

"BABS & CO'S REGATTA PROBLEM!" Magnificent LONG COMPLETE story of Cliff House School inside.

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EVERY **2^D** SATURDAY

Incorporating
"SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN"



**THE MYSTERY
RACE WINNER'S
AMAZING FLIGHT!**

And Babs—the only one who knew who she was—had got to overtake her.

(See this week's wonderful story of the Cliff House Chums)

A Gay, yet Intriguing Long Complete story of Barbara Redfern & Co. the Chums of



BABS and CO'S REGATTA

A Song They Would Remember!



"**C**CAREFUL with the tiller, Bessie," warned Barbara Redfern. "You'll jolly well have us into the bank!"

"Oh, really, Babs!" protested plump Bessie Bunter. "I'm jolly good at steering, you know."

"All right; but keep your eyes open," laughed Babs. "Well, as I was saying—what was I saying, girls?"

"About the regatta," prompted golden-haired Mabel Lynn, the third member of the trio who shared Study No. 4 in the Fourth Form passage at Cliff House School.

"Oh, yes!" Babs smiled, that bright, dimpling smile of hers. She glanced at the other girls in the boat—Tomboy Clara Trevlyn and Janet Jordan of Study No. 7, and Christine Wilmer and Leila Carroll, the American junior. "Clara, you chump, don't row so hard," she chuckled. "We're not in training for your race. They tell me that Mrs. Fortescue is going to present the prizes."

"Jolly good," Clara approved.

"Nice woman," Christine observed with some enthusiasm. "And frightfully clever, too. I helped Judy Snaith—Judy's her secretary now—to type that last book of hers, and my, Mrs. Fortescue can certainly write! Wasn't she on the stage or something before she took to writing, Babs?"

"Yes, I believe she was. In some opera company—a singer, I think," Babs said vaguely. "Anyway, I'm glad they've singled her out for some honour

in the regatta. Mrs. Fortescue has done more work for the Courtfield charities than anyone else in the district."

There was a nod. Nobody disputed that. They all knew and liked the clever Mrs. Fortescue, the author-widow who had recently appointed their friend, Judy Snaith, as her secretary. They were all pleased that she had been singled out for one of the chief honours in the forthcoming Courtfield Regatta, in aid of local charities, which was to be held on the River Fallsweir next week.

What gorgeous fun the river regatta is going to be! Babs & Co. are thrilled by the part they are to play in it. So is their new, golden-voiced chum, Natalie Trent. Happy times indeed—until that memorable moment when Natalie sings a certain little lullaby. Then comes most baffling mystery—a series of strange events. Not until the lullaby is sung once again is an astounding climax reached.

"It's going to be a wow, I guess," Leila Carroll said. "The regatta, I mean. Sorry, Roly polyskins—did I splash you?" she added, with a grin to plump Bessie. "Say, what about pulling into the bank there and taking a rest and a chinwag? Looks very peaceful and still about here."

Peaceful, still, serene, it did look. An ideal spot, surely, for a rest and a talk. In spite of the cool breeze which blew off the surface of the river, it was hot. Perhaps, too, there was greater inclination to talk than to row on this lovely afternoon, for the Cliff House chums were all excited about the regatta in which they were going to

play no small part. Already they were entered for half the events.

But, apart from that, they all had special tasks. Babs and Mabs, for instance, were planning the Cliff House boat, which, designed as a huge swan, with its rowers dressed in fluffy costumes to represent cygnets, would take its place in the river procession.

Mabs, in addition to that, was also organising several items for the open-air concert to be held on both the regatta afternoons. Clara, Leila, Janet Jordan, and Christine were rowing in the Cliff House boat for the

Courtfield Sculls—one of the most serious events in the regatta; Bessie, besides doing a ventriloquist act, was going to help her friend Mrs. Bennett to run an open-air tea and refreshments' tent.

The Courtfield Regatta was one of the most important charity functions of the year. All the schools, all the villages, for miles around entered for it; all did their best to outdo in spectacle and in performance all their friendly rivals.

Many and various were the prizes, but those for the best decorated boat and the winner of Lord Courtfield's Silver Sculls were perhaps the most important among them. Clara had set

The Fourth Form at Cliff House School.



PROBLEM!

her heart on bringing the Silver Sculls back to Cliff House.

"And if," Babs said, "we don't get the prize for the best decorated boat—"

"We'll go without it," Janet Jordan chipped in, with a grin. "But—I say, listen!"

She held up a hand. The chums gazed at her curiously. Then they, too, sat up sharply.

They had moored the boat to a stout old willow, whose drooping branches cascaded almost into the river.

Sweetly, clearly from the direction of the next bend, had come the sound of a human voice. A human voice up-raised in song.

"Take a pair of sparkling eyes,
Hidden ever and anon,
In a merciful eclipse—"

Fresh, clear, swelling, the notes rang out, causing the chums to catch their breaths. Even Clara, usually unimpressed by music, sat spellbound.

"Oh crumbs! Who is it?" murmured Bessie Bunter. "I sus-say, you girls, can't she sing!"

"I'll say she can!" Leila breathed.

The song went on, accompanied by a rippling splash. Gay, joyful, tuneful, it seemed to send a lilt to their very hearts.

Then, round the bend swept into view a punt. A girl was standing up in it, mechanically poling herself along; and apparently oblivious to the presence of anyone else, gaily singing as she poled. She was a tallish girl, slightly older than the Cliff House chums, and dressed from head to foot in white. Her face,

piquant, pretty, was turned away from them at the moment.

"Take a pretty little cot—
Quite a miniature affair—"

And then: "Oh!" cried the girl, as her eyes fell for the first time upon the chums. And with that "Oh!" became so flustered and embarrassed all at once, that she let loose her grip upon the pole. Unfortunate, that, particularly as it happened that she was in the act of making a downward stab through the water. With a splash the pole escaped.

"Oh, my goodness!" gasped the girl. "Cheer-ho! Hold on!" Clara cried. "Up with the oars, Leila! Now!"

By

HILDA RICHARDS

Illustrated by T. LAIDLER

And whoosh, whoosh, whoosh! in three quick pulls they had reached the escaping pole, and Babs, with a laugh, retrieved it.

"Oh, I say, thank you awfully," the girl said. "How silly I was. I'm afraid I was rather taken by surprise when I saw you."

Babs laughed.

"And I'm afraid we were rather taken by surprise when we heard you," she returned. "I don't think I've ever heard Gilbert and Sullivan sung so beautifully off the stage before. You have a topping voice," she added.

The girl blushed, and laughed.

"Thank you for the compliment," she

said. "As a matter of fact, I am having my voice trained. I suppose I'm rather a goose," she added. "I've got a silly habit of bursting into song without realising it. But, I say, are you Cliff House girls?" she added eagerly. "I saw your school this morning—just from the river, of course. And, oh, I do think it's a wonderful place! Do you enjoy it there?"

"Do we?" Leila chuckled. "You bet! Are you a stranger here, then?"

"Yes. I only came here with my aunt and uncle two days ago. We're living over there." The girl pointed vaguely through the trees. "A place called Riverview. My name's Natalie Trent," she added. "And, do you know, you're the first girls I've spoken to since I've been here. Have you had tea yet?"

"No, we jolly well haven't!" said Bessie Bunter. "These mean cats wouldn't stop at the tea-rooms down the river—"

"Then," Natalie said, with a light, cheery laugh, "what about coming along to Riverview?"

Babs smiled; the rest of the chums looked at each other and grinned.

Perhaps it was just a trifle early for tea, but they welcomed the invitation from this pretty girl with the wonderful voice.

"Well, that's ripping! Lead on!" Babs said cheerfully.

The girl laughed. She led on—or, rather, poled on. Three hundred yards down-stream she slid into a quiet back-water fitted with mooring posts, and, lightly leaping on to a wooden landing stage, made fast her punt, while the chums tied up the Cliff House boat.

A flight of stone steps led up from

the landing stage, and beyond those steps they could glimpse Riverview House, with its red brick facade and twin turrets, occupying a commanding view from the crest of a hill.

"Here we are!" laughed Natalie. "But—Oh goodness! Wait a minute! My bag!" And she dived back into the punt, re-emerging laughingly with the bag in her hand. "That's another silly habit of mine," she said; "I'm always leaving things about and always forgetting things. Another thing I've forgotten," she added, "is to ask you your names. I can't very well introduce you to aunt and uncle unless I know them, can I?"

The names were given. Natalie, looking happy and excited in the company of her new-found friends, piloted them up the gravel path.

The door of Riverview was open. Into the wide lounge hall they walked. Natalie sent out a ripping:

"Coo-ee! Aunt! Uncle!"

"Oh crumbs! I hope they won't mum-mind, you know!" Bessie said, as they stood waiting.

"Mind?" Natalie chuckled amusingly. "Aunt and Uncle never mind anything I do; they're dears. And they'll be ever so pleased to know I've made friends at last; it is so dull here without anyone of your own age to talk to. Oh, nunky-nunks," she cried eagerly, as a middle-aged man with a marked tendency to baldness and a scrub of iron-grey moustache appeared from an adjoining door, "come and be introduced! And, aunty!" she cried gaily, as a rather faded-looking but still pretty woman followed her uncle out. "This is Uncle Noah," she added. "This is Aunt Prunella. Babs—you don't mind if I call you Babs, do you?—this is my uncle."

The introductions were affected. Very gravely and with heavy dignity Uncle Noah welcomed them.

The aunt, Babs thought, appeared a little nervous, but she seemed pleased enough to see them.

Tea was served in the big morning-room overlooking the river. Mr. and Mrs. Trent sat with them, smiling fondly from time to time at their niece, and, though not joining in, seeming to be entranced with the Cliff House girls' chatter.

Natalie, gay and obviously delighted by the presence of the chums, kept up a rapid fire of questions.

"I should love—just love," she said—"to see over your marvellous school. And nunky would love me to. Wouldn't you, nunky?"

"My dear, anything that would make you happy," Mr. Trent said gravely.

"And sports—I suppose you have heaps of sports at Cliff House?" Natalie asked. "I see you row. And, oh, don't you love the river? I do. And, I say, isn't it awfully thrilling about this regatta that's taking place? Nunky darling, I hope you don't mind—but I haven't told you yet—I've entered my name for six of the events at the regatta."

"Oh, what events?" asked Clara eagerly.

"Well, now, let me see." And Natalie, frowning thoughtfully, held up five fingers. "The greasy pole pillow fight, the raft-and-broomstick race, the—the—Oh, this wretched memory of mine! Oh, yes, the half-mile swimming race, the Courtfield Sculls, the high diving, and the four-widths swimming race."

"Sure sounds as if you're going to be busy!" Leila grinned.

Her uncle sighed.

"Natalie is just uncontrollable when swimming or rowing are in question," he said indulgently. "She ought to have been born a mermaid. Well, mind you bring a few prizes home," he added teasingly. "Who is presenting the prizes, by the way? Lord Courtfield, I suppose, as he is the regatta president."

"Oh, no!" corrected Babs. "Mrs. Fortescue is doing that."

"Mrs.—"

Abruptly he put down his fork.

For a moment Babs wondered at the swift, startled look which passed between him and his wife.

"I—I don't seem to have heard of her," Mr. Trent said. "What Fortescue is it?"

"The novelist," Janet Jordan put in. "Mrs. Amelia Fortescue. She lives about here, at Red Galleons Cottage; that's near Pegg, you know—and she's an awful dear! She—" And then Janet stared, as flusteredly he took out his handkerchief and quite vigorously and agitatedly rammed it back into his pocket. "You don't know her?" she added.

"That woman? Oh—er—no, of course not! I—er—ahem! My dear Prunella, I—I really do think that we ought to see if that letter has arrived; I have just seen the postman leaving the house. Girls, will you please excuse us?" he added hurriedly, but with such a significant look at his wife that Babs knew the letter was an excuse invented on the spur of the moment. "Natalie, please see that your friends have everything they want. Prunella, please!" he added urgently.

They rose and left.

"Now, what letter was that?" murmured Natalie, while the chums looked at each other a little wonderingly. "Bessie darling, do pass the jam, will you? Thank you. Now, what shall we do after tea?" she asked eagerly. "Or must you get back to school?"

"Oh, no; we've got two hours to kill yet!" Babs said. "But, Natalie, we'd love to hear you sing again. Will you?"

"Thanks for the compliment. Yes," Natalie dimpled. "Any preference? Or would you like me to sing a little song I happen to know? It's what I call my mystery lullaby," she added, "because I never remember learning it; I haven't the ghost of an idea where I got hold of it, and I've never found it in any of the song-books I've got. It's rather kiddish, but very sweet. Sit here; I'll sing it while you finish tea."

With a gay laugh, she whisked up from her seat. A baby grand stood near the window. Seating herself before it, she ran her fingers over the keys.

Sweet and haunting the strains which floated into the room. Even Bessie Bunter stopped eating as Natalie's pure voice rose with them.

"The wind sighs in the branches;

Dark clouds in the sky;

And in the west the red sun sinks

As chilly nights draw nigh.

And now, my darling baby,

The time has come to rest,

So close those pretty dear blue eyes

While in my arms you nest—

You nest—

You nest."

The song dropped to a soft, soothing croon, dying away into a whisper. Natalie, with a smile, swivelled round on the stool.

"Like it?" she asked.

"Oh, Natalie, you do sing so beautifully!" Mabs cried. "And the tune—"

I don't think I've ever heard that before. Is there any more of it?"

"Oh, yes, two verses," smiled Natalie. "But for goodness' sake don't let me stop you eating. Here's the second."

Again her voice swelled into beautiful melody. It was at that moment that Mr. and Mrs. Trent came out of the adjoining room and stood looking at her by the door.

Babs saw the man's eyes light up, saw the smile he threw towards his wife. And, watching as she listened, she suddenly saw that smile freeze, saw the wild look of alarm that sprang into his eyes.

Mechanically her gaze travelled towards the window upon which, with its view of the river, the man's attention had become abruptly concentrated.

A boat was in the act of passing Riverview. A woman, in the boat, was glancing towards the house. It was:

"Mrs. Fortescue!" breathed Babs.

Mrs. Fortescue had obviously caught the sound of the singing voice, now dying into the low crooning notes which characterised the end of the verse, and she had paused to listen.

For one moment a tremor shook Noah Trent's frame; then, quickly, he had jumped towards Natalie.

"Stop that—stop that song!" he cried thickly. "Stop it, do you hear?"

"Uncle!" cried Natalie, and whirled in amazement.

"Stop!" he choked. And out of his pocket wrenched his handkerchief, and agitatedly mopped his brow as he stared through the window at the still visible figure in the rowing-boat. "I—I—Get back to the table, Natalie!"

Again Natalie stared. She was hurt, bewildered, and a little angry, too!

Babs & Co. looked at each other uncomfortably.

"But, uncle, I was only entertaining my friends," Natalie objected. "And you've never, never objected to me singing before—"

"Never mind, stop it!" he blazed. "Natalie, if you can't entertain your friends without singing, your friends had better go!"

At once Clara Trevlyn, blunt as ever, rose to her feet.

"Thanks, that's good enough for me!" she said tartly.

"And me, too, I guess!" Leila put in.

"But—oh, please!" Natalie burst out. "Please—please don't go! Uncle, what is the matter with you? Why can't I sing before my friends? I always thought you were pleased to hear me sing."

Again he cast a swift, curiously scared, glance through the window.

Mrs. Fortescue had rowed on by then.

He drew a deep breath.

"I have no objection normally," he said, "but I am rather busy now. Your voice disturbed me. Er—"

He glanced rather flusteredly towards the girls, and Babs noticed he seemed relieved.

"I am sorry," he said. "I forgot myself for the moment. No, girls, please don't go! Do finish your tea. At the same time," he added, a note of warning in his tone, "do not sing again, Natalie, unless you ask my permission first."

And, with a nod, he walked back towards the door, leaving the chums feeling rather constrained and awkward all at once, and Natalie, still gazing after him as though she was passing through an experience that was really a dream.

A "Scoop" for Mabs!



"HALLO," Barbara Redfern said suddenly, "there's Mrs. Fortescue!"

It was an hour later. The chums were returning downstream in their boat, after having left Riverview House, and, ahead of them, in the act of pulling in to the landing-stage at the Cliff House boathouse, they had glimpsed the figure of the authoress as they rounded the bend.

Not a very happy experience had that visit to Riverview turned out, after all. Natalie they liked.

But the incident at tea had left its mark. In a rather subdued atmosphere had the remainder of the time been spent, and Natalie, that thing of life and sunshine before tea, had been strangely thoughtful and serious since.

The chums had been rather glad at last to get away, promising Natalie that they would see her on some future occasion.

"I think Mr. Trent's a bit of a pig," Clara said bluntly. "All the same, there's no reason why we shouldn't see more of Natalie. We ought to have invited her to the school, Babs."

"Well, we will!" Babs agreed. "We're bound to be running into her up and down the river. After all, if she's entering for all those events in the regatta, she'll have to practise. But what a turn, Mabs, she'd make for your concert—a real live sort of Deanna Durbin. Hallo, Mrs. Fortescue is going to the school!"

"I was wondering," Mabs said, "if she'd agree to give a turn. As a matter of fact, we could do with a couple of singers. Hallo, there's Mrs. Fortescue waving to us! Row up, Leila!"

Leila, who had the oars with Janet Jordan, grinned. Three or four lusty pulls and they were alongside the landing-stage.

Mrs. Fortescue, a pretty little woman nearing middle age, laughed as she helped them to moor up the boat.

"Funny! I was just thinking of you girls," she observed. "I was going to speak to you, Mabel, about the concert. I don't know if you've completed your programme—"

"No, I haven't," Mabs said. "Any suggestions gratefully received. I was just telling Babs I'm short of singers, for instance."

The famous authoress smiled. "And you'd like some?" she questioned.

"Yes, rather!" "Well"—Mrs. Fortescue blushed a little—"what about me?" she asked.

"I haven't sung for years and years, but on an occasion like this I fancy I'd like to try again. By the way, talking about singing, do any of you know who has rented Riverview House? I was rowing past there some while ago, and I heard a most beautiful voice."

The chums looked at each other. "We were there," Babs said.

"Oh! Who was doing the singing? And what sort of song was it? I only caught two or three notes, you know, but those did strike a familiar chord in my mind. It was a girl singing, was it not? Not one of you, I suppose?"

Mabs merrily laughed. As if any one of them could even come within a mile of Natalie!

Babs explained. "Natalie Trent?" The authoress shook her head. "No; I've never heard of her. Nor of Mr. and Mrs. Trent, either. But the girl most certainly should have that voice trained. Anyhow, Mabel, what about my proposition? Would you like me to sing?"

"Oh, Mrs. Fortescue, I'd love you to!" Mabs glowed.

"Better wait till you've heard me first, then!" the woman smiled. "I don't even know what my own voice sounds like these days. Anywhere we can have a try-out, Mabel?"

"Why, yes; in the music-room at the school!" the delighted Mabs said.

Mrs. Fortescue smiled. She nodded. Up the footpath that led into the school grounds she followed the chums.

Bright and shining under the waning sun those grounds stood, looking fresh and green after the rain of yesterday, with girls on the tennis courts, at the cricket nets, and everybody apparently happy and busy. One or two of them paused to wave a hand or racket towards the chums as they passed.

The music-room, cool and deserted, was reached. Mrs. Fortescue's eyes grew soft as she gazed around it.

"A lovely place!" she breathed. "It

reminds me of my young days, when I was on the stage before I was married. Now, what would you like me to try, Mabel?"

"Well, what would you like," Mabs asked—"an opera piece?"

"Have you 'Gipsy in Fairyland'?" asked Mrs. Fortescue.

"Yes, rather!"

And Mabs flew to the shelves. In a few moments she had unearthed the vocal score of the famous little operetta.

Mrs. Fortescue's eyes swam a little as it was handed to her.

"I—I—" she said, and there was a queer little catch in her throat suddenly, as though looking at the score brought the overwhelming memories of the past flooding back into her mind.

Then suddenly, impulsively, she sat herself down at the piano. She strummed nervously a few bars, and then, in a rich, resonant voice, began to sing.

The chums listened. Bessie blinked. "I sus-say, that's nun-nice, you know!"

Swelling, ringing, the notes filled the air. Time and space had obviously ceased for the figure seated at the piano. With eyes shining, and such an extraordinary look of rapture in her face that Babs felt thrilled, she sang on. However neglected her voice might have been in the years intervening since she had last sung that song, it certainly had power and vitality and charm.

"Oh, lovely!" breathed Babs, when she had reached the end of it. "Mrs. Fortescue, please sing something else!"

Mrs. Fortescue nodded pleasantly.

She sang "Little Lady of the Lake" from the same score; she followed it with "I Saw a Swallow in the Morning."

"Well, Mabel, will you have me?" she laughed at last.

"Have you?" Mabs' eyes shone.

"Oh, Mrs. Fortescue, if only you will sing! And if," she breathed, "I can only get Natalie to sing in the same programme, too—my goodness, the concert would be a real star show! Babs, what do you think of that for an idea?"

Babs, most enthusiastically, thought it was simply a stunning idea. As soon as Mrs. Fortescue had gone, indeed, she suggested to the eager Mabs that she should phone up Natalie at once. The Trents were too new to the district to be in the directory, but an inquiry from



"STOP that—stop that song!" cried Mr. Trent, and he seized his surprised niece by the shoulder. The Cliff House chums stared in amazement. Up to this moment Mr. Trent hadn't raised any objection to Natalie singing.

the telephone exchange soon put Mabs in possession of their number. Bubbling over with eagerness, she put the call through.

But it was not Natalie's sweet voice which answered. It was Mr. Trent's.

"Hey? Mabel Lynn, of Cliff House School?" he said, when Mabs had introduced herself. "No"—rather shortly—"I'm sorry; you can't speak to Natalie."

"But—"

"And I should be obliged," Mr. Trent went on icily, "if you wouldn't ring up again! Good-bye!"

Mabs flushed. She put the receiver down. What beastly rudeness!

Rather angrily, she told Babs what had transpired. Babs frowned a little.

"Funny!" she said.

"Funny?" Mabs sniffed. "If that's your idea of humour, Babs—"

"No, I do not mean funny in that way. I mean—well, it's strange," Babs said, "because this afternoon he was so pleased to see us. He seemed so jolly bucked with Natalie, so proud of Natalie. And then—did you notice?—he seemed to change from the moment I mentioned Mrs. Fortescue's name. And I'm sure, you know, Mabs, he made that scene because Mrs. Fortescue happened to be on the river at the time Natalie was singing."

"But why?" asked Mabs.

"Ask me!" Babs returned, not very helpfully.

Mabs shrugged. She was still feeling ruffled.

Call-over bell rang then, however, and they all tramped down into Big Hall to answer the register. After that came bed, and, weary after the exertions of the day, Babs slept so soundly that she did not wake until rising-bell was clanging noisily through the dormitory. Then Mary Buller, duty prefect for the day, put her head in at the door.

"Barbara! Miss Primrose! Hurry!" she ordered in her terse way; and, with a grunt in response to the cheerful "Good-mornings!" of the other girls in the room, vanished through the door.

"Tut, tut! More trouble!" Jemima Carstairs sympathised. "Chin up and chest out, Babs, old Spartan!"

But it was not trouble of Jemima's variety that awaited Babs when she reached Miss Primrose's study. The headmistress was concerned mainly with the railway officials of Courtfield Station.

"Apparently," she said, in wrath—"apparently, Barbara, someone has been playing absurd practical jokes at the railway station. Last night a number of labels were removed from cases and packages which were to have been delivered this morning, and the result at the station is utter confusion. Fortunately, the stationmaster has a list of names and addresses to which these packages should have been dispatched, and yours is among them. Have you ordered anything from London recently, Barbara?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Primrose! All the costumes and things for our regatta boat."

"Then I expect that is the package," Miss Primrose said. "Barbara, you will be excused first period of morning lessons to go to Courtfield Station and identify them. You had better take another girl with you, and—er—as the lesson is American history, and Leila is well advanced in the subject, take her."

"Yes, Miss Primrose," Babs beamed, and flew off.

She found Leila in Study No. 3, which she shared with Jemima Carstairs and Marcelle Biquet. Leila, hearing the news, was overjoyed, and immediately after Assembly was dismissed she and

Babs, watched by the envious eyes of their chums, wheeled out their bicycles and set off.

Courtfield Station was reached in remarkably quick time, and the first package of luggage which was offered to the chums for their inspection, turned out to be the decorations from London.

"Gee! Slick work, I guess!" Leila gleed. "Here we are, all finished, and morning lessons at the old school hardly started. No sense in ambling back before we're expected, I guess, so what say to a coffee and cookies at the Anglo-American Cafe in the Market Square? I'm in funds."

"And I," dimpled Babs, "am your girl!"

And off to the Anglo-American Cafe they went, rejoicing in the unexpected freedom of the morning. In the window, facing the High Street, they took their seats. Coffee and "cookies"—Leila's term for the delicious little pastry delicacies in which the Anglo-American specialised—were served, and for the next twenty minutes the two girls enjoyed themselves hugely. Then suddenly Babs, gazing through the window, started.

"Leila, look!" she breathed.

Leila looked, and gave a low whistle.

The cafe immediately faced a rather imposing new building, and across the lower floor of that building, in neon lighting, were the words: "Professor Larkin's Academy of Music." Both Babs and Leila knew the professor—a fussy little gentleman, who had played a big part recently in training a Cliff House girl for the stage.

The door of the professor's establishment had opened, and two people, emerging, had stepped on to the pavement. Babs jumped to her feet.

"Leila, it's Natalie!"

"With Mr. Trent, I guess," Leila observed.

"Come on, we may get a word with her."

Together they darted out of the cafe, just in time to see Mr. Trent hailing a taxi. Babs' voice rang across the Market Square.

"Natalie, coo-ee!"

Natalie spun round. She saw Babs. Her face lighted up in a glad smile. Mr. Trent spun round, too. He also saw Babs and Leila. But he did not smile. A rather thunderous frown came to his face.

As Natalie raised her hand he turned to her. Babs, watching him, saw him deliberately pull it down. Then the taxi came up, blotting the two from the chums' view. Leila blinked.

"Say, what's the matter with the old man?"

Babs bit her lip, a little angry, more than a little puzzled. The taxi was moving away now.

And then suddenly the door of Professor Larkin's Academy opened again. The professor himself appeared, waving a bag in his hands. He shouted after the taxi:

"Mr. Trent! Mr. Trent! Your niece—"

"Hallo!" Babs murmured. "Looks as if Natalie's been leaving that bag of hers behind again. Wait a minute," she added, and, nodding to Leila, crossed the road. The professor gazed at them as they came up.

"Ah, that girl; she's so careless!" he said. "Her memory—poof! Every time she comes to my academy she leaves something. This time it is her bag. I am so very busy a man that I cannot always run after her. Yet the bag is important. Girls carry so many things they so constantly need in bags. You understand?"

Babs smiled.

"Can we help, professor?"

"How may you help, Miss Redfern?"

"Well, Natalie is a friend of ours. We know where she lives. We could take the bag back to her immediately after dinner."

"So!" he cried relievedly. "That is good of you, Miss Redfern. The girl, she is clever—very. She has the voice of the nightingale, and she will shortly make such another wonderful star as your Miss Lily Walters. Ah, but she has such bad memory; she is so careless! If you would be so good, Miss Redfern—"

"We'd love to," Babs said. "You are training her, professor?"

"I am training her, yes." The professor looked impatient. "In five weeks she will be under contract—she will be an operatic star. A wonderful singer! Five years have I been in touch with that girl; five years have I watched and taught her. This is her final course of training, and in that training, Miss Redfern, she has been handled, on my advice, by the best instructors in this country. Thank you! I am busy; I must fly. If you will be so good as to return that bag—"

He smiled wistfully. Then, like a rabbit startled at the sound of a shotgun, he bolted back into his academy, leaving Babs with the bag in her hand. Leila chuckled.

"Excitable old bean—what?" she said. "But, phew! Babs, fancy Natalie going slap bang into opera at her age! It must have cost those relatives of hers a pile of dollars to get her trained."

Babs was thinking that, too, and for a moment she found herself wondering if she had misjudged the unsmiling Mr. Trent. On the other hand, though, he had no right to bar Natalie to her friends like that.

Anyway, the handbag would give them an excuse this afternoon to go and visit her. For some reason Babs experienced a strange thrill at that prospect.

And that afternoon she, Leila, Mabs, and Janet took out the boat, Clara and Christine having been invited to practise with the first team tennis champions with a view to inclusion in the match against Hillside School, which was shortly due to take place. Rather to Babs & Co.'s surprise the door of River-view was opened to them by Natalie herself.

"Why, Babs!" she cried delightedly. "And Janet and Mabs and Leila! Oh, I have been thinking about you. Aunt and uncle have gone off to Courtfield for the afternoon," she added, "and I am all alone. Barbara, I am sorry—this morning—"

Babs smiled.

"But it wasn't your fault," she said.

"No," Natalie agreed, and her face became rather troubled. "No, Amy," she said to a maid who had made a somewhat belated appearance, "I shall not want you. Babs—all of you—come with me, please, into the morning-room."

And when they had reached that apartment she turned impulsively.

"Oh, Barbara. I—I am so unhappy!" she cried.

"Natalie, what's happened?" Babs asked.

"Oh, I do not know—I do not know!" Natalie flung out a despairing hand. "But since yesterday, Babs, everything has changed. I was so happy. I have always been so happy, but yesterday I was happier than ever, because I met you. Babs, before yesterday I was so fond of aunt and uncle. Now—now"—

her voice choked a little—"I feel I do not like them any more."

Babs bit her lip.

"But, Natalie, whatever they're doing is only for your own good."

"Yes?" Natalie twisted round. "How is it for my good to say that I shall not take part in the regatta? How, when they know my heart and soul are in the regatta? How is it for my good when they say I am not to have anything to do with you girls any more? How, for my good, when I am not even allowed to go out? When I am no longer allowed to sing, either in the house, or even in the grounds? What has happened to them, Babs, that they, who once were so kind, now treat me as if I were their prisoner? Why, why, why?"

The chums stared at each other. Certainly this was strange.

"And last night—last night!"—Natalie looked round, dropping her voice—"they were so mysterious. They do not seem like that old aunt and uncle I so liked in the past. I—I feel afraid of them sometimes—especially uncle. Last night I went into his study. He and aunt were there. They were burning letters in the fire, and my uncle was saying: 'Whatever we do, Natalie must not see her.' Babs, who is 'her'?"

But Babs baffledly shook her head. "And why should I stop in?" Natalie asked. "Why mustn't I meet you now? They say it is my voice. I am being trained for an opera star. But how can my friendship with you affect my voice? Oh, Babs—" Her voice broke. "Oh, Babs, tell me what to do!" she cried fitfully.

Warned Off!



BABS felt a throb in her heart. Then a swift gust of anger against the absent Mr. and Mrs. Trent welled up within her.

"Oh, don't worry about it, Natalie," she said gently. "Come out with us on the river."

"But, my aunt—my uncle—" Natalie said dubiously. And then suddenly her eyes flamed up. "Well, why not?" she said, on a note of defiant challenge. "Why not? Yes, I will come!" she added, with swift decision, and, her mind instantly made up, broke into a dazzling smile. "Wait, please!"

She flew off. The chums looked at each other, smiled, feeling happier themselves. At the same time, Mabs cast a doubtful glance through the window.

"Babs, do you think it's going to rain?"

Babs frowned a little. Certainly, the view she had of the sky was not reassuring. Fine enough, it had been when they had set out from Cliff House, but in the interval a threatening bank of cloud had rolled up.

Still, that sort of weather had been common enough these last few days, but always the threatened cloud had passed over, with never a spot of rain. She shrugged.

"We'll risk it," she said. "Anyway, we'll row back towards Cliff House. If it does come on to rain we can bolt back into the school. Ah, here we are, Natalie—"

This as Natalie, her own laughing, radiant self once more, appeared in the door, dressed in a light summer frock.

"Come, let us go!" she cried eagerly, and herself led the way to the door and

out into the grounds, bursting into song as she did so.

No resisting Natalie in such a magnetic mood. The chums laughingly followed her. Natalie jumped into the boat. At Babs' suggestion she took the tiller, and, sitting there as they pulled downstream, began to sing. Sweet, flute-like, clear, the notes came, to be taken up by the twittering of the birds in the trees.

Babs' eyes shone. Oh, what a voice the girl had!

Then—"Whoops!" cried Janet Jordan. "See that? Rain!"

Rain it was. A spot had splashed on Janet's neck. Five heads craned anxiously upwards.

"My giddy aunt! It's coming!" Clara gasped.

Coming it was, in truth. This time, at least, the dark cloud had been no

"Cold? No!" Natalie laughed. "But, Barbara, where are we going?"

"To the school," Babs said, and eyed her apprehensively as Natalie sneezed again. "And there you're going to have a change of clothes," she added, "and something hot to drink. Come along!"

Natalie gurgled. Off with the chums she flew. They entered the grounds, rain-drenched and deserted now, and Natalie's eyes sparkled as she saw the old school. Up the drive at the double they ran, to be confronted by a gloomy crowd of girls in Big Hall, all driven indoors by the shower. Bessie Bunter, who was among them, cried out as she saw Babs:

"Babs—oh, I sus-say, there's Natalie! Babs—"

"Bessie, be a good old dufferkins, and go and put the kettle on," Babs said urgently. "Get a nice, hot cup of tea."

CLIFF HOUSE PETS

No. 17.

Dulcia Fairbrother's Angora Rabbits

THE two quietest and most reserved pets in the Pets' House at Cliff House are Peter and Paula, the fluffy, white-furred and pink-eyed "Angora" rabbits belonging to Dulcia Fairbrother, the captain of the school.

They are great favourites—especially with the "babies" of the school and with the keen amateur photographers. For Peter and Paula are very docile and friendly and of their species are really handsome animals.

I am afraid I cannot regale you with any great adventures of Peter and Paula. They lead very normal, happy lives, are very well contented, and have never made any attempt to escape. They have never indeed—so well does Dulcia look after them—had even a day's illness!

But they are great fun. And, unlike most of the pets at Cliff House, they have great practical uses. Many and many a shilling have they provided for the school's charities—this out of their soft, long fur, which is regularly plucked and made up into articles by the girls of the school.

Dulcia, of course, collects this fur, and it is Dulcia who pays for it to be spun, afterwards handing it out to be used in the manufacture of articles.

I think the loveliest things made from Peter and Paula's fur were the articles which Marjorie Hazledene of the Fourth Form contributed to the School's Charity Sale last term. They included two pin-cushions which were exact replicas of Peter and Paula themselves, three marvellous powder puffs, and an adorable



PETER and PAULA

fluffy white doll's coat, with bonnet and shoes and muff to match!

Although such charming little bunnies, Peter and Paula do not, of course, mix freely with the other pets of the enclosure. But they have a friend of their very own—a nuthatch, a diminutive bird which lives in a tree near by. Dulcia calls him Freddie, and Freddie is so tiny that it is the easiest of feats for him to squeeze through the wire netting of Peter and Paula's hutch. At most hours of the day he can be found there, hopping about, and, sometimes nestling down between them. Often this bird takes a wet bath in their drinking water or a dry one in the sand of their run. In spring time it is really fun to see Freddie plucking the good-humoured Peter and Paula with his beak and fluttering off with their angora fur in order to make a cosy lining for its nest.

Peter and Paula are two years old, and have been at Cliff House since they were two weeks old. They have no special tricks, but just love to be groomed and cuddled.

false alarm. For suddenly, with a violence that was almost tropical, the rain began to hiss downwards, splashing in the water and forming tiny spurning fountains in the bottom of the boat. Natalie laughed.

"Oh, lovely!" "Says you!" Leila grunted. "Step on it, sisters!"

"Yo, heave-ho!" cried Mabs. They pulled with a will. But in two minutes each of them was soaked to the skin.

But Natalie, of them all, did not seem to mind. With her voice ranged against the hiss of the rain, she sang on. Ten, fifteen, minutes hard rowing and the landing-stage adjoining the Cliff House boathouse loomed up. Hastily they made fast the boat and scrambled ashore. Natalie sneezed a little.

"Natalie, you haven't a cold?" Babs asked anxiously.

Natalie, this way!" "But let me stop and talk to these girls, Babs," Natalie pleaded.

"When you've had a hot bath and a change you can do all the talking you like," Babs said firmly, and clutched her wet arm. "This way! Mabs, get the bath ready," she added anxiously as Mabs flew on ahead.

Natalie gurgled. She was enjoying this. Shining her eyes as she flew up with Babs to the Fourth Form dormitory. Laughing her face as she was pushed into the bath-room and Babs, hastily collecting a frock and underwear, flung them in after her. While the chums vigorously towelled themselves and changed their own soaked things, they heard her voice.

"Take a pair of sparkling eyes, take a—oh, dear—" And "Atishoo!" went Natalie, and "Atishoo!" again.

"She's got a cold!" Babs said anxiously.

That was obvious. Natalie's sneezing fits grew more frequent, more violent. Her eyes were moistly red, but her lips still laughing when finally she emerged into the dormitory again, to be rushed at once to Study No. 4.

There Bessie had not only prepared a pot of tea, but had also laid the table for the meal, including the basketful of delicious home-made pastries which she had brought back from Mrs. Bennett's tea-rooms, on the river, where she had been to discuss the arrangements for the regatta refreshments. Natalie beamed.

"Oh, I say, how really lovely!" she breathed. "Do you always do this at Cliff House? Tea? Yes, please, Babs—and two lumps of sugar, please! This is lovely!" she gurgled, as she sipped the hot beverage.

"Come up to the table and have something to eat, you know," Bessie invited.

Tea began. Natalie was all eagerness to know about the school.

"Oh, it must be thrilling!" she said. "How I would love to go to a big school like this! What Form would I be in, Babs?"

"Well, how old are you?" Babs laughed.

"Just turned fifteen. My birthday's in June."

"Then," Babs said, "you'd be in the Lower Fifth, providing, of course, that you were up to what Miss Primrose calls the 'educational standard.' But haven't you ever been to school?" she added inquiringly.

Natalie sighed.

"Once—many years ago," she said. "I don't remember much about it. I don't even remember the name of the school. But I seem to see some place like this in my mind's eye. I have such an awful memory, with such terrible blanks in it, that I don't seem to remember anything very clearly until I started these singing lessons five years ago."

"But your mother—"

Natalie shook her head.

"I don't know," she said, a little sadly. "I don't remember her—or my father. Aunt and uncle say they were drowned in a shipwreck at sea. That is how I came to be their ward."

Babs looked at her sympathetically.

"But how have you been getting on for lessons and all that?" she asked.

"Oh, I have tutors!" Natalie replied. "You see, we are never in one spot long enough for me to settle down at any school. Always I have to be trekking to this place and that place to be near some professor for the training of my voice. And then I only learn languages," she added, with a little sigh—"Italian and French and German, and all that—so that I shall be able to use those languages when I visit foreign countries with my opera company. But please don't talk about me," she added earnestly; "let us talk about the regatta."

So they talked, with Natalie interjecting an occasional remark, but more often a sneeze. She was over-bubblingly enthusiastic about the regatta. Wild horses and forest fires, she declared with some fierceness, would not keep her out of that.

And when Mabs asked her if she would sing at the concert—

"Oh, me? Oh, lovely!" she cried, with shining, eager eyes. "What shall I sing, Mabs?"

"Well, that lullaby; certainly that."

Natalie beamed.

"I should love to—just love to! Include me in the programme, please!"

Mabs laughed, as happy as Natalie herself.

Then the door opened, and the cheerful face of Boker, the page-boy, peered into the room.

"Miss Redfern, your things have come from the railway station, and I've unpacked them in the boathouse. If you'll let me know when you're going to decorate the boat, I'll come and give you a hand."

"Good old Boker!" Babs dimpled. "We'll be along in about twenty minutes. I say, the rain's over and the sun's shining again," she added.

"Please could I come and help?" Natalie asked eagerly, as Boker left.

"Please, Barbara—"

"Well, Natalie, with that cold, you ought really to be in bed," Babs said.

"Oh, stuff to bed! It'll be gone by to-morrow. Please!"

Impossible to resist that appeal.

Tea was finished at last. Accompanied by Clara Trevlyn and Marjorie Hazeldene from Study No. 7, they tramped off to the boathouse in a body.

Boker was already there, and Boker, true and faithful friend of Babs & Co. that he was, had carefully unpacked the goods contained in the crate from the railway which had been delivered during the afternoon. And how the chums' eyes opened at the sight of them!

Already the long boat, which was to be used in the regatta processions, had been rigged by Boker. Here was the great swan's head which would fit on the prow; here, in imitation fluffy feathers, were the great wings which would decorate the sides of the boat. But most delightful of all were the little cygnet costumes, each made of real white feathers, and fitted with a separate headdress, the beak of which opened to give a brief view of the face of the wearer.

"Oh, lovely!" Natalie cried.

Lovely the costumes were, indeed. Thrilled, the chums examined them, tried them on; while Boker, with Babs' help, started work on the decorated boat. Suddenly, however—

"Barbara!" cried a voice.

They all swivelled round. Silence fell upon them as up strode Miss Primrose, followed by another figure, at the sight of whom Natalie gave a violent start. It was her uncle, Noah Trent.

His eyes at once fastened upon Natalie; his face, angry before, flushed a brick red.

"Natalie!" he cried.

"Barbara, I am sorry to interfere," said Miss Primrose, with a faintly distasteful look towards Mr. Trent, "but this gentleman has made a complaint. He complains that you enticed his niece to disobey him."

"Oh, that's not— Oh dear! Atishoo!" Natalie said furiously. "Uncle—"

"Be silent, please!" He glared at her. Bristlingly he stared at the chums. "Do not deny it, any of you!" he said gratingly. "Amy, the maid, was present at the house when you called, and she has told me all I want to know. Natalie had instructions to remain indoors. You deliberately persuaded her to go out! You were caught in that rain—"

"Uncle—" Natalie flamed.

"Do not speak to me, miss!" he said furiously. "I thought you understood by this time, Natalie, the question of obedience! What is the good of my spending all my money and going to all the trouble I have, only for you to persist in running risks and wrecking your voice? I told you not to have anything to do with these girls—"

"Indeed! And why not?" Miss Primrose asked.

"Because, madam, I do not consider

them fit associates for my niece!" Mr. Trent thundered, while the chums stared angrily. "Even you, I think, will agree that their action bears it out! I am training Natalie's voice for opera; in a few weeks' time she will be under contract. And what do these girls of yours do? They come to my house while I am out; they persuade her to take a trip in the rain which results in her catching cold! Look at her!" he added bitterly, as Natalie exploded into another sneeze.

Babs bit her lip. Miss Primrose looked stiffly annoyed. Then, before Natalie could do anything—before she had even recovered from her sneezing fit, indeed—he had stepped forward, roughly seizing her by the hands. Babs gave a cry:

"Mr. Trent—"

"Don't you dare interfere, young woman!" he barked. "Natalie, you are coming home with me—now! Miss Primrose, I should esteem it a favour if you would forbid these girls to see my niece any more."

"That," Miss Primrose said, with a faint curl of the lip, "is beyond my authority, Mr. Trent. It is unfortunate your niece has caught a cold, but that does not allow me to interfere in any harmless friendship she may have for my girls. At the same time," she added to Babs & Co., "please see that you do not annoy Mr. Trent any more."

"But—but—" Babs gazed at Natalie helplessly.

"Come, Natalie!" Mr. Trent said gruffly.

And he tugged her away, while the chums, angry, yet with their hearts welling with pity at the sight of the tearfully distressed face turned towards them, stood still. Miss Primrose made off in the other direction.

Clara clenched her hands.

"Well, of all the pigs—"

"Of all the bullies!"

"Poor Natalie!" Marjorie Hazeldene said, with a sigh.

Poor Natalie, indeed! But sympathy for Natalie was mixed with fury for Mr. Trent. What a bully the man was to be sure! And how extraordinary this change in him since they had first met!

Again Babs' mind was trying to find a reason for these things. A reason there must be, of course. It was as if, suddenly, Mr. Trent had grown afraid of his niece mixing with the chums. Why? It was as if, suddenly, he was even afraid of her to be out of his house, or out of his sight.

Babs shook her head. Strange! Queer! Again her mind went back to the scene in the morning-room of Riverview House, when Mrs. Fortescue had paused in her boat to listen to the singing voice of the girl. Was that the reason? But how could it be a reason, when Mrs. Fortescue herself had said that she did not know either Natalie or the Trents?

Babs was trying to puzzle it out all the time the chums were noisily and energetically decorating the regatta boat. Prep bell went in the midst of that task, and they all trooped back to their studies. It was half an hour later that Bessie came into Study No. 4.

"I say, Babs, Natalie left her wrist-watch behind," said the plump one. "I fuf-found it in the bath-room, you know. At least," Bessie added dubiously, "I suppose it is hers. I seem to remember seeing it on her wrist yesterday, you know. This is it. Bub-be careful! The back flies open."

She handed the watch across the table. It was a neat little silver one, and had obviously seen a great deal of wear. Babs gave a little cry as, without warning, the back of the watch flew open, disclosing an inner case beneath it, and on that case, two initials.

"I say, this isn't Natalie's!" she said.

"Well, it was in the bath-room, and she's the only one who's had a bath in that room since this morning," Bessie said. "Why isn't it Natalie's?"

"Well, the initials. Natalie's initials are N. T. These initials are 'A. F.' There's—" And then Babs rather sharply peered at the silver mark on the inside of the case, and something else engraved just below the initials. It was a date. It read, 'June, 1930.' "June," murmured Babs. "June"—and remembered then that Natalie had mentioned the month of June as being her birth month. She peered at the silver mark which read 'Canada.'

"But it is Natalie's!" Mabs said. "Because I distinctly remember seeing this watch on her wrist when we met her yesterday. Perhaps a friend gave it to her—that would account for the wrong initials. Anyway, we'd better let her have it back—"

"But," Clara said, "we can't take it now. There's prep bell! It'll have to wait."

And wait it did. Not indeed until after morning lessons next day could the lost property be restored to its owner.

In that time Babs was still trying to puzzle out the reason for the Trents' amazing hostility towards their ward; their unfriendliness towards herself and her chums. Mystery there! And mystery which was making Natalie so dreadfully unhappy. She wondered anxiously how Natalie had been faring in the meantime. If only—if only she could get a few words with Natalie alone!

That was her thought when, after lessons, she, Leila, Mabs, and Janet set off down-river for Riverview, ostensibly to return the watch.

A bright, smiling morning it was in all truth, with the hot sun glinting on the river, the trees rustling lazily in the gentle breeze.

They moored the boat in the little backwater adjoining the grounds of Riverview. Stepping out they approached the house, and Babs rang the bell.

A minute's pause; then the door was flung open. It was Mr. Trent himself who faced them, and he glared at the sight of them.

"What do you want? I thought—"

"We—we came to give Natalie her watch back," Babs said quietly, and held it, folded in the tissue-paper in which she had wrapped it, towards him. "She left it at the school."

"Oh!" he said, and took it. "Well, thanks!" he said gruffly.

"Is—is Natalie at home?" Babs questioned.

His lips came together.

"Natalie," he said, "is not at home. Thanks to you, Natalie is in hospital with a very, very bad cold and a sore throat. Now go!" he added coldly. And while the chums stared, the door slammed in their faces.

"A real old English gentleman!" Leila said, in disgust.

"Ill-mannered mammoth!" snorted Janet Jordan.

Babs shook her head. The closing of the door seemed final, anyway.



CAUTIOUSLY Babs & Co. crept up the ladder. They were determined to see Natalie, to help her, but if they were caught by Mr. Trent it would mean very big trouble for them all.

Obviously there was no getting in touch with Natalie if she was in hospital—and she really did feel a bit guilty then. In a rather angry silence the chums reached their boat. Janet was about to cast off when—

"Listen!" cried Mabs.

Every eye turned back towards the house.

For suddenly, in a well-remembered tune, that bore no trace of a sore throat, or any other affection, the trilling notes of a song swelled out:

"The wind sighs in the branches,
Dark clouds in the sky—"

"Natalie!" cried Babs.

"Then she is in there!"

"That old grumpy was telling fibs!"

They blinked. Sweetly flowing the notes came. Then suddenly, in the middle of a bar, they stopped—just as if, indeed, a hand had been clapped over the singer's mouth. And Babs, standing up in the middle of the boat and craning her neck above the hedge, saw something that momentarily caused her blood to boil.

"The—the cad!" she gasped.
"Look!"

Just Like Bessie!



THEY looked, craning upwards from the boat. They did not see all that Babs had seen, but they saw enough in the very first glimpse to tell them what had happened.

At a window, on the first floor, confronting the river, Natalie was clearly visible, with a hand to her face. Mr. Trent, less plainly visible, was standing in front of her, shaking a fist into her face.

Leila breathed hard.

"Say, he hit her!"

"And why?" asked Babs grimly, and immediately answering her own question. "Because she was singing!" They stared.

"Sure is a funny idea to pay for the girl to sing and then hit her when she does sing. I'll say!" Leila said puzzledly. "But, gee, wasn't that the song she was singing when Mr. Trent went wild the other night? Seems as though he doesn't like that song!"

Babs flashed her an odd glance. For Leila was voicing the very thought in her own mind. That song—the song which Natalie's queerly patchy memory would not allow her to remember how she had learned it, whence it had come to her. A queer little thrill seemed to run up and down Babs' frame as slowly she sank back into the boat.

"Well, what can we do about it?" Leila asked. "I guess I loathe leaving poor old Natalie in that plight."

But what could they do about it? Short of storming the house, there was nothing. In any case, as Babs pointed out, Mr. Trent, as the girl's legal guardian and relative, had every right on his side.

"But, at the same time," she said thoughtfully, "we're going to get a word with Natalie. We can't ask for it openly. It's pretty plain now that Natalie is being kept a sort of prisoner.

I've got a funny feeling there's more in this than meets the eye—no, don't ask me what, please; it's little more than a hunch, as Leila would call it, and I don't want to be called a fool."

They stared a little.

"But how are we going to get a word with Natalie?" Mabs asked.

"Well, we know her bed-room—that's it, of course," Babs nodded at the window. "She'll be in to-night, and I did see a ladder round the back of the house—"

"Oh my hat! You mean—break bounds and come down here?"

Babs nodded seriously.

"Why not? Of course, I don't want you all to come with me."

"And of course," Janet sniffed, "you want to have all the fun yourself. I don't know what sort of funny idea you've got buzzing in your brain, Babs, but—well, if you're breaking bounds, you're not going on your own."

"I guess not," Leila nodded. "And Clara will want to come, too. You know how she'd hate to be left out of a stunt like this. Just us then—and Clara."

And that was agreed; though, as a matter of fact, it did not quite turn out according to plan. One girl they had forgotten—and that one Bessie Bunter. For when, in the darkness and the silence of the dormitory they awoke that night, Bessie awoke, too. She blinked at Babs.

"Oh crumbs! I sus-say, are you going out?"

"Shush!" Babs whispered in agony.

"Where are you going?"

"Nowhere."

"Well, that's rot," Bessie sniffed. "Girls don't get up in the middle of the night to go nowhere. Besides, there isn't such a place, you know. Look here, you're not going for a secret feed, are you?"

"No, you porpoise!" Clara hissed. "And for goodness' sake shut up!"

But Bessie was not inclined to shut up. Girls didn't get up like this in the middle of the night for nothing. Some big and fearful inspiration was needed for that, and the only big and fearful inspiration that Bessie ever could think of was—food. And if there was a free feed going, Bessie did not mean to be left out of it.

She rolled out of bed.

"Bessie, what the dickens is the matter?" Babs asked testily. "Where are you going?"

"I'm coming with you," Bessie announced defiantly. "Oh, you can't pip-pull the wool over my eyes, you know. If there's a free feed, then I think it's like you greedy and selfish things to leave me out."

Clara breathed hard and exasperatedly. Wasn't that just like fat-headed duffer Bessie? Free feed indeed—at this time of night!

The chums paused in exasperation. Leila moved towards the door.

"Here, wait for me!" Bessie yelled.

"Shush, you fat siren!" Clara hissed.

"You'll bring a mistress on the scene."

"All right, let her come," Babs said resignedly. "It's no use trying to convince her. But buck up, old Bess."

Bessie bucked up. Stealthily they crept out. In the lobby downstairs they unfastened the window. In five minutes the river, winding like a silver ribbon in the moonlight, stretched before them.

"Oh, I sus-say, are we going to have a river picnic?" Bessie beamed. "I sus-say, that's a jolly good notion, you know. Where's the grub?"

"Oh, stuff! Come on!"

They went on, Bessie blinking wrathfully. The boathouse was reached, a

skiff pushed out. Clara handed the tiller ropes to Bessie.

"But look here, you know, what about the grub?" Bessie asked.

"Oh, come on!" Clara said.

"But—"

"Janet, push Bessie overboard!"

"Oh really, I refuse to be pushed overboard!" Bessie remonstrated. "I think that's most unkind of you, Clara Trevlyn! If I get pushed overboard I shall get wet, and if I get wet I might catch cold, you know, with my delicate constitution! Wow!" yelled Bessie, as Clara suddenly jerked on the oars. "Here, I sus-say, you know, I'm not ready."

The chums chuckled, and pulled with steady stroke. Presently, ahead of them, they saw the dark little backwater, with the black turrets of Riverview etched against the moonlit sky. Very gently they slid into the backwater.

"Oh, I sus-say, is Natalie coming, too?" Bessie asked, in delight. "Is she bringing the feed, Babs?"

Babs breathed hard as she climbed on to the landing-stage.

"Bessie Bunter," she ordered, "you sit here!"

"Oh, rats! I'm coming!" Bessie said. "After all, you'll want somebody to help you carry the stuff."

The chums glared.

"All right, then, come," Babs said. "But one word from you, Bessie—one little word—and we'll stuff your head into a rabbit hole. Now—shush!" she added warily, and herself crept up the bank, peering at the house.

The house was shuttered, and in darkness, save for one window. That window, Babs saw with a sudden thrill, was the window of Natalie's bed-room—and wide open. Evidently Natalie believed in fresh air.

"Funny, though—she's got the light on!" Clara muttered, creeping up beside Babs. "Don't see anything of her."

"Perhaps she's reading in bed," Babs suggested, "or has gone to sleep and left the light on by accident. Anyway, she's there."

They reached the shadow of the wall. And there another surprise awaited them.

For, propped up against that wall, and resting on Natalie's window-sill, was a ladder.

"Funny!" Babs said. "What the dickens—"

"Well, let's get up and see," Clara practically suggested.

That, obviously, was the only thing to do. Babs gripped the ladder. Not very firmly was it fixed in the ground, however.

"Clara, and you, Leila—follow me!" she said. "Janet and Mabs, you hold the ladder. Bessie, seeing that it's about time you did something useful, keep cave. Now!" Babs whispered, and, catching at the side of the ladder, began cautiously to climb up.

Clara followed; then Leila.

Above Babs a bat, attracted, doubtless by the light, flew over her head with a swift flapping of wings.

That same bat, swooping over Babs, dived in a sweeping circle towards Bessie Bunter.

Bessie, standing near the ladder, was apprehensively blinking towards the river. Bessie did not like the dark.

Then out of the night swooped that bat. It came straight at Bessie, looking enormous in the glow of the lighted window. Whoosh! And Bessie distinctly felt the breath of air it displaced as it came. For one moment she stood rooted with terror. Then,

with a frightened yell, she staggered back.

Janet had her feet on the bottom rung of the ladder, to steady it, but Janet went toppling off with a gasp as Bessie reeled into her.

The ladder wobbled towards Mabs. Mabs gave a cry as she suddenly received the full weight of it. Near the window Babs, forgetting herself as she suddenly felt the ladder swinging under her feet, let out a shout.

And then—pandemonium! Down came the ladder, slithering noisily against the wall. Bessie, still howling that a vampire or an eagle was attacking her, was clinging to Janet, imploring that girl to "sus-save her!" On the ground, mixed up with ladder and each other, were Babs, Leila, Mabs, and Clara. Then suddenly there was another shout. A crash, as a door opened. A new voice thundered on the air:

"What's that? What's that? Stop, you scoundrels!"

"Mr. Trent!" spluttered Clara. "My hat, come on!"

Up to their feet they scrambled. Too late! For, round the corner of the building Mr. Trent, in dressing-gown and pyjamas, came rushing, a torch in one hand, a poker in the other, and hopping like fury in his carpet slippers, through the sole of one of which an unseen thorn had pierced.

"Why, y-you!" he gasped, and glared.

Babs gulped.

"Oh, crumbs! I say, Mr. Trent—"

"You! What are you doing here?"

"Well, we—we came to—to talk to Natalie!" Babs blurted.

"So! At this time of night! I thought," Mr. Trent blazed, "I had warned you off these grounds? I thought I had made it clear that this was forbidden territory? Does your headmistress know you are here?"

"Oh, crumbs! Nun-no!" stuttered Bessie Bunter.

"Then," Mr. Trent said, "she shall. She shall know at once. And maybe," he added furiously. "Wow! My foot! Maybe I shall take a trespassing summons out against you! Now go—at once!"

The chums looked in sickly dismay at each other. Babs sighed. Then, in a forlorn body, they drifted back to the backwater, Mr. Trent angrily limping in their rear. Grimly he stood on the bank, one foot raised in the air, as they cast off the boat. Grimly he watched them as they rowed into midstream. Babs smiled bitterly.

"And we haven't," she said, "either seen Natalie or spoken to her."

"And a nice old racket we're likely to find ourselves in when we get back," Leila sighed.

"But—oh, I sus-say, you girls—"

Bessie bleated.

"Well, chump?"

"I—I hope you—you haven't brought me out on false pretences!" Bessie said indignantly. "What about the feed?"

A deep and withering silence answered her.

Will o' the Wisp Natalie!



MR. NOAH TRENT, they found when they reached Cliff House, had been as good as his word. Immediately upon arriving back at Riverview he had telephoned Miss Primrose, and that good lady, rather grimly, was awaiting the truants when they returned.

"I'm deeply disappointed," she said. "I did think, Barbara, that you would

have done your best not to annoy that man again. Apart from that, it is a serious offence to be out of bounds at night. In the ordinary way, I should detain you for the whole week-end."

"Oh dear!" sighed Mabel Lynn. "We—we're sorry, Miss Primrose."

"No doubt!" Miss Primrose agreed tartly. "Most transgressors are when they are caught out! I am extremely displeased and extremely annoyed. However, as this is the regatta week-end, and as," she added, "the regatta is being held for charitable purposes, in which you are playing rather a large part, I shall let you off with two hundred lines each. But only on one condition," she added.

"Y-yes, Miss Primrose?"

"That you do not attempt to go near Riverview again. Do you give your word on that?"

The chums looked at each other. But there was no way out of it.

"We—we give our word, Miss Primrose."

"Very well. Then go to bed!"

And forlornly, crestfallen, they went to bed. It seemed that they were definitely finished with Riverview now. And if they were finished with Riverview, how to get in touch with Natalie? Natalie most emphatically had asserted that she would be at the regatta. But how was Natalie to be at the regatta if she was being held a prisoner at that house?

Babs worried about that. Mabs worried about it, too. Mabs had only two singers on her concert programme—one, Natalie, and the other Mrs. Fortescue. Mrs. Fortescue was all right—but what about Natalie now?

Up early in the morning were the chums, despite their broken rest of the night before. That day was Thursday—the day before the regatta was due to start, and there were many, many things to be done and attended to.

Babs & Co. went down to superintend the finishing touches to the boat. Some minutes before Assembly bell rang they finished their task, and were turning back to the school when suddenly a furious hail fell upon their ears.

Babs, Leila, Clara, and Janet, who composed the group, twisted round.

"Oh, my hat! The Trent bird!" Clara giggled.

"Calling us, looks like," Leila said.

Calling them Mr. Trent certainly was. His face was red, he was perspiring. In one hand he brandished a silver-banded ebony walking-stick, the other he was shaking towards them as he came. The chums stopped. Miss Primrose, just emerging from her own private house on her way to the school, paused and stared in astonishment.

Breathlessly Mr. Trent panted up. His eyes were glaring.

"You—you!" he said thickly. "What have you done with her?"

"Her?" Babs said.

"Where has she gone?"

"Gone?"

Then Miss Primrose rustled on the scene.

"Really, my dear sir," she said frigidly, "I see no reason why, having most expressly forbidden these girls to trespass upon your grounds, you should commit that same offence on these premises. And if," Miss Primrose added, with that starchy dignity she could well assume at times, "you wish to speak to these girls, you should remember that my permission must be obtained first."

The man choked.

"Madam, this is not a matter for levity"—and Miss Primrose flushed angrily—"this is serious! Trespassing

and permission do not enter into it. I want to know what these girls have done with my niece."

Babs started.

"Natalie! But what—"

"This morning," the man said—"this morning, Miss Primrose, I went to Natalie's room. Natalie was not there; her bed had not been slept in. But her light was on, showing that she had disappeared during the night. Her window was open, and at the bottom of that window was a ladder. Last night, as you know, I found these girls—"

The chums stared at him round-eyed. Miss Primrose frowned sharply.

"Barbara, do you know anything of this?"

"Why, no, Miss Primrose," Babs said. And the headmistress could tell from the wonderment on her face that she spoke the truth.

And, indeed, Babs was flabbergasted. It had never occurred to her before that Natalie would run away; but now, remembering last night's happenings in their sequence, she fancied she saw the reason for the lighted room, the open window with the ladder mysteriously reared against it. Natalie had run away before they had arrived.

"The girl," hooted Mr. Trent, "is telling lies! Why else should she and her friends visit my house in the dead of night? Why—" he added wrathfully, and then abruptly stopped. Babs saw him staring with wide, suddenly

Have you seen

SNOW WHITE and the SEVEN DWARFS—

that fascinating new card game which is on sale at all stationers and toy-shops? It costs only 1s. 6d., and is lovely fun. Get one to-day.

frightened eyes, towards the figure of Mrs. Fortescue, who was unhurriedly strolling through the gates. He blinked a little, the words died to a gurgle.

"Er—er—" he said hurriedly. "Miss Primrose, I will see you later to—"

"But, really, sir—" Miss Primrose protested.

"Later!" he repeated. "Later!" and hurriedly he turned. While Miss Primrose stared, while the chums gaped, he strode rapidly away—but not towards the main gate through which Mrs. Fortescue had now passed, but towards the mistresses' gate, some distance to the right.

"Well!" Miss Primrose gasped. "Well! What an extraordinary man!"

But Babs' eyes were gleaming. She thought she knew why Mr. Trent had hurried away. The man had been alarmed by the sudden appearance of Mrs. Fortescue!

First he had stopped Natalie singing when that woman had been near—now, apparently, he was also afraid of meeting her himself!

"WHO WAS that man?" Mrs. Fortescue asked curiously as, having chatted with Miss Primrose, she joined Babs & Co. on their way to the school. "I didn't get a view of his face, but there was something about him which vaguely reminded me of someone."

Babs gazed at her thoughtfully.

"He's Mr. Trent—uncle of Natalie Trent, the girl you heard singing."

Mrs. Fortescue shook her head. "Then," she said, "I obviously do not know him. No. Perhaps I have met him somewhere before, when—when I was on the stage. Curious though"—she frowned for a moment, then, as if dismissing some unpleasant thought, shrugged. "I really came to see you about the regatta. I am afraid, Barbara, that as soon as the regatta ends I shall have to say good-bye to you for a while—"

"Oh, Mrs. Fortescue—"

"Because," Mrs. Fortescue said gently, "I have to go to London. I did not tell you, did I, that I had written a play? And the play is going to be performed. Naturally, as the author, they want me there for rehearsals, and I may be in London for several months."

That was news that seemed to disturb Babs. Clara noticed the fact, and as the chums were walking along the Fourth Form passage, she remarked on it.

"Well, it's Natalie," Babs said.

"Natalie? What on earth has she got to do with Mrs. Fortescue going to London?"

"Come into Study No. 4," Babs said. "No, close the door first. Has anything struck you—about Natalie and Mrs. Fortescue?"

"Well, what?" Clara asked puzzledly.

"Hasn't it occurred to you," Babs asked, "that Mr. Trent, for some reason, is afraid of Mrs. Fortescue? Otherwise, why should he have run away when she entered the grounds? And hadn't it struck you, either, that he's been doing his best to keep Natalie away from Mrs. Fortescue?"

Mabs blinked.

"But why?"

"Ah!" Babs shrugged. "That's what I want to find out. There's something funny—something fishy, somewhere. Ever since the Trents knew that Mrs. Fortescue was in the neighbourhood they've been acting queerly. They're afraid of Mrs. Fortescue. They are afraid of us because we know Mrs. Fortescue; because, through us, Natalie might be brought face to face with her. That's why," Babs added, "they've been trying to keep Natalie a prisoner; that's why they've forbidden her to have anything to do with us. That's why they've told her she must give up the regatta. I'm sure of it. It's the only solution."

They stared at her.

"There's a mystery," Babs decided, "a jolly big and a jolly deep mystery, if you ask me. I don't pretend to understand it, but I'm jolly sorry for Natalie, and I do want to help Natalie. And," Babs added, "there's just one way in which we can help her—or, at least, in which we might help Natalie, and that is—bring Natalie and Mrs. Fortescue face to face!"

"And then?" Leila asked puzzledly.

"I don't know; but I've got a queer hunch that something will happen."

The chums looked at each other.

"Wait a minute," said Janet Jordan slowly. "If Mr. Trent is scared of Mrs. Fortescue, why hasn't he shifted out of the district?"

"Because," was Babs' instant retort, "there are Natalie's singing lessons. Remember Natalie will get her contract in five weeks' time. He's just got to stick on here—to be near Professor Larkin."

"Phew!" whistled Leila. "That's true!"

"So, you see," Babs added earnestly, "of course, there may be nothing in it. But I think there is. I think, somehow, it will help Natalie no end to meet Mrs. Fortescue, and if," she added, "we don't

(Continued on page 14)

OUT OF SCHOOL HOURS

PATRICIA is your very own friend, who writes to you week by week in that chummy way of hers, so typical of her. She tells you of things she does herself; and gives you helpful suggestions and how-to-make ideas.



THIS Patricia of yours is all countrified this week—just because she has been spending a few days on a farm.

I admit I don't go around shouldering a pitchfork, and with straw in my hair—but I do not run away from cows any more!

In fact, I call them by their names—not that they seem to take the slightest notice, let me modestly add, for apparently they don't understand my town-y voice.

I try saying "Daisy," "Buttercup," and "Clover" in all sorts of tones, ranging from a well-bred Oxford-and-Cambridge accent to a cheery Cockney and (as I fondly imagine) a real West Country tone. But it's no good—those superior cows don't even twitch one of their glorious eyelashes at my voice!

So I've decided that I'd never make a farmer's lass, after all!

But if I wouldn't, my young brother, Heath (or Heatherington in full) would certainly make a "varmer's boy"!

He can turn those cows out of the field and into the shed where they are to be milked in record time, murmuring "shoo" and "giddup" most professionally.

● A Lovable Litter

The old sow on the farm is certainly not very beautiful, but her name is rather sweet—Clementine.

And Clementine has just produced the most adorable litter of baby pigs that you ever saw. (Or "farrow" of pigs, as the farmer calls them!)

I never used to know which I thought the more enchanting—baby lambs, or baby goats (kids, to you!). But now, I've added piglets to the list—for they really are sweet.

When I first picked up a tiny, long-legged lamb, I had expected it to be very soft and cuddly. So you can imagine my surprise when I found it wasn't at all. In fact, the wool was quite harsh.

But there were no little lambs on the farm this week-end. They had all grown into very serious and distinctly foolish-looking sheep, while their mothers looked rather comic, having been newly shorn, and reminded me of French poodles that have been shaved.

● A Gobbling Chorus

Oh, there were turkeys, too, on this farm—blissfully unaware that there are only five more months to Christmas!

I wanted to take a snap of them, and so tried to make them "gobble," for they look so funny then.

But to make a turkey "gobble" to

order wasn't easy. I tried saying "miaoumiau" and "woof-woof," but they just turned their backs.

So—"What do you think of Father Christmas?" I said sternly.

At which, such a gobbling set up that I nearly dropped the camera in surprise.

You try it next time you see some turkeys!

● A Ribbon Strip

I tucked-in to such delicious food on this week-end that I'm quite sure I must have added a pound to my weight, but I'm too frightened to weigh myself—just in case I have!

All the same, I have thought of a very simple and, I think very attractive, way of letting out a frock and giving it just that extra inch or so that is sometimes necessary when one is at the growing stage.

An opening should be made all the way down the front of the frock, and a piece of striped ribbon about two inches wide let in this opening.

Providing the right choice of ribbon is made, this alteration need look like nothing of the sort, but actually improve the appearance of the frock.



● When Pressing Pleats

What with pleats being so fashionable again I expect you have heard murmurs in the family circle about the bother of pressing them.

But then, you know something about this, too, don't you? For tunics need lots of pleat-pressing if they are to have that handbox look all the time.

Next time some pleats are due for pressing, here's a little tip to remember. Instead of having lots of bother tacking them into position, just clip each pleat at the end with a "hair-grip."

It saves lots of labour—and leaves no mark, as pins sometimes do. Pass this on to mother, won't you?

And here's another suggestion mother would be sure to appreciate. Next time she is washing a black garment and is a little bit worried about it in case some of the deep dye should vanish and leave it rusty-looking, just tell her not to worry.

Tell her that if the garment is rinsed in very deep blue-water it will improve that blackness enormously.

● A Tiny Gift

Are you wishing with all your might that there was something very small, very inexpensive, and very simple that you could make in a twinkling?

Perhaps a chum has a birthday and you'd like to give her a "little something"—perhaps there is a charity bazaar in your district, and mother has asked you to contribute something to sell at a stall.

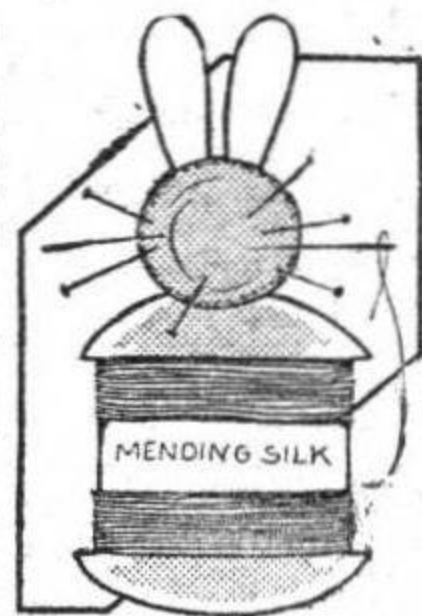
So what about this little mending silk novelty?

You trot into our favourite-shop-of-many-counters and select the one where cottons and needles and mending things are sold. There you purchase for three-halfpence a card of stocking-mending silk in a sun-tan shade.

At home, you cut out a very simple rabbit's-head from cardboard. Place a piece of cottonwool all over the circle part, and then cover it with a tiny scrap of silk.

Now you sew this bunny-head to the top of the card with two or three big—but invisible—stitches, and then jab a few needles and pins into the silk-covered part.

As a gift, it would be received with cheers, I'm sure, while at a bazaar I don't think it would be robbery to charge six-pence for such a novelty—especially in a good cause.



● Little Pests

Aren't moths a nuisance this weather? Clothes' moths, I mean.

They will fly out of wardrobes, and out of carpets, making all the family dash to catch them, for we know what damage they can do both to clothes and furnishing.

All sorts of preparations can be bought in the chemist, of course, for preventing these pests—from the pungent and inexpensive camphor, to the very superior pine perfumes.

But if you would like to try a more homely preventive—then cloves is the answer.

A few of these slipped down the arms of settees and chairs, pushed under the carpet and placed in the wardrobes and chests of drawers will send the moths scuttling.

Next time mother asks you to make some egg sandwiches for tea or for a picnic, I want you to remember this little tip.

If you mash up the hard-boiled egg with a fork, mixing in a little butter, not only will the egg spread more easily, but it will also go much farther.

To give the egg flavouring a new "kick," it's also quite an idea to mash the egg up with the pulp of a small tomato.

Oh, and don't forget the salt, will you? Just a sprinkling on each slice.

Bye-bye till next week, all!

Your friend,

PATRICIA.

A SUMMER-TIME HOBBY

Carol and her friend, Anne, go for a Nature Ramble—and love it!



“A NATURE Ramble?” said Anne in mild disappointment. “Sounds awfully dull to me.”

Her friend Carol looked at her pityingly. “Child,” she said. “That just shows how ignorant you are. Obviously you’ve never been on one. They’re fun!”

Fun! Anne was rather doubtful, but still, she had to go the following Wednesday afternoon, for it was a school arrangement, so she decided to make the best of it.

Carol, of course, has been on Nature rambles with Miss Home last summer, but that was before Anne had moved to her district.

The party—of twelve—alighted at a country-side station and set off across the sunbaked golf-links and common.

“Lovely day,” Anne said appreciatively. “And at least I can walk with you, and talk. Have you seen Robert Taylor yet in—”

But Carol didn’t seem to be listening, although Anne knew that Robert Taylor was Carol’s favourite film star. She had suddenly darted off.

Back she came in triumph, eyes sparkling.

“Anne,” she said, “a pheasant’s nest. Over there, hidden in the grass. Come on, let’s go and count the eggs.”

And forcibly Anne was dragged off, not very interested, it must be confessed.

Then: “Oh!” she gasped, when she saw the cunningly concealed nest, which contained no fewer than fifteen eggs. “Oh, how pretty—and how cutely hidden!”

“You hold the grass back like that,” ordered Carol quickly. “Now, where’s that portrait attachment dad gave me? Oh, here!”

Quickly she fixed over the lens of her box-camera the portrait attachment which enabled her to take close-up pictures—and snapped.

“Now come on, Anne,” she said. “We must catch up the others. Oh, look, this is Wild Orchis. Isn’t it sweet? I must have that,” and stooping, Carol picked it.

Anne felt a little out of it, so she picked a flower, too.

“What’s this, Carol?” she said. “It looks interesting.”

Carol examined the “find.”

“Oh, that’s only Yellow Dead Nettle. I’ve got that, and White Dead Nettle, and nearly all the nettle family, as a matter of fact. But see this?” she stopped again. “This is Wild Strawberry—and it actually has the most delicious fruit. It’s different from Barren Strawberry. I must have a specimen of the flower.”

“Do you mean this one?” Anne asked, anxious to be helpful.

“No, that’s Scarlet Pimpernel,” Carol said. “You ought to know that, Anne. You saw Leslie Howard in the film, didn’t you?”

Anne blushed and tucked the Scarlet Pimpernel into her paper carrier.

A LOVELY DAY

Before very long the two chums had collected Teasle, Bulrushes, Wild Rose, Marsh Marigold, and Foxgloves—and, curiously enough, Anne was every bit as keen as Carol.

When they came across a flower or plant they didn’t know the name of, they consulted Miss Home, who seemed to have a surprisingly interesting tale to tell about each.

One plant contained sap that was supposed to be a cure for corns, so the country folk said. Another could actually ensnare a small fly—and absorb it!

Anne was almost sorry when it was time to have the tea they had brought with them, and to compare “finds,” for she had least.

“Just wait, though, till the next ramble,” she whispered to Carol. “I’ll need a lorry to take mine back in.”

Home again, Carol and Anne planned a similar outing for the next three Saturdays, for Carol was going away after that. “And I shall look out for specimens on my holiday,” she warned Anne.

HAPPY MEMORIES

Both girls have their own Nature books.

They lay the specimens on a sheet of blotting-paper, place another on top, and then keep them pressed under several heavy books for two days.

At the end of that time they are ready for the Nature book. This is a thick exercise book, out of which Carol and Anne tear every other page, so as to give the “specimens” plenty of room. Each one is named by the help of Miss Home at school, and an old pack of cigarette cards at home. Any snapshots of “Nature” interest are added.

“I think it’s a lovely hobby, Carol,” says Anne. “And see how brown I am, too.”

“Vain thing,” Carol chuckles. “But I’m glad you’re enjoying it. And we’ll keep it up after the holidays, won’t we?”

“We sure will,” nods Anne, who has quite forgotten the name of that picture in which Robert Taylor was appearing.

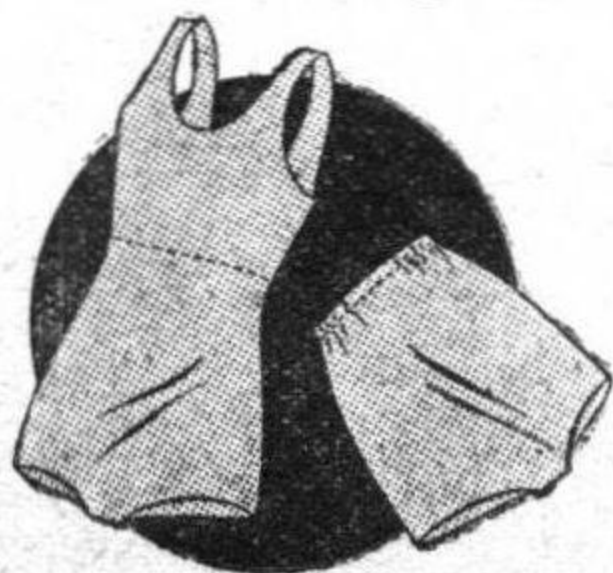
A PLAY-SUIT FOR YOUR HOLIDAY

BY this time, I think, “play-suits” must be quite familiar to you—even though they did only appear on English beaches for the first time last year.

They are the most adorable garments—a cross between the briefest bathing suit and the ever-useful shorts. Only, they are prettier than either.

For you see, play-suits are made either of cotton material or silk, as gaily printed as you like. They are often sleeveless and generally have a fairly low neck, in order to give the maximum amount of sunshine. They are also as short as possible, to give you absolute freedom.

The very latest beach-garment that you can make yourself from a too-short frock and a discarded bathing-suit.



You could soon make one yourself in time for your holiday, providing you have a simple, cotton frock (or a silk one for that matter) that is so short already that to shorten it a bit more won’t matter.

First you cut a square neck. Bind this around on the inside. Next cut out the sleeves, so that they are little more than wide shoulder-straps, and bind these too. Then you cut off the skirt part, so that the playsuit is about ten inches above your knees.

Next, of course, comes the little problem—what to wear under this tiny garment?

It must be something neat, and something tight-fitting—so ordinary panties won’t quite do.

The lower half of a last year’s bathing suit would be the very thing. You chop the top of the bathing suit, make a hem round the middle, and thread elastic through, making a most comfy pair of wool trunks.

Worn under this play-suit you will be able to skip, jump, and turn somersaults on the beach to your heart’s content.



(Continued from page 11)

do it between now and the end of the regatta, the chance will be lost for ever. In five weeks Natalie will be going away—to a foreign country, perhaps. Mrs. Fortescue will be in London, and they may never, never see each other again. But first we've got to find Natalie."

And that was the most difficult of problems. At break they scoured the river. No Natalie. After afternoon lessons they scoured the woods and the seashore. Still no Natalie. A phone call put through to Riverview was answered by Mrs. Trent, who, almost weeping, assured them that Natalie had not turned up, in spite of the fact that she had been due for a lesson from Professor Larkin that afternoon. Night came and went.

The day of the regatta—bright, sunshiny, cloudless—dawned. Natalie, apparently, had disappeared off the face of the earth.

Even Babs was feeling a little despairing then.

But if Babs was thinking of Natalie that bright regatta morning, her chums were not. They, in common with the rest of Cliff House, were in a fever of excitement. Bessie, full of importance because she was going to help with the catering, rolled off before breakfast to Fallsweir Cottage. Girls of all sizes and ages were tripping down to the river, and bagging every possible kind of boat. Before ten o'clock every motor-bus that passed Cliff House was completely loaded.

"Just on ten o'clock," Clara said cheerily. "And what a day for it, kids! Time for us to get dressed and be off!" she cried impatiently. "The old swan will be waiting for its young. Come, crew!"

The crew, consisting of Clara, Babs, Mabs, Janet, Leila Carroll, Jemima Carstairs, Jean Cartwright, and Christine Wilmer, scampered off in glee. Down to the boathouse they went, where Diana Royston-Clarke and Jean Charmant had secured a punt for the great occasion. Fortunately it was a large and deep punt, but even so they all had to stand up.

That didn't matter, though. Nothing mattered on this cheery, bright morning, and while Joan and Diana did the poling between them, the chums sang lustily as they drifted down-stream.

Shortly the regatta site came into view. Crowds and crowds of people lining the banks; all sorts of weird and wonderful boats and costumes moored up to the landing-stages. The great swan, which was Cliff House's Junior School's boat, was already moored there, and already people were thronging about it, discussing it, photographing it. The regatta-master met them as they leapt ashore.

"Just in time, girls!" he said jovially. "You'll find your cabins over there. The procession starts in twenty minutes, but I want you all to be in your places in the boats ten minutes before time. Cabins No. 1 to No. 10," he added. "You'll find all your clothes there. Here are the keys, Miss Redfern."

"Whoops!" cheered Clara.

They started across to the cabins, but just before they were reached Babs paused with a start. Mabs, who was with her, stopped as she felt Babs suddenly pluck at her sleeve.

"Mabs, look over there—that man and woman. Look at the walking-stick."

Mabs followed the direction of Babs' eyes. The man and woman to whom her chum referred were standing a dozen yards distant, earnestly talking to each

other. A rather red-faced, frumpish little woman it was, her face concealed by a veil. The man was broad-shouldered, clad in a long, light ulster overcoat, wearing a pair of tinted spectacles. There was something at first glance familiar about them, but the walking-stick gave the clue. Mabs recognised it at once. She had seen it recently, brandished in the hand of Mr. Trent.

"Mr. and Mrs. Trent!" she breathed. "In disguise! But why?"

"Why?" Babs' eyes flashed. "Because they're afraid of being recognised by Mrs. Fortescue. And because," she added, "they're on the look-out for Natalie. I'm sure that's it!"

"Phew!" Mabs said.

But there was no time for more then. Already Clara was shouting for Babs to come and open the door of the cabins. Each cabin bore the name of the girl or girls to whom it had been allotted, the largest ones to be shared by two girls. Babs saw that she had one to herself.

She unlocked it; she pushed open the door. And then she stood still.

For, facing her, was a girl.

"Natalie!" cried Babs.

"Hush!" Natalie put a finger to her lips. "Babs, I—I had to come. I—I don't want to miss the regatta," she said. "And my aunt and uncle—they're here, in disguise."

"I know; I've seen them," Babs said. "But, Natalie, why did you run away?"

"Because," Natalie said fiercely, "they were planning to take me away until this regatta was over; because I do not trust them! Babs, the night before last, before I went to bed, I reared a ladder against my window, and as soon as I heard them go to bed I nipped out. I've been hiding in a hut in the woods ever since. Because—Oh, Babs, I do want to see the regatta, and I knew they'd never let me. But now, Babs, what am I to do? If they see me, they will only take me away again!"

Babs was thinking quickly.

"Listen," she said, "but be quick, though. Natalie, dress in my cygnet costume, take my place in the swan boat, but keep the beak closed while you go down the river. Don't worry, Natalie. You're not robbing me of any pleasure. I have something else to do."

"Oh, Babs—"

"Please buck up! Get into that cygnet dress. Let me help you. You take my place in the boat, remember. And, Natalie, when you come back, stay here!"

Natalie gasped. But she laughed; her eyes shone then. Oh, this was glorious! Rapidly she dressed. Outside she went, skimming towards the swan boat. Babs, meantime, had her own idea to follow out.

From her pocket she took her sun spectacles; she donned them. Then she put on a light, shady hat she had brought along, pulling down the brim so that it threw a shadow across her face. While the procession was in progress, Babs was going to do a little detective work!

She trotted out. Everybody was peering towards the river now. Word had gone round that the procession was to start. Very soon Babs saw the disguised Mr. and Mrs. Trent standing near the water's edge. Unobtrusively joining the crowd, she approached them, standing a little in their rear.

There was a roar, a shout. A pistol banged.

"The procession's off!"

The procession was. Babs dimpled. Certainly the swan boat of Cliff House looked marvellously well. And what a

roar of cheering went up as it was seen that the eight cygnets, apparently nestling between the mother swan's wings, were rowing it! Off down the river it went, to be followed by a raft on which a crowd of pirates thrashed the water with birch-brooms as they propelled their craft along. After that came a motor-boat, disguised as a miniature man-of-war. After that, an old boat decorated with flowers, a barge representing a broadcasting station, and scores of other craft.

Babs heard Mr. Trent muttering.

"She's here—somewhere—I'm sure of it," he said. "But she's not with those girls from Cliff House. We must search everywhere."

"And when we find her?" queried the woman.

"Threaten her with the police."

Babs smiled grimly. As they moved off, she followed. Very carefully she hung about, hoping to goodness that Natalie, in the meantime, had not been spotted. Half an hour went by; then, amid a fresh roar of cheering, the procession reappeared. Loud and long the cheers assailed the air, but loudest and longest were those for the swan boat as it gracefully came to a halt at the landing-stage and the eight cygnets leapt out.

And then, suddenly, near at hand, talking to Lord Courtfield, Babs saw Mrs. Fortescue.

In a moment she had wrenched off sun spectacles and hat. She ran towards them. Natalie would be in her cabin then. If Natalie obeyed her instructions, she would be waiting.

"Mrs. Fortescue!" she gasped.

"Why, Barbara! Good gracious! I thought you were in the boat!"

"No, I wasn't," Babs said. "I—I gave my place to another girl. Please, Mrs. Fortescue, there's someone I want you to meet—in my cabin. Will you come?"

"Why, yes." But Mrs. Fortescue frowned a little, gazing anxiously at the excited face of the Cliff House junior. "Excuse me," she said to Lord Courtfield, and, with Babs, walked away. "What is this mystery, Barbara?"

But Babs laughed. She was elated, triumphant then. At last she had achieved her object. In another minute Natalie and this woman would be face to face. Almost at a run she reached the cabin door. She threw it open. And then she stared and Mrs. Fortescue blinked.

The cygnet costume was hanging in its place—but of Natalie there was no sign!

End with a Song!



"DOING well," Clara Trevlyn said cheerfully.

"Looks as if

we'll win the prize for the best boat in the procession.

And we're through the first heat of the Courtfield Sculls, and Janet's won the six-widths race. What's the next event, Babs?"

"The mystery canoe race," Babs said. "I'm in that. Every rower is masked, and not until the race is finished will anyone know who the winner is. After that"—she frowned as she studied her programme—"there's the greasy-pole fight—you're in that one, Leila—and then the concert. Everything ready, Mabs?"

"Everything," Mabs said, a little gloomily, "except Natalie. Oh dear! I wonder where that girl has got to?"

Babs did not reply. Nobody yet had discovered that Natalie, and not herself,

had taken one place in the Cliff House show boat. Yet she was as mystified as the rest. For Natalie once again seemed to have disappeared off the face of the earth, and Mrs. Fortescue still had to be confronted with the surprise Babs had prepared for her.

But everything else had gone off well—exceedingly well.

A cry went up:
"Mystery canoe race! Ten minutes! Get ready, please!"

"Whoops! I must fly!" Babs laughed. And fly she did; while the chums, who were not in this event, strolled down to the banks to watch the fun. In her cabin, Babs donned her black mask. Down to the landing-stage she hurried, where a grinning attendant gave her a number—8.

"Ready, please!"
She climbed into the canoe. Other competitors, similarly marked, were ready now. In a line they strung out across the river. The starter's pistol exploded. Bang! A roar of cheering went up.

"Go it!"
"Hurrah! Cliff House!"
Babs laughed. Splash, splash! In, out, her paddle went. She was lying second when the turn was reached. A girl in a white dress, paddling fiercely, was half a dozen yards to her front. Babs' eyes gleamed.

"Come on! Come on!" came a roar. Only two of them in it now—Babs and the girl in the white dress. Desperately Babs paddled after her; but, expert as she was, the other still held the lead. Who was she?

The girl looked back. Babs caught a flash of a smile. And then marvellously her voice rose in song as she neared the winning post. Babs, caught in a shock of amazement, missed her stroke.

"Natalie!" she cried. "Stop!"
Natalie it was. But she was forging ahead then. A cry—she had reached the winning post. Babs saw her canoe glide into the bank, saw Natalie leap up and run away. A second later her own boat had grounded. She saw Natalie's lithe figure dodging towards the crowd. Then she had gone.

"Well!" Babs panted. "Well, what a blessed will-o'-the-wisp!"
"Hard luck, Babs!" Clara said. "Tough cheddar! But, I say, could the girl who beat you paddle? Who was she?"

Babs shook her head at that, though she saw Mr. and Mrs. Trent near by and rather suspiciously watching her. Natalie obviously had seen them, and, afraid of being spotted herself, had skipped out of their way. But how to find the girl now? How to get in touch with her?

Mrs. Fortescue approached.
"Hard luck, Barbara!" she said. "That was a good race, but you were beaten by a better girl, I think. Oh hallo, Mabs! I suppose you are looking for me."

"Yes," Mabs said. "I think we're after the next event."

"But," Mrs. Fortescue smiled, "there is no need to look so anxious about it. What's the matter, my dear?"

"Was—was I looking anxious?" Mabs asked. "I'm sorry. I'm just a little disappointed, that's all. I hoped to have two singers, you know, and—well, only you have turned up. The other was Natalie Trent."

"Oh, the girl who's disappeared? What was she going to sing, Mabel?"

"Well, one or two things, but principally a lullaby," Mabs said.

"Sweet and Low?" questioned Mrs. Fortescue. "Land of Nod"? If you

particularly wanted this lullaby, perhaps I can sing it."

"Well, it's one I've never heard before," Mabs said. "I wonder if you know it. I can't sing, of course—not like Natalie. But it goes like this." And she hummed the opening bars. "I wonder— Mrs. Fortescue!" she cried.

For Mrs. Fortescue had turned quite pale; she was looking at Mabs with wide eyes.

"Mabs, where did you hear that?"
"Why, Natalie sang it."

"But—but I know it—I know it!" The words came from Mrs. Fortescue almost in a cry. "Mabel— Oh great goodness! What is happening to me?" she cried. "It was just as if—as if— Barbara dear, get me a chair," she said. "Excuse my—my foolishness, but that lullaby—that lullaby was written by my husband!"

"Your husband?" cried Babs.
"Yes. I never guessed anyone else knew it. I sang it once or twice years ago at charity affairs, and—well, I suppose someone got hold of it, though it



AS Babs pointed excitedly to the stick the man was carrying, Mabs gave a start. She recognised it instantly, as Babs had done—and knew who the man and woman were. "Mr. and Mrs. Trent!" she breathed. "In disguise! But why?"

never was made public. You see, my husband, when he wrote it, dedicated it to our little girl—"

"Girl!" Mabs started. "But, Mrs. Fortescue, I never knew you had a girl."

"I haven't." Mrs. Fortescue sadly shook her head. "That," she said in low tones, "was the reason I left the stage. As you know, I was an opera singer. My husband was a stage manager. I met him at the Regent Opera House, and we got married. We had a daughter—a sweet little girl whom I called Aurelia—and he composed this lullaby when she was very young. But—but she is dead now."

"Oh!" Babs said.
"She died when—when she was eight," Mrs. Fortescue went on, and gulped a little, while the chums stood sympathetically around her, and Babs felt a queer little thrill run through her.

"She died just after my husband was burned to death in the dreadful fire at Dorminster Theatre. I was on the Continent with my opera company then.

I rushed home. After I had given little Aurelia into the charge of my brother and sister in London I had to hurry back to Canada, where the company had left for. But I yearned to see my child again. I couldn't get away, so eventually I wrote asking my brother and sister-in-law in London to bring little Aurelia out to me."

The chums were silent, though each one of them was decidedly moved.

"And—and then"—the woman's voice choked a little—"perhaps you have heard about that dreadful accident to the s.s. Coddolcia? Near Newfoundland, in the fog, she struck a drifting iceberg. She was lost with practically all hands. My little girl—my poor Aurelia—and my brother and sister-in-law—"

"Oh my goodness!" Babs cried, but she was quivering suddenly. She felt almost afraid of the sudden tumultuous thoughts which were racing in her brain. "Mrs. Fort—"

"Thank you. I am all right now," Mrs. Fortescue said and smiled mistily.

"Please do forgive me. But it was because of those two tragedies that I gave up the stage. Somehow, after that, I simply could not go on; that is why I took to writing. And—and please do not ask me to sing that, Mabel, please. I—I don't think I could bear it again now."

Babs was a little pale. If she had only known this before! If only—if only— She felt almost afraid of the fantastic chain of sequences which were being forged in her mind. She had to ask one question.

"Mrs. Fortescue, did you give Aurelia a watch on her tenth birthday?"

Mrs. Fortescue started in surprise.
"Why, yes," she said; "I sent it from Canada, with her own initials engraved inside it. But, Barbara—"

"Then," Babs said, and gave a little excited laugh, "Mrs. Fortescue, don't ask questions, please," she pleaded. "I've got an idea, but it might be wrong, and—and I don't want to hurt anyone. But please sing that lullaby."

"Barbara, do not ask me—"

"But I am asking you," Babs said earnestly. "Mrs. Fortescue, I mean it. Please—please!" she added. "Oh, please do sing it! I've a reason for asking—a terrific reason!"

There was a moment's silence. Mabs stared at Babs incredulously, but Babs appeared not to see her. Mrs. Fortescue stared at them for a long moment. She gulped, bit her lip; then, as though the words were wrenched from her:

"Very well. But—but if I break down—"

Babs could almost have laughed then. Her eyes were aflame with excitement. If Natalie was there, Natalie would be in the audience; Natalie, hearing that song, perhaps, out of that vague and patchy memory of hers, would recognise the woman who sang it. And then—but Babs did not dare to think of that then.

The greasy-pole fight was occupying the attention of the crowd then. They all hurried to the stage. Mrs. Fortescue, as if keyed up for some ordeal, was biting her lip and was deathly pale. Babs, knowing the agony of remembrance she was suffering, felt deeply sorry for her, and almost ashamed of herself for her insistence. Then there was a roar of cheering, showing that the greasy-pole fight was over; people came flocking into the enclosure.

Babs, from behind the curtain, scanned the audience anxiously. She saw Mr. and Mrs. Trent. She saw, near them, the funny little figure of Professor Larkin. No sign of Natalie, however.

Was she there?

The programme started with a ventriloquist turn by Bessie Bunter. The audience laughed; the audience applauded. Bessie, beaming and bowing, went off. Flora Cann and Georgina Skeppington of Cliff House's Fifth Form came on and did conjuring tricks. Then a man appeared before the curtain.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, I want you to listen to Mrs. Fortescue, who is our prize-giver to-day. Mrs. Fortescue will render some of the melodies she used to sing in opera."

A clap, a cheer. The curtain went up. Mrs. Fortescue stood in the centre of the stage. Mabs took her seat at the piano, and from memory struck up the lullaby:

"The wind sighs in the branches,
Dark clouds in the sky—"

A breathless hush fell as the crystal-clear notes vibrated through the air. But there was in them a note of pathos, of emotion.

"And in the west the red sun sinks
And chilly night"—here, for a moment, the woman's voice broke—"draws nigh.

And—and now my darling baby—"

And then, in the very middle of a note, went up a cry that was wrung from the very heart of the singer.

Mrs. Fortescue, her eyes filled with tears, a look of such pitiful emotion on her face that it struck Babs to the core of her heart, stood up.

"I—I can't! I—I can't!" she cried. "I can't go on!"

"But," Babs cried, springing on to the stage, "Natalie can! Natalie, where are you? Natalie, come forward! Natalie, please, please sing that song!"

An instant's breathless silence. Then, from among the audience, a wonderful thing happened. A clear, tuneful voice began, on a soft note swelling swiftly

to the beautiful crescendo. And moving from behind the tall figure of Police-Inspector Winter, a girl walked out.

"And now my darling baby,
The time has come to rest—"

People stared, people craned. Natalie, moving slowly forward, singing still, mounted the stage. A gasp of wonderment went up. There was an atmosphere of sudden tension, of vibrant drama. And Babs was quivering and flushing all at once.

Natalie was mounting the steps of the stage.

"So close those pretty, dear, blue eyes,
While in my arms you nest—"

"Aurelia!" cried a trembling voice. "Aurelia—"

And there, her face convulsing, her whole form shaking, was Mrs. Fortescue. Mrs. Fortescue, with her arms outstretched as she tottered towards the singing Natalie.

Natalie paused, and looked. And suddenly she stopped dead. Suddenly something seemed to flash into her eyes. It was though, all at once, something snapped within her. In a flash the vague gaps in her memory were filled. She gave one choking, sobbing cry.

"Mother!"

While everybody stared, Babs' voice rang out.

"Inspector Winter, please stop those two people, Mr. and Mrs. Trent, who are running away!"

AMAZING AND sensational interlude to that regatta. But Babs had done it! Babs' hunch had come true! Babs, in the end, had been right. The child believed to be drowned, the mother who mourned, had been reunited!

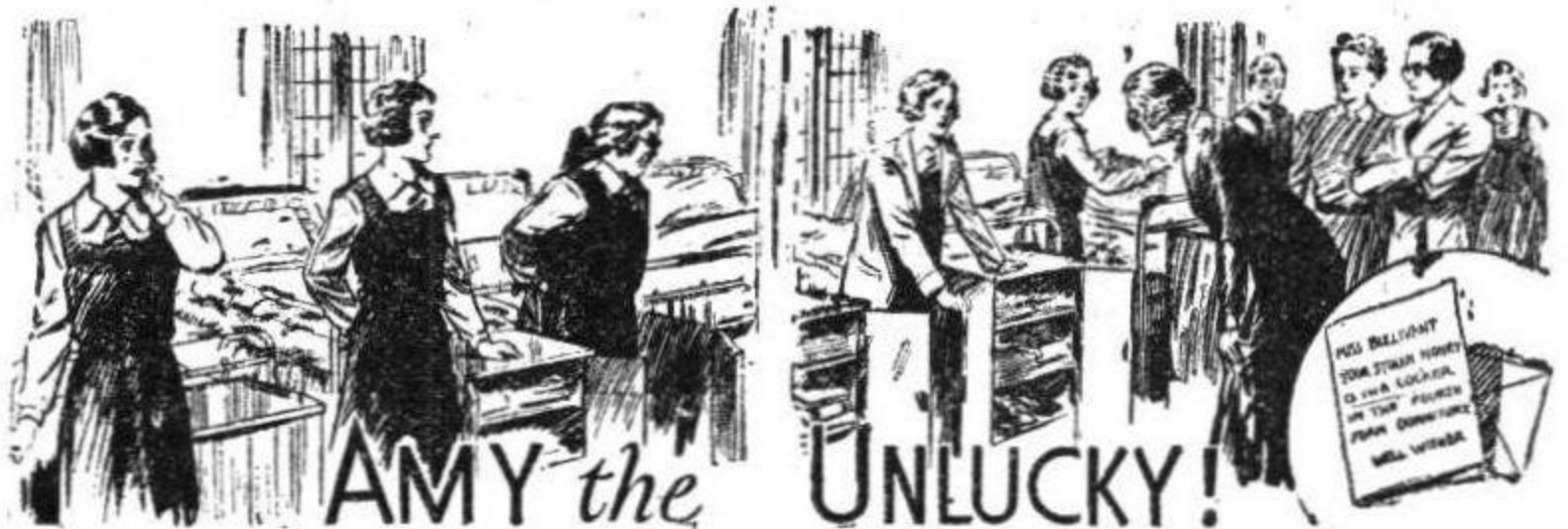
Before that night the story was being whispered right through the regatta grounds. Mrs. Fortescue and Natalie—or rather Aurelia—were mother and daughter. Professor Larkin, called upon to tell all he knew, filled in the missing details. He had been on the s.s. Coddolcia when it foundered. It was on that ship he had heard Aurelia sing at a ship's concert, and, believing Mr. and Mrs. Trent to be her legal guardians, had promised, if only they would have the girl's voice trained, he would make a fortune for them when she was older. Then had come the crash. Aurelia had been struck on the head in the melee to get to the boats. Hence her faulty memory. After that—

The Trents—or rather the Fortescues—had not gone down. Adrift on their own in one of the ship's boats, with Aurelia unconscious, they had been picked up. Intent on making the fortune which Aurelia's voice would earn for them, they had, from that moment, taken another name and posed as her legal guardians, allowing the heart-broken mother in the meantime to believe they had all been victims of the disaster.

"A dreadful, dreadful plot!" Mrs. Fortescue said. "A dreadful plot! But I shall not prosecute. They are my own flesh and blood. In this moment of my happiness I do not wish to bring unhappiness even to those who have done me wrong. But, Barbara, I shall never, never be able to thank you for what you have done. Never."

"Nor," Aurelia said softly but happily, "I, Barbara. And some day," she added, "I will prove that to you. Dear, dear mother!" she sighed. "Dear Babs! Dear all of you! Oh, how happy, how happy I am!"

END OF THIS WEEK'S STORY.



Always unlucky! That seemed to be the fate of Amy Jones, of the Cliff House Fourth Form. And yet when Babs & Co. were arranging the Fourth's part in the grand garden party to be held in the school grounds, it really seemed that Amy's luck had changed. For she was the lucky girl drawn to be in charge of the form stall; she the one who would be most in the limelight.

No wonder Amy was thrilled, excited. But—not for long. Again, her luck changed. Something happened to mar her happiness; something which, deliberately made use of by a girl who coveted Amy's honoured role, looked like ending in utter disaster for the "Jonah" of the Fourth.

Be sure not to miss this absorbing—and very "summery"
—HILDA RICHARDS story. It appears complete next week.

Further chapters of our fascinating and unusual Western story—

GIRL RIDER OF THE BLUE HILLS!



By
**DORIS
LESLIE**

FOR NEW READERS.

FAY THORNTON lives on the Flying H ranch in Texas with her father, ROBERT THORNTON, and her two little brothers. The ranch is small and not too prosperous. Mr. Thornton is wounded by cattle thieves on the land of wealthy John Hampton, who owns a big neighbouring ranch, and who is their enemy. Mr. Thornton is not seriously hurt, but people are whispering that he is really one of the men rustling cattle. A saddle bag containing articles used by cattle rustlers falls into the hands of Fay and her father. Mr. Thornton rides off to try to track down the owner. It is Fay's birthday, and she is preparing a party when her two young brothers arrive home early from school. There has been trouble at the school because the other boys have been saying that Mr. Thornton is a rustler. Fay rides down to the school, and learns that because of the trouble the school children are to miss a treat. The mothers of the other boys and girls are furious.

(Now read on.)

vehement words, there still remained to be solved the problem of the cancelled school-treat, and all its disastrous repercussions against her and her young brothers.

Because they had defended their father's name against the taunt that he was a rustler, there had been disorder in the school, and John Hampton had cancelled the treat he had been giving them that afternoon.

No wonder all the boys and girls were miserable, dejected. And no wonder they and their mothers blamed her brothers. Fay's lips compressed. That had been Hampton's idea, to make things even worse for her and daddy.

Undoubtedly Hampton was an enemy. Undoubtedly he wanted to drive the little family from the Flying H Ranch, so that he could add it to his own vast

the other way round; supposin' one of my boys—my Ted—had said one of your husbands was a rustler. Yours—or yours—or yours!"

She nodded quickly to one woman after another.

"And supposin' there'd been this same trouble 'cos your boy, believing it was a lie—knowing it was a lie—had stuck up for his dad and gone for my boy. What would you have done? What would you have felt? In your heart wouldn't you have been proud of him?"

Breathing a little heavily, she surveyed them one by one. They were silent, uncertain, held despite themselves, and most of them were regarding her with new expressions.

"Waal, I—I reckon I can see yore point," said Mrs. Gribbin. She was a friend of the Thorntons, and had taken no part in the baiting of Fay. "Personally I've never believed a word of those yarns, an' never will. But it is difficult—"

"It's more'n difficult," cut in another woman, frowning. "I ain't sayin' as I altogether blame the Thornton kids, but that don't give back the treat to our kids."

Fay's face lit up. Excitedly she looked at them all.

"No," she said; "but I tell you what will. Look! I'm holdin' a party to-day." She didn't add it was her own birthday party. "I've got heaps of everything—jellies, trifles, cakes, and sweets—an' I could soon make some more. Supposing all your kiddies come to that? And you, too, if you like. What do you say?"

There was no doubt about the answer so far as the youngsters were concerned. Tears gone, faces radiant again, they clamoured round their mothers, begging for permission to go.

"Aw, ma, do say yes—please—please!"

"Gee, ma, I can go, can't I? Can't I?"

There was a general nodding of heads; a battery of smiles.

"Why, sure—sure! Course you can go! And if Miss Thornton doesn't really mind, guess I'll pop along, too."

"And me!"

"Reckon I'll do the same!"

But one of the obstinate ones surlily raised an objection.

"Yes, but what about all the kids who've gone home? Who's going to get

An Unexpected Helping Hand!

"ANYTHING'S fair with a rustler's kids!"

Like the lash of a whip those fiercely uttered words sank into Fay Thornton's mind.

For a moment she did not speak, but stood hemmed in by that circle of hostile mothers, with the silence broken only by the fitful sobbing of one or two bitterly disappointed children.

And then, in a great surging wave, anger and defiance welled up inside her. Eyes blazing, she turned upon the speaker.

"Who says my father's a rustler?" she cried. "A lot of lying rumours, that's all. Just because he was wounded while chasing them on Hampton's land, people who haven't anything better to do go about whispering: 'Thornton's a rustler!' And if any of you believe it," she went on, scanning face after face. "it's only because you want to believe it—because it's something new to talk about!"

A little breathless, she broke off, and the crowd of irate mothers looked uncertain. But Fay knew in her heart that although she might have created something of an impression with those

FOR THE SAKE OF HER FATHER AND HER TWO YOUNG BROTHERS FAY HAD TO MAKE HER BIRTHDAY PARTY A GREAT SUCCESS!

holding, the Lazy T, which already hemmed it in on three sides. But—Fay clenched her hands—that knowledge didn't help her now.

"Yore boys want a good thrashing, making the rest of the school unhappy like this!" one woman burst out.

"Why?" asked Fay, keeping her temper by an effort. "Because they stood up for their father?"

"Because they behaved like young hooligans!"

"Settin' on young Johnny Benson like little savages!"

Fay might have smiled at that last remark, considering that Johnny Benson, who wasn't here, happened to be inches taller than her elder brother Ted; but she didn't.

"Listen, all of you, please!" she begged. "Now, supposing things were

them out now? They won't feel like ridin' over to the Flying H after they've just been here an' back."

"Oh," said Fay, for that was certainly a poser. She'd forgotten that only about half the school was represented here. "That's awkward."

And then another voice intervened—the gay, familiar, and very pleasant voice of a young man.

"Not if you people are any good at climbing into this old wagon," it declared.

Everyone looked up; everyone except Fay stared in amazement. But Fay broke into a broad smile.

Standing beside a large wagon was a youth of about seventeen, immaculately dressed in English riding clothes—breeches, check jacket, and light felt hat. Never had Fay been so glad to see anyone before.

"Why, you again!" she cried, moving towards him.

"Well, I told you I'd be seeing you again shortly," Douglas Lessiter replied. "It isn't often I break a promise."

Fay laughed. She felt suddenly happy. The wagon would solve the problem easily enough, for there would be ample room not only for all the mothers and children here, but for the rest of the scholars, whom Douglas could collect one by one from their homes.

But she also felt once more that strange sense of puzzlement that gripped her whenever she was with Douglas.

No doubt about it; he was a queer fellow. She'd caught him spying on daddy not many days ago. That certainly wasn't the action one expected of a friend. Then, again, he was one of Hampton's guests. And yet, in a number of little ways, he had shown his friendliness towards her.

Why, his very appearance now, with the one thing that would enable her project to be a complete success—that was an example of friendship, all right. And strange, too, for she had passed him on the trail not half an hour ago, riding out of town with Hampton and his daughter, and he had whispered that he'd be seeing her presently.

Had he known of the cancelled treat? Had he even then been considering how he could help her?

Fay, still smiling, looked at him questioningly.

"Mighty lucky for us you happen to have that old wagon," she said.

"Isn't it?" was Douglas' bland reply. "I was going to have a bit of a beanfeast myself—drive out somewhere and picnic, you know. I've got oodles of tuck in the back, there, even popcorns, and I fancy the fellow at the stores shoved some candies in by mistake. Only spotted them when it was too late, but they'll be pretty useful now, won't they?"

Fay's wonderment became certainty. He had done this to help her. Candies by mistake! Who ever heard of such a thing?

Radiant-faced, she turned to the mothers and children.

"Well, thanks to Mr. Lessiter, we've nothing to worry about," she exclaimed. "In you tumble! By the time you arrive I'll have everything ready."

With whoops of excitement the children scrambled aboard, over the back, up via the wheels, and in any way that served as a step. Then, when the mothers had made a more sedate, but just as delighted, ascent, Fay lingered for a few final words with Douglas.

"There are one or two others to be collected," she said. "The mothers'll tell you where to go. And thanks so

Your Editor's address is:—Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Please send a stamped, addressed envelope if you wish for a reply by post.

BETWEEN OURSELVES



MY DEAR READERS,—It's glorious; it's gorgeous; it's simply wonderful! I mean, the weather. Here is your Editor, minus coat, with sleeves rolled up, pipe on the edge of his desk, typewriter before him, sheet of paper snugly nestling between the rollers—and on the other side of the room the most alluringly dazzling sunshine you ever did see!

I have been thinking of holidays. Your holidays, my holidays, the Cliff House girls' holidays! For naturally we've simply got to include Babs & Co. in such delightful reflections, haven't we? Well, with regard to the summer holidays of your Cliff House favourites, I shall have something more to say next week—something that will, I am sure, fill you with eager anticipation.

Until then, I suppose, we must try to thrust holidays to the back of our minds for just a few more days. And here's something to help make you forget that tedious period of waiting.

"AMY THE UNLUCKY!"

That is the title of next Saturday's absorbing LONG COMPLETE Hilda Richards story. Amy is Amy Jones, the timid Fourth Former who seems to be dogged by ill-luck—at least, so far as Amy feels—no matter what she does, and no matter how promising things may seem for her.

But at last, apparently, Amy's fortunes have changed. The Fourth are taking part in a thrilling garden-party. Their contribution is a beautiful flower-stall, and Amy wins a lottery for the honour of being in charge. She, such a back number in the Fourth for so long, to be the star turn of her Form; to be dressed in lovely, old-fashioned clothes, to be something important, something valuable!

No wonder Amy is deliriously happy. No wonder Amy almost forgets her legendary bad luck. But, alas! it hasn't forgotten Amy. In the most startling, unfortunate manner, it descends upon the luckless Fourth Former at the very moment when she is revelling in her chance of triumph.

And, thanks to the activities of someone who covets Amy's role, it bids fair to end in utter disaster for her!

On no account miss this magnificent story. It will hold you spellbound, as well as enchant you with its summery flavour.

As usual, of course, next week's issue will contain another superb instalment of "Girl Rider of the Blue Hills," another topping COMPLETE story of "Cousin George and 'The Imp'," more of Patricia's Bright and Instructive Pages, and a further Cliff House Pet. A really grand number, you'll agree. And now—au revoir until then.

With best wishes,

Your sincere friend,

THE EDITOR.

much for all this. It's mighty fine of you."

"Oh, nothing much," said Douglas, with an airy grin. "Only too-pleased to be able to get rid of those candies and things!"

And, with a salute and a jump, he was up on the driving-seat.

Next moment, to the roar of shrilly happy voices and a forest of waving arms, the buggy clattered up the High Street in a cloud of dust.

Thoughtfully, Fay watched it disappear.

"Queer guy, isn't he, Starlight?" she murmured, fondling one of her range pony's ears. "Wonder if I'll ever understand him properly. Oh, well, come on! We've work to do!"

And, swinging into the saddle, she galloped off in the same direction as the buggy, far beyond which she could see the distant blue hills.

At a fast canter she swung along, until, rounding a bend in the trail, she spotted a group of figures, hitherto concealed by a wall of rock.

John Hampton himself, heavily built and swarthy faced—in conversation with three of her father's cowboys!

They did not notice her until she was within earshot, then one of them—Lefty Mason, a short, bow-legged little fellow, in his early thirties—gave a warning cough, and, like four conspirators caught red-handed, they all turned towards Fay's lone figure as she approached.

Party Fun—and Peril!

LIKE magic, the quartet's conversation ceased, but not before Fay had caught a fragment of something Hampton was saying.

"—just thought I'd let you boys know that if ever you wanted—"

That was all she heard, because Hampton abruptly broke off. But it was sufficient to fill her with sudden wonderment, and to make her glance sharply at the cowboys as they drew to one side to let her pass.

"Afternoon, boys!" she said, studying their faces.

"Afternoon, Miss Fay!"

In a chorus they returned her greeting and touched their broad-brimmed stetsons. But they seemed ill at ease. Lefty Mason was biting his lip. The others—Sam Hicks, the youngest puncher on the ranch, and tall, blond Jim Orr—only held her gaze for an instant, then looked down.

Something was wrong. What?

Fay looked at Hampton, on her other side. His sallow features wore a peculiar expression.

"Well, s'long, boys! Glad to have had this little chat," he said, and, spurring his horse forward, galloped away.

Fay glanced after him, smiled at the three cowboys, and, patting Starlight's neck, resumed her interrupted journey home.

Her forehead was crinkled into a brooding frown. Funny! Those words of Hampton's and the manner of the cowboys. It had almost seemed as if Hampton had been offering them a job with him. That was just the sort of thing he would do when she and daddy needed all the help they could get. And if those three left—if capable, efficient Lefty Mason—

Then, almost irritably, she shook her head.

Oh, but Lefty wouldn't desert the Flying H. He was too loyal for that. Fay, remembering how she had nursed his little girl Tina through pneumonia, way back in the winter, found it impossible to believe that Lefty could ever

show such ingratitude because of any offer from Hampton.

"Maybe Hampton did offer them jobs," she finally decided, "but they turned it down! Guess I'm worrying over nothing."

The shadows of late afternoon were beginning to lengthen when she rode up to the Flying H ranch-house through the fluttering chickens, and sent Starlight straight into the corral. With easy strides she went round to the back of the ranch-house, to the vegetable patch, where six-year-old Bobbie, looking adoringly cute in his suit of dungarees, was trying to lasso the long-suffering mongrel, Rex, while Ted sat on an upturned box, whittling down a piece of wood.

Ted, being three years older than the golden-haired youngster, could sometimes be quite sedate. His damaged cheek was a vividly-coloured bruise by this time, but Fay did not appear to notice it.

"Great news, boys!" she cried, and told them of the expected guests.

And she told them in such a way that, not realising for one moment exactly how important the party was, they whooped with delight, and, joining hands, capered round the box.

"'Rah! 'Rah! 'Rah!" they cheered.

They were still noisily demonstrating their jubilation when Fay, in the kitchen, busily started making more good things. Time simply flew. It barely seemed more than a few minutes before Douglas drove up with a buggy that simply overflowed with shouting, singing children and smiling mothers, and a few fathers.

Happily Fay welcomed them all, made them at home, supervised the removal of Douglas' provisions, saw to it that Bobbie and Ted were doing their duty as joint hosts, and then turned to Douglas, who lolled in the porch.

"Thanks ever so much!" she said, rosy-cheeked. "And now, in you come! I'm sure the kiddies'll love you to stay."

But, to her surprise, Douglas shook his head.

"Awfully sorry, Miss Thornton," he said, "but I can't. I'd like to, of course, but—well, there's something I've got to do." He doffed his hat, turned away, and then swung round again. "Oh, by the way, I saw your father not long ago. He seemed to be in a hurry, as if going to meet someone. Don't know who it was, of course, but I hope he meets the chappie, anyway. I do hate people to be disappointed, you know. Well, cheerio, I'll be beetling now!"

And, with a little flip of the hand, he strolled away.

Fay, eyes widened, watched his athletic figure cross the yard. What did he mean? And why had he bothered to mention daddy like that? She knew where daddy was. He had gone in quest of a clue to the whereabouts of the rustler whose saddle-bag they had found—the saddle-bag which had contained a photo of a man, a mask, and an iron used for altering the brand on cattle. She and daddy hoped it would lead them to the real rustlers.

Fay drew in her breath. Did Douglas know about the saddle-bag? Oh, but he couldn't! It was locked in one of the dresser cupboards. All the same, he had known or suspected something. His manner made that clear.

Fay gave it up. Speculation got her nowhere, and she had such a lot to do—such a vitally important task to tackle. The party must be a tremendous success, so that all the youngsters went away completely happy.

If they did, Bobbie and Ted need

suffer no persecution at school, and perhaps the rumours about daddy would die down at last.

Smiling gaily, she faced the crowd of children and adults.

"Make yourselves at home, folks!" she cried. "Tea won't be a jiffy. I'm just waitin' for the kettles to boil."

"Oh dear! They are a long time, sis!" said Bobbie wistfully.

And he and some of the smaller ones cast such longing, eager glances at the well-laden table that there was a roar of laughter. Fay, joining in the merriment, felt her heart glow.

"You'll find playing-cards on the dresser, folks," Fay went on. "And there's a dartboard on the wall. Ted, fetch some more chairs, there's a good lad! And you, Bobbie, will you go and see if the cowboys are coming in?"

Ted rushed off to carry out his instructions, but Bobbie, swinging on his heels, dallied over his.

"Could—could we have some of those candies, please, sis?" he asked.

"After tea," Fay told him. She patted his cheek as she turned towards the big stove. "You won't have any room for the trifle otherwise."

Just as Fay was announcing that tea was ready, the cowboys trooped in. Long-legged, melancholy looking Tiny Shaw, the foreman, led the way. To-day he was grinning broadly. So were the others. Even the trio who had been talking to Hampton seemed to have overcome the awkwardness that had smitten them when she had ridden up.

And, with the arrival of those seven Texans, things livened up at once. The fun was fast and furious. There wasn't any too much room—Bobbie and a few of the tinier ones kept nudging each other's elbows off their plates—but nobody seemed to mind. It only added to the fun.

With sparkling eyes, Fay, presiding over the largest "family" she had ever had to supervise, watched the good things gradually disappear. And as the table became shorn of its delicacies, so conversation became less stilled and more spontaneous, so jokes and jests and good-natured leg-pulls were bandied from one to another.

And after the meal began one of the most riotous and yet most wonderful evenings of Fay's life. Everybody joined in the fun. There were games for children only, games for adults only, games for both sections combined, and moments when the parents could relax, taking a little stroll in the cool evening breeze outside the porch.

"If only daddy were here!" Fay thought, once or twice. "It'd do him good to see everyone so friendly."

Daddy had promised to return in time for the party; but, then, perhaps he was on the trail of that rustler whose saddle-bag they had found. Instinctively Fay glanced towards the dresser. A good job none of these amiable guests suspected what was hidden there.

One glimpse of that running-iron, which everyone in these parts knew was a rustler's indispensable tool, and her father's guilt would seem irrefutable!

And then she became aware of a lull in the merriment, while Jim Orr took the stage to announce that he was going to play some mouth-organ solos—whether they wanted it or not!

"O.K.!" Fay chuckled. "I'll get some cottonwool for our ears!"

Jim Orr laughed, and strode over to the dresser. Stooping, he tugged at one of the cupboards. The door held fast.

"Say, whar's the key, Miss Fay?" he yelled, above the din.

"The key, Jim?" Fay, who had gone to fetch some cigarettes for the menfolk, turned with an inquiring smile. "What key, Jim?"

"The key to this cupboard. My mouth-organ's in there, Miss Fay."

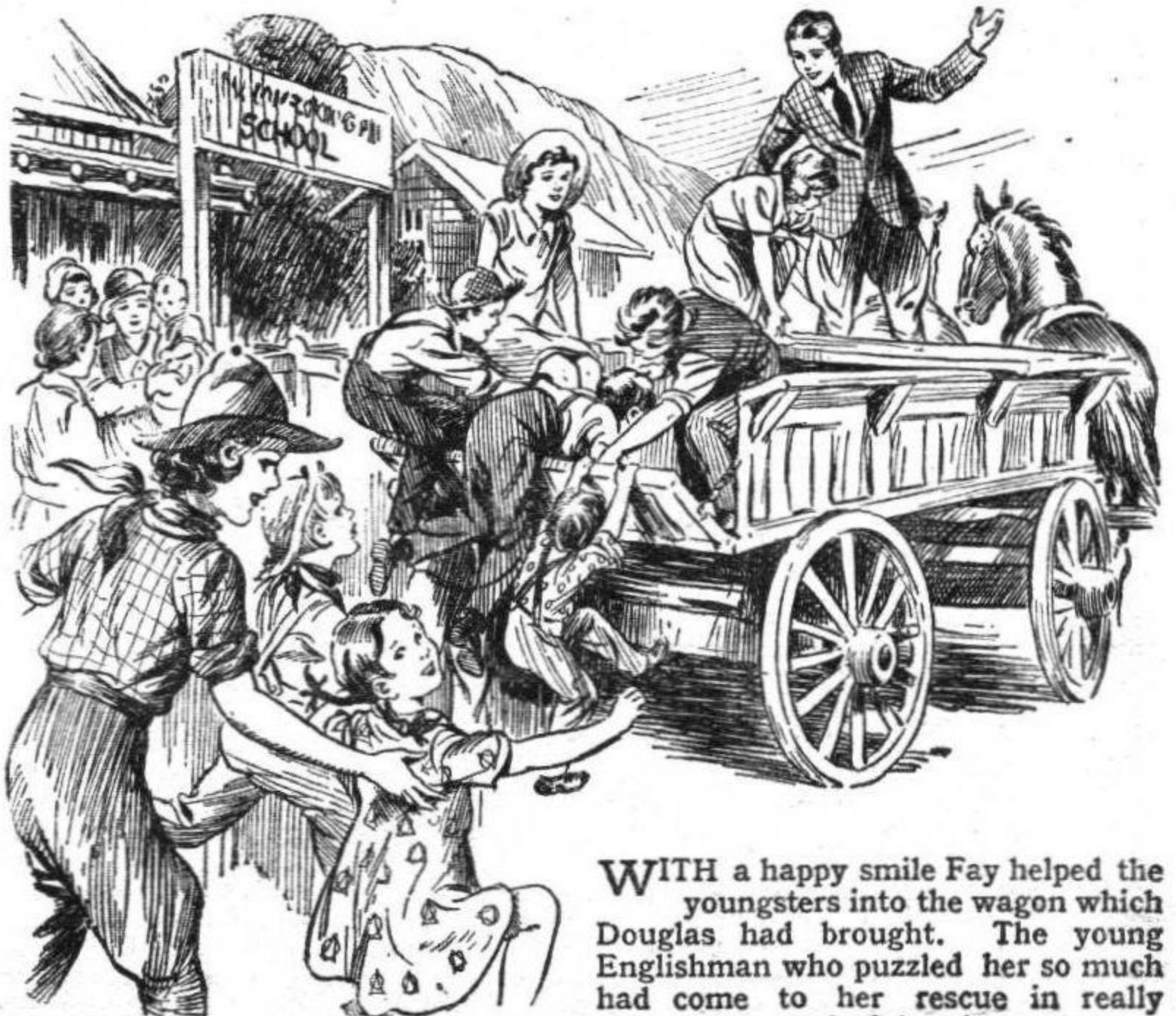
Fay's heart went cold. Jim Orr was pulling at the very door which concealed the incriminating running-iron!

"Oh, that?" she said, and gave a light laugh. "Guess—guess it's mislaid somewhere. But I'll find it later."

"O.K.!" said Jim, and would have gone from the dresser had not Ted given a hail from the other side of the room.

"Sure, I know where the key is, Jim!" the boy yelled. "I'll show you!"

And while Fay stood there, rooted to the floor in horror, her young brother began a zigzagging struggle across the crowded room that could only end in



WITH a happy smile Fay helped the youngsters into the wagon which Douglas had brought. The young Englishman who puzzled her so much had come to her rescue in really wonderful style.

utter disaster for their father—if the running-iron was found!

A Fresh Problem!

NEVER had Fay thought so swiftly, so frantically. And never had she acted with such haste.

Dodging in and out of the guests, she reached Ted just as he was about to lift the eggcup under which the cupboard key was hidden. Her smile was broad, her voice apparently quite calm, but her heart beat with painful thumps.

"Later on, Ted; just before we break up," she said. "You don't mind, Jim, do you?" she added, flashing the cowboy a smile. "Only it's right an' proper to end a beanfeast with a sing-song, and I've just thought of a mighty fine game we can all play."

So she had; but only because it was a game which would give her an opportunity of removing that menacing object from the cupboard, so that later the mouth-organ could be secured without danger to daddy.

"Waal, I reckon I can wait," said Jim Orr.

Yet he gave Fay a wondering look as he turned away—a look which Fay fortunately did not see, for she was busily calling for silence, and explaining just what this wonderful idea of hers was like.

She called it "Cowboys and Indians." Slips of paper were drawn in secret—all of them plain except two—which contained drawings of a bow and arrow, and a revolver. Whoever got the bow and arrow, the Redskin, had to lay a hand on someone in the dark, then slip away. The "victim" counted thirty, and then screamed. The lamps were relit, and the person who had drawn the revolver, assuming the role of cowboy or detective, tried to discover who the Redskin was.

"Gee, that's a swell game!" Ted cried. "I remember it now. Come on! Get some paper! Got a pencil, Bobbie?"

Within a few minutes the lots were drawn. Fay blew out the lamps, and the kitchen was wrapped in darkness, save for the vivid Texan moon which streamed through a crack in the curtains. On tiptoe people began to steal away, until only Fay, hidden behind the kitchen door, remained.

Then, heart in mouth, scarce daring to breathe, she fetched the key.

So quickly did her desperate mission succeed that she was almost startled to find the running-iron and the mask and saddle-bag in her arms. As she recrossed the room she bumped into someone, but, whoever it was, said nothing, and it was the work of only a few seconds to secrete the salvaged objects in the copper, and then replace the lid. Long before someone screamed, all danger had been averted.

And so the evening did end with a sing-song, after all, except for the cheers given in Fay's honour as everyone departed. Gracious, how she thrilled! No doubt about it. The party had achieved everything it had set out to achieve.

She soon got Bobbie and Ted to bed, and then Mr. Thornton's tall figure appeared. His injured arm was no longer in a sling, but he looked tired and haggard, and Fay, kissing him fondly, helped him to a chair, and drew off his riding-boots.

"Poor old dad!" she said. "You are acue up. Any news?"

Nodding, he patted her cheek. Yes, fairly hopeful news. He'd been to Ainsworth, fifty miles away, and the sheriff there was obtaining the photographs of known rustlers who frequented this district, so that their likenesses could be compared with the photograph of the man in the saddle-bag.

"Then we may get on the trail of the real culprits, after all, daddy," Fay said eagerly.

"I sure hope so, honey," was his quiet reply.

She did not mention the trouble at school, although she told him briefly about the party. He looked so worn-out. A good night's rest was what he needed.

And she herself, having kissed him good-night, was so gloriously happy and contented at the way everything had turned out, that sleep came to her almost as soon as her head touched the pillow.

It was during next morning, however, that one of her problems was revived.

Just before dinner, Tiny Shaw rode in with a folded slip of paper.

"For yore dad—from Lefty an' Jim an' Sam." He was frowning perplexedly. "Seemed sorter queer, they did, too. S'long!"

The three cowboys she had caught talking to Hampton! Wondering, Fay sought out her father. He was repairing the roof of one of the out-houses; but his hammering ceased as, mounting the ladder, she handed up the note. With quizzically lifted brows, he opened it and began to read. Then all at once his brows dropped; he stared at it for a while, slowly put down the hammer, and, descending to the yard, walked past Fay into the kitchen.

"Daddy!" she called. "Daddy, what is it?"

She tore after him. The look on his face as he went past her had been that of a man who has seen a ghost. It frightened her.

It was in his bed-room that she found him, with the door closed. Seated in a chair, his head buried between his hands, he was unaware of her approach, and gently she took the slip of paper that still protruded from his fingers.

It was crumpled now. With trembling hands she smoothed it out. She bent down to it and began to read, and what she read, in misspelt, barely legible words, was like the thrust of a knife:

"We seen that iron Miss Fay took from the cubberd last nite, and we ain't working for no rustler no more.—LEFTY, SAM, JIM."

She remembered now bumping into someone last night in the darkened kitchen. Slowly Fay lowered the note.

"Guess we can hardly blame them, daddy," she said quietly.

"Aw, I'm not blamin' them, honey!" Almost fiercely her father spoke. "I'm thinkin' of what this means to us. Me under suspicion, bills to meet all over th' place—maybe not urgent at the moment, but gettin' urgent every day—an' now jest when we can do with all the help we can get, half th' outfit slopes. Seems as if—as if things ain't meant to get right for us, honey."

He turned away his head.

"Maybe we can get other hands, daddy," Fay murmured comfortingly.

"Lucky if we do. There ain't any

as I knows of. I—I figger I'm just about whacked, honey." He did look at her then, taking her chin between his fingers, and tilting back her head. "If it was only for myself I wouldn't care two hoots! I'd manage somehow. But it's you an—an' those youngsters asleep in there I'm thinkin' of. It ain't right that you should all be made to suffer like this. An' you've enough on yore hands, honey, runnin' the home at the best o' times, without things like this to drive you crazy with worrying. It—it just ain't right, lass, that's all."

Fay set her lips. Her heart was torn with grief to see this big, strong, self-reliant daddy of hers so utterly crushed and broken. But he'd had to endure so much.

Only too well did she realise the utter disaster that faced them now. With three hands less they could never run the ranch, small as it was. And yet they must run it. It was their only means of livelihood.

And all because—

Flaming anger burned within her as she suddenly recalled that encounter on the trail. This was Hampton's doing, up to a point. She could guess what he had been doing yesterday, trying to induce those three cowboys to leave the Flying H, and join him. And they had refused, until one of them had seen her remove the running-iron. And that had crystallised in their minds whatever suspicions Hampton had sown.

"Daddy," she said, with sudden decision, "there's only one thing to do. Lefty's always been loyal to us—more of a pal of yours than a hand. I'm going to ride out to the Blue Hills an' see him; have a—a talk with him, and beg him to come back. If Lefty comes back, I think perhaps the others would."

It would mean humbling herself, but she wouldn't mind if only they could stave off the disaster that threatened them now.

"Waal, if yuh think it'll do any good, honey," her father said, with a wan smile, "you're sure at liberty to try. Lefty's more likely to listen to you than anybody. Makes me feel kinder ashamed at being such a milk-sop."

"But you're not a milk-sop, daddy," Fay told him, her arms around his neck. "If you were you'd have given in days ago, when you got that wound," she added meaningly. "Now just you go an' lie down, and to-night I'll ride over to Lefty's."

It was nearing dusk when Fay, saddling Starlight, set off along the trail. Bobbie and Ted had returned from school in their old spirits. Everything there was just "dandy," as Ted put it. And they'd gone to bed healthily tired.

But Fay was not thinking of them now as she cut off at a tangent across the plains. It was the Blue Hills yonder that occupied her every thought. Lefty Mason lived there. It was only occasionally that he slept with the other cowboys in the Flying H bunkhouse. She was going to plead with him; go down on her knees, if need be, trusting that for old-time's sake Lefty would change his mind.

"If he don't, old boy," she whispered, "then I sure guess things are mighty bad. But he's going to, Starlight. Somehow, I'll make him!"

ADVENTURES come Fay's way on her vital mission into the Blue Hills. You'll read all about them in next Saturday's chapters of this grand serial.

COMPLETE this week. Another delightful fun-and-frolic story featuring—



"Mother's birthday shall be made really memorable. And we'll buy her a Pekingese, as you say, Hetty." Thus Cousin George when the IMP, first as usual, reminded him of the great day.

The Imp Makes Up Her Mind!

"MY golly, and I nearly forgot—pshaw! That's a bit of luck!"

And Hetty Sonning almost shot out of the armchair in which she had been sitting toying with her homework.

There was another occupant of the bright and sunny room this lovely summer evening—her Cousin George. For Hetty was a guest in her cousin's house, and she was suffered to share his study, which thus became a Common-room.

Cousin George, looking up, frowned heavily. He was some two years Hetty's senior, but by the way he behaved, he might have been twenty years older.

"If," said Cousin George, in a crushing tone, that was a fair imitation of his headmaster's, "you have had some extraordinary piece of luck, such as adding up two and two, and making them four, you can keep quiet about it, Hetty. I am busy with trigonometry."

Hetty, who had been known in her boarding-school days as the Imp, nearly made a cheeky retort, but remembered in time that in this household she had to behave herself.

"Oh! Sorry, Cousin George!" she piped, in her meekest tone.

"Don't let it happen again," he said loftily, and returned to his calculations.

But the thing Hetty had thought of was really important; nothing at all to do with homework.

Looking idly at the calendar on the opposite wall, the Imp had realised that to-day was Tuesday, the twenty-first. Therefore, to-morrow was the twenty-second—not, perhaps, a very complicated piece of thought.

But the twenty-second was Aunt Miriam's birthday, and Aunt Miriam was George's mother.

"Golly—and I nearly forgot!" murmured Hetty. "Cousin George!" she called. "Do you know what to-morrow is? Your mother's birthday!"

Cousin George jumped, dropped his pen, and gaped at the Imp.

"Mum-mother's birthday?" he said in horror. "Oh, gosh! And I've forgotten all about it! Haven't bought anything—"

And thanks to two Pekes, exactly alike, it was memorable indeed—but not in the way intended!

"Well, there's plenty of time to do things properly," said Hetty. "Get some really useful presents. Flowers on her breakfast tray. Up with the lark—"

Cousin George nodded eagerly.

"That's an idea—"

"And then we've got to get her a present," said Hetty quickly.

"Quite!" said Cousin George. "Naturally, I intend giving mother a present."

"And planning her day," the Imp added. "A tea-party—all her friends. We'll order the cakes, see to everything—a birthday cake—"

"Leave it to me," said Cousin George. "We'll spend every penny in the cashbox."

By IDA MELBOURNE

"Hear, hear!" agreed Hetty eagerly. "You know what she'd really like, Cousin George?"

"A new Shakespeare. Hers is very shabby."

Hetty laughed scoffingly.

"No; a dog."

"A dog?" Cousin George ejaculated.

"Yes; you know—one of those funny things, with fur all over it, a leg at each corner, a tail, and so on. Like a cat, only more so," said the Imp humorously.

Cousin George glowered.

"This isn't a time for silly jokes. I happen to know what a dog is. I am questioning whether mother wants one. She's not the kind of woman to go tramping over fields with a terrier at her heels, or a setter, or a bloodhound. Of all the daft ideas—"

"What Aunt Miriam wants is a Pekingese," said Hetty pleasantly. "I've heard her say so."

Cousin George nodded.

"A Pekingese! There's something in that idea," he commented. "And I saw one in the village dog shop."

"Yes; so did I. That's what gave me the idea," said Hetty.

Cousin George tried to think of some good reason for saying "rubbish," but couldn't; for in his heart, galling though it was to have to admit it, Hetty was dead right.

A Pekingese was just what his mother wanted.

"And I know she needs a new overall—I heard her say so," he said, determined to think of something. "I'll jot down those two things, and we'll get them to-morrow, the shops being now closed. Cash in hand," he mused, bringing out the book in which he checked his savings, "two pounds seven-and-sixpence. Ample!"

The Imp said nothing, but the price of that Peke in the shop was three guineas—a fact which could wait until to-morrow for broaching.

"And don't forget, Cousin George," she warned. "Right from the start, it's to be a day she'll never forget."

"A day she'll never forget," nodded Cousin George.

But he little realised in what way it would be memorable!

AUNT MIRIAM awoke the next morning earlier than usual. She couldn't help herself, because there was a most thunderous crash that seemed to shake the whole house.

With the papers full of war, Aunt Miriam thought that a bomb had fallen on her house.

"Help!" she cried. "George!"

George's voice came from the bottom of the bed.

"It's all right, mother; I tripped over the mat."

Aunt Miriam switched on the light, blinking, and then goggled as George, looking red-faced and sheepish, rose from the floor. At first glance—Aunt Miriam being hardly wide awake—she thought that he was sitting in a garden, so many flowers were littered around.

Cousin George looked down at pieces of china, a pool of tea, and a broken vase.

Through the open doorway peered Hetty.

"Golly!" she said. "Many happy returns of the day, aunt!"

George snatched up some flowers and

thrust them towards his mother, spraying water.

"Many happy returns of the day, mother!" he said. "I brought you your morning tea."

Aunt Miriam gave a sickly smile as she kissed him.

"Thank you," she said gratefully; and added: "Get a cloth and mop it up, there's a good boy."

But Hetty was already doing that. Having seen Cousin George carry trays before, she had followed in his wake with a cloth.

"My best china," said Aunt Miriam, looking at the tray.

Cousin George nodded.

"Yes; I used the best as it was your birthday."

"And—and, darling, you've picked the best flowers," his mother went on, uncertain whether to be pleased or hurt.

Cousin George frowned heavily. As a start for the happiest day of his mother's life, it was not too good; but Hetty whispered into his ear.

"What's that?" he asked. "I can't hear."

"Don't whisper, Hetty!" snapped Aunt Miriam. "What you have to say can surely be said aloud."

Hetty blushed.

"All I said was—only the best flowers are good enough for you, aunt."

"Is that sarcasm?" asked Aunt Miriam.

"Oh dear! No, aunt," sighed Hetty. "I know it sounds a bit forced now, but I thought if George said it—"

"George needs no prompting to pay his mother compliments," said Aunt Miriam. "Don't tread on the plate that isn't broken, George—"

"Wasn't!" said the Imp softly, as there came a scrunch.

George's teeth could be heard grating.

"Perhaps I'd better get you some more tea, mother," he said.

"Oh, no, don't you bother!" said Aunt Miriam hurriedly. "I'll ring for Nellie. And draw the blinds, there's a good girl, Hetty. Oh dear! Half-past seven," sighed Aunt Miriam; "and I'd promised myself a nice long lie in on my birthday."

Cousin George opened and shut his mouth.

"I'll bring you your breakfast in bed," he offered.

"No, no, no, no, no!" said Aunt Miriam. "Thank you, darling," she added anxiously; and then almost absently to herself: "I couldn't match that breakfast service."

Hetty slipped out of the room, and Cousin George followed a moment later. The expression on his face went to her heart.

"That's a good start!" he said bitterly. "And we didn't take her a present."

"We haven't got it yet," pointed out Hetty. "But look! Let's forget this bad start. Let's make sure everything goes right from now on."

"Right! Early breakfast, and then down to the dog shop," he said, "and the cake shop and the overall shop."

He was grimly determined about that overall.

Hurrying through breakfast, they set out for the village, armed with the two pounds seven shillings and sixpence.

First call was at the cake shop, and Cousin George ordered pastries of all kinds and a grand birthday cake.

"Phew! That'll cost a lot," said Hetty.

He waved her aside, and then asked for the bill.

"Fifteen shillings and fourpence," said the girl, smiling.

Cousin George hesitated. He had estimated it at four-and-sixpence.

"Er—put it down to my mother," he said.

"Oh, certainly!" said the girl agreeably, rather surprised, since Aunt Miriam had argued about an éclair the previous week, paid up her account in a huff, and said she would never enter the shop again.

"You don't think aunt will mind all that being booked?" asked Hetty.

"Do you think mother's mean?" asked Cousin George in scorn, wondering how and when he would break it to her.

"No," smiled the Imp; "but it's a whole whack for cakes. Still, she likes entertaining her friends."

"And that reminds me—the invitations," said Cousin George. "I made out a list in bed. We'd better phone the people up right away."

That was done next, and then the overall was tackled.

"Shall I choose it?" asked the Imp.

"I know mother's taste," declared Cousin George grandly.

And he chose a pink overall with green leaves on it, which would fit his mother perfectly—if ever she doubled her bulk and grew six inches taller!

But, of course, it was the thought that mattered. And now, last of all, they reached the dog shop—which instantly became a deafening zone of barking, woofing, yapping, and yelping. There were dogs of almost every kind, shape, appearance, weight, and temper.

"You haven't such a thing as a Pekingese?" asked Cousin George diffidently, for he felt rather a fool asking for such a dog.

"No," said the girl assistant. "I'm afraid we haven't."

"Oh!" exclaimed Hetty, forgetting her agreement to leave it to Cousin George. "But where's the slinky little darling that was here the other day?"

"That one? Oh, he's at our other shop in Gluton," said the girl. "I dare say we could get him by tomorrow. He's a sweet thing, but he fretted after Fang Wu went."

"Who's he?" asked Hetty.

"Mrs. Marsden's little Peke. She bought him here," said the girl. "He's the other little chap's cousin, and they're really awfully alike."

"How much is the other one?" asked Hetty.

"Very cheap, indeed. Three guineas," said the girl.

Cousin George uttered a gasp, and then nodded.

"Well—er— Good-morning!" he said.

Outside the shop, Hetty looked at him.

"We could easily go over to Gluton," she said.

"Three guineas, though!" he grimaced. "Where do we get the other guinea? Talk sense!"

"Um!" said Hetty, and thought of her Post Office savings account.

She was a generous girl, but this would be an extravagant present.

"When in doubt," frowned Cousin George, "give money. That's what we'll do now. Of course, I may mention the Peke, and if mother cares to add the other guinea, there it is. But we'll decide to give her the money in the meanwhile."

The Imp said nothing. For to Aunt Hetty a money present would not be very exciting.

But getting a surprise gift of a Peke—perhaps in a hat-box, tied up with a bow—would be ever so thrilling. Hetty's eyes sparkled at the idea.

"You're right, Cousin George," she said.

And there and then resolved that she would get that Peke from Gluton, even

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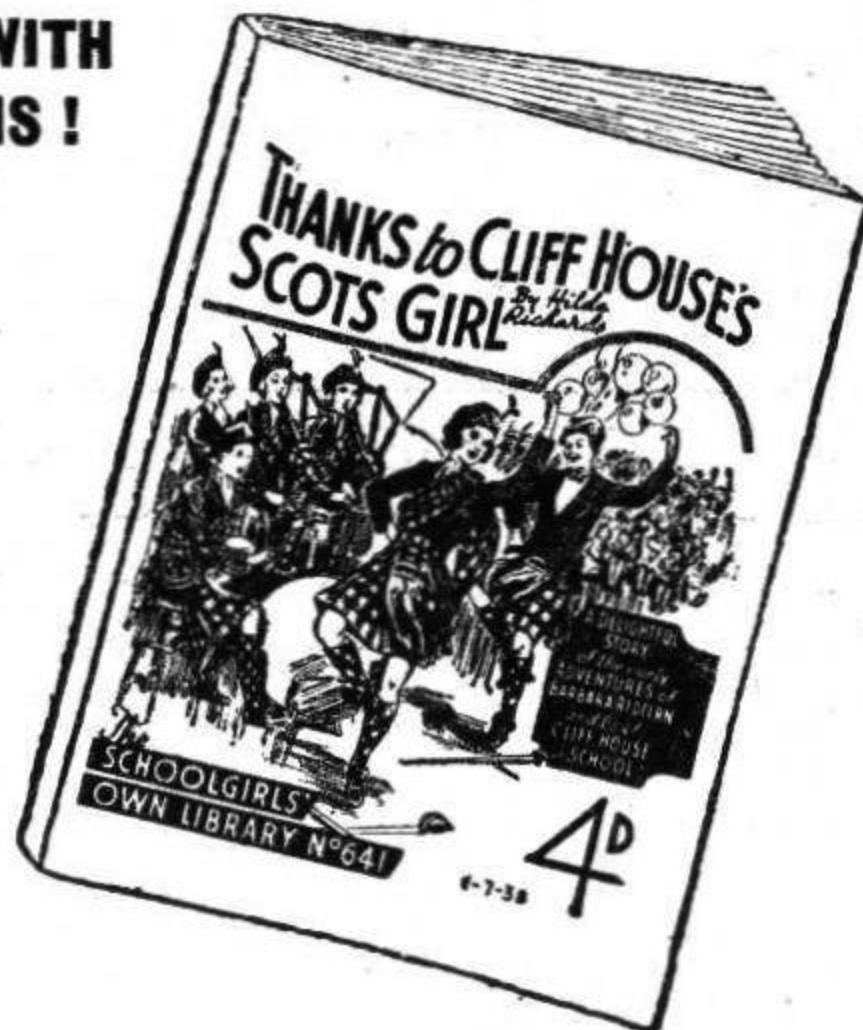
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if she had to get a headache during last lesson that morning.

Time had flown; and now it was time for school.

"Leave it to me—a well-worded note, and the money," Cousin George said.

"Good!" said Hetty, thinking of that cuddly little Peke.

Directly after, or immediately before the end of morning lessons, Hetty would be bound for Gluton.

Daylight Robbery!

IT was only ten minutes later that the Imp, cycling to school, saw Mrs. Marsden. The plump, little woman wore a worried frown, and, carrying a dog's lead and harness, was wandering about, muttering: "Fang Wu—Fang Wu!"

Hetty braked her cycle and stopped, instantly guessing what was wrong.

"Please, have you lost a Peke?" she asked.

"Yes, yes! Oh, have you seen my little darling?" asked Mrs. Marsden, in relief.

"No," confessed Hetty. "But I'll look out for him."

On she went, looking carefully, and only two hundred yards away came upon Wu sporting round a Great Dane, who was wondering where the noise came from, and hadn't thought of looking down, so far.

"Fang Wu, you scamp!" said the Imp, raising an admonishing finger.

Fang Wu drew back, and eyed her loftily with an: "I really don't think I know you, and I never speak to strangers" look. But, all the same, the Imp grabbed him up.

Although she was latish for school already, Hetty went cycling back to find Mrs. Marsden; but that good lady was hunting in the garden of a nearby house, having heard something under one of the bushes—a ginger cat.

"Bother! Now we can't find your missus!" said Hetty to Fang Wu.

For three minutes she cycled up and down, and then a voice hailed her.

"Hetty! Goodness me!"

And Cousin George drew alongside.

"Well, my golly!" he went on, in envy. "Here, I'll give him to her. You're late already, and I've wangled the morning off."

"Goody, goody!" said Hetty, in relief. "I'm terribly late. She was here a minute ago."

"No, really?" said Cousin George. "Well, don't you hang about."

Quite relieved, the Imp went off. It had not occurred to her to mention that Fang Wu was Mrs. Marsden's, and that she was the "she" referred to.

Nor had it occurred to Cousin George to think anything else but that this little Peke was his mother's present.

"The cheek!" he said in amazement. "Going to give him to mother herself. And how she got you, I don't know, and you can't say—eh? That girl—give her her due, she's quick. I only hope she didn't book it to mother, or anything foolish. Wish I'd asked how she paid for it."

But Cousin George rode on home. As a prefect, swotting for an exam, he was allowed time off to specialise, and, being renowned as a keen scholar, he was never questioned. Seriously he intended to do a little swotting at home, but the real reason for his leave from school was, of course, the business of arranging for the party.

He reached home just as his mother



MRS. MARSDEN gave one look at the Pekingese in Aunt Miriam's arms, and then screamed. "Thief—thief!" she cried. "My own Fang Wu. You've stolen him!" The Imp and Cousin George looked on, horrified. Now for the fireworks!

came downstairs, dressed at her best. She took one look at the Peke, and then at George's face. Her eyes brightened and shone, a warm glow came to her cheeks, and she laughed.

"George, that's not my present! Oh, you don't mean—" she began.

"Mother, your present," said George proudly. "I knew you'd like it. Hetty and I got it for you between us."

His mother took Fang Wu and lifted him; then she snuggled him to her, looked at his comic face, and kissed his nose.

Then she kissed George warmly, and patted his cheek.

"You dear, dear boy!" she said. "I couldn't have asked for anything—I'd like more. It's just too sweet of you and Hetty—really it is! Oh, but what a lamb he is! What a sweet, cuddly darling! Far, far better than Mrs. Marsden's, although he's a pet, too. My ownny-ownny!" she finished in ecstasy.

George, pink-cheeked, and a little dazed by all this joy, sighed.

"Well, mother, thank goodness things are going right at last!" he said. "And there's another surprise."

"George," his mother protested, "you must have spent all your money."

"Oh, well!" said Cousin George diffidently, and, wondering how on earth Hetty had done it, he became quite uneasy.

For now nothing could ever wrench this dog from his mother; he could see that. Even if he had to sell his Meccano set, his camera, or his bike, the dog must be paid for. And obviously Hetty had not paid cash over the counter.

"And he shall come out to tea with mummy, too," she laughed.

Cousin George jumped.

"You're not going out to tea, mother?" he asked.

"Out? Yes, dear," she said innocently. "It's been arranged for weeks. Didn't I mention it? A little birthday treat of Cousin Flo's."

Cousin George went so pale his mother could not help noticing it.

"What's the matter, George?"

He choked before replying.

"Mother—I've ordered cakes—I—I've invited twenty of your friends," he gulped. "This afternoon at—at four."

His mother nearly swooned.

"Oh, good gracious!" she cried. His eyes glittered, and then Fang Wu wriggled and she remembered. After all, George had only arranged this to make her happy, and for a boy so kind as to buy such a birthday present as the Peke, some sacrifice had to be made.

"Very well, George," she said listlessly. "It—it was sweet of you. I—I'll stay in."

"You're not cross, mother?" asked Cousin George anxiously.

"Oh, no, no, no, dear! No!" said his mother, her brows knit.

"Well, that's all right," said Cousin George, in relief. "It should be a good party. Mrs. Marsden's coming, so you can swap notes."

"Ah, yes!" said his mother. "I hope she brings her dog."

Fang Wu twitched a little—but later there would be some more twitching when his mistress arrived and saw Aunt Miriam's nice present. And Cousin George would twitch, and Hetty would twitch, while Mrs. Marsden—well, she was said to have an uncontrollable temper!

What a Muddle!

THE Imp, happily beaming, was cycling back from the dog shop in Gluton, and under her arm was a fluffy little Peke, ears flying in the wind, thinking life great fun away from all the rough, common dogs in the shop.

"Sweetie pie, we're homeward bound," said Hetty. "And do you know, I took a whole pound from my savings bank to get you! There'll be such a row one day when George finds out!"

But, of course, the row was really quite near!

Hetty had been optimistic about getting excused from last lesson; in point of painful fact she had been detained. So, telephoning home, she had told Nellie the maid, who answered, that she was "lunching out." In other words, she had a bun and a glass of milk, and then rode to Gluton.

The net result was that Hetty, even racing back, had no chance of reaching the house until four o'clock; and she had to brush up the Peke, put him in a hat-box, make the bow, wash, dress, and tidy herself, and let Cousin George into the wonderful secret.

But even before she reached home the fur began.

The guests were arriving, and Aunt Miriam, managing to look as though she liked it, was greeting them, some her worst enemies—some who hated each other and were not on speaking terms.

From the first the party did not seem to go with a swing. George noticed that his mother seemed "funny" about the cakes when she saw from which shop they had come, and then one woman guest made a casual remark about another's hat that brought silence.

To liven things up, George tried to do a few conjuring tricks. But after three people had selected a card, and not bothered to look at it, or forgot what it was, after refusing to let anyone else share the secret, George's best trick went wrong. On the occasion when someone selected the king of hearts, and showed everyone, George, in triumph, produced the ace of spades.

His only other trick, piling six pennies on his bent elbow and catching them as they fell, broke Miss Stockley's glasses, and caused some unpleasantness because only four of the six pennies could be found.

It was a glad moment, therefore, when Mrs. Marsden was announced.

"Thank goodness!" muttered George. His mother leaped forward and wrested her new pet from a friend, just as Mrs. Marsden entered, eyes red-rimmed, and melancholy.

"I've come," she said, "a broken-hearted woman. I've lost my little Fang Wu—stolen by some wicked—"

She came to a halt, drew up, and goggled at Aunt Miriam's wonderful present.

"Why—Fang Wu!" she shrilled. "There was a hush, and looks were exchanged."

"I beg your pardon," said George's mother, with a smile, "but this is Ming Fu."

"Indeed! I may be silly and short-sighted—at least short-sighted," said Mrs. Marsden angrily, "but I do know my own dog!"

Cousin George hastily intervened. "I think you are mistaken, Mrs. Marsden," he said gently. "That happens to be Ming Fu, my mother's dog, and cousin of your dog, Bang Tu."

"Fang Wu!" stormed Mrs. Marsden. "Give me my dog, you—you thief!"

Aunt Miriam drew back, shocked. "Mrs. Marsden—please!" she exclaimed.

"I got that dog for my mother only this morning," George said loudly. "Where?" snapped Mrs. Marsden.

Cousin George shrugged, and then a horrible chill ran down his spine, and his flesh came out in odd prickles of goose-flesh.

Come to think of it—where had Hetty got the dog? At that moment the door opened and Hetty, peeping in, beckoned him.

In the hall she held out a hat-box. "Guess what's inside," she said, her eyes shining.

Cousin George, looking very grim, took her arm.

"Where did you get that Peke this morning?" he demanded.

"From the lane," said Hetty. "Why?"

She saw Cousin George go white as a sheet.

"You—you know whose dog it is?" he echoed.

"Of course," said Hetty. "Mrs. Marsden's. Why?"

Cousin George clung to the banister-post.

"Why—why did you give it to me?" he asked blankly.

"To give it back to Mrs. Marsden. Weren't you looking for it? Most people for half a mile round were," the Imp commented. "What did you do with it?"

Cousin George pointed a quivering hand at the door.

"I gave it to mother," he managed to blurt out. "And—and Mrs. Marsden's just arrived and—and recognised it!"

"Wha-a-t!" yelled Hetty, in horror. "You don't mean— Oh golly, you mutt! I mean, oh, Cousin George!"

"It was your fault!" he said hotly. "Mine?"

From inside the room came the sound of a table's falling over, and angry voices.

Cousin George flopped down on to the stairs and clasped his head in anguish.

"Oh golly—mother will never forgive me! She'll be the laughing-stock," he groaned. "She'll break her heart losing Ming Fu. Oh gosh! What a day!"

The hat box fell over of its own accord.

"Oh, poor sweetie," murmured Hetty.

She opened the lid, and, before Cousin George's goggling eyes, took out her Peke—or, rather, Aunt Miriam's.

Cousin George thought he was past being shocked, startled, or surprised, but he wasn't. His hair almost rose on end.

"Where did you steal that one?" he demanded fiercely.

"Steal it? I bought it. A pound from my saving account—and a promise of two more," said the Imp. "And, Cousin George—we've got to swop the two dogs."

Cousin George rose, a new light in his eyes.

"That's mother's dog—gosh, if only we could swop them, by conjuring, or something—"

Hetty looked at him steadily.

"It's got to be done; it's the only way," she said. "Your mother will love this one just as much—she'll never know the difference."

"I couldn't," admitted Cousin George. "And mother's short-sighted. They both are. Gosh—could it be worked?"

Hetty skipped in the air.

"Got it!" she said. "Come on—upstairs."

MRS. MARSDEN had won Wang Fu and was in the garden about to escape, Aunt Miriam having decided that the poor woman, losing her own dog, had become hysterical.

But even as Mrs. Marsden walked down the path a figure leaped from hiding—Cousin George.

He did it so suddenly that Mrs. Marsden gasped, and before she could

resist, Fang Wu was snatched from her grasp.

Back to the bushes went Cousin George, and when next she saw him he was rushing to the house. After him went Mrs. Marsden, livid with rage.

"Mother—Ming Fu," George panted, rushing into the drawing-room and pushing the dog into her arms. "Look out—here she comes!"

His mother, clutching the wee scrap, dived into the dining-room adjoining, and slammed the door, while Mrs. Marsden hammered the panels.

She was still hammering when Nellie the maid looked in.

"Mrs. Marsden?" she asked.

"Yes. I'm here—I shall still be here to-night—"

Nellie took a good look round, and then said what the Imp had told her to say.

"The young lady you spoke to this morning has found your dog."

"What? Not my dog. He's in there—"

Then she broke off, for, into the room, breathing hard, walked Hetty, holding Wang Fu.

"There—there's your mumsy-wumsy," she said.

Mrs. Marsden took one look, put on her glasses, looked again, and picked up Wang Fu, and he, after so adventurous a life, almost smothered her.

"My own—my sweetness. It is—it's Fang Wu!" Mrs. Marsden cried, and down she flopped on a chair and laughed and hugged him.

Then, hearing the commotion, out came Aunt Miriam, clutching Ming Fu. The whole room stared, and then peals of merry laughter arose. Aunt Miriam, immensely relieved to find that her pet was indeed her pet, laughed, too.

"Well—how did I come to think that was my dog?" asked Mrs. Marsden blankly. "I—I—grief must have blinded me. Oh, I'm so sorry—so—oh dear!"

"Not at all," said Aunt Miriam happily. "And really, I felt sure that your dog was the one I had earlier. How alike they are. But this is my owny."

And everyone was so merry that even enemies laughed together.

If anything was needed to round off a jolly party, it was when Cousin George remembered the overall and produced it. They all took one look and then sobbed with laughter. And when Aunt Miriam tried it on, she nearly collapsed. Finally, two of them tried it on together, and George, at first giving sickly grins, finally pretended it was a joke, and laughed with the rest.

"Dear, dear boy, the thought's the thing," said Aunt Miriam.

"And what a brain-wave," chuckled Hetty, hugging Ming Fu.

Cousin George looked up at that; they exchanged looks, and then sobbed with laughter. But no one knew quite why; for no one even began to guess the comic truth about the dogs.

Relief after the awful tension had put everyone in a mood for laughter, and the party went on until quite a late hour, everyone really friendly.

"Ah, dear—the happiest day of my life, I do believe," sighed Aunt Miriam, giving a hand to George and Hetty. "And you two dears made it for me—a day I shall never forget!"

END OF THIS WEEK'S STORY.

MORE delightful times with The Imp next week, not to mention pompous Cousin George. Be sure to meet them again.