

"OUTCASTS IN THE JUNGLE!"

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THE SCHOOLGIRL

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2^D



BESSIE'S FIRST RIDING LESSON!

A delightfully amusing incident from the funniest Cliff House Story Hilda Richards has yet written! It appears complete inside.

A delightfully amusing long complete Cliff House School story, featuring Barbara Redfern & Co.—and Bessie Bunter in particular

That Rich Relation of Bessie's!

By
Hilda
Richards



A BUMP FOR BESSIE

"BUCK UP, Bessie!" called Barbara Redfern.
"Yes, come on, slowcoach!" supported Mabel Lynn.

"Put some pep into it, Bessie!" urged Clara Trevelyn.

"Oh, really, you girls!" puffed Bessie Bunter.

Bessie, really, was doing her best. But Bessie's best, compared with the efforts of the three of the most athletic girls in the Fourth Form at Cliff House School, was a very poor effort indeed.

Though Bessie would never have admitted it, cycling was not a form of exercise at which she excelled.

Bessie, indeed, found cycling hard work, especially as the going was slightly uphill and there was a nasty little head wind to be faced.

Bessie was fat, and Bessie was short. Those two factors alone rather militated against her breaking records. Besides which, Bessie was also short-sighted.

And the machine which she now rode was not the most ideal from Bessie's point of view. It had, indeed, been made for a much taller girl than Bessie Bunter. Altogether, Bessie was not happy.

Yet Bessie was not going to give in. The end of the journey, at least, promised its reward.

For she, Barbara Redfern, Mabel Lynn, and Clara Trevelyn were on their way from Cliff House to Friarale village, to buy supplies for a splendid midday dormitory feed, with which

BESSIE'S oft-repeated boast has at last come true! Her titled relatives have really turned up—and Bessie Bunter is the proudest girl at Cliff House. But although the fat girl will not admit it, there is something of a mystery surrounding Earl Percy de Bunter.

the Fourth intended to celebrate Clara's victory in the recent Pets' Show.

It was only the vision of that treat, however, which kept Bessie going.

"Oh crumbs, don't go too fast. Wait for me!" she panted.

"Well, buck up!" exclaimed Babs.

And Babs, though she was usually tolerant of Bessie's little failings, looked anxious. She had cause to look anxious, for it was already growing dark, and if they were not back by the time allowed on their passes, trouble would follow for a certainty.

"Can't you go just a little faster, Bessie?" Mabel Lynn asked.

Bessie blinked through her large round spectacles.

"Oh, really, Mabs, how can you expect me to go faster?" she expostulated. "I'm going all I can now!"

"But I always thought you were such a jolly good cyclist, Bessie," Clara Trevelyn put in, with a smile. "You've always said so, anyway."

"Well, I am," puffed Bessie. "But that's under better conditions, of course. Besides, this isn't my jigger."

"What?"

"Oh dud-dear! I mean, it is really, of course," Bessie put in hastily. Bessie had a habit of unconsciously betraying her own secrets. "Oh, yes it is! I wouldn't dream of borrowing Jean Cartwright's cycle because mine has a puncture. Ow! That was a stone!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You needn't laugh," went on Bessie aggrievedly. "If you want my opinion, I think this is a rotten bike. How on earth Jean over rides it is more than I can say. The pedals are too near the ground, for one thing."

"Well, considering Jean's nearly twice as tall as you are, that's hardly surprising," Babs smiled. "But does she know you've borrowed the bike, Bessie?"

"Nun-no! Of course not! Not, of course, that it is her bike," Bessie puffed. "I thought I said it wasn't Jean Cartwright's bike, Babs."

"Yes, come on! We shan't be in Friarale to-morrow at this rate!"

"But—oh dear!" Bessie gasped as she missed the pedals. "I say, wait for me, you cats—you girls! Ow! Ow!" she yelled as she plunged into a pothole and bumped out again. "Oh, dud-dear, I'm bruised all over."

"Come on!"

"Get a move on!"

"Bib-but— Look here, I'm going to speak to Jean Cartwright about this rotten b-bike," Bessie yelled furiously.

"Something's coming undone behind me. The saddle's wagging! I can't sit on it. Clara, lend me your bike," she added pathetically. "I can ride better on yours!"

Clara chuckled.
"No, thanks!"

"Well, yours, Babs."

"Sorry, Bessie."

"Mabs, be a sport—"

"My bike's in use," Mabs chuckled, pedalling on.

"But look here—ow!" yelled Bessie. "It's that saddle again. The blessed thing's slipping. I can feel it. Babs, Mabs, Clara—wait for me! I'm falling off! I'm slipping! I'm going! I'm going! I'm—"

Bessie's voice ended in a thin wail of dismay as she suddenly let go of the handlebars and described a whirling circle into the road.

"Bump!"

"She's gone!" laughed Clara.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The chums stopped, dismounting. Bessie, sitting up by the side of her fallen cycle, groaned hollowly.

"Hurt, Bessie?" asked Babs sympathetically.

"Ow! Yes!"

"What's the matter?"

"Ow! I'm bruised all over. I've dislocated my spine, I think," Bessie said pathetically. "Oh dear! My spectacles have fallen off and I can't find them. I'm all bruises. I'm sure my leg's broken in three places. Clara, you cut, don't come too near. If you tread on my spectacles they might get broken and then you'll have to buy me a new pair." She groined around shortsightedly. "Oh dud-dear, where are they?"

"Lost them, Bessie?" asked Clara sympathetically.

"Ow! Yes!"

"Then what's that hanging from one ear?"

"Ear?" Bessie blinked. Then she put up a podgy hand and looked bewildered as she found the missing spectacles dangling from one ear. "Oh, really, Clara, you might have told me before!" she said aggrievedly, and put the spectacles on. "Ow! I'm a wreck! Babe, you might lend me a hand, will you? Or fetch an ambulance. I'm sure I'm fractured all to pieces. Oh dear!"

"Can't you move?" asked Mabs sympathetically.

"Ow! No!"

"Not even an inch?" Babs asked sorrowfully.

"Ow! No!"

"Oh, I say, look out!" Clara roared suddenly. "Bessie, you duffer—"

"Oh dear! Ow!" yelled Bessie, and like lightning scrambled to her feet, bolting towards the hedge. "Oh, my gurgoodness! Don't let me be run over, Babs! I say—"

And Bessie blinked round in bewilderment. She had imagined, at least, that a record-breaking car was in the offing, but the lane was as deserted as it had been before her tumble. She blinked.

"Clara, you eat—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the chums.

"There's nobody there," yelled Bessie furiously.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Why did you shout like that?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, for somebody's who's dislocated her leg in three places and fractured her spine, you're a wonder, Bessie," Clara chuckled. "Cheer up, old invalid. Now, what about this jigger. Got it, Babs?"

"Yes," called Babs.

"What's the matter?"

"Saddle worked off."

"Oh, bother!" Clara looked cross. "That would happen—in this light, too! Isn't that just like Bessie? She must go and borrow a bike belonging to the girl with the longest legs in the Form! You might have known, duffer, that the saddle would be as high as it possibly could be."

Bessie glared.
"Look here—"

"Can't! Too dark!" Clara sighed.

"Well, come on; all hands to the pump! We'll never get to Friardale at this rate. Better light up. We can see what we're doing then—unless," she added tentatively, "Bessie likes to run all the way to Friardale. I'll tow you behind my jigger, Bessie."

"Oh, really, Clara?" Bessie blinked.

"But I know what you could do," she added, with a flash of inspiration.

"And that?"

"You could carry me on your handlebars."

"I could, certainly," agreed Clara, with a sniff; "but I've some respect for my handlebars. I like the shape of them as they are at present, thanks!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, I'm blest if I can see anything to cackle at," Bessie said peevishly. "I consider that a perfectly good suggestion. Really, Clara, I think you might be a bit more helpful. I think—"

And Bessie broke off there, blinking through the trees. "I say!" she exclaimed in a suddenly changed voice.

"Now what's the matter?"

"Look, Babs! That light!"

Babs, who had retrieved the trunk saddle which had worked off the spindle beneath Bessie's contortions on the bike, paused. She looked in the direction with the fat junior indicated, and then stared.

Bessie was right. Through the trees, a good two or three hundred yards away from the road, flashed a light. It went out, flashed again, and then disappeared once more.

"I say!" Babs cried.

"What is it?"

"Somebody signalling."

"Piffle!"

"It's true! Look!"

They all turned, watching that winking light. Flash, flash! In, out, in and out, again.

And Babs, who was one of the Cliff House Girl Guides, and had taken her badge for signalling, looked puzzled.

She gave vent to a sudden exclamation.

"It's a message!" she cried excitedly.

"My hat, yes!" Clara thrilled. She, too, could read Morse, and very distinctly it was a message.

Mabs gazed ahead intently. She could see, too, that a message was being flashed, but her knowledge of the code was not as good as that of Clara or of Babs.

The four of them stood tense.

"Look!" cried Babs.

She began to spell out the message as it appeared.

"H-E-L-P! I-I-A-M-A-P-R-I-S-O-N-E-R-I-N-T-H-E-H-A-N-D-S-O-F-G-I-P-S-I-E-S."

"My hat!"

"It's a joke," Clara Trevlyn opined.

"Flash back, an answer!" Babs called excitedly. "Mabs—"

But Mabs had already lit one of the cycle lamps. She handed it to Babs.

"I say—" muttered Bessie Bunter.

But nobody paid any attention to Bessie. The attention of Clara Trevlyn and Mabel Lynn was fixed now upon Babs as the leader of the Fourth, with the aid of the dark blue beret she wore, flashed back the message:

"W-H-O-A-R-E-Y-O-U?"

"M-A-R-M-I-O-N-T-R—" And then suddenly the light flashed off.

"Marmion!" muttered Babs.

"Who is she?"

"Signal again."

Babs signalled. They awaited a reply; but no reply came.

"She was interrupted in the middle of that last message," Clara Trevlyn said excitedly. "Babs—"

Babs paused. Her own blue eyes were shining with excitement as she looked at her chums. It was growing darker in the lane, and the lamp in her hand shone vividly.

Around them was silence, except for the rustle of the wind in the trees, the faint barking of a dog some distance away.

"What shall we do?" asked Clara.

Babs heaved a deep breath.

"Well, what is there to do?" she wanted to know.

"Go!"

"Why not?"

"It may be a joke."

"It may be, certainly," Babs nodded. "On the other hand, it may not. And if it isn't, it looks to me as though somebody needs help. Come on, let's go. It will be an adventure, anyhow."

"I'm game!" exclaimed tomboy Clara at once, and her eyes sparkled.

"And!"

"But what about the tuck?" expostulated Bessie aggrievedly.

"Well, you stop here."

"But that won't get the tuck."

"Bother the tuck!"

"Oh, come on!" cried Babs.

"We shall be late."

"Never mind!"

"But I do mind!" Bessie expostulated, in alarm. "This is silly. Besides, you don't study me. You don't ask if I'd like to come. It's all nonsense. I don't believe that was a message at all. It—it was a glow-worm, or something."

"Duffer!" Clara cried, with withering scorn.

"But look here—"

"Come on, let's hurry!" cried Babs.

"But the tuckshop will be closed!" howled Bessie. "Those ripping cream puffs will be gone. I say— Ow, you cats! Don't run away like that. Wait for me!"

"You stop and mind the bikes!" Clara called.

But Bessie was not stopping. Not if Bessie knew it was Elizabeth Gertrude Bunter going to be deserted on this now dark and lonely road.

Bessie had no patience with the adventure in project; but Babs and Mabs and Clara were company, and Bessie was going to stick to them. She lumbered forward as the three darted among the trees.

"Hi! Wait for me!" she called.

"Oh goodness, Babs! I almost fell down then!"

Babs paused.

"Better wait," she counselled. "We can't leave the duffer. Come on, Bessie!" she added.

Bessie grunted. But she came on, breathless, after a stumble into a hole in the ground. She blinked at the grey faces of her chums in indignation.

"Look here—"

"Can't see," said Clara Trevlyn.

"And thank goodness for that!" she added, under her breath. "Now, Bessie, be quiet. I say," she added, in a tense whisper, "what's that?"

"What's what?" Bessie stared.

"Hush!"

"But—"

"Be quiet, you duffer!"

They all stared in the direction in which Clara was facing—towards a dark

clump of trees from which came a red glow.

"A fire!" muttered Babs.

She strained her eyes, and now, becoming accustomed to the gloom, she was able to pick out dark, shadowy objects. She saw figures moving in and out of the glow. She saw black outlines with tiny smoke-stacks floating upwards.

Her face flushed.

"Caravans!" she muttered.

"Gipsies!"

"Oh goodness!" muttered Bessie Bunter.

"Come on!" cried Clara.

She began to steal forward, Babs and Mabs following. Bessie hesitated, casting a glance back towards the road, where the lighted lamps marked the parking-place of the cycles.

Bessie did not like gipsies. Why, she did not know; she simply did not like them.

"Babs—!" she muttered.

And then she jumped. For Babs, Mabs, and Clara there was no sign; they seemed to have vanished.

Actually they had; though, had Bessie known it, they were less than ten yards away. Babs, Mabs, and Clara had simply dropped on all fours, in order to approach the encampment without being seen.

Indian fashion, they were peering the camp, every nerve a-tingle.

The fat junter hesitated. She had not seen the three drop on to their knees; and they, for their part, imagined that Bessie was following.

Bessie for some reason suddenly felt frightened. It was so dark, so lonely, here, and her chums had just disappeared as though the earth had swallowed them up.

She hesitated between going on towards the glow or seeking the comfort of the winking lamps that gleamed upon the road by the cycles. And then near at hand came the sharp snapping of a twig.

"Babs!" gasped Bessie.

A shape loomed in front of her—a dimly discerned human shape—that of a man. Bessie could not see his face, but she took in sufficient to observe that he was a gipsy.

There was something strange in the stealth of his movements, in the attitude in which he paused. Fear took possession of fat Bessie Bunter. She gave a yell and turned to fly.

"Ow! Bib-Babs!" she shouted.

But that was all. For out of the darkness there leapt a shape. It was the shape of the gipsy man.

In two bounds he was upon Bessie; with one strong arm he caught the fat girl round the shoulder. The yell that Bessie meant to utter died into a spluttering gurgle of fear as she found herself gazing into a pair of blazing eyes. Then a hand was clapped over her mouth.

"Got you!" came a sibilant whisper in her ear.

And Bessie, half fainting with fright, felt a handkerchief being passed around her face.

"You would, would you?" came a threatening voice in her ear. "Try to get away, would you? But I saw you, my fine bird! Jake's got his eye on you! Kimmion now! No nonsense!"

And Bessie, her knees knocking with fright, was roughly pushed forward.

Bessie's one inclination was to yell, but the handkerchief prevented that. She could do nothing, she saw, but follow the man, especially as he had one of her hands caught in his—and, naturally, where her hand went Bessie must follow.

The man plunged among the trees, following a path through a wood of almost Stygian darkness. Bessie stumbled after him, quaking with fear, expecting at any moment to find herself pounced upon from all sides.

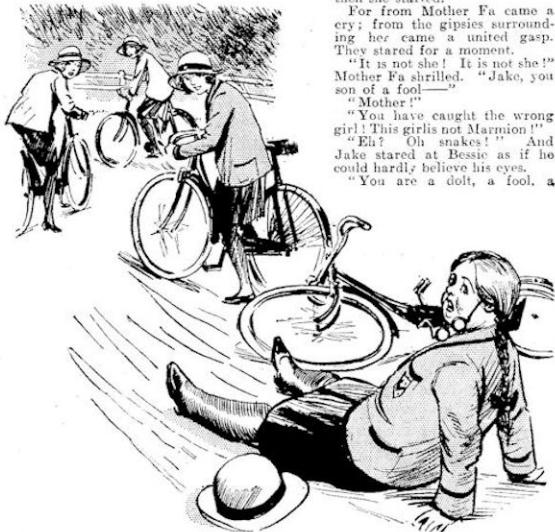
It seemed a long way to the fat girl, that journey through the trees. At times so dark was it that she could not even make out her guide. But gradually the faint red glow loomed ahead again, and Bessie saw the light from a fire reflecting on the coloured paintwork of caravans.

Now they came within sight of the fire. Bessie looked apprehensively around her. She saw men and women squatting in front of the fire; she saw men moving about; and beyond, in the darkness between two caravans, she saw for a moment a face—the white, frightened face of a girl.

Bessie, fascinated at the sight of that face, stared towards the caravans.

It was a white, distressed face, dimmed by the shadows which fell upon it from the caravan. It looked out at her with big, imploring eyes.

A hand came up; two fingers were pressed upon the lips in a gesture which was meant, obviously, for Bessie to remain silent. Bessie blinked. When she looked again the face had gone.



BESSIE'S bicycle skidded sideways, and the fat girl descended with a bump into the road. "Ow!" she belloved. "Ow! I'm bruised all over! I've broken my leg in three places!"



What Bessie Saw in the Gipsy Camp

"W! Gug-gug-gug!" gurgled Bessie Bunter.

But that was all poor Bessie could say. The handkerchief was around her mouth then, and was being securely knotted at the back of her head.

"Now!" cried her captor.

Bewildered, Bessie was hauled into the light. An old croone came forward, hobbling by the aid of a stick. Long, white hair, straggling and untidy, hung down from her sharp, white features.

The shadows revealed her cheeks as two black pits surrounded by a sea of crinkling lines. Her nose, hooked and long, reminded poor Bessie of the picture of a witch which, as a child, had terrified her into nights of sleeplessness.

She shuddered.

"Ah! So you have got her!" the old croone shrielled. "She was not clever enough for my Jake, eh? Marmion! Pretty Marmion!"

"Gug-gug!" gurgled Bessie Bunter.

"You came back to us, eh?" the old croone went on. Her hands—thin, scraggy, the long fingers with their tapering, claw-like nails—came up, working in front of the painting Bessie's eyes. "You not like your friends the gipsies, eh? You not like to stop with us? But, oh, we treat you so kindly! We give you so much that you want. Do not run away again, pretty Marmion."

"Gug-gug!" gurgled Bessie, shaking with fright.

"Be not afraid. Old Mother Fa will not hurt you. No!" And Mother Fa fastened a pair of beady, glittering eyes upon Bessie. "Old Mother Fa so kind to little Marmion. Old Mother Fa show her, oh, so many things! Now, now, pretty Marmion, run away no more! Jake, take the cloth which binds her mouth. Let us see our pretty Marmion's face!"

Jake grinned. The other gipsies, crowding close, looked on.

Bessie gulped as she felt the handkerchief being untied from around her mouth. She gasped for breath as her features were revealed once more. And then she started.

For from Mother Fa came a cry; from the gipsies surrounding her came a united gasp. They stared for a moment.

"It is not she! It is not she!" Mother Fa shrielled. "Jake, you son of a fool—"

"Mother!"

"You have caught the wrong girl! This girls not Marmion!"

"Eh? Oh snakes!" And Jake stared at Bessie as if he could hardly believe his eyes.

"You are a dolt, a fool, a

scatterbrain!" The ~~old woman~~ shrieked and danced such a terrifying fandango with the aid of her staff, that her followers drew back. "You idiot! You white face! Go—go!" Her voice rose to a shrill scream. "Go and find the girl—the real girl!"

"But, I say—" expostulated the bewildered Bessie.

"Wah, you!" And the old crone, her temper immediately deserting her, smiled—a hideous smile which sent shivers through Bessie. "Ah, missie! Pretty gringo missie!" Mother Fa went on, her voice sinking to a persuasive lisp. "Be not alarmed. Gipsy Jake mean no harm. He have just the joke."

"'Ji-joke'!" spluttered Bessie. "Just the little merriment!" And the old crone cackled on a shrill note, meant to indicate her vast amusement. "Just a joke! No harm! Ha, ha, ha! Jake is the funny one of the tribe."

"Well, I'm blest if I call this a joke!" spluttered Bessie, beginning to regain some of her confidence.

"Be not hurt," Mother Fa crooned. "Do not hurt, pretty miss. You have the sense of humour, yes? You see the fun? Yet it is a shame. Jake shall be punished for daring to take such a liberty with one so beautiful and so young as you! Pray accept the hospitality of our camp. Stay to supper."

"Oh, nun-no, thanks!" Bessie said, with an appetising glance at the stew-pot which bubbled over the fire.

But she was pleased, all the same; her fear now was rapidly disappearing. "And—and may I go now?" Bessie asked.

"Go—yes! And may good fortune go with you," Mother Fa said. "We are but poor gypsies, pretty lady, and you are so high above us. Yet, if I may offer you the hospitality of the tribe, let me assure you that here is always a welcome for you. Here you shall always be received as one to whom honour is due, whose high-born station in life entitles her to our humble respect. Good-night, fair lady; good-night!"

"Good night—and thanks!" Bessie said.

And, rather amazed at the termination of the adventure, but nevertheless, immensely pleased and flattered, Bessie stumbled back towards the road.

"**S**HUSH!" warned Barbara Redfern.

"Hist!" repeated Mabel Lynn.

"Oh, goodness, get on!" was Clara Trevlyn's impatient retort. "There's nothing here."

The three chums looked baffled. It seemed that, after all, that message was just a joke on someone's part. For, as they had examined each one, not a trace of anything untoward had they discovered.

They had stered clear of the fire, naturally, preferring to work from the darker side of the camp. They could hear the gypsies moving about in front of them.

They caught the mutter of voices. Once Babs, peering through the bushes, saw old Mother Fa wildly waving her arms as she screamed at a sulky looking young man in a corduroy waistcoat and fringed trousers.

The sight of the strange old creature fascinated Babs.

"Oh, come on," said Clara disgustedly; "we'd better get back! And where's Bessie?"

"Bessie?"

"Yes. We haven't seen her for the last five minutes."

"Oh crumbs!" The three looked startled. If they required anything to make them abandon the search that was it. So intent upon that search had they been that they had momentarily forgotten all about their fat chum.

But where was she? "Come back to the road, I expect," Mabel Lynn guessed. "We'll get back, too. It doesn't seem that there's anything to be gained from hanging around here, and we shall have to buck up. Come on!"

"Yes, come on!" supported Clara. Babs nodded. She had to bow to the majority. She followed Mabs and Clara as they blundered on through the dark, but at the same time she could not get rid of an uncanny feeling that something was wrong.

YOUR EDITOR is preparing a BIG SURPRISE for You!

Somehow, Babs was convinced that the message she had read was the work of no practical joker—that the mysterious Marmon was indeed a prisoner in the hands of the gypsies. But if she was a prisoner, where was she?

Babs felt puzzled. It seemed strange to her, there were only five caravans in the camp, and they had looked in each one. But nobody had been there. Nobody had been in the big tent which had been erected at the side of the caravans. It was queer.

By this time they had reached the road again, the cycles remaining exactly as they had left them. Babs joined Clara and Mabs, to find them peering around in bewilderment.

"Where's Bessie?"

"Bessie's not here."

"Oh goodness!" cried Babs. She looked at the cycles. The four of them still stood, Bessie's machine lacking the saddle, as they had left it.

But of Bessie there was no sign.

"Well, where on earth has the duffer got to?" cried Clara. "She ought to know—"

And then she stopped, as, from the direction of the camp they had just left, came a sudden piercing scream:

"Help, help!"

Babs' face paled.

"Bessie!" she cried.

It was a girl's voice—of that there was no doubt. And, seeing that Bessie was so strangely absent, there was no question in their minds that the voice must belong to Bessie Bunter.

For a second they all stood stuck into paralysed silence.

"Then Clara set her teeth.

"Then Mabs," she said.

She led the way, sprinting across the field. Babs and Mabs in her train.

And then suddenly Clara, who was slightly in the lead, ran into something soft and heavy, and Babs and Mabs, immediately behind her, tripped over her as she fell. With a concerted bump they went down.

"Oh dear!"

"Good gracious!"

"Gly hat!"

"Who was that?" Clara wanted to know.

"Ow, ow!" From beneath them came

a muffled voice. "Ow! Gerroff, can't you? Bib-Babs!"

"My goodness!"

"Bessie?"

"Bessie, you chump!"

"Oh really! Oh dear!" Bessie gasped. "Ow! You idiots, can't you see where you're looking? That was me. You mun-might have stunned me, or something. You might have broken my glasses, and if you'd broken them—"

"You'd have been more short-sighted than ever!" Clara snorted, rising to her feet. "Couldn't you have shouted, or something?"

"Well, I never saw!"

"But you must have heard, duffer! Where have you been?"

"Been?" Bessie glowered in the darkness. "Perhaps," she said, with frigid dignity, "seeing that you've knocked me down, one of you will help me up. Oh dear, I'm puffed!"

"But where have you been?" Babs insisted, wrenching the fat girl to her feet.

"In the camp."

"What camp?"

"The gipsy camp."

"Oh, my hat! Was that you who screamed?"

"No, it wasn't."

"Well, who was it?"

"Look here," Bessie expostulated, "what do you take me for—an encyclopedia? How should I know who screamed? And why shouldn't I go to the camp? Really, Babs, I think you might stop asking questions. I'm quite flustered as it is."

"But why did you go to the camp?" howled Clara.

"Oh, really, Clara—"

"Oh, come on!" cried Mabs, in exasperation. "It's obvious, anyway, that Bessie hasn't come to any harm, and that, after all, is what concerns us. Besides, we've got that duffer's saddle to fix up. You didn't see the girl in the camp, Bessie?"

"What girl?"

"Oh, the girl I left behind me!"

Clara snorted; and, in a huff, led the way back to the road, leaving Bessie blinking and wondering whether her tomboy chum had suddenly taken leave of her senses.



Bessie Inspires a Plot

"**F**UNNY!" remarked Barbara Redfern thoughtfully.

"Jolly funny!"

"Bessie—"

"Oh, yes, Babs! I think we'll take some sausage rolls, don't you?"

"Yes. But I wasn't thinking of that."

"And some sponge cakes?" Bessie asked hopefully.

"Yes. But about that girl you saw in the gipsy camp?"

"Some hot cake would be rather nice, too," Bessie said thoughtfully.

"Look here, stick to the point!" exclaimed Clara. "Babs is asking you a question, Bessie."

The four of them sat in Uncle Clegg's tuckshop in the village of Friardale. As it was a warm evening, they sat round a small table near the door, which opened into the village street, and they were making use of the interval during which Uncle Clegg was collecting the very generous order they had given him, to sip at lemonades.

In spite of their adventure, they still had plenty of time before they were due back at school. Babs' watch, which

they had relied upon, had proved to be considerably fast.

Bessie, of course, was rummaging in her mind for the things they had not ordered, quite oblivious of the fact that they had more tuck than was really convenient for them to carry back to Cliff House School.

But Babs was thinking of the strange story which Bessie had told of her adventure in the gipsy camp, and Babs, still haunted by the fear that she and her chums had not done all that might have been done for the gipsy prisoner, was feeling a little uneasy.

Clara felt like that about it, too. So did Mabs.

"Bessie, try to think," Babs begged. "What did you say the girl's name was?"

"Name? Oh, Mar—Mara—Mar—something!" Bessie returned vaguely. "Sounded like marmalade to me."

Clara chuckled.

"Of course, it would sound like something to eat. Sure it wasn't raspberry jam, Bessie?"

"No!" said Bessie seriously. "Not that. Oh, really, Clara, I believe you're joking!" she said. "Look here—"

"Was it Marmion?" asked Mabs.

Bessie blinked.

"Well, now I come to think of it, it was."

"What was she like?"

"Like?" Bessie glanced towards the plate of sausage rolls on the counter. "I say, Babs, I could do with a snack," she said eagerly. "We've got time for a sausage roll or two."

"What was she like?" repeated Babs.

"Oh, like—" Bessie looked vague.

"Well, I didn't see her properly."

"She had a face, I suppose?" Clara asked.

"Oh, really, Clara, of course she had a face. That's silly," Bessie said huffily.

"How could a girl not have a face?"

"Well, if you saw it, you should be able to describe it. What was it like?"

Bessie paused.

"How do I know?" she expostulated.

"I've told you I didn't see it clearly.

It was in shadow. I say, Babs, about those sausage rolls—"

Babs heaved a sigh. It seemed hopeless to question Bessie.

"I believe I could manage a few," Bessie said longingly. "Tell you what, you girls, I'll stand treat!"

Clara stared.

"Well, that's jolly nice of you, Bessie. Thanks. Go ahead!"

"But—" Bessie blinked. "I hate to mention the matter, of course," she added hesitatingly, "but the fact of the matter is—well, a postal order I was expecting hasn't arrived."

"Oh? Go hon!" Clara scoffed.

"It's true," Bessie nodded seriously.

"I can't understand what could have happened to it. It should have arrived last—"

"Year!" Clara suggested.

"Oh, really, Clara! It should have come this morning," Bessie corrected, with dignity. "From one of my titled relatives, you know. Lord Percy de Bunter, Lord Percy intended to send me a postal order for five pounds on Monday."

"Not really?"

"Yes," Bessie nodded seriously. "Of course, it must have got delayed. In—in the post, you know. Really, you girls, I think it's scandalous the way letters get held up these days. I—I might have wanted that five pounds."

Babs smiled. Clara grinned. Mabs chuckled. They looked at Bessie, not a bit deceived.

It was a source of wonder to them

how Bessie Bunter continued to expect that mythical postal order—for mythical, like the titled relative, it was.

Lord de Bunter, and all the other titled Bunters, whose names Bessie so glibly reeled off, were more names and nothing more. Only Bessie herself believed in their existence.

Bessie had no titled relatives, in fact, and really Bessie was not very well off. Bessie was a lovable duffer, but it must be stated that she had her faults.

Perhaps the biggest of those faults was an incurable disregard for the truth, linked with a romantic imagination.

Bessie often talked what her friends now know to be utter nonsense, about her titled relatives, about her palatial home of Bunter Court, her millionaire father, her two-thousand-pound car.

Bunter Court and Bessie's millionaire father were just jokes. They were jokes, indeed, to most of the girls at Cliff House.

"Poor old Bessie," Babs said. "And, of course, as the five pounds hasn't arrived you'd like to borrow threepence on account?"

Bessie blinked.

"Oh, really, Babs! I can't stand treat on threepence," she expostulated.

"Now if you make it a pound—"

"Threepence, Bessie," Babs persisted.

"No, Babs, do be serious," Bessie begged. "Make it ten shillings."

"Threepence."

"Well, five shillings, then."

"Threepence," repeated Babs inexorably.

"Well, shall we say half-a-crown?"

"Half-a-crown," said Clara.



OLD Lord Fa pointed at the bewildered Bessie. "This girl is not Marmion!" she shrieked. "Jake, you have caught the wrong girl!"

All those things, however, existed only in the fat junior's imagination. They were unrealities belonging to that dream world in which Bessie so loved to live.

Perhaps it was Bessie's attempt to make them more real which caused her to speak of them with such seriousness. Be that as it may, she had so elaborated upon her titled relations and her palace of a home that Bessie actually believed in them herself now.

When she spoke of Lord Percy de Bunter, or Lord Dillwater de Bunter, or the Earl of Bunter Court, she really did see some vague figure in her mind. And her illusion of the postal order was not, these days, merely dream-like. If Bessie had possessed those titled relations Bessie would have had postal orders. Or so Bessie considered.

But her friends, at least, were not deceived. Babs and Mabs and Clara lived in a practical world, and they had tried very hard to make Bessie practical.

To them Lord Percy de Bunter and

"Half-a-crown," repeated Mabs solemnly.

Bessie blinked.

"What's the matter?"

"Well, you said 'say half-a-crown,'" Clara returned. "Don't you want us to say half-a-crown?"

"Oh, don't be silly! Babs, old thing," Bessie implored, "make it half-a-crown. I—I'll give you five shillings for it when my postal order turns up—really, the earl is away on—on his yacht, you know."

Bessie added vaguely. "I suppose my remittance has slipped his memory. He'll probably send ten pounds when he does send it, just to make up. Make it half-a-crown, Babs."

Babs sighed. She looked at Bessie.

"Bessie, I'll lend you a shilling," she said resignedly. "But I'll lend it on one condition."

"Yes, what's that?" Bessie asked eagerly.

"That you give these imaginary titled relations of yours a rest. They're getting a bit thin, you know. Why are

you always such a chump as to trot them out? Nobody believes in them." "Oh, really?" And Bessie looked offended.

"Supposing, for a change, you tell the truth? Supposing, for once, you say, 'Look here, Babs, I haven't got any money, but if you'll lend me some until I get my allowance at the end of the week, I'll pay you back!'"

Bessie glared.

"Well, you know my pocket-money is only a shilling," she said. "And I really have got titled relations, so there!"

"But where are they?" asked Clara. "Why is it nobody has ever seen them?"

"Eh?"

"You heard."

"Oh, well, they—they're all busy," Bessie said. "They all belong to the Peerage, you know. It's an awful responsibility belonging to the Peerage. They have no end of things to do, you know."

"Such as?"

"Well, such as—writing cheques," Bessie said uncertainly. "They write millions of cheques, you know. And then they sail yachts, and fly aeroplanes, and—and all that sort of thing. And then they have to sit in the House of Lords," she added vaguely, not sure what was entailed by sitting in the House of Lords. It sounded good, anyway, so Bessie said it. "Oh, and there're heaps and heaps of other things they have to do."

"But why don't they ever come to the school?" Mabs asked.

"Too busy polishing their coronets, perhaps!" Clara guessed.

"What are they like?" Mabs asked, with a smile. "What's this Lord Percy de Bunter like for instance? If you have a Lord Percy de Bunter, Bessie, you must be able to describe him. Is he short or tall, fat or lean—or what?"

"Oh, well, he—he's tall," Bessie said desperately. "Awfully good-looking—"

"Like you?"

"Yes, like me," Bessie said modestly. "I—inherit my beauty from my titled relatives, you know."

"Ye little fishes!" Clara gasped.

"Has he a moustache?" asked Mabs. "Oh, of course."

"And wears a monocle—naturally?"

"Oh, really, Mabs, of course he does! I should have thought you'd know that all aristocrats—oh, nobility—wear monocles."

Babs laughed. And then, on the point of making a further remark, she paused, casting a quick glance through the doorway.

For from beyond that open door had come a movement. And, as Babs watched, a man and a woman moved away. Babs did not know it, nor did Clara or Bessie, but the man, accompanied by the woman, had been listening to every word.

And that man, walking away now with the woman on his arm, was looking excited. He stopped half-way down the street.

"You heard?" he asked.

"Yes, I heard."

"That fat girl—Bessie Bunter. You saw her?"

"Yes."

"She's very like Marmion."

"Very like her."

The man paused. He looked exultant. "Georgia, she is the girl for our purpose," he said. "She is the girl we must get hold of. The old man has never seen Marmion since she was a child in arms. If we can prevail upon

this Bessie Bunter to take her place, all will be well. And we must—must!" His expression became intense. "You heard what she said!"

"About her titled relations?"

"About those—yes." The man grinned. "Georgia, I have a plan—a great plan. This fat little idiot believed in those titled relations. Supposing suddenly, one of them materialised?"

"You mean?"

"I mean," the man said, and laughed softly, "that to-morrow Earl Percy de Bunter is coming to life. You saw that those girls belonged to Cliff House School, to Cliff House School we will go. And I will go—not as Augustus Fanshaw but as Lord Percy de Bunter. And you, Georgia, shall go as Lady Georgia de Bunter. I feel the fat girl will prove the solution to our problem. What do you think?"

Mrs. Georgia Fanshaw smiled. She nodded slowly.



Bessie's Titled Relatives Arrive!

"BESSIE!"

"Bessie Bunter!"

"Where is the plump chump?" asked Jean Cartwright crossly.

It was the following morning at Cliff House School, and Jean Cartwright, the Scottish member of the Fourth Form, was looking excited. There was a light in Jean's eyes which seemed to indicate that something unusual was afoot.

"Anyone seen Bessie?" she asked again.

Jemima Carstairs, standing in the Big Hall near the notice-board which she had been examining with interest, turned. She put up her monocle and surveyed the excited Scots girl curiously.

"Jimmy, have you seen her?" Jean asked.

"Search me," Jemima said solemnly. "But this excitement—isn't unusual? Why this hectic frown upon that Spartan brow? Has Bessie scoffed your plum tarts, or has she just borrowed a

fessed; "but it's true enough. Earl Percy de Bunter—that's what he says his name is, at all events. He's in Bessie's study now with his wife."

"Ye lobster pots and little fishes!" Jemima gasped. "No, Jean! No! This is too sudden! Tell me that I am dreaming! Wako me up! Bessie—with a real titled relation, straight from Bunter Alley! Oh, James! Jean, has he brought his title with him?"

Jean laughed.

"I mean, didn't he produce it and show it to you, or something?" Jemima asked anxiously. "This sort of thing wants looking into, you know. You're certain he's real? Flesh and blood, and bone and brain, and all that sort of thing?"

"Well, what do you expect him to be?" Jean laughed.

"Oh, nebulous, what! Cloudy, sort of! Bit of the jolly old ether! Wisp of fog!" Jemima explained vaguely. "I've always looked upon Bessie's jolly old titled relations as pigments of her imagination. Observe!" she added sternly. "I said pigments—not figments. Pigments means highly coloured—what? Marcia, you might put that in your notebook, in case you forget it!"

But Marcia Loftus, the sneak of the Fourth, did not even scowl. She looked as excited as any. Bessie Bunter with a real, titled relative! It was incredible!

"The age of wonders and miracles and marvels and all that sort of thing," Jemima observed, polishing her monocle, "is apparently not past. Thank you, Jean. I feel better now. But a titled relative—ye veribronned hatboxes! And Bessie was trying only ten minutes ago to borrow a shilling from me! Well, well! Jean, she added impromptly, "tell me just one thing more. Has he come with his aristocratic pockets stuffed full of all the postal orders Bessie's ever expected?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And has he a diamond-studded belt, forsooth? I trust he is a belted earl, Jemima said serenely. "I prefer only to associate with the belted variety."

"But—"

"Shush!" Jean counselled. "Hero he comes!"

"Ahem! 'Shun!' Jemima muttered, and adjusted her monocle. "Hold your breath, my Spartans. Present arms, and all that sort of thing! Jean, is this it?"

"It is," Jean said.

Jemima's eyes widened. She looked as if she was about to throw a fresh faint. For along the corridor, rather uncertainly, was approaching a rather flashily dressed woman and a man—but what a man!

He was dressed in morning coat of the finest and the most fashionable cut. The stripes down his trousers, Jemima afterwards declared, almost mesmerised her by their straightness. In one hand he carried a top-hat which gleamed as if it had been polished. He was a model.

And, as a finishing touch he carried in one eye a monocle. His wife, as a contrast, carried a pair of lorgnettes.

"Hom!" He stopped, smiling uncertainly at the girls, his hand going up to a trim, neat, scrubby moustache. "Good-morning!" he said graciously. "Good-morning!" Jemima replied brightly.

"Er—er—" said the man.

"Er—can I help you?" Jemima asked politely.

"Well, yes. I'm looking for a young lady, Miss Bessie Bunter—my niece, you know."

"Oh, of course!" Jemima murmured.

"Bessie is in the tuckshop, methinks, inducing her friends Babs, Mabs, and Clara, to part with half-a-crown. May we show you the way?"

"Well, if you don't mind," the man said hesitatingly. He seemed to have doubts about Jemima.

"With pleasure!" Jemima muttered. "This way, please."

And Jemima led the way, Earl Percy de Bunter—as he styled himself—following, his wife leaning upon his arm.

But they did not go alone. The girls who had heard were interested. They, too, wanted to be present at the meeting between Elizabeth Gertrude Bunter and her uncle, the earl.

"JUST a shilling, Babs," Bessie said persuasively.

"Sorry, Bessie, I lent you my last before breakfast," Barbara Redfern replied.

"Well, you, Clara. Just a shilling," Bessie said pathetically.

"I've only tuppence-ha'penny and a halfpenny stamp."

"Mabs—"

"Couldn't manage it, Bessie."

"Oh blow!" And Bessie, eyeing the tempting plate of tarts on Auntie Jones' tuckshop counter, sighed disconsolately. Bessie was hungry.

She looked hopefully at Auntie Jones.

"Yes, Miss Bunter?" Auntie Jones said primly.

"I suppose you—you couldn't let me have half a dozen of those tarts until my remittance arrives?" Bessie asked eagerly.

"I'm sorry, Miss Bunter," Auntie Jones replied frigidly, "but I couldn't possibly give you credit."

"Oh, bother!" And Bessie locked disconsolate. "But, really, Auntie Jones! Oh, come on, now! Do be a sport!" she urged coaxingly. "You know I'll give you the money just as soon as ever my postal order arrives. In fact," Bessie added generously, "I'll give you the whole postal order. That's a bargain!"

"I'm sorry, Miss Bunter."

"It'll be a big one," Bessie said temptingly. "One of my titled relations is sending it. You know what my titled relations are, Auntie."

"I'm sorry, Miss Bunter. The last postal order which you received from one of your titled relations—the one for a shilling, you remember—was considerably out of date. I had the utmost difficulty in cashing it."

"Ha, ha, ha!" pealed Clara.

"Then, you won't let me have six tarts on account?" Bessie asked, with dignity.

"Am I really to understand that?"

"I'm afraid so, Miss Bunter."

"Very well!" And Bessie, in disgust, turned away. "If this is your sympathy, thank goodness I'm not a tuckshop-keeper," she said haughtily. "If you'd allow poor girls to starve, I'm done with you, Auntie! I shall write and tell Lord Dillwater de Bunter to do something about this. You will hear from him!"

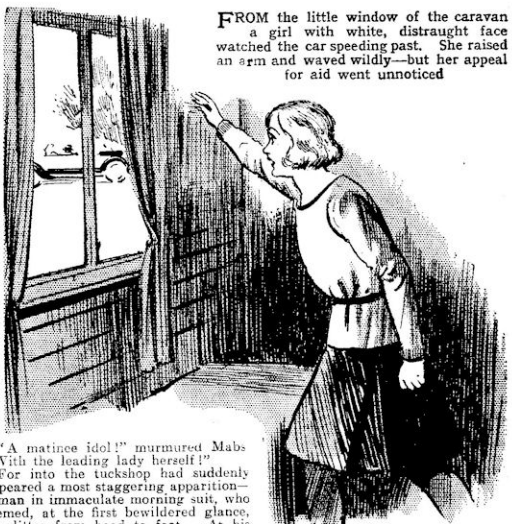
"Very well, Miss Bunter."

"In fact, I—I'll get him to bring a bill in to Parliament forcing tuckshop-keepers to allow hungry girls to have tuck on credit!" Bessie threatened darily.

"Oh, that's enough!" Clara Trevlyn said. "It's no good, Credit's barred. And until Lord Dishwater de Bunter sends the old P.O. it's no go. Joke there if anybody can see it," she added flippantly. "Hallo!"

She paused in the act of turning away from the counter, to stare at the sudden commotion outside. Bessie paused, too, blinking.

"Good gracious!" muttered Babs. "Who's this?"



FROM the little window of the caravan a girl with white, distraught face watched the car speeding past. She raised an arm and waved wildly—but her appeal for aid went unnoticed

"A matinee idol!" murmured Babs. "With the leading lady herself!"

For into the tuckshop had suddenly appeared a most staggering apparition—a man in immaculate morning suit, who seemed, at the first bewildered glance, to glitter from head to foot. At his side was an over-dressed, rather nervous-looking woman. They were followed by a crowd of interested and smiling girls.

The chums stopped. Bessie stood still, her eyes goggling at the strangers. Rarely, except on speech days, when the girls' parents and brothers visited the school, had such splendour ever been seen at Cliff House.

Very carefully the man adjusted his monocle and looked at the three girls. Then he gave a gasp, and took a step forward.

"Bessie!" he cried joyfully, while the lady beamed at the fat girl.

"Eh?" gasped Bessie.

"Bessie—Bessie Bunter! My niece—my little niece!" the man exclaimed in rapture.

"Eh?" Bessie looked alarmed. Very hastily she backed behind Babs. "I suspect, Babs, he's mad!" she said. "Oh! Sus-sus-sus! Keep him off!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the crowd from outside.

"Bessie, don't you know me?" The man stopped, shaking his sleek head.

"Bessie, you remember me, don't you? You remember your uncle—Earl Percy de Bunter?"

"Eh?"

"My goodness!"

"I am he!"

"Eh?" Bessie's eyes grew so round that they almost eclipsed her large spectacles. "I—what—say it again!" she begged.

"I am your uncle—Earl Percy de Bunter," the man repeated. "This is your aunt—Lady Georgia! We have just come from abroad. I heard from your father that you were here, and I've come to see you—to give you a good time!"

"Oh dud-dud!" Bessie said blankly.

And she felt quite bewildered. For she had said so much about her titled relations that she had almost come to believe in them herself. But this man—assuredly Bessie had never seen him before.

"Bessie, you do recognise me?" the man said gladly.

"Eh? I—yu—yes," Bessie gasped. She had not got it all in line yet; but Bessie was ever one to take advantage of the moment.

If this man said that he was her uncle, then he must be right, of course. Besides, he was an earl—a member of the peerage. Bessie felt she wanted to investigate no further than that. There might be a mistake somewhere—but that was not Bessie's business.

"Well," she said, and eyed him rather nervously, "fuf-fancy meeting you!"

"It is a pleasure," the man smiled, flicking his gloves across one hand. "A great, great pleasure," he added profusely, "to see my dear niece again. Looking as pretty and as charming as ever, too. My dear Bessie!"

Bessie simpered. Now, having got over the first shock of this surprise, her good fortune was dawning upon her.

She—Bessie Bunter—had at last produced a real, living, titled relative! He was here, obviously rich, ready to do anything for her.

Bessie coughed. All in a moment she became important. Her head went up, and her nose went up with it. She smiled round in a superior manner.

"My dear uncle," she said loftily, "it is indeed a pleasure to meet your earlship. Would your earlship and your-er—earless—I mean ladyship like a—cup of coffee?"

"No, thank you, Bessie."

"Perhaps your Highness would like a—lemonade?" Bessie pursued.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Thank you, no."

"Oh! Then I'm blest if I know what your royal lordship can have!" Bessie said anxiously. "Barbara, you might make room for my dear uncle and aunt, will you? Uncle, I'm sure you must be tired after your long journey. Will you sit down?"

The crowd in the doorway grinned. Bessie putting on airs was the funniest thing it had seen for a long time.

But Bessie, puffed up with importance now, swelling like a balloon in her

pride, affecting the manners and mannerisms which, as she believed, became a scion of the aristocracy, was in her element.

"Thank you, I won't sit down," his lordship replied. "We haven't had a very long journey, Bessie. We've come from Courtfield."

"El?" asked Bessie.

"Your aunt, Lady Georgia de Bunter, and myself have engaged a suite of rooms at the Courtfield Hotel," Earl Percy de Bunter explained. "We are remaining there until we have become better acquainted with you, my dear."

"Oh!" exclaimed Bessie, and she swelled more importantly than ever. "Barbara, old thing—oh, I almost forgot! Pray, your earlship, let me introduce you to my friends." And Bessie, with a vague idea she was doing the correct thing, convulsed the watchers by placing her hand across her chest and bowing before his lordship. "Your Highness' Excellency, allow me," she said.

"Why, certainly!"

"My—ah—friend," Bessie said, waving an airy hand towards Babs, "Barbara Redfern."

"Pleased to meet you," said his lordship, and Lady Georgia raised her lorgnettes.

But Babs, as he took her hand, frowned. She was enjoying the joke as much as anyone, but she could not help but wonder who Earl Percy de Bunter and Lady Georgia really were.

"Mabel Lynn. Ha—another friend," Bessie introduced, becoming more and more aristocratic.

Mabel, smiling, curtsied.

"And Clar-rah Trevelyn," Bessie finished. "One of the—the Trevelyns, you know. Came over at the same time as the Buntahs—with William the Conqueror, you know. It was the Conqueror, wasn't it—or was it William of Normandy?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Or perhaps Cleopatra!" Clara suggested.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bessie frowned.

"Pray, Clarah, do not be levit—levit—funny in front of my—er relations!" she exclaimed. "May I offer your dukeship some refreshment? I—er—as a matter of fact," Bessie added, "I was about to partake of some myself."

"Ha, ha, ha!" howled the crowd.

"Well, I'm sure I don't want to interrupt you, Bessie," his lordship said genially.

"Nun-no; certainly not!" Bessie paused. She looked at her "uncle," frowning a little, and suddenly realised that despite her sudden elevation to the ranks of the aristocracy she was still penniless. "As a matter of fact," she said, "I'm rather short of beastly money. One of my other titled relations—Lord Dillwater de Bunter—has forgotten to send his usual postal order, don't you know. Such a nuisance, you know—"

"Oh, don't worry, Bessie!" And the earl immediately brought out a note-case. "Order what you like," he said, "and your friends, too. Your aunt and I have come over here expressly to give you a good time, and I want you to enjoy yourself thoroughly. Never mind the expense. Come in, girls!" he cried genially. "Come in, all of you!"

"Yes, come in!" cried Bessie. "Oh, I say, this is ripping, isn't it? My hat! Talk about angels—I mean, of course," she added, becoming elegant again. "This is frightful kind of you, your earlship!"

"Not at all. Go ahead!" "his earlship" invited. "Please take it out of that," he added to Auntie Jones, "and give Bessie the change." He handed the astonished tuckshop-keeper a five-pound note. "I can't allow my little niece to be without money, can I?"

"Nun-no," Bessie said. "I say, auntie, be careful with that five-pound note!" she added apprehensively.

"Yes, of course, Miss Bunter," Auntie Jones replied deferentially.

"And, oh, while you are about it you can take out that five shillings I owe you from last term!" Bessie said grandly. "Make it six, if you like. The other shilling for keeping you waiting. I say, your Grace, this is ripping! I mean," Bessie said, making a sudden attack upon the treat, "it's exceedingly enjoyable, what? Come on, Barbara. Tuck into these chocolate eclairs. They're ripping!"

But Babs shook her head. The others by now had surged to the counter and were making rapid inroads upon the "spread" so generously offered.

It was something new for a perfect stranger to pop in at the tuckshop and to stand the girls treat with such open-handed liberality, and Cliff House was not slow to respond to it.

Now travel quickly. Good news travels like lightning. It seemed before long that all Cliff House had heard about Bessie's amazing uncle and the free "spread" which was being provided.

The tuckshop became crowded. Bessie, too happy and too full to remember her own dignity, welcomed all comers with a fat and satisfied smirk. Who into this was in funds she was always generous.

"Come on, girls! Come on, everybody!" she said. "Meet my uncle, his dukeship, Sir Percy de Dillwater de Bunter. And my aunt, her ladyship, you know! I say, these tarts are ripping! I always said that yours were the best strawberry-tarts in the district, Auntie Jones, even if you don't let me have some when I've got no money. I hope," Bessie added severely, "that this will be a lesson to you. You see now what a really influential girl I am."

"Yes, indeed, Miss Bunter," concurred the flustered Auntie Jones.

More and more girls were arriving now, and the little tuckshop was crowded. Earl Percy de Bunter and his wife, indeed, found themselves unheeded for the time being. He glanced tolerantly at the crowd, however, smiling down at Babs and Mabs.

Babs gazed at them.

Babs was not joining in the feast. Neither was Mabs nor Clara; nor was Jemima. Truth to tell, they were feeling uneasy and not a little suspicious.

Bessie by now had fully made up her mind that Earl Percy de Bunter was the man he represented himself to be, but Babs was doubtful.

And not she was puzzled. What on earth could be the man's object?

And if he were not Earl Percy de Bunter, who was he?

Babs glanced up at him again. She found nothing to dislike about him. He looked a fop, it is true, but he was a well-dressed fop, and though he must have realised that his money was disappearing at an alarming rate, he did not appear to mind.

He seemed, in fact, to be enjoying it, and laughed as heartily as anyone as Bessie, sitting up in a prominent position by the counter, turned to reveal a fat smirk and a decided smear of jam upon her shiny countenance.

Bessie indeed was in her element.

"I say, this is jolly fine!" she said. "Go on, you girls, never mind the expense! This is as good as Bunter Court—isn't it, your earlship? You girls, have I ever told you about Bunter Court?"

"Oh!—ten thousand times, Bessie!"

"Well—yes, thanks, I'll have a ginger-pop," Bessie said eagerly. "My hat! I'm enjoying this, Oh dear! I don't think I can eat any more."

"Oh, Bessie!"

"No, really!" And Bessie, with a regretful shake of her head, slipped off the stool. "You go on; I'll pay. You know what a jolly generous girl I am, really. I like to see you all enjoying yourselves."

"You've finished, Bessie?" his lordship asked, coming forward.

"Ow! Yes!"

"Then perhaps," his lordship suggested, "you'd like to come for a little run in my car? Lady Georgia and I are rather anxious, you know, to have a quiet chat with you. I believe it is a half-holiday here to-day, which means you are free for the afternoon."

"Yes, your grace."

"Then will you come?"

Bessie paused. She blinked towards Babs and Mabs. For the first time Bessie remembered that she had acquired her belted car in rather peculiar circumstances.

"Kik—can Babs and Mabs come, too?" she asked.

The nobleman frowned.

"Well, yes, if you like," he assented, after a pause.

"Oh, good! Then that's all right. Babs, you'll come, won't you? And you, Mabs?"

"Why, certainly!" Babs agreed, at once.

And Babs felt relieved. She really had been apprehensive when the earl put forward that invitation to Bessie.

Babs did not know what to think about Earl Percy de Bunter, but she wasn't going to trust him too far with Bessie Bunter until she had satisfied herself what his intentions towards her fat chum really were.



The Girl in the Gipsy Camp

THE car—a magnificent Rolocedec saloon—was waiting outside the gates, a uniformed chauffeur in attendance. At Earl Percy de Bunter's invitation, Babs and Mabs occupied the front seat beside the chauffeur. The earl himself, after seeing Lady Georgia seated, clambered in beside Bessie at the rear.

"I say, this is jolly decent of you, your earlship!" Bessie said, with a fat smirk in his direction.

He smiled.

"Bessie, call me uncle, please!" he said. "Were you surprised to see me?"

"Well, yes, I was, rather!" Bessie confessed.

"I only learned that you were at the school the other day," the earl explained. "Otherwise I would have come before. I am stopping at Courtfield for a time, and I hope I shall be able to arrange for you to visit me frequently. Oh"—he paused—"by the way, Bessie, can you ride?"

"Ride?"

"Yes, Horseback, of course," the earl said, with a smile.

Bessie couldn't. Bessie, in fact, had

never sat on a horse in her life. But from watching the other girls, and from what Bessie had observed when she went to the cinema, horse-riding appeared dead easy. And Bessie wasn't going to let herself down in front of her newly arrived relative.

"Ride?" she said now. "Oh, really, uncle, you ought to see me! Why, when I get on a horse I'm the swiftest thing you ever saw. I—I once won—"

And Bessie paused there, realising that even her imagination was taking her a little too far. She had been on the point of adding, "The Derby." I—I once won a race," she added lamely.

"Oh!" His face lighted up. He seemed, for some reason, to be relieved. "I'm glad of that, Bessie. Have you a horse at school?"

"A horse? Nun-no!" Bessie stammered. "Philippa Derwent, in our Form, has, though. My pet's a parrot. Oh, but we've got a horse in the gym—a leather one, you know."

But Earl Percy de Bunter did not seem to be interested.

"You must have a horse of your own," he averred.

"Oh," gasped Bessie.

"I will see that one is sent for you."

"Oh, my hat!"

"You have a riding-habit, of course?" he added.

"Well—" Bessie felt a little dazed.

"Habit?" she repeated. "You dud-did say habit?"

"Yes. Riding dress—breeches, and so on."

"No." Bessie shook her head. She wondered, vaguely and with a little trepidation, what was going to happen now. She felt certain in her own mind that she wouldn't know what to do with a horse if she had one, and the prospect of having to ride it, complete with riding dress, momentarily appalled her.

But having said she could ride, Bessie wasn't going to back out.

"No!" he frowned. "In that case we'll have to get you one," he said.

"Oh dear!" sighed Bessie.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said they're rather dear," Bessie responded feebly.

There was silence. The car was bowling along now. They were on the main road to Friar Dale, which ran parallel with the road on which they had met with the adventure of last night. Babs and Mabs, in the seat in front of Bessie, instinctively turned their eyes towards the woods.

From above the trees little spirals of smoke were ascending, showing that the gipsy caravans still rested there. They caught a glimpse of one broadside on to the road as the car flashed past.

But they did not see, behind the tiny lace curtain which hid the interior of the caravan from their view, the white, distressed face of the girl who followed them hungrily with her eyes.

THE girl's name was Marmion Tracey.

She was rather like Bessie Bunter in figure and not unlike her facially, except that Marmion was prettier, and had her hair bobbed; and her figure, though plump, had not quite such large proportions as Bessie's.

Her eyes were grey like those of Bessie, but she lacked the large round spectacles which were such a part of Bessie. In a way, Marmion actually was pretty, but her face was very pale now.

With eager eyes she watched the road. She saw the car, and saw its four occupants. She caught in her breath.

"Uncle Augustus' Rolceeds!" she gasped.

She looked again. She recognised the car. She recognised the chauffeur, but she did not recognise the man who sat in the back with the three girls.

Somehow he reminded her of Uncle Augustus—that uncle who had been her guardian before the gipsies had so mysteriously spirited her away from her home in Surrey. But Uncle Augustus had never worn a moustache, had never dressed as immaculately as the man she saw now. The car flashed by, disappearing in a cloud of dust. Marmion, the hands she had raised dropping back to her sides, gave a shrug of despair.

"Oh, will they never let me go?" she sighed unhappily.



"OH—ah—I wish to speak with Earl Percy de Buntah!"

She went up to the caravan door. It was locked. Once again she examined the windows; they, too, were shut tightly. She stood for a moment in the middle of the tiny compartment, resting one hand upon the top table fastened to the wall. Again puzzlement clouded her eyes.

Why had she been brought here? For what purpose were the gipsies holding her a prisoner?

"If only I could get away—if only!" she thought desperately.

But she couldn't. Last night she had tried it. Last night she had been recaptured by the hateful gipsy, Jake. She wondered for a moment who was the fat girl she had seen brought into the light of the camp-fire with the handkerchief tied about her mouth.

Marmion shook her head. Her grey eyes became thoughtful. It seemed such a mystery to her, all this.

A few days ago she had been one of the happiest girls alive. She had been as free as the air. She had had her own

pony, on which she had raced so regularly each morning across the downs.

She had been fairly embarked upon the musical career on which she had set her heart. She had, in her own private library, all those books so dear to her heart, including one written by the dear grandfather whom she had not seen since a little child.

Augustus Fanshaw and his wife—dubbed uncle and aunt for courtesy's sake—had been her guardians, had treated her, if not lavishly, at least generously. Then—

Marmion's eyes clouded again. In her mind she went over the events of the last few days. First there had been that letter from grandfather—grandfather whom she had not seen since he had left for Canada when she was seven years of age—saying that he was coming home again.

With what joy that prospect had filled her heart! How she clung to and cherished the fondest memories of that grandfather. Every week for seven long years she had written to him—he to her. Marmion had been in raptures at the prospect of seeing him again.

And then—

Her eyes clouded as the incident came back, but she did not connect it with her present circumstances.

Then had come the day when she had seen Uncle Augustus, as she called him, burning documents—documents which she knew belonged to her grandfather. She had protested.

For the first time in her life there had been a scene between her and her uncle. She had threatened to tell grandfather all about it when he returned. But her uncle had told her that the documents he burned were entirely valueless.

So she had put the matter out of her mind.

Then—the next day! Riding across the downs, she had been suddenly attacked and carried off by these gipsies. Since then she had been a prisoner.

Marmion sighed again. She felt hopeless, miserable. In a few days' time that grandfather she loved would be back in England. He was coming only for a short stay—especially, as he said, to see her.

She had written to him, joying in the prospect, explaining the happy times they were going to have together—riding in the mornings, singing, reading favourite books by the fireside in the evening.

A day or two now and grandfather would be here—in England. Was she never to see him?

A cry burst from Marmion's lips. "Oh, grandfather, grandfather!" she sobbed.

But the little room echoed her words, seeming to throw them back at her in mockery.

The face of Marmion became a tragic mask of despair. She sat down on the tiny stool by the table and buried her face in her hands.



Just a Tiny Tea Party

DING, ding, ding!
"Three o'clock," said Barbara Redfern, glancing up at the clock on the mantelpiece in the lounge of the Courtfield Hotel. Mabs, what—

"Yes, Babs?"
"Bessie's been up there over an hour."

Mabs looked uneasy. She, too, glanced at the clock. It was true.

Over an hour had passed since Earl Percy de Bunter and Lady Georgia had brought them here, requesting that they should remain in the lounge while they took Bessie up to their suite to indulge in a family chat.

They had promised to be only a few minutes, and yet an hour had gone by. Mabs' uneasiness, growing momentarily, was deepening.

"You think the old duffer's all right?" Mabs questioned.

Babs looked worried.

"I don't know—what to think," she confessed unhappily. "Oh, Mabs, I don't like it—really. This man, Earl Percy de Bunter—"

"It's too good to be true," Mabs supplied.

"Well, doesn't it seem like it?"

I did. But what the man's motive in posing as Bessie's aristocratic uncle could be, Babs did not know—could not even hazard a guess.

He had behaved with such apparent sincerity all along, indeed, that had it not been for Bessie's obvious amazement at beholding him in the first place, Babs would have felt inclined, fantastic as it appeared, to accept him at his face value.

Bessie's stories had been very insistent about those titled relations of hers, but nobody had taken her seriously until this particular specimen had turned up. But Babs, remembering Bessie's astonishment at seeing him, remembering her alarm, could not help but feel that there was a snag somewhere. What could the man want with Bessie Bunter?

"Mabs, do you think we'd better go up?" she asked.

Mabs hesitated.

"Give them another ten minutes," she advised.

Babs nodded, but again she glanced at the clock. She had a magazine in her hands—an illustrated society magazine which she had unconsciously picked up from the table in the hotel lounge. But she was not reading.

Queer things had happened in Babs' experience at Cliff House School, but this arrival of Bessie's titled relation, in its way, was one of the queerest of all. She scented mystery, did Babs. And yet, where did the mystery lie?

Distractedly she glanced again at the magazine in her hand. Listlessly she turned over a few pages. And then she paused, giving such a jump that Mabs stared.

"Babs, what's the matter?"

Babs laughed.

"Oh, nothing! This photograph here," she replied. "I thought, just at first, that it was Bessie herself. She held the magazine towards Mabs, displaying a full-page portrait of a girl of fifteen years or younger, rather plump in the face, but possessing grey, thoughtful eyes. "Of course, it's not Bessie—you can see that at a second glance. But there's a likeness." "It is similar," Mabs agreed. "Who is it?"

Babs, bringing the book round again so that she could read it, allowed her gaze to travel over the type under the picture.

"The pretty granddaughter of Sir Richard Tracey," she read, "who is enjoying life at Tracey Towers in Surrey. Sir Richard, after an absence of seven years, shortly intends to return to England for a brief visit, and it is certain that one of his warmest welcomes will be from his charming granddaughter, Marmion, who has kept in touch with him since he left England. This is Marmion Tracey's latest picture,

and we learn, her favourite. Marmion is chiefly distinguished as being the richest young heiress in England. It is rumoured that her grandfather's wealth runs into many millions."

"Marmion?" breathed Babs.

"Marmion?" repeated Mabs. "Babs, where have we heard that name before?"

Babs frowned also. For a moment her eyes closed. And then they lit up with sudden excitement.

"Mabs—Bessie!"

"Bessie?"

"Last night—don't you remember? That signal we got in the road. It was from a girl named Marmion. She didn't spell out her second name, but the first two letters of her surname were T-R—for Tracey. It's an unusual name. And the girl Bessie saw in the gipsy camp—that was Marmion!"

Mabs looked excited.

"Babs, you think there might be some connection?"

Babs shook her head. "yet," she cried. "I don't know—yet," she cried. "But"—and a rather grim light came into her eyes—"if there is, we're going to find out what it is, and help that girl in the camp at the same time."

"But shush!" she added. "Not a word, Mabs. It's no good going upon mere suspicion. And"—she looked up confusedly—"hide that paper," she whispered urgently. "Here's Earl Percy—and Bessie!"

"**W**HEW! What an afternoon!" gasped Barbara Redfern.

And she looked across the study table at Mabel Lynn, who, prostrated in the armchair, was feebly fanning herself with her hat.

A crowded afternoon it certainly had been. Bessie, keen that Babs and Mabs should share her sudden good fortune, had insisted upon taking them everywhere.

Bessie, whose Bessie, conscious now of her new standing and her wealth, had wanted somebody to whom to show off.

Had Babs and Mabs been more easy in their minds concerning Bessie's belted relative, they would have thoroughly enjoyed it. Bessie, as a playactress, was funny enough, to be sure.

Bessie had her own ideas of how a scion of the nobility should behave, and Bessie was behaving accordingly.

Outwardly an amazing change had come over the fat junior. She walked now with a new strut. Bessie said that it was a strut which all high-born ladies used, and it seemed to consist of stiffening the back leg as the front one was brought forward.

Bessie walked now with her head up, chin in the air, trying to look bored and languid, but merely succeeded in looking cross-eyed.

When she spoke it was with a dreadful accent which she had picked up from some comic talking film she had once seen in the town of Courtfield.

Cliff House was enjoying Bessie. She was the joke of the term.

And Cliff House as a whole approved of Bessie's new relative. He appeared to be genuine enough, for Bessie had arrived back half an hour ago with a wad of pound notes, and at the moment was going the round of the school paying off her various debts.

Her uncle had bought her clothes, and she had bought her a ready-made riding habit, which still rested in its box upon the study table.

Babs & Co. had trailed round with self-important Bessie on these expeditions, advising her about this, helping her to select that. It had been a great

time for Bessie, but it had left the clowns utterly exhausted.

"Well, I say tea!" Mabel Lynn said.

"And well said!" Babs supported.

"Where's that fat duffer?"

"Oh goodness, don't ask me!" replied Babs wearily. "Acting the lady some where, of course. I say, did you see how much money her uncle gave her? Ten pounds!"

Mabs whistled.

"He's an ass!" she opined.

"Ass or not, he's treating Bessie very generously," Babs said. "I wish I knew what his little game was, though. I've been wondering, Mabs—you put the kettle on, will you? I'll lay the cloth. I've been wondering—" she went on.

"Yes?" said Mabs, picking up the kettle.

"Oh, I don't know! It seems so silly really. It may just be a coincidence that the girl Marmion we read about in the magazine is the Marmion who's held a prisoner at the gipsy camp—that is, of course, if there is a prisoner."

"But Bessie saw her," Mabs said.

"Oh bother! The kettle's got no water in it!"

"Yes, Bessie saw someone. And apparently Bessie was mistaken for someone else," Babs agreed. "I wish you remember. The girl Marmion—if things are as we suspect, is plump. It was just possible she was trying to get away, and Bessie was mistaken for her. But what I can't make out—"

"Yes, Babs?"

"Well—And Babs, in the act of unfolding the tablecloth, paused. "Oh, I don't know!" she said restlessly. "If that girl Marmion really had disappeared from Tracey Towers there'd have been a hue-and-cry. The papers would have been full of it. And, as far as I know, nothing has been said. I was just wondering if perhaps, after all, we were all wrong. And where, if we're right, the connection between the arrival of this earl of Bessie's and the missing girl comes in."

Mabs rubbed her cheek thoughtfully.

"It seems a bit of a tangle," she opined.

"It is."

"But"—and Mabs' eyes suddenly brightened—"Babs, we could find out. Supposing after tea we go along to the gipsy camp again? We may see the girl."

Babs paused.

"That's a good idea certainly," she said. "In any case, it's up to us—Bessie or not—to do something for that girl. If we can only see her, or prove that she is being held prisoner against her will, then we can tell the police. We'll go on our bikes. Tell Clara as you go past Study No. 7."

Mabs nodded, and then quitted the study.

And Babs, thoughtfully laying the cloth, breathed a sigh of quiet satisfaction. It seemed hopeless to conjecture, having nothing but suspicion to go upon. But it seemed absolutely a duty that they should get to know more about the girl in the gipsy camp.

And if she was being held a prisoner, whether she was Marmion Tracey or not, their obvious job was to assist in her release.

To prove that she was there, anyway, would be one step towards clearing up the mystery.

But Babs still frowned. She had an uncanny instinct on occasions, had Babs, as though for the life of her she could not see where the connection was; she felt that the girl in the camp and the

sudden adoption of Bessie by the man who called himself her uncle bore some relation to each other.

Even now Babs did not believe that Earl Percy de Bunter was all that he represented himself as being. She did not believe in his professed fondness for Bessie.

Babs had been watching the earl that afternoon, and she had noticed on several occasions that he had been openly contemptuous of Bessie.

Bessie, being had he been so keen on Bessie's why had he been able to ride a horse? Why had he bought her that habit? Why had he promised to buy her a horse that she did not want, yet which Bessie, with her supreme self-confidence and swank, said that she could ride?

Those things puzzled Babs. The door opened; Mabs reappeared with the kettle.

"I've told Clara," she said. "That's all right. Meet outside the gates at six o'clock."

"Oh, good!" breathed Babs. "Now what about tea?"

"Get the kettle on— And then Babs paused. "Oh, my hat! I almost forgot. We've got hardly anything for tea."

"Oh bother!" And Mabs looked disgusted. "That means a visit to the tuckshop. I'll go, Babs."

But there was no need for Mabs to go, for at that moment there came a tramp of feet along the passage, accompanied by a very familiar voice.

"This way, girls."
"Good old Bessie!"
"Don't drop those parcels."
"No fear!"
"Go easy with that box of pastries."
"Trust me!"

"You can all come to tea," Bessie went on—"all of you! I hope I know how to treat my friends when I am in funds."

"Hurrah!"
"Now, here we are!" And Bessie, her head high in the air, lunged open the door of Study No. 4 with lordly grandeur, smiling patronisingly at Mabs and Babs, who stood and stared. "Hallo, Barbara! Hallo, Mabel! I hope you don't mind; I've brought a few friends along to tea. This way, girls!"

"Good old Bessie!"
"Put the parcels on the table."
"Rather!"

And while the amazed Babs and Mabs stared until their eyes almost dropped out of their heads the procession poured in.

There were ten girls in all, each of them loaded with parcels.

Bessie, considering her dignity, carried nothing, of course, but simply stood by the study door directing operations with lordly waves of her fat hands. First came Nancy Bell with half a dozen tins of salmon; then came Gwen Cook carrying three boxes of pastries; next came Philippa Derwent, grinning all over her face and simply staggering under a huge cake. Her friend Phyllis Howell stalked in after her, dumping upon the table a parcel of sandwiches.

They were followed by Marcelle Biquet, the little French girl; Leila Carroll, the American girl; Jean Cartwright, the Fourth Form's Scottish member; then Elsie Effingham, Matilda Tattersall, Brenda Fallace, and Marjorie Hazeldene.

They spread into the study, filling it to overflowing. The table being by that time full, they dumped the goods on the floor.

"My hat!" exclaimed Babs. "What's this, Bessie—a banquet?"

"Oh, no; just a small tea, don't you know!" said Bessie affectedly.

"But all these things—"
"Pray do not mention it!" Bessie said stiffly.

"But you've practically bought that shop!"

"Oh, really, Babs!"

"And where are we all going to sit?"

"Eh?"

"Well, I ask you!"
"Oh crumbs!" said Bessie; and, for the first time, it dawned upon her that Study No. 4, normally meant to hold three, was going to be a bit of a tight squeeze for fifteen girls. "Oh dud-dear! I never thought of that." she said in dismay.

"Really, Babs, I don't think you ought to raise these objections—"

"Sure, that's all right, Bessie!" Leila Carroll put in. "Don't mind us. We'll fix ourselves O.K. Bags the coal-box!"

"And I the window-sill!"

"You serve it out, Babs," Bessie ordered. "You're jolly good at serving out. Oh, really, Elsie, I want the arm-chair," she said with dignity. "As— as founder of the feast— Now, girls, go ahead and help yourselves," Bessie said genially. "Eat as much as you like; don't think of the expense. I hope," she

added with dignity, "I know how to stand treat."

"You do, Bessie."
"This is scrumptious!"

"Tres bien, Bessie Buntaire!"
"I'll say!"

"Just a—ah small repast," Bessie explained.

"Have you any more uncles like the earl, Bessie?"

"Have I?" Bessie puffed out her cheeks. "Oh, dozens!" she said recklessly.

"So many, in fact, that the House of Lords is full of 'em!" Philippa Derwent chuckled.

There was a tramp of feet along the passage, and Clara Trevlyn appeared.

"Hallo!" the boisterous tomboy called. "My hat, what's going on here? Bessie giving a concert, or something?"

"Oh, really, Clara!"

"No, just tea. This is Bessie's idea of a small treat," Babs explained, with a smile. "You can come in—if you can get in!"

Clara grinned.

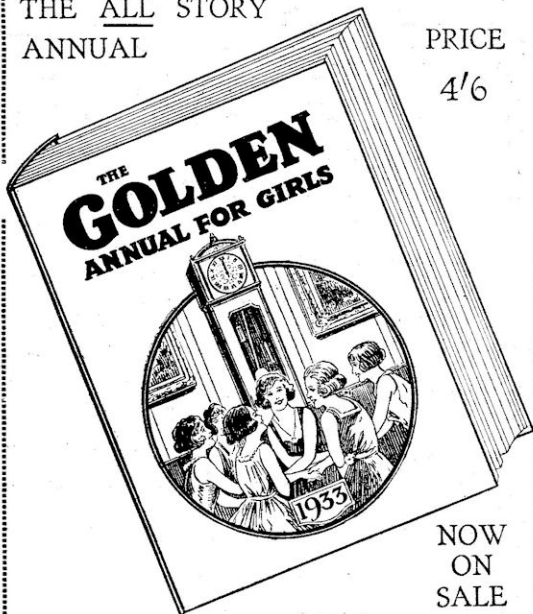
"Thanks! But I'll grab my share and take it along to Study No. 7," she said. "My hat, though! Uncle Dish-water, I suppose, Bessie—"

(Continued on next page.)

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"Oh, really, Clara! If you call my uncle names—"

"Oh, Bessie!"—Clara looked shocked—"accuse me not!" she begged. "But this is lavish—what? Nunkie Percy pays, I suppose?"

"He gave me the money," Bessie confessed loftily.

"Sold his coronet in the gold rush—eh?" Clara guessed cheerfully. "But I didn't come to see you about that, Bessie. His noble nibs is on the telephone in the prefects' room. He wants to speak to you. At least, he did want to speak to you," Clara added; "but he's left a message: Ring up Courtfield one-two-three."

"Me?" Bessie jumped. And then she smiled as she saw the glances of the girls about her. It was unusual, at least to be rung up on the telephone, and a girl rung up was always the centre of a momentary interest. "Oh, of course!" she said languidly, and rose to her feet. "Pray, girls, let me pass!" she requested. "I must answer this beastly telephone—what? Awful gag, of course, when one is in the middle of one's afternoon tea!"

Clara stared.

"My hat! What's the matter, Bessie?"

"Mataah!"

"Got a bone in your throat, or something?" Clara asked sympathetically.

"Or is it merely the mumps?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, really, Clara!" Bessie blinked. Then she sniffed. "Are you referring to my accent?"

"Oh, is that the name of it?" Clara asked interestedly. "I suppose it's a new complaint," she added sympathetically. "Does it hurt?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bessie blinked wrathfully.

"I suppose you think that's funny?" she asked loftily. "I suppose you call that wit. Well, I'm blest if I can see anything to laugh about, so there! I hope," she added, remembering her new importance, "that you will inflict your humph upon your infernals, Clara Trevlyn. Remember we ladies of the land are above that sort of thing."

And Bessie, leaving Clara looking utterly crushed, stalked with leisurely dignity into the passage.

The prefects' room, where the telephone was situated, was on the lower floor, and thither, without haste but strutting her new goose step, Bessie wended her way.

She strolled quite languidly to the telephone, sat down elegantly, picked up the receiver, and crossed her legs. A voice came from the other end of the wire:

"Number, please!"

"Oh—ah—give me Earl Percy de Bunter," Bessie requested loftily.

"Number, please!"

"Numbah—"

And then Bessie Bunter frowned. She had forgotten it, of course. "Oh, really," she expostulated, "can't you get him without a numbah? You've heard of Earl Percy de Bunter?"

"Sorry, I haven't!"

"No?" Bessie frowned. "Not the—Earl Percy de Bunter?" she asked.

"Please will you let me have the number?" the operator asked, a little impatiently.

"But—Oh, the numbah?" Bessie said, and smiled again as it suddenly occurred to her. "Courtfield three-two-one."

"Sorry, there's no such number."

And click went something at the other end.

The operator, feeling that she had

been made the victim of a joke, had rung off.

"Yes!" called Bessie, blithely unconscious of that fact, however. "I say can—"

No reply.

"Look here!" complained Bessie. "I say, are you ther-ah?"

Again no reply. It dawned upon Bessie that something was wrong. She frowned, and touched the hook of the telephone receiver.

"Yes?" came a voice.

"Oh—ah—give me the—operating theatre!" Bessie said frigidly.

"The what? Do you mean the operator?"

"Well, didn't I ask for the operator?" Bessie asked, beginning to forget some of her dignity. "Yes, the operator. She cut me off!"

"I am the operator."

"Oh, are you?" And Bessie snorted. "Then why didn't you say so?" she expostulated. "I suppose you know who I am? I am Miss Bunter, the niece of Earl Percy de Bunter."

"Oh, that joke again?" the operator asked wearily.

"Joke indeed!" Bessie looked indignant. "I'll have you know, young lady, that the earl is—a frightfully important man! I want to speak to the earl. Hallo! I say, don't ring off again! Are you there? What number do I have to ask for to get Courtfield three-two-one?"

"There isn't such a number," the operator explained testily.

"Oh, really, there is. There must be! The Courtfield Hotel, you know. My uncle—"

"You mean Courtfield one-two-three!" the operator said exasperatingly, and promptly switched Bessie through.

A voice came to her ear:

"Hallo! Is that Bessie?"

"Ahem, yes!" smiled Bessie. "Is that the—ah—earl?"

"Yes, this is Earl Percy speaking. Bessie, I'm buying you a mare—"

"A what?" gasped Bessie, in bewilderment. "A mare! Oh, really, indeed, that's topping! Will he arrive in his gold coach?" she added eagerly.

"Coach?"

"Yes. Do tell him to come in his coach," Bessie implored. "With his chain and things, of course! The girls here will love to see him—"

"Great Scott, girl, what are you talking about?"

"Well, you said a mare!" Bessie explained surprisedly.

"A mare—not a mare! A horse. An animal with four legs!" Earl Percy snorted, exasperated. "I've purchased a horse for you, and I'm bringing it along now."

"Oh, crumbs!" gasped Bessie, in dismay.

"Beg pardon?"

"I sus-said how awfully kind of you!"

"You do want a horse?"

"No. Oh, of course, I mumm-mean yes!" the unhappy Bessie stammered.

"Very well, Bessie. I shall be along in half an hour. Will you change into your riding habit at once, and meet me outside the gates of the school at a quarter past six? I am anxious to see you ride."

"Oh, yes!" stammered Bessie, and broke into a cold perspiration at the mere thought. She to ride a horse!

For once in a way Bessie regretted her vain boasting.

But it had to be faced. There was no retracing her steps now. Bessie groaned dismally as she hung up the receiver. In a chastened frame of mind she rolled back to her study.



Marmion Must be Rescued

"READY?" asked Clara Trevlyn. "All ready!" smiled Babs. "And you, Mabs?"

"Ready and willing!" Mabs

laughed.

"Then we'd better get along. What about Bessie?"

"Oh, Bessie's in the dormitory. She's gone to try on her new riding habit, I think," Babs said, with a faint smile.

For Bessie had mumbled something to that effect when she had quitted the study. "Bessie will be all right—until we come back, at all events. Let's get going!"

Clara nodded, and the three of them

walked out of the school and down to the cycle sheds near the porter's lodge.

It was the work of a few minutes to get their cycles out. Very soon they were pedalling towards the road which led to the gipsy camp.

"We'll park the bikes in the copse near the camp," Babs said presently.

"and get into the camp by the back way. If we take up a vantage point we should see a lot of what's going on while the light lasts."

The other two nodded. The plan was acceptable. All Babs' plans were acceptable on occasions like this. She was the leader of the party, and usually Babs did the right thing.

It was no far cry to the gipsy camp.

In just over ten minutes, indeed, they had reached the copse which Babs had mentioned, and, carefully concealing their cycles therein, crept through the trees towards the camp, the caravans of which could be dimly perceived.

A brief skirmishing brought them to an ideal hiding-place—a tiny copse consisting of low growing undergrowth in which they could lie comfortably, and watch every movement in the gipsy camp and the caravans at the same time.

"Just the place," murmured Babs. "Quiet now. Keep your eyes peeled."

The others nodded. They lay down, peering intently through the foliage.

The gipsies, apparently, were at their evening meal. A dozen or more of them were seated round the camp-fire, over which was suspended a great iron stew-pot. Old Mother Fa, looking more like a witch than ever, hobbled among them with the aid of her crooked stick.

It was upon her that Babs focused her attention. The old woman fascinated her. She looked, in some ways, such a picturesque figure.

Now and again the high-pitched note of her cracked laughter came to Babs' ears. She saw the men and the women laugh. And once, Babs noticed, she glanced at the nearby caravan. Once she looked straight towards the copse.

The sun was beginning to sink now. Long grey shadows were stretching beneath the trees. A chill wind was beginning to blow and rustle through the leaves of the trees.

Babs, her eyes fixed intently upon the caravan, saw the curtain at one of the tiny windows move.

"Look!" she said tensely.

They all turned their heads. And then lay still, hardly daring to breathe. For suddenly the curtain was pushed aside, and a face looked out—a face which Babs recognised at once as the subject of the photograph she had seen in the illustrated society magazine.

It was a pale, plump face, surrounded

by a bobbed mass of chestnut-brown hair.

"Marnion!" breathed Babs.

"Then she is here!"

"Shush!"

Very cautiously Babs raised herself. With a glance towards the camp, she raised a hand. She saw the girl start, her eyes grew wide.

From where she was she could see into the copse, and now, as Babs straightened upon her knees, she started. Quickly Babs put a finger to her lips to enjoin silence.

Her heart was beating now to suffocation point. She waved a hand, beckoning the girl to keep under cover. The girl nodded quickly. The curtain swung back into place. Babs once again dropped flat.

"What now?" muttered Clara.

Babs threw a glance towards the camp. The old crane had squatted down now, and was seated with her back towards the girls.

"Ready? Keep watch!" Babs breathed.

"O.K.!" said Mabs.

Babs nodded. With caution and stealth, she crept from her hiding-place, one wary eye upon the caravan door.

The gipsies, talking round the fire, did not turn round, however, and Babs, creeping along silently, had reached the caravan door before she realised it.

She saw the anxious face of Marnion watching her from behind the curtain in the window. She pointed to the door. Marnion nodded understandingly.

Very stealthily Babs crept up to the door. She hardly dared to breathe. Her hand dared to turn, turning the key so that the lock slipped back. Quickly she thrust the key into her pocket.

One fleeting glance she gave towards the camp. With her heart thumping tumultuously she crept back towards her chums.

was out of the question. Marnion was in the grips of her captors again; the whole camp would be upon them at once if they attempted to interfere. A rescue, in fact, was impossible.

"No!" she muttered. "Wait! I've got another idea! We know now she's here against her will. We know that she's a prisoner. This isn't our job! This is a job for the police! Come on!"

"But where?"

"To the police station in Friardale!" Babs answered, and she led the way towards the road.



BABS, Mabs, and Clara sprang up, in time to see Marnion hurrying towards them. But before she could reach safety, old Mother Fa had caught up with her. "You would trick me, would you?" the gipsy screamed, beside herself with rage.

"BESSIE!"
"Bessie Bunter!"
"Oh dear!" gasped Bessie Bunter unhappily.

Bessie was in the Fourth Form dormitory. She stood before a mirror, her face very red, gazing in utter dismay at her reflection.

Bessie presented an unusual figure. She was, as a matter of fact, dressed in her new riding habit. That riding habit, bought in haste, had not been exactly made for Bessie Bunter.

The breeches fitted with terrible tightness round the waist. The brown riding-jacket was so tight that Bessie could hardly breathe.

The tie which Bessie had fastened on the blouse she wore beneath the habit, was not tied at its best. The tie, indeed, looked a sorry mess.

Just for effect, Bessie tried on the cap she had bought. She blinked again at the mirrored reflection of herself.

"Mum-my hat!" she muttered. And then came those voices from outside.

"Oh dear!" gasped Bessie. "Owl! Yes, what is it?"
"Your uncle is outside with a horse, Bessie."

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Babs' brain worked like lightning. She saw now that if she was going to do anything it must be done at once—whilst the attention of the gipsies was not upon the caravan which held the schoolgirl prisoner.

She looked towards the caravan again, and then her eyes gleamed.

She saw that the key of the door was sticking out of the lock. The sight gave her an idea.

"Clara, Mabs!" she whispered. "You stop here. I'll wriggle along towards the caravan and unlock the door. I'll bring the key back with me so that it can't be locked again. Marnion can watch her opportunity then, and slip out."

"And then?" questioned Clara, the practical.

Babs shrugged.
"We'll just have to make a dash for it," she said.

"Right-ho!" And Clara grinned. Here was an adventure after the tomboy's own heart.

But hardly had she reached them than there was a cry from old Mother Fa.
"Marnion! Stay!"

Babs turned with a gasp. Clara and Mabs straightened up. And then gasps of dismay came from their lips. They saw the caravan door open; they saw Marnion at the bottom of the steps running towards them. They saw the old crane travelling with a speed incredible in one of her age.

"Marnion, quick, quick!" Babs yelled.

"Run!" shouted Clara.

But Marnion, her eyes full of frantic fear, paused, huntedly gazing this way and that. The pause was her undoing. In a moment the old crane was up with her, had snatched at her shoulder with her talon-like hands. Her voice, thin, screeching, rose up.

"You would trick me, would you? You again—"

"Come on!" muttered Clara.

But, as the impulsive tomboy took a step forward, Babs put out a restraining hand. She had the sense to see, as far as rescue was concerned, that it

"Oh, gurgacious!" gasped Bessie unhappily.

"He wants you."

"Dud—does he?"

"Yes. And"—the door was pushed open and half a dozen Fourth-Formers came into the dormitory. Then they paused, staring for a moment and went off into a concerted yell.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Bessie!"

"Bessie glared—"

"Look here—" June Merrett chortled, "and what a sight! Oh Bessie darling, where did you get that hat?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here, you grinning duffers—" roared Bessie furiously.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, my hat!" And Nancy Bell, who was among the crowd, roared. "Oh dear, this is too rich. Leila, fetch your camera!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Don't you dare!" roared Bessie furiously.

But Leila Carroll, in high glee, sprinted off. Nancy Bell sprinted off, too, to spread the good news, and to prepare the school for the resplendent apparition which was about to burst upon its astounded vision.

Bessie sniffed. She looked again at the mirror, and picked up her riding crop. With majestic dignity she stalked towards the door.

"Let me pass," she said haughtily.

"Please, your ladyship," Elsie Effingham murmured.

"Yes?" said Bessie graciously.

"Would you give me the name of your tailor?"

Bessie sniffed in wordless contempt. Followed by yells of laughter, she stalked off down the corridor.

But Bessie, though she did her best to put a brave face upon things, could not help but feel that she was causing a sensation. She was! Everywhere she went, she was met—first by amazed stares, then by shrieks of laughter.

Dulcia Fairbrother, of the Sixth, saw her and grinned. Stella Stone, the captain of the school, met her as she went down the stairs, and turned away to hide a smile.

In the entrance hall Doris Redfern and a crowd of Third Form girls, just in from a practice game of hockey, saw her as she appeared, and roared.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look at this!"

"It's Bessie Bunter!"

"Whoa, Dobbins!"

"Who poured you into that coat?"

"Who's going to get you out?"

Bessie glared. She stopped, breathing fury.

"Are you kids laughing at me?" she demanded.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bessie threw up her head. It was obviously of no use arguing with these "kids." She strode on towards the door, into the quad, followed by a laughing crowd.

"Voicks! Tally-ho! Here she comes!" yelled Leila Carroll from the quad. "Behold, sisters! Gaze upon our one and only, and then go home and happily die! There are eight wonders of the world, and Bessie in riding-kit is the eighth. Bessie, stand still. I'm going to take your photograph."

"Look here—"

"Now smile. Smile sweetly. This is for a comic paper!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bessie turned red.

"Look here—"

"We are!"

"If you think I'm going to be your laughing stock—" roared Bessie furiously.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, Bessie, don't go near the dogs in the pets' house!" implored June Merrett. "They'll wonder where the fox is!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But Bessie, breathing fury, walked on—not, however, before Leila and half a dozen others had snapped her.

She had lost her strut now. Bessie, indeed, was feeling distinctly hot and uncomfortable as she waddled off down the drive.

She came to the gates, followed by half the school, yelling uproariously at the figure she made. And there she paused, gazing up in dismay at the horse which stood there, all ready saddled. Near it, holding it by the head reins, was Earl Percy de Bunter himself.

H stared as he saw her. A slight frown overcame his face. But next moment he smiled.

"Hallo, Bessie! I say, you do look marvellous in that kit!"

"Dud—do I?" Bessie asked hopefully.

"A real picture," Earl Percy decided.

"Oh, thuth-thanks!" Bessie said doubtfully. But she did cheer up. Of course, she looked nice—as if she could look anything else. Those other cats who had pulled her leg were only jealous. Well, she didn't care for them.

She looked again at the horse.

"I—is this—the mare?"

"This is she—yes." The earl smiled.

"You like her, Bessie?"

"Oh, yes—yes!"

"Her name's Nobby."

"Oh, is it? Wh—what a nun-nice name!" Bessie said nervously.

"Stroke her, Bessie!"

Bessie looked again. She did not quite like the appearance of the animal.

It occurred to her now that to ride this beast might not be such an easy thing as she had anticipated.

But she reached out rather nervously, putting up a palpitating hand. The horse thrust its head forward and snorted into her face. Bessie jumped away.

"Oh dud—dear! Is she safe?" she asked.

"Safe as houses!" Earl Percy laughed cheerily. "That's just her affection, Bessie. But come on now. Let me see you mount!" And he went to the side of the horse, holding out the stirrup.

Bessie stopped. At that moment she felt like flying. For the first time since she had met him she regretted exceedingly having ever set eyes upon Earl Percy.

But there was no running away now. The horse had her way to the front. Earl Percy himself set off her retreat towards the village, and the hilarious crowd at the gate effectually barred her way back into the school.

"Go on, Bessie!" came an encouraging shout.

"Want a helping hand?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh dud—dear!" gasped the unhappy Bessie.

"Come on!" his lordship exclaimed, a little impatiently.

He held the stirrup out again. Bessie, trying to show a confidence she was far from feeling, put one foot in it.

His lordship gave her a heave at the same time, and Bessie, to her vast astonishment and alarm, found herself shooting upwards on to the horse's back.

As a matter of fact, she shot straight

over the horse's back, and descended into the road on the other side.

"Bump!"

"Ow, ow!" yelled Bessie dazedly. "Ow! I say, that beast threw me off! I'm hurt! I'm dud-dying—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the crowd at the gates.

"Look here, you cats—" roared Bessie furiously.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Try climbing up its front leg, Bessie!" advised June Merrett hilariously.

But Earl Percy was a thunder round now, his face as black as a thundercloud. He glared down at Bessie, the expression on his face so malevolent that Bessie even forgot to go on shouting.

"You ridiculous girl! I thought you said you could ride!" he snapped.

"Oh, really!" Bessie said, blinking. "I hope, your earlship, that you don't think I could tell an untruth."

"Get up!"

"Oh, say!" And for a moment Bessie glanced up in bewilderment. Was this the same man who had shown himself to be so kindly, so tolerant towards her? She blinked again.

"I mean, let me give you a hand," the man said, changing his tone, and reached down, extending a hand, which Bessie gripped gratefully enough. "I'm sorry! I thought you could ride," he said.

"I was disappointed, that's all," Bessie coloured. She felt a sense of guilt suddenly. She did not know why it should have such an effect upon him, of course; but Earl Percy looked quite distressed.

Bessie, whatever her faults, was not devoid of a sense of gratitude, and since it went so much to him that she should ride, she made up her mind, much as she hated it, to have another go.

She smiled rather feebly.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, uncle! I—I wasn't just ready, you know. Besides, this mare—I'm used to a much smaller horse, you see. Bu—but let me have another try."

It required a lot of courage on Bessie's part to make that offer, but Bessie really did feel that something was due to the benefactor who had treated her so handsomely.

Bessie was anxious to keep in her uncle's good books, for by now she had accepted him unquestioningly as her relative.

The earl nodded. He gave Bessie a second lift. Bessie this time sprawled upon the horse's back, clutching the animal frantically round its neck.

"Oh dud—dear!" she gasped.

"She's up!" yelled the crowd at the gates.

The horse, surprised to find herself clasped with such sudden violence, shied and tossed her head. Bessie yelled.

"Ow! Stop! Stop! I'm falling off!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Stick it, Bessie!"

"Look out!"

There was a laughing scattering among the girls at the gates. For the horse, with a shrill whinny, suddenly reared on her hind legs. Bessie, in the act of uttering a terrified exclamation, uttered instead a frenzied gasp. She elung tighter and tighter to the animal's neck, grasping her man with one hand.

Earl Percy jumped aside, his face suddenly startled.

"Bessie, grasp the reins!" he roared.

But Bessie did not hear that. Bessie, more frightened than she had ever been in her life, hung on grimly.

The horse reared and pranced about, hoofs flying. And then, turning her head in the direction of the woods, she

streaked away like the wind, with Bessie, most of the breath being bumped out of her body, clinging on for dear life.

"There came a shout.

"My hat!"

"Look!"

"The mare's run away!"

"Bessie!"

But Bessie never heard. Bessie, indeed, sick with fear now, had closed her eyes. Her hands were holding fiercely to the horse's mane. The horse, stretching herself at a full gallop, streaked on. Through the woods she went, Bessie bobbing up and down like some grotesquely bouncing ball on her back.

Like the wind the mare travelled. It seemed to Bessie that she was racing off the earth altogether. But she clung on, not daring to open her eyes. The voices of the girls behind died away—became fainter and fainter.

Still Nobby crashed on.

MOTHER FA, her beady eyes gleaming wickedly, glared down at Marmion Tracey again.

"So you would go, would you?" she grated. "You would leave us? You would get your fine friends from the school to help you to desert the gipsies

who have done you no harm. My pretty gringo, you shall pay for this—you shall suffer!"

Marmion did not reply; but she felt sick at heart. She was caught, once again. When escape had seemed so near, when those girls had seemed so ready and so willing to help her.

It seemed to her now that her last hope was gone, and the dismay she felt showed itself on her face as she gazed into the witch-like features of the old gipsy crone.

Mother Fa, her fingers clutching the girl's shoulder, shook her again.

"See," she said vengefully, "you have earned punishment. And do you know what that punishment will be, gringo maid? Do you know what I have the power to do to you? How shall you like being tied to the wheel of a caravan for the night—oh? How shall you like being shut up without food or drink? How shall you like to be whipped?"

Marmion flinched, but her pale face showed no fear.

"Ah, listen!" the old crone said vindictively. "All these things will I have done to you if you seek to escape again. You must give me your word—you understand? You must make the promise. You must say to me that you will try no more to escape, and by-and-by you shall go of your own free will. In

the meantime, you shall become a member of the tribe. Now, is it that you shall give me that word? Promise!"

"No," said Marmion quietly.

"The old woman's eyes glittered.

"It shall be the worse for you."

"No," repeated Marmion.

"You will go away—"

There the old crone paused. She gave a quick glance towards the trees to her left. For, from among those trees, had come a sudden thud of hoofs, a wild crashing and tramping. Involuntarily her hold upon the girl relaxed. She gave back.

"In the name of all the Fa's—"

That was enough. The next moment a shriek left her lips, for, bursting through the trees had appeared a sudden and most startling apparition—a huge horse, with foaming jaws, upon whose back, panting and dazed, desperately clung a very fat girl.

Straight for the old crone the horse streaked.

Mother Fa shouted; Marmion jumped aside. And at that moment Bessie opened her eyes. She saw where she was. She gave a gasp. Involuntarily her hold upon the mane of the animal relaxed. Nobby gave an upwards heave. Off like a ball bounced Bessie, a shriek

(Continued on following page.)

Talking It Over with Your Editor

"MY DEER READERS—"

Says Bessie Bunter

As popular Bessie Bunter is the central character in our present series of *Cliff House stories*, I thought it would be quite a good idea to have an "all-Bessie" Chat. The following is the result, and I make no apology for the "na spelling."—Your Editor.

MY DEER READERS,—I'm sure you've enjoyed reading all about me and my famous relatives in this week's *Cliff House story*. Of course, I new all along that my uncle, the earl, was coming to *Cliff House*. But Babs & Co., the gellous cats, wouldn't jolly well believe me. Now I hope they understand what an inflewshank girl I am. But as I am very kind-hearted, I will forgive them this time.

My uncle, the vicount, has promised to give me all sorts of things. He said I ought to have a car, so I'm thinking of having one built. Clara said it would have to be about a hundred horse-power if I was to ride in it; but that's just Clara's gellousy. When they see me going down to *Uncle Clegg's*—I mean, down to the village in my limmer-seen, they'll be jolly envious. I'm thinking of asking Lord Percy to get me an aeroplane, too. After all, a girl of my position needs to get about, you know.

Jenima Carstairs says I ought to wear a monicle, just to show my blue blood. When I said, "What about my glasses?" she said, "Ware a monicle in each eye—what?" She said I'd look like a Spartan, whatever that is.

Of course, Lord Percy is only one of my titled relations. I'd like you to meet Lord Dillwater de Bunter, the famous explorer. And Vicount Bunter de Vere-Bunter, who was the first man to swim the Atlantic Oshun. (I think it was the Atlantic Oshun, but I wouldn't be sure.) And then there was the

Duchess of Bunter, from whom I get my good looks, you know.

Clara says I'm fat, but I'm jolly well not. I wouldn't have a skinny figure like hers, anyway. How could anyone be fat, I ask you, when they get so little to eat at *Cliff House*? I'm thinking of asking Miss Primrose to open a kafe for weak girls like me, so that they can have a snack when they feel faint. There ought to be a kafe in every corridor at *Cliff House*, and then I shouldn't have to go and borrow Clara's truck—I mean, of course, I shouldn't have so far to go for a snack.

Anyway, Earl Percy is taking me out to tea this afternoon, so I shan't have to rely on those mean girls in *Study No. 4*. I've a jolly good mind not to ask Babs and Mabs and Clara to come with me!

Well, I eggspect you want to know all about next week's story, in which, of course, I take the chief part. I'm glad to see that at last everyone has realised that I am a person of importance. I know Clara is gellous, because she isn't featuring in next week's story; but, as I told her, it's only nature that good-looking girls like me should be in the limelite.

You will like reading about me in next week's story. You should just see the way I tick off Babs and Mabs when they show their gellousy. And, of course, I'm responsible for clearing up the mystery of Marmion. I'm a jolly good detective, really, but they won't give me a chance at *Cliff House*. However, now that I have come in my own, I'll jolly well show them. Don't forget to read about me next week, will you?

I can't keep it up any longer, dear readers! Bessie Bunter's spelling is too



appalling, so I've decided to write the rest of this Chat in a normal manner.

I can assure you that next week's *Cliff House story* is full of laughs. There are serious moments, of course—moments of excitement and drama, when Babs & Co. are endeavouring to reach a solution of the mystery surrounding Marmion Tracey, and the man who is posing as Bessie's Earl Percy.

The title of this delightful tale will be

"AGAINST THE HEAD'S ORDERS!"

and it has been written, of course, by Hilda Richards. You won't miss it, will you?

How do you like the opening chapters of our splendid new African adventure serial, featuring Ann Tomlinson? The ensuing instalments are even more exciting, packed with thrilling episodes and dramatic developments. Do please tell all your chums about this ripping new serial; they'll be delighted with it, I know.

Miss Helen Waring, our own Film Correspondent, has written two most delightful Screen articles for our next number. They are entitled "Stars of the Homeland" and "The Stars Confess." So those of you who are film "fans" are in for a special treat!

of fear, leaving her lips as she felt herself sailing towards the earth.

Bump!

"Ow, ow, ow!" yelled Bessie.

Riderless, the horse galloped on; but not for many moments. Marmion had seen. For the moment Marmion was free. Marmion, at least, knew all there was to be known about horses. She was an expert horsewoman. The sudden arrival of Nobby could not have been more advantageous.

She braced herself.

There was a desperate light in her eyes now.

She jumped forward. She had vowed to escape, and escape she would. Bessie, bellowing on the ground, she could see, was more frightened than hurt.

Marmion caught at Nobby's head-reins, and steadied him. Easily she swung herself into the saddle, turning the horse's head. At the same moment there came a yell from Mother Fa.

"See! See! The girl—she is escaping!"

Marmion cast one hunted look around. Feverishly she grasped the reins. She saw the old crone rushing towards her; she saw the rest of the camp aroused—running in her direction. She set her teeth, grabbing at the reins.

"Gee up! Go!" she panted, and dug her heels into the horse's flanks.

Nobby whinnied. She tossed her mane. But she understood. She knew now that she had a rider on her back. There came another shriek from the old crone as the horse started forward, the daring girl clinging to its back.

"Stop her! Stop her, Jake!"

"Ow, ow! You beast!" yelled Bessie Bunter, as Gipsy Jake, rushing forward, trod upon her fingers.

Off thundered the horse, Marmion desperately shaking at the reins. Jake, with a gasp, pulled up.

"Jake! You fool! You dolt! Follow—follow!" screamed the old woman.

"But, I say!" howled Bessie Bunter, sitting up. "Oh, I say—what—what's happening? Where's the horse?"

But nobody paid any attention to Bessie, who was only vaguely aware of what had happened, and had never seen that daring escape of the girl who so much resembled her. But she saw Jake now. She saw him spring upon the back of another horse.

"Hi! That's my horse!" Bessie yelled.

It wasn't. But Bessie was too short-sighted. And too utterly flustered to see that. Not that she was concerned, however. Bessie rather hoped, in fact, that she would never see the horse again. It was purely out of loyalty to the uncle who had bought her the horse that she made her protest.

But nobody heeded Bessie, Jake least of all. Jake, indeed, was in pursuit now, and he disappeared just as there came an excited shout from the road.

Babs, Mabs, and Clara had arrived! Accompanied by the police!

BY the greatest good luck, indeed, Babs & Co. had encountered on the road Inspector Wissendale, of the Courtfield police. He and a constable were in a car, returning, as it happened, from the County Police Sports, which had been held in the town of Lantham that afternoon.

A few words had sufficed to put the inspector in possession of the facts. He and the constable had agreed to come along at once.

And now, just as Jake, hot in the pursuit of the fugitive Marmion, disappeared, Babs, Mabs, and Clara, accompanied by the inspector and the constable, burst on the scene.

Babs headed the rush, her face flushed with excitement. The light was falling now, and from a distance she saw Bessie—sitting up, surrounded by the gipsies. From that distance, and in the light, Bessie appeared startlingly like Marmion Tracey, for Babs had not seen Bessie in her riding habit, and Babs felt into a natural error. She pointed frenziedly.

"There she is!" she cried excitedly. "That's the girl! Look—the gipsies!" They raced forward. And then, coming nearer, Babs saw for the first time the mistake she had made. She pulled up, a gasp of dismay on her lips.

"My hat—Bessie!"

"The one and only!" exclaimed Clara.

"Oh, dud-dud-dud!" groaned Bessie.

"Ow! Babs—Babs—"

"But—" The inspector paused.

"This is Miss Bunter!" he said suspiciously.

"Yes, sorry! This isn't the girl! Bessie, what on earth—"

Bessie groaned again.

"Oh, really, Babs—"

The inspector frowned.

"Where's the girl? This Marmion Tracey!"

"What name?" And the old crone, a ghastly smile wrinkling her parchment-like face, shuffled forward. "You search for something, kind sir?" she asked.

The inspector eyed her.

"I have reason to believe that you have in your keeping here a girl—Marmion Tracey—against her will!"

The old woman shook her head.

"Indeed, no!" she denied. "That is a strange name—a name I have not heard. Perhaps," she added, with a malicious glance in the direction of Babs, "the schoolgirls make fun of you."

Babs flushed.

"You are in charge of this camp?" the inspector asked.

"Ay, indeed, kind sir. I am in charge!"

"You deny that you are keeping a girl here?"

"Most certainly!"

"Oh!" The inspector looked baffled.

"H'm!" he said, and glared rather grimly at Bessie, who was sitting up and wondering what all the fuss was about.

"Perhaps you will have no objection if I search your camp?" he hazarded.

The old woman grinned.

"If it pleases you, kind sir, search with pleasure!"

"Thank you!" The inspector nodded towards the policeman. He was frowning now.

"You girls—please remain here!" he ordered. "I will be back in a few moments."

And the policeman at his heels, he strode away.

Babs & Co. looked at one another in bewilderment.

"Well, my hat!"

"What can they have done with her?"

"Bessie!"

"Ow!" Bessie was still groaning.

"Bessie, get up! I do believe the inspector thinks we've been pulling his leg!" Mabel Lynn said. "But they can't have got her away! They can't! Bessie, have you seen her?"

"Seen who?"

"Marmion."

"Ow! No!"

"How did you get here?"

"On—on some big brute of a horse!" Bessie gasped.

"What horse?"

"Ow! Dad-don't ask silly questions!" Bessie protested.

Babs was prevented from questioning the fat girl further by the reappearance of Inspector Wissendale. He looked distinctly annoyed.

"I think," he said acidly, "that your desire for a joke, Miss Redfern, has rather run away with you this time. I have searched the camp, but can find no trace of the girl you speak of."

Babs crimsoned.

"But—"

"Thank you, you need say no more," the inspector said stiffly. "This may be your idea of a joke, Miss Redfern. It is certainly not mine. And, in the circumstances, I shall have to report you to your headmistress!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"But—"

"Inspector!" cried Babs desperately.

But the inspector turned angrily away. They saw him walk towards the road and climb into the car.

He evidently meant what he said. Babs & Co. looked at one another in dismay. They had tried to help—and this was the result. Trouble—dire and certain—awaited them at Cliff House when they returned.

The galling part of it all was that they had succeeded in neither of their objects. Marmion Tracey was still the maid of mystery, Bessie's uncle still remained secure in his impersonation!

What would be the outcome of it all?

NEXT WEEK'S CLIFF HOUSE STORY

reveals new and amazing developments in the dramatic mystery surrounding Marmion Tracey. It also throws new light upon Bessie Bunter's remarkable titled relative.

You must not miss this full-of-fun story, which will appear under the title of:

"AGAINST THE HEAD'S ORDERS!"

By HILDA RICHARDS.