

# The Schoolgirls' Own



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**JUST IN TIME TO PERFORM!** (An incident from the grand long complete story of the girls of Morecove School contained in this issue.)

You couldn't find a finer school story than a "Morcove" yarn. The story below will convince you of that.

# THE MORCOVE MUSICIANS!

A splendid new long complete story of the girls of Morcove School, featuring musical Madge Minden and her pupil, little Maggie Shaw.

By MARJORIE STANTON.



## Cora Thinks it Funny.

CORA GRANDWAYS looked into the small study in which Paula Creel, the Fourth Form aristocrat, was lolling in an armchair. "Huh!" said Cora, putting on her aggravating air. "So you are not going to the festival, Paula, after all!"

"What? Oh, wun' away!" Paula answered, airily waving a hand. "You wealise quite well, Cowa, that are not only uncalled for, bai Jove, going to the festival."

"Yes, I did hear—"

"Pweicisely! Then why pwovoke me, Cowa? Why awouse my temper, bai Jove, by twoubling me with your wudiculous questions? Questions, Cowa, that are not only uncalled for, bai Jove, but, I wather suspect, merely intended to show what an aggwavating person you can be. Yes, wather!"

Having delivered herself of which lengthy speech, Paula lolled back in her armchair once again.

Cora sniggered.

"He, he, he! But I can't help laughing! It is so very rich, to think that—"

"Cowa—"

"To think that you girls have been getting so worked-up about the music festival over in Barncombe, and now—now that the day has actually come, you're not going!"

"Cowa—"

"All the singing practice you have had, the times you have stood screeching your lungs out in the music-room downstairs, and now—"

"There will be some scweeching heah, in a minute. Yes, wather, bai Jove!" breathed Paula, for all she was the last girl in the world to go in for warlike encounters with other girls. "You wile me, Cowa. You are, I wegwet to wemark, a particularly aggwavating twial, bai Jove!"

"I hear that Audrey Blain is going to the festival, in spite of what has happened," Cora hung about the doorway to say.

"Audwey is Audwey, Cowa, and I—I am Paula Cweel," said that young lady. "Yes, wather! And, as I happen to be particularly pwostwate after our early morning hunt, would you mind, Cowa, wemoving your pwesence without twoubling me any further, bai Jove?"

"Oh, I'm going!"

"Thanks!"

"What are you all going to do with yourselves, though?" Cora asked. "Where are all the others?"

Before answering, Paula sat up a little and gave ear to certain footsteps in the passage.

"Bai Jove!" she exclaimed, looking relieved. "Unless I am gweatly in ewwor, here are two of the othahs. Yes, wather!" she added beamingly, as Betty Barton and Polly Linton appeared at the open door.

Cora was still lounging there, and she did not step out of the way to let the two girls enter more easily.

On the contrary, Cora stuck out a foot, and very nearly sent Polly Linton headlong.

It was a mistake, a great mistake. For Polly, the madcap of the Form, was the very last girl to play tricks of that sort with, and Cora knew it.

"I—I'm sorry!" Cora thought she had better apologise, as Polly recovered her balance and turned upon her with glinting eyes. "I couldn't help it."

"No, perhaps you couldn't," said Polly, "with feet like those!"

"Ha, ha! Bai Jove, wather smart, that!" applauded Paula, from her armchair. "Singularly witty, bai Jove!"

There was a moment whilst Cora Grandways stood gnashing her teeth. Why—oh, why could she not think of some annihilating thing to say—something to make both Polly and Paula squirm? But it was no use! Paula alone she could have had great fun with, but Polly—she never could get the better of Polly!

She stalked away, nose in air, and the door was promptly closed after her departure.

"That geal," said Paula, "she is a downright disgwace to the Form, bai Jove! Even at a time like this, geals, when she wealises we are all howwibly 'wowwied about poor Madge Minden, she must come wunning awound to wile one!"

"I know," Betty said, knitting her brows. "She and her two or three cronies are gleating over the fact that we can't go to the festival to-day. They don't seem to think how awful it is that our plans are only upset because of an absolutely serious affair. This disappearance of poor Madge—"

"It's more than serious," struck in Polly, hoisting herself on to the edge of the study table from sheer force of habit. "It's tragic!"

"Bai Jove, it is!" agreed Paula. "And there's another thing I can't understand—how Audwey

Blain can feel like going to the festival after what has happened. Bai Jove, it stagghs me!"

"I'm disgusted," Polly exclaimed, "and I let her know it, too!"

"Her going is certainly in worse taste than the whole choir's going would be," Betty remarked, in her quiet way. "The choir had entered, so as to do a bit of good for the school, as a whole. Some people might even say that the choir ought to go, in spite of what has happened; but for Audrey to be going all by herself, to compete for a prize that only means a personal triumph—is that somebody at the door, Polly?" the speaker broke off, fancying she had heard a gentle rap.

Polly hopped down from the table and was at the door in a flash, whisking it open. And then she gave a delighted cry.

"Oh, it's Lady Evelyn—"

"Bai Jove!"

"Come in, do!"

"May I?"

"Yes, wather!"

It was one of those rare moments when Paula felt electrified.

The visitor—a very beautiful, stylishly dressed young lady—was Lady Lundy's daughter. The Earl and Countess of Lundy lived at Barncombe Castle, and to-day's annual music festival in the town was only one of the many functions which owed their inception to the great family's fine public spirit.

Young Lady Lundy had had a lot to do with the girls of Marceve School during the past year or so, and she was great chums with many of them.

"I say," exclaimed her ladyship, with an absence of that vivacity with which she usually burst in upon Betty and Co., "this is a dreadful thing about Madge Minden!"

"Yes—yes, wather! You've heard, then?"

"It's all over the town, I believe," Lady Evelyn answered, taking the seat Paula was offering. "She vanished yesterday evening, isn't that so? And the police have made inquiries—have searched—"

"We have searched, too," Betty broke in. "We were all up at dawn, and we hunted every likely spot. It's shocking!"

"Poor Madge—yes!" exclaimed the visitor. "And, of course, you don't feel like taking your part in the festival contest now. You haven't the heart."

"That's it," said Polly; "we simply haven't the heart."

Lady Evelyn nodded sympathetically.

"The moment we heard at the Castle, we said we didn't see how you would manage the contest," she remarked. "Besides, Madge Minden was the very one who was going to conduct you, was she not?"

"Yes, wather!" exclaimed Paula. "You are aweah, Lady Evelyn, our music-mistress was called away, and Madge vewy bwickishly offered to twain us. And now—"

Paula paused abruptly. The door had flashed open, and Tess Trelawney was calling into the room:

"I say. Excuse me, everybody, but you are wanted, Betty. Miss Somerfield asked me to find you. She is in her room, waiting."

"Oh, I wonder what this means?" Polly burst out excitedly. "Some news about Madge at last, perhaps!"

"Come with me and see—that's best," Betty

invited them all cordially. "Lady Evelyn, you'll excuse us for a bit, won't you?"

She jumped up, shaking her beautiful soft furs to rights.

"Oh, I must fly! I only hopped out of the car for a moment, as we were passing—the mater and I, yes. I wish I could stay; and for goodness' sake ring me up if you get any news of Madge!"

She went with the girls as far as the entrance hall below, and then sped away, whilst Betty and Co. at once hurried to the Headmistress's room in response to that rather exciting summons.

#### Cora Gets the Worst of It.

"A H, Betty—all of you, come in!" Miss Somerfield exclaimed eagerly, as the girls presented themselves in the doorway.

Her expression showed that she had been anxiously awaiting the girls' appearance, and her reason for wanting to save every moment was soon to be made clear.

Hardly had the girls taken their stand before her than she went straight to the point.

To their utter amazement, she as good as suggested that they should go to the festival, after all!

"I will be brief," she said, "for if you are to go, then you must get ready and be off at once. Madge—ah, poor Madge! She is still missing, and the mystery as to what has become of her is, I know, preying upon your minds just as much as it is preying upon mine and my colleagues'. I can quite understand you have very little heart for singing. Your one thought is—what has become of Madge? But there is this to be said: Going to the festival will take your minds off a grave trouble, which you can do no good by brooding over. I myself would not dream of going; but then I am in an altogether different position, am I not?"

"Oh, yes!"

"As Headmistress, I shall, of course, remain here to give all my anxious attention to the case of Madge Minden," she went on. "The same with the mistresses. But as for you girls—Well, there, I leave it to you to decide for yourselves."

And then there was a pause.

"If we do go," Betty broke out at last—"if we do—"

"Well? But I think I know what you are all thinking," the Headmistress said gently. "You are wondering, will people think you showed a want of heart as regards this trouble about Madge. There will be no chance for people to form any such idea. I shall take steps to make it known that you were advised to go to avoid harmful brooding."

"We'll go!" Betty exclaimed decisively, with the sudden absolute assurance that it was right to go. "Yes, we will! You've changed my opinion, Miss Somerfield—"

Miss Somerfield detained them not another moment. She was attending them to the door as she said softly:

"There are times, after all, when one must carry on—when it is best to carry on, instead of sinking into useless despair. Go, then, and think of me and my colleagues doing everything possible, during your absence, to solve the mystery of Madge Minden."

They were words that seemed to inspire these youthful hearts that had, indeed, been heavy with despair only a minute since. Away sped the girls to tell others who were members of the choir; and

it was just as Polly had said. Now that they were caught up in the excitement of getting ready, they could see what a mistake it would have been to stay away.

They would carry on—yes, and that would not mean that they were forgetting all about poor Madge. Far from it. Nor did it mean that they would be going to the festival in the same spirit in which Audrey Blain was going.

For Audrey, by unhesitatingly declaring her intention to go early this morning, had indeed revealed an utterly callous spirit. The whole Form had derived the impression—and it was a true one—that Audrey meant to go, and meant to cover herself with glory, no matter what happened.

Whilst the girls were upstairs hastily getting ready for out of doors, Cora Grandways appeared, wearing a malicious smirk.

"Oh, so you are going, I hear!"

"Yes."

"Yes, wather!"

"I thought you were all so broken-hearted about—"

"Cora, if you say another word like that," Betty cried out furiously, "I'll make you smart for it! I will, so just you mind!"

Cora thought she had better be a bit careful. To charge the girls with being callous, when their loving anxiety for Madge had been demonstrated so unmistakably, was perhaps too risky.

"Who is going to conduct the choir, anyway?" she asked, taking care to keep near the room door. "Shall I come and conduct for you? He, he, he!"

One or two of her cronies had suddenly joined her in the doorway, and they shared her titter.

"I suppose Betty Barton is going to conduct, being the Form captain," sneered Diana Forbes.

"Betty Barton is going to do nothing of the sort," said that girl curly. "We shall place ourselves in the hands of somebody who will be there to conduct other choirs."

"I pity the somebody, whoever it is!" chuckled Cora. "I don't think I had better come; I shall simply shriek with laughter!"

This drew no retort from the girls. They were giving a last hustle round, prior to hurrying down to the private char-a-banc which had been ordered by telephone to pick them up for the run into Barncombe.

"Oh, don't get out of breath!" said Diana Forbes. "You'll want it for the screeching competition, won't you?"

"Ha, ha,—yes!" said Ella Elgood. "The one who screeches the hardest gets the prize! Shall I give you 'doh'?"

"Yes, come on—give them 'doh'!" exclaimed Cora. "All together—daw-aw-aw!"

"Rather flat!" grinned Diana. "Once again—doo-oo-oo! Cock-a-doodle-do!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Cora and Co. always laughed riotously over their own jokes. They began to roll about with their laughter on the landing, whilst every now and then they did some sort of "take off" of a choir singing.

Then suddenly Polly Linton came away from the room—the first girl to do so.

"Doh-h-h-h!" bawled Cora, right in Polly's left ear. "Do-oh-oh—yah, leggo!" she howled next moment, the change of tune being due to the fact that Polly had seized the mocker by her hair.

"Ooo! Polly, you cat, leggo!"

"Now sing it—go on!" Polly challenged, giving a tug at the handful of hair. "Sing, duffer—sing!"

But Cora simply screeched for help, although she was not really being hurt.

"Help! Di—Ella—Grace! Ow, stop it, Polly! He-e-e-ep!"

"Bai Jove!" said Paula, coming away from the room. "With a voice like that, no wondah you were turned out of the choir, Cow!"

Polly let go the spitfire's hair, and Cora seemed glad enough to fall back against the wall, gasping for breath. Next instant, however, she made what was simply a frenzied rush at the other girl, and this incited Diana, Grace, and Ella to display their spiteful feelings.

All round Polly they mobbed, pushing and hustling her until she could hardly have known whether she was on her head or her feet.



**BETTER THAN MOPING!** "If you festival," said Miss Somerfield, "I shall make it known that I advised you to go. It will imply no lack of concern for the girl who is missing—Madge Minden."

"Hallo—hallo—hallo!" This was Betty, as she also came rushing up to lend a hand at Polly's rescue. "Now, Cora—Di—"

For a full minute there was about as lively a scrimmage on the landing as Morcove, in its most boisterous moments, ever knew. It was such a general mix-up, not one of the girls realised that they were all slowly working towards the head of the stairs. And so suddenly the end came in a manner as startling to them as it was amusing to those who were looking on.

Cora went over the edge of the top stair. They was a hair-raising yell, and then—

Bump, bump, bump!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bumpity, bump—flop! finished Cora, at the bottom of the stairs.

Polly shook herself to rights now that there was a sort of truce.

"Any more for the trip?" she wanted to know blandly.

Cora's cronies, however, did not seem to be keen on bumping all down the stairs after their leader. And, for fear of being made to go down like that, whether they wanted to or not, they fled.

"Ah," commented Betty serenely, "then I take it we are ready, and can be off?"

"Yes, wather! Howevah," panted Paula, "let me get my hair to wights again, geals. Bai Jove, what a howbible fwight I must look, wumped so dweadfully."

"You're a duck!" said Polly, winding her arm about the dressy girl's waist. "Come on, duffer, and put yourself to rights at the other end."

And so, with the feeling that the bit of violent exercise had done them quite a world of good, they made a rush for it together down through the house, and five minutes later they were off and away in the char-a-banc, bound for Barncombe and its festival.

#### Prisoners Both.

A CHAMBER below the level of the ground—a vault-like place into which the light of day seldom or never penetrated, for windows there were none.

To such a gloomy spot as this does the scene suddenly change. Broad daylight, indeed, flooding upon the outer world at this very moment; but here, in this dry cellar of a certain lonely house on the Devonshire moors, there would have been groping darkness, but for the lamp dimly burning upon the paved floor.

Perhaps the lamp had been burning for so many hours continuously that its oil was almost all used up. For the time had now come when, to make the wick give its proper degree of flame, one or the other of the two girls who were here had to take hold of the whole thing and give it a shake.

Two girls—yes, and prisoners both!

Ever since yesterday evening had they been helpless captives behind the massive, locked door which formed the only means of communication between this dungeon-like place and the outer world.

All through the long winter's night had they remained shut away together, knowing that their imprisonment had come about in such a fashion that an immediate rescue was hardly to be hoped for.

And of these two girls, one—the elder—was the missing Madge!

"Past midday, Maggie dear," Madge Minden now remarked quietly, holding her wrist-watch close to the lantern. "We should have been at the festival by now, if—if—"

"Yes, Madge," the other murmured, with intense sadness, "if only my father had not served us like this. So cruel of him! Oh, I wonder how he could be so heartless!"

"He was desperate, dear," the elder girl reminded her distressed companion. "Ah, we must make allowance! He had done wrong, and he feared that I was going to denounce him to the police, and so he felt there was nothing else to do but fly from the neighbourhood."

The girl Maggie made no response to this. The lantern-light, shining upon both faces, showed

that hers was much the more anguished of the two.

"We know, too, Maggie dear," Madge Minden went on, for she would have been ashamed not to say the best that could be said for the girl's father—"we know that he really hated locking us away down here before he rushed off. Remember what he called out to us, as his last word—that he would see we were set free before another night came round."

"But—but— Oh, Madge, it is like you to keep all the anger and bitterness that you feel to yourself!" the child whimpered. "But when I think what it all means—what I have found out father to be—"

"Hush, my darling! Try—try not to think about it. There, there! Oh, Maggie, don't cry—don't, you poor little darling!"

For the child was sobbing now. Such a sorrow it had been to her, as good and true a girl as ever lived, to find that her father was no better than a thief.

This poor, motherless little Maggie, how she had toiled from day to day, not only keeping the humble home in Barncombe clean and tidy, but often earning a sixpence by cleaning other people's steps, and never once had she murmured against the hard life. Never once had she had anything but loving compassion for her father when he seemed unable to get any work. And all the time he had been, unbeknown to her—a burglar!

"I could bear it all the better," she faltered presently, whilst Madge Minden kept closer to her in a comforting way, "if only it had not brought such trouble upon you! You were so good and kind to me, Madge, from the moment when you found that I was fond of music and wanted to improve my playing."

"You made me want to be kind, Maggie darling."

"And I was always telling father," the poor child went on in her anguish, "what a lot you were doing for me. How you were giving me lessons at the piano, and how you had even encouraged me to enter for the Lady Lundy prize at the festival in the town. I told him that your friendship might be the making of a—a career for me, but he could never have cared."

"Well, darling, you see how it was," Madge murmured soothingly. "All the time I was taking a purely friendly interest in you, he was suspecting that I associated him with that burglary at the school. He thought I was trying to pry out evidence that I could take to the police. And then—only yesterday afternoon—he had that letter from somebody, warning him that I really meant to denounce him to the police."

"That letter," Maggie said bitterly; "whoever wrote it was doing you an ill turn, Madge! Far from meaning to denounce my father, you—you were actually worrying and fretting as to how he could be shielded, and yet turned from the wrong path. For my sake—"

"Yes, Maggie, whether I was doing right or wrong, I only know that I felt so sorry for you, I simply had to shield him."

"Then who wrote the letter, I wonder?"

Madge did not answer, but she could have told her fellow-captive, if it had seemed expedient to do so, what her suspicion was.

In the middle of the night that suspicion had flashed upon Madge as she lay with Maggie upon the mattress which had been given them to sleep on. Lying awake for hour after hour, pondering

the whole terrible situation, the schoolgirl's weary brain had suddenly leapt, as it were, at the name of the person who had penned that fateful message.

Audrey Blain!

The moment that name occurred to Madge she had been amazed that she had not thought of it before. Because it was all so clear, so obvious that Audrey Blain was indeed the person who had had a motive for warning the burglar to flee the neighbourhood.

It was, in fact—it must have been, Madge felt certain—nothing else but a cunning attempt on Audrey Blain's part to rid herself of a dangerous competitor in the piano contest for the Lady Lundy prize!

As the great day for the festival drew on, Audrey had realised that her one serious rival was Maggie Shaw. If Maggie Shaw attended the festival, then it was all up with Audrey's hope of achieving personal glory. But if something happened to prevent Maggie's attendance, then—then Audrey would have nothing to fear.

So yesterday, on the very eve of the contest, Audrey had written that cunning note to Maggie's father. She had warned him to flee the place, unless he wanted to be arrested by the police; and she had done this, feeling sure that when he fled he would take Maggie with him!

But he had not done that. He would not hamper himself with the poor girl. He had bluntly said that her going with him would lead to his capture as soon as a hue-and-cry was raised. For the police all over the country would be asked to look out for a man who had with him his twelve-year-old daughter.

In his sudden frantic desperation he had cast both Maggie and her schoolgirl chum into this prison-cell, seeing no help for it but to let them remain there until he had got almost to the other end of the kingdom.

His own safety—that was his one thought! Little he cared that, by locking up the girls like this, he was causing terrible anxiety to all Madge's friends, and was preventing his own child from taking part in the contest. They would not come to any harm, and that, in his selfish opinion, was good enough.

"He left us some food and water, Madge," the other girl broke out presently. "Won't you try to eat something?"

"No, dear; I don't feel I could," Madge answered. "I am thinking, Maggie, if only we could get away, after all."

Maggie's half-tearful eyes went to the bolted door.

Ah, if indeed they could only get away at once! But they had tried several times already, tried with all their strength to burst open the door, and all in vain.

Yet as Madge Minden now stood up and went across to the door, Maggie joined her there eagerly. Despite the sense of despair which had come to them after those previous efforts, the one girl was as eager as the other to try again.

Madge turned back and fetched the lantern. Giving it a shake so that the wick would pick up the last few drops of oil in the reservoir, she watched the flame burn up, and then held the light close to the door.

Hopeless, surely! She could not help feeling so. The door was a very solid one, and without doubt there were sound bolts on the outer side.

"Yes—oh, yes! Perhaps, Madge, if we—if we

take it calmly. We—we were so excited—so frantic, those other times," Maggie murmured.

Madge knew what her chum meant. It made all the difference if they hurled themselves against the door with all their strength at the very self-same instant, instead of making agitated thrusts at it, not always in concert.

So, having set down the lamp, they acted with great deliberation. They took time to gather all their strength and all their breath, and then, taking their stand near the door, they were ready.

"Now!"

The well-timed onslaught was better than anything they had done before.

Thud! They hurled themselves against the woodwork at exactly the same instant. But nothing gave; hardly a timber creaked.

No, it could not be done! It was hopeless for two girls to try to force the door by that means. It needed a battering-ram.

And yet they tried again and again after that.

In mad desperation they hurled themselves against the door time after time—thud, thud, thud!—only to leave themselves bruised and breathless, whilst the stout timbers remained as fast as ever.

Here they were, and here they must remain surely, whilst the cruel hours dragged by.

No freedom for either of them until Maggie's fugitive father had found such safe refuge for himself that he could venture to send word to the local police without bringing disaster upon himself.

That was his intention, they knew—to drop a letter to the Barncombe police in some letter-box, telling them to go to the house on the moors and release two girls who were shut up there. But this the hapless prisoners also knew—such a message would never reach the police before this evening, at the earliest!

And, meanwhile, this was the great day of the festival, a thing that added how much bitterness to the cruel situation!

Poor Maggie, indeed—above and beyond all her anguish over what had come to light about her father, forced to think of what she was missing—the great chance that had looked like being hers, a chance to achieve the first step towards a great career!

And poor Madge, too, forced to believe that this was all Audrey Blain's doing, and that even at this moment Audrey Blain was at the festival, assured of her coveted triumph.

#### Audrey's Hour is Coming.

**B**ARNCOMBE was en fête for the festival. The char-a-banc in which the Morcove choir had made the journey from the school proceeded at a snail's pace as soon as the quaint old town was reached.

Impossible to do otherwise, when the narrow High Street teemed with extra traffic on account of the day's great event.

The cars of the wealthy, waggonettes and buses from the villages round about, pony-traps and dog-carts hailing from remote farmhouses—all were here, proving what keen interest the festival and all its music contests had excited.

There were banners and streamers of bunting across the street, whilst Betty and Co. heard hawkers bawling "Official programme!" long before the fine Assembly Rooms had come in sight, with huge placards framing its handsome entrance. "Programme! Here y'are, ladies! Official programme!"



### THE IMPRISONED MUSICIANS!

Together, Madge and Maggie Shaw hurled themselves at their prison door, but hardly a timber creaked.

Polly bought one right away, enjoying the fun of reaching over the side of the char-a-banc and being held on to by Betty and Tess for fear of her taking a "header." She was a sort of gypsy woman, with a baby slung at her breast, who retailed a programme to Polly, which meant, of course, that the poor soul was requested to "stick to the change."

"Haul me back, that's all I ask!" Polly playfully yelled at her chums, pretending to be in danger of going clean overboard. "Quick—pull! Pull me hard!"

"My gwacious!" papitated Paula, taking alarm at this outcry. She thought Polly was in real danger. "Stop the dwiver—whoa! Heah, bai Jove!"

And then Polly came upright in the slowly moving vehicle, and there were roars of laughter from all save Paula as the madcap was seen to be enjoying the scare she had created.

"Cheer up, Paula!" smiled Betty. "There's the Assembly Rooms, and so we get down in a moment."

They had all mustered on the pavement, and were making a move towards the Assembly Rooms entrance, when several of them noticed a queer little person giving them a keen, anxious look, as if she wanted to speak to them.

Sure enough, Betty had only to come to a standstill and respond with a look that said, "Can we do anything for you?" for the stranger to draw near and speak.

She was a shabby, grey-haired woman, all of a shake with nervous excitement. Amidst the hubbub of talk going on around the girls, they could hardly hear what she said, in such a faint, fluttering voice did she speak.

"I beg your pardon!" said Betty. "Would you mind speaking a little louder?"

And then, to the girls' surprise, the queer old soul said exactly the same thing in response.

"I beg your pardon, my dear! Would you mind speaking a little louder? You see," she said, smiling from one to another in the most excitable way, "I am deaf—very deaf."

"Oh!"

"Yes, it is my misfortune to be very deaf," she exclaimed. "And perhaps you wonder at a deaf person coming to a music festival?"

"Bai Jove, it is wather weparkable!" Paula said. "Howevah—"

"There is a reason for my being here," the old lady went on, in her flustered manner. "Ah, a great, wonderful reason! I cannot explain, for that would be detaining you too long. But perhaps you will find out as the day goes on. My dears, I wanted to ask you—"

She paused, taking a moment for breath.

"You are Morcoove scholars, I think?"

"Oh, yes! Yes, wather!" they chorused, feeling more and more amazed.

"Then I wonder, my dears, if you can tell me—has Madge Minden got here yet?"

The girls simply gaped in blank amazement.

"I am looking out for her—yes," the strange old lady continued. "I am Miss Agatha Ainley, and Madge knows me well, although you girls have never, I suppose, heard of me before."

"Miss Ainley? Oh, yes, we have heard of you!" Betty now cried out. A light was breaking in upon this strange situation. "Of course, you are the lady who lives at Parish Place—"

"Yes, my dear—the house where your school-fellow used to come to give music lessons to at least one pupil. I know that Madge will be here to-day—"

"Oh, but she won't be here!" several of the girls exclaimed together distressfully. "Miss Ainley, it is a thing that has upset us ever so much. Madge Minden is—missing!"

"What—missing! Madge Minden—missing!"

Almost before that incredulous cry had died away the girls had started to explain what a strange mystery was surrounding the girl's disappearance.

They had a sudden hope that this old woman might be able to propound some theory as to how and why the girl had vanished. But no, Miss Ainley was completely at a loss.

All she could say was that Madge had called at Parish Place for a few minutes yesterday afternoon, and had promised to look out for her—Miss Ainley—at to-day's festival.

"Perhaps you can tell us this, anyhow," Betty said at last. "Why did Madge Minden start giving music lessons for money? It was not because she was in need of money, we know. Why did she do it, then—why?"

"Yes, why?" chimed in Polly and the others eagerly. "It has been a puzzle to us all along. She took on a poor stepgirl as a pupil; she advertised for others—"

"That is so," Miss Ainley answered. "But as to why she did it, I can only say that I am sure her motive was a good one."

"Ah yes!" Betty was quick to assent. "That almost goes without saying. But we want to know why—why exactly did she do it?"

At this moment a policeman politely asked the girls if they would mind not blocking the path for others, and the next thing they knew was that Miss Ainley was lost to their view in the throng of people arriving for the festival.

"We shall see her again, anyhow," Betty exclaimed consolingly. "Let's look out for her, girls. Hallo, there's Audrey, talking to Lady Evelyn!"

Even as Betty made the remark both Audrey Blain and Lady Evelyn saw the choir-party. But, whereas Lady Evelyn at once came zig-zagging through the press of people to have a word with them, Audrey slipped away.

Was she a little ashamed, after all, to meet her schoolfellows?

Perhaps!

More than a little ashamed of herself, perhaps, when she knew that, but for her own selfish scheming, Maggie Shaw would have been here to-day, and along with Maggie Shaw, missing Madge Minden!

**Still Time, Perhaps.**

"MAGGIE—oh, Maggie darling!"

"Yes, Madge."

"I have an idea. Oh, I do believe there is a way, after all, of our breaking open the cellar door!"

Madge had ended a despairing silence by her sudden outcry.

It was half an hour since that last futile attack of theirs upon the cellar door, and now the lantern was on the point of going out. The wick had soaked up every atom of oil.

"Look—this pavement which covers the floor!" Madge rushed on, pointing to the stone flags at her feet. "There—there is a battering-ram for us! One of these big slabs of stone, if only we can prise one out of place."

Could that be done?

The glimmer of lantern-light showed Maggie's face to be as suddenly excited as Madge's. To think what it meant if only they could get away after all—now, at an hour when the festival was still in progress!

"There was a knife—I want it, Maggie."

"Here it is!" panted the younger girl, whipping about and snatching up the ordinary dinner knife which her father had provided them with along with the food, a jug of water, and a mug.

Madge took the blade and looked at it critically. Then she eyed the paving.

Each slab was doubtless cemented down, and she felt it would be wonderful luck indeed if she could loosen one—prise it up—with no better implement than this dinner knife. But she was going to try!

Down on her knees she dropped, asking Maggie to stand by with the lantern. In a state of wild suspense, the two girls remained silent, Madge hastily getting to work with the knife.

She worked the end of the blade along one of the fissures, thus cleaning away a lot of cement that had become brittle with age. If only she could have got her fingers into the fissure, she felt she would have found strength enough somehow to drag the stone from its resting-place. But the narrow slot between the stones would only permit of the knife's insertion.

In sheer desperation she began to try to use the knife as a chisel, and then—snap! went the blade at once.

"Ah, bother, that's done it!" Madge fumed. "Maggie—"

"Oh, I believe the light is going out!" that girl could not help exclaiming frantically. "And you can't manage it, Madge—the stone?"

"Can't I? Not that stone, but this one—look!" was the elder girl's sudden wild cry of joy.

She had shifted her kneeling position on the cold floor, and in front of her now was a broken slab.

"See, Maggie. We can easily prise away one of the broken fragments, and that will leave us free to work at a complete stone. There—splendid!"

For, in an instant, she had used the shortened knife-blade to pick out one of the broken pieces of stone.

Then the wick of the lamp went blip! and all was groping darkness.

"Oh, Madge!"

"Never mind, darling! I can do just as well in the dark," was Madge's heartening cry. "I can use my hands now and the fragments are coming away easily."

"Can't I help?" pleaded the other girl wistfully.

For a few seconds Madge did not answer. In that utter darkness, which now filled the prison-chamber, she was working away furiously. There was the sound of her hard breathing, and now and then a bit of stone clinked as it was picked out of position and tossed aside.

"Now you can help—yes," came the cry at last. "Stand closer, Maggie darling, and heave with me at this big slab. We shall get it away between us."

And they did.

Heaving together, sharply they jerked the slab away from the rotted cement in which it had been embedded. There was a moment whilst they held it poised on one end; then, gathering breath for another effort, they carried it right across the pitch-black cellar to the door.



**"MADGE IS MISSING!"**

This was Betty's startling answer to Miss Ainley's inquiry as to whether Madge Minden had arrived at the Festival.



That slab of stone—what a weight it was! A little more, and it would have been almost too much for the girls. But they could just lift it between them, and now they levelled it edgewise towards the door.

"One, two, three—go!" cried Madge.

They lunged it against the timbers, and there was a deafening crash.

"Again, Maggie!"

Crash! Thud! Crash!

The door had to give way now. They knew it. Timbers twice as stout, bolts doubly as strong, could not have held out against such a furious onslaught.

Bang! Crash! Thud!

Furiously the desperate girls kept at their task until, with a sudden splintering of the woodwork, coupled with the loud snap of bursting locks, the door flew outwards.

Done!

At last—at last the girl captives were free—free, with the light of day blinding eyes that had been immersed in that awful darkness of the cellar.

Out of the vault-like chamber they staggered, reeling with exhaustion, and yet they could not take a moment to recover their spent energies.

There were some steps leading up to the ground level of the house. Clumsily they made the ascent, emerging upon a narrow passage. Another moment and they were through the kitchen and whipping open the back door of the house, which Maggie's father had left on the latch.

"Oh, Madge—the fresh air—the sunshine!" almost sobbed little Maggie.

"Yes, dear; and the time— Oh, there is still time!" was Madge's excited rejoinder, as she looked at her wrist-watch. "Still time, perhaps, for you to take part in the contest, if only we can get away at once."

She pulled up for a mere instant to wave Maggie back to the house.

"Your music, Maggie—fetch it, quick! The 'Woodland Symphony'—that thing of Miss Ainley's!"

"I know—yes, all right!" Maggie panted, and dashed back into the house, whilst Madge ran out across the rank garden, with eyes glancing eagerly in all directions.

She was looking for her bicycle. Was it still here—the bicycle which she had with her yesterday afternoon when she came to see Maggie?

For a minute or so Madge was tearing about the great garden as if she had taken leave of her senses. Where was it—the bicycle? It must be here, for Maggie's father would never have—

"Ah!"

The gleam of bright metal had caught her roving gaze. With a pounce she was in amongst a tangle of brambles, seizing the bicycle by its silvered handlebars.

"Coo-ee, Maggie! This way!"

"Yes, I'm coming! I've got it—the music."

"And I've got the bike! Oh, Maggie darling," the elder girl cried joyfully, "it's wonderful—this! You are to get your chance, after all, and that other girl, Audrey—"

"Who is Audrey?" panted Maggie. "What has she to do with it all—Audrey?"

Madge felt inclined to answer: "Audrey is a girl who has everything to do with it—everything!" But she refrained, and hardly another word passed whilst the escaped prisoners made their way out of the garden on to the moorland road, Madge wheeling the cycle.

"You must ride behind me, Maggie," Madge cried gaily then, "on the step. You must know how, surely!"

"Oh, yes! There, I'm all right!"

"Hold tight, then; we're off!"

And away they went—whirr, whirr, whirr!—along the open road that would take them to Barncombe town.

Away, with this furious whirring of pedals, on this thrilling race against time. Away, with many a warning tr-ring, tr-ring! of the bell, so as to reach the festival in time for Maggie to get her chance.

Would they do it? Or would they get to the Assembly Rooms only to find that the pianoforte contest had been held, and the prize awarded? Awarded to Audrey Blain!

#### Surprise on Surprise.

IT was half-past one, and the Assembly Rooms had begun to fill up again after a brief interval for lunch.

Possibly some of the patrons who had attended the opening ceremony a couple of hours ago were not coming back, having other engagements. But this did not mean a thinning-off of the audience.

Far from it. There was going to be a greater crush than ever for the afternoon "session," and in the next few minutes the ushers at the doors would be crying:

"Standing room only!"

Betty and her chums resumed the row of seats which they had occupied during the morning session, with girls from other schools both in front and behind. This part of the auditorium, in fact, had been reserved for members of the various competing choirs, so that they could enjoy items in the programme with which they were not concerned.

The afternoon session was to commence with the contest, open to all girl-pianists of a certain age, for the much-coveted Lady Lundy diploma and prize.

This, of course, was the pianoforte contest for which Audrey Blain had entered, and now she could be glimpsed, along with other competitors, hovering in the "wing" of the fine-sized stage.

Attendants came on to drag the grand piano into a suitable position for solo work, and then a storm of applause greeted Lady Lundy once again, as she came forward in her unaffected way to say just a few words.

"The contest that is now to be carried out is, I am sure, one you are all keenly interested in." She stood there, smiling her pleasure at the fresh outburst of handicaps. "Myself, I think the primary purpose of these festivals should be that of discovering talent—youthful talent."

"Hear, hear! Hear, hear! Bravo, bravo!"

"There is just one other point," her ladyship continued, glancing at a slip of paper in her hand. She was not enlarging upon the pianoforte contest for fear of appearing to regard it as her own pet production. "The choir-singing—"

Another pause, to let the thunder of applause die away.

"We who are on the committee feel it right to say that a certain choir is attending under very trying conditions. I think you all know the girls I mean, and I am sure you join with us in giving them great sympathy. I—I don't know, but I—I think it rather brickish of them to have turned up. And that's all," she finished, bowing with a grace that simply captivated everybody.

Then, whilst the applause was still going on,

the first competitor in the pianoforte contest walked forward rather self-consciously, with another girl to turn over for her. The audience hushed itself immediately, and on the deadly silence came the first notes of some exquisite classic which the girl had chosen as her "bit."

It was a capital performance—a difficult bit of music played with great skill and an absence of all affectation. At the finish, this first girl deserved every bit of the applause she received.

A second competitor was announced, and took her seat at the piano, and now, with all the goodwill in the world, certain sections of the audience could not help getting amused.

The girl was a duffer. She should never have been there at all. Only sheer conceit could have made her think she was good enough for an open contest of this sort, and she merited nothing more than the moderate applause she got.

A third girl did better—much better. So did the fourth competitor, no other than Miriam Haste, from Barncombe High School. When a fifth had also given of her very best at the piano, plenty of people in the audience frankly admitted that they would not like to say who was the best competitor so far. But the judges were there; they would know!

"Number Six, ladies and gentlemen," announced some official sitting well to the left of the stage; "Miss Audrey Blain."

"Oh, give her a clap!" exclaimed Polly.

As a matter of fact, almost instinctively the Morocco girls had all started clapping. They felt sore with Audrey, but—well, there, she was a Morocco girl, and it seemed hateful not to back-up one's own candidate.

Audrey was "all there." That was perfectly evident the moment she walked forward. Without being objectionably at home in front of such a vast audience, she had a degree of self-possession which was charming to see. The applause went on a little longer than it had done in advance of the other competitors' performances.

She sat down, tried the piano, then wiped her hands with a handkerchief. Then she took off a bangle—a thing that Polly and the rest thought she might have done before!

Hitching the piano-stool into better position, she made some smiling remark to the girl standing by to turn over. Then dead silence again, and again the first notes of some wonderful piece that was beginning quietly like this, only to work up to a crashing finish, as the whole audience felt sure.

Before a page of the music had been turned, Audrey's playing had made its impression.

Wonderful!

That was the word which the most seasoned of critics were ready to use.

The delicacy of her touch, the way in which she was getting the subtlest effects of tone—wonderful!

And then the passion with which she worked up to the tremendous finale, her hands bounding up and down the scales, her foot treading the pedal and then springing away from it, only to spring back, the glorious volume of sound which the girl was getting from this one instrument, making the audience hold its breath as it waited for the last majestic chords!

"Bravo! Bra-vo-o-o!" was the one cry that accompanied furious handclaps, the stamping of feet, and thumping of walking-sticks and umbrellas. "Bravo!"

Audrey stood up. In the excitement of the moment she did not forget to smile her thanks to

the girl who had "turned over." Taking her piece of music off the stand, she shuffled its pages together, then faced the audience and bowed.

They were still cheering and clapping.

With the sweet, demure smile that she knew so well how to assume, she bowed again, then turned to leave the stage. She had won—she knew it for a certainty!

She even saw Lady Lundy, in the wings, waving her to remain on the stage for a moment. Was she to be asked to do an encore? The audience were yelling for one. Or was she to be acclaimed the winner here and now?

Conscious of Lady Lundy and the rest of the committee putting their heads together for a lightning confab, she stood in the middle of the stage, laughing at the crazy applause and bowing again and again.

"She's got it!" said Polly, turning to Betty. "The prize is hers!"

"Yes."

"Bai Jove, yes, wather! Weal, geals, after all, it is all to the school's credit!"

"Oh, yes!" said Tess. "But was Audrey thinking the least bit about the school's credit, or was she—"

"Hallo—look!" gasped Polly.

For, all in an instant, an astounding thing had happened.

Whilst Audrey was still holding the centre of the stage, with the applause coming at her in wave after wave, she had suddenly had her attention distracted by something that was happening in the wings. The whole audience was aware of her looking staggered. She took an unnerved step, then recoiled. The sheaf of music fell from her hands, and she did not stoop to pick it up.

Then, with a rush, two other girls dashed through the audience and climbed up the steps to the stage. A bewildered outcry arose from the audience.

There was something in all this that was not in order. The two girls could have nothing to do with the contest. They were untidy in their dress, utterly breathless, and so—who were they? What did it all mean?

"Why!" someone shouted in the audience—and it was Polly. "Oh, do you see? Girls—girls!"

"It's Madge—it's Madge!" yelled every Morocco girl in the audience. "Oh, Madge!"

For a few moments the wild voicing of that name drowned all other sounds.

"Madge! Madge! Oh, Madge! Hurrah!"

"Order, please!" some of the stewards felt they ought to entreat at last. "Order, please, young ladies!"

Then Lady Lundy came forward, wearing an expression of joyful excitement.

"It is quite all right!" she smilingly called to the stewards. "The girls may be excused making a commotion. Ladies and gentlemen, I am overjoyed at being able to tell you that one of these girls is the Madge Minden who has been missing since yesterday!"

Tremendous sensation!

"The other girl is Maggie Shaw," continued Lady Lundy at last, "and we understand that she wishes to enter for the pianoforte contest. Both girls are— But I will let Madge Minden explain, shall I?"

It was another example of Lady Lundy's self-effacing disposition. She simply quitted the stage without another word, and there was breathless

Madge, suddenly called upon to satisfy the audience's wild curiosity.

"Ladies and gentlemen—"

"Bravo, Madge! Oh, hooray!" This was Polly again; but her chums were shouting with her: "Good old Madge! Hurrah!"

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are sorry to have come bursting in at the last moment, but—but—better late than never—"

"Yes, yes, wather, bai Jove! Huwah—hooway!"

"My friend Maggie Shaw—"

"Your pupil, Madge! You know she is!"

"Oh, well!" Madge gave a breathless laugh as that correction came from the Morocco row of seats. "Maggie Shaw, at any rate, hopes to do justice to herself, although she has come here on the step of my bicycle!"

The audience, still puzzled, went off into a roar of laughter at that amusing detail. All over the vast auditorium there was a great deal of excited talk, whilst Madge followed her stepgirl pupil to the piano.

Audrey was still on the stage, although she had shrunk away from the footlights. People saw her give a rather ghastly smile to the two girls, and they saw, too, how her confusion increased as neither Madge nor Maggie paid the least heed to her.

"Sh! Sh!" entreated voices in different parts of the house now that Maggie was actually seated at the piano.

The girl who had been turning over for the players up to now was gone. She was a nice, unassuming girl, who had divined that Madge ought to be the one to be at Maggie's side. Now, as the audience hushed itself, a last word from Madge to Maggie was almost audible.

Then Maggie Shaw played the "Woodland Symphony."

Maggie, the stepgirl—motherless Maggie, her thoughts all the time with that fugitive father of hers, as her chum knew full well, although that was something the audience had no knowledge of whatever. There she sat, just doing the best she could with the piece of despised music by which poor Miss Ainley had once hoped to achieve fame.

"Betty," Polly felt she simply must whisper, when the piece had only just begun, "we know that piece! It's that awful symphony thing!"

"Yes, wather! Howevah—"

"Sh! Don't speak!" gestured Betty. "Listen!"

Polly shook her head. She felt she simply must give play to her feeling of grief.

"Oh, why—why did Madge let Maggie choose that awful piece?" You know we have always said it is—"

"Sh! Polly dear—quiet! Can't you see the audience likes it?"

Then Polly looked behind her, scanning the sea of faces. To her amazement, she saw rapt expressions everywhere—saw old and young alike leaning forward in their seats, their looks transfigured by the emotions that this piece of music was inspiring.

Paula Creel had also looked round. Now Polly and Paula met each other's astonished gaze.

"Well, I declare!" said Polly's eyes. "It's a fact—they like it!"

And Paula's beaming glance meant nothing if it did not mean an emphatic:

"Yes, wather!"

### Lost and Won.

LIKE it?

There were people in that audience who would never know how to describe their enchantment over this piece of music to which they were listening now.

It was a piece that no one had ever heard before. Its title and composer had not been announced; but this much those who were the best judges of good music were already yearning to say of it—it was a great, a marvellous composition!

But these keen critics were just the most breathless listeners of all in the packed Assembly Rooms. To miss a note would be a crime! What originality, what harmony! Ah, and what skilful rendering it needed for that same harmony not to become the most distressing sort of discord! But this girl-pianist—

Never mind who she was or where she came from, she was a genius!

So the really capable critics were saying to themselves as they listened. If Audrey Blain's playing had deserved the word "wonderful," then what else could one say of this girl's playing but that it was magnificent, inspired?

And Audrey Blain, as keen a listener as any, as she loitered in the wings, knew only too well before the piece was half over that she was beaten.

She felt she wanted to rush away, but something chained her to the spot.

The frightful fear was upon her that the next few minutes would see her being denounced by Madge Minden before the whole vast audience as a girl who had stooped to the most wicked device to keep a dangerous competitor out of the way. And yet she had to stand by, waiting for the end.

It was as if the fates, having indulged her up to a point, had not only turned upon her suddenly, but were holding her fast, so that she should experience mortification, humiliation, the bitterness of defeat, to the very full.

Maggie's piece of music did not round off with the crashing chords that Audrey's had ended with. The melody simply rippled away—became fainter, fainter, then stopped, leaving the spellbound audience wondering if that really were the finish, or whether there was not going to be some last bit of "fireworks."

But no, that was really the end. Maggie was standing up, and now—

The audience stood up, too. Stood up to give all the better expression to pent-up emotions—stood up to shout deafening "Bravos!" and to clap extended hands and wave programmes, and in some cases even to flourish hats, fur necklets, walking-sticks.

It was, in fact, a scene of frenzied applause.

One round of cheering was followed by another. Maggie looked more frightened than pleased. She bowed and bowed again mechanically, and then turned to Madge with a look that plainly said:

"Can't we run away?"

Madge, however, shook her head. She herself was intending to go, but she meant Maggie to remain.

"No, stay, dear," was Madge's quiet word; and because Maggie could never dream of flouting any wish of Madge's she stayed.

"Bravo—bravo! Well done! Encore—encore!" the uproar went on.

Poor Maggie!

It was getting quite too much for her. If she

bowed, that only sent the audience more off its head than ever. And she had been told not to run away.

In a flustered way she glanced to right and left of the stage. The committee only laughed and clapped. She said afterwards that she was wishing some trap-door would open and let her through, when—thank goodness, Madge Minden came back!

And not alone, either!

But who—who was this person, then, the audience wondered, whom Madge Minden was suddenly bringing before them all? A timid, trembling little person in shabby clothes—a quaint little lady, who seemed to be just as agitated as Maggie was by all this wild applause. Who, then, was she?

"Why, it's Miss Ainley!" exploded Polly, who was just enjoying the whole crazy scene as being something quite after her own madcap disposition. "Betty—Paula!"

Then the applause broke out afresh. Polly Linton was not the only member of the audience standing on a chair to cheer. It was pandemonium again—the wildest demonstration of praise for Miss Agatha Ainley, only dying down when it became evident that she, in her own nervous way, wanted to say something.

"But, ladies and gentlemen," came Miss Ainley's quavering whisper upon the hushed house. "what can I say except thank you—thank you all? My heart is full—too full for words. My poor little symphony, as I used to call it—"

She broke down for a moment.

"For years, indeed, it was tucked away as useless, worthless, in my old bureau at home. And I can never, never forget, ladies and gentlemen, that it would have been there to this day, but for Miss Madge Minden's chancing to see it, and begging me to let her do the best with it. I—I owe everything to her, you see. That is what I want to say. I am so happy!"



**WOULD THEY BE IN TIME!** "There's my bike!" exclaimed Madge joyfully. "We'll be able to get to the festival at Barncombe, after all!"

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove, geals!"

"Hark! 'Sh—'sh!"

The uproar died away in a moment. Madge was ready to speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she said, in a ringing voice, "with Lady Lundy's permission, may I introduce to you the composer of the piece you heard just now? Miss Agatha Ainley, of this town—"

"Bravo! Br—"

"And composer of the 'Woodland Symphony,'" Madge cried, checking the fresh outburst of cheering. "Ladies and gentlemen, I want to say one more word. Miss Ainley composed the 'Woodland Symphony' years ago. She could never get it published, never even get it played. But, after the way you have received the piece this afternoon, I have not much doubt that printed copies of it will soon be selling by the thousand. What do you say, ladies and gentlemen?"

At this point, Paula Creel sat down in the seat and began to wipe her eyes. It was too "distressing!"

"And all my happiness—any little bit of fame that has come to me in this wonderful hour—I owe it all to Madge Minden! Madge dear—bless you, bless you! You, too, Maggie Shaw! I can say no more, only kiss you both, my dears!"

Which she did, with the audience going clean off its head once again, whilst Polly, in her excitement, fell off her chair and "squashed" Paula.

A minute later Lady Lundy was announcing that the diploma and prize of twenty pounds in cash had been awarded by the committee to—Maggie Shaw!

Happy Days for Maggie.

LATE that evening there was a rare jabbering of tongues in the study belonging to Betty Barton and Polly Linton.

All their best chums were there, and everybody was talking at once.

Even Paula Creel, who looked as if she were half asleep in an armchair, was really drawing quite a lot—without, however, getting the least attention paid to her.

"I do wish you would let me get in one word, anyhow!" yelled Polly. "To get back to my point. We don't know, even now, why Madge Minden went in for giving music lessons for money."

"Supposing we go and ask Madge point-blank?" suggested Dolly Delane.

"Hooray—yes!"

They went along to Madge's den, and found her there alone, just gumming-up a letter for the post.

"Madge," said Betty, with sudden gravity, "we girls would like to have one or two things explained, if it is all the same to you. Perhaps, though, you would rather not say who caused you and Maggie to be locked up in the house on the moors by writing a warning note to Maggie's father?"

"No, I—"

"You have a pretty good notion why that letter was written, we may take it?"

"I— Yes, I think I am entitled to say that," said Madge.

The girls exchanged glances, and then Betty spoke again for all of them:

"In that case, Madge, we shall say no more, except that we also have a pretty good notion, too. Now for another matter. All this business that has ended up in such a wonderful way to-day—it began with your getting the sudden craze of taking music-pupils."

"Yes—"

"Any pupils, never mind who or what they were, so long as you got—pupils."

"That is so," Madge said, smiling serenely.

"Well," smiled back Betty, "why? That's what we are so puzzled about. Why did you do it, Madge?"

"Oh, I can easily tell you now," said Madge. "I have just been writing to tell dad. I have reminded him how he pook-pooked the idea of music being any use as a profession, some time back. It was after he had given me quite a talking to about being so keen on music, and had said that it would be no earthly use as a means of support if ever I should need to keep myself, that I just made up my mind to carry out an experiment. Whilst I was still at school, I would see how many paying pupils I could get. That's all!"

"Bai Jove!"

"I got a good few," Madge pursued, taking up a small notebook. "I could have got a good many more, I think, only things began to get a bit tense as regards poor Maggie and that awful business with her father. Still, there is what I earned, girls, and I really don't see why it shouldn't go to the Christmas hospital collection."

"Four pounds three shillings—"

"In four weeks!"

"Mostly out of Audrey, too, you'll see," Madge

remarked, with a dry laugh. "She was a paying pupil—Audrey, I will say that."

There was a telling silence after that, before Betty exclaimed grimly:

"Nuff said about Audrey, I think. Then, girls, all we have to do before we start talking about breaking-up day is to take it out of Cora Grandways and Co. just a little bit, for the way they persecuted Madge about her stepgirl pupil."

"Come on—yes!" approved Polly gleefully. "They often made a row outside Madge's door. Now we'll make a row outside theirs!"

And they did!

It was the work of a few moments for the girls to concoct a parody of that derisive song which Cora and her cronies had been so fond of dimming in Madge's ears. That song had been called "Only a Stepgal." Betty and her chums thought their parody might well be called "Only a Spitfire!"

So they announced it as such, at a moment when Cora and the rest were feeling quite small enough over Madge's final triumph, without any need for being "ragged."

"Oh—!" began the chums, lifting up their voices outside Cora's study door.

"Oh, I'm only a miserable spitfire,

A-snapping and snarling all day;

My voice was no use for the choir,

For all I could do was to bray!"

"Hee-haw, hee-haw! Ha, ha, ha!" vociferated all the girls in the passage.

And the peals of laughter continued long after Betty and her chums had romped away, leaving Cora Grandways, and her kindred spirits simply speechless with wrath.

You will be wondering how Maggie fared in the days that followed, and what happened as regards her father.

What happened was that Maggie, thanks to the kindly interest taken in her by Lady Lundy, went from triumph to triumph with her music, and she had not turned sixteen before she made the greatest triumph of all at Queen's Hall, London, before a most distinguished audience.

Need it be said that one item she played on that great night was the famous "Woodland Symphony"?

As for Maggie's father, she had gone for years without seeing or hearing anything of him, when one day he came back into her life as suddenly as he had gone out of it.

But what a changed father he was!

He had been abroad all the years he had been out of her life. He could tell her that he had made complete restitution for all past wrongdoing, and, indeed, would never have let himself come back to her unless he had been able to look her in the eyes as an honest man.

"Maggie darling—little girl!" he said over and over again, kissing her. "As I have made it up to others for all the wrong I did, may I make it up to you, Maggie, always so good and true?"

And they clung and wept together, re-united now, never to part again!

[END OF THIS WEEK'S STORY.]

Next week's issue of "THE SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN" will be on sale, MONDAY, DECEMBER 18th.

(Next week's long complete Morcove story is the first of a splendid new series, and is entitled "The Treasure of Castle Garth!") It describes Betty & Co.'s Christmas holiday adventures. Order your copy of next week's Christmas issue of the SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN at once!