

NOW ON SALE:

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The School Friend

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**THEY ALL KNEW FOR WHOM
IT WAS MEANT!**

(A startling class-room incident from this week's new long complete story of the girls of Cliff House School.)

Complete in this issue: **"THE GIRL THEY DOUBTED!"** A splendid story of Barbara Redfern & Co.

THIS WEEK'S FINE NEW LONG COMPLETE STORY OF THE GIRLS OF CLIFF HOUSE SCHOOL!



The Girl They Doubted!

By HILDA RICHARDS.

Polly Vane, the Cliff House Day Girl, continues to mystify Barbara Redfern & Co. of the Fourth Form.

The Mysterious Message!

"I SAY, Babs, do pass that note from Clara!"

"Oooh! Don't push me like that, look at Freda Foote, you cat!"

All was excitement in the Fourth Form classroom at Cliff House, for, as yet, Miss Steel, the Form mistress, had not come to take over the command of her charges.

At this moment, Barbara Redfern, captain of the Fourth Form at Cliff House School, was engaged in passing a note to Mabel Lynn, her special charm and study mate.

As she did this she was watching the efforts of Bessie Bunter, the fattest girl in the whole school.

Bessie's efforts were directed in preventing herself being pushed off the seat by a laughing-eyed girl who was thinking this a huge joke.

Freda Foote, a friend of Barbara's, was forcing Bessie nearer and more near to the edge of the seat, and it was this fact which had given rise to the words above. Behind these two sat an angry-faced girl, and, next to her, a rather pale and sallow-complexioned Fourth-Former.

This latter was Marcia Loftus, and the girl who had spoken to her was Lady Hetty Hendon, the purse-proud snob of the Fourth.

And the girl to whom Marcia's attention had been drawn, Polly Vane!

She was seated alone, and at this moment her face was wearing an anxious, a worried look.

It was this that had drawn the words from Hetty Hendon and had made her nudge her friend, Marcia Loftus, one of the most deceitful and least popular of all the Fourth-Formers.

Polly Vane was the mystery girl of the Form, and had been so for a number of days now.

She had come to Cliff House in the simplest of clothes, and there had been something so wishful and retiring in her manner that had appealed to the heart of Barbara Redfern and Barbara's chums.

Babs, to give her the name by which her friends knew her, had immediately taken to Polly Vane with her fair, bobbed hair, her shy manner, and her sincere eyes.

Not so Marcia Loftus and Hetty Hendon, and their bosom crony, the lazy Nancy Bell.

These three had been rudeness personified; and already Marcia had schemed against Polly Vane, for, to add to the mystery of Polly's nervous manner, Marcia had come upon an advertisement

for a missing girl, and she was convinced that the advertisement described Polly perfectly.

And now Marcia's eyes were glowing, for one hundred pounds' reward was attached to that advertisement, and Marcia felt that already the money was in her keeping.

Suddenly there came a frantic shout from Bessie Bunter, followed by a terrific bump.

"Groogh! Ooooooo! You kikkat, Freda! I say, help!"

Bessie's unequal fight against Freda Foote had ended in disaster for herself, and now she was seated on the floor, with her little eyes looking up into Babs' laughing face.

"Get a crane, somebody!" cried Clara Trevlyn, the tomboy of the Fourth, whose eyes were dancing with merriment.

"Poor Bessie!" said Babs, extending her hand to the fair girl.

But Bessie did not take it. She sat there, glowering up at Freda Foote.

It was at that very instant that the door of the Form-room opened; there came the sound of a quick footfall, a sudden hush, and then—

"Elizabeth Bunter, what are you doing on the floor? Arise, girl!"

Miss Steel was before her class, and looking coldly down at Bessie Bunter.

"Please, Miss Steel—" began Bessie Bunter, her face the colour of a beet-root, as she clambered to her feet.

"Silence, Elizabeth! Take your seat at once!"

And Bessie hurriedly carried out the order, thankful to escape punishment.

"Now, girls," said Miss Steel, "I do not intend that the recent exhibition of foolishness shall interfere with your work in any way. Your lesson has been set, and you can proceed with it, and, so much as a word among any of you, and—"

Miss Steel let her words sink in for a moment, and the next she was bending over her books and preparing to correct the lesson papers of the previous day.

And, as the other girls bent over their books, a wishful-eyed girl endeavoured to concentrate on her own.

Polly Vane only saw the print as through a veil, for there was something in her eyes that was blurring her vision.

She was remembering the happenings of the previous night when, soon after her return home, her return to meet her father, that trio of mysterious figures had come to the road outside the little cottage where she lived, and, in mistake for her, had carried the prying Marcia Loftus away!

Perhaps it was curious that she thought so, for much the same thought was in the mind of Barbara Redfern at that moment.

Babs had caught Lady Hetty Hendon's words, and she had seen Marcia glancing in Polly's direction.

What was the mystery of Polly?

How well Babs remembered the coming of Polly to Cliff House and then the discovery she had made that Polly was living in a cottage with a woman who was evidently a servant to her.

Hot upon that discovery had come the finding of the advertisement that offered one hundred pounds reward for the finding of a girl answering to Polly's description, and then that discovery of Marcia tracking Polly on her homeward way.

Babs had been a witness of the capture of Marcia, and she had rushed after the car that had borne Marcia away, only to discover that Marcia had escaped Cliff House in advance of Babs herself.

This had added to the mystery, and, to Babs, it seemed certain that the people who had offered the one hundred pounds reward were the very people who had, in capturing Marcia, fancied that they were spitting Polly away.

What was their intention? How much did Marcia know? How had she escaped from the deluded captors?

As Babs gave a side glance at Marcia, and saw that Marcia's interest was not on her lesson books.

At times she would glance up at Miss Steel, and then take a sideways look at Polly as though gloating in all that she knew about the mystery girl of the Fourth.

Babs was fearful for Polly's safety, and, although she had not told anything to her chums that Polly would not have wished them to know, she knew that those Fourth-Formers who were Babs' chums—and they were many—had realised that a mystery surrounded the newcomer.

Try as Babs might, she could not concentrate on her work.

She had no wish to pry upon Marcia, but she did feel that Marcia was working against Polly Vane.

And upon this thought there came a sudden interruption.

It was a tap on the door.

An interruption such as this was rather unusual at Cliff House School, and all eyes were raised from the lesson books as the door opened and Angelica Jelly, a rather simple girl, and a member of the Fifth Form, revealed herself in the doorway.

With a broadening smile she looked about at the seated girls.

Miss Steel was looking up with surprised eyes.

"Well, Angelica!" she said. "What is it?"

"Please, Miss Steel," said Angelica, "it is about Polly Vane."

"Well!" exclaimed Miss Steel. "And what about Polly Vane, Angelica? Do come to the point quickly, my good girl."

"It's her aunt, Miss Steel," said Angelica nervously. "I met Polly's aunt by the gates, and she wants to see Polly Vane at once, she said."

Miss Steel looked very surprised now. "This is most unusual—most unusual!" she exclaimed.

"Polly's aunt said that she had to hurry, Miss Steel," rambled on Angelica. "Polly!"

Miss Steel turned to where Polly Vane sat, and it was remarkable that, at this moment, there was not one vestige of colour on Polly's cheeks.

The girl was trembling visibly, and her nervous hands let her books fall from the desk as she rose to her feet and came towards Miss Steel's rostrum.

"Polly," said Miss Steel, "you may go and see this aunt of yours, but you will kindly tell her that it is not usual for *Chiff House* girls to be called away from lessons in this manner."

Polly's hands were clenched at her side, and a wondering Fourth Form saw that she seemed nervous, a prey to some nameless anxiety.

There was not one of that gathering of Fourth Formers but would have gladly jumped at being freed from lessons, if even for ten minutes or so.

But Polly Vane did not seem glad. If anything, it was the reverse.

"Oh, I'd rather not go, Miss Steel, if you don't mind!" she faltered.

A murmur of astonishment came from the class as Polly spoke, and Miss Steel looked astonished, too.

"Not going, Polly?" she exclaimed sharply. "And why not, pray?"

Polly drew herself up.

"Because my aunt has not sent that message," she answered quietly.

Angelica flushed.

"But she did, Polly," she said quickly. "She told me that she was your aunt, and asked me to bring the message to you."

"That makes no difference," said Polly, as the whole Form gasped. "I am not going."

Miss Steel gazed keenly into Polly's eyes.

"Is there any particular reason why you do not want to see your aunt?" she demanded.

Polly shook her bobbed head.

"No, Miss Steel," she answered. "It simply means that my aunt has not sent that message. I am sure of it."

Angelica looked hopelessly at Miss Steel, flushed again, and then beat a hasty retreat.

"Very well, Polly!" said Miss Steel abruptly. "You can go back to your place."

White faced, and with her eyes lowered, Polly Vane walked back to her desk, and all eyes watched her as she did so.

In Marcia's eyes there was a gleam of malice. It was as though Marcia was conscious of the reason for Polly's reticence.

Babs saw that look, and made a mental note of it.

There would have been murmured conversations after this remarkable happening. Miss Steel's stern look about the Fourth Form precluded the possibility of that.

The work continued, and to one girl

in that Form-room the moments were weary hours.

She could find no interest in her work now; she felt that a strange shadow hovered over her, and at times she would raise her eyes and look about the room as though some shadow in it concealed a furtive figure.

And with what relief she rose from her desk when the lesson came to a close, and the girls were free to go to their studies or the common-room.

Babs and Mabs hurried ahead of the others, for there were preparations to be made to-day. It was a half-holiday, and Barbara Redfern, Mabel Lynn, Clara Trevlyn, Marjorie Hazeldene, Freda Foote, and Peggy Preston had planned a long walk.

It was not long before they were in Study No. 4, and the door was closed behind them.

And when that door was closed both Mabs and Babs blurted out the question that lay on their lips.

"What does it all mean?"

Babs shook her head.

"I can't make it out at all, Mabs," she said softly. "Did you see that hunted look on Polly's face?"

"Rather!" exclaimed Mabs. "But why didn't she go, Babs?"

"Give it up," answered Babs at once. "I feel dreadfully sorry for Polly Vane. She looked so frightened, so pale."

"I know," put in Mabs. "But how was it she knew the message had not come from her aunt?"

Babs' face was worried.

"How can I answer that, Mabs?" she replied.

As she spoke, the door opened, and Clara Trevlyn, Peggy Preston, and Marjorie Hazeldene came hurrying in.

"Well, if that little business wasn't the giddy limit!" cried Clara. "Have you ever seen anything like it, Babs?"

"Fancy her aunt sending for her, and then Polly not going!" put in Peggy.

"It's very curious," said Marjorie Hazeldene in her quiet way.

Babs looked at her chums.

"There is some very good reason for her not going, anyway," she said. "I like Polly Vane, and I am sure that she

is dreadfully worried about that strange message."

"Strange!" exclaimed Peggy. "I call it mighty mysterious."

"And so do I," agreed Mabel Lynn. Her words had barely died away when the girl who had been under discussion opened the door and entered the study.

Babs looked surprised.

It was a half-holiday.

What was Polly the day girl of the school, doing in the school? Babs had fancied she must be on her homeward way by now.

But Polly looked so sad and so woe-borne that Babs' heart went out to the girl.

"Hallo, Polly!" she said, drawing her into the room. "I thought you had gone."

"No, Babs."

Polly hesitated. To Babs it seemed that she wanted to say something that she was nervous of saying before the other girls.

It seemed that the other girls came to that conclusion, too.

"We'll be getting along, Babs," said Peggy Preston quickly. "You'll follow, won't you, Babs?"

Babs nodded, and the girls trooped from the study.

"Barbara," murmured Polly, when they had gone. "I—I wonder if you would grant me an awfully big favour?"

Babs was looking into two of the most appealing eyes she had ever seen in her life, and she nodded compassionately.

"As long as it isn't too difficult, Polly," she answered in low tones.

"What is it, dear?"

Polly paused, and now, clasping her hands, she gazed at Babs.

"Babs," she said, "would you let me wear that new blue serge dress of yours, and that little hat that I have liked so much? Would you?"

Babs was so surprised that she did not know what to say, but the next instant her heart went out to little Polly Vane.

Polly's clothes were as shabby now as they had been when first she had come to the school, and in a flash Babs realised why it was that Polly wanted to borrow the little blue dress.

She did not hesitate for a moment.



FUN FOR THE FOURTH!

Amidst shrieks of merriment Babs' struggle with Freda Foote ended in the fat girl slipping to the floor.

"That is not a very difficult favour to grant, Polly," she said gently.

"You will lend me the dress and the hat?"

Polly's eyes seemed to be wells of relief now, where once they had appeared so worried.

"Of course!" laughed Babs. "Come with me, and I'll find you a gym frock and hat just like mine."

She drew Polly from the room and upstairs to the dormitory, and a few minutes later Polly Vane was being decked out in Babs' dress.

And Babs' thoughts were all pity for the poor little girl with the pale face.

But, had she thought, she would have contrasted this wish with what she had seen by the cottage. That car in which Marcia had been spirited away, that car that had belonged obviously to Polly's father, for Babs had heard Polly calling him "Daddy, daddy!"

Other thoughts had driven that scene away, though, and there was only the feeling that, for a little while, Polly wished to wear nice clothes.

It was Babs' joy to see the difference at her neat blue dress made to Polly.

It fitted perfectly, and, where once she had looked like a little waif, she now looked dainty and twice as pretty in consequence.

"Oh, Babs!" whispered Polly, when the change had been made. "I can never thank you enough for this, never!"

The next moment she was giving Babs a hug, and there was a different look in Polly's eyes as, turning to the door, she thanked Babs again, and then hurried away.

Babs watched her go.

"Poor little Polly!" she whispered. "Poor little girl, that such a small thing as this should give her so great a happiness!"

And Babs was still thinking of Polly Vane, when, a little later, she hurried along the lane and joined her friends in their walk.

The Figure on the Road!

"HOOP-LA! Heigho for the long and high road! Next to hockey, give me a long tramp through the country."

Clara Trevlyn was in high spirits—the Fourth Form tomboy usually was—and the party of girls smiled appreciably.

It was gay and care free these girls were as they went joyously on their way to Friarclade village, and to Uncle Clegg's, where they had decided to lay in a stock of tarts and cakes to help them on their way.

But, if they were happy, there was one who was not, and that was a girl, who, hearing the sound of merry laughter behind her, turned and looked apprehensively in the direction from which it came.

It was Polly Vane.

Hurrying on her way homeward, she had not expected to find Cliff House girls on the road.

But here they were, and she knew that it would be very obvious if she ran to avoid meeting with them. A moment since she had been screened in the shadows beneath a high hedge, but now she came into the road again just as Clara and her companions turned a bend in the path.

Clara was the first to see Polly, and surprise came into her eyes as she saw that figure ahead.

"Is that Polly Vane, Mabs?"

Mabs looked carefully at the girl in the distance.

"I don't think so, Clara," she replied. "It seems too neat for Polly."

"I thought it was Babs at first," laughed Marjorie. "There is something familiar about that blue dress."

Clara hurried along, and, as she came nearer to Polly, and as that girl turned and looked now and then in the direction of Babs and her companions, Clara's surprise increased.

"Why, it is Polly Vane!" she exclaimed. "I should never have known it was you, Polly," she said to the new girl, as they came up, "if I hadn't seen your face."

It was then that Clara was conscious of the fact that perhaps she had said something she should not have said, for Polly had flushed, and was looking wistfully at Babs.

"We didn't expect to see you, Polly," Babs explained, feeling that Polly was conscious that the girls knew it was Babs' dress she was wearing.

Polly was certainly a prey to great awkwardness. She stood there flushing and hardly knowing what to say.

She felt that the eyes of all the girls were on her. She must have felt also that they knew her secret, and yet, how closely she had guarded that secret.

"I was late in leaving the school," she said at last. And, as she spoke, she looked about her, as though at any moment someone might appear on the scene—someone of whom she was dreadfully afraid.

She had seen a picture of fear, and her lips trembled as she spoke.

"On your way home, Polly?" asked Peggy, looking in rather a mystified fashion at Polly Vane.

"Yes, yes, Peggy!" came the answer. But it lacked conviction.

The girls were standing in the middle of the road, and Polly was looking apprehensively.

"Don't let us stand here," she said quickly, nervously. "A car might come. Let us walk—it would be safer."

They were strange words to say, for the broad country road had no other travellers upon it save these girls, and Mabel Lynn looked askance at Babs.

Babs was quick to respond.

"Come along, girls!" she said cheerily. And, linking her arm through Polly's, she continued on her way with Polly at her side and the other girls following.

If Polly had been a mystery to them before, she was even more so now.

In an undertone Clara told Marjorie that she was sure the dress Polly was wearing was Babs'.

Mabs had drawn level with her chum, and now she and Barbara were discussing the Fourth Form's chances at hockey now that the season had opened.

"Do you play hockey, Polly?" asked Babs, wanting to bring Polly into the conversation.

"Oh, yes!" answered Polly. "I was——" She broke off awkwardly. "Yes, I can play, Babs," she said, flushing.

Babs looked into her nervous eyes. What had Polly been about to say when she broke off so abruptly?

For a moment Babs paused, but only a moment. She wanted to put Polly at ease.

"You must turn out at practice for the Fourth Form, then," she said. "We're all awfully keen on hockey, and we have quite a strong side! But we're not averse to having it strengthened."

"I say!" Clara exclaimed. "Look there—over there! Who is she?"

All eyes followed the direction of Clara's gaze.

With drastic suddenness a veiled woman had come from the screening shelter of the high hedge, and was

watching them—watching them most mysteriously.

"Seems interested in us!" murmured Marjorie.

"Wonder what she wants?" said Peggy.

Polly's hold on Babs' arm tightened, and her head was bent. Babs could see that as she glanced at the girl.

She felt Polly trembling, too, and this occasioned her a new surprise.

Slowly they came abreast of the woman, and, dark as the veil was, Babs could see darting eyes scanning them, searching their faces, suspicious and calculating.

"I say!" whispered Mabs. "Did you see that glance, Babs? Whatever did she look at us like that for?"

Babs shook her head.

She did not speak as they passed the woman by, but she had a vague feeling that she had seen those eyes once before—where she could not tell.

Polly had not spoken a word, and her head was still lowered as Babs looked at her.

Clara had swung round.

"Now she's going in the direction of the school!" she muttered. "I wonder what she's after?"

"Looks as though she's up to no good," said Peggy. "I didn't like the look of her."

"Neither did I," said Mabs quickly. "She seemed furtive, strange, and didn't she give us a look?" put in Babs.

But still Polly said nothing, and now the girls were coming towards Friarclade village.

In the distance Uncle Clegg's stores was visible.

Polly disengaged her arm from its hold on Babs, and she paused.

There seemed to be a certain amount of relief on her face as she turned to Babs.

"You're not leaving us here, are you, Polly?" cried Clara. "Come and have coffee and cakes at Uncle Clegg's!"

"No, really no, thank you!" said Polly. "I must go! I must get home—really I must!"

"But, Polly!" murmured Babs. "After coming all this way——"

There was an appeal in Polly Vane's eyes.

"If you don't mind, Babs," she said, "I should love to come, but——"

Her eyes had strayed up the way they had come; she could still see that furtive figure, though only vaguely. She walked towards Cliff House School.

"Do come, Polly; don't leave the party!" said Marjorie.

"No—no! I can't—really I can't!" said Polly; and now, to the amazement of those girls, she turned and they saw her run swiftly away in the direction where lay Clematis Cottage, her home on the fringe of Friarclade.

A gasp of astonishment came to Clara's lips.

"Well," she exclaimed, "if Polly Vane isn't the jolly limit!"

"She is a bit of a mystery, isn't she, Babs?" said Mabel Lynn, turning to say her chum.

"Yes," said Babs softly. "Perhaps she is, Mabs, but somehow I feel rather sorry for that poor girl—she seems to find everything so strange!"

"I have never met a more nervous one!" said Clara.

She turned away from watching Polly. "Well, anyway," she added, "let's go to Uncle Clegg's! Come along, girls!"

The next moment the girls were hurrying towards the tuckshop.

The eyes of Polly Vane watched them go.

She had paused at the entrance to Rose Way, in which leafy lane her house

lay, and she was looking longingly in the direction of the Fourth-Formers.

"Oh, if only I could have gone with them!" she whispered to herself. "If only it were safe to go! But no, no, it is not safe!"

Poor Polly's lips were sad at that moment, and tears lay in her eyes.

"Oh, daddy, daddy," she said brokenly, "if only all this worry would pass, if only I could be as happy as they are happy, how lovely life would be then!"

Those tears were streaming down her cheeks now.

To Polly it seemed that always, always there would be this shadow of fear over her life. She had never fancied that she could ever be as nervous as this, but, as day followed day, she was getting more and more afraid.

As she opened the little rustic door that led into the garden of Clematis Cottage, she looked over her shoulder as though she were expecting someone to come towards her and drew her back.

And that someone she feared was the elderly woman they had met on the Friarale road, and Polly was asking herself how long it would be before, like some poor fly, she was drawn into the web that was forming about her!

The Spite of Marcia Loftus!

THAT will teach 'wanted' girls to come to Cliff House School!

Marcia stopped back and surveyed her handiwork as she spoke.

She had chosen her time well to make this excellent drawing on the blackboard of the Fourth Form, and now, with her task accomplished, she turned the board round so that only the clean side could be seen by the Form.

Well did she know that, in a few minutes, Miss Steel and the class would be here, and Miss Steel never used the rougher side of the board.

Yesterday Marcia had been a witness of something that had surprised her, and that something had been nothing less than Babs and Polly Vane in the dormitory of the Fourth Form.

Marcia's astute eyes had watched that rapid transformation, and later she had seen Polly Vane in the Friarale lane—in Babs' blue frock.

"I'll open the eyes of Barbara Redfern's chums!" she chuckled to herself, as she stole from the class-room.

It was not Marcia's intention to breathe a word of this jape to a soul, neither was it her intention to be one of the first in the Form.

She was congratulating herself on a work of art that she had never hoped to accomplish as well as she had done.

In fact, what she had done was a revelation even to herself.

"You ought to be an artist, Marcia Loftus!" she told herself proudly as she hung about waiting for the class to assemble.

In little groups the girls tramped in, and then Marcia joined Hetty Hendon and Nancy Bell as they came along and strolled in with them.

The chatter ceased, for Miss Steel had come into the class-room, and, walking towards her desk, looked out over the sea of heads.

Then she walked towards the blackboard, and the next moment she had lifted the board down and was turning it so that she might work on the side she preferred.

As she swung the object about and stepped back, a cry of surprise came to her lips.

That cry was echoed by a gasp of astonishment from the girls of the Form. Heads were craned forward, there came murmurs, and somewhere a girl laughed.

And there was every reason for those sounds that tokened amusement and surprise.

Polly Vane had gone as white as death, and her eyes were focused on that blackboard, as indeed were the eyes of every girl in the Form.

Miss Steel had stepped back, and the class could see more plainly what it had been sketched quite cleverly on the blackboard.

"Polly Vane!" breathed Dolly Jobling.

"Like her to the giddy life!" whistled Clara. "Who could have drawn that?"

There on that blackboard was an excellent likeness of Polly Vane, and in large letters beneath the picture the following words had been written:

"THE GIRL WHO BORROWS BARBARA REDFERN'S CLOTHES! WHAT IS SHE DOING AT CLIFF HOUSE?"



POLLY ON HER GUARD! "You are not going to see your aunt!" exclaimed Miss Steel in astonishment. "No!" replied Polly. "Because my aunt has not sent that message!"

This was what had made the Fourth Form gasp. This picture, and the words beneath it, had sent Miss Steel stepping back, a flush of indignation on her cheek.

She was so angry that she did not know how to speak for a moment, as she surveyed what was really a most excellent likeness of the day girl of the Fourth Form.

Polly Vane was a picture of mortification.

She was going white and red by turns, and she felt that the eyes of all the girls were on her.

Miss Steel was slowly recovering her composure.

She had recognised the likeness to Polly Vane at once, and it was Miss Steel's intention to find the culprit—and at once.

With that object in view, she walked briskly back to her desk, and stood there, her face the picture of anger.

"Which girl," she cried, pointing dramatically to the picture on the board—"which girl did that?"

Not a girl spoke, and, as if by magic, the murmuring died away.

"Is the culprit without the courage to admit her guilt?" demanded Miss Steel.

Still there came no voice from those girls who were seated at their desks.

Miss Steel's lips were compressed.

"It was done by a girl in this Form—must have been done by one of you!" she exclaimed. "And I am waiting for the girl who did it to speak—otherwise—"

Miss Steel looked out significantly over the sea of heads.

She waited for quite three minutes, but all was still, not a voice broke the silence.

And now she nodded. It was a grim nod.

"Very well, she said. "As no girl will confess, I am in the painful situation of having to punish the whole class."

She paused.

"Your usual liberties and privileges will be cancelled for a week," she said. "That punishment I shall confirm with Miss Primrose. It will mean that you are banned from passing out of gates."

"Gated—for a week!" gasped Clara

Trevlyn; and the gasp was echoed by almost every girl.

Miss Steel walked over to the blackboard, and the next moment she was wiping out Marcia's masterpiece.

"That will be all," she said coldly.

"Now you can get out your geography books and turn to South America."

But there was but scant thought of South America at that moment.

A surge of indignation had gone through the Fourth Form.

Who was the girl?

She had only to speak to lift the punishment from the others.

There were many eyes on Marcia Loftus now—Marcia, the only mean girl of the Form clever enough to have drawn that lifelike sketch on the blackboard.

Babs was looking accusingly at her, and Clara, Marjorie, Peggy, Freda, and Dolly Jobling were following Barbara's eyes.

But Marcia remained silent, a sneer upon her hard face.

How those Fourth-Formers' eyes filled with anger!

They felt certain that Marcia had perpetrated this, and Marcia hadn't the pluck to speak up.

"She would sooner the whole Form suffered than that it should be discovered that she was responsible for the joke at Babs' and Polly's expense!"

"I'll make Marcia speak, see if I don't!" Clara whispered to Dolly Jobing.

"I should think so! We're not going to be gated on account of Marcia Loftus!" muttered Dolly.

And there were many more mutters in the Form room to the same effect.

Meanwhile, the innocent subject of that caricature was looking down at her book with eyes that were filled with tears.

Somehow Polly felt that she was the unconscious agent for the punishing of the whole Form, and there was a tremulous feeling in her heart. It had been prompted by the fear that the girls might turn against her because of this.

She was afraid that she might lose the friendship of Babs and Mabs and those loyal friends of these two chums of the Fourth Form.

And she realised something else now—realised it only too well.

The hand of one of the girls in the Form was against her!

There were foes inside the school as well as outside it, and to cope with enemies on either hand seemed more than she could bear.

"Daddy, daddy!" she breathed. "How long shall I have to suffer? How long?"

But she could find no answer to that question, nor, as the lesson proceeded, could she find much interest in South America.

Babs was watching the new girl with a feeling of pity that Polly had been made to suffer like this.

Simple as the joke seemed, it was very cruel. There was the suggestion of Polly's poor clothes, her inability to get better ones. It was not usual for a girl at Cliff House to borrow another girl's new dress.

But little did Babs know why Polly had borrowed that dress which had been returned this morning brushed, and, oh, so neatly folded!

Polly's tears stained her cheeks as she bent over her book, and, although the other girls did not see those tears, they had not escaped Barbara Redfern.

At last a rather dismal lesson came to a close. It was not dismal because it was geography, and South America as the subject, but it was gloomy because none of those girls were looking forward to a week robbed of their liberties and privileges.

There was also the awkward feature of the inability to set the blame at Marcia's door.

Marcia was not in the least conscience-stricken.

"Serves them both right," said Hetty Hendon spitefully to her crony. "Fancy havin' such a girl as that there Polly Vane at Cliff 'Ouse!"

And Marcia grimaced back at the one-time servant girl of the school.

The next morning school ended, and an indignant swathe of girls surged in the direction of the Fourth Form common-room.

No one had convened a meeting, but it was taken for granted that there was indignation to be vented, and, as the Fourth Form common-room was the

place for such a thing, thither the girls swarmed.

But not Polly.

As she had come into the corridor, Babs and Mabs had come to her side.

"Don't take it to heart, Polly," whispered Babs, giving Polly a comforting squeeze of the arm. "It was a spiteful trial by a spiteful girl, who isn't worth worrying about."

"We'll find out who did it, too!" said Mabs. "Marcia Loftus is the culprit, and we'll make her sit up for this!"

Polly's pale face was touched to a smile of gratitude, and, thanking both the girls with her eyes, she was about to hurry away, when Marjorie Hazeldene ran towards her.

"Say, Polly!" said Marjorie. "I wonder would you do something for me—something very important?"

Polly flushed. There was such friendliness in Marjorie's voice.

"Why, of course I will!" she answered, "if it is in my power to help you, Marjorie."

"I knew that you would," said Marjorie, pressing Polly's arm enthusiastically. "It is just this, Polly."

She looked about her to see that they were unobserved.

"It's old Mrs. Crotchett," said Marjorie quickly. "She's been ill, Polly, and she's always been a good friend to the girls of the Fourth. She hasn't been able to work, and we made a collection to pay her rent for her. Unless it is paid to-day, she'll be turned out by her cruel landlord."

Polly's face was filled with sympathy.

"Oh, Marjorie! I will," she whispered. "I know that you would for me as well do," said Marjorie. "And we've got enough to pay the rent and to tide her over."

"It's here—two pounds, Polly—and will you take it to her? It is Church Cottage, in Friarade itself. You know it?"

Marjorie saw something pass across Polly's face that Marjorie fancied to be a look of fear, but she could not be sure, although Polly hesitated for a moment before replying.

"Yes—yes, Marjorie," she said nervously. "I know Church Cottage."

"You will take it for me, then?" said Marjorie Hazeldene, with a sigh of relief. "I was so worried, for, you see, now that the whole form is 'gated,' I did not know how we should help Mrs. Crotchett. Even the post office is out of bounds, through Maria Loftus."

She slipped the money into Polly's hand, gave Polly's arm another squeeze, and, with a final caution that the matter was desperately urgent, hurried off to attend the indignation meeting.

It was in full swing, and at this moment being addressed by Clara Trevlyn.

"Are we going to accept the blame that should fall upon another?" cried Clara.

A volley of "No's" greeted Clara's words.

"The giddy limit, isn't it," added Clara. "Who made the silly drawing, that is what we want to know?"

And a unanimous cry burst from every lip:

"Marcia Loftus!"

"Marcia Loftus is the culprit," cried Clara. "And, somehow or other, we're going to prove it against her!"

Somehow or other! If Clara had but realised how difficult that "somehow or other" would prove!

Indeed, had the girls but known how quickly all thought of Marcia's little trick was to be banished from their minds by the advent of a vastly more important affair!

But the girls did not know, and, whilst Clara waxed eloquent in her indignation, feeling in the Fourth Form grew very bitter against the spiteful Marcia Loftus.

Polly Fails in Her Mission!

POLLY VANE seemed very timid as she walked down the drive that led to the Friarade Lane.

She looked to either side of her, as though figures lurked amid the tangled undergrowth or in the gloom beneath the tall and almost leafless trees.

Coming to the gate, she opened it and looked down the road.

A sigh of relief came to her lips. There was no sign of a solitary traveller upon that white road, and the fact seemed to hearten the girl; for, clasping the two pounds firmly in her hand, she hurried away from the school in the direction of the village.

Polly's face was very pale, and in her memory there was still a picture of that class-room she had left, and the picture on the blackboard, and the eyes that had watched her.

Oh, if all this mystery would leave her! If she could just be as those other girls were, happy and care-free!

With nervous eyes she looked to either side of her, peering into the hedgerows, looking behind and before her, as though expecting some alarm to come.

She was trembling, apprehensive, as she hurried on her homeward way, but with each step she went she seemed to gain confidence.

She was thinking of Mrs. Crotchett and the money that would have to be delivered to her, if her home was to be saved.

There was that mission to be carried out, and, whatever her fears, she must do what Marjorie Hazeldene had asked her to do.

She had suffered so much herself recently that she could realise what terrors poor Mrs. Crotchett was undergoing.

It nerved Polly to a greater speed, and she was almost running as she turned the bend in the road.

And well for her that she was, for, as she came speedily round the bend, with a cry on her lips, a veiled woman sprang from the undergrowth and darted towards Polly.

For a moment Polly recoiled. A scream came to her lips, and she felt too dreadfully afraid to act. But only for the passing of a second was she held as if transfixed.

The next moment she had gathered speed, and, dodging past the woman, she tore with all the speed she could command in the direction of Friarade.

And behind her raced the woman.

Fleet as Polly was, her pursuer was fleet, and Polly began to realise that as she heard the sound of those footsteps coming nearer and heard the sharp voice of the woman calling upon her to stop.

Frantically she turned to the left, scrambled over the ditch, forced her way through the hedge, careless of what damage she did to her clothes, and the next instant she was running across a ploughed field.

This diversion had thrown the woman out of the race for the space of a second or so, but she had quickly recovered from the surprise, and soon she was following through the hedge and over the field in full cry after Polly.

Heartbroken cries were coming from Polly's lip, for she felt that she could not run faster than she was doing, and to her it seemed that already the shadow

(Continued on page 633.)

THE GIRL THEY DOUBTED!

(Continued from page 628.)

of her pursuer was falling on the ground at her side.

But she persisted in her efforts, and once, giving a glance over her shoulder, she saw that the woman was farther behind than she had fancied, and, even as she watched, the woman caught her foot in one of the furrows and came to the ground.

Polly did not wait for more. She simply tore in the direction of the hedge that lay at the farther side of the field, and through this she scrambled, to find herself in a bridle path.

Polly's eyes lit up as she saw the path into which she had come. It linked up with Rose Way, where lay Clematis Cottage, and now she knew that she was not far from home.

But, as she realised that fact, she remembered that the two pounds was still clutched in her hand, and that she had not fulfilled the mission that Marjorie Hazeldene had set her.

How could she carry that out? That woman was still following, and no doubt there were others on the look out for Polly.

No, no, no! She could not go to Church Cottage—dared not go!

It would be nothing short of foolhardy to attempt to get there. And yet! What of Mrs. Crotchett's own worries? What of the money so urgently needed, the house that would be taken from her, her furniture perhaps sold to pay her debts?

"Oh, if only I dared—if only I dared!" sobbed Polly.

But she knew that she dared not go into the village.

Much as she might worry about the poor old lady, who had done so many kind things for the Cliff House girls, the fact remained that Polly could not venture into the village now.

Perhaps, she told herself, she would be able to get out when night fell, and take the money then.

But would it be in time? No, no! She would try now, it was the better course.

Panting for breath, she sped down Rose Way, and she had just come abreast of Clematis Cottage, and was preparing to speed into the Friardale Road in order to get to Mrs. Crotchett's when she saw a figure running towards her.

There was no gainsaying the purpose of that running form, and, with frantic fear and worry in her heart, Polly threw open the gate of the cottage garden and tore up the little garden path, to at last find shelter behind a door that was locked and barred against all intruders.

"Missy, little missy!"

The middle-aged woman, whom Babs had seen, was addressing Polly and looking anxiously into her face.

"They followed me—they're here again, Agnes!" sobbed Polly. "And now—"

"You can't go to school this afternoon, missy," said Agnes fearfully.

"Neither of us can go out until this new danger has lifted."

With that she left Polly and went to the back of the cottage, to look apprehensively out over the garden at the rear of the cottage.

"Oh, what shall I do, what shall I do?" moaned Polly. "How can I get the money to Mrs. Crotchett?"

But she could find no answer to that question. None at all.

All the afternoon she waited in the cottage, and there were visible signs of the fact that the cottage was being watched, for Polly saw furtive figures in the trees, and she knew that it was hopeless to attempt to leave the little place.

She had mad ideas of making a frantic rush into Friardale, but she was forced to dismiss them, for, on one occasion when she went to the cottage door, unbarred, and opened it, she saw a figure flit through the trees, and the next moment the door was closed, and Polly was leaning against it, trembling with fear.

What long hours those were. Agnes was at the back, watching and waiting in case these mysterious people sought to enter the cottage, and, with fast-beating heart, Polly watched the front of the house as the slow hours came anent.

The sun faded, and the mist came slowly over the fields to herald the approach of darkness.

The tall and almost leafless trees in the old garden loomed spectral-like and eerie in the gloom, and Polly shivered with fear.

To her it seemed that, with every moment that passed, the danger was increasing, and that the garden was crowded with vaguely-seen figures.

Her imagination was playing all sorts of tricks with her. Once, when the flurry of the wind shook the old door of the cottage, she fancied that hands were trying to force the door open, and she cried out to Agnes.

But it was a false alarm, and a downward look from a window above the door showed no figure standing there trying to gain an entry.

And so the evening wore on, and, as it grew later, so did Polly's fears increase. Not fears for her own safety so much as fears for old Mrs. Crotchett.

She could picture the landlord calling for his rent, the sad-eyed old woman shaking her head, and telling herself that those she had fancied to be friends had deserted her in her hour of trial.

"Oh, if only I could do something! If only I could get out to help her!" moaned Polly.

But she knew that she could not get out. She knew that it would be foolish, and that the attempt would serve no good purpose.

Probably it would only mean that she would be captured, and that the two pounds would be lost.

She wrung her hands, and the tears would come into her eyes, much as she tried to be brave and drive them back.

It was a ceaseless vigil. Polly had never seen Agnes as alarmed as she was, and the fear of Agnes only added to Polly's own terrors.

There was but little rest for Polly and Agnes that night.

The slightest sound brought alarm and sent two terrified people running below to see if their fears were to be made very real indeed.

But the night passed, and the grey dawn came slowly over the edge of the world, and then tired eyes closed to snatch a few minutes' sleep before the day awoke to work.

Polly was dead tired when she did at last get up, and there was but scant time to get to Cliff House.

All through the night both dreams and waking hours had been thronged with thoughts of Mrs. Crotchett and the fate she might meet with.

Polly's first thought, now that she was in Rose Way, was to go to Church Cottage, but, even as she came to the Friardale Road, it was to see a figure run from a clump of trees in the garden of

Clematis Cottage, and Polly had to run fast to avoid that hurrying form.

She felt sure that she had had another narrow escape, and she was out of breath by the time that she reached the school.

Polly was pale after the happenings of the night, and she was sick at heart that she had not been able to perform the mission for Marjorie Hazeldene.

The first person Polly saw as she hurried into the school was Babs, and Babs ran to her with Mabel Lynn coming fast behind her.

"Polly, Polly, what did Mrs. Crotchett say? Was she delighted to be helped out of the difficulty?"

Babs' words had barely died away before Marjorie herself appeared, and, with flushed and excited face, bore down towards Polly.

"You gave her the two pounds, Polly?" exclaimed Marjorie, eager to have her mind made easy on that score.

Polly's lips trembled, and she looked awkwardly at the three girls, and now at Clara, Freda, and Peggy, who came up.

"Marjorie, Marjorie, I don't know what you will say—really, I don't!" murmured Polly brokenly.

"I know!" laughed Marjorie. "You didn't wait to hear her thanks."

Polly shivered.

"Polly, was it that?" she said, as the girls looked at her inquiringly, wonderingly.

"Polly, what on earth's the matter?" asked Clara, in astonishment. "You didn't see a ghost there, I suppose?"

Slowly Polly unfolded her hand to reveal two crumpled notes lying in the palm.

A gasp of astonishment came to Marjorie's lips.

"Polly!" exclaimed Babs. There were tears of mortification in Polly's eyes.

"Marjorie—girls!" she said, her lips trembling as she spoke. "I didn't go—couldn't go and give her the money!"

A cry of disappointment came from Marjorie's lips.

Clara looked blankly at Polly, and Clara's face was filled with astonishment.

"You did not go, Polly!" said Babs, catching her breath as she spoke, and thinking of the poor old woman being turned out of her home.

"It was so important—almost life or death," said Mabel, astounded by Polly's news.

"Why didn't you go?" asked the practical Peggy, getting to the point at once.

Polly's eyes were filled with tears. She was conscious of a sudden atmosphere of tension and awkwardness.

"I couldn't go!" she answered. "Oh, if only I could have gone and given her the money!"

Suddenly, from behind the group of girls, there came a scornful laugh.

"She forget, that's what it was!" Marcia had spoken, and Polly could see Marcia's narrowed eyes.

"That is not true!" Polly exclaimed. "I couldn't go!"

"But why, Polly?" asked Babs gently.

Polly's eyes were troubled. She seemed at a loss what to say or do at that moment.

"Don't ask me—don't, Babs!" she answered. "I can't explain, really!"

Marjorie had gone quite pale and, in common with her chums, she was feeling most desperately sorry for old Mrs. Crotchett.

A sudden feeling of resentment against Polly Vane had crept into Marjorie's tender heart.

"Polly," she said quickly, and hardly thinking what she was saying, "I should



"MARCIA LOFTUS—SHE DID IT!" The cry was taken up by all present and drowned Clara Trevlyn's eloquence for the moment.

have fancied that you would have had more consideration for a poor old body who couldn't help herself."

"Jolly mean not to do everything in your power to get the money to her!" said Clara.

"She may have been turned out of house and home by now!" Peggy exclaimed.

"But can't you explain, Polly?" pressed Babs, realising that her chums were not only sorry on Mrs. Crotchett's account, but, for the most part, angry with Polly.

"Babs, Babs, I beg of you not to ask me!" flushed Polly.

"Babs flushed.

"Very well, then, Polly," she said, "I won't!"

Marjorie had turned away. She had taken the two pounds from Polly's hand, and Polly was standing blankly there with tears in her eyes.

If only she could have told these girls the reason for her having neglected the task! If only she could have explained!

But the fact remained that her lips were tied, and she had to suffer those harsh looks, those murmured words, and she could hear Marcia's mocking laugh.

Polly did not know that Marcia had not subscribed one penny piece to the little fund for the old lady at Church Cottage.

The girls walked away, all save Babs, who stood near to Polly and looked inquiringly into Polly's face.

"Poor Polly!" she whispered. "There must be some very good reason why you did not go—some very good reason; I am sure of it."

But Polly did not speak. Her throat was too full for her to do so.

In the distance her Form companions were telling one another that she had been unkind of a poor woman's sufferings, that she had been callous, almost cruel.

But it came as quite an inspiration to Barbara Redfern to ask Amy Barlow, a good-hearted Fifth-Former, to take the

money, and Amy returned with the news that the rent was not due until that day, and that after all the two pounds had come in time.

But Polly had not been true to her word or to the Form, and they could not forget that fact, much as they tried to do so.

But Babs believed in Polly, and so did Mabel Lynn.

It helped Polly to be brave. It gave her courage to be calm; but it was hard, very hard, to be doubted by almost the whole Form.

"Oh, if only I could have told them the real reason for my not taking the money!" she whispered to herself. "How well would they have understood then!"

Clara's Strange Discovery!

POLLY'S thoughts were still dwelling on the little rift that had come in her friendship with the Fourth-Formers when, after morning school, she found her way to Babs' study.

She had decided that it would be wiser not to return to the cottage until after school. There had been some little difficulty in explaining the reason of her absence on the preceding afternoon.

But the note she had brought from Agnes to the headmistress had only been slightly questioned, and Polly had breathed again when the short interview had come to a close.

Agnes had cut her some sandwiches, and Polly had asked Babs if she might eat them in Study No. 4.

She was here now, looking with wistful eyes out into the quadrangle and the grounds beyond it.

She flushed suddenly, and that feeling of awkwardness returned, for, coming down the corridor, were a number of girls and, from their laughter, she knew them to be Babs and her particular chums.

The next moment the door opened, and Babs entered with Mabel Lynn, Clara, Freda, Dolly Jobling, and Peggy Preston.

Although Babs smiled at Polly, the laughter died out of Clara's eyes, and Peggy's, and there was a certain stiffness

in the manner of all the girls save Mabel and Barbara.

But Babs did her best to dispel this. Babs seemed more than convinced that the non-delivery of the two pounds had not been Polly's fault, and she had told her friends so, and also she had pointed out the fact that, after all, no harm had been done by the money being a little late.

"Hallo, Polly!" she said brightly, going to Polly's side. "You had your lunch in loneliness!"

"Tears were not very far from the eyes of Polly Vane at that moment.

She had felt more than lonely these last few days, and the effects of that isolation were showing on her face.

"Yes, Babs!" she whispered.

Clara, Peggy, and Marjorie Hazel-dene, who had just entered, had gone towards the table, for their post had arrived, and, laughingly, they were opening their letters from home.

"I see you have got your proverbial newspaper, Clara," laughed Marjorie.

Clara smiled.

"Uncle John's ideas of cheery gifts are funny," she replied. "He always sends me a weekly picture newspaper to elevate my mind!"

"He really thinks you've got one?" asked Freda, the Fourth Form humourist.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The next moment Clara had brought the folded paper down on Freda's lap amidst general laughter, and a sudden confusion, for Freda's chair had tip titted, and Freda came down to the floor with a resounding bang.

"Pax, Clara!" she exclaimed, holding up her hands. "I'll mind my keys and pews in future."

"P's and Q's, you mean, duffer!" laughed Mabel, helping Freda to her feet, as Clara slit up the wrapper of the newspaper.

Polly was a wistful witness of this jolly badinage between the Fourth Formers.

She felt that, if there were not so many difficulties in the way, she could be just as happy and care free as they.

But, alas, a black shadow lay betwixt herself and happiness, and she was realising that fact more and more as the days passed.

"What's the latest, Clara?" cried Dolly. "Queen Anne dead?"

"William the Conqueror won the Battle of Hastings yet?" chimed in Babs, going to Clara's side and looking over her shoulder at the newspaper that Clara had laughingly spread out before her, as though she were intent to read every word of it.

"I say, Babs!"

A sudden exclamation of surprise had come from Clara's lips.

She had been reading a rather scaring headline in black type.

"Millionaire's Daughter Missing!"

An exclamation of surprise had come to Barbara's lips, and as she looked up the wistful eyes of Polly Vane were turned towards her for a moment. Then those sad eyes looked away, and Polly walked towards the door.

Somehow the girl was feeling that it was not wanted by Babs' friends, and it was not one of Polly's characteristics to make things awkward for those of whom she was fond.

Even as the door closed behind her slim form, words telling her to stay were forming on Babs' lips.

But Polly had gone. The echo of her departing footsteps came back to the girls in the study.

"Marjorie, Dolly, Freda, Peggy, come over here."

Babs' eyes were shining with some

strange excitement, and Clara was looking at the photograph displayed in the paper.

It was printed none too well, but, faint as it was, there was something about it that had provoked a peculiar interest for Clara and Babs.

"What's the matter?" asked Dolly, with a smile. "Found a long-lost relative, Clara?"

"A jolly old mystery is the matter," cried Clara, as the girls clustered about the table to gasp with astonishment as they followed the direction of Clara's gaze.

And Babs was reading out what that paper announced:

"MILLIONAIRE'S DAUGHTER MISSING.

"WHERE IS BERYL WINGATE?"

"Mr. Richard Wingate, the famous owner of Clevely Court, and a millionaire three times over, is distraught at the loss of his only daughter, Miss Beryl Wingate.

"She was last seen playing in the garden at Clevely Court, where she was being privately tutored.

"It is suspected that she has been abducted through the instigation of some rival faction, who have sworn revenge upon Mr. Wingate since his recent formation of the powerful oil combination of which he is the managing director.

"Detectives are busily at work trying to solve the inexplicable mystery of Beryl Wingate's disappearance.

"We publish a photograph of the missing girl, and anyone who has information to give will be amply rewarded by Mr. Richard Wingate. News of the girl may be sent either to this office or direct to Mr. Wingate at Clevely Court."

A whistle came from Clara's lips as Babs passed.

"I needn't read any more," said Babs excitedly. "It only goes on to tell of the romance of the Wingate millions and of attempts made to injure Mr. Wingate."

Marjorie was looking strangely at Babs.

"But what is it all about, Babs?" asked Marjorie blankly. "What has it got to do with Cliff House?"

Ever needed in agreement with Marjorie, but Freda Foote was looking into Babs' eyes as though she understood the meaning of the excitement.

"Don't you recognise the photograph, Marjorie?" asked Freda quickly.

Marjorie shook her head.

"I've never seen that girl before," she answered.

"This photograph," said Clara deliberately, "is the image of Polly Vane."

"So it is!" murmured Marjorie, gazing intently at the photograph. "What an extraordinary coincidence!"

"Look here, girls!" cried Peggy.

"Let's all go down to the Fourth Form common-room and see what the others think."

"That's the idea!" chimed in Clara.

Picking up the paper, and followed by the others, Clara hurried into the corridor, and the excited band of girls made their way in the direction of the common-room.

There was a fair sprinkling of girls there, and amongst those occupants of the room Marcia Loftus, Nancy Bell, and Lady Hetty Hendon were prominent.

Marcia's sneering face was turned in the direction of the door as the chums entered.

"Here, I say, you girls!" said Clara, holding the paper up. "Tell me who this reminds you of."

A laughing and jostling mob of girls crowded about Clara and looked up at the paper.

"Take a good look at it, you giddy judges!" laughed Clara.

"H'm! Looks rather like Polly Vane to me," Phyllis Howell remarked.

"Very much like!" agreed Philippa Derwent, her chum, looking closely at the photograph.

A mocking laugh came from Marcia Loftus at the moment that, unobserved, Polly Vane herself stole into the Fourth Form common-room.

"Polly Vane!" said Marcia contemptuously. "She looks like the daughter of a millionaire, doesn't she?"

No one heard that choking exclamation of amazement that Polly checked as quickly as it had come.

"Fancy that shabby creature, who borrows other people's clothes, being the daughter of a rich father," sneered Nancy Bell. "Think again, Clara!"

"My people mix with the Wingates!" said Lady Hetty Hendon pompously. "Let me tell you there's no one like that there Polly Vane among 'em!"

Babs was looking at Clara. To Babs it seemed that, against this census of opinion, they had no ground to stand on at all.

And then, glancing backwards, she saw Polly Vane, white-faced and nervous, standing by the door as though she were on the verge of making a quick exit.

A cry came to Babs' lips.

"Why, girls," she exclaimed, "here is Polly! Let's see what she thinks!"

Polly looked as though she were on the verge of collapse.

"What—what is it, Babs?" she asked, trembling.

Babs took the paper from Clara's hand, and now she was showing it to Polly.

"Polly," she said, as a hush came over the Fourth Form common-room, "this photograph of a missing girl—it's like you—very like!"

Polly was doing her best to conceal her feelings.

She forced a laugh.

"Not very like me, Babs!" she answered. "Why, it is hardly like me at all!"

"There," said Peggy Preston, laughing. "That Clara to get hold of a mare's nest!"

"I'll get hold of you in a moment, Peggy!" cried Clara, making a dive at

Peggy, who, avoiding Clara's clutches, darted from the common-room, with Clara in hot pursuit after her.

And in the momentary confusion a white-faced girl stole from the room, and, with fast-beating heart, ran down the corridor. Nor did she pause until she was safe from being seen or being spoken to.

Mabs and Babs, in the common-room, were looking for Polly.

"She's gone," said Mabel Lynn.

"And, Babs—"

Mabel's eyes were still excited.

"Didn't her manner seem strange to you, Babs?" she added.

Babs nodded.

"That struck me at once," she answered. "I wonder, Mabs—I wonder if she is Beryl Wingate."

And as those two chums wondered, in a distant class-room, alone and with tear-filled eyes, Polly Vane trembled lest any of the girls should come and find her here!

If her school friends but knew—if they but knew! was the thought that rushed through her distraught mind.

A Fallen Letter!

"Oh, daddy, daddy! If only you would come to Friarale!"

If only all this trouble would lift!"

Polly Vane's eyes were unable to keep back the tears; her lips would not cease to tremble, as she looked dismally before her.

Not only was her mind filled with torturing doubts, but the mystery that was outside the school had come into it, and now she did not know how to cope with all these things.

She felt that her heart would break beneath the tension of it all.

There was so little hope, so little relief from the carking worry; and, to add to all her sorrow, there was that rift between herself and some of Barbara Redfern's friends.

Oh, how loyal Babs had been to her, she told herself.

What she would have done without Babs she did not know.

It had helped her to be brave, and she felt that disaster would have come long



CLARA TO THE RESCUE!

"Stop your bullying!" cried Clara, as she wrenched Marcia Loftus away from Polly.

ago had it not been for the support and friendship that Babs and Mabel Lynn had given to her.

And now this had come—this new terror that only added to terrors that had gone and others that remained.

How long would she have to go on in this manner? How long would she have to fight her fears and put a brave face to the danger that confronted her?

Distantly she could hear the sounds of merry laughter.

There could be no such laughter for her, no such care-free joy. For her there was this burden of thought, and it was, not fair that she should have so much of worry when others had none.

Happy schoolgirls could enjoy their school life untroubled, but for her there was the darkness of danger, the threatening shadow that robbed her of all the sunlight that otherwise she would have had.

Suddenly to her ears there came the sound of footsteps.

Polly started to her feet and quickly dried her eyes.

She was terribly afraid now—afraid lest Babs or Mabel had come to find her hiding-place.

Worse still—much worse—Marcia Loftus might come!

A hand settled on the knob of the door, and now the door slowly opened. A figure, for the moment vaguely seen, came into the class-room.

It was Miss Steel.

"Ah, there you are, Polly!" said Miss Steel, surprise in her tones.

"She came into the room."

"I have been searching for you everywhere, Polly," she added. "What are you doing here?"

Polly felt awkward, at a loss for words, and there was such deep inquiry in Miss Steel's eyes.

Miss Steel's rather austere exterior only concealed a very warm heart, and she had taken an instinctive liking to Polly Vane, and perhaps there was compassion for the manner in which Polly Vane was dressed. No doubt, thought Miss Steel, funds were scarce in Polly's family.

"I—I came here to be alone, Miss Steel," answered Polly falteringly. "I had a headache."

It was true. Polly had a headache. Thought and worry had brought it, and somehow she felt that she would never shake it off.

"Well, it was only by chance that I looked in here," said Miss Steel. "The headmistress asked me to find you, and I have been looking for you everywhere."

Polly Vane's eyes lit up.

"Miss Primrose wants to see me?" she cried.

Miss Steel smiled.

"My child," she answered; and she added: "You evidently have nothing on your conscience, or you would not be so delighted."

"No, no. I have done nothing wrong," said Polly simply. "I am wondering if Miss Primrose has news—good news for me."

"That remains to be seen," laughed Miss Steel. "I would go at once if I were you. You know the headmistress' study?"

Polly nodded.

"Yes—oh, yes, thank you, Miss Steel!" she answered. "I will go now."

Polly, her heart beating fast, quickly reached the headmistress' study door.

She wondered—would she find her father in Miss Primrose's study?

Perhaps he had come to tell her that all the danger was passed—had come to fetch her!

She tapped on the door.

THE SCHOOL FRIEND.—No. 251.

"Come in!"

As she heard Miss Primrose's voice she did not know how to contain herself. She felt that she would faint beneath all the excitement.

The next moment the door was opened and she was looking expectantly into the room, to recoil as she saw that it was empty save for herself and the headmistress.

"Come in, Polly!" said the headmistress kindly, and, with waning hopes, Polly walked slowly towards the desk.

She looked a very sad and wistful figure at that moment, as, with her hands behind her back, she looked into the kindly eyes of Miss Primrose.

"You sent for me, Miss Primrose?" she murmured softly.

"Yes," said the headmistress, smiling encouragingly at Polly. "I have some news for you, Polly."

Polly's heart leapt anew.

"From my father?" she breathed, catching at the desk now.

Miss Primrose nodded.

"It is from your father, indirectly, Polly," she answered.

She leaned forward.

"You were sent here through your father's solicitors," said Miss Primrose quietly. "And now they communicate to me the wish of your father that your studies at Cliff House should continue under different conditions. You are to be a day girl no longer, Polly, but will come into the school as a boarder."

It was not the news that Polly had expected, but now she felt that this was something of a fulfilment of dearly expected hopes.

How much safer it would be here! There was that to be considered.

The change might alter all things, might even make for her happiness at the school. And she would be with Babs and Mabs more, and with their friends.

Miss Primrose had been watching Polly's face closely.

"I can see that the idea appeals to you, Polly," she said.

She paused.

"There is one other thing," she added. "I am to see all the arrangements for having your things brought here, and your solicitors make the curious request that you shall not return to Clematis Cottage. That is all, Polly."

Polly thanked her, and then, turning, she hurried from the room.

She felt a strange chill at her heart as she saw Marcia Loftus come into the corridor from one that gave on to it.

Marcia's sneering lips were curled as she saw Polly.

It was evident that she realised where Polly had been.

"Called you over the coals for your shabby clothes. I expect?" said Marcia cruelly. "And I don't wonder, either! You should just hear what the other girls are saying about you!"

Polly drew back as though Marcia had struck her rather than spoken to her.

How she feared those cruel grey eyes, and how the girl's spiteful nature.

"I don't wonder you look frightened," said Marcia. "Fancy them thinking for one moment that you were a millionaire's daughter? You! I like that! Why, I shouldn't be surprised if your father were in prison even!"

She came closer to Polly.

"And perhaps that is where you ought to be, if not already," she added.

The next moment, with a sneering laugh, Marcia hurried away.

She had seen Miss Steel coming, and Marcia always chose safety in flight. It was her way.

Polly, her eyes sad, her recent hopes

almost dashed to the ground, walked gloomily up to Study No. 4.

How could she stay here with all this worry? If only her father would take her away and guard her from the all-threatening dangers.

The study was empty, and, as she entered it, and saw that neither Babs nor Mabs nor Bessie were there, she seated herself at the table, and, drawing out writing materials, began a letter to her father.

If it was splashed with tears it was not because of any lack of effort to stem that sorrow.

She wrote in tears, and tears lay in the words she wrote.

"Oh, daddy! Day and night I am afraid. There seem to be so many of them, and I am nervous of them. Can nothing be done? Can't you take me away where I shall be safe from all the plots and schemes? What have I done to them that they should treat me so? It is hard to find happiness with friends here, friends with whom I could be so very, very happy. There is a girl called Barbara Redfern, and what I should do without her friendship I do not know. Oh, daddy, daddy! Do your best for your little daughter who loves you, and sometimes feels so afraid."

There was much more, for Polly Vane had so much to tell, and she had spent quite a time over the letter before it was finished and ready to be posted.

Finding an envelope, she had just finished addressing it when the door opened, and Babs came into the room, to smile as she saw that Polly was here.

"Hallo, Polly!" she exclaimed. "We lost you! Where have you been?"

Polly was fumbling with the letter. She had turned it face downwards on the table, and now she picked it up and inserted it in her blouse, and a look of relief came into her eyes.

"Oh, Babs!" she whispered. "You will never guess my news!"

"Well, what is it, Polly?" laughed Babs, perching herself on the side of the table, as Bessie Bunter rolled into the room, accompanied by Mabel Lynn and Peggy Preston.

"I am to stay at the school!" said Polly quickly. "I am a day girl no longer, Babs. I am to be a boarder."

Babs' face flushed with pleasure.

"I say, but that's splendid!" exclaimed Mabel Lynn enthusiastically.

"Rather!" put in Babs. "Cheers, Polly!"

"You're glad?"

Polly looked up wistfully into Barbara's face as she spoke.

"I should say I am!" said Babs. "And so is Mabel. We all are!"

Polly's eyes filled with tears.

"How kind, how generous you are to me!" she whispered.

The next moment the tears had gone, and, almost for the first time since she had come to Cliff House, Babs saw a real smile shine through the cloud of strange unhappiness that had wrapped itself about Polly Vane.

She rose from her seat at the table.

"I am just going to post a letter, Babs," she added. "I won't be long. It is important."

Polly flashed a rare smile at Babs, and, walking from the room, closed the door behind her.

And when she had gone the girls exchanged glances.

"What a mystery she is!" said Peggy Preston, looking in Babs' direction.

"Anyway, mystery or no mystery, I like her," put in Mabel.

"And so do I," chimed in Bessie Bunter. "She gave me a cake the other

day. Polly Vane is a nice girl. I shouldn't wonder if I invite her to Bunter Court for the Christmas vac."

"Don't take her to dreamland, Bessie," said Peggy, with a laugh. "We'd much rather she stayed with us."

And Bessie sniffed prodigiously. Somehow, her references to Bunter Court were always received with reserve in the Fourth Form at Cliff House.

"Well, the mystery of Polly Vane isn't solved yet!" Clara Trevlyn remarked, as she came into the study. "And there is a new one, Babs."

"A new one, Clara!"

Babs jumped down from where she had been seated on the table. "Yes," said Clara. "We all may have just a bit of 'down' on Polly for not having got that money to old Mrs. Crotchet, but I think that it is the sky-blue limit when Marcia tracks and sleuths Polly as though she were a Red Indian and

to place the letter in the box that she heard a movement behind her, and, turning, she saw Marcia's eyes watching her.

A feeling of terror surged through her heart, and her hands trembled so that the next moment the letter fell from her grasp, and, blown by the wind, fluttered to Marcia's feet.

Marcia stooped and picked it up, for Marcia had wondered how it was that Polly wished to post a letter when she was so near to her home.

Unblushingly, Marcia had come from her place of concealment to do this, and now, as she looked down at the letter, as a frantic cry came to Polly's lips, an exclamation of amazement came to Marcia's.

She had stepped back, and her eyes were fascinated by that name and that address she saw on the envelope.

There, and so plainly written in neat,

"How can you say that?" she exclaimed. "You know that you were eavesdropping."

"I wasn't."

"You were."

"I'll teach a new girl to say I tell falsehoods," exclaimed Marcia, advancing threateningly.

The girls watching from the window saw that action of Marcia's.

"I say!" cried Babs. "I'm not going to stand this."

"Neither am I," cried Clara.

And now those girls were rushing down the stairs to come to the grounds and the drive.

Down the drive they tore, and they came upon Marcia just in time.

She had caught hold of Polly by the arm, and she was preparing to inflict a sound box of the ears on Polly Vane.

But the blow never fell, for Clara had

2 SPLENDID NUMBERS "The Schoolgirls' Own Library"



An enthralling long complete story of a girl's bravery and devotion to her persecuted father.



Telling of a girl's fine stand for the honour of her family.

Polly was some poor settler in danger of losing his scalp."

"What do you mean, Clara?" asked Mabel Lynn.

"Mean!" exclaimed Clara. "I only saw Polly going out to post a letter, and there was Marcia flitting through the trees following her! Come and see!"

There was a general stampede to a room that gave a view of the drive, and, as the girls flocked to the window, it was to see Polly Vane just approaching the letter-box.

Behind her was Marcia Loftus, and, although for the moment Polly did not know Marcia was there, the girls who watched from the window did.

Polly had run down the drive intent to post that letter to her father, and, if she had fancied that she was followed, it occurred to her that it might be only fancy, and she had not paused to make sure.

No. Down to the pillar-box she hurried, and it was just as she was about

girlish handwriting that it could not be mistaken, was:

"Richard Wingate, Esq.,
"Clevely Court,
"Buckinghamshire."

The next instant Polly, her eyes filled with anger, had snatched the letter from Marcia's grasp, and, running to the pillar-box, she posted it, and had turned to face the girl who had spied upon her.

Her hands were clasped, her face was red and angry.

"What did you mean by following me? How dared you spy upon me as you have done?" she cried.

Marcia laughed contemptuously.

"If you fancy that I was honouring you with such an interest, you are mistaken," she said.

Polly paused helplessly. She was convinced that she had made no mistake. She could see guilt writ large on Marcia's face.

darted forward and had caught hold of the descending arm.

And Clara's grip was none too gentle. A shout of dismay came from Marcia.

In her excitement, she had not heard those footsteps bearing down on her, and now, her face the colour of a sheet of paper, she swung round upon Clara.

"Stop this kind of thing, Marcia," said Clara grimly.

Clara's eyes conveyed her meaning.

"What's it got to do with you?" snapped out Marcia Loftus.

"Everything," answered Babs. "We saw you tracking Polly down to the gates here, and we know you were after no good."

"You were spying on her," exclaimed Peggy Preston.

"Mind your own blessed business," said Marcia, with a dark scowl.

"We're minding it," said Babs quietly.

"We saw you from the window, and what is more, we saw you attempting to strike Polly."

THE SCHOOL FRIEND.—No. 231.

Polly, white faced and trembling, was standing near to her friends.

Marcia's eyes were like daggers, and now, with a contemptuous curl of her lips, she pointed to Polly.

"A precious fine member of the Fourth Form to make such a fuss over!" she said scoldingly.

There was a strange smile on that sarcastic face of hers.

"It's a good thing I did come down here, that I did watch," she said very deliberately.

Polly had stepped forward, and was looking into Marcia's face with frantic fear.

She knew what Marcia had seen, and she was afraid now—terribly afraid.

The other girls were silent. It was obvious to all of them that there might be an unexpected ending to this incident.

"What do you mean, Marcia?" asked Barbara coldly.

"What I am going to say, Babs Redfern," retorted Marcia, her cold eyes gleaming. "I think that you'll all be mighty sorry you made a friend of this Polly Vane when you hear what I have got to tell you."

Polly, with a low gasp, caught at Marcia's arm.

"Don't speak! I beg you not to speak!" she pleaded, to the amazement of the girls.

Marcia shook her head and sneered. "I am going to speak, Polly Vane—or whatever your name is!" she said. "Speak so that all these girls can know the kind of girl they have made a friend of."

She looked bitingly at Polly.

"I've found her out!" she cried. "I saw her sneak down here to post a letter. And do you know what was written on that envelope?"

Marcia pointed dramatically. "This girl," cried Marcia—"this girl, Polly Vane, has written to Mr. Richard Wingate, and you can see what she intends doing."

A gasp of astonishment came from the assembled girls.

"I can see her idea!" blazed Marcia. "She's going to pretend that she's the missing girl. That's what she intends doing!"

A cry of amazement came to Polly's lips.

Marcia had said something that she had not expected her to say. There was no doubt about that.

Perhaps relief showed in her eyes as she looked about her and took in those surprised faces.

"But how do you know she wrote to Mr. Wingate?" asked Babs.

"Because I made it my business to see the envelope, Barbara Redfern!" she answered.

Mabel Lynn laughed softly.

There was something amusing about Marcia's frank confession of eavesdropping.

Polly looked scared, she looked as though what Marcia had accused her of was the truth; and the girls looked askance at Babs.

Had they been wise in making this girl their friend? was the question that lay in their eyes.

Babs was amazed.

"And there is another thing," cried Marcia. "There's another girl advertised for—a girl for whom a reward of one hundred pounds is offered—and that girl corresponds in every way to Polly Vane!"

She came nearer to Polly.

"Deny that if you can," she added. "Deny that you're wanted for something—some crime—and that is why you're hiding here!"

Marcia laughed as a cry of alarm came to Polly's lips.

"Why are you tracked, followed by strange people?" continued Marcia, as the girls gasped with astonishment.

"Tell me that Polly Vane! Why?" she exclaimed. "They are detectives, I know; for I have seen them! And now, Polly Vane, try and be popular in the Fourth Form if you can!"

Marcia waited only for a moment.

She felt that she had reduced Polly to nothing. She felt that her telling evidence had convicted Polly already.

From Polly's attitude it indeed seemed so. She was sobbing as Marcia, her work done, turned and walked back up the drive.

And other girls followed her.

Not so Babs.

Babs had gone to Polly's side, and was doing her best to comfort her.

"Polly—Polly," she whispered, "why didn't you answer Marcia? Why were you afraid for her to speak? Why didn't you deny what she said?"

Polly looked up through her tears.

"Oh, Babs—Babs," she moaned, "I couldn't deny a word of it—I couldn't!"

A cry of fear came to Babs' lips. Her hands were clasped, and she had stepped back.

"You don't mean that you are guilty of something—can't you see that? No, no!" she exclaimed. "I know that that cannot be; for you could never do anything wrong, Polly—never!"

She soothed and coaxed Polly.

"Don't cry, Polly!" she begged. "It will all come right—all of it."

But there was fear in Babs' heart. Although she believed in Polly, there were now many girls in the Fourth who could not.

After what accusations Marcia had made—accusations that had not been denied—it would seem that there was real meaning behind the charges that Marcia had made.

Polly's shoulders were shaking with sobs.

Babs did her best to comfort her; but it was hard work, for Polly seemed as though she could not be comforted.

She stood there looking through her tears into Babs' face; and Babs realised that in Polly Vane she had come upon a mystery such as she had never come in contact with before.

"Polly—Polly," she said keenly, "you will do me a good by taking it to heart like this!"

Slowly Babs led Polly back up the drive, and Polly could not stem her tears.

Comfort Polly as Babs had done, there was alarm in Babs' heart.

What was all the mysterious meaning of this? What could the explanation be?

There would be no holding Marcia after this triumph.

Then again, as Babs thought, she wondered what purpose Polly could have had in writing to Mr. Richard Wingate.

Her attitude had spoken a complete denial of her being the daughter that had been lost, and a second glance at the photograph had shown that the girl was not really like Polly.

And that other advertisement?

The "wanted" girl!

Babs could not believe that Polly had ever done anything dishonest; she refused to believe it.

Now they had come to the school, and grouped about by the door were the Fourth-Formers.

How cold were their glances as they looked at Polly Vane!

Babs drew Polly back.

It were better not to enter the school at that way.

There was another way, a better way, by the servants' entrance, and thither they turned their steps.

"Oh, Polly, if only you would speak! If only you would tell Marcia how wrong she is!" pleaded Babs.

"If only I could!" sobbed Polly. "If only I could, Babs!"

They had come into the side entrance, and now they were in the domestics' quarters of the old school, and passing through them in the direction of the school proper.

As they walked through the kitchen Babs was conscious of an exclamation that came from a woman who a moment since had been looking through a window that gave a view of the school entrance.

The woman had turned, and a pair of hard eyes were resting upon Polly.

Babs did not remember having seen this woman before, and as she watched her she saw Polly look up, saw her shrink back.

Polly's heart had suddenly stopped, to go on beating at a frantic rate a moment later.

As she looked into those eyes she seemed to see a veiled figure dashing at her from the shadow of the hedge-rows on the Friarade Road.

And when at last she had come to the distant corridor she wondered if it were her imagination that the woman had looked at her in a meaning and malevolent manner.

Little did Polly know! Little did she realise the explanation of that look! Who it was had come to find service at Cliff House, and for what reason had she come?

Had Polly known, how different things might have been! How very different!

END OF THIS WEEK'S STORY.

(What is this baffling mystery which surrounds Polly Vane? A shroud? Are there any grounds for Marcia Loftus' grave accusation? And—a last and yet a vital question—who is this strange woman who has suddenly appeared in the servants' quarters of the school? You simply must not miss next Thursday's enthralling story of Cliff House School, entitled "THE TRUTH ABOUT POLLY VANE!" By Hilda Richards.)



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