspector should come to the room and find the ashes?"

Miss Sands nodded her head.

"You are right," she said, "as you always are. We must wait. For the present they are safe."

And then, just as Betty was leaving the study, she called her back, and impressed on the girl's cheek a kiss that was sincere, grateful, and of deep affection.

No wonder that Miss Sands' heart warmed to the girl—her first real friend.

CHAPTER 17.

The Secret of the Panels.

"HALLO! Here's Betty!"

"Where've you been? Precious little breakfast left for you!"

"You've deserted us!"

"I've been talking to Miss Sands," Betty laughed as she sat down at the depleted table. "But what's the game now—snowballing?"

"Not yet," Madge said. "As a matter of fact, I've been telling them that there are, perhaps, secret panels in the house."
"Oh!"

Betty bit her lip. She trusted her friends, but, having promised Miss Sands that she would not let them into the secret, she naturally could not tell them anything of the mystery.

And now they all unwittingly were going to search for secret panels. Suppose they found the one in which was the convict's clothes?

"You see, said Madge, "it's rather funny about the convict. Those clothes have disappeared from the cupboard where you put them, you know."

"Disappeared?" Betty cried in mock surprise.

"Yes, and it's pretty certain that he's in the house. A police-inspector came to see someone."

"Phew!" said Betty.

"So it's up to Morcove to capture the convict!" Polly interrupted. "Personally, I don't think he is friends with anyone in the house. Perhaps he managed to follow us by chance, you know, and found that this was a big house."

"Yes, there's nothing to prove that he does know anyone here," Betty agreed.

"Nothing at all! Therefore," said Polly, "we must look for him. Lead off, Madge, and show us the panels."

But Madge shook her head.

"I don't quite know where they are," she said, "but they are somewhere about here. I should think they are in the upper corridor."

"How about asking Kyra?"

"My word, she ought to know," Tess Trelawney agreed.

"Yes, wather. I think that is a good ideah, y'know. But pway let me take the lead, deah geals. It is a mattah we-quiwing tact and judgment."

"Tacks and judgment!" grinned Naomer. "Oh, plenty of tacks for Paula. Then she can keep her hair on. Tin-tacks are good for wood, eh?"

"Weally, Naomer, this is a sewious mattah, y'know. We must do our duty to the west of the community, and wound up this scoundwel!"

"You're wound up all right!" said Polly. "If only someone would lose the key, we should have a moment or two of peace sometimes."

"Bai Jóvo, Polly. I didn't mean——"

But Polly placed her hand firmly over Paula's mouth, thus losing for ever the wise words that would have tumbled forth in a coherent stream.

"I'll ask Miss Sands," said Betty, after a slight pause. "Perhaps she'd know."

"Yes, good idea. You seem to get on well with her, Betty," smiled Madge. "And I'll go and ask Kyra."

The others waited whilst the two hurried off.

Betty, in great perturbation, entered the governess' room and explained quickly what the girls intended doing.

"Are there other secret panels?" she asked anxiously.

But Miss Sands' paleness told her that there were.

"Arthur, my brother—he is hiding in one dark, gloomy corridor. It is the eighth panel along on the upper landing. Oh, Betty, if you can prevent them going there! If they found him——"

"I will do my best, but it won't be easy," Betty said worriedly.

But, resolving to try, she ran back to her friends.

Betty found the girls waiting for her, and Madge and Kyra were talking eagerly.

"I am sure there is some such paneling on the landing above," said Kyra. "Daddy once said something about it, only I fancy it was screwed up. Sands ought to know. She was daddy's secretary for a time, and knew where his secret place had been made."

So they all turned eagerly to Betty as that girl came running up.

"Not much use," Betty said. "There is no panel here."

And she indicated the walls by which they were standing.

"At least, if there is, Miss Sands doesn't know of one!"

"Poof! Sands forgets," said Kyra. "I am quite sure that there is one upstairs. We'll try, anyway."

So upstairs they ran, all excitement and eagerness. Yet Betty did not seem keen, although she feigned to take an interest in it.

Her feeble attempt at putting them off

had failed, and, indeed, it would seem to be something very important that would now prevent them continuing with the search.

They stood in the corridor and looked about them.

"No sense in all being together," Betty said. "Let's start taking a panel each and tapping it—pressing all round the sides. There are eight of us, I believe. Eight! Then let's take this order!"

And then Betty numbered them off, so that number eight fell to her. Polly had the next position of number seven, and Betty meant to deceive Polly by some ruse and prevent her looking whilst the search for the panel was made.

Eagerly and excitedly the girls tried, and there was quite a deal of rapping and pressing going on.

Betty left her panel alone, only making a pretence of searching, and when, after a few moments, nothing had been found, she gave a glad inward sigh.

"No good!" said Polly. "None here!"

But Kyra was not so certain. She had heard that there was a panel, and she meant to discover it.

"We can't tell this way, you silly!" she declared. "We ought to tap them in turn one after the other, so as to tell the difference in tone. See?"

She went to number six panel and tapped it twice. Then she went to number seven. The sound was the same.

In a second she would have touched number eight, and Betty, quivering slightly, wondered how she was going to stop the girl touching that panel.

Somewhere behind it the convict crouched. Somehow he must be warned!

Two sharp taps had been the pre-arranged signal, Miss Sands had said.

Kyra Moore raised her hand, then sharply she tapped the panel.

Tap, tap!

It was a faintly hollow sound, and Kyra jumped back.

"It's hollow!" she gasped.

And then Polly caught her hand and pleaded for silence.

For now, from the other side of the panel, came a distinct sound and answering knock.

Rap, rap!

There was a breathless hush, and it was indeed time for silence if the convict was not to be warned; but perhaps because it

was such a time, Betty Barton gave a loud cry:

"My goodness, the convict—the convict! See that he doesn't escape by some other panel in the side!"

The girls stood back from the panel, and Polly looked down the passage.

Betty looked down and craned back her head, then she simply jumped off the ground.

"Quick! Quick, girls—this way!"

They did not hesitate. They did not doubt that she had seen the man, and they followed her lead, as they had always done. Even Kyra, who did not follow people's lead as a rule, ran with the others, for it seemed so certain that Betty must have seen the man.

But Betty, leading, smiled to herself and sharply turned the corner. It would be easy to lose sight of the imaginary person, and then the chase would be over.

Probably she would be able to lead them a fine chase, and give Miss Sands a chance to release her brother.

But as she turned the corner Betty halted, and before she could turn or utter a sound, Polly, Tess and Kyra were beside her, staring in the same direction.

All of them saw what had made Betty halt—a panel that slowly opened, showing a dark interior.

Betty clenched her hands and clicked her teeth.

Instead of leading the girls astray, she had actually led them straight to the secret exit of that passage! The convict, probably thinking that the girls were on the outside of the panel, had deemed the coast clear to escape another way.

And now—

Betty could have kicked herself for her folly. Yet it was something that could not have been helped. Had she known of this exit she would have acted differently; but she had not known, and now there was nothing to do.

Already Polly and Kyra were tumbling excitedly down the short flight of stairs that led to the panel, and Polly, with a gesture to Kyra, halted, realising that it would not do to alarm the man a second time.

There was a hush—a dramatic hush—as through the opening of the panel there came a leg, and then the head and shoulders of a man.

The man stood upright, and for a moment

did not see the girls—not until they uttered a sharp cry of surprise.

"Mr. Hampden!"

He was not the convict, after all!

Betty breathed again, and actually laughed; but the other girls were not laughing. They were angry and annoyed.

"We—we thought it was the convict," said Betty.

Mr. Hampden dusted himself.

"Convict!" he said. "No, I happened to find this panel by accident—leant upon the spring, I suppose—so I walked in. Ugh, it was dirty!"

Then he stopped short in his action of dusting his clothes and looked at the girls, noting their excitement and the fact that they had obviously been running.

"What's this about the convict?" he asked.

Betty was silent, and nudged Polly.

Polly guessed at once what her chum meant—or thought she did. "Morcover Game," she whispered to the others, and it was a message that Kyra alone did not understand.

But as Polly chose herself as spokeswoman, that did not matter.

"We thought you were the convict. We hear he has been seen in this district, and, naturally, when we saw the panel open—"

"We thought it was you. Bai Jove! How-eh, you don't look like a convict. y'know," Paula hastened to assure him.

"H'm! I hope not! But if you girls see that convict you'd better report it to the police; or, better still, tell me, and I will take up the matter."

But he might have realised that the girls wanted the honour and the glory of the capture themselves, without his assistance or interference. But he did not realise, and went his way, probably thinking that they would assist him.

"Well," said Polly, when he had departed, "what now? It wasn't the convict!"

"So that panel, if it is hollow, contains no one," Betty said eagerly.

But then it was that Madge Minden interrupted.

"Not at all," she said in her quiet way. "He would surely have mentioned about the rapping. Why should he keep quiet? And when we tapped, why should he give answering taps?"

"That's so," Polly admitted, while Betty was silent.

"Well, let's explore this passage," Betty exclaimed, "and see if it leads to the other."

And, of course, they were then all enthusiasm and eagerness. So excited were they that they did not notice, when at last they had opened the panel, that Betty had disappeared.

But Betty was running for all she was worth back to the other panel.

Twice she tapped, and the answer came; then carefully the panel opened.

"Are you there?" Betty whispered. "I come from your sister. Escape somehow from here. My friends are searching the panels!"

The convict gave an exclamation.

"I will see if the coast is clear," Betty added.

And when she was assured that no one was in sight, she gave the word to the convict. She did not see him escape, for she was running to meet her friends, whose voices she now heard.

So when later they examined the other passage, they found that it was quite empty.

"It must have been Mr. Hampden who tapped the panels," said Polly.

Betty said nothing at all to dissuade them from that idea.

CHAPTER 15.

The Escape.

"FOR Paula in the morning," winked Polly. And she indicated a heap of snow on the window.

"Good! It will be lovely for Paula, yes!" Naomer cried. "I am longing for the mornings!"

"Poor old Paula!" laughed Betty.

"What a life she has with you two!"

"Oo-oo! But I love her terribly so!"

"Rather!" agreed Polly. "She gave me a freezing glance to-day, and told me I poured cold water on her ideas; so, you see, if she gives a freezing glance to the cold water, she can't be surprised if it freezes and lands on her as snow."

"She will be surprised, though!" Betty laughed. "It would surprise any girl."

But Polly and Naomer intended that it should be a still greater surprise. The

pile of snow they had gathered on the window-sill was remarkable. To push it off would be simplicity, of course, and when Naomer had lured Paula under that window Paula would indeed believe that the sky had fallen in on her.

It was pitch dark then, and just before bed-time, so, yawning, the girls trooped off to bed. They had had a trying day of snowballing, convict-hunting and other fun. So it was not surprising that almost directly their heads touched the pillows they fell asleep.

Miss Sands had told Betty that once her brother obtained clothes and a disguise all would be well, but to get them was the great difficulty; for, apart from Mr. Hampden, there were no men in the house.

Also, since the police were watching the house, the purchase of men's clothes in the district would be incriminating evidence of the most convincing nature.

What was to happen Betty did not know, but she decided, when finally all her chums were asleep, to creep down the stairs and see what was going forward.

To lock her friends in was her first decision, but somehow she could not quite bring herself to do that. As it was, she hated deceiving them, but unfortunately there was no help for it. However, to lock them in was another matter, and she decided to leave them free.

It was not very difficult to creep down the dark staircase without making a noise, and she managed it quite easily. Down below all was dark and perfectly quiet.

Betty stood still for several minutes, listening intently, but no sound met her ears.

If Mr. Hampden were up and about, he was extraordinarily quiet. But then, surely a detective would know how to make his movements stealthy! Such a man was not likely to arouse a sleeping household!

Nor was Betty. She went down the stairs one at a time, slowly and steadily, treading so that the floorboards did not creak when her whole weight was upon them.

If the detective were about a creaking board would certainly alarm him.

Suppose he were about, what should he do? Would it be best to make a noise and lead him astray, or should she give the alarm to the governess and endeavour to prevent the detective's interference?

Betty progressed nearer and nearer to the governess' study where, even at that

moment, Miss Sands was holding conversation with her brother.

The brother, dressed in an old suit of Kyra's father—Mr. Moore—that the governess had discovered, was drinking a cup of coffee.

The two used the same cup, lest an intrusion might reveal the fact that two had had coffee in that room, and there would be inquiries for the other person.

"Arthur, you cannot go! It is impossible!" she was muttering.

He smiled wanly, and put the cup back into the saucer.

"I must, Lilian! I have imposed upon you too long. If I stay here I am in danger of being captured."

"But if you go, what chance have you out in the freezing cold?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"In either case I am likely to be captured; but if I am captured here I implicate not only you, but the brave girl who has so courageously assisted you. I must not only think of myself."

His sister was silent. He was right. But how could she allow him to go into the pitiless night and out into the shrieking wind and the driving snow?

She shuddered and drew closer to him. "Oh, Arthur, if only there was some safe way we could think of!"

He nodded sadly.

"No one would be happier than I if there were; but this man Hampden—I do not trust him. At any minute he may expose you and me. You know what the punishment would be for shielding me."

"Yes, but—"

"Lilian, there are no 'buts'! I must try to get as far away from here as possible. Suppose this man Hampden is watching; suppose this place is surrounded—who knows? They'll want to know where I got these clothes, and they'll soon find that out. Then what of you?"

"I can stand the blame," she said proudly. "It is little enough to do."

"I'll say that I broke in," he exclaimed. "I can have stolen them. Yes"—he looked at the clock—"well, it's time I was going!"

He tried to steady his voice, but he could not, and when his arms were round his sister and he was thanking her for all her brave help, there was a faint glimmer in his eyes, as though tears were not far away.

But he blinked his eyes and turned up the collar of his coat.

"Now for it, Lillian!" he said. "Switch out the light." Then he turned swiftly. "A step in the passage!" he exclaimed huskily. "Who is it? Quick!"

He hid behind the screen, and Miss Sands opened the door.

"Who is there?"

"I—Betty."

Betty stepped forward out of the darkness.

"I think all is clear," she said.

And then, as Miss Sands opened the door for her, she entered the study.

"Arthur, this is the girl! This is Betty!"

The convict came into the light.

"You are the girl who has risked all for my sake," he muttered. "My dear, I thank you! I have never seen you before. I don't know why you have done this; but you have proved a friend, and I shall not forget. Perhaps, some day, circumstances will be altered and I may be able to repay you. I shall not forget."

"And I hope you get free and away,"

Betty said, her eyes shining. "I am convinced that you are innocent, and if only I had something to go upon—some clue—I'd try to prove it!"

Mr. Sands' eyes narrowed slightly.

"I, too, want a clue," he said. "The man who has brought me to this pass—ah, if ever I come face to face with him!" He paused and frowned. "Well," he went on, "if I stay here any longer I shall get you all implicated in my trouble. Good-bye, Lillian! Good-bye, Betty!"

He shook Betty's hand firmly, and his eyes looked gratefully into hers. Then abruptly he turned to the window, and Betty, thinking that the two wished to take a last farewell, went into the corridor.

There, next to the window where Polly and Nacmor had piled their snow, she looked down into the darkness.

A faint noise told her that the convict had opened the window and that he was on the sill.

Betty opened her window and peered out. On the right she could see the convict crouching on the sill, and below—what was that dark shape in the snow?

The dark shape moved, and Betty uttered a sharp exclamation.

Mr. Hampden—watching down there, and waiting!

What should she do? Give the warning?

But it was too late. Even now the convict had left the sill and was sliding down the pipe. Mr. Hampden crept forward. Now he was under the next window—the window where Polly had piled the snow.

Then it was that Betty's great idea came.

Mr. Hampden was below the window, and the snow was there ready, waiting to be pushed off the sill—a whole load of it on the sill of the only window that opened inwards.

Quick as a flash Betty opened the window, then pushed the snow.

It whizzed down through the air, and then from below there came a sharp yell, breaking the silence:

"Oh! Ah!"

Betty popped her head out of the window and peered down. Buried under that perfect avalanche of snow, quite dazed for the moment, was Mr. Hampden, and soon, down the corridor, from behind Betty, came the shouts of the girls. Mr. Hampden's cry had roused them from slumber.

"Betty, where are you?"

"Is it the convict?"

Betty did not reply at once. Out into the darkness the convict had vanished, and the falling snow quickly covered the light track that his feet made.

Below, Mr. Hampden struggled and gasped.

"Yes! Quick! Down the stairs!" ordered Betty.

Down the stairs they went, all excitement and joy. They were all fully dressed, for Polly had awakened, and, noticing Betty's absence, had aroused the others, and suggested an exploration party.

It was lucky that they were dressed, for the night air was icy cold.

The big door was flung open, and they dashed into the darkness.

"There! Who's that?" asked Betty.

Mr. Hampden was just struggling up, and Betty shied a snowball that sent him staggering down again.

In the darkness it was difficult to distinguish him save for his dark figure, and Polly gathered up handfuls of snow and hurled them accurately.

Snowballs fell quickly, and suddenly Mr. Hampden rolled over and over, completely snowed under.

On him they fell in a horde, rolled him this way and that, until he seemed one huge snowball.

"Captured!" Paula exclaimed.

"Ugh! Ugh!" gasped Mr. Hampden.

And then, to the girls' amazement, without a word, he scrambled to his feet, dodged them, and ran off into the darkness.

"After him!" Polly cried.

But Betty caught her arm.

"No, dear; it wasn't the convict. Look!"

And she held up something that she had picked up from the snow—a beard!

Polly glared at it, but did not understand! Madge Minden jumped to it at once.

"Mr. Hampden!" she said. "My word, what a frost!"

And a frost—a freezing, bleak frost—is what Mr. Hampden had judged it.

"But the convict——" Paula exclaimed.

"He's gone! If he was here," said Madge. "My word, I'm nearly frozen! Who's coming in?"

They all went in, disappointed and dismayed.

When they reached their bed-rooms, they burst into laughter.

"Ha, ha! Poor old Hampden!" said Polly. Then she became serious again. "But the beard—he is in disguise. He is the detective, after all!"

"Yes, I suppose so," Betty said.

"Phew!" gasped Polly. "What fun! And the convict—— Girls, in the morning we're going to capture that convict! Mr. Hampden may be a detective, but Morcove leads even detectives!"

"Yes, wather! Being a detective——"

"Br-r-r!"

Betty laughed.

"I don't want to throw cold water on your ideas," she said, "but I don't suppose you'll get him!"

And Betty yawned, and got into bed, quite happy to know that the convict was free of the house.

But free for how long?

If only his innocence could be proved! If only there were some clue! And with that hope in mind, Betty fell asleep.

But that night there was no sleep for Miss Sands.

Restlessly she paced her room, wondering how her brother fared, wondering what the morning would bring, yet full of the deepest gratitude to Betty Barton, her schoolgirl friend.

CHAPTER 19.

Paula's Idea.

BETTY was silent the next morning when the girls foregathered for breakfast. Kyra, as usual, was not down at the same time, while Madge's aunt had her breakfast in her own room.

Miss Sands was not to be seen. Betty could understand that the governess would prefer to remain in her own room, and to avoid any mention of the events of the night before.

But the one topic amongst the girls was that of the convict and of the mystery of the beard which Mr. Hampden had shed.

"I think that there is not much doubt that Mr. Hampden is really the detective now," said Madge Minden.

"Yes, wather," said Paula. "Y'know, geals, I always thought theeah was something—er, fishy about him!"

"I saw him just now as I came down," said Madge quietly. "He was wearing his beard again. I wonder why. We all know now that it is a false one."

"Perhaps he is still wearing it in case the convict should see him," suggested Polly. "You see, although we know that the beard is false, the convict doesn't."

"It almost seems as if he didn't want that convict to recognise him," said Madge.

Betty started. That was the very thought that had been crossing her mind.

"Yes, wather," broke in Paula. "Bai Jove, geals, that's it!"

"He went out early this morning," continued Madge. "He was wrapped up in a heavy overcoat, and his hat pulled down over his eyes, and wore a muffler."

"Then we may depend upon it he has gone out to look for traces of the convict," said Polly. "Hallo! What's wrong with you?"

This last question was addressed to Paula, who was standing lost in thought.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed that worthy. "I've got a jolly good idea, geals!"

"Then keep it, Paula dear," said Polly.

"Weally, what do you mean, Polly?" asked Paula, in a slightly aggrieved tone.

"Well, you see, dear," said the irresponsible Polly, "you so rarely get a good idea that I shouldn't let this one escape you when you've got it."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the girls, while Paula gasped.

"Weally, Polly," said Paula, "you know

my ideals are always good. I often think I would have made a jolly good detective. In fact have seriously considered taking up the practice of criminal investigation when my—er—scholastic career is ended."

This was too much for the girls. The prospect of Paula as a future Sherlock Holmes set them off into roars of laughter. "Ooo, Paula! How funny you are!" cried little Naomer, bounding forward and seizing the genial aristocratic girl in a crushing embrace. "But I love you, you duffer!"

Paula gently disentangled herself from the encircling arms.

"Weally, Naomer," she said gently. "Such demonstrations of affection may be all wight in Nakara, but weally, deah, they are not done heah, y'know—not in weally good circles!"

"Well, what's this good idea, Paula?" asked Polly.

"You see, geals," proceeded Paula, "the detective has gone out. Now, supposing I disguise myself as the detective. Perhaps, you know, the convict will show himself. Y'know, it stwuck me that the detective might not be the detective, weally. I remember weading a stowy like that once!"

"Something else will strike you, Paula, if you make inane remarks like that," said Polly, picking up a cushion and flourishing it significantly.

But Betty was silent. Paula's remark might have been inane, but there was something she had said which made Betty think. The detective might not be a detective, really!

Was there anything in that?

But no! It could not be. Betty dismissed the idea with a shrug of her shoulders. It was only too obvious that the man was genuine. Besides, was not the name of Mr. Ferguson Dormayne well known?

"You are very quiet, Betty," said a gentle voice at her elbow, and Betty turned to find Madge had come close to her.

"Oh, it—it's nothing!" she stammered, and she turned away.

Yet Betty Barton was sad at heart. For the first time in her life she was keeping something from her chums; she had a secret she could not tell them.

But that was because Betty Barton was remaining true to Miss Sands, the governess, who was proud—and justly proud—of her schoolgirl friend.

CHAPTER 20.

A "Treat" for Miss Sands.

WHAT to do with themselves for the rest of the day was a problem that now faced the Morcove girls. It was not a difficulty that usually troubled them for very long, for Betty & Co. were not hard to amuse, and generally one of them would come out with some suggestion that was agreeable to the rest of them.

But to-day they seemed to be without a leader. It was rarely that Betty Barton was so quiet and unresponsive to her chums' presence as she was now.

They glanced at her, sitting by the window, gazing out across the grounds as if her thoughts were far, far away.

Polly skipped over to her side.

"What's the matter, Betty dear?"

Madcap Polly was frequently not the most considerate of girls, but when her chum Betty was concerned, she always had some sympathy to spare.

Betty Barton woke from her reverie with a start.

"Why, nothing," she answered. "I—I was just thinking!"

"Thinking? Betty, you looked as if you wanted to cry!"

At those words Betty looked more uncomfortable than ever. She rose from her seat, obviously conscious that all the girls' eyes were upon her.

"What—what are we going to do this morning?" she asked.

"Hurrah—hurrah, for the cap! She has provided the burning question of the moment! Now, girls—get your brains to work!"

Polly, once again the madcap, made a dive across the room towards Paula. Perhaps Polly thought that Betty wanted cheering up, and that "ragging" Paula would help to do it; at any rate, her intentions were obvious.

Even the aristocrat of the Fourth realised them, and backed somewhat anxiously.

"Now, weally, Polly," she commenced. "I sincerely hope that you are not going to be too fwivolous. I am perfectly willing to think out something to do this morning, yes, wather, but you will not healp matters by being wough—"

"Excuse ze smile," cried Naomer.

"Queck, Polly, I will help Paula to think, too!"

Naomer was always willing to join in any fun that Polly might originate.

The future for Paula—that is the immediate future—loomed very black.

But, as it happened, she was to be spared on this occasion. Polly had barely laid a hand on her when there was the sound of footsteps in the passage, and Madge Minden entered the room.

"Girls," she announced, "there's a matinee this afternoon of the pantomime at the Royal Theatre at Maundsley. Aunt wondered if you would like to go. She can 'phone through for tickets, and the car can make two journeys each way so as to take us all there and back."

Polly Linton turned from her contemplated rumpling of the innocent Paula.

"Splendid!" she declared.

"It is very nice of your aunt," Betty remarked, and there were murmurs to the same effect from Tess Trelawney and Trixie Hope, whilst Paula murmured:

"Bai Jove, a wippin' tweat. Pway conzey my kindest thanks to your aunt, Madge—"

She broke off as she felt Naomer shaking the sleeve of her blouse.

"I beg your pardon, Naomer, what is it you wequire?"

"Ze panto—what-you-say! Will I love him?" the little Eastern girl wanted to inquire.

"Yes, wather!" answered Paula.

"We'll learn all sort of new tricks to play on Paula there," Polly promised, thinking of the humorous dame, and the fun and backchat there is in any pantomime.

Naomer clapped her hands.

"Then I like him very much!" she declared, and danced excitedly round the room.

But the other girls had noticed that Madge had something further to say, and now they were giving her their attention.

"I thought," Madge began, "that if you girls didn't object, we'd ask Miss Sands to accompany us. She hasn't been looking too well these last few days, and perhaps the change will do her good—"

"Jolly good idea," declared Polly.

"Yes, wather!"

There was a chorus of agreement from all the girls except Betty.

Betty seemed to have relapsed once more into her moody reverie.

"Well, that'll make nine of us," Madge Minden continued, not noticing the Fourth Form captain's quietness. "Betty, Polly, Tess, Paula, Naomer, Miss Sands, Kyra, and myself. I'll go and tell my aunt—"

"Won't your aunt give us the pleasure of her pweasence this afternoon?" asked Paula.

"Hear, hear!"

"Of course, your aunt will come, too, Madge!"

Madge Minden shook her head.

"Aunt has asked if you will excuse her. She has just started on another article, and wants to finish it whilst she has the idea in her head. Well, I must tell her you'd like to go, because I believe the theatre warned her that the last few seats were going fast, and advised her to ring up again as soon as possible. I'll ask Miss Sands after aunt's booked the seats—"

It was then that Betty looked up.

"I'll ask Miss Sands if you like," she offered.

"Oh, thanks, Betty!" And Madge was gone.

Betty followed, making straight for the governess' room.

She tapped on the door, and a tired, strained voice asked:

"Who is there?"

"I—Betty! Can I come in?"

There was the sound of footsteps crossing the room, and then the door opened, and Miss Sands, looking more worried and white than ever, was revealed.

She stood aside for the schoolgirl to enter, and it was noticeable that she did not speak until she had shut the door again.

Then she spoke at once.

"Oh, Betty, dear girl. I wanted to see you. I wanted to thank you for what you did last night. I watched from this window here. And Arthur would have been caught if you had not acted so promptly—"

"Oh, I did nothing, Miss Sands," protested Betty.

"You did a great deal, dear girl," insisted the governess. "It was clever of you to think of emptying that snow upon Mr. Hampden's back, and then, when the other girls would have gone off after the convict—after Arthur, you deliberately misled them by pretending that you mistook Mr. Hampden for the man you were

after. You delayed the pursuit so that Arthur got away."

"You've heard from him, then? He's all right?"

The governess shook her head.

"No, I haven't heard," she replied. "I meant he got away last night. Oh, I do hope he will be able to get clear away—away from the neighbourhood, and find some hiding-place where he will be safe from this terrible cold, and be able to get good food!"

Her eyes strayed out of the window on to the snow-covered garden and trees without.

"I hope so, too," said Betty fervently, and added, "I'm sure he'll be all right, Miss Sands."

There was silence for a moment whilst they both thought of the fugitive, homeless and hunted, stealing across snow-covered country, blue with cold perhaps, and famished with hunger, but frightened to show himself to any living soul.

"Betty, did you come to see me for any special purpose?"

Miss Sands dismissed her wandering thoughts, and Betty, at the sound of the governess' voice, remembered the task she had in hand.

It was not one that she relished, but she had felt that it was better that she—who knew this woman's secret sorrows—should be the one to tell of that afternoon's plans.

With good intentions the light-hearted girls downstairs had suggested that "It would do Miss Sands good" to go to the pantomime that afternoon. But then they had not known the anxiety that the governess was experiencing.

Betty knew, and Betty felt that even she would not be able to enjoy that afternoon's performance, no matter how good it might be. Her thoughts would be on the escaping convict all the time.

And if Betty felt like that, how much worse must the man's own sister feel?

"Miss Sands, the girls downstairs want you to come out with us this afternoon. Mrs. Moore is booking seats for the pantomime at Maundsley—"

"Oh, but I couldn't, Betty. It's very kind of you, only—"

"I didn't suggest it, Miss Sands. I think it was Madge Minden's idea—"

"Madge is nearly as kind a girl as you

are, I think, Betty. But she doesn't realise—"

"I knew how you would feel, Miss Sands, and yet I didn't like to refuse on your behalf, without asking you first! I'll go and tell them that you're not feeling well, and want to be excused, but you mustn't be surprised if they come and plead with you, themselves. They'll mean well—"

Miss Sands suddenly drew herself up.

"I'll come with the girls this afternoon," she announced, with new determination. "I can do no good here. Arthur won't come back to this house, he's too afraid of getting you and me into trouble. And—if he's captured, I'll hear sooner in Maundsley, where afternoon papers are on sale!"

Betty looked up at the brave woman who was making such a fight against the grief and anxiety that oppressed her.

"I'm glad," she said. "I couldn't have borne to have left you alone in this house. We can sit next to each other in the theatre, and—comfort each other."

Miss Sands squeezed her young companion's hand.

"How you understand my sorrow, Betty," she said. "How you—comfort me!"

And Betty was the comforter, the kind friend who looked after another in distress, during that afternoon.

It was Betty who arranged that Polly, Naomer, Tess, Trixie and Kyra should go in the car, the first journey.

Kyra usually liked to arrange things, but girls of her type don't mind as long as they get the best of everything. She wanted to go in the first car, and she didn't particularly want to be saddled with Miss Sands' company, so Kyra was satisfied.

The Fourth Form captain kept Madge and Paula behind with her to go with the governess because Madge was always quiet, and Paula, though the aristocrat might be stupid, was of a very sensitive and sympathetic nature. Betty was not quite sure that those qualities might not be required if Miss Sands suddenly heard bad news or—and Betty felt the possibility more probable than many might have thought—if the governess caught a sight of her brother.

The car came back at length, and the three girls and the middle-aged woman climbed into it,

Betty and Madge took the tip-down seats with their backs to the driver, and left the comfortable, cushioned back-seat to Paula and Miss Sands.

"Bai Jove, weally wipping, what?" beamed Paula. "I must admit it is a treat to enjoy a weal west for a short pewiod without any feah of being pounced upon suddenly by that dweadful geal, Polly, or by that delightful, but at times wather twying little cweature, Naomer."

The car could not travel quickly, as the roads were in a dreadful condition. Snow had been swept by snow-ploughs from the centre of the main-roads, but a hard, slippery surface had been left beneath, and though the wheels were fitted with chains to help them to gain a grip, they would speed round furiously, without securing any hold, if they were asked to revolve at too great a speed.

Paula did not enjoy her "west." Every now and again she would start up nervously as the car behaved in a crab-like, or at another time, a broncho-jumping, manner.

Madge was calm through it all, and it was not what the car did that worried Miss Sands and Betty.

The captain of the Fourth soon noticed how very many policemen there were on the roads. They seemed to stand at nearly every four-cross road, and at every point of the thoroughfare that commanded a view over wide intervening spaces.

They were on the look-out for someone or something.

Miss Sands saw them, almost as soon as Betty, and Madge noticed them at length.

"They're after the convict, I expect," she remarked.

"Bai Jove, is the poor fellow still in the neighbourhood, then? I should have thought he would have gone wight away when he only just escaped fwom us the other night."

Betty and Miss Sands said nothing. They could neither of them have spoken without betraying their anxiety.

Seven of the party thoroughly enjoyed the pantomime that afternoon. They spoke of it for many days after as one of the wittiest, prettiest and most tuneful that they had ever seen.

Even Betty and Miss Sands were entranced at moments by the charming little show, but most of the time their thoughts

lay back on the road between the theatre and Mrs. Moore's house.

It was dark by the time the matinee was over, and street lamps outside the theatre shone down on glistening pavements and streets. Snowflakes fell very slowly, flocking the ground a deeper white, but melting and disappearing before others fell upon them.

It was arranged that the party should have tea at a restaurant near the theatre, and there Betty, Madge, Paula and Miss Sands would stay, whilst the other five were carried home, until the car came back for its second load.

Tea was soon finished, and when the first five started off home, the remainder picked up the illustrated magazines and weeklies that lay about the restaurant.

"Get me an evening paper, will you, Betty?" said Miss Sands, and, taking a penny from the governess, Betty performed the little task asked of her.

Then she pretended to be engulfed in a humorous publication, but covertly she watched Miss Sands go carefully through the news-sheet.

The governess looked up at length, and, catching Betty's eye, shook her head.

Betty sighed with relief. Apparently Miss Sands' brother had not been captured yet.

"'Fraid I'll have to travel very slowly, miss," Jones, the chauffeur, said to Madge, when he returned. "The roads are worse than ever. It's freezing again, and even the chains won't grip the slippery surface."

Fortunately he was a very good driver, but even that fact did not save him from a minor misfortune before they reached Hillchurch Manor.

Suddenly the car slewed round, and buried its rear axle in the heaped snow at the side of the road. He had it out again in a few minutes, but then he opened the door at the back of the car and announced that a couple of chains had broken off the rear wheels and it would be as well if he stopped to repair them before proceeding any farther.

Betty settled down for the short wait. The inside of the car was warm, and only her feet were cold. But suddenly she noticed Miss Sands peering ahead through the glass at the back of the driver's seat.

She turned and saw at once what had

attracted the governess' attention. Lights were moving about in a wood a little farther down the road, and every now and again the silhouetted figure of a constable would snow up against a light.

Betty slipped out of the back of the car, and Miss Sands followed her. Madge looked up questioningly, but the warmth of the car was making both that girl and Paula feel sleepy, and not in the least inclined to turn out into the cold night.

Betty closed the door, and left them. But the old chauffeur, who had been bending over one of the rear tyres, looked up as he became aware that they had left the inside of the vehicle.

"You're not going far from the car, are you, miss?" he inquired. "They say there's an escaped convict in these parts somewhere. That's the police along the road up farther, searching for him. He's been seen during the afternoon within half a mile of this spot."

"All right, Jones," answered Miss Sands, in her kindly voice. "We'll keep to the road. You needn't be anxious about us."

But the chauffeur gazed after them doubtfully as they strolled away from the car.

"I couldn't sit still and watch that search go on, Betty," whispered Miss Sands, as soon as they were out of earshot. "It's bad enough just waiting, but watching as well—"

The girl did not answer her. She suddenly clutched the governess by the arm. Miss Sands glanced at her companion to see what had attracted her attention.

She saw almost immediately. Something glistened in the hedge by the side of the road; it was the light reflecting in the eyes of someone crouched in hiding.

"Arthur, is that you?" jerked Miss Sands.

"Lilian!" came a whispered voice in reply.

Miss Sands looked up and down the road. Two hundred yards away the police were searching the wood, a hundred yards back was the car. It was safe to carry on a very careful conversation.

"Arthur, you'll be discovered. They're so near, why don't you get away?"

"I'm all right here," was the response. "They've searched this spot, closely. I'm hidden in a tree which they didn't suspect of being hollow, and I'm all right as long

as I crouch low, but when I heard your voice I couldn't resist the temptation of looking out."

"But you'll get away soon, in case they come back, won't you?"

A soft, mirthless laugh came from the tree.

"I've nowhere to get away to. The district's too well cordoned—"

"Then you must come back to Hill-church Manor. Mr. Hampden thinks you've left. He spends every day now away from the house—"

She broke off. Jones had started his engine again, and was bringing the car along towards them.

"Do come, Arthur. I shan't be easy to-night until you come," Miss Sands breathed hurriedly and anxiously, and there was no time to say more.

On their return to the manor it could not be said that Miss Sands' afternoon had done her any good. She pleaded a headache, and went at once to her room, and Betty, though she stayed with her chums, seemed now almost as ill as the governess.

But that night, after the rest of the girls were asleep, the captain of the Fourth came back to her bed-room with a smile upon her face. She had been down to the governess' room, and there, temporarily safe, and in the warmth of the house once more, she had seen Miss Sands' brother.

CHAPTER 21.

A Surprise for the Chums.

"FIRE!"

As Polly Linton gave that command she hurled snowball after snowball, and in return snowball after snowball was hurled back at her.

There was a chorus of "Oh's" and "Ah's" as the mimic battle waged fast and furious.

The snow was everywhere, and the day was cold and clear, just the very day to please the Morcove girls on Christmas holiday.

Betty Barton, the captain of the Fourth Form at Morcove School, was captaining her band of snowballers, whilst her friend and study-companion, Polly Linton, captained the opponents.

What laughter there was, what fun; and the battle was quite a serious affair.

But the seriousness became suddenly interrupted when Paula Creel, the aristocrat of the Form, suddenly threw too hard and overbalanced.

Flop! went Paula into a heap of snow, and whizz-whizz went the snowballs, that soon covered her from head to foot.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Immediately there was a truce, and hostilities ceased, and enabled the girls to laugh without restraint.

"Oh, deah! Bub-bai Jôve!" lisped Paula, in her inimitable way "That's an earthquake, you know."

"Snowquake!" chuckled Polly Linton.

"Mind, Paula! Duck!"

Spotch went another soft snowball on Paula's elegant head, and she gave a wail.

"Ha, ha! I told you to duck," laughed Polly. "Paula dear, you're wounded—"

"Gwacious! When I get up, I'll—"

She staggered up, and Naomer Nakara winked at Polly. Naomer was an Eastern girl, and her dusky face contrasted strangely with the snow. But perhaps the contrast with her own pure white teeth was even stranger. When Naomer smiled it was like a snowstorm of whiteness.

"Polly! Oooh—fire!" she gurgled in pure joy.

And fire she undoubtedly did, although that fire was a sort that Paula found almost freezing as it descended upon her in a literal avalanche.

"Charge!" roared Polly delightedly.

Her companions gathered together even as Betty & Co. fired desperately. The battle recommenced with a vigour, and Paula was between the two.

"Lie down!" called Betty. "You're interrupting our fire! There!" she exclaimed, as Paula unfortunately stopped a whizzing snowball with her ear. "If you hadn't stood up that would have hit Polly!"

"And mine!" said Madge Minden, who was on Betty's side. "Oh, do get out of the way, Paula!"

"Oh, oh! Ah-oo!"

It was certainly exasperating from Betty & Co.'s view-point that Paula was interrupting the line of fire. Snowballs that might have knocked down the invaders only burst on Paula.

However, the same circumstances were affecting the attackers. For their snowballs also burst on Paula.

"Get out of the way, duffer!" called both sides.

And Paula, who was covered from head to foot with snow, spluttered helplessly.

"Bub-bai Jove, you do—don't think that I want to be fished at!" she wailed.

"Sit down!"

Whizz!

And Paula obey the command. Then in earnest the attackers went forward. The castle was a strange affair—a mound of snow hastily erected, on top of which a flag had been perched.

It was an old flag, but it sufficed, and the victory went to the invaders if they captured the flag; to the defenders if they defended it successfully for twenty minutes or forced the attackers to retreat a given distance.

As the battle had raged ten minutes the excitement was indeed great, and every snowball seemed to take Polly & Co. nearer to the castle.

It was an evenly divided contest, for supporting Betty were Madge Minden, and Madge's cousin, Kyr. Kyr's mother, Mrs. Moore, Madge's aunt, was their hostess, and the battle was taking part in her grounds at Hillchurch Manor. Of course, there was also Paula, but then Paula was fairly hors de combat now.

Polly attacked strongly, supported by Naomer Nakara, and Trixie Hope and Tess Trelawney, but an extra keen counter-offensive from Betty & Co. drove the attackers away from their ammunition store.

Paula it was who, still crawling on the ground, seized the opportunity and the snowballs.

"My word! Well done! Hooley!" Betty called.

And the whole party cheered as it was discovered that Polly had no ammunition, and little time to make any.

Whizz, whizz, whizz!

Back the attackers went, one after the other, under the hail of snowballs, and only Polly, who was feverishly making balls, was able to return the fire.

The attackers were surely but slowly driven back to the gates just in front of which their line was. Once across that line they were adjudged losers.

"Fire!" cried Betty. "Only another yard!"

Paula threw wildly three times, and from the gateway came a shout:

"Oh!"

Betty Barton heard that cry, and turned to the gateway. Then she dropped her arms and the snowballs they contained.

"Phew! I say—" she murmured.

Madge Minden stared, too, and only Kyra and Paula continued to fire.

Polly & Co., seizing their opportunity, rushed to the attack, but Betty raised her hand.

"Pax—pax! Truce! Look!"

Realising at last that something must be amiss, Polly ceased fire and turned to stare at the gate. What she saw caused her to exclaim in dismay and then to laugh.

For there, the most comical spectacle possible, was a police-inspector, his hat on the ground, and his face and head covered with snow.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Paula. "Betty, how could you—"

"How could I?" Betty asked, with a laugh. "Why, it was you!"

"But—but I was not aiming over there!"

"That's why," nodded Polly. "You'd better go and apologise, Paula."

"Yes, wathah!" said Paula uncomfortably. "This is weally most distwessing!"

The inspector, having cleared away the snow from his features, had replaced his hat and was now looking in the opposite direction.

But Kyra Moore sniffed contemptuously.

"Poof! Who cares? Let's have another shot at him, silly old duffer!"

And she raised her hand in which was a snowball. There could be no doubt but that the girl intended to hurl it at the police-officer. The others stood aghast. Only Betty moved.

"Kyra," she said, catching the other girl's hand, "you mustn't!"

But Kyra, ill-tempered and impetuous, tore her arm away.

"Don't interfere with me!" she snapped. "I'll do as I like!"

But in jerking away her arm she dropped the snowball.

Meanwhile, Paula, the personification of politeness, was treading daintily through the intervening snow towards the police-officer.

"Bai Jove! Ahem! Pway accept my apologies, sir!"

"Your apologies—huh! Are you the girl who threw the snowballs?"

"Yes, wathah! Bai Jove! However, it was entirely an accident, and I must apologise!"

The police-inspector eyed her fiercely for a moment, then he brushed more snow from himself and smiled.

"Accidents will be accidents," he said.

Then it was that Paula saw that besides the police-inspector there were several police-constables.

Polly and Betty had noticed the fact also, and they exchanged wondering glances.

"The police! Phew!"

"Whom do they want?" Betty asked anxiously.

But the police-inspector soon informed them. With stately tread, that did not prevent his using care, he advanced through the snow, then touched his cap politely in a salute to the girls.

"Miss Moore?" he asked.

Kyra, rather amazed, stepped forward. And Polly gave a low murmur.

"What have you done, Kyra? Robbed a bank?"

"Nothing for you young ladies to fear," he said. "I merely wish to ask a question. Have any of you seen the escaped convict here?"

CHAPTER 22.

Betty's Daring Rescue.

AT the police-inspector's voice an ominous hush had fallen on the group of girls, and Polly Linton gave a low whistle of amazement. They knew the convict; they had seen him. But they had not seen him that morning, and said so.

"Not this morning?" the inspector mused. "But have you seen him?"

"Yes. The day we came here," said Betty. "We saw him in the town where our school is—Barncombe."

"Oh, you're Morcove girls!" smiled the inspector. "It's a far cry from here. But no doubt you would see him there. The prison is not far from Barncombe. Where did you see him there, and what was he wearing?"

At that question Betty frowned slightly,

for upon their arrival at the station she had given full particulars to a detective who had been awaiting their train.

However, it was possible that the police-inspector and the detective were working independently, so Betty gave the desired information.

Polly and Madge joined in, of course, and the inspector jotted down the notes. Then he read them aloud:

"You saw him in the woods, wearing convict clothes, and later he was on your train, but when you reported the matter he had escaped. Later you saw him here—where?"

Then it was that a silence fell upon the group of girls, and Betty sidled into the background. Perhaps the police-inspector noticed the general reluctance to answer the question, for he tapped his chin with his pencil and looked from one to the other of the girls.

"Where?" he asked. "You know?"

"In the house," said Kyra.

"But we didn't actually see him," said Betty.

And then silence fell again.

This time the police-inspector spoke in an irritated tone.

"Come, come; you must know whether you saw a convict in the house! Don't any of you know? You!" he said abruptly, pointing at Betty, and Betty fell further into the background, as though she had a particular desire to avoid answering the question.

"Well, we thought it was the convict, but it wasn't. Both times it was Mr. Hampden, the detective."

"The detective?" asked the inspector. "A detective is here?"

"Yes, didn't you know?" asked Polly.

"Who is it?" he asked.

But the sergeant was as ignorant as was the inspector.

"Can't understand," the inspector said briefly. "Where is the detective?"

And further questioning of the girls ended there. For obviously, if the detective was in the house, he would know all about the convict.

"A private detective," smiled the sergeant, looking meaningfully at the inspector.

"H'm! Then our bird has flown," the inspector agreed. "But you'd better see the man and find out the work that he is

engaged upon here. It is not his business to track convicts."

"H'm!"

They reached the mansion to find the girls following them in a crowd. The snow-fight was forgotten, leaving the snow-flag still waving uncared for, unwon, and undefended.

The girls' chatter reached the police-inspector's ears, and he jerked his head in their direction.

"Their eyes are keen, and they may be useful in tracking and following the man. Once clear of the house we have got him. There is a safe-cordon round?"

"Yes, sir, and we know that he entered here. Where he is in the house, of course we can't guess!"

"Funny if he hangs round this place—if his sister doesn't know anything about him!"

"She's governess here?" asked the sergeant. "You've seen her here, sir."

"Yes, but she didn't give herself away. She was perturbed, but that proves nothing. The knowledge of her brother's escape—the fact of my questioning would do that."

Betty, who was following them, heard all this, and when they stopped in the corridor, she stopped, too.

"Mrs. Moore in?" the inspector asked the servant as he whisked off his cap.

The girl eyed him suspiciously, and then went away to report his presence to her mistress.

Betty ran quickly up the stairs, whilst Polly and the others stopped to ask the inspector a few questions. It was only tit-for-tat, as Polly said, and they naturally thirsted for information.

Meanwhile, Betty Barton, alarm written on her face, raced along the corridor at the head of the stairs. When she halted before one of the doors she was breathless.

She tried the handle of the door, and there was the sound of hurried movement in the room.

"Miss Sands—Miss Sands!" she called softly.

But the governess did not open the door.

"Miss Sands—quick! It is I—Betty!"

Then the key turned in the door, and the door itself was opened.

In the doorway stood an elderly woman, her grey hair throwing into contrast the lines on her face, the marks of strain, worry and anxiety and tiredness.

"Betty!" she exclaimed. "What is it?"
Betty gasped for breath, and clutched the door-knob.

"The police! Your brother——"

"He is here, in the room! Where are they? In the house?"

"At the foot of the stairs. Hark! They are coming up!" Betty exclaimed in a hoarse voice.

And the sound of a heavy tread was already on the stairs.

Inside the room a masculine voice spoke gently.

"Let me go, Lillian! I will give myself up!"

"Never—never! There must be a way—there must!"

The footsteps came relentlessly nearer, and Betty clenched her hands in desperation. The man she was sure was innocent—the man who had escaped for a few days' freedom—was he to be captured now and thus robbed of his chance to prove his innocence?

"I have had my Christmas," the convict muttered. "I can ask no more."

But the tragic figure of Miss Sands, like a statue of justice, seemed to weigh the matter fairly.

"Stay, Arthur—stay, while there is yet a chance. At most you can but be caught."

"They have surrounded the house," Betty said. "It is useless to try and get away."

"I suppose I might as well try it out to the end," the man exclaimed. "And yet, if only they had not come! If only I could find the clue that would prove my innocence!"

But the footsteps were ominously nearer now, and out in the grounds a watchful policeman eyed the windows of the mansion.

In another minute the inspector would probably be in the corridor, making escape impossible and capture certain.

"If your innocence is to be proved, we must throw them off the scent," Betty cried. "They have seen you this morning. What were you wearing? Give me the coat immediately."

In a moment, without knowing Betty's purpose, the coat was handed over and then the cap. They were clothes that had belonged to Mr. Moore, and Miss Sands had borrowed them.

The coat trailed the ground with Betty, but that didn't matter—in fact, prevented her stockinged feet from showing.

Her hair was tucked under the cap, and she glanced round.

The inspector had halted at the head of the corridor.

Carefully she crept along, knowing her way well about the house, and choosing a path that would prevent her instant capture.

At the end of the corridor there was a landing, and from it the stairs led to the hall below. On the other side stairs mounted, too, and it was on those stairs that the inspector and the sergeant stood, as she ascertained by a very cautious peep round the corner.

The men were talking and did not see her, which was just as well, perhaps, for front view the disguise was not excellent.

Round the corner she darted quickly, gathering the coat about her and bending low. In that attitude the difference between her height and that of the convict's could not be noticed.

A sudden exclamation from the police-officer told her that she had been seen, and a shout from below told that the police-officer's exclamation had been heard by her friends.

"There he is—after him, quick!"
From below came a shout from Polly.

"Where? Come on, girls, we're in this!"
"After him! Bai Jove, y'know!"

"Yes, yes, catch heem!" shrieked Naomer excitedly.

The Morocco girls, little dreaming that it was their own chum they were pursuing, followed in chase, reaching the landing as the inspector and his junior officer disappeared round the corner after Betty Barton.

Betty had won, but she had only won the first round!

CHAPTER 23.

In the Name of the Law.

AS she put further distance between herself and her pursuers, Betty's brain worked quickly. Her chums, she knew, were behind her, and so were the police-officers. Constables surrounded the house, but they were not in it, and, anyway, their only chance of reaching this portion of the house was by using

the main stairway—unless they entered by the tradesmen's entrance.

But that was not likely.

There was someone else, however, excluding the servants and Mrs. Moore, someone with whom Betty felt that she had to reckon—keen-eyed Mr. Hampden!

The detective was in disguise, although his beard and stoop were ineffectual as far as the girls were concerned. For they had accidentally taken off his disguise. Perhaps Mr. Hampden fought shy of the girls after that unfortunate incident? Certainly they had seen but little of him.

Once or twice Betty had seen him near the governess' room, and Polly had said that she had seen him entering one of the two secret panels they had discovered.

Since those secret passages led nowhere, there was little to be gained in searching them, so that it was possible for the convict to remain there in hiding for a little while.

Betty kept her eyes wide open as she ran, and her ears were alert, too.

At the first opportunity she meant to throw off her disguise and become Betty Barton once again. But first she wanted to give them a definite clue of her whereabouts, or a definite clue as to which way the convict had gone.

She could hear the excited shout of the crowd behind her, and they were not far away now. If she were not to be discovered she must take action soon.

Suppose they did discover her!

It was a serious thought, and her eyes became troubled. Already Kyra suspected much of Miss Sands' part in the affair, and if Betty were implicated too, there would be trouble.

What could she do—where could she go? For the first time she realised the agonies of a dog-hunted fox or the hotly-pursued hare.

There were doors along the corridors, but the time taken to run into one of those rooms would give the pursuers their opportunity.

Then it was that a splendid idea occurred to her.

Throwing the cap ahead, she darted into the nearest room and closed the door. It was a spare bed-room, unused. The bed was in the centre of the room, neatly made. To tear off the coat and put it

under the mattress was the work of scarcely a second.

In the corner of the room was a wardrobe with just enough room for her to squeeze round. But she was only just getting it when she heard the heavy steps of the inspector outside. He was gasping rather painfully, and Betty smiled. A second later she heard him shout, and the smile broadened widely.

"He's left us the cap! This way, quickly!"

Now Polly & Co. could be heard, and the voices of Polly and Naomer.

"I dare say he's dodged aside somewhere," Madge Minden said in her sensible way. "Perhaps he's waiting until we have gone by to dodge back."

At that moment Betty wished sincerely that Madge was not quite so cute; but she was thankful for Polly's enthusiasm. For Polly would have no delay.

"No fear; the inspector knows—he's probably seen him! Come on!"

They ran on, and Betty dodged from behind the wardrobe.

"Phew! That was a close shave!" she murmured.

Then she turned to the mirror in order to re-arrange her hair, which under the hat had become rather disarranged. So busy was she in attending to her toilet that she did not hear the door's soft opening.

"But I diddle 'em—I diddle 'em!" she said joyfully.

The next moment she almost collapsed as a quiet voice interrupted:

"Diddled whom, Betty?"

Betty spun round as though twirled by a cord.

"My goodness, Madge!" she gasped.

For a moment the two friends looked at each other wonderingly—Betty rather flushed and guilty; Madge frowning and amazed.

"However did you get in here, Betty, and who have you diddled?"

"Not you!" Betty said. "Goodness, you gave me a shock. I thought it was the inspector."

"And would it have mattered if it were?" Madge smiled.

"Well, yes!" Betty flashed a look at Madge and sighed.

She had promised Miss Sands that she would keep the secret faithfully. That she

would not confide in her chums; but how badly she wanted Madge's aid then! Madge was so sensible and so wise at times.

Even now Madge was coolly sitting on the bed, eyeing Betty reflectively, as though weighing up the matter before reopening the discussion.

"I see," she said suddenly. "It was you—"

"Was I—"

Then Betty smiled and shrugged.

"You were chasing me!"

Madge nodded.

"But you're not likely to do it for a joke, Betty. You're not the sort to play such a silly trick. There is something more serious in it. You disguised as the convict—"

"Shush!"

Betty put her hand warningly to her mouth, and Madge quietly closed the door. "Sorry," she apologised; "but I'm so excited to find out. You know, Betty, you've been very mysterious of late."

"Have I? I tried not to be. I tried to be normal."

"But you went out and explored alone the other night, leaving us in bed."

Betty sighed.

"I know," she said regretfully; "but I promised—"

"Ah!"

Madge was all smiles, and Betty, crimson and annoyed, realised in those few words she had betrayed herself to the very keen Madge; Madge missed little of what went on about her.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to trap you, dear," Madge smiled. "As a matter of fact, I did guess it; one couldn't miss her face—"

And Betty was glad that Madge did not mention Miss Sands' name.

"I suppose not, although she does try to hide it," Betty sighed. "But what's the use? Poor thing! I feel so sorry for her; and Kyra, she only makes matters worse!"

"Far worse!" Madge agreed. "And do you know, Betty, I really believe that she would betray Miss Sands—"

"Betray her?" said Betty in horror.

And Madge nodded coolly.

"Yes, I'm sure of it. Kyra is my cousin, and I know her nature. She is spiteful and revengeful, and never forgets or forgives a hurt. Miss Sands has never hurt

her, but she resents her presence—resents that she has power over her, although, goodness knows, the power she has is little enough."

Madge spoke in little more than a whisper, but her words came to Betty distinctly, and the captain of the Fourth nodded.

"Yes," she said, "we must keep the knowledge away from her. He's innocent," she added impressively. "I'm sure he is innocent!"

"I am sure, too. I know Miss Sands, and I know that no brother of hers could be guilty of a crime," agreed Madge. "And I knew the part that you were playing. It is better with two, of course, and it would be better perhaps if we all knew, although Paula, the dear, well-meaning little ass, might give it away, not meaning to."

"Yes, rather," Betty smiled, "with the very best intentions in the world. No, we must keep it to ourselves, Madge. It's the only way." Then she stood up suddenly.

"Hark! They are returning."

Madge whisked open the door.

"Not here," she said loudly.

"No, he certainly isn't—"

Betty made a great to-do, slamming the wardrobe door, and she again remarked that the convict was not there. When Betty turned she saw the sergeant blocking the doorway.

"Not here," she smiled at him.

"Oh, been searching, miss?" he asked, still gasping and panting. "Phew! There must be some hiding-place somewhere here. We are going to search the rooms. Have you searched here?"

"Nowhere much to search," Madge smiled at him. "Under the bed." She raised the coverlet. "Or in the wardrobe—both empty."

The sergeant smiled and returned to the search elsewhere. They searched the rooms in turn thoroughly, one after the other, but the convict did not put in an appearance.

"I didn't see any skylights, but you never know," said the inspector keenly. Then he turned to Betty.

"What is this about the detective?" he asked. "Where is he?"

"I don't know," Betty confessed. "But, anyway"—she smiled broadly—"he isn't

supposed to be one. He's in disguise. Only we recognised him."

The inspector frowned, and then smiled. He said nothing, but his silent opinion of the detective was more expressive than if he had spoken.

Room after room they searched, until they reached the governess'. Betty looked at Madge, and they both grimaced. Was the convict there now? Had he escaped?

The inspector rapped on the door and tried the handle. The door was locked.

"Whose room is this?" the inspector asked.

"Sands', my governess," Kyra volunteered.

The inspector and the sergeant exchanged meaning glances, and the inspector tried the handle. There was a momentary pause, but no reply from within.

Then, with a firm expression, the inspector clenched his hands and rapped the panel three times.

"Open in the name of the Law!"

CHAPTER 24.

The Locked Room.

"**P**HEW!" Polly Linton rubbed her hands excitedly and Betty looked alarmed. Kyra, on the other hand, looked quite delighted.

"Bai Jovel! Why doesn't Miss Sands open the wretched door, y'know—"

"Yes, why not?" asked Polly.

But the door did not open; but something else did. There was a slight squeak from inside the room—a squeak that awakened the police-sergeant to life.

"The window—someone is getting out through the window!" he exclaimed.

And even as he did so, there came a chorus from the girls.

"Miss Sands—"

The governess quite calmly was walking down the corridor. As she heard her name called she raised her head and became aware for the first time of the crowd that was gathered round her door.

Betty, her back to the door, tried to signal, by making grimaces, what was happening, in order that the governess should not be alarmed.

But Madge was wiser.

"Miss Sands, there is someone in your room," she exclaimed.

"Yes." And Betty winked hard. "We think it's the convict!"

Miss Sands was equal to the occasion, and by a stern effort she controlled herself.

"The convict—in my room!" she exclaimed. Then she looked at the inspector.

He bowed to her.

"Yes, Miss Sands. I think we've run him to earth this time."

Miss Sands gave a weary sigh.

"Thank goodness!"

The inspector, taken off his guard, looked surprised. Then he turned abruptly to the sergeant, who had come running back.

"No one got out, sir," he said. "But I saw someone's head bob out of the window—it was a man—"

There was a buzz of excitement, and the girls crowded round the door. The inspector and the sergeant had a brief consultation. They would have to smash down the door—they had no alternative.

"What about ladders?" asked Polly. "If we could get in through the window—"

"A good idea," said the inspector. "I'll see to it at once." He turned and walked down the corridor.

"Bai Jovel! Yes, wather!" said Paula, in a thrilled whisper. "All pwetend to wun away, y'know. Then he'd come dashing out, y'know—and then we could captuahn him—"

"Perhaps," said Polly.

"Yes, wather," said Paula, quite excitedly. "No, I have a bettah ideah—"

"Well that's not difficult," Polly agreed. "The real task would be to get a worse one."

"Pway listen, deah geals. It's a wippin' ideah. Inspectah—pway listen!"

The inspector somewhat impatiently turned.

"Yes, miss. But please be quick. My time is valuable."

"Yes, wather. I am awah of that. I hope and trust that you will not wegard me as capable—"

"Please don't waste my time," said the inspector testily.

"It was not my intention to waste youah time, y'know; but to wender you valuable assistance by making a suggestion—"

The inspector breathed deeply and his

eyes seemed inclined to start from his head.

"What is the suggestion?" he asked in a truly awful voice.

"The suggestion is that I disguise myself as another convict," said Paula brightly. "And then he will think that I am a friend, y'know. Doubtless we could get convict's clothes from the police-station—bai Jove—wheah is the inspector going?" she asked in surprise.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The girls simply shrieked.

"Oh!" choked Polly. "Dr-ress me up as a convict—"

"Get—get the clothes from the police-station," sobbed Tess Trelawney. "As if they had scores of them—oh, Paula!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He, he, he!" shrieked Naomer. "Oof Paula, you are funny!"

And even Miss Sands smiled. Paula, however, was amazed. She stared after the retreating inspector.

"Even in the police force surely politeness is not out of the way, bai Jove! The least he might have said was thank you—"

Betty shot a sympathetic glance at the governess.

How well Miss Sands was taking the blow! How bravely she was comporting herself in face of this new danger!

In a minute the police would have obtained ladders, and then all indeed would be over.

Betty tried the door, shaking it.

"You may as well come out," she said. "The police are here!"

The sergeant who was standing by shook his head.

"No good, miss! They always hold out until the very last minute! We'll get him all right! He can't escape now—"

"Wather not—howevah—"

But Paula was not allowed to proceed. Fearing that she had yet another brilliant idea, Polly placed her hand over her chum's mouth, thereby preventing her from further speech and from further explanation.

The police-sergeant was eyeing Miss Sands carefully; but not one glance nor one movement betrayed her anxiety, or even gave the man cause for suspicion.

He was plainly puzzled and somewhat annoyed.

The buzz of excitement in the corridor increased, servants arrived upon the scene, and Betty, weighing the matter up, decided that it was an opportune moment for the convict's escape.

She and Madge could easily baulk the police-sergeant, and the others would be too surprised to capture the man as he burst through.

But—how was the door to be opened from the outside?

It was a problem to which Betty could see no solution, and, sighing, she resigned herself to the end that seemed to be inevitable.

"Hark!" exclaimed Polly excitedly. "There's the ladder!"

They rushed then to the corridor window, leaving Betty, the police-sergeant and Miss Sands behind.

Betty looked meaningly at the governess, and Miss Sands smiled. She had never seemed so cool before, and Betty's heart beat quickly. In an emergency Miss Sands was stronger than she had imagined.

When the inspector appeared at the window, what was more likely than that the convict would make a bolt for the door, open it, and break his way through?

With the other girls at the window there was only the sergeant to reckon with. To frustrate him would not be difficult; indeed, the convict in the first rush would probably knock him aside, leaving the governess and Betty to hamper the sergeant.

How eagerly Betty waited as she heard the heavy tread of the inspector on the ladder.

Click!

There came softly the sound of a key turning in the lock; but it had not been too soft for the policeman to hear it, and he stood aside expectantly.

Now the door opened, but no one appeared.

"Come out, No. 83!" ordered the sergeant briefly. "The game's up!"

Then out of the room came a bearded, stooping man.

The inspector stared blankly, and the sergeant gasped.

But from the girls came an explanatory cry:

"The detective!"

CHAPTER 25.

Who is the Detective?

"THE detective!"
 "Mr. Hampden!"
 The sergeant clenched his hands and glared.
 "What's this mean?" he jerked out furiously. "Who are you?"

The man leaned forward, putting his hand to his ear and adjusting his spectacles. He did not use spectacles as a rule, but he had obviously been reading some papers that lay scattered on Miss Sands' desk.

The governess stepped forward, her face red with anger.

"You have been searching my desk!" she cried.

The detective looked at her and smiled.
 "Desk? Yes, I have searched it. Why not? Inspector, if only you knew your job better—"

"Who are you, any way?" the inspector wanted to know.

The man groped in his pocket and brought out his card.

"Come inside," he said.

The inspector entered the study, and the sergeant accompanied him, and the short conversation was audible to the girls outside.

"I am watching," said the detective. "The convict will not leave here, and we can trap him when we want him. Meanwhile, it is essential that he remains here."

"Oh, why?"

"I cannot explain. The matter that has been entrusted to me is private. But you must know my name."

"Yes, sir, I do, anyway," the inspector said politely. "I have never had the honour of meeting you before, Mr. Dormayne, but I know of you!"

"Same here," said the sergeant. "You've pulled off big cases." He nodded towards the door. "Have you anything against her?"

The detective put his fingers to his mouth.

"It is a big deal," he said, "and I am laying out plenty of rope. Enough said! Sorry I didn't open the door before, but I wanted to give you an opportunity of watching the governess' face. Did you?"

"Oh!"

"Yes," said the sergeant, frowning

slightly, "and she looked straight enough!"

The detective nodded.

"Good! I think she is!"

The inspector did not conceal his surprise at that statement.

"Then who in the name of goodness are you watching, Mr. Dormayne?"

But that the detective did not say. The inspector came from the room, and, taking Miss Sands aside, started to ask her questions.

Gradually the crowd had dispersed, and Betty and Madge wandered off together.

"I—I can't understand it!" Betty said. "It's quite beyond me. I was certain that the convict was in there. He hadn't time to get away."

Madge wrinkled her brows, and her eyes had a far-away thoughtful look.

"It puzzled me, too," she said.

Then she turned as the door of Miss Sands' room opened. The detective emerged. Very carefully he locked the door, and slipped the key in his pocket.

He was about to walk in the opposite direction, but halted and called to Betty: "Little girl!"

It was how Mr. Hampden usually spoke, and Betty could not help smiling. Considering now that everyone knew who he was, the disguise was ridiculous. Even Miss Sands knew, and it was certain that the convict did, too.

"Yes, Mr. Hampden."

"Kindly tell the inspector that I have taken charge of Miss Sands' room, and that I have the key, will you?"

Betty did as she had been bidden, and ran swiftly down the stairs with Madge behind her. The inspector was in the hall below. He was talking to Miss Sands, but not about her brother. The matters they discussed were of general interest, and the inspector seemed to be comporting himself as though nothing in the nature of duty and convict-catching had been invented.

Yet Madge noticed how keenly he watched the governess' face.

Betty beckoned the inspector on one side, gave the message, and then returned to Madge. She noticed a smile on her chum's face.

"Wherefore the smile?" she asked.

"Thinking," said Madge. "Mr. Dormayne is keener than we think, you know."

"Keener?" asked Betty. "He strikes

me as being rather peculiar, all things considered. He hasn't done much, although, of course, as he says, he may have something else up his sleeve. Do you think that he is watching Miss Sands?"

"Shouldn't think so!" said Madge. "He's gone into his room now—probably we shan't see him for the rest of the day!"

"Funny detective!" said Betty.

"Oh, I don't know," said Madge.

And Madge was so mysterious that Betty looked at her in frowning inquiry. But Madge was talking of something else, something far away from convicts and detectives.

"Hallo—there's Paula!" Madge laughed. "What's she going to do—disguise as a detective?"

Paula, with a somewhat mysterious air, came hurrying towards the two friends.

"I say, geals—I wather fancy that these people are not competent to deal with that mattah!"

"Not competent?" Madge smiled. "How?"

The elegant girl smoothed her hair and fanned herself with a delicate lace handkerchief.

"Well, y'know, I was awah that the convict was not in that woom. I guessed——"

"Goodness—you guessed?" said Betty.

"Yes, wather—don't you remember my saying at the commencement——"

"Stuff!" laughed Madge. "You were more certain than anyone; of course you were."

"Weally, Madge, I twust that you do not imagine that I am so easily deceived. As a matter of fact, y'know," proceeded Paula. "I have decided that theah is some fwiend of the convict's in the house!"

"Go on!" said Betty, quite overcome.

"Really, Paula, how do you do these things?"

"Yes, wather, y'know. And, what is more, deah geals, I am wather twoubled, bai Jove! Because I think the person is——"

But then Madge and Betty frowned at her so ferociously that Paula was silenced.

"I should hate to think ill of——"

"Shush!"

"Gwacious—deah geals—I was only going to say that I weally don't suspect Miss——"

"Will you be quiet?" Betty exclaimed,

half-laughing and half-angry. "If you must talk, come along here."

Arm-in-arm, they commenced to walk off, quite unaware that Polly and the others were calling to them to continue the snowball fight. The snowball fight, however, was buried in the past, as far as Madge and Betty were concerned.

"I wather think that Kyra suspects," said Paula. "Just now, y'know, she got the key of Miss Sands' woom."

Then, at last, Paula had succeeded in interesting them.

"Got the key of the room—but how?" asked Betty.

"But the detective has the key," said Madge.

"She whispahed to me that she was going to bowl out that convict, and said she knew wheah there was a duplicate key of Miss Sands' woom."

"Oh!"

"And she's gone to get it?" Betty asked.

"Yes."

Then Betty smiled.

"Well, after all, it doesn't really matter a very great deal, does it? Kyra can't do more than the detective; and he already has the key!"

"Bai Jove! Weally!" Paula looked quite worried then. "You know, deah geals, that I weally feel quite sowwy for Miss Sands—it is most unfortunate. But I shouldn't be surprisid," she added, with such an air of wisdom that Betty and Madge simply could not help laughing, "if, after all, the convict is not guilty."

Betty was smiling, but Madge had a frown on her brow.

"Oh, you dear, silly one," said Betty, squeezing Paula's arm. "Don't talk, dear, whatever you think, it's—it's dangerous!"

And Paula comprehending, her head fluttered, as she would have expressed it, to find that she had others in full agreement with her.

"Why are you looking so worried?" said Betty to Madge when they were several yards away from the point where Paula had first joined them. "Kyra doesn't matter."

But Madge shook her head in a most decided manner.

"I'm not so sure," she said. "I don't want her to go to Miss Sands' room."

"Why ever not?"

Madge coloured slightly.

"I may be silly, but—well—I suspect.

Come on," she added abruptly. "Let's find Kyra and forestall her, if possible. You go to Miss Sands' room and prevent her from opening the door somehow."

Betty did as she had been bidden, and Paula and Madge hurried off to find Kyra. As a matter of fact, the two had a shrewd idea where that key was. The only duplicate keys were in Mrs. Moore's possession, and it was thither that Kyra had gone.

As they approached Mrs. Moore's room they could hear Kyra talking to her mother, and Kyra's voice was raised in anger.

"But I want it, mother!" she was saying. "Ask Miss Sands, my dear. You must not go into her room without asking her permission. I don't know where the key is, anyway. Don't bother!"

Madge nudged Paula, and they crept away.

"Good!" Madge exclaimed. "Now, how can we get in?"

"We?" Paula said in great surprise. "We don't want to woom about Miss Sands' woom, suahly?"

"No, not exactly, only we want to make sure that Kyra doesn't, or anyone else. The window is open, and there is a ladder outside. That window ought to be closed."

Madge uttered the last few words of the sentence slowly; then she struck one palm with the other fist.

"I've got it!" she exclaimed. "I know where there is a key that will fit it!"

In excitement she left Paula behind, and the aristocrat of the Fourth blinked after her wonderingly, not able to imagine what had happened to Madge, who usually was so calm and collected and unruffled.

However, it was useless for Paula to follow, so she roamed back to the governess' study, outside which Betty was still mounting guard. Kyra had not put in an appearance, and was still not in sight when Madge came racing along waving a key.

Madge turned it in the lock and, with a gesture, flung open the door and motioned Betty to walk in.

Rather perplexed, the captain of the Fourth did so, and Paula followed.

Madge's first action was to make a cautious survey of the grounds, to see whether anyone was watching. There was a policeman below, and she waited until he was looking in another direction, and then closed the window and latched it.

"Now," she said, in the same mysterious way, and turned back into the room.

But there was nothing about the room to suggest anything peculiar, and Betty stared at Madge amazedly.

"What on earth—" she began, then caught her breath and stared towards the screen, whence a strange sound had come.

It was a faint sound between a gasp and a groan that startled Betty.

But Madge seemed not the least bit perturbed, and pulled the corner of the screen.

What they saw made Betty and Paula jump back in dismay, for there was visible two legs tied together.

The boots were heavy and thick, and the suit was one that Betty, at least, recognised, if the others didn't.

"The—the convict!" she exclaimed.

"Bai Jove!"

"You mean that the detective did not know that he was hiding here?" Betty rambled on, too excited to think clearly.

"But he's bound—surely the detective—"

But Madge Minden only laughed.

She opened the screen wide, and they saw then that the man was bound and gagged. Their amazement, however, was increased instead of lessened. For why should the detective bind the convict and leave him there?

That mental question was quickly answered by Madge dragging the pair of them to the other side of the room.

"Quiet!" she warned. "I don't think he's recognised us!"

"But—but," protested Betty, "we must surely release him!"

"Wather!"

"Oh, dear, no!" said Madge. "That isn't the convict at all—it is our friend, the great detective. In other words, the convict has got the better of Dormayne, the sleuth hound. The convict has escaped—the detective remains!"

"Are you sure?" whispered Betty.

"Positive!"

"Oh, I say!" breathed Paula. "Then the man who locked up this woom a short while ago was the—the convict?"

"That's it," said Madge. "He attacked the detective and changed clothes with him!"

"Bai Jove!"

"My word!"

It was clear to them now, as was also the long silence in the study. How it had

happened exactly was only a matter for contemplation; but Betty guessed that the convict had been hiding behind the screen when the detective entered, and had seized him, forcing him to change clothes, and then bound and gagged him.

The rest had been simple.

"And now," Madge laughed, "the detective will continue as before, keeping to his room until the police have gone. When they have retired, we can come back and rediscover him."

At that moment the door of the room softly opened, and there appeared a stealthy figure. No second glance was necessary to tell them that it was the convict, disguised as the detective. His face was white and exceedingly anxious.

"Who—what are you doing here?" he gasped.

Quickly Betty whispered what had happened.

The man smiled and nodded.

"That was thoughtful. Thank you a thousand times. I shall never forget the kindness that you girls have shown me, but—"

The colour had returned to his face, and he smiled broadly. Then it was that they realised that he was holding something in his hand, a paper, an old, torn piece of paper that looked like half a sheet of foolscap.

"This paper," he explained. "It—it proves my innocence!"

"Proves your innocence!" Betty exclaimed.

And the girls looked as though they could have been knocked down by a feather.

"Yes, I have had the other half; my sister has kept it for me. I wanted but this half, and I did not know where it was, save that it was in possession of the man who really was guilty. He, in his turn, was searching for the piece of paper that my sister kept."

"But—but where did you find it?" Betty asked.

The convict raised his hands in an expressive gesture.

"Our friend, who has skilfully stolen from that desk the other portion that until a few hours ago was safely kept by my sister."

"Goodness!" Betty gasped. "You don't mean, you don't mean—the detective!"

And then the convict smiled and nodded.

"Yes, I do. I mean the detective. The

man who poses as a detective. For he is a fraud. He is the guilty party, and when I reclaim the other portion of this paper I can prove it. I will at once tackle him and force—"

He never completed the sentence, for at that moment the screen fell on them with a thud. They had a fleeting glimpse of a flying figure darting by them, and then crash, the window shot up, and someone was climbing out.

No need to tell them who this "someone" was. It was the man who they thought was bound and gagged. By some means or other he had got free from his bonds, and now had escaped!

CHAPTER 26.

The End of It All.

"H OORAY! Your turn, Naomer!"

Polly Linton simply danced with joy, and the policeman standing by smiled tolerantly.

Near the gates the girls had constructed a wonderful slide on a hard path.

Polly Linton, of course, was in her element, and simply flew down the slide, her fair hair flying in a stream behind her, keeping company with the tails of her scarf.

"Oo—lovely!" screamed Naomer, as she followed Polly. "Oo—how I love him—the slide—oo!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Naomer's feet travelled faster than the rest of her body, and there was a sudden alarming bump as she landed on the slide. Tess Trelawney, who was following her, had not time to stop and cannoned into her. Trixie Hope gave a wild yell, and crashed into Tess.

Flop! Bump! Biff!

Then, of course, Polly, her eyes simply sparkling with mischief, had to race down the slide and add herself to the human tangle.

How the policeman laughed, and how the girls laughed, too, not minding the slight bumps and bruises, taking them all as part of the excellent fun.

"Oh dear! Where is Paula?" sighed Polly regretfully. "What wouldn't I give to hear her say, Yes, wather—but Jove! Then—ooop, she'd go—"

"Flop!" ended Naomer joyously. "Oo—where is Paula? I love her!"

"And Madge, too!"

"And Betty!"

And the girls looked rather regretful as they picked themselves up from the ground. However, there was no sense in wasting valuable time, and Polly rushed down the slide again.

It was wonderful fun, and they all enjoyed it immensely. There were roses in their cheeks now, and their eyes gleamed with laughter.

Perhaps the policeman longed to try his hand, or, rather, his feet, but his dignity did not allow that, and he could only watch and regret the passing years.

One more tangle there was, and this time they landed in a heap of snow, and lay there gasping, too exhausted to move.

Slowly they rose, and this time Polly had a scheme. They must all line up, one after the other holding waists, and go down together. Go down was to prove more literal than Polly had intended!

They had started to run, when the policeman gave a shout. In their excitement they did not see him, or hear his shouts; nor, for the matter of that, did any of them see the wild figure that a second before had scrambled down the drainpipe.

It was not the convict—the tousled hair told that. And the face, too, was different. But at one of the windows three figures shouted excitedly, and the policeman darted forward, determined to act first and ask questions afterwards.

But the man saw him and dodged.

The policeman chased him, but he was heavy and had not the frightful need for haste that the man had. His strained look, his flying hair, and terrible desperation spoke of guilt.

But now—he was free. He was past the policeman, and the gates were straight ahead. The cordon that had been drawn around the house would not prevent his passing, since they would realise that he was not the convict.

In a second the fugitive would be through the gates of freedom. Only the girls were in front, and they were laughing and shouting too much to heed the others' shouts.

Betty and Madge at a window of the mansion had already screamed themselves hoarse, and Paula was shrieking uselessly.

"Stop, stop!" yelled the policeman.

But if the girls heard him at all they thought that he was calling them.

Tess, who was last on the line, slipped slightly, and released her hold on Trixie.

Spinning half-round, she saw the man, and realised the position in a flash.

Out she darted right in his path.

He raised his hands, dodged, and had to cut right in front of the running girls.

And then what happened was volcanic. His running feet touched the slide, and it must have seemed to him that the end of the world had come.

Up went his feet as he slid mightily, and, at the same moment, the whole string of girls shot giddily and trying hard to stop, cannoning right into him.

Bump! Bump! Flop!

It was all over then. One by one the girls rolled aside, shaking the snow from themselves, and the policeman, puffing and gasping, took a firm hold on the man.

But there was no need for it. The man was holding his ankle and rolling in agony.

With a sprained ankle, he was helpless; but, all the same, all the girls escorted him back to the house, or, at least, back to where the duplicate Mr. Hampden, and Betty, Madge and Paula awaited them.

Betty, speaking hoarsely with all the voice she had left summed up the situation in two words:

"Bowled out!"

Back to the house the man was taken, and Miss Sands heard the whole story with about a dozen voices helping to add bits.

And then Miss Sands, quite overcome, could stand the strain no longer. Betty it was who folded her in her arms, while the hot tears of gladness warmed the careworn cheeks.

And Betty, too, it was who suggested a celebration.

And what a celebration that was—a celebration in honour of Mr. Sands—who'd soon leave prison for good. He had to return to prison, and there wait for his reprieve; but he had not to wait long. It arrived before the girls had finished their holidays at Hillechurch Manor, and then, of course, there was another celebration.

Kyra did not seem pleased; but she had the grace not to put in an appearance at the festivity, and so cast a damper upon everything.

Mr. Hampden, alias Ferguson Dormayne, was now in prison, and probably heartily regretting his recent impersonation.

The great detective he had impersonated was amused, and, of course, on a charge of impersonation alone, the rogue would have been adjudged guilty.

But as it was, he confessed to all his crimes, and he had to serve the sentences that had so nearly wrecked the life of the governess' brother.

"Howevah," said Paula philosophically, "all's well that ends well. I'm glad that I suggested making a slide."

"You suggested!" exclaimed Polly. "Why, I was making it to get you to sit down on!" Polly explained candidly.

"Yes, wather—that is what I mean. If you hadn't made the slide for me, the man would nevah have slipped on it; and therefore he would have escaped, you see."

For a moment the girls looked at their elegant chum in admiration; and then they could control themselves no longer.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the merry laughter rang musically in the old rafters of Hillchurch Manor, so that the echo of it could cheer the governess, and add balm to the ache in her heart that their departure would make. For shortly they would be back at Morcove—dear old Morcove!—with plenty of fun, plenty of play, plenty of chums, and all the good things that go to make up school life.

But first the girls had their parents to visit, and what a scene there was when the time came for them to part!

Betty Barton was overjoyed at the prospect of going up North to visit her parents

and her little brother and sister. Also there was Zonia, the one-time gipsy-girl, who had been adopted by Mr. and Mrs. Barton, and who was now at Betty's home.

"Well, good-bye, geals!" said Paula Creel, as they parted at the nearest junction.

"Good-bye, Paula darling!" said Polly, giving the aristocratic one a hug, and at the same time winking to the mischievous Naomer.

The next moment Paula was the centre of a miniature whirlwind, for the girl from Nakara had also twined her arms round Paula's neck, and she and Polly were dancing round and round, still hugging the flustered Paula.

"Weally, deah geals!" gasped Paula.

"Oh, how shall we get on without our beloved Paula?" cried Polly, pretending to cry at the parting.

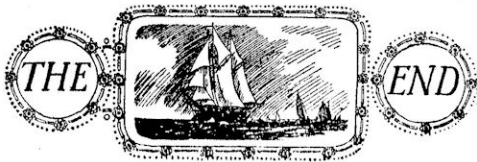
Paula looked genuinely distressed, but, before she could say another word, her train steamed in, and Polly and Naomer hustled her into a compartment.

"Good-bye, you dear old duffer!" cried Polly, as the train pulled out of the station. "See you next term. And won't I just lead you a life!"

And, from the look in her eyes as she voiced the words, it was evident that Paula was in for some teasing when they all returned to Morcove.

Betty was the last to leave the junction, for trains to the North were few and far between.

And, before she left, she had made all arrangements for the girls to meet again after their stay at their respective homes, and to journey to Morcove again together.



Four more splendid numbers of "The Schoolgirls' Own" Library will be on sale on Thursday, Jan. 2nd, 1930. See page iv of cover for particulars.

" SAY IT WITH FLOWERS ! "

Do you know that most flowers and plants have a meaning of their own, and that from earliest times they have either been sent as a message or placed in a prominent position as a symbol or a warning?

Grass, from its many beneficial qualities, has been made the emblem of usefulness; and the ivy, from its persistent habit of clinging to the heaviest support, has been universally adopted as a symbol of confident love and fidelity.

The cypress, in floral language, denotes mourning; and it gained its reputation as an emblem of woe through a legend which told how a certain mythical Greek, sorrow-stricken at having slain his favourite stag, was transformed into a cypress tree.

I expect all my readers know that the laurel is a sign of renown. Olympic Games winners were presented with a wreath of laurel leaves, which they valued more than any prize.

The rose and the myrtle are both emblems of love. The myrtle is used in wedding ceremonies on the Continent, and the wedding wreaths of Jewish damsels are made from the same flower.

The palm is the symbol of victory, and it has been carried before many a conqueror during a triumphant procession.

The almond, because it is the first tree to bloom in the spring, stands for haste. The white poplar, whose leaves are black on one side, and white on the other, is spoken of as a token of time. This is because its leaves always appear to be in motion, turning over and over, first the black side on top, and then the white, "like day following night."

Plane trees are indicative of genius and magnificence because in olden times learned men taught beneath their branches, and gained for the trees for all time a reputation as seats of learning.

The bitterness of aloe is universally

known, and this plant is frequently spoken of as an emblem of bitterness.

Some flowers get their meaning from their peculiar behaviour. Balsam is held to be expressive of impatience, because its seed-pods when ripe curl up at the slightest touch, and dart forth their seeds with great violence. The plant also gains a nickname through this characteristic, being known in some parts as "touch-me-not."

The wild anemone has been considered indicative of brevity because its fragile blossom is so quickly scattered to the wind and lost.

The heliotrope denotes devoted attachment, and earned this reputation because of its tendency to turn its blooms continually towards the sun.

The sunflower, for the same reason, i.e. that it will turn its head towards the sun when it rises, and follow it round during the day until it is looking towards it when it sets, is an emblem of constancy in affection and sympathy in joy and sorrow.

The evening primrose, because it only blooms when all other flowers have gone to sleep, stands for silent love.

Pretty lilies of the valleys have several symbols conferred upon them. Because of the bright hopeful season of spring, when they blossom, they have been regarded as emblems of returning happiness, whilst their delicate perfume makes the plant a symbol of sweetness. The perfect snow-white flower is the emblem of purity.

The narcissus denotes self-love, from the story of Narcissus, who was so struck by his own beauty that he became spellbound to the spot, where he pined to death.

And lastly:

"Violet is for faithfulness
Which in me shall abide.

Hoping likewise that from your heart
You will not let it hide."

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