

Don't miss the Magnificent
LONG COMPLETE Barbara
Redfern & Co. story inside:—

“LEFT BEHIND AT CLIFF HOUSE!”

THE SCHOOLGIRL

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EVERY **2^d**
SATURDAY

Incorporating
"SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN"



**BABS' SCHEME TO
WARN THEIR CHUM!**

An intriguing incident
from the fine story of
the Cliff House girls in
this issue.

A Superb Long Complete story of Barbara Redfern & Co. and mysterious Gwen Cook, telling of their adventure in an empty school.

Left Behind at CLIFF HOUSE!



When Such Happiness Promised!



"W HOOPEE! Go it, Bessie!" cheered Clara Trevlyn.

"Put some beef into it, Babs!" yelled Janet Jordan.

"Mind your steps, Twins!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The din in the gaily decorated Fourth Form Common-room at Cliff House School was truly terrific, and the scene was terrifically unusual.

For in the centre of the floor a space had been cleared, and in that space a score of girls—Barbara Redfern, captain of the Fourth, and her fat chum, Bessie Bunter, among them—were dancing the hilarious "Lambeth Walk."

In one corner golden-haired Mabel Lynn tried desperately to keep time on a piano; near her Jemima Carstairs was cheerfully and enthusiastically blowing through a paper comb; next to Jemima stood Jean Cartwright, the tall Scottish junior, extracting as much noise from her wailing bagpipes as possible.

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In another corner Rosa Rodworth banged on the tin lid of a biscuit-box, and with her was Elsie Effingham, seriously trying to play a violin. Apart from them, everybody was either clapping, shouting, singing, or dancing.

Amazing! A wonder, in fact, that half a dozen prefects were not stamping on to the scene! But still more amazing was the fact that half a dozen prefects were there, taking part with undisciplined zest in the fun, and making almost as much row as the care-free juniors.

And yet—not so amazing!

For to-day was an unusual day at Cliff House. To-day all rules were relaxed. All rules, in fact, had already been put in cold storage until the beginning of the new term, which commenced next January. To-day was the very last day of the old term, and Cliff House was breaking-up for its long anticipated Christmas vacation.

From early morning girls had been taking their leave, off for the holidays. From early morning the old school grounds had resounded with the ceaseless voices of girls bidding each other Happy Christmases and good-byes, and

the old school was now half empty. But there was no flagging in the fun and festivities for those left behind.

Barbara Redfern & Co., not due to depart until this evening, were making the most of the interval. Thus this scene of unparalleled gaiety in the dignified confines of the stately old school.

"Whoops! Quicken it up!" Leila Carroll cried.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Barbara, beaming at her partner. "Too much Gwen?"

Gwendoline Cook shook her head and laughed.

"No, rather! I'm just loving this! Now part, Babs."

Such happiness—such radiating happiness—in that noisy room! But perhaps happiest of all those girls was Gwendoline Cook, of the Fourth—Gwen who, to her own unbelievable joy, was to accompany Barbara Redfern, Mabel Lynn, Bessie Bunter—the famous trio of Study No. 4—Clara Trevlyn, Leila Carroll, Marjorie Hazeldene, Jemima Carstairs, and Janet Jordan on their Christmas trip to Pellabay Hotel, on the rocky coast of Cornwall.

Until Babs & Co. had invited her to

spend Christmas with them, Gwen had not been looking forward with any great eagerness to the holiday, for Gwen's father was a crusty old martinet, and home for Gwen contained much more discipline than school.

But now she was joining Babs & Co. A thrill that, if you like, for Gwendoline Cook was by no means one of the leading lights of the Fourth Form. Gwen was one of the average members of the Form—average in lessons, average in games, never full of really bright ideas, but always a willing follower.

One thing that Gwen did possess in an unusual degree, however, was an undoubted skill in conjuring, and it was because of that, and because they liked her and felt she ought to have a break, that Babs & Co. had invited her to join the Christmas festivities at Pellabay Castle Hotel, where they were organising items in the programme of entertainment. This was, of course, at Clara's Aunt Grace's request, because Clara's Aunt Grace owned the hotel.

The dance went on. Faster and faster! Swifter, noisier the music grew, until—

"Miss Cook!" came a voice above the din. "Miss Co-ok!"

Gwen, full of excitement and happiness, did not hear.

"Miss Co-o-k!" bellowed the voice.

"Hallo!" Babs stopped and turned.

In the doorway she saw a red-faced page-boy, frantically waving an envelope in his hand.

"Gwen, there's Boker. He's got something for you."

"Eh? Oh!" And Gwen laughed breathlessly. Then, with an "Excuse me!" look at Babs, she trotted across the floor, beaming at the hoarse-voiced Boker, who surrendered the envelope with a relieved and thankful grin. Babs, following her up, saw her open it; saw her glance at the note inside. And then, swiftly, all the happiness left Gwen Cook's face. Her cheeks turned deathly pale.

"Gwen!" Babs cried.

Gwen gulped.

"Gwen, what is it? Bad news?"

"No—yes! That—that is—" And Gwen looked up with such a sudden hunted look in her eyes that Babs felt staggered. "I—I—excuse me, Babs!" she muttered. "I—I've got to go!"

"Go? But, Gwen, where?"

"Please, Babs, I—I won't be long," Gwen pleaded; and, as if afraid of answering more questions, bolted through the door.

"Well, my hat!" gasped Babs; and then, catching the Terraine twins staring at her, shook her head. "What's the matter with Gwen?"

"She seemed very upset," Priscilla Terraine said thoughtfully. "Didn't she, Ermyntude?"

"Most dreadfully upset," Ermyntude agreed wisely. "There was not, I fear, very good news in that message."

And most dreadfully upset all at once Gwen Cook was as she went speeding down the corridor to the Fourth Form cloak-room. Her hands were trembling as she took down her hat and coat and hurried out.

It was past three o'clock then, and getting dark—a grey, misty, cold darkness. In the quadrangle half a dozen cars were waiting to be loaded up, and girls stood about laughing, talking, wishing each other their good-byes. Nobody seemed to notice the running, agitated figure of the Fourth Former.

Through the gates into the Friardale road went Gwen. Here the mist was thicker, seeming to be caught and arrested in the branches of the trees.

A quarter of a mile down the road

By HILDA RICHARDS

Illustrated by T. LAIDLER

she came to the A.A. telephone-box, and there she paused, looking round.

Then suddenly there was a step along the road. Gwen swung round with a start. Out of the mist a figure loomed up—the figure of a tall girl. Gwen sprang forward with a cry, peering sharply.

The figure came nearer, became recognisable. Gwen quivered.

"Enid!" she whispered. "So it is—you! What—what has happened?"

IT was ten minutes later that Gwen Cook set her face Cliff Housewards again.

But it was a different Gwen from that happy girl who, less than half an hour ago, had been so gaily dancing with Barbara Redfern. It was a different girl from the flurried, agitated figure which had left Cliff House with such startling abruptness. This Gwen walked slowly. This Gwen had a thoughtful, worried look on her face, and was muttering as she went.

"I've got to do it! I've got to do it!"

Breaking-up Day at Cliff House! Tremendous fun and excitement in the school! Enthusiastically plans for the Christmas holidays are discussed. And who more enthusiastic than Gwen Cook of the Fourth Form? What a wonderful time she will have with Babs & Co. at Pellabay Castle! And then comes mystery and shock; for suddenly Gwen announces that she must remain at the school throughout Christmas!

She paused, listening for a moment as hurrying footsteps sounded in the mist behind her. Then she started as she heard her name.

"Gwen!"

The girl twisted sharply, peering back into the misty gloom. She knew that voice—indeed, everybody at Cliff House knew it. The voice belonged to Mildred Tamplin, of the Upper Fifth, and though everybody was rather sorry for Mildred, who had to spend the whole of her Christmas holidays at school because her parents were absent in America, nobody really had a great deal of use for her. For Mildred was lazy, spiteful, and a bully by nature.

Gwen waited.

In a few seconds the tall, rather thick set frame of Mildred Tamplin appeared out of the mist. Her face wore a strange expression.

"Gwen, who were you talking to?"

Gwen started.

"Well, is it your business?" she asked.

"Who was it?" Mildred insisted.

"Mind your own!" Gwen retorted shortly.

Mildred Tamplin's hands clenched tightly.

"I want to know," she snapped. "I've a reason for asking. I fancy I recognised the voice of the woman you were talking to. Now will you tell me?"

"No!" Gwen panted.

"Afraid, eh?" Mildred sneered. "No, I'm not afraid! Why should I be afraid?" But the pallor of Gwen's face as she made that statement belied her words. "And don't you dare touch me!" she added, as Mildred, her face angrily spiteful, took a step forward, making a swift grab at her wrist.

Back in a flash went the arm which Mildred reached for, and at the same instant out lunged the Fourth Former's other arm, pushing Mildred in the chest. Mildred gave a stifled yell as she went backwards and, slipping on the frosty path, measured her length.

"You little cat!" she cried. "Hi, come back!"

But Gwen was fleeing. By the time the furious Mildred had staggered to her feet the darkness had swallowed the junior's rushing figure completely. Not until she reached the gates of Cliff House did Gwen pause. Then it was to be met by a cheery hail.

"Gwen! Gwen, is that you?" And Barbara Redfern, rosy-red with excitement, came forward, surrounded by her chums. "Come on, old thing, we're waiting for you. The cars have arrived, and Piper's packing our luggage now. And Diana's standing a treat in the tuckshop as a farewell toast before we all push off!"

"Yes, rather, you know!" plump Bessie Bunter beamed. "And we're having the toast in Aunt Jones' home-made ginger wine! Ripping stuff, that ginger wine! Come on, Gwen!"

"But wait a jiffet," Mabel Lynn put in. "Gwen, hadn't you better see your luggage out of the school first?"

Gwen gulped.

"I—I—oh, Babs—"

"That's all right!" Babs cheerily laughed. "Don't worry about the luggage, Gwen; I tipped Boker to keep an eye on that for you, and he'll see everything's cleared up. But you look cold," she added, "and you've got a jolly long journey in front of you. Come on. A spot of ginger wine will buck you up!"

"Yes, but—"

The Form captain eyed her curiously.

"But what, Gwen?"

"I—I want to tell you—I—I—" And Gwen turned a fiery red. "Oh, Babs, I'm sorry—most awfully, dreadfully sorry—but—but—"

"But what?" Babs repeated.

"I—I can't come!" Gwen stammered on, and averted her gaze. "I—I've decided, after all, to spend Christmas at school!"

A Warning—to Whom?



FOR a moment eight faces, expressing blank amazement and consternation, eyed her.

"Bu-but, Gwen, surely you're joking?" gasped Babs.

"I wish I was," Gwen said miserably.

"Bu-but why?" stammered Tomboy Clara Trevlyn.

"I'm sorry—"

"Yes, but why?" demanded Mabel Lynn.

"Oh, please, Mabs—please, all of you, don't ask me!" And Gwen faced them almost piteously. "I want to come—you know that. I—I want to come like anything. But something's happened, you see—something that—that—" Her voice mumbled off into silence.

The chums stared at each other. It had made them all so happy to be able to include Gwen in their party. And how happy Gwen herself had

been! Now here she was, white-faced and miserable—so wretched, indeed, that even Clara's characteristic impatience was melting into pity.

"Gwen, had that note anything to do with it?" Babs asked quietly.

Gwen bit her lip.

"Yes—no. I mean—oh, please!" she added wildly. "I—I can't tell you."

"Because," a sneering voice put in, "she's too jolly scared, eh?" And, unnoticed till this minute by the group, Mildred Tamplin strolled up. "Why don't you tell them the truth, Gwen Cook?"

Gwen started.

"Do you know the truth?" Jemima Carstairs questioned, eyeing the Fifth Former through her monocle.

"No; not all of it. But I know something." And Mildred gazed with malice at the girl's white face. "If you ask me, there's some rotten shady business going on. Girls don't meet women on the sly in misty lanes for nothing."

"Mildred!" Gwen cried quiveringly.

"Rats! Why shouldn't I tell? Why the dickens don't you play the game, and jolly well go with Babs & Co., now you've promised?" Mildred retorted. "Why should you sneak off to meet some unknown woman, and then come back letting everybody down? If you ask me, there's something jolly fishy about this."

"But nobody's asked you, Mildred!" Babs fired back. "And if," she added, with a flash of heat, "that's the best help you can give, then the sooner you buzz off the better. Well, never mind," she said, and gently took the trembling Gwen's arm. "We can, at least, have the ginger wine. Why, hallo!" she added, as another figure loomed up out of the mist. "Who's this?"

"The telegraph-boy," that figure said. "Very happy Christmas, misses! Does Miss Trevlyn happen to be among you?"

"I'm here!" Clara said.

"Telegram for you. Urgent, too," the boy said. "Oh, thank you!" he added, as Clara took the telegram and slipped a sixpence into his hand. "Another merry Christmas, young ladies! Any answer, Miss Trevlyn?"

Clara was already slitting the telegram open, however. She gave a sharp cry as she read it.

"Oh crumbs!"

"Clara, what is it?"

"It—it's from Aunt Grace!" And Clara stupidly gazed at her chums. "Well!" she said, drawing a deep breath.

"But what, ninny, is it?" Babs cried impatiently; and then as Clara passed the telegram to her, she started. "Oh, my hat! Listen!" she cried; and while the chums stood, she read it out:

"Postpone departure. Owing to heavy snowdrifts, roads impassable. Remain at school till you hear from me again.—AUNT GRACE."

Once again the Co. regarded each other in utter consternation.

"Any answer?" the telegraph-boy asked sharply.

"No!" Clara groaned.

He went off.

"Tut, tut!" Jemima Carstairs sighed. "Jolly un-British of jolly old man Winter to call off the trip just as we've got the luggage embarked—what? Tough," she added, in her usual burbling manner—"jolly tough!"

"It looks," said Mabs, "as if we're joining you for a while, Gwen."

Gwen looked startled.

"You mean you're going to stop here?"

"Where else, forsooth?" Jemima chirruped.

"Well, there's one bright spot," Clara considered, trying to be cheerful.

"If, old Spartan, you're referring to your nose, I should call it a bright crimson spot at the very old moment," Jemima burbled.

"Don't be an ass, and leave my nose alone!" Clara said warmly. "I mean to say, it can't last long. As soon as they've got the road clear we shall get another message from aunt. And, after all, there are days till Christmas yet. But if they've had all that ripping snow, what a chance for winter sports, and so on—skiing, skating—"

"And bumping, what-ho!" Jemima cheered. "Trust old Clara to find the elusive silver in the old cloud's lining! Well, us for the comfy old tuckshop, and me for a drop of Diana's ginger wine. Let us stagger, Spartans!"

"You—you mean"—and Gwen stutted—"you're really postponing the trip?"

"What else?" Babs asked.

"But—but—" And for a moment Gwen's face filled with wild alarm.

Next Week's

extra-special Christmas number
of

The SCHOOLGIRL

will be published

ONE DAY EARLIER

than usual—that is, on Friday,
December 16th, instead of
Saturday, the 17th.

"But—but you mustn't!" she cried. "Babs, you mustn't! If you don't go, I—" And then she paused, pulling herself together. "Oh, goodness, what am I talking about?" she added distractedly. "But isn't there some other way you could go? By sea, for instance? I'm sure they run boats from Eastbourne."

The chums started.

"Well, if you jolly well expect me to go by sea," plump Bessie said indignantly, "I'm not going at all, so there! It's not that I'm a bad sailor, but they never give you enough to eat on those measly boats, you know, and I hate being seasick."

"Well, by air, then?" Gwen desperately suggested.

"Or why not," Clara sarcastically chimed in, "burrow our way under the ground. Dash it all, what's the matter with stopping at the school? It's only for a few days. Anyone," she added, with a glance at the agitated Gwen, "would think you didn't want us to stop."

Gwen bit her lip. Rather curiously Babs regarded her. It seemed, in that remark, as if Clara had hit the nail on the head.

"Well, that—that's silly," Gwen said unsteadily.

"But not," sneered Mildred Tamplin, "so silly that you wouldn't like it to happen, eh? Bit scared, aren't you, because they're all stopping on—rather spoils whatever little game you're playing with your mysterious friend. Look at her!" she jeered.

"Anybody can see she's scared to death because you're not going—"

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Barbara, and tugged at Gwen's arm. "Come along, Gwen!"

Gwen gulped. Unresistingly, as if she hardly realised what she was doing, she allowed herself to be led away to the tuckshop.

There, as in the Common-room, was a babble of noise, and, like the Common-room half an hour previously, the tuckshop was crammed to capacity, with Diana Royston-Clarke, the lordly Firebrand of the Fourth, holding the chair of honour. There was a whoop as the chums were sighted.

"Come on, slackers!" Diana said. "We're waiting for you, Grab glasses, girls, and, yoicks! for a gay old time. Up glasses, girls, and down with the old cordial! Three cheers for a happy Christmas!"

"Three cheers!" whooped Clara Trevlyn.

"And Christmas," said a genial, gruff old voice, "wishes you three cheers back, you know!"

For a moment everybody gazed in amazement at the ceiling from which that voice appeared to come, until it suddenly dawned upon them that it was only fat Bessie using her ventriloquial voice, and amazement gave place to a hearty burst of laughter.

Cheery girls! Happy their spirits! Though Babs & Co. had been somewhat dashed by the news of their own postponed departure, they were all merry and bright again now. In fact, they were rather looking forward to the novelty of the experience of spending the early part of the holiday in a school free of all irksome rules and discipline.

One by one, cars called; one by one, the girls went off. Thinner and thinner became the crowd in the tuckshop, until at last the very last of the breakers-up, in the form of the Terrain twins, came to say good-bye.

It was dark then—with a raw tang in the air and a sighing wind which seemed to promise the coming of snow. Out in a body the chums went. They saw the twins into their car; saw their hands wave. And then—

"Well, here we are, poor little babies in the chilly old wood, what?" Jemima said. "Having bid our sad and tearful farewells, we find ourselves stranded. 'Tis a sad life, my henchmen, but let us extract the blithful happiness that shall be ours when we tell the entranced major the joy in store by having us to look after!"

"Oh my hat! Yes!" Babs said, with a start. "I've forgotten to tell Miss Keys"—Miss Keys being the gym mistress, who was in charge of the school during the absence of all other mistresses. "Come on! I say, where's Gwen?"

"Search me!" Janet Jordan said. "I thought I saw her standing on the school steps, watching some of the girls go, but that was some while ago."

Babs frowned a little. Rather guiltily she remembered that in the happy excitement in the tuckshop she had almost forgotten Gwen; and, certainly, Miss Keys would want to know all about their arrangements.

They tramped on towards the school. "Well, Gwen isn't in her study," Marjorie Hazeldene said, staring at the vague black block which was the school building. "There's no light in her window. Oh, I spoke too soon!" she laughed an instant later, for from the window of Study No. 8, which Gwen shared with Jean Cartwright and Lorna Millerchip in term time, there came a

sudden glow, only, the next instant, to go out again.

"Hallo, something wrong with the electricity!" Clara said. "No; there it goes again! My hat! Now it's gone again! What the dickens is she playing at? It's come again!"

"Phew!" whispered Babs.

"Eh?"

"She's signalling!" Babs cried.

"What?"

"Look!" And Babs, her eyes alight now, watched as the electric light in Study No. 8 flashed and disappeared at intervals. "That's a dot; that's a dash!" And then, as they all stopped, Babs, who understood Morse, began to spell the message out: "Too dangerous to-night."

Then the light went up and stopped up, and for an instant they saw the silhouetted head and shoulders of Gwen at the window, peering out.

Leila Carroll gave an exclamation.

"Look!" she whispered.

And the chums, staring into the grounds, saw from the corner of the school wall a tiny light flash back. It spelt two letters in Morse.

"O.K."

With startled faces they regarded each other. What did Gwen Cook's strange message mean? And with whom had she been communicating?

Gwen is Evasive!



STRANGE, rather disturbing, somehow; and more than ever disturbing when, having seen Miss Keys, they met Gwen again.

True, Gwen seemed a little more calm and collected, but her face still wore a strange, worried look.

That was at supper—taken at Miss Keys' orders in the Second Form dining-room, which was the smallest in Cliff House. It was a very snug little apartment, for all its fairy-tale wallpaper.

Mildred Tamplin was with them, of course—for now there could be no distinction between senior and junior girls. But she took little or no part in the gay chatter which accompanied the meal, for the most part keeping her attention riveted upon Gwen Cook.

Then Miss Keys appeared, and she was not the stern, severe-looking figure they all associated with the gym mistress of Cliff House. She looked, as Janet somewhat unkindly whispered, almost human—especially in the soft light of the Second Form dining-room. She wore a bluish dress of some soft material, and was actually smiling.

"I just want to tell you girls that, although rules are relaxed, we must still observe some measure of discipline," she said. "Though there will be no dormitory bell to-night, I would like you all to be in bed no later than ten o'clock, and meals during the day will be served at the same times as usual. Naturally, you are free to come and go where and when you like, but as we are short staffed over the holiday, I shall expect you to make your own beds and all that sort of thing."

"Oh, yes, of course, Miss Keys!" Barbara assented.

"I am afraid, however," Miss Keys went on, "you will have to make your own amusements, and as long as they do not involve too much horseplay or result in damage to the school property, you may do as you wish. I need hardly add, however, that there will be no smoking, and no breaking bounds at night. Meantime, you will all occupy the Second Form dormitory. That is

all. Good-night, girls. Enjoy yourselves!"

"Well, that's sporting," said Mabs, when the mistress had gone.

Sporting it was. And a thrill, too, to stay up at Cliff House till ten o'clock to-night. No lessons; no bells; practically nothing to interfere with their liberties. Jemima chuckled.

"Well, well," she chirped. "Why can't they always run the school like this? And now, old Spartans, having finished a sumptuous supper, what about an exciting spot of ludo or an exhilarating game of tiddlywinks in the Common-room?"

So to the Common-room they repaired. To be sure they played neither ludo nor tiddlywinks, but gathered round the fire, told stories, discussed holidays and events, and roasted chestnuts.

A happy evening in a way—an evening of quiet and pleasant contentment. But though they all revelled in their new-found freedom they were all secretly glad when ten o'clock came and it was time to go to bed. Off they trotted then to the small Second Form dormitory, snug and warm with its central heating, and to-night, with no prefects to bother about, at their leisure undressed and climbed into bed.

The deep snore of Bessie proclaimed that girl to be the first asleep. Babs waited till the last was in bed, then switched out the light and turned in herself.

She closed her eyes. She felt faintly worried. None of the chums had said anything to Gwen about the signals they had seen from her study window, but Gwen undoubtedly was afraid of something. Strange that she, so gay and happy this afternoon, should now be so bowed down with such care and anxiety. What a sacrifice it must have been to her to cancel the trip to Pellabay she had looked forward to with such eager delight!

Poor Gwen. If only she could do something to help her!

Babs dozed. Then suddenly she started up. Somebody in the dormitory was speaking. It was Mildred Tamplin.

"Gwen! Gwen, are you going to tell me? Who was the woman I heard you talking to?"

From Gwen's bed came no reply.

"And don't," Mildred went on sneeringly, "pretend you're asleep! Don't pretend you don't know that woman's still hanging about! I know. Babs & Co. weren't the only ones who saw your signals!"

Babs held her breath. From Gwen's bed came a sharp hiss.

"Babs—she saw?" she asked breathlessly.

"She did—at least, she must have done. I was in the cycle shed when you flashed the signals, and Babs & Co. were walking back to school. Was it—to her? And the message—was something too dangerous for her to do?"

But again Gwen did not reply. Mildred repeated the question. No answer. Gwen seemed to have fallen asleep.

But Gwen hadn't—Babs could guess that, and her own mind was racing now, trying to connect, without tangible results, Gwen's secret meeting with the unknown woman and those strange signals.

And why, apparently, was Mildred Tamplin so antagonistic towards Gwen?

Babs' eyelids drooped. Oh, what was the good of trying to find answers to questions so apparently incapable of being answered? She dropped asleep. She was awakened presently, however, by a sound.

What was it?

Sharply she sat up in bed.

A movement near the door caused her eyes to swivel at once in that direction. The pale moonbeams, filtering in through the windows, struck straight upon that door, and in the act of creeping out of it was Gwen Cook. Even as Babs watched she disappeared, the door closing behind her. But almost immediately another figure arose. That figure, too, sped towards the door.



AS Babs left the happy, dancing throng, she saw Gwen open the envelope; saw her expression change. "Gwen," cried Babs, "what is it? Bad news?" "No—yes! That—that is——" And Gwen looked up with such a sudden hunted look in her eyes that Babs felt staggered.

"Mildred!" Babs muttered. Impulsively she half-flung the bed-clothes from her. Then she paused, reflecting, after all, what business was it of hers? What right had she to interfere? At the same moment, Mabs, in the next bed, awoke.

"Hallo, Babs! What's the matter?"

"It's Gwen," Babs muttered. "She's gone out—and Mildred's following her."

Mabs pursed her lips.

"Pretty risky, isn't it?" she asked.

"I mean, on Gwen's part? Remember what the major said—Hallo!" she added, with a start.

For the door, left ajar by the hurrying Mildred, and fanned by the wind, had creaked wide open, and plainly to her ears came a sharp voice.

It was Gwen's.

"Bother you! What are you following me for?"

"Hallo! She's spotted Mildred!" Mabs murmured. "Sounds as if they're in Big Hall. Listen!"

They stiffened; but what Mildred said in reply, was inaudible. Then suddenly they heard Gwen's voice again, and this time there was the sound of a scuffle. The scuffle ended abruptly with a sudden shattering, metallic crash, which brought Clara Trevlyn leaping out of bed.

"My hat! What's that—an air raid?"

A cry of pain sounded.

"Come on!" Babs said.

She was out of bed now. Clara and Mabs followed. Without even troubling to don slippers or dressing-gowns, they flew to the door. And then Babs paused again.

For, downstairs, another door had banged furiously, and Miss Keys' voice, upraised in vibrant anger, was speaking.

"You, Mildred and Gwen, what are you doing here? I thought I gave orders—"

"She was following me!" panted Gwen.

"And she pushed me against this suit of armour!" cried Mildred Tamplin.

Babs looked at her two chums. Off they hurried. They reached the landing just as the lights went on in Big Hall, and then, descending the stairs, they saw.

One of the suits of armour with which Big Hall was decorated lay on its side. Near it was the glowering Mildred, angrily rubbing an arm. Facing the decidedly furious Miss Keys, was Gwen.

"So!" Miss Keys snapped. "You were breaking bounds, Gwendoline, and Mildred was following you! And this, in spite of my orders! Neither of you had any right at all to be out of bed at this time of night! Gwendoline, where were you going?"

"To—to my study," Gwen stammered.

"What for?"

"I—I wanted to get something."

"So!" Miss Keys gazed at her keenly. "H'm! And why, Mildred, were you following her?"

Mildred shrugged.

"I wasn't following her. I—I was only trying to stop her making a fool of herself," she said. "After all, I am the senior girl in the dormitory, and it's my business to see that order is maintained—"

"I am not aware," Miss Keys said freezingly, "that I have delegated that duty to you, or anyone else, Mildred! All the same, if that was your motive, I excuse you. Gwendoline, I am not altogether satisfied with your explanation; but, seeing that it is Christmas-time, I will accept it. But I warn you," she added, "this is your last chance! If anything like this happens again, I

will send you away from this school instantly. Barbara, what are you and Clara and Mabel doing here?"

"Well, we—heard the noise, Miss Keys."

"Then go back to bed—all of you!" Miss Keys pursed her lips. "And I think that, to make sure that there is no repetition of this scene, I will lock you all in your dormitory for the night."

Gwen started.

"Miss Keys, please—"

"Go upstairs!" Miss Keys thundered.

Gwen sighed. She shook her head. A chastened girl, she followed the chums upstairs. Almost reluctantly she entered the dormitory while Miss Keys, still very stiff and angry, snapped out the light and locked the door on the outside. Mildred Tamplin burst into a sneering laugh.

"Well, serve you jolly well right!" she said. "Who were you going to meet, eh?"

"Y-you sneak!" Gwen said bitterly.

"Oh, shut up!" Babs said grimly. "You won't mend matters by calling each other names Gwen—"

But from Gwen came no reply.

"Gwen—" Babs said again.

Still no reply.

Babs decided then not to press the point. She settled down herself, vaguely worried, vaguely disturbed, wondering what strange mystery had suddenly enmeshed Gwen Cook. Who had Gwen been going to meet? Why had she risked discovery by Miss Keys by getting up in the middle of the night?

And why—for never before had Mildred Tamplin taken the slightest interest in the doings of Gwen Cook—was that Fifth Former so strangely keen to keep track of her every movement?

Uneasily pondering those questions, Barbara Redfern fell asleep, to be awakened next morning by a cold wind blowing on her face and a scurry of fine snow rushing in through an open window. With a shiver, she rose, and then, quite inadvertently, her eyes went to Gwen Cook's bed.

And Babs jumped. In that moment she knew why the window was open. Gwen's bed was empty. Gwen, foiled by the locked door, had taken that way out of the dormitory instead!

Jemima is Not Deceived!



DESPERATE indeed must have been the nature of Gwen's appointment to

make her adopt that method of escape, for there was a

twelve-foot climb down the ivy outside.

Babs rose. She went to the window. Outside the world was full of fine flying snowflakes, which had already covered the ground. But of Gwen Cook, or even prints of Gwen Cook's feet, there was no sign. That seemed to prove that Gwen had been out a long time.

She was in the act of drawing the window to when Mildred Tamplin sat up. Her eyes momentarily turned to Gwen's bed.

"Hallo! Where's the Cook girl?" she said. "Up?"

"Well, looks like it, doesn't it?" Babs asked casually.

"Up jolly early, isn't she?" Mildred asked suspiciously. "Anyway, how did she get out?"

Babs faced her.

"Mildred, can't you mind your own business?"

"It is my business—and yours!"

Mildred retorted. "If you ask me, there's something jolly funny about this. If there isn't, why is she afraid to meet that woman in the open?"

"Have you," Babs retorted, "got any reason to believe she is meeting any woman?"

"Well, haven't you?" Mildred stared. "Wasn't it a woman I heard her talking to in Friardale Lane last night? Wasn't it that woman she was signalling to? Wasn't it the woman she tried to go to meet last night when she shoved me into that rotten suit of armour? Obviously, it was too dangerous for the woman to come here, so Gwen went out to meet her. If she's out now, it's because she's meeting her again."

"And what I say," Mildred pronounced in a loud voice, "is that if it's so necessary to meet the woman in secret like this, then either she or Gwen is up to no good! For all you know, they might be plotting to rob the school!"

"Well, then, I guess the first thing I hope they do is to kidnap you!" Leila Carroll said, sitting up. "Don't be such a half-wit, nit-wit!"

"Who's a half-wit?"

Mildred glared at the American junior.

"You are!" Clara Trevlyn chimed in.

"Oh, rats! Give Gwen Cook a rest!" Mildred scowled, but said no more.

Quickly she rose, very hurriedly washed—for Mildred was not the most meticulous of girls—and when Mrs. Carey, the housekeeper, came to unlock the door, she left the room.

"And thank goodness," Clara breathed, "for her exit! Wonder why the dickens she's got her knife into Gwen Cook?"

The others shook their heads. They couldn't even hazard a guess at that.

"Anyway, if she doesn't stop it—"

Janet Jordan said.

"We'll jolly well make her!" Babs finished.

"But where," Marjorie Hazeldene said, "is Gwen now?"

Babs was wondering that, too, and it was perhaps with some idea of finding out that she dressed more quickly than the rest and was the first out of the dormitory. Quickly she hurried down to the Fourth Form corridor; quickly she entered Study No. 8. She only half-expected to see Gwen there, and received quite a start of surprise when that girl, whirling round from the window, stared at her. Babs was shocked into swift confusion by the utter wretchedness on her face.

"Gwen—" she said.

Gwen bit her lip.

"Gwen—" Babs closed the door. She went towards her. "What is it, old thing? You're in a jam, aren't you?"

Gwen nodded.

"Won't you let us help?"

For a moment Gwen did not reply.

"You—you can't!" she said unsteadily.

"But, Gwen, we can; we'll try," Babs said gently. "Dash it, you're one of us! We hate to see you in so much trouble. Please don't think I'm trying to poke my nose into your business," she added.

"But, Gwen, we're all concerned; we'd all like, if it's possible at all, to help you out of whatever difficulty you're in. Gwen, let us?" she pleaded.

For a moment Gwen hesitated, staring steadily at the captain of the Fourth. For a moment her lips moved, almost as if she had decided, in the trembling desperation which was to be read on her face, to blurt her troubles out there and then. Then sharply she turned away.

"No!" she cried. "No, Babs! I—I can't—I can't!" she almost wailed.

"You see—you see, I can't! Babs,

please don't—don't ask me again—don't!"

Babs gasped a little.

"But, Gwen, you know what Mildred Tamplin's saying—"

"I know—yes!" Gwen stared at her. "But you don't believe that, do you?" she asked, almost fiercely. "Babs, you can't believe that! I'm sorry I—I can't tell you, but I swear, Babs, that what I'm doing is nothing to be ashamed of—nothing that you yourself wouldn't do if you were in the same position as I am. You—you believe that?"

"Gwen, of course I do!"

"Then—thanks!" Gwen drew a deep breath. "Please, Babs, go on believing it!" she said. "Never mind what Mildred Tamplin says." She stared queerly at Babs. "Babs, why does that girl hate me so? Why is she spying on me? Why is she following me about?"

Babs shook her head.

"Gwen, honestly I don't know."

"Until yesterday she'd never even seemed to notice me," Gwen went on—"until—until"—her voice faltered a little—"until she heard me talking to someone in the lane. She—"

And then she stiffened, as there was the sound of footsteps in the passage and a tap came upon the door.

"Yes?" she called.

The door came open. Marjorie Hazeldene, her face distressed, appeared on the threshold.

"Gwen, Miss Keys wants you at once—in Mildred Tamplin's study!"

"Why, what—"

"Because," Marjorie said, "Mildred says you've ragged her room. She's trying to make out you did it as an act of spite because she followed you downstairs last night—"

"But I haven't been near her room!" Gwen cried.

"Well, you'd better come along. Miss Keys is in a frightful paddy," Marjorie said apprehensively.

Gwen looked at Babs. The look said, as plainly as anything:

"Another of Mildred's tricks!"

Babs followed her as she rushed off to Mildred's study. Mildred was there, and at the door, peering into the room, were Mabs, Clara, and Jemima. A murmur came from Jemima as Gwen hurried up.

"Chin up, Spartan!" she encouraged.

Gwen, with Babs, stepped into the room. Then they both halted, eyes widening with horror.

For Mildred's room was a complete wreck. The mantelpiece had been swept clear of its ornaments, which now lay broken in the hearth. Three of the four pictures which Mildred had on the wall were daubed with soot; a great pile of soot and ashes had been heaped in the middle of Mildred's carpet. Gwen gasped.

"Oh, my hat! Miss Keys—"

"Gwen, what do you know about this?" Miss Keys asked grimly.

"Why, nothing!"

"Then why," Mildred Tamplin shot out, "did you break out of the dormitory this morning? Why were you up hours before anybody else? Who else could have done it but you?"

Gwen started.

"You—you accuse me? Why, you—"

Miss Keys raised her hand.

"Gwendoline, Mildred has asked you a question which she has a right to have answered. The only other girl who could have been in this study except Mildred herself this morning is you. You broke out of the dormitory—in order, apparently, to wreck this study, as revenge for the incident last night!"

"But I—I didn't!" gasped Gwen.

"Then," Miss Keys said, "why did you break out of the dormitory?"

Gwen licked her lips.

"I—I—I—"

"Why?" Miss Keys pressed. "Gwen, answer me!"

But Gwen remained dumb, a hunted look in her eyes as she stared from the mess on the floor to the stern, unyielding face of the mistress.

"Gwen!" Miss Keys thundered.

you would probably have found yourself sent home. As it is, I must request you to pack your luggage and go. I will arrange, until I can get in touch with your parents, for you to stop at the Courtfield Hotel."

"But, Miss Keys," Gwen cried wildly, "on my honour—"

"There is no call for dramatics, Gwen. Do as you are told."

"Excuse me a moment—just one

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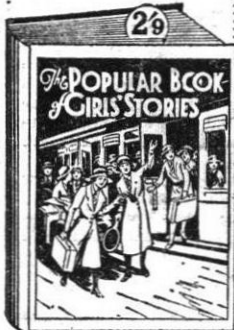
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"I—I'm sorry." Gwen faced her desperately. "I—I did break out—yes, I admit that! But I never came near this study, Miss Keys!"

Miss Keys regarded her coldly.

"As you are so unwilling to give any other reason, Gwen," she said frigidly, "you must allow me to draw my own conclusions. I am sorry, but in the circumstances I can do no other than accept Mildred's explanation. If this had happened in ordinary term-time

merry old moment!" Jemima Carstairs said, and edged into the room. "Miss Keys, as this is Christmas, time of good will and all that sort of stuff towards men, women, and domestic animals, you know, may I make a suggestion?"

"Well, Jemima?"

"I suggest," Jemima said gently, and polished her monocle, "that there may be another solution. Now," she added, and while Miss Keys stared a little, Jemima swiftly turned, gently caught

the trembling Gwen by both arms, stood her firm on her feet, and then, to everybody's astonishment, swished both her hands down the front of her skirt from waist to hem. Then she exhibited those hands to the mistress.

Miss Keys stared. So did the chums. But Babs' eyes were gleaming a little. She knew that Jemima, for all her oddities, was a shrewd and clever girl. "Really, Jemima," protested the mistress, "if this is some absurd conjuring trick—"

"Not so! Not so, forsooth! Tell me, I prithee, what do you observe on my hands?"

"Why, nothing—absolutely nothing! Jemima, really—"

"But you will observe," Jemima suggested, with a gentle smile, "that I haven't washed them?"

"Jemima, this is not the time for foolery!" Miss Keys said angrily.

"Too true," Jemima sighed. "Therefore—" And before Mildred could make a move, she had executed exactly the same manoeuvre as she had performed on Gwen, brushing her hands down the front of the skirt. Once again she turned her hands to the mistress.

"And now, dear old mistress—" she murmured.

Miss Keys jumped. "Jemima! Why, goodness gracious! Your hands are black!"

"Exactly—with soot!" Jemima sighed. "Tough, having to wash twice in this weather, but anything in the cause of justice, and so forth! Well, well, here we are! Gwen, accused of emptying soot on this carpet, has a perfectly clean frock, showing, if you don't mind my pointing it out, dear old mistress, that she hasn't been in contact with soot. Our beloved and injured Mildred, on the other hand—"

Mildred's face had turned livid. Miss Keys jumped. While from Clara went up a stupefied:

"My hat!"

"You mean, Jemima, that it was Mildred who deposited this mess here—did it deliberately to get Gwendoline blamed?"

"Aha! How my secret thoughts are read!" Jemima sighed. "Let the evidence speak for itself, Miss Keys."

But the evidence was speaking for itself. It was speaking for itself in Mildred's beetroot features, in the glare of hate she was directing at Jemima.

Miss Keys' lips came together.

"Mildred, I understand!" she said icily. "You did this yourself!"

"I—I—I—" stuttered Mildred.

"Deliberately!" Miss Keys added sternly. "Hoping that I would take your word and blame Gwendoline—"

Apparently she was forgetful that she had already done that. "Gwendoline, I am sorry. I withdraw what I have said. Mildred—"

Mildred Tamplin shook.

"I plainly perceive," Miss Keys went on, "that you have perpetrated this plot simply in order to get Gwendoline into trouble. So far from Gwendoline plotting an act of revenge against you, it is you who have plotted against Gwendoline. A despicable trick, Mildred!"

Mildred groaned.

"I—I—I— Oh crumbs! Miss Keys—"

"Mildred, please do not try to excuse yourself," Miss Keys said coldly. "Were it not for the fact that your parents are abroad I should banish you instantly from this school. In the meantime, however, please do not come to me with any more ridiculous stories of Gwen. Jemima, thank you. I am very grateful to you."

"Quite!" Jemima beamed. "And now may I trickle back to the old dorm and give the soap a dose of overtime?"

The Strange Woman Again!



"If only," Barbara Redfern said restlessly, "we knew what was the matter with Gwen!"

It was after breakfast—a breakfast to which the sulky Mildred had not put in an appearance, and Babs, Clara Trevlyn, and Mabel Lynn were in Study No. 7, staring, without enthusiasm, through the window.

It was not an inspiring view which met their gaze. The fine snow of the morning had changed to sleet, which was converting the playing fields into a drab-looking swamp, thus foiling the chums' carefully prepared plan to have a jolly snowfight outside.

Babs, Mabs, and Clara, to kill the time they found hanging rather heavily upon their hands, had been rehearsing one of the items they intended to spring on an astonished public at Pellabay Hotel. The rehearsal had not been a success, however, for that item depended largely on Gwen, and how could they rehearse whole-heartedly when they already knew that Gwen would not be at Pellabay?

As Babs said—if only they knew what was the matter with Gwen. But they did not know, and Gwen seemed too utterly scared to tell them.

Nobody made any reply to Babs' comment.

Rather glumly they continued to stare out. Then Mabs gave a sudden exclamation as she spotted a figure plodding through the murk towards the school.

"Hallo, postman!" she cried hopefully. "Wonder if there's any news from Aunt Grace, Clara?"

"Come on, let's meet him!" Clara cried eagerly.

Together they hurried out, glad even of this small diversion to break the monotony. In Big Hall they met the postman, who had nothing more exciting than an advertising brochure from a theatrical agent for Mabs and a Christmas-card for Clara from her brother Jack. But nothing at all from Clara's Aunt Grace.

"Well, I didn't expect a letter, really," Clara said. "I expect aunt will send a wire. All the same, if it's like this at Pellabay it might be days before we get away. Hallo!" she added abruptly, suddenly staring at the notice-board. And then she chuckled. "Look at this!"

Mabs and Babs looked. Then they grinned.

For the notice was in Jemima Carstairs' well-known handwriting, and it said:

"NOTICE TO ALL SPARTANS LEFT IN THESE SACRED OLD CONFINES.

"'Tis a well-known fact, beloveds, that brains left idle may go rusty. In some cases they may disappear altogether. Counter this peril by keeping alert and alive. Professor Jimmy Carstairs will give free lessons and lectures every morning until further notice, in the Fourth Form class-room, at 10 a.m. precisely.

"(Signed) JEMIMA CARSTAIRS."

"A rag!" chortled Babs. "Trust Jimmy to liven up the show. Come on! Let's round everybody up."

Clara and Mabs grinned. Off they rushed. Everybody, with the exception of Mildred Tamplin and Jemima herself, was gathered in the Common-room, seeking what occupation they could on such a miserable morning. But everybody brightened considerably when Babs broke the news.

"And Mildred?" Leila Carroll asked.

"What about her?"

"I'll fetch her," Babs said.

She darted off to Mildred Tamplin's study, clean again now, Mildred herself having been forced to clear up the mess she had made. She scowled furiously when Babs told her of the proposed lark.

"Thanks! But if you think I want to be mixed up in your kid's japes you're mistaken!" she said sourly. "Soot!"

"Sweet thing!" Babs said.

"Buzz off!"

Babs "buzzed," grimacing her contempt as she went. In the Common-room she rejoined her chums, and in an expectant body they strolled off to the Fourth Form class-room. There, quietly, they took their seats, occupying the front row of desks. Then the door came open.

And everybody at once yelled with laughter.

It was Jemima who strolled in—but what a Jemima! Dressed in a black gown, which trailed across the floor, a mortar-board on her sleek Eton crop, her famous monocle clamped fiercely into one eye, and wagging moustaches clipped on to her nose, she looked as if she had just stepped off the stage of a music-hall. In her hand she carried a long pointer.

She stopped, forbiddingly frowning. "Silence! How dare you, girls!" she cried, imitating the voice of Miss Bullivant. "Tut-tut, and gadzooks! Is this the way you greet your professor?"

"He, he, he!" giggled Bessie Bunter. "You do look a scream!"

"I fail to see," Jemima said loftily, "that a scream can look, Bessie Bunter! A scream is a sound, and, therefore, invisible. Take two lines for displaying ignorance!" And Jemima slowly fished under her desk and threw two skeins of rope at the giggling fat girl. "Now, silence, please!" Jemima roared. "Class, shun! Clara Trevlyn, if you do not cease that unseemly mirth this moment I shall give you a black mark!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Clara.

"Step out here, miss—in front of the class."

Clara, giggling still, came out. Jemima picked up something from her desk.

"Now stand there, miss! Now, take this black mark."

And while the smile suddenly faded from Clara's face, Jemima, moving forward, scrawled a cross on her forehead with a piece of charcoal.

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

"Quiet!" Jemima said severely. "Upon my merry old dictionary, this class is nothing better than a bear pit! Ahem! We will now," Jemima said, with frigid dignity, "take lessons."

And, turning to the blackboard, tripped over her long gown and came to earth with a crash.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The class gurgled. The class was enjoying this. Jemima, when she liked, could beat even June Merrett in the comedy line, and in her ridiculous disguise and her bleating imitation of Miss Bullivant she was, as Bessie had said, a scream.

"We will now deal with the Stone

Age. Barbara Redfern, get up and tell the class what was the Stone Age."

Barbara looked purposely wooden. "Please, professor, it was the age when people had no money."

"Really, Barbara—"
"And because," Barbara said owlishly, "they were all so stony they called it the Stone Age!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"Ahem! Very good—very good! Go to the top of the class, my girl. No. Perhaps you'd better remain seated at the bottom, as it's warmer near the fire. Ahem! An intelligent girl, Barbara," Jemima decided. "Gwen, perhaps you will now pour into our attentive ears what is meant by a fossil?"

"You!" retorted Clara Trevlyn cheekily.
"Another remark like that, Clara, and I will expel you!" Jemima said severely. "Gwen—"

But Gwen was not looking at Jemima. She was staring through the window.

"Gwen!" Jemima repeated, and then followed the direction of that girl's gaze. The sleet, fortunately, had stopped now, but an overcast sky still made it murky dim. Thirty yards from the class-room window the forlorn shrubbery, its leaves still covered with half-melted snow, dripped dismally, and just for a moment Jemima caught sight of a figure moving stealthily among the laurel bushes. It was the figure of a woman, heavily veiled in black, and she had an arm extended, as if beckoning.

"Ahem!" Jemima said as Gwen, rather guiltily, rose. "Ahem! Gwen, where are you going?"

"Please, Jimmy, be—be back in a moment!" Gwen said agitatedly. "I—I've just remembered something."

"But, Gwen—" cried Babs.
Gwen, however, was springing for the door. She tore it open and vanished.

"Well, my hat!" gasped Clara.
"Where has she gone?"

"Something doing outside," Jemima said. "A woman." She looked towards the window, and then, craning forward, saw a movement in the shrubbery; then saw Gwen, without either coat or hat, making towards that shrubbery. "Somebody," Jemima murmured, "our Spartan Gwen is anxious we should not see, methinks! And—hist!" she hissed.

"Look who's stealing into the picture from the east wing door!"

And then all tensed, forgetful now of the "rag" as they saw.

Gwen had disappeared into the shrubbery, but not so completely that they still could not make out her movements beyond the sparse-leaved branches of the bushes. There she was, obviously talking to the mysterious woman in the black veil.

But now, sneaking along by the wall, had appeared another figure—the figure of Mildred Tamplin, who most obviously had seen that meeting, and who most obviously intended to be present at it.

"Mildred spying again!" Babs said, and her lips com-

pressed. "And Gwen can't see her! We've got to warn her, and I know how to do it!"

She stepped to the blackboard and grabbed a piece of chalk. While Mildred sneaked closer and closer, Babs wrote rapidly, scribbling in words nearly a foot high, "LOOK OUT. MILDRED IS SPYING!" and pushing the blackboard to the window, placed it so that the message could be read from outside. She gave a sharp rap.

They saw for an instant Gwen's white face through the bushes; then they saw her peer out. Mildred, standing ten yards away, stood rooted.

"But who," Janet Jordan whispered, "is the woman?"

"Look!" Babs breathed. "Hallo, she's going!"

And suddenly they saw the woman in the veil break away, running in the direction of the cloisters. They saw Mildred furiously start in pursuit. They saw Gwen running forward to ward her off. For a few moments, this way and that the Fourth and Fifth Formers ducked, the one cutting off the mystery woman's retreat, the other furiously trying to dodge past her. The woman disappeared.

"Done her!" cheered Clara. "Come on!"

And out of the class-room they all stormed, rushing into the quad. Gwen was pale then, but Gwen was triumphant, and Mildred was ranting at her furiously. She glared as the Fourth Formers came up.

"You!" she mouthed bitterly. "You warned her; I saw the notice!"

"Bright idea—what?" Jemima asked calmly. "Did your friend get away, Gwen?"

Gwen nodded.
"And you," Mildred stormed, "helped her to get away!"

"Exactly!" Babs nodded.

"Clever!" Mildred scowled furiously. "Oh, very, very clever! Backing her up!" she added bitterly. "Backing up that woman, too! But perhaps you wouldn't be so ready to back her up if you knew what I know!"

Gwen gave an exclamation.
"What do you know?"

"Well, never mind!" Mildred retorted darkly. "But I know this—that woman

isn't waiting about, afraid to show her face, for nothing; and she can't be up to any good if you're so jolly well afraid to meet her in the open. If you and her aren't playing some deep and shady game, why is she afraid to show herself? And why are you afraid to introduce her even to your pals?"

"Ahem! Well, that's a point," Jemima considered. "Why, Gwen—hi, hi!" she cried, in consternation.

For Gwen, suddenly covering her face with her hands, was flying back towards the school as if pursued.

Mysterious girl!

On the Track!



AND after that, most amazingly, they did not see Gwen Cook again for a very, very long time. When Babs, rushing anxiously after her into the school, went to her study, it was to find that study locked. There came no reply to her knock save the sound of a suppressed and trembling sob inside the room.

Three times Babs knocked; three times she called out. But each time there was silence, and reluctantly at last she withdrew, to report her progress to her worried chums. They all wanted to help Gwen—as far as they could, they were helping her. But, as Clara said, there was a limit to what they could do while kept so utterly in the dark.

Dinner came, and with it an improvement in the weather. Since it had stopped raining a heavy frost had set in, and the ground was hardening marvellously. It was sports-mad Clara, just before dinner, who proposed a five-a-side hockey match, a suggestion enthusiastically welcomed by all—except, of course, Jemima, who, professing her usual sluggishness, protested that a vigorous game like hockey would just make her old and ancient bones cave in.

But Jemima's protests were not heeded. Neither were the offers of Bessie Bunter to captain both sides and referee at the same time.

"We play!" Clara declared firmly. "Babs, Mabs, Jimmy, and Marjorie and



"NOW, take this black mark—" And "Professor" Jemima scrawled a cross on Clara's forehead. "Ha, ha ha!" yelled the class.

Gwen on one side, and the rest of us, including Mildred Tamplin, on the other. Never mind umpires. There won't be any; nor goalkeepers. Babs, will you go and tell Mildred and Gwen?"

Babs laughed. Off she trotted, her footsteps echoing in the deserted corridors. But when she reached Mildred Tamplin's study no Mildred was there. Neither was Gwen in Study No. 8.

She reported her lack of success to Clara, who grunted. "Never mind; see them at dinner," she said.

But at dinner neither Mildred nor Gwen, most mysteriously, turned up. Miss Keys, who looked in at the end of the meal, frowned.

"Well, they have not gone out," she said. "I have just had to speak severely to Piper, who forgot to unlock gates this morning, so they could not possibly have gone out. You might tell them, Barbara, that even if there are no rules, I expect them both to be in to meals in future."

"Yes, Miss Keys," Babs said. But she wondered. It was odd, to say the least of it. If Gwen and Mildred were in the school, it was queer nobody had seen anything of them all morning; still queerer they had not turned up to dinner.

"Well, let's have a hunt for them," Leila suggested.

They hunted. Everywhere they could think of, they hunted. Still no Gwen and no Mildred.

Clara was looking a little peeved then.

"Oh, well, blow them!" she said. "Anyway, we can't hang about much longer. The light won't last. Who says the hockey match?"

They all said the hockey match. Outside the air was frosty and fresh, and the ground was not too bad. To be sure, a four-a-side was not such fun as five, but even a two-a-side match would have been preferred to nothing, especially with such a long evening in front of them.

The match commenced, Clara and Babs bullying off. Clara got away, skimmed past Mabs, and passed with a shout to Bessie. Bessie, blinking through her thick spectacles, saw the ball, waited for it to come to her, and then hit out with a smite that should have sent it into the next county, but didn't. What exactly happened was that Bessie, losing her grip on her hockey stick, hurled it across the pitch.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the chums. "Look here, where's my stick?" Bessie glowered.

"Here's your stick, nunny! And for goodness' sake, if you can't keep it in your hand, tie it round your neck or something!" Clara growled. "Look, now Mabs has got the ball!"

"Hi! Bring it back, you know!" Bessie yelled. "That's mine!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But Mabs, having sneaked the ball during the interval, had banged it into goal.

"One goal up!" Babs said cheerily. "That's the ticket!"

"It wasn't a goal!" Bessie protested indignantly. "Babs pinched that ball when I wasn't looking, you know! Clara, I claim a foul!"

"Shucks! Make it a turkey, seeing it's Christmas!" Leila chuckled. "Bully off, Babs! Whish! There! Whoa, Bessie! Take this pass!"

Bessie took it. At least, Bessie sprinted forward, and this time, with a do-or-die expression on her face, she lifted her hockey stick as if it had been a navy's pick, and smote.

Squelch! A smother of half-frozen mud rose up, and Bessie, spluttering, suddenly stepped back.

"Ooo! Woo! Wow!" she howled. "Here, you cats, who threw that?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hit that ball!" shrieked Clara Trevlyn.

"But I can't see the hub-ball! Groo, I can't! Ow! Wow!" howled Bessie as, cannoning into Mabs, who raced forward again, she sat down in the mud. "Look here, stop pup-pushing, you cat!"

Babs, laughing till her sides ached, helped her to her feet. While Clara hastily chased Mabs for possession of the ball, muddy Bessie was put on her pins again, and her face wiped. Then, whish! out from the blue came the ball, and again Bessie howled as it clumped her on the toe. Wildly she lunged out with her hockey-stick. There came a yell from Clara as it swished past her head.

"Why, you dangerous idiot!" she cried. "If you want to stun someone, stun one of the other side! I'm playing with you!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh dear! Is stunning the other side in the rules?" Bessie asked.

"Bessie, the ball!" Janet Jordan shrieked.

"Oh!" said Bessie, and, spinning like a teetotum, blinked wildly round.

Then she saw the ball trickling three yards away. With a cry, Bessie pounced on it. Off went Bessie, dragging it along at the end of her stick.

"Hi!" shouted Clara. "Bessie—"

But Bessie didn't care then. Bessie's blood was up. She saw in front of her the open goal—and a most marvellous opportunity to show her Bunter worth—nobody between her and it. With her fat little legs working like clockwork, she rushed on. She reached the shooting circle, deaf to the shouts behind her, and, whoosh!—bang went the ball right into the rigging. Bessie gave a victorious shout.

"Goal! Goal! Hurrah! Well done, Bessie Bunter!" And she turned, red-facedly beaming at her chums, four of whom were doubled up. "I say, why don't you cheer, you cackling cats?"

"You—you priceless numskull!" Clara stuttered.

"Oh, really, I've scored a goal!"

"Yes, you've scored a goal all right!"

"Well, then," Bessie said warmly, "that's no reason why you should jolly well call me names, is it? If the international committee had been here, they'd probably have given me a hat for that. I think it's a jolly clever thing to do. You couldn't have scored it."

"No, I jolly well couldn't!" Clara agreed grimly.

"Then you're just jealous," Bessie sniffed. "After a lovely goal like that, you ought to be cheering like anything, you know. What's wrong with the goal?"

"Nothing's wrong with it—as a goal," Clara said, glowering. "But everything's wrong with it as a goal for our side. You've scored a goal for the other side, you screeching jabberwock!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, really!" Bessie feebly protested; and then she blinked dismally, realising too late that Clara was right.

"Oh crumbs! Then—then that's a foul, you know," she added, brightening. "And if it's a foul, I ought to have a penalty hit at the other goal."

"You'll have a penalty hit right enough," Clara darkly promised.

"Come on, you fat egg! And next time you get the ball!" she added. "take a map with you so that you'll know which goal to shoot it into. Line up, everybody!"

Rather crestfallen, Bessie tottered back to the centre circle. Laughing still, the chums lined up. Once again Babs and Clara crossed sticks, but just before Clara gave the word, Babs started.

"I say, look!" she cried, in a suddenly breathless voice.

She was facing the old cloisters. A sudden movement there had attracted her attention. As one the chums spun round, and as one became rooted to the spot. Just for an instant they saw two figures near the entrance to the old crypt. One was Gwen Cook. The other a woman in a black veil.

"Gwen, at last!" breathed Babs, and raised her hockey stick. "Gwen, coo-ee!" she called.

Gwen turned. They all saw the violent start she gave. Then suddenly she nudged the woman with her, and while they all blinked the woman went speeding towards the hedge. Babs shouted again.

"Gwen—my hat! What's the matter with the girl?"

For Gwen, while her companion flew one way, had flown the other, disappearing into the school.

Funny that. Mysterious. Even Babs, believing in Gwen as she did, felt taken aback. Most certainly, if Gwen had nothing to fear or be ashamed of, she was acting in a decidedly strange way. Who was that woman?

The game progressed; but it did not progress long. The ground, already slippery, was rapidly churning up.

Jemima, chasing the ball, slipped, and measured her length in a patch of sticky mud, and limped off with a bruise on her knee. Shortly after that Bessie, clumping the ground half a foot from the ball, broke the end of her hockey stick clean off, and also had to retire.

"Better chuck it," Clara said, frowning at the pitch. "Anyway, it's been a rotten game."

The rest of the chums chuckled. For their own part, they had enjoyed it. But then Clara never had displayed a sense of humour over games, quick though she was to see the fun in everything else. Panting and muddy, they wended their way back to the school.

Hot baths, then—and what a luxury not to have to wait one's turn! Each of them had a bath-room to herself, and for the next twenty minutes revelled in the hot water. But Babs, even as she rubbed and scrubbed, was not thinking so much of the enjoyment of the bath as of Gwen and her mysterious friend. Who was that woman? Why should Gwen go to such pains to meet her so secretly? And why, in the name of everything that was wonderful, should the two meet in Cliff House, of all places?

Immediately after her bath she went along to Study No. 8. Gwen, white-faced, looked at her almost frightenedly as she came in.

"Gwen," Babs said.

Gwen herself shifted restlessly. "Babs, please—please don't ask it!" she said unhappily. "I know what you're going to say, but—but I can't tell you!"

Babs shook her head. "Gwen, isn't there anything we can do?"

Strangely Gwen regarded her. "There is—one thing—but only one thing you can do to help me," she

said slowly. "And that's impossible."
 "Well, Gwen, tell me! What is it?"
 "For"—Gwen averted her head—"for you—and your chums—to leave the school!"

Babs jumped.
 "Gwen, what are you saying?"
 "I—I'm sorry." Gwen bit her lip.
 "I—I didn't mean that," she said. But Babs knew that she did mean it.
 "Please, Babs, don't—don't tell any of the others," she pleaded. "I—I— Oh, Babs, I hardly know what I am saying!"

Babs gazed at her searchingly.
 "Gwen, you're doing this—whatever it is—for the sake of that woman?"
 Gwen nodded, but obviously meant to say no more.

Babs, sensing that she would rather be left alone, went out again, worried in her mind, yet sure, if Gwen would only unburden herself, that there must be some way in which she and her chums could help her. But why should Gwen want them all out of the way?

In the passage she met Miss Keys. That mistress was looking more than a little worried.

"Barbara, has Mildred turned up yet?"

"No, Miss Keys; but Gwen has."
 "Oh, perhaps she knows something! Thank you, Barbara; I will ask her."

She passed on, while Babs wandered off to join her chums at tea in Study No. 7—the study shared by Clara, Marjorie, and Janet. Gwen had already been invited to that tea, but she did not come in, and not until supper-time that night did they see her again.

Miss Keys, by that time, was looking decidedly grave, and the chums, for all their dislike of Mildred Tamplin, were beginning to feel alarmed. Mildred was still missing.

At nine o'clock Miss Keys came into the Common-room. Gwen had joined the chums then, and they were playing "Spelling Bee," the new card game. The mistress's face was serious.

"Mildred," she announced, "has still not turned up. Barbara—all of you—I wonder if you would mind helping me to look for her? I cannot rest while that girl is still missing. The school has been searched from vaults to roof. If she is on the school premises she must be somewhere in the school grounds."

"Like the crypt, for instance,"
 Jemima put in idly.

And Babs, watching Gwen at that moment, saw her give a violent start.

"Like the crypt." Miss Keys nodded.
 "Barbara, you have a torch, have you not? I do not think you need all come. Barbara—Clara—Mabel—and perhaps you, Jemima, Gwendoline, would you like to come, too?"

"But—but she can't be in the crypt!"
 Gwen burst out.

"Why not? It is as likely a spot as any other. Barbara, I will meet you in five minutes in Big Hall."

The mistress rustled out. Babs and the four girls named rose. Once again Babs, glancing at Gwen, was struck by the sudden pallor of her face. As they went out she caught the Fourth Form captain by the arm.

"Babs, don't—don't go to the crypt!" she breathed.

"Why not, Gwen?"
 "Because she isn't there—she—she can't be there!" Gwen said a little wildly.

"Why not? Do you know where she is?"

"No."
 "Then," Babs decided, and really did feel a little impatient then, "you can't possibly have any objection to us looking there. Anyway, we've just got to go to the crypt now; Miss Keys has decided

on it. Don't be scared, you silly old goose; nothing can happen. Go and get your things. And don't forget," she added, "your torch."

Gwen went off. More slowly Babs followed her. She was rather puzzled. She sensed Gwen's fear—but what was there to be afraid of?

She got her coat, her torch. In Big Hall the party met Gwen, who was trying to look as unconcerned as possible. Into the dark and frosty quad Miss Keys led the way, and presently, with torches shining, they reached the dark, crumbling hole which was the entrance to the ancient crypt. Babs, shining a light down the long flight of steps, peered.

And then she paused.
 "Listen!" she said.
 "What?"

They all stopped, straining their ears. Was it Babs' fancy, or had she heard something very like a stifled gasp down there, followed by footsteps?



"THERE—there is one thing you can do to help me," said Gwen slowly.

"Well, Gwen," said Babs sympathetically, "tell me. What is it?"

"For"—Gwen averted her head—"for you—and your chums—to leave the school!"

"It—it's nothing," Gwen put in feverishly. "Nothing, Babs. A—a rat perhaps!"

"Let us go," Miss Keys said.

She herself led the way, somewhat nervously flashing her torch in front of her. Down into the dusty crypt the chums followed her, silent now, their footsteps echoing with uncanny hollowness. Presently they halted at the bottom of the steps, near the stout door of the old underground chapel. Once again Babs started as she peered sharply into the gloom. She was certain she heard something.

Miss Keys frowned.
 "Barbara, try the door of the chapel."

Babs tried it. The door, recently, had been fitted with a patent automatic lock because, during the decorations going on in various parts of the school, Miss Primrose had stored there certain articles of furniture. It was, as Babs expected, locked.

"Follow me," Miss Keys said.
 Cautiously she led the way across the

floor. With the torch lights flashing in front of them they moved slowly forward. Then all at once Mabs gave a sharp exclamation and dived forward.

She stooped. With sudden excitement in her face, she scooped something from the ground and held it up. And Babs jumped and Clara started as they recognised it.

It was a woman's black veil.
 In the torchlight Mabs looked at Babs, and Babs, behind Miss Keys, made a frantic negative signal with her head.

"Well—" Miss Keys stared. "I do not see any significance in that, Mabel. You do not suggest, surely, that Mildred was wearing a veil?"

"Nun-no, Miss Keys," Mabs stuttered. "Then let us proceed."

And proceed they did, though Mabs' face was rather peculiar then. So, for that matter, were Clara's and Jemima's, for the finding of the veil had instantly caused them all to think of the heavily veiled woman with whom they had seen

Gwen. That veil belonged to her—if it didn't, how else could it have come here? It seemed, plainly, to indicate the presence of Gwen's mysterious friend in the crypt.

They went on, Babs puzzledly thinking. She looked round for Gwen. But of Gwen, who had been following in her rear, there was no trace. Instinctively she halted.

Then she stood stock still.

For behind her, flashing cautiously from behind a pillar, was a tiny glowing light, winking in and out. Gwen, of course. For a moment, in its irregular flashes, Babs saw her white face. Gwen, again, was signalling. What was she saying?

Almost instinctively Babs found herself spelling out the message:
 "MEET HERE MIDNIGHT."

Quickly Babs slewed round. She was just in time to catch an answering light from a recess in the far end of the crypt. It said simply:

(Continued on page 14)

OUT OF SCHOOL HOURS

There are all sorts of little problems that arise round about Christmas-time, aren't there? What-to-give for presents; what-to-wear at parties; what-to-play; what-to-do. It is with these things that your friend PATRICIA deals most chummily and helpfully in her weekly letter to you all.



WHAT a lovely, hectic rush we have been having in our family this past week!

The most exciting-looking crackers have arrived—which mother won't let even your Patricia glance at.

Father came staggering home the other evening, almost invisible under a Christmas tree.

Big brother Brian has gone all electric, and says he's going to fix up some super fairy lights for the tree. (Mother isn't too keen on 'candles being lighted. She thinks they're a spot dangerous.)

Mother herself has been making mysterious excursions "up West" as she calls the West End shopping district of London, and has been coming back, dead tired, but very pleased with herself, and trying to change the subject every time your Patricia or small brother Heath ask her what she's been doing.

● Christmas Surprises

Heath (which is short for Heatherington, you know) has been tiptoeing about the house with all the stealth of a smuggler, pretending that he's got a load of secrets no one must know.

That's one moment. Next moment, he's asking mother if fur coats cost an awful lot of money, or would she rather have a lovely piece of pink soap for Christmas. (Pink is definitely one of Heath's favourite colours.)

Then he tried the same question on me, your Patricia, and I told him firmly, that I did not like pink soap; that I thought he'd better save up until next year before buying me a fur coat, as I want a mink one or beaver at the least.

Heath looked a bit disappointed at that, but cheered up considerably when I told him that I do want a new face flannel.

● Secrets

But what is your Patricia doing in the house of mystery?

Well, I'm behaving much the same as the others. I creep upstairs like a soft-footed burglar, sneak into my bed-room, look under the corner of the carpet for a certain key, unlock a certain drawer, pop something in.

I gloat for a few moments at the growing little pile of presents there, shut the drawer hastily as I hear a footstep, lock it and hide the key again—for, as you can guess, that certain drawer holds Christmas presents, which I'm trying really hard to keep secret.

But, golly, it is difficult!

toys, and would certainly not say thank you if we gave them clothes.

So mother always gives them books—for everyone likes reading, providing you give them the right book, don't they?

"I think I'll give young Jane a copy of 'Alice in Wonderland,'" mother said thoughtfully. "Do you think she'll like that, Pat?"

"We-ell—" I felt very wicked, mind you, at admitting it, but truth made me confess to mother that I didn't think Jane would.

"You know I read it when I was about ten, mother," I said. "I know you'll be shocked, but actually, I didn't like it!"

Mother wasn't shocked, but she was certainly surprised.

"I thought all children liked it," she said faintly.

"That's what most grown-ups think," I said darkly.

"Well, I want them to have a book they'll really enjoy—not a sort of 'duty' book," she said. "So we'll give them all *Annuaux*, shall we?"

This was certainly a brainwave, for when I was at school, Christmas wasn't Christmas without "*Annuaux*"! I would have missed my Christmas pudding as much as a favourite *Annual*.

So the result is that the girl cousins are having the "*School Friend*" and "*The Schoolgirls' Own Annual*" from us, and I think it is quite likely that they will receive the "*Golden*" and the "*Popular Book of Girls' Stories*" in their stockings—lucky things!

● "Miss Mopsy"

Does your mother use a dish-mop for washing-up, or does she get right down to it with a dish-cloth?

Well, whichever she does, I'm quite certain that she'd love the "*Miss Mopsy*" here, as a sort of "extra" present.

You must buy a twopenny dish-mop and a three-halppenny dish-cloth (or duster, if you think that would be more useful), and two teapout brushes—which are two for threepence.

Wrap the dish-cloth (or duster) around the wood handle of the dish-mop, and

wind the spout brushes just below the "mop-head."

Tie the duster around with coloured wool, and work comic eyes, nose, and mouth on the mop-head.

It will certainly cause some smiles on Christmas morning—and its usefulness needs no emphasis from me!

● Extra Presents

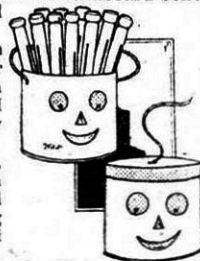
Now for two more little "extra" presents for mother.

You'll want two tins or cardboard boxes—one with a lid and one without.

Cover each tin with coloured paper or else paint them over with enamel paint, and allow them to dry.

For the peg-tin, bore a hole at each side and thread coloured string through, and fill the tin with pegs.

The string box should have a hole bored in the lid, a ball of string tucked inside and pulled through the hole to make a sort of topknot. If you like to paint a comic face on the tins, so much the jollier.



● Decorations

I had quite a fight with my young brother, Heath, about the decorations in the sitting-room.

He's got a frightfully *vivid* taste in colour schemes—mother says it's the artist in him—and would insist on our buying loads of hectically gaudy paper chains.

We fastened them in position with drawing pins, by the way—which don't do much harm to mother's precious walls.

Minkie, the family puss-cat, who still has the most absurdly young ways in spite of the fact that he's now nearly a year old, just adored the decorating business, as you can guess.

He frisked in and out of the paper chains, ripping them when we weren't looking. Then he thought he'd have a game with the holly—but the prickles soon put an end to his capers, and off he went into the kitchen with our Olive, to sulk.

● My Thanks

Now I simply must say thank you—oh, very much, for the lovely Christmas cards you have sent to me at the office. You really are dears!

Bye-bye now, until next Saturday,

Your friend,
PATRICIA.



PLANS FOR A CHRISTMAS PARTY

A very helpful article for you who are having a Christmas party of your own this year.

I EXPECT quite a lot of you are already looking forward to the Christmas party you're going to have at home this year—and, of course, you're just longing for it to be a success.

If it is planned out beforehand, I am quite sure it will be. So I have prepared a time-table for you that I think will help.

Naturally, some of the times may vary in different cases, and you may prefer other games than those I have selected. All the same, if you use my time-table as a guide—or perhaps even as it stands—I am certain that a grand time will be had by all.

Send out the invitations at least a week before the date of the party, won't you? And be sure to state the time the party starts and ends.

Then, as the acceptances roll in, you must get out a pencil and paper and prepare your plan.

- 3.30 Guests arrive. After removing hats and coats, each guest should pin on her dress (or his jacket) a drawing which represents the title of a well-known book or story. You should have mentioned this in the invitation, of course. (See paragraph A on the right for examples.)
- 3.45 Late arrivals can join in the Book game now. Give each player a pencil and paper, and all must guess as many book titles as possible. Fair questions only may be asked, and titles guessed must be written down—not spoken aloud. A very friend-making game, this.
- 4.0 Call in all lists, and then ask each player the name of the book she represents. A small prize is awarded to the player who has most right on her list.
- 4.15 A game of "Film Star Statues." The girl who pulls out may say which film star the players are to represent. The best "star" pulls out next time, of course.
- 4.30 Interval for tea. (See suggestions for popular and inexpensive goodies in paragraph B.)
- 5.0 Wash and brush up.
- 5.15 Quiet game. "Memory Test" or Observation Test. (See paragraph C.)
- 5.30 All ready now for Grand Treasure Hunt. (See paragraph D.)
- 6.0 Another quiet game. "Whispering." (See paragraph E.)
- 6.15 Musical Chairs or Musical Mat. (See paragraph F.)
- 6.45 Paper and pencil game. Word-making from long word—say Manchester. Allow ten minutes for brain-work and five for choosing winner and awarding little prize.
- 7.0 Supper interval. (See paragraph G for suggestions.)
- 7.30 Dancing to wireless or gramophone.
- 8.0 Presents from Christmas-tree or Lucky Dip from Bran Tub. (See paragraph H.) Or—Carol-singing.
- 8.30 (about)
Goodnight, and thank you for coming—and thank YOU for the lovely party!



DETAILS

A.—No drawing ability is required for this—as long as the sketches are recognisable. For example: "Treasure Island." This could be represented by a drawing of an island map with all the usual decoration, and a spot marked x where the Treasure—a chest of gold coins—can be found. "The Scarlet Pimpernel" is another book that can be illustrated easily—by a simple drawing of the flower. "Red Riding Hood" describes itself. "Uncle Tom's Cabin" is easy, too. If you like to be amusing, a picture of an egg and a piece of bacon could represent "The Good Companions." I once saw a blank piece of paper which puzzled all the players—except one who guessed right: "Gone With the Wind."

B.—Crackers, muscatels and almonds, nuts, and sweets are almost essential to a Christmas party. Sandwiches are nearly always easier to eat and more tempting than bread-and-butter. The "treat" could be individual jellies in glasses—or a delicious Christmas cake.

C.—For Memory Test you arrange twelve homely articles, such as thimble, pencil, etc. on a tray. Let the players see it for two minutes, then remove it. Players must write down as many articles as they can remember. For Observation Test each player must look around and write down the names of the articles in the room beginning with, say C, or instead, things of a certain colour chosen by you.

D.—Make it quite clear into which room players may NOT go before the Hunt—other rooms being free to explorers. Allow two "treasures" as rewards—one for a boy and one for a girl.

E.—You sit in a circle for "Whispering," all close together. The leader whispers something to the girl on her right, who passes it on exactly as she has heard it. This goes right round until it reaches the last player—and she must say aloud exactly what she heard. It's amazing how the first whisper has changed in its travels!

F.—Musical Mat is perhaps less hard on the furniture than Musical Chairs. You place a mat in the room and arrange all players in a circle. They dance around to music, but each player MUST place two feet on the mat as she goes around. The girl with one or both feet on the mat when the music stops is out.

G.—Meat-paste sandwiches would go down well now, followed by a portion of delicious trifle or blancmange. But don't forget the nuts and fruit again, will you?

H.—These presents should not cost more than threepence. It is essential that boys' gifts should have one colour wrapping and girls' another. Then if a boy fishes out a girls' present, he must put it back without opening it, and the same applies to the girls if they find boys' presents.

BABS & CO'S WINTER DRESSES

This week: CLARA TREVLYN

"I don't care much what I wear," says the sturdy Tomboy. "But if I've got to choose, I like something sensible and comfortable—no frilly bits for me."

It doesn't even occur to the un-vain Clara that she looks perfectly ripping in her most comfortable clothes. The jersey and cardigan match. They are called "twin sets."

Clara's jersey is in her favourite emerald green, and the cardigan is the same colour, though she has one in brown also which looks equally attractive over the green jersey.

The skirt suits Clara, for though she is big-boned, she has quite a slim "middle" as she calls it. This particular skirt is brown. It has a very sensible pocket which fastens with a zip, a big inverted pleat back and front, which allows plenty of leg room.

It's Clara's shoes, though, which created a sensation in the school. She went into a shop and bought the first pair that fitted, without even realising that they had the very latest "wedge" soles—that is, with no dip under the instep.

Clara had never had anything so much admired as these—so she's jolly pleased with them now. They are brown to match the skirt, and Babs says she should wear emerald green laces in them, which Clara thinks is a bright idea.

She wouldn't admit it, mind you, but she's jolly pleased to notice that these particular shoes make her feet look distinctly smaller.—H. R. & P.



(Continued from page 11)

"O.K."

Then—then Gwen's mysterious friend was in the crypt.

"Gwen!" she whispered.

The whisper, magnified in the close confines of the old crypt, must have reached Gwen's ears. For suddenly her torch went out. There was a moment's pause; then Babs heard her feet pattering towards her in the darkness.

"Babs!" Gwen cried in an agitated voice.

"Gwen, I—I saw." Babs voiced the words unsteadily. "She—your friend—she's down here—"

"Yes!" Gwen muttered; and Babs suspected she was glad of the darkness, so that she could not see her face. "But—but, Babs, please!" she pleaded, almost with a sob in her voice. "Please, please don't say anything!"

"Barbara!" came Miss Keys' sharp voice from thirty yards away. "Where are you?" And the beam of the mistress' torch came circling round, fastening upon the two girls. "We have decided," Miss Keys said, "to go back. But what, pray, are you two girls doing back there?"

"We—we thought we heard something, Miss Keys," Gwen swiftly put in.

"There is most decidedly nothing here," Miss Keys said. "What you heard was a mouse—or a rat. I do not think there is any sense in protracting our search here. We will turn back and look elsewhere!"

Gwen gulped; but it was a gulp of relief. Clara, Mabs, and Jemima, issuing out of the darkness with the mistress at their head, came towards them. Miss Keys shivered a little in the sudden icy draught of air that came from the staircase. Having made up her mind to go, she was anxious now to get out. Perhaps just a little more hurriedly than they entered, they crossed the floor back to the steps. Until, reaching the old chapel door, Jemima cried out:

"Hist!"

"Oh rats! What are you hissing for?" Clara sniffed.

"Listen!" Jemima repeated.

But even as she uttered the word, from behind the chapel door came a voice.

"He-!p!"

Miss Keys jumped.

"It is Mildred!" she cried. "Mildred, are you in there?"

"Yes. I—I—oh, I can't get out!" Mildred's voice cried. "I'm locked in!"

Babs tried the door. The automatic lock which was fitted was of the self-locking variety which could not be opened, once closed, without the aid of a key. It was of a pattern fairly common in Cliff House, however.

Fortunately Miss Keys had the presence of mind to bring with her a bunch of keys. She found one, inserted it in the lock, and switched on her torch. Then she recoiled with a gasp.

For lying on the floor, her hair awry, her face grimed with dust, was Mildred Tamplin herself.

"Mildred!" she cried. "How on earth did you get in here?"

Mildred groaned.

"Please, please help me!" she cried out faintly; and then, as Miss Keys agitatedly assisted her to her feet, she saw Gwen and jumped. "So—she is here with you!" she cried, and stretched out a trembling finger. "Miss Keys, it was Gwen—and a woman in a black veil, who pushed me in here and shut me up this morning!"

"What—"

"It's a fib!" Gwen cried, white to the lips.

"It's true!" Mildred flashed out. "You know it's true! I—I followed her and the woman down here. They were plotting to steal Miss Primrose's collection of Grecian coins from her study. Then they saw me. The door of this place was ajar, and they pushed me in—"

"Gwen!" cried Miss Keys. "Why, it—it's a wicked fib!" cried Gwen furiously. "Miss Keys—"

The mistress stared at her strangely. "Gwen, we have found a veil—a black veil belonging to someone. I imagined it had no significance until this moment, however. But, Mildred, come," she added kindly. "Gwen, go to my room while I investigate in Miss Primrose's study."

"But, Miss Keys, it's impossible!" Babs cried. "Gwen wouldn't—"

"Thank you, Barbara; please keep any observations you have until later. Come, all of you."

And in a wondering, dazed silence, with Babs supporting Gwen, who was shaking like a leaf now, they went up into the open air. And while Mildred was sent off at once to see Miss Thwaites, the matron, Babs and Gwen and Jemima and Mabs and Clara congregated in the mistress' study.

Five minutes later Miss Keys came in, carrying a box of coins in her hand. Her face was set in hard lines.

"Gwendoline," she said. "I have found this box in your study. Apparently it was stolen from Miss Primrose's room, and you hid it, rather clumsily, under the cushion of your armchair. I am afraid, my girl, that Mildred's story is proved up to the hilt. What have you to say?"

"Only—only that it isn't true!" Gwen cried.

"You deny you have been in the crypt to-day?"

"No, but—"

"You deny you were there with a woman in a black veil?"

Gwen was silent.

"Gwendoline—"

From Gwen's lips:

"No-o, Miss Keys, but please, please believe—"

"I am sorry, I cannot believe. Gwendoline, you will go to the spare study in the Sixth Form corridor. There you will sleep to-night. To-morrow, my girl—to-morrow, immediately after breakfast, you will leave the school. And until I can get in touch with your father, you will remain in the village. That is all. Now go—no, Barbara, you need not follow."

And Gwen, with one wild, pleading look at the chums, who, standing there, hardly knew what to believe in the light of this staggering discovery, turned heartbrokenly towards the door.

Jemima's Theory!



"HOOKUM!" Jemima Carstairs said briefly.

"Eh?" Barbara Redfern asked, with a stare. "Hookum!" Jemima

frowned. "Forgive the old Americanism, but I just can't think of another word, y'know. Hookum. Meaning spoof, rot"

Clara Trevlyn sniffed.

"That," she said witheringly, "may mean a lot to you, but it doesn't clear up what we were talking about. The question we're discussing is whether Gwen did or did not arrange with the woman in the black veil to pinch old Primmy's Grecian coins."

The scene was the dormitory again, and Babs, Mabs, Bessie, Clara, Janet, Marjorie, Leila, and Jemima were discussing the recent disturbing events at Cliff House. Mildred Tamplin was not there, Mildred, for the moment, being closeted with Mrs. Thwaites, who had been asked to keep an extra special eye upon her after her hardships of the day. Neither was Gwen—Gwen, virtually banished already, had been condemned to the spare study in the Sixth Form quarters.

"I said," Jemima went on, "hookum! I mean hookum! Meaning to say, dear old woodhead, that Gwen isn't guilty!"

"Oh!" Janet Jordan stared. "How do you make that out?"

"By thinking," Jemima said profoundly. "I'm not often suspected of having a brain, but what passes for one I do use sometimes! Supposing," Jemima added, "that Mildred told the truth? Supposing that she had been shut up in the merry old chapel since this morning?"

"Well?" Clara asked.

"Don't you think," Jemima said gently, "that she would have shouted out when we went downstairs instead of when we came back—because, you know, she must have heard us!"

They blinked.

"You mean," Babs breathed, "that Mildred shut herself up in there?"

"Why not?" Jemima shrugged. "She wrecked her own study, didn't she? We all know that she's been dead against our Spartan Gwen. Who was it, in the first place, who suggested that Gwen might be in league with this woman in the old veil so that they could rob the old school together? And I think," Jemima went on with a sage nod, "that we know our Gwen better than to think, whatever mysteriousness she may have been up to, she'd descend to a spot of robbery."

They all stared at her.

"Well?"

"Well!" Jemima polished her monocle. "This is my way of thinking it out. We don't know the secret between our Gwen and her mystery friend. Let that pass. What we do know is that Mildred has had her merry old knife into Gwen ever since the arrival of the mysterious woman in a black veil: that Mildred has been out to make all sorts of naughty old trouble for her."

"Yes. Well?" Babs asked.

"Put two and two together," Jemima answered comfortably, "and what happens? Mildred tried the wrecked study business. Ahem! Thanks to the brainy brilliance of a girl I wouldn't mention, that wheeze didn't come off. So far from coming off, indeed, sweet little Mildred got a severe biff over the old knuckles from the old Major, who told her not to come with any more complaints about Gwen. Now, consider, comrades. There is no evidence to show from that moment that Mildred had given up her vendetta against Gwen."

"Well, no," Marjorie considered.

"Thank you. 'Tis pleasing," Jemima murmured, "to observe I am being followed so well. To proceed. Forbidden to carry tales of Gwen's misdeeds to Miss Keys, what now must Mildred do? By letting Miss Keys herself discover Gwen's crime, Mildred was playing a nifty little card."

They blinked.

"Then—then—"

"Then," Jemima observed, "dear Mildred imprisoned herself in the old chapel. Mildred, spying on Gwen and her veiled friend—that's why she's been missing—had apparently found out they were meeting in the crypt. Mildred, apparently, got wind that Miss Keys was

going to hunt in the crypt. Mildred, waiting for us to go off on the aforesaid hunt, quickly purloined old Primmy's Grecian coins, hid them in Gwen's study, and faked the rest of the plot as we know. Another thing," Jemima added thoughtfully, "which leads me to this strange conclusion, old Spartans, is the fact that the coins were hidden so clumsily—just, in fact, as if Gwen's one great wish in the world should have been to let Miss Keys find them."

"They stared. Not quite had they thought of the plan in that light. But Jemima spoke seriously. They all felt instinctively, if she was not speaking the exact truth, she was very near it.

"Then," Babs said, "in that case, we've jolly well got to save Gwen."

"Oh, yes! And so easy, isn't it?" scoffed Clara.

"But wait a minute!" Babs' eyes were suddenly glimmering. "Oh, just wait a minute!" she breathed. "If Jemima's right—and I personally think she jolly well is—the first thing we've got to do is to solve the mystery of

they positioned themselves in the darkness, making no sound.

Five—ten—fifteen minutes went by.

Then suddenly there was a footstep. A dark form passed them. Then a light flashed on. And the chums stiffened.

For, less than ten yards away, were two figures.

One was Gwen Cook. The other they recognised by her form. It was Gwen's mysterious companion of the black veil. But this time she wore no veil.

"My hat!" breathed Babs suddenly.

"What?" Mabs whispered.

"I—I know her!" Babs whispered.

"At least, I've seen her photograph. She's an old Cliff House girl named—named"—and for a moment Babs paused.

"Oh, goodness, yes!" she breathed. "Her name's Enid Cook!"

"Cook!" breathed Mabs. "You mean, Gwen's sister?"

"Yes. Her elder sister. She was expelled for something or other about five years ago—but shush!"

"Gwen, wait! I was here—somewhere near this spot! Gwen, another girl was with me—a smaller girl! I took something from her—"

"The silver casket!" breathed Gwen.

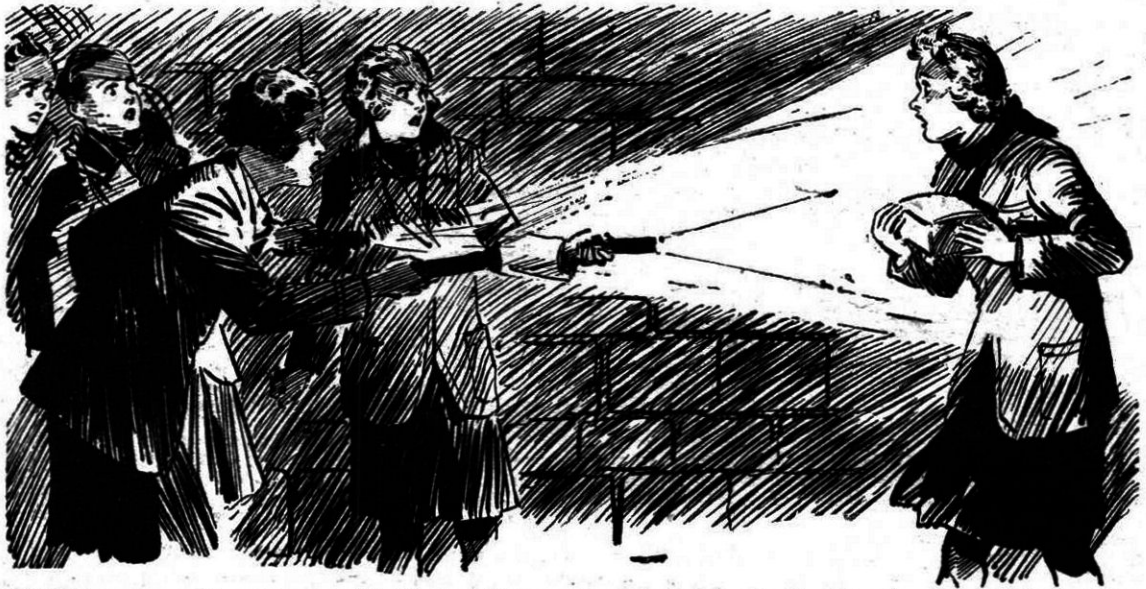
"Enid, was that it?"

"The casket?" Enid frowned. Then her face lit up. "Gwen—yes! It was the casket! It was!" she cried, her voice suddenly shrill with excitement. "I took it from her. I turned. I moved this way. Gwen, I believe it's all coming back—all, all, all! I hurried towards the wall here—and then—my goodness, Gwen—I know!" she cried.

"Enid!" quivered Gwen.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Babs, as thrilled and excited as if she had been watching some stupendous film.

"Then, Gwen, I heard the mistress. It was Miss Primrose. She was coming down the stairs. I had the casket. I saw the other girl running away. Now what did I do? My thought, of course, was to hide the casket—just temporarily, so that I could put it back in the museum when it was safe to do so. Now



"LINE up across the entrance, girls!" cried Babs, and on flashed her torch. Her chums switched on theirs, and a white-faced girl, a silver casket in her hand, was revealed.

Gwen's companion. Once we know that, then Gwen simply must allow us to help her."

"Makes sense, sure!" Leila considered. "But how the Uncle Sam do we find out?"

"Simply," Babs retorted, "by being present to-night when they meet in the crypt"—and then she told them of the strange signal she had seen.

The chums looked at each other. It was, perhaps, a forlorn hope—but it was a hope. Not one of them who did not cherish a desire that, after all, Gwen might be able to come to Pellabay with them, but what was more important now was that Gwen should not be punished for a crime she had not committed.

"Agreed?" asked Babs, looking round.

Agreed they were—all except Bessie who, though she liked Gwen, could not be persuaded to go poking about in the draughty darkness of the old crypt at midnight. Half an hour before midnight, Babs, Mabs, Clara, Leila, Marjorie, Jemima, and Janet arose. With stealth they crept downstairs and, arming themselves with torches, slipped up the lobby window and crept towards the crypt. Near the old chapel door

Mabs blinked. Her blood was racing now. Not till this moment had she remembered that almost-forgotten story of Gwen Cook's elder sister Enid, who, as Sixth Former five years ago, had been expelled from Cliff House School. That had been before Gwen's own arrival at the school.

What had she been expelled for? For a moment Mabs shook her head. Then she remembered. Something to do with a silver casket which had been stolen from the school museum—Enid Cook, apparently, accused of that theft.

In the glow of the torch there was an intent and strained expression on Enid's face.

"Gwen, I feel it! I feel it!" she breathed. "This atmosphere—you here. It seems to be coming back—sometimes I think it will all flash upon me; other times, it's just hopeless. It is strange that this one black-out in my memory always seems to elude me. I remember this place. I—I—"

"Yes?" Gwen cried, and her own face was white and strained. "Enid, try—oh, please, try!" she begged.

"Wait!" Enid suddenly gripped her wrist, and the chums thrilled as they saw the light that leapt into her eyes.

where, where? Gwen—yes! The secret door!"

"Enid, what?" Gwen cried, as white as a sheet.

But Enid was running now—as though that gap in her memory, black for five years, would yet elude her. She reached the wall. Feverishly, tremulously, she was running her hands over it. And, while the chums, with goggling eyes, watched, they heard a sudden triumphant cry. A section of the solid wall swung inwards.

Enid disappeared into the entrance, Gwen shining a light into the cavity beyond it. The chums breathed heavily, almost dazed by the drama and the magnitude of their discovery. They understood now, and understanding, asked themselves why they had never recollected the story of Gwen's eldest sister's disgrace.

Gwen, all the time, had only been helping that long-expelled sister to recover her memory—to find that casket which, in the most mysterious circumstances, she had been accused of stealing.

From beyond the secret door came a sudden sharp exclamation. It was almost a shout.

"Gwen, look! It's here!"

And then, into the light of Gwen's torch, came Enid, her face alight as she held a long, oblong, silver something in her hand.

"The—the casket!" stuttered Gwen.

"Enid, you've found it! Oh, Enid—"

And then suddenly she started back with a gasp. For out of the darkness behind her, a sudden rushing figure hurled itself.

Crash! went the torch from Gwen's hand!

"Oh!" went up a gasp from Enid Cook as the figure cannoned into her. Then a sudden, desperate cry:

"Gwen! Gwen, where are you? Gwen, I've lost the casket! Somebody's stolen it!"

The Secret of the Past!



BUT the echoes of that stricken cry had not died amid the echoes of the crypt before Babs & Co. took a hand.

"Line up across the entrance, girls!" cried Babs.

And no sooner said than done, while in front of them came the sound of gasping breath and pattering footsteps. Then suddenly Babs' torch flashed out, Mabs' and Jemima's but an instant behind it, and three direct beams fastened upon the hurrying figure of a girl who, the treasured casket in her hand, suddenly pulled up short.

"Mildred!"

For Mildred Tamplin it was.

"Grab her!" cried Clara.

She was the first to run forward. For a moment Mildred stood. Then, losing her nerve, she turned—but by that time Gwen and Enid were running, and Mildred had banged straight into them. Grimly Enid's grasp fastened upon her.

"Let me go! Let me go!" screamed Mildred. "Let—"

"Hold her!" panted Clara. "Take the casket!"

She started forward. Now Mildred was surrounded. Gwen, meantime, had snatched the casket, and, held in the grip of the stalwart Clara, and the hardly less sturdy Leila, Mildred was facing her aggressors. Then suddenly Enid flashed her torch into her face.

"You!" she cried. "You—your name—oh, I remember it now! Mildred Tamplin! You were my tag!"

"Enid!" Mildred gasped. "You were my tag!" Enid went on excitedly. "You stole this casket! I saw you! You stole it from the museum. You brought it down here, and I followed you. But I, in my turn, was followed by Miss Primrose, and, in order to save you from your folly, I hid it—to save you from getting into a row. And while I was hiding it, you rushed off!"

Mildred's face was ashen.

"Enid, I—I never meant—"

"And then—then"—Enid's face was grim—"then I tried to hide from Miss Primrose. I ran away, and when she shouted, I fell. In falling I suppose I hit my head. From that moment, until to-night, that incident has been a blank in my memory. I was accused of stealing the casket and hiding it. Nobody believed that I had lost my memory—they just thought I was telling lies, and pretending when I told them I had. And all the time" she went on, her voice vibrating with fury, "you could have saved me from being expelled."

"You cat, Mildred!" Clara burst out. Mildred's lips quivered.

"Since then," Enid went on, "my life has been just a misery. My father, humiliated by the disgrace of my expul-

sion, refused to do anything for me. In spite of my education, I have had to work in offices, as a factory girl. I have been a waitress, wasting all these years of my life."

Mildred gasped. The chums looked at her with scorn.

"And all the time you could have saved me. Why didn't you speak?"

"Enid, I—I would, but—but—"

And Mildred, white-faced, gave a hunted glance round. "Oh, Enid, don't you understand?" she burst out. "I never intended to steal that casket, any more than you did. That year I had a bad report, and an awful examination paper—don't you remember? I was afraid, when my report was posted home, that—that my father would take me away from school again. So I—I stole the reports and the examination results!"

"My hat!" Babs cried. "I remember hearing about that—"

"And—and, in a panic, I hid them—in the casket, in the museum. I thought nobody would ever think of looking for them there. Then—then I got frightened. I just had to hide them in a safer place. I thought of the crypt—"

"Yes, go on!" Enid said grimly.

"And the night when you saw me climbing out of the window with the silver casket in my arms—"

"You were off to hide that?" Enid's lips pursed. "I think I understand. And you've been afraid, ever since I left, that it might turn up?"

"Y-yes," gulped Mildred.

"And that was why you were scared when you heard me talking to Gwen in the lane the other afternoon? You thought you recognised my voice, and that I had come back for the casket?"

"Y-yes. Oh, Enid—"

"And that's why," Babs put in, "you've been against Gwen ever since? Oh, you worm, Mildred! I see it now. Your game, all along, has been to get Gwen turfed out of the school so that she couldn't let her sister in, and so help her search!"

Mildred's downbent head gave its own answer to that accusation.

"Well, are we going to see Miss Keys, girls?" asked Mabs.

"We are!" Babs said. And in spite of Mildred's almost wild

protests, off to Miss Keys they went there and then. And that mistress, by no means pleased at being awakened from her sleep, listened in astonishment to the tale which was told. Her face was grim as she looked at Mildred.

"To-morrow morning, Mildred, you will leave the school," she said.

"Meantime, I shall prepare a report of all this for Miss Primrose, who will probably take action in the new term. Enid, my dear, I am sorry! Please remain at the school with your sister as long as you wish. Gwen, I must apologise to you, too. Enid, would you care to share the dormitory with these girls?"

"Oh, thank you, Miss Keys!" Enid beamed.

And off, in a joyful group, the chums went, Enid beaming, Gwen, her eyes alight, laughing now. And for the rest of that night there was great rejoicing in the Second Form dormitory, and much talk and great happiness. For Enid, the shunned, the outcast, could go home now for Christmas, could look her father once more in the face and take her rightful place at the family table.

"But, Gwen, what are you going to do?" Babs asked.

Gwen blushed.

"Well, if you'll still have me—"

"If," Babs said, her eyes mischievous, "we will! I'm not so sure, Gwen. First, you've got to tell us something we all want to know. Now why, ninny and goosefeather, did you refuse, in the first place, to let us into the secret, so that we could help?"

Gwen looked at her sister.

"Because," she said, and shook her head, "it might all have come to nothing. I knew from the first that it was going to mean trouble, and I just didn't want you to be in it."

"After which," Jemima beamed, "there can be no question of Gwen coming with us. Well, well, here we are! Let's hope to-morrow, Clara, old Spartan, a telegram arrives from Aunt Grace, bless her heart!"

The very first thing on the morrow a telegram did. It said:

"All clear again. Please come at once!"

END OF THIS WEEK'S STORY.

CHRISTMAS at PELLABAY CASTLE HOTEL!

Heaps of fun for Barbara Redfern & Co., bent upon having the most exciting time of their lives. And so they do—though not quite in the way they expected, for in addition to fun there is mystery, created by another girl guest at the hotel whose behaviour completely baffles the chums. Don't miss

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Princess to Save Leiconia!



FOR NEW READERS.

PAMELA COURTNEY, an English girl living in the romantic little Balkan kingdom of Leiconia, is asked to impersonate the Princess Sonia. Sonia must go abroad in order to save the country—but nobody except Prince Alphonse must ever suspect that Pamela has taken her place. Thrilled beyond measure, Pamela agrees. She is so like the princess that a wig makes her Sonia's double. Her chief adviser is the Grand Duke Bernard, who does not know of the masquerade. She learns from a young Leiconian, **PAUL NALDI**, a secret helper of Princess Sonia, that the duke is plotting to disgrace her in the eyes of the people, and then seize the throne. Pamela gives a garden-party for the peasants and at the end of it she finds it necessary to send a note to Paul. She asks Juanita, a newcomer at the palace, to take it. She thinks Juanita is her friend, not suspecting for one moment that the girl is really working for the grand duke.

(Now read on.)

Her Secret Helper Unmasked!

“YOU'RE a darling, Juanita! Sure you don't mind?”

And Pamela looked at Juanita in sudden doubt, for there had been an appreciable hesitation on the girl's part before she took the note.

But then, of course, Pamela did not realise exactly what the note meant to Juanita; did not even suspect the wild exultation that was surging through the girl as she tucked the note into the breast-pocket of her riding-jacket.

Juanita had hesitated to accept it. But it was excitement that had caused her hesitation.

At last she knew the name of Pamela's lone helper; knew where to find him; knew where he could be trapped!

But there was no trace of her inner feelings now. In perfect control of herself, she smiled down from the back of her horse.

“Mind, Sonia? Of course not! I'm only too thrilled to be able to help you. I'll deliver it all right,” she added, gathering up the reins. “It'll be there in no time. Cheerio!”

“Cheerio, dear! And thanks once more!”

Smiling, Pamela returned Juanita's gay little flip of the hand, and watched her until, a spick-and-span figure who rode her mount with superb ease, she had disappeared around the wall of the palace.

Then she heaved quite a sigh of relief. Well, that was that! Paul wouldn't mind if she was late for their appointment, especially when he knew the reason. It wasn't every day that a princess was invited to the home of one of her subjects when that same subject, a peasant chief, had been full of bitter hostility only a few hours before!

It wasn't every day that a princess, out of favour with some of her subjects through the treachery of an enemy—in her case, the Grand Duke Bernard—was able to win back the loyal esteem of those same subjects.

And that was what Pamela had done. Slowly, she turned upon the terrace and surveyed the beautiful palace grounds.

In the swiftly descending dusk they looked enchanting. Green lawns and

A BREATHLESS DASH TO THE MOUNTAIN HIDE-OUT!

And Princess Pam is being chased by her own soldiers.

trees, winding paths, sloping banks, the rippling river, and the flower gardens, a veritable patchwork of vividly coloured blooms whose fragrant scent reached her even here.

But there was something else about the grounds this evening that filled her heart with joy. Stalls, marquees, side-shows, flags, bunting; all the impediments of a gay garden party. And people, too.

“My people,” Pamela murmured, and felt a strange little thrill as she began to ascend a flight of broad stone steps to the first lawn.

Her people, yes—at least, until Sonia returned. Those same peasants who had held her in scorn and contempt but a short while ago. Now their attitude was changed. With a different impression of their princess, they were preparing to depart for their valley encampment.

Pam's eyes sparkled roguishly. “You're more clever than you thought, my girl,” she complimented

herself. “It was a brain-wave, inviting them all here on your birthday—or, rather, Sonia's birthday. And didn't they enjoy themselves!”

Pamela glowed at the memory of it all; the laughter, the cheers, the unrestrained happiness that had captured everyone there. And then the invitation of the chief. Would she be so kind as to come and see his daughter? The child had been unable to attend the party because of a cold. She'd be so delighted!

“So will I,” Pamela chuckled, “only I shan't let on. It doesn't look as though I needed to meet Paul, after all.”

For the reason for their rendezvous later this evening was for Paul to tell her exactly how the peasants really felt—just in case they were assuming their friendliness.

And there didn't seem the slightest doubt that the peasants were genuinely delighted with the arrangements made for their entertainment, with the princess herself—with everything, in fact.

Happily, Pamela strolled towards the slowly emptying scene. She had arranged to meet the peasant chief in ten minutes' time by one of the marquees, whence he would escort her to his car for the drive into the village.

Suddenly a member of the Civic Guards, tall and handsome in his gorgeous crimson and white uniform, sprang to attention before her, smartly saluting.

“Your Highness,” he exclaimed respectfully, “I have been asked to inform you that there is a certain amount of food and a number of prizes left over.”

“Oh!” said Pamela, then added almost at once: “Why, they can be distributed among the peasants. Have them sent to the village. Look! I've an idea!”

And so, for the next few minutes, Pamela was absorbed in the very pleasant task of arranging for an additional surprise for the tiny community.

At precisely the same moment, a

By

DORIS LESLIE

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No. 660

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dramatic little scene was taking place in the Grand Duke Bernard's study.

Juanita had burst in like a tornado. Flushed and breathless, she had stood for a moment on the threshold, looking from the duke to his chief accomplice, Ricardo, in quivering, wide-eyed excitement.

And then she had rushed to the duke and held out Pamela's note. The envelope's jagged edge told its own tale. Juanita had read it. But even so the grand duke did not understand at first. "What's this, Juanita?" he asked, frowning.

He took the envelope, glanced at it, made to turn it over, and then, starting violently, stared at the superscription.

"Naldi," he said in a whisper. "Paul Naldi! That fellow; the one whose father I had banished. You mean, Juanita—"

But Juanita, leaning against the mantelpiece, wanted to extract the maximum amount of satisfaction from her triumph. She merely smiled and gestured.

"Read it," she urged. "Read it, uncle!"

The grand duke, glaring, did so feverishly; so did Ricardo, craning at his elbow. At last the grand duke lowered the note. He looked up. His eyes met those of his confederate. For a moment neither said a word. Words were not needed. It was all so plain—so amazingly plain and simple.

This was Sonia's accomplice; this the young man they had been trying to trap.

With three quick steps, the grand duke reached his desk; a snatch, and the phone was in his hand. Rapidly, authoritatively, he snapped out orders.

"That you, Captain Schipa? The grand duke here! Take a posse of guards—go to the White Deer Inn—surround it. Don't let anyone leave it. There's a young man there; a Paul Naldi—yes, yes!" Impatiently he nodded. "You're to arrest him. Bring him here. But if he resists—" He paused. "If he resists, you have her Highness' permission to shoot! And see that you shoot straight. That is all!"

He might have added: "A clever touch—her Highness' permission."

That'll get Sonia blamed if the young fool is shot." But, instead—

Click! He hung up. Slowly, he turned.

"So that is the end of that," he murmured. "Sonia is alone! We've half beaten her already. It won't be long now before she's in flight and I am on the throne. Well done, my dear." He patted Juanita's shoulder. "You shall have your reward. We shall all have our reward."

Juanita's lips twisted exultantly. "She can't last out now. With him in the dungeons—"

"Dungeons?" said the grand duke. He tapped his chin with a pencil. "If I know anything about that young man," he said, with quiet ominousness, "he'll put up quite a lot of resistance. I don't think he'll get as far as the dungeons!"

"VERY well, your Highness! I will attend to it at once."

The Civic Guard saluted, briskly about turned and made his way across the palace grounds.

Pamela continued her slow journey to the marquee.

Rather fortunate about that stuff being left over, she was reflecting. The peasants were bound to be pleased with it.

But those satisfying thoughts were suddenly interrupted. There came the sound of pounding hoofs some distance away, and Pamela, turning, saw about a score of mounted guards, two abreast, their swords shining dully in the twilight, cantering for the main gates.

"That's funny," she murmured.

And she was wondering what on earth was taking them away so unexpectedly, when she chanced to overhear a group of peasants talking near by.

"There they go! So it is true, after all."

"Of course it's true. I told you I heard them talking. They've gone to arrest someone, as I said."

"Who?"

"Some political offender, so I gathered. Quite a young chap, too, I believe, staying at the White Deer Inn. But that's none of our business. Let's be going."

The peasants moved away. Pamela stood perfectly still, the blood slowly draining from her cheeks.

The White-Deer Inn! A young chap to be arrested! For her those things could only have one interpretation, horrifying and incredible though it seemed.

The young man was Paul, her friend, her helper!

A Desperate Getaway!

HER appointment with the peasant chief forgotten—everything forgotten except the terrible danger drawing nearer and nearer with every second to the unsuspecting Paul—Pamela turned and tore towards the palace.

Her heart was pounding; her mind was racing.

How had the grand duke learned where Paul was to be found? No one but herself knew the identity of her helper; no one but herself knew that Paul was at the White Deer Inn; no one—

And then, as she raced up the stone steps on to the terrace, Pamela came to a sudden, panting halt.

Juanita! She was still here. There she was now, adjusting the stirrups of her saddle.

"Juanita!" Pamela gasped. "My—my goodness! She knew! At least, she had that note. And she hasn't gone yet—she's been delayed. I wonder—"

Pamela did not pause to try to solve the mystery by guesswork.

"Juanita—Juanita!" she cried. And, dashing up to the girl, caught at her arm. "That note! Has—has anything happened to it? I mean, you didn't give it to the grand duke, did you?"

Juanita, face turned towards her horse, bit her lip. She was vexed, annoyed. It didn't suit the plans of herself and the grand duke for Pamela to discover so soon that something was wrong. But Juanita's supreme confidence asserted itself. Well, it didn't really matter, she thought swiftly. It was too late for the princess to do anything now, anyway.

Slowly she turned. Her head was bowed, her shoulders were shaking.

"Oh, Sonia," she sobbed, "I—I didn't dream there'd be any trouble, or I—I wouldn't have given him the note! He did take it, yes. He—he suddenly sprang up and stopped my horse, and he was so angry. He—he threatened all sorts of things if I didn't give it to him. Oh, Sonia, I'm so dreadfully sorry! You do forgive me, don't you? Was it so terribly important?"

Who could have been heartless enough not to feel forgiveness on looking into Juanita's remorse-racked face? Pamela, despite her distraction on account of Paul, felt a pang of compassion.

"There, there, dear!" she said gently. "Of course I forgive you. It was just—just something the grand duke doesn't approve of. But I can't stop, I've got to try to put things right. Don't worry, dear."

And, pressing a kiss to Juanita's cheek, Pamela darted on. She turned an angle of the palace, streaked through ancient, vine-covered arches, and reached a shadowy, bush-ringed portion of the wall. Halting before it, she whipped out a sword buried in one of the bushes, and, inserting the blade in a tiny keyhole-like crack, gave it a twist.

With scarcely a sound, a portion of the wall swung open. A black gap yawned before her. Pamela, hastily concealing the sword again, stepped through. Five seconds later the cunning door had returned to its original

position without showing a trace of its secret.

That was why Juanita, stealthily hurrying after Pamela, looked about her in vain when she reached the spot. "Now, where's that little cat got to?" she muttered. "Anyway, what does it matter? She can't warn that fellow in time. The guards are half-way there by now!"

Perfectly true, the guards were half-way to the inn—but that was half of their way. What Juanita did not know—and what Pamela did know, and was relying upon to bring success to her desperate bid to save Paul even now—was the fact that this underground tunnel along which she was plunging provided a short cut to Tolari Forest. It saved nearly two miles compared with the route by road.

Frantically Pamela tore on through the darkness, feeling her way with outstretched arms, sometimes cannoning into jagged stone walls as she reached an unsuspected corner, sometimes stumbling, tripping.

But not for a moment did she pause. Paul had got to be saved—simply got to!

And not only for Paul's own sake—although that was vital enough. The whole of Leiconia was threatened, from the real Princess Sonia, in far away America, down to the humblest peasant.

If Paul were captured there would be no one to aid her—Pamela—in her struggle against the treacherous grand duke; and no one to warn her of traitors among the peasants; no one to pop up at the most critical moments and save her from being exposed as an impostor, as Paul had so often done in the past.

Ah! Steps before her now. She could see them in the faint evening light that came through the hollow trunk of the oak-tree above the end of the tunnel. She scrambled up them, heaved herself out of the trunk, and, dropping to the ground, tore through the forest.

She reached a glade. As she streaked across it she glanced towards the nearby road. Her pounding heart gave a leap.

The posse of guards! She could see them—at least, those intermittent flashes must come from their swords. They were behind her, and the road curved in more than half a circle before it reached the inn, whereas her path, dotted by trees and bushes though it might be, was unerringly straight.

She'd do it—she'd get there first, after all!

There was the inn, not a hundred yards away, on the other side of a hedge, with the road between them. A quaint, picturesque building, it was painted black and white, with turrets, gables, and long, spindley chimneys.

Pamela tore her way through the hedge. There was no sign of the guards at the moment, for they were hidden by the final bend in the road, but faintly she could hear the drum-drum of hoofs. And that ominous tattoo, growing louder and louder, dinned in her ears as she raced across the road.

In the nick of time she remembered to conceal her features. A scarf, swiftly fastened over her conspicuous black wig, helped to disguise her; the turning up of her coat collar partly shaded her face.

But, with her clothes begrimed with mud, torn and creased, she looked a wild, dishevelled figure when she tottered into the living-room. The innkeeper started forward in astonishment.

"My dear girl—" he began, eyeing her up and down.

Pamela cut him short. "Please—please!" she managed to say

between great gulps for air. "Paul Naldi. Where—where is he?"

"There," said the innkeeper, jerking a thumb towards some stairs. "But—hi, come back, miss—come back! You can't do that! Paul—Paul!" he roared, as Pamela, ducking under his blundering arms, raced up the stairs two at a time.

A door on a landing opened and Paul looked out. Pamela flew towards him. At the last moment she staggered, and would have fallen if he hadn't leaped forward and caught her.

"Paul!" she sobbed.

Incredulously he looked down at her white face.

"You!" he breathed. "Pam! What is it? You poor old thing, you're all in! What's happened?"

Pamela clutched his shoulder. "The—grand duke. He's found out you're helping me; he knows you're here. Guards are on the way to arrest you. Listen!" Her grip tightened.

"Hear that? They're coming down the road. Oh, Paul—Paul, you've got to get away! Quick—quick!"

Paul, staggered though he was, swiftly recovered himself. His face granite set, he looked past Pamela to the astounded innkeeper.

"They've traced me," he said tersely. "You fob them off, Rudolfo. Keep them searching—anything you can to delay them. My horses are at the back? Good!"

Putting one of Pamela's arms around his neck, he began to help her down the corridor.

"I'm afraid you'll have to come with me, old thing," he said gently. "We daren't have you caught here, even though the duke knows we're in this together. How do you feel?"

"Topping—now!" Pam declared, hoping she sounded truthful. "Look! I can manage quite all right without any help, and we'll get along more quickly. Oh, but let's hurry, Paul—please!"

Paul, nodding, broke into a run. He led the way down a flight of dark, narrow stairs, and at the bottom a door

led them into the gardens of the inn. Two horses were tethered to posts just outside.

As they unfastened them, the clatter of the approaching guards on the other side of the inn reached a crescendo.

Paul, helping Pamela to mount one horse, swung on to the other. Slowly, so as to make as little noise as possible, they walked the horses over the spongy lawn to a wooden gate, beyond which was a tree-lined lane.

For more than fifty yards they went down this. The suspense, the deliberate wasting of time, drove Pamela almost frantic, even though she knew it was the wisest plan. But at last Paul gave the signal.

"Now—all out, Pam!"

At the same time as there came a shout, "Let us pass, in the name of her Highness!" from the front of the inn, Paul and Pamela went tearing away in a desperate effort to get clear before the guards, frustrated in their search, guessed what had happened, spotted the telltale hoof-marks, and came in pursuit.

In the Peasant Camp!

"WHERE are we going, Paul?"

"There, Pam!"

"The mountains?" And Pamela's eyes rounded as Paul pointed. "But what'll you do there? You've got to go into hiding now, Paul."

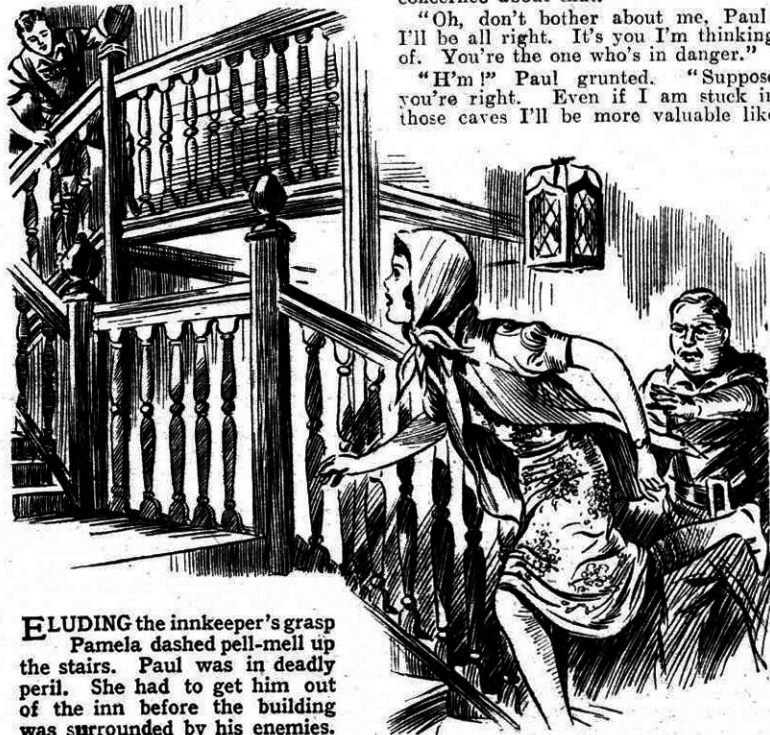
"Exactly!" said Paul, and, twisting round in the saddle to snatch a peep behind them, he settled down again.

"That's why I've chosen the mountains." He smiled as they galloped side by side down the lane. "Caves, old thing," he informed her. "A perfect maze of 'em. I used to play there as a kid. But I say, you know," he went on, suddenly becoming serious, "it's put us in a pretty nasty fix, all the same. I'll be cooped up there most of the time, Pam, hardly able to do a thing to help you."

Pamela pretended to be almost unconcerned about that.

"Oh, don't bother about me, Paul; I'll be all right. It's you I'm thinking of. You're the one who's in danger."

"H'm!" Paul grunted. "Suppose you're right. Even if I am stuck in those caves I'll be more valuable like



ELUding the innkeeper's grasp Pamela dashed pell-mell up the stairs. Paul was in deadly peril. She had to get him out of the inn before the building was surrounded by his enemies.

that than if I were in the dungeons. I can take a risk if things get desperate."

But only, Pamela reflected, if things did get desperate enough to justify such folly. For from this moment onwards Paul would be an outcast, an outlaw, sought not only by the grand duke's minions, but by traitors among the peasants—and there were quite a few, bought over by her enemy with gold and promises.

And, meanwhile, she would be virtually alone against the grand duke. It was not a pleasant prospect.

Reaching open ground, with the mountains not more than a mile away, they were streaking across it at a good pace when Pamela gave a cry.

"Oh, bother! Paul, I'd forgotten—the chief!"

And then, as Paul regarded her in frowning inquiry, she swiftly explained. Even before she had finished Paul had reined in his horse. Then he turned it off at a tangent.

"Paul, what are you doing? We can't go to the camp. It's too near the inn. I'll have to leave it."

"And give the peasants another chance to get mad with you?" was Paul's quiet reply. "You've got to go, Pam. There isn't much risk."

"All right!" Pamela made up her mind. "But you—" She laid a hand on Paul's arm. "You go on to the caves. I'll—I'll find you afterwards."

For a moment Paul hesitated. Then he grinned.

"O.K. But I'll see you safely there, anyhow. Come on!"

The peasant encampment, consisting of caravans, tents and huts, was situated in the valley, not more than a quarter of a mile from the inn. So far as population was concerned, it was not large or important, but it was one of many similar encampments dotted throughout Leiconia, all with similar interests, so that, by pleasing or offending one section, the princess did exactly the same to all the others.

Pam's heart beat queerly as they approached the camp. They were nearing the danger zone!

"Oh, Paul, I wish you'd go on!" she entreated.

"I'm going to in a sec. Here we are!" He stopped by a cluster of trees and slipped from the saddle, to help Pamela jump down beside him. "You slip off to the chief's van. You know the one. I'll tie up your horse."

Stealing away, Pamela glanced back, and then hurried on in relief. No sign of Paul now. He was on his way—to safety!

By now most of the peasants had returned from the garden-party. Caravan windows were oblongs of light; there were blazing camp-fires; men and women moving to and fro, preparing supper.

There was a light in the chief's van, and Pamela, hurrying towards it, pulled up the collar of her coat and tucked her chin well down.

Then she paused. A child's plaintive voice sounded from inside.

"She—she won't come now, daddy! Oh, I know she won't!" A little choking sob. "And I did so want to see her, daddy! Do you think she—she just couldn't come, or that she didn't really want to see—me?"

Pamela, her face softening, gently pushed open the door. She did not announce her presence because she wanted her appearance to seem as magical as possible to the bitterly disappointed youngster.

And as she looked in on the scene taking place there she forgot for the moment about Paul, about the searching guards, about danger and treachery.

Such a sweet little girl, not more than eight, sat up in a bunk, tightly clasped in her father's arms. Her face was towards Pam; her little eyes were staring up so longingly, yet so mistily, to the ceiling. And then, as they dropped and settled upon Pamela, they slowly widened, filling with wonder.

"Daddy, daddy!" the child burst out. "Look! She—she's here! She has come, after all! Oh, daddy, it's her—it's my princess!"

Pamela, her face radiant, hurried forward.

The chief sprang to his feet at once.

"But—but, your Highness, you have surely not come here through the forest? I left my car with a message that—"

Pamela was only too eager to seize on that explanation.

"Well, yes, as a matter of fact, I did," she said, forcing a laugh. "There—there was some hitch at the palace. That's why I'm late. But is this the little girl who wanted to see me?"

And she turned, with a broad smile, towards the bunk.

Instantly, her extraordinary appearance was forgotten. The chief and his daughter were far too delighted that she had come.

And Pamela herself was so thrilled and—well, yes, so flattered—to know that her very presence could transport a child she had never seen before, into such a realm of joy, that she would have loved to stay there for hours.

But remembering Paul, she at last said good-bye.

It was dark now, except for the wan light of a crescent moon. Through shadows, cast by trees and shrubs, Pamela raced to the spot where she had left her horse. And, arriving there, a little breathless, she got a shock.

The horse had vanished! There was no sign of it anywhere.

"Oh, goodness!" she gasped. "Where ever is it? Surely the guards haven't—"

"No," said a quiet voice at her elbow, "but they jolly well would have done if it hadn't been for me!"

And there stood Paul. Grinning cheerily, he half-saluted. But Pamela did not grin. She jumped.

"You!" she cried. "Oh, Paul, you didn't go on! And you promised—"

"I know," he admitted ruefully. "I even tried to. But I couldn't. I simply had to hang about to make sure you were all right—that none of the grand duke's spies recognised you. A good job I did, too. A couple of the guards came snooping round. They'd evidently been sent on a scouting tour. And I just managed to hide your horse."

He led her to a thick clump of bushes. And there, almost completely hidden, were both horses.

Gratefully Pamela looked at him. Impossible to be angry at his disobedience. It had saved her from possible detection, and that would have been extremely awkward.

Without delay the ride to the mountains was resumed. But before long it was interrupted in the most startling fashion.

Two figures, also on horseback, appeared in front of Pamela and Paul—two figures in the familiar uniform of the Civic Guards.

"Stop!" one cried, holding up his hand. Then: "It's him!" he yelled to his companion. "That's the fellow! Hi, in the name of the princess—"

But Paul acted like lightning. Pamela might be paralysed with terror: not he. Grabbing her reins, he tugged. Both horses slowed wildly round, then charged away through bushes and shrubs.

"Duck!" Paul panted. "Crouch as low as you can!"

Not a moment too soon. The guards, starting in pursuit, blazed away with their revolvers. Snapping twigs told of bullets that had gone astray. Paul, leaning out of the saddle, shielded Pamela as much as he could with his own body, while she, crouching low over her horse's neck, clung on, heart pounding.

But the chase soon ended. Paul was just a little too smart for the guards. He knew these parts so well, and, suddenly swerving, tricked both pursuers into galloping into soggy ground that brought them to a floundering, helpless halt.

And Pamela and Paul raced on. "Oh, my goodness!" Pamela breathed unsteadily a few minutes later, when they reached the foot of the mountains, and knew they were safe. "I—I thought they'd got us, then."

"Well, so did I, to be truthful," Paul confessed.

They dismounted, and Paul, sending their horses galloping across the valley, led the way to a narrow, tortuous mountain path.

It seemed ages before they reached a wide ledge, where the face of the mountain was scarred with innumerable cave-mouths. Paul set such a slow pace, and now and again stopped to recover his breath.

But at last they were inside one of the caves, and, groping ahead in the darkness, Paul leading and steadying Pamela with one arm, went far into the interior until she was almost dizzy with the twists and turns.

Then Paul halted. He was gasping, she noticed, as he fumbled for a box of matches. He struck one, and in its flickering light they gathered up a heap of twigs and set them on fire.

"We—we're too far in to be spotted," he said, and leaned against the wall. "Well"—he paused for breath—"we made it. And now, old thing, you've got to fly back to the palace."

Pamela nodded. It was vital that she should return to the palace without delay. Every minute that she was away from it might be of advantage to the grand duke.

"All right, Paul," she agreed. "I'll smuggle you food and things later, when the—"

She broke off as Paul, his face contorted with pain, swayed, flinging out one arm to steady himself against the wall. And then it was that Pamela saw his other arm clearly. In growing horror she stared at it.

The shoulder was stained by an ominous red patch—a patch that welled bigger and bigger before her eyes. There were red streaks down his arm, and even on the back of his hand.

"Paul!" It was a cry of frantic dread. "Oh, Paul, you were hit! The guards—they shot you! Paul—Paul—"

Frantically she sprang forward; but she was too late.

"I—I think," Paul murmured, with another twisted grin, "I think I'm going—to faint!"

And even as she flung out her arms to save him, he crumpled up, and slumped to the ground.

WHAT now? Pamela can't leave Paul lying there wounded—helpless. And yet she mustn't remain away from the palace too long. Next week's chapters bring further thrills and surprises. Don't miss them.

Further gripping chapters of our Great Thrill and Adventure Serial.

Guests at Mystery Manor!



FOR NEW READERS.

HILDA FARREL, with her chums BERYL, LORIMER and JUDY BROUGH, and her clever dog MARCUS, go to Hawsley Manor for a holiday as paying-guests. The manor is owned by the father of LAVENDER MORTIMER, with whom the girls become friendly, and is the Mortimers' means of livelihood. A strange woman is "haunting" the house, using secret passages, in one of which the girls find a paper referring to hidden treasure. A woman detective, THELMA HARKNESS, arrives to solve the mystery, and soon has Hilda & Co. under suspicion. The chums are sure the mystery is connected with an old mill near by, which can be reached from the manor by a secret passage. There is also a tunnel to the mill from outside. A guest, MIRANDA BATES, learning of the treasure, accidentally sets fire to the mill, but the chums save the building. Later, Lavender disappears—kidnapped by a hooded woman and kept in a secret room. Marcus finds her and tries to lead the chums there.

(Now read on.)

The Corridor's Secret!

"WHERE is he leading us?" Hilda asked, as she followed Marcus along the corridor that led from the hall of the manor house. "And why?"

Marcus, being only a dog, could not explain, but his whole bearing showed that his mission was a highly important one, and Hilda, who knew her pet's keen intelligence too well to ignore his pleas, really felt that something serious was amiss.

Presently Marcus, who was some yards ahead, stopped close to an oak-panelled wall, and with head on one side waited for Hilda, Judy, and Beryl to reach him.

He scratched at a panel and whined pathetically, then, moving nearer to it, listened.

"Ah! Another secret panel," opined Beryl. "My goodness! How does Marcus find them?"

Hilda did not stop to argue that out, but did her best to move the panel in case it slid or opened. The manor house, as they had already found, had many secret corridors. Built hundreds of years ago, it had been cunningly devised to provide hiding-places for refugees. Even now all the secrets of the old house had not been revealed, and Hilda was ready to believe that Marcus had found yet another secret panel.

But when she stooped close to the wall, she heard a sound that caused her to draw up.

"My goodness—someone groaning!" she exclaimed.

Judy and Beryl drew close, the latter

rather pale, for she was inclined to be nervous.

"The ghost," she whispered.

"No. If it were that sort of thing Marcus would be afraid or, anyway, upset," said Hilda quickly. "Nor would anyone play ghost just here, and in broad daylight. That is a real groan."

She tried again to open the panel, but could find no clue to suggest that it moved. Perhaps it did not, she thought. The fact that someone was behind that panel did not mean that it had been used as the means of entry.

"There's a corridor behind there, as we know," said Hilda quickly. "We've got to find the way in. It might be the

LAVENDER MORTIMER KNOWS WHO THE MYSTERY WOMAN IS—AND YET SHE CANNOT TELL!

detective lying there—the mystery woman, or—"

"Lavender," murmured Judy in awe. "Phew—"

That was Hilda's own suspicions, and she turned away to seek the entrance to the corridor, hoping that one of the near-by panels would prove to be movable.

But Beryl suddenly remembered something that had happened earlier that morning. They had seen the mystery woman, hooded and unrecognisable, in another secret corridor in the floor above. They might have caught her but for the fact that in the floor of the corridor a gap had suddenly appeared, and it had been impossible to bridge it without taking a risk of a fall.

"Hilda—that gap! Remember?" said Beryl excitedly. "It must have been about here on the floor above. If there's someone groaning, do you think—could they have—have fallen through?"

By
ELIZABETH
CHESTER

Hilda did not stop to argue. She knew the way into the corridor above, and raced off, with Marcus and her friends following.

Presently, by means of another secret panel, they were in that dim and musty corridor above, and with a torch flashing, Hilda led the way.

"Wait!" she murmured suddenly. "This is where the gap was. But it's covered now."

She made to cross it, and then gave a startled cry as the floor gave way beneath her. Judy, just behind, threw out an arm and grabbed Hilda just in time. Another step forward, and Hilda would have gone crashing through the floor.

"That's what happened to whoever is down there," said Beryl.

Hilda, a little shaken by the alarming experience, drew back, and then shining the torch down, warily pushed at the boarding that covered the gap in the floor, a kind of trapdoor, working on a spring.

The rays fell upon a girlish figure sprawled on the dusty corridor below, a girl whom Hilda recognised at a glance.

"Lavender!" she cried aghast. "And my goodness! She's unconscious. She fell from here. Oh, I say!"

"How can we get down?" asked Judy, peering over with Hilda.

The rays of the torch showed rungs made in a wooden ladder fixed to the side wall, and Hilda, picking her steps with great care, climbed down while Judy held the torch.

"Look, Beryl," Judy whispered. "What's that beside Lavender? The cloak! The mystery woman's cloak. Lavender must have pulled it off!"

It was easy for them to piece together what must have happened. Lavender, escaping, had managed to elude her captor, and had actually torn away the woman's hooded cloak. But she had fallen through the trap!

Below, Hilda knelt at Lavender's

side. There was a bump on the girl's head, but no limbs were broken, and Hilda judged that she had not been badly hurt, although she was stunned.

"Lavender," she breathed. "It's Hilda."

Lavender groaned, but made no reply. Standing erect, Hilda looked up and down the corridor. She knew that the mechanism of the secret panels could be clearly seen from inside the corridors, and that therefore she could find a way out.

Leaving Lavender for a moment, she went along the corridor until the rays of the torch showed rusted iron mechanism affixed to a panel. Excitedly she tried to operate it, and gave a nod to herself as she noticed that it was well-oiled, for all its rust. Someone had used it recently.

A moment or two of experiment revealed the way to open it. Pressing the right lever, Hilda had the satisfaction of seeing the panel swing open. Daylight was let in, flooding the corridor for a yard or two, and Hilda stepped out.

Then, finding that she was near to the spot where Marcus had led them, she ran to find Lavender's father.

At the moment he was busy with the new paying guests, Mr. and Mrs. Robinson and their son, Bertram.

"Just the kind of house in which one would expect to find a ghost," said Mr. Robinson, a lean, cadaverous-looking man. "I am interested in all ghostly phenomena."

"Ugh!" said his wife, with a shudder. "And secret corridors, eh, dad?" asked Bertram, a scholarly looking lad.

Mr. Mortimer, who, in the absence of the real butler, was playing that part, chose to be non-committal.

"I have never seen a ghost here," he said mildly, and did not add that the servants had been scared from the house by what they believed was a ghost.

"I shan't stay a single night if there is one," said Mrs. Robinson anxiously. "If there is I will investigate," said Mr. Robinson.

"And I'll shoot it with my air-pistol, dad!" piped Bertram.

Hilda managed to attract Mr. Mortimer's attention, and, excusing himself from the new guests, he joined her.

"What is it?" he asked, noticing how pale Hilda looked.

"Lavender. We've found her. Mr. Mortimer," said Hilda softly. "But she's had a slight accident. Stunned by a fall."

She hurried with him back to the corridor, and while she kept guard at his request to ensure that the new guests did not wander in that direction and

notice the secret panel, he crept in, and presently returned with his daughter limp in his arms.

"Poor child!" he murmured. "I am beginning to think that the servants were right. This is no house to live in."

"Oh, don't say that!" said Hilda anxiously. "It means the end. Lavender has worked so hard to keep this place going. Mr. Mortimer. And there isn't a real ghost."

He went at once with her to an empty bed-room, and, placing Lavender on the bed, examined the bump.

"I will get a doctor," he said, and then faced Hilda worriedly. "Despite what you say, I am coming to the sad conclusion that we must admit defeat. This kind of thing cannot go on. Without Lavender I cannot run this house. We have no servants, and guests cannot be expected to pay for service they do not get."

Hilda took his arm in appeal. "Mr. Mortimer, let us help, please!" she begged. "I know my friends will rally round. We don't mind putting on servants' uniform. But we're not letting this fake ghost beat us—and it is a fake ghost!"

He looked at her with deep gratitude, touched by her ready offer of help.

"I don't see why you should, my dear!" he protested.

"For your sake—and for Lavender's," said Hilda earnestly. "And because—because—well, we won't be beaten. That mystery woman isn't going to empty this house and then steal the treasure—your treasure!"

Mr. Mortimer squeezed her arm, smiling wanly.

"If you think you can succeed where the detective has failed, by all means try," he agreed. "But Miss Thelma Harkness is clever—has a high reputation—yet she has been baffled."

He went then to telephone the doctor, and Hilda remained with Lavender, joined in a moment or two by Judy and Beryl.

"She's all right?" asked Beryl softly. "Stunned—a touch of concussion," said Hilda quietly. "It means she will have to rest for a day or two. But when she does come round—"

There was a glint in her eyes, and friends knew what she was thinking. Before her fall Lavender must have seen that mystery woman unhooded. And she could tell them whether their guess was right—whether, after all, the mystery woman who was playing ghost, seeking the treasure, and trying to drive them from the house, was none other than Thelma Harkness, the detective!

A Message from the Ghost!

HILDA & CO., dressed in maids' caps and aprons, were very busy. Hilda and Judy were making beds, while Beryl, rather late in the day, was running the vacuum-cleaner over the hall.

Watching her a few yards away was the solemn new guest, Bertram.

"That's not the way to use a vacuum-cleaner," he said critically. "You servant-girls have no brains."

Beryl looked at him indignantly. "If you know so much about vacuum cleaning, why don't you do some, instead of just standing there?" she asked.

Bertram looked shocked for a moment, and then advanced to take charge of the instrument.

"This is the way," he said, demonstrating. "You have to get maximum suction, you see. In ten minutes I could fill this bag."

"Rubbish!" said Beryl, her eyes glimmering.

Your Editor's address is:—
The SCHOOLGIRL Office, Fleetway House,
Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

BETWEEN OURSELVES



MY DEAR READERS.—Such exciting news for you this week. Next week's issue of THE SCHOOLGIRL—on sale one day earlier than usual—will be our Extra-Special Christmas number. And, goodness— isn't it just full of good things?

But if you'll forgive me for a moment I'd like to chat about something else which is full of good things. I mean the SCHOOL FRIEND ANNUAL. Now you all like animal stories, don't you? I know by your enthusiastic letters every time one of the Cliff House pets is featured. And you'd like to meet some of those pets again, wouldn't you? Say, Clara Trevlyn's fine Alsatian, Pluto, and Bessie Bunter's quaint and clever little Pekingese, Ting-a-ling.

Well, you can in this year's SCHOOL FRIEND ANNUAL, for those two dogs are featured in the most delightful stories specially written by Hilda Richards.

That's thrilling news for you animal-lovers, isn't it? But here's something more to whet the appetites of all of you. That strange Fourth Former, Gemima Carstairs, also "stars" in the Annual. She, too, has a story to herself, for even though Babs & Co. and lots of your other favourites all play their part, it is Gemima who holds most of the limelight—and you know how entertaining Gemima can be!

If you want to be sure of reading these delightful stories—and other Hilda Richards stories, too—as well as the host of other superb features the SCHOOL FRIEND ANNUAL contains, then I would advise you to visit your newsagent at once. Even if you don't buy the Annual now, you can ask him to reserve you one until just before Christmas, can't you? And in the meantime you can save up the three and sixpence it will cost you,

or let daddy or uncle or aunt know you would like them to buy it for you.

And when you've finished this feast of reading, do let me know what you thought of it.

I've dwelt at length on the SCHOOL FRIEND ANNUAL because of its special appeal to readers of the SCHOOLGIRL, but there are three other Annuals just as attractive in their own way:

THE POPULAR BOOK OF GIRLS' STORIES, 2/9

THE SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN ANNUAL, 6/- THE GOLDEN ANNUAL, 3/6

All four books make ideal presents, you know—either for yourself or your friends; the sort of presents that can last a lifetime, and be brought out again and again.

Now I really must tell you something about next week's issue—which will be on sale one day earlier than usual, by the way; that is, on Friday, December 16th, instead of Saturday the 17th.

First of all we have Hilda Richards' magnificent LONG COMPLETE story of Barbara Redfern & Co. And what a grand story, too. Full of the spirit of Christmas! For it takes place in snow-clad Cornwall, where Babs & Co. are spending Christmas at the most romantic old castle owned by Clara's aunt; a castle which still retains traces of the Middle Ages, while at the same time being run as a most modern luxury hotel.

And that is not all. There is a mystery—a most puzzling mystery concerning a girl whom the chums first meet on their way to Pellabay Castle, and then discover is actually staying there.

From that point onwards the most inexplicable things happen. Babs & Co. are astounded by the mystery girl's behaviour. They set out to discover what she is up to—and in the end bring about a simply sensational surprise! There is loads of Christmas fun, as well as adventure, so don't miss this grand tale, will you?

As usual, next week's extra-special number will contain further splendid instalments of "Guests at Mystery Manor" and "Princess to Save Leiconia," as well as more of Patricia's Bright and Interesting Pages, a really lovely programme in themselves.

Now good-bye until next week.

Your sincere friend,

THE EDITOR.

"Rubbish?" asked Bertram hotly. "I know what I'm talking about. Do you know where I came in physics at my school?"

"Bottom," said Beryl, guessing at random.

"Top," said Bertram loftily. "I know all about physics. This motor creates a vacuum—or, rather, a depression of the atmosphere, not really a vacuum. There is no such thing as a vacuum. Now, watch this!"

He got the thing going and swept the floor. Beryl watched for a moment, and then, seeing a fashion paper on the window seat, sat down comfortably and glanced through it.

Beryl's school report always drew attention to her idleness, but she had worked hard this morning to make up for the lack of servants in the manor house, and this was a welcome respite.

She was still enjoying it when Bertram's mother drifted into the hall. "Good gracious, Bertram! What ever are you doing?" she demanded.

"I—I'm showing the servant how to sweep the hall, mother."

"While she sits there reading! What manner of place is this we have come to? Where is the manageress?" demanded his mother hotly.

Beryl dropped the book and sprang up.

"Sorry!" she said guiltily. "He was just demonstrating."

"He? Master Bertram to you," said Mrs. Robinson stiffly. "Remember your place!"

Beryl, about to explain that she, too, was a paying guest, smiled instead, choosing to play her part as faithfully as Lavender's father played his.

But Bertram suddenly jumped to the vacuum-cleaner and switched it off, dragging out a piece of paper that was just jamming the orifice.

"What's this? A drawing-pin in it, too," he said. "Must have been pinned to the wall. It slipped behind that bookcase I was sweeping under."

"Let me look, please," said Beryl. But another voice made the same remark with greater emphasis.

"Let me look!"

And there stood the grim-faced woman detective, Thelma Harkness, who had entered the hall too softly to be heard.

Thelma Harkness took the slip of paper and studied it grimly.

"Another warning that the ghost will walk to-night," she exclaimed.

"Ghost!" gasped Bertram's mother. "Oh, no! Then there are ghosts here!"

"Ghosts—or pretenders," said the woman detective. And Beryl saw that she held a stump of candle in her hand, hardly more than a molten mass.

Crumpling the note, she turned to Beryl, eyeing her servant's uniform in some surprise but without comment.

"Have you seen a candle of this type before in the house?" she asked.

Beryl frowned in thought, and then gave a slight start.

"Yes; in Miranda's room," she admitted.

Thelma Harkness turned away, and Beryl, puzzled, watched her go. She would have followed, but Mrs. Robinson detained her, hand on arm.

"Tell me, are there ghosts here?" she asked.

Beryl, remembering the apparition she had seen, hesitated. Hilda had said it was a fake, however, and although Beryl had been scared at the time she quite believed her friend's explanation.

"Not a real ghost," she said.

"No—"

"Ma'am."

"No, ma'am," said Beryl. "Only someone playing a lark."

WHILE Judy held the torch and Beryl watched with bated breath, Hilda went through the trap-door to the help of their unconscious friend.

"Not much lark about it when I shoot my air-pistol at the ghost," said Bertram, with relish. "I'm quick on the draw, and—"

He whipped an air-pistol from his pocket, and Beryl hastily skipped back. It was well that she did so, for something went wrong, the pistol fired, and from the air bag of the vacuum-cleaner came a dying sigh and a cloud of dust.

"Oh, Bertram!" said his mother, in dismay.

Beryl, giggling, turned away. She had heard Hilda's voice, and gladly took the opportunity to escape.

"Beryl, here—Lavender's coming round," said Hilda. "The doctor is here and says she's not badly hurt."

"Oh, I'm so glad!" said Beryl. "Can she talk yet?"

"She was just blinking a little," said Hilda. "I want her to see us all in uniform so that she doesn't worry about the house and the visitors."

Beryl went with her to the room where Lavender lay. It was darkened now and warm, and in it were Mr. Mortimer, the doctor, and Judy.

"She's just speaking," said Judy softly. "Shush!"

Lavender, very pale, hand to forehead, glanced up at them. It was tragic to see the change in her. Usually spirited and gay, she was now quite wan, and Hilda's heart went out to her.

Finding her voice, Lavender spoke softly.

"Where am I? What's happened?" she whispered.

Her father leaned forward, brow furrowed.

"Lavender, dear, this is one of the rooms on the ground floor. You had a fall. What happened, dear? Who kidnapped you?"

"The hooded woman?" said Hilda gently.

Lavender stared at her fixedly, worriedly.

"I—I don't know," she said. "I—I—"

She struggled up, and then sank back, closing her eyes. Almost immediately she opened them again and stared at her father. But her look was puzzled and there was no hint of recognition.

Shocked, he drew up, and Hilda felt a sharp, cold feeling of dread.

Without the need of the doctor saying so in words, she knew the worst. Lavender Mortimer had lost her memory!

In silence, very sad and sympathetic, Hilda, Judy, and Beryl crept from the room, rejoining Marcus, who had waited patiently outside.

Not a dozen yards away stood Thelma Harkness, who at once beckoned them.

"Well, what news?" she asked softly.

"How is she?"



They told her, and she pursed her lips, frowning.

"Bad! She cannot tell us who the woman was?"

Hilda looked at the detective keenly, wondering if she would be able to notice a sign of relief that Lavender could not give that vital information. But Thelma Harkness' expression did not change. Her thoughts were not revealed on her face.

"But there is something else," she said swiftly. "I find that I was wrong in blaming you girls for the fire at the mill. I know the culprit now. Miranda Bates."

"Oh! Mr. Mortimer told you?" asked Hilda.

"Mr. Mortimer? Does he know?" said Thelma Harkness, and her surprise was too obvious to be pretence. "I discovered it by reason of this clue—this candle I found when searching the charred ruins. It is still recognisable as the missing one of the pair that was in Miranda's room. What was she doing in the mill that night?"

"Seeking the treasure," said Hilda promptly. "She overheard you and Mr. Mortimer discussing it, and sneaked out to the mill to do a little hunting on her own account. Then apparently the hooded woman looked in, and Miranda was so scared that she dropped the candle."

Thelma Harkness nodded her head slowly.

"I see—and all that is known but kept from me," she said a little bitterly. "Doubtless that is why the girl is in her parents' room, crying bitterly!"

"I suppose so," admitted Hilda, who felt sorry for Miranda, even though the girl had behaved so treacherously. "And she admitted that she only pretended she had been frightened by the ghost just to get her people out of the house."

"H'm!" mused Thelma Harkness. "We are still in the dark. The best we can do now is to wait until midnight. The ghost has threatened to appear, and we must lay a trap. This time

there must be no blundering. That ghost must be laid, that mystery woman captured before she locates and steals the treasure."

Then she left them. Thoughtfully the chums stared after her.

"I'm blessed if I can make out whether that woman is a fraud or not," Hilda murmured. "Only Marcus can really know, and he can't say."

"If she is the mystery woman herself," said Judy slowly, "she must have seen Miranda in the mill. So why bother to find that candle and denounce her?"

"I don't know," said Hilda. "The plot thickens. She thought we were to blame—and we think she is. She was wrong, and maybe we're wrong, too!"

Beryl gave a faint shiver at that, and looked about her.

"In that case," she said, "there is a mystery woman at large. Someone lurking in the corridors, kidnapping—she took Lavender and hid her. She plays ghost—and—"

Beryl was uneasy, but not so uneasy as the paying guests would be if they learned the truth. Fortunately they only knew that someone had played ghost for a joke, and not even the Bates were completely convinced about the warning that the ghost would walk at midnight.

True, Miranda had claimed to see a cloaked, hooded woman in the mill, but her parents—although they would not have admitted it to others—knew that Miranda did not always speak the truth, especially when in a scrape.

To them it sounded far-fetched, and they decided that Miranda had behaved very badly, and that the best thing they could do was to stay on, since by leaving they might cause unpleasantness and possibly receive a demand for compensation for the burning of the mill.

"Midnight—that'll be the time!" said Hilda. "What I suggest is that, to get the party really going, just as Lavender would want us to, we'd better start something like hide-and-seek after dinner—and while we're hiding, we can keep watch for the mystery woman."

To which suggestion, Judy and Beryl eagerly assented.

Face to Face!

LAVENDER was not suffering, and the doctor predicted that she would soon be quite well, save only for her loss of memory, which might prove to be quite a temporary affliction.

But the fact that she was in bed prevented the manor house from being run in its usual efficient manner. None of the girls had quite realised how much she did, or how expert her management was. It was a case of not missing the water until the well ran dry.

Hilda, Judy, and Beryl did their very best. They helped to prepare lunch, and then drew lots to decide who should help the butler, and who should serve in the dining-room.

Beryl was the unlucky one—unless the others were unlucky in the sense that she dropped the dish containing potatoes. But Beryl did not mind, and to all three the work was good fun.

There was every chance that on the morrow—provided the ghost did not make an unwelcome midnight appearance—Mr. Mortimer might be able to

engage some staff. If he could, Hilda, Judy, and Beryl would be free to continue their hunt for the treasure.

During the afternoon—there being no housework for them to do—they managed to slip away to the Old Mill, and there explore the ruins.

Thelma Harkness was searching, too, and they joined her. But there was nothing to indicate that the treasure had been hidden there.

"All the same, the clue we have does hint that the mill has something to do with it," frowned Hilda, "so we mustn't give up hope."

It was Beryl who had the bright idea of showing her gold watch to Marcus, and telling him to seek. She thought that, being very intelligent, he would realise that it was gold they wanted, and snuffle round until he found some.

But, brilliant though the idea was, Marcus' execution was poor. He found an old boot, a bone, and a cat who chose

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to remain at the top of a tree, despite his invitation to descend for a scamper.

There was a twinkle in his eyes that suggested that he did not take his searching very seriously.

Darkness limited their chances, in any case, and it was not long before Hilda had to make use of her torch. Nor did the woman detective appear to have any luck; for she went back to the manor house with a long, disappointed face.

"Can't make her out," frowned Hilda. "Is she the mystery woman, or isn't she?"

"We'll bowl her out before long," said Judy. "She's cunning, but most cunning people are careless. That'll be her downfall."

"Like my Uncle Harry," nodded Beryl. "He was careless. He fell off the top of a two hundred and fifty foot monument in Italy."

"Golly! Was he killed?" asked Judy, aghast.

Beryl shook her head.

"No; he only sprained his ankle."

Hilda and Judy stared incredulously.

"He fell off a two hundred and fifty foot monument—that's eighty yards, nearly four times the length of a cricket pitch," said Hilda, "and only sprained his ankle!"

"Fell on his head, perhaps, and then rolled over," giggled Judy. "He's like Beryl."

But Beryl was as surprised as they. "When I say he fell off the top of the monument, so he did," she said. "Only luckily he managed to hold on to the guard rail. He sprained his ankle climbing back."

"Oh!" said Hilda, with a chuckle. "Swindle!" said Judy. "Anyway, what's it got to do with Miss Thelma Harkness? She hasn't fallen off a monument, or sprained her ankle. Now my Aunt Jane once had a—"

But Hilda suddenly caught her arm. "Shush! Skip Aunt Jane!" she said. "Listen!"

She ran forward and dropped to the ground, and Beryl and Judy did the same.

"Rattling chains—the ghost!" whispered Beryl, paling.

"In the tunnel—leading to the manor house from the mill here," nodded Hilda. "String out—you left, Beryl, Judy right. If it gets softer, lift one hand; if it gets louder, lift both."

Without quite seeing what Hilda was driving at, the two girls obeyed, and took up their positions.

Beryl suddenly lifted both hands, and Judy one. Beryl not only lifted her arms, but waved them; the sound was getting louder and louder. Therefore, reasoned Hilda, the chains in the tunnel were being dragged in a direction from her to Beryl on her left, and away from Judy, on her right. In other words—towards the manor house!

"Now for it!" said Hilda excitedly. "To the manor house—quick as we can! We know where this tunnel leads out. Come on, Marcus—"

They raced into the manor house, slowing when they saw other guests in the hall; and with decorum made for the panel where the secret tunnel emerged into the house.

Presently their excitement grew, and they exchanged nods. They could hear the chains approaching—nearer, nearer.

Hilda put out the corridor light and they stood in darkness, Hilda in front of the panel, Judy and Beryl on either side.

Click! The secret panel was opening, and there was a luminous, shapeless glow in the darkness. Beryl gave a stifled gasp, but Hilda snapped on her torch.

For a split second she saw someone holding a flimsy bundle of cobweb-like material, and clutching a long chain:

But who it was they could not see, for the person wore a long, hooded cloak.

Quick as a flash, seeing that the mystery figure was about to dodge back, Hilda took a grip on the cloak. But at the same moment the figure knocked the torch from her hand.

As darkness came, she heard a rending sound—the cloak was splitting. If only a light could shine now, they would see this mystery woman face to face!

Suddenly it happened. A light blazed out!

WHAT a thrilling and intriguing moment this is! Who is the mystery woman? Don't miss next day's fine chapters.