

THE PAPER EVERY SCHOOLGIRL LOVES!

The Schoolgirl's Own 2^d



THE JOYS SHE HAD TO LEAVE!
An incident from this week's splendid complete tale of Betty Barton & Co.

The First of a Magnificent New Series of Morcove School Stories.

PARTED FROM HER PARENTS.

By MARJORIE STANTON.

Back again at Morcove after all their adventures in South America! But there are further surprises in store for Betty Barton & Co.—surprises connected with that sterling character, Zonia Moore, of Stormwood School. You will enjoy this fine tale.



Off For a Picnic.

"LOOK here, girls! I know the best place for the picnic! Let us take the tea-things along to where Tess Trelawney is sketching a bit of the moorland!"

"Bai Jove, wather! Geals—"
"Yes, yes, queek, queek! Ooo, that will be jolly!"

And Naomer Nakara, whilst her beloved Paula Creel beamed with delight, did her own especial caper on the study carpet.

A packed picnic-basket gave its tell-tale jingle of spoons and rattle of crockery as Polly Linton thumped it on to the study table.

"Ready when you are, girls!" was Polly's high-spirited cry. "Can we start right away, then? A lovely afternoon like this—"

"Yes wather! Haw, haw, haw! Geals, geals, what a ripping day, what! Weally, it is gwand to be going off for such a ripping tweat! How-ehav, I must just awwange myself!"

"Thought so," Polly commented, with a mock groan. "Now I suppose we have to wait ages and ages, whilst you fiddle with your hair, Paula, and with your frock!"

"Oh, eet is so good to be back at Morcove School again!" exclaimed Naomer, cutting another caper. "How I was so tired of the voyage from South America! I not ever want to leave this country again!"

Then Betty Barton, captain of the Fourth Form, smiled.

"I don't know that I ever want to be kidnapped again, Naomer darling, like the four of us were, and taken away to a foreign country by a gang of wretched plotters. But that's all a thing of the past now. At present I can't think about anything else but this ripping picnic!"

"Best we have ever had—you see if it isn't!" put in Polly gaily. "Hallo, Madge, come in! Yes, we are ready, except for Paula!"

Madge Minden had appeared in the study doorway—one of the quiet ones of the Form, but by no means the least popular girl.

There was a depth of character about Madge Minden that endeared her to all. What is more, her sober disposition was a pleasant set-off to such unruly spirits as Polly Linton, the madcap, and Naomer Nakara, Morcove's own royal scholar from the semi-barbaric heart of Africa.

Polly took up the picnic-basket and shouldered

it, exaggerating its weight by staggering to the door.

A general move for out of doors was setting in. By ones and twos the girls quitted Study 12, where the muster for the picnic had taken place.

All the girls were laden with contributions towards the alfresco meal in some form or another. Even Dolly Delane, who carried the tea-kettle—and a big kettle it was!—could feel that hers was an important share, although it was not an eatable one.

There was a wait downstairs for Paula, who, of course, had delayed in order to "awwange" her hair, and a few of the girls found themselves idly scanning an attractive poster that had been displayed in the entrance-hall of the school.

"The annual art exhibition in Barncombe—we'll have to go to that," remarked Betty, with her eyes upon the placard. "It is always so good, and great fun, too."

"Besides, we must back up the girls who are sending in exhibits," rejoined Helen Craig. "The Fourth Form won't have to hang its head, that it certain, whilst it has Tess Trelawney to uphold its position in the school!"

Polly overheard this remark as she strolled up. "What is Tess going to send in this year, girls—has she decided?"

"Oh, Tess—Tess is the limit for modesty!" exclaimed Madge. "She has been saying she had nothing good enough to send along—if you ever heard such nonsense! I fancy she has gone out this afternoon to do a sketch, in the hope that it will make a picture really to be proud of."

"And yet that study she shares with you is simply stuffed full with lovely paintings!" said Polly. "You are right, Madge; Tess rates her talent too low. Now, if I could paint—and I did once paint the summer-house at home; it took four pounds of green paint—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Shan't say any more!" pouted Polly. "My genius never does come in for any encouragement. Never mind, here is Paula at last. Hurry, Paula—come on, come on! What an age you've been!"

"Ooo, yes, queek, queek! I want my tea already!" cried Naomer.

After which the entire party trooped away, with a peal of laughter that witnessed to the general high spirits.

Paula Puts her Foot in It.

IT was not surprising that the chums of Study 12 were in such a jubilant, jaunty mood.

Never had the girls known better weather than this that Morcoove was enjoying; just, as present. Warm showers a week ago had given a full May-time loveliness to the countryside. This particular afternoon was not only brilliantly sunny; it was almost as hot as the height of summer.

As soon as the picnickers were tramping the open moorland, the perfume of the golden gorse—as sweet as honey to the senses—came to them on the gentle breeze.

Some of the girls' satchels and baskets got severely shaken up during the mile or so's jaunt across the rough wilderness, for there was some scampering about, and race-running, and daring jumping of brooks.

Tess Trelawney, the artist of the Form, wanted some finding. The chums had thought they knew just where to come upon her; but it was only after a great deal of hallooing that they got a faint hail in return, leading them to where the artist of the Fourth had set up her folding easel.

"Now, what do all you girls want?" Tess received them mock-resentfully, as they breathlessly ended their tramp by gathering around. "I was hoping for a bit of peace and quietness."

"We are not going to speak; not going to breathe," said Polly. "Just going to sit down and admire the scenery!"

"Yes, wather!" sighed Paula, as she sat down and took out her pocket vanity-case.

"Let's have tea at once!" proposed Betty, who came up at that moment. "We won't disturb you, Tess dear."

"Oh, that's all right!" said Tess, still busy with her oil-colours. "I know what to expect, now you've all turned up. Naomer, if you would kindly stand out of the way I might see what I am sketching!"

Naomer skipped aside with the agility of a young deer, and was soon well out of the girl artist's way, for there was wood to collect for the fire that was to boil the kettle. Naomer enjoyed doing that!

She enjoyed still more coming back with a great armload of dry twigs, and dropping it "accidentally for the purpose" on top of indolent Paula, who was lying back with eyes closed.

Paula yelped. "Heah, what are you doing? Healp! My gwacious—"

"I very sorry!" Naomer said prettily. "You were so tired, I know, after helping to do so much!"

"Such a wemark is ungenewous!" complained the elegant one, sitting up to tidy her hair again. "You ought to wealise by this time, Naomer darling, I am a geal who likes to wemain quiet—"

"And admire the scenery!" teased Polly. "Yes, wather!" said Paula, fitching out her pocket mirror again. "Weally, I nevah saw a pwettier sight, what! Are you geals going to light a fire just there?"

"We thought of doing so," Polly answered casually, piling up the sticks. "It's very trying, but kettles just won't boil unless there is something like a fire to make them!"

"Then I had better shift fwm here, bai Jove!" "It would be advisable," said Polly, just as dryly as before. "Unless you are thinking of having your hair frizzled!"

Paula shifted—hastily. A match was set to the

collection of twigs and sticks, and up leapt the flames, with no risk of anything taking fire round about the blaze. Betty & Co. were very careful to guard against a mishap of that sort.

As soon as the fire had settled down into a glowing mass, Dolly Delane dumped the kettle upon it, and then the happy picnickers began to unpack satchels and baskets.

All this time Tess went on with her sketching, paying no heed to the babel of talk that attended the spreading of a large white cloth on the grass and the rattling out of tea-things. Tess was so absorbed in her work, that she never even heeded the yell of horror that Polly suddenly gave, as she threw back the lid of her basket.

"Healp, what's happened?" yelled Polly, taking a horrified peep into the basket. "Oh, dear, all those lobster patties—"

"Bai Jove, lobster patties—"

"Would you like to eat on one now?"

Polly asked the question very sweetly as she gingerly put a hand into the basket.

"There you are then, Paula darling; there, my pet! And now be good!"

So saying, the madcap brought forth the relics of a lobster patty, with a cream burr sticking to it.

"Ha, ha, ha!" went off all the girls except Tess and Paula.

Tess was busy sketching. As for Paula—

"Healp!" she groaned, and nearly swooned at the sight of what was being offered her. "Take it away!"

"There's ingratitude," complained Polly. "There's unkindness, if you like. I offer her a nice lobster patty—"

"Polly, deah—"

"And just because it is a bit damaged in transit; just because it has a squashed cream-bun sticking to it, and all the jam out of a jam-tart plastered on one side, she refuses it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"All right, go without!" Polly went on. "Great improvement. I call it!" And she daringly took a bite at the horrid compound of lobster patty, cream bun, and jam.

"Scrumptious!"

But Polly did not take a second mouthful. It may have been because there was so much still to do before the meal began. It may have been for another reason! Anyhow, she was well to the fore in all the fun of making tea, when the kettle had boiled, and in getting the cloth nicely arranged.

Polly and Naomer! As usual, they were the life and soul of the party. And, as usual, Paula was the one to come in for all the teasing. Directly the meal started, it became a joke amongst the girls that Paula must not be allowed to be greedy. It was an all the greater joke because if any girl was dainty and abstemious, Paula was!

"No, Paula darling," Polly said firmly, "I don't think you ought to have any cake with almond icing. It is not good for you!"

And Paula found that the modest morsel of cake to which she had helped herself was suddenly whisked from her plate.

"Is this a joke?" asked the fatuous one.

"Joke!" said Polly seriously. "When we are doing our best to take care of your health. If you had a digestion like mine—"

"Or mine, yes!" chuckled Naomer, taking a big bite at a frothy cream bun. "Ooo, how nice!"

"If you didn't need looking after, Paula darling, you might have one of these," said Polly, helping herself to a slice of Swiss-roll. "But we simply must take care of you!"

"Bai Jove, it's all vewy weal—"
 "Never, Paula darling—never be greedy!" the
 teaser lectured the duffer gravely. "Another
 thing; always think of your looks."

"Yes, wather! I do, geals—"
 "You do—rather," agreed Helen Craig.
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 "But, geals, I must have something to eat,
 bai Jove! Look at me, famished!"

Then, to the increased merriment of the party,
 Polly paused in her own good tea, to survey the
 "spread."

"What can we safely give Paula, to keep her
 quiet? Ah, one of those slices of plain bread.
 They are nice and dry. Dry bread, Paula dear—
 good for the complexion! Do have a slice, Paula
 darling!"

"Are you geals having a joke with me?" Paula
 still wanted to know, blankly. "Dwop it! I
 want something respectable to eat!"

"Oh, tempers!"
 "I will—I simply will have a pwooper tea!"
 "Paula, if you don't behave, you will be sent
 away from table!" warned Polly gravely. "Have
 that, and have done!" And she shot a very plain
 bun on to poor Paula's plate.

"Ah, dear," sighed the long-suffering duffer,
 resignedly setting her pretty teeth to the bun.
 "What a life!"

Of course, the sequel to this "rationing" of
 the duffer was that Polly and the rest suddenly
 began to load Paula with things to eat.

Hardly had she washed down one mouthful of
 dry bun, before there was a rush to "help" her
 to everything that was rich and tasty!

Genoa cake, Swiss-roll, sardine sandwiches, jam
 tarts, cream buns—with all these did Paula sud-
 denly find herself being plied. Her small plate
 became a pyramid of pastries. In vain she pro-
 tested; her chums were now in a frightful state of
 anxiety lest she should not have enough!

"Do, do eat a proper tea, Paula," urged Polly,
 tipping a couple of chocolate éclairs on to the
 already overladen plate. "You'll be complaining
 that we have starved you!"

"This is for you, dear," purred Helen, passing
 a macaroon. "You must—"

"I won't! I wufuse! Dwop it!" Paula fairly
 howled. And in her desperation she suddenly
 slammed the laden plate to one side and jumped
 to her feet.

"Do you geals take me for an elephant at the
 Zoo, bai Jove?"

"Paula—"
 "Polly—"

"Oh, look out, Paula—the kettle!" came the
 sudden warning shout from Betty. But it was a
 warning that came too late.

Poor Paula! It was just like her to be out of
 one trouble into another. Failing to look where
 she was stepping, after jumping to her feet, she
 had kicked over the kettle. It toppled towards
 the fire, spilling all the water that was left in it
 into the embers.

Next second, the entire picnic-party were jump-
 ing up with mingled laughter and howls of mock
 dismay.

A huge cloud of steam was arising from the
 hissing embers, and for a few moments the girls
 could hardly see one another as they floundered
 around.

When the cloud of steam did clear off, there
 was Paula, looking the very picture of horror as
 she found that she had knocked over Tess
 Trelawney's easel, and had stuck one foot right

through the canvas that bore the girl artist's pains-
 taking bit of work.

"There!" exclaimed Polly, in genuine dismay.
 "Now you've done it, Paula! Put your foot in it
 properly!"

And that luckless one, with an expression of
 sheer despair, answered dolefully:

"Yes, wather, bai Jove! I wather fancy I
 have!"

More Fateful than Funny.

IT was Tess who spoke first, after giving a sharp
 burst of laughter.

"So much for the picture, I was going to
 send in for the exhibition! All right, girls; now



WHY DID SHE LISTEN? Betty & Co. chatted on animatedly as they looked at the fine picture of Zonia which Tess Trelawney had painted. None of them was aware that the strange girl had lingered behind and was listening intently to their words.

the Fourth Form will simply have to take a back seat at the show!"

That Tess could treat the disaster in such a good-
 humoured way only made her chums feel all the
 more distressed. Paula herself was almost in tears.

"Weally, Tess, I don't know what to say! I—
 I— Bai Jove, you know, this is, isn't it? I
 mean to say, you know, it's just too cwuel!
 Your gwand picture—look at it!"

"If you would kindly take your foot out of the
 burst canvas, we might look at the alleged picture
 all the better," chuckled Tess. "Ha, ha, ha!
 What a scream!"

"Pway, accept my apologies, Tess deah!
 Pway—"

"Rubbish! Do you think I really mind?" said
 the girl artist, grinning at the ruined canvas,
 which she had now picked up. "It is nothing to
 make a fuss about."

"Vewy geneuous of you, Tess deah, to say so; but—"

"Hear, hear!" chimed in Polly. "Girls, what shall we do with this Paula, for being so clumsy? Come here, Paula!"

"He, he, he! Ooo, yes, queek, let us tease her; she deserves it!" shrilled merry Naomer, making a sudden dart for the long-suffering one, who promptly fled, screaming.

"Get away! Naomer—healp—dwoop it! Naomer!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Far and wide sounded the chums' laughter, as they saw the duffer instantly overtaken by Naomer, who landed with a spring upon Paula's back.

They came to earth with a flop! And after that it was a general mix-up, her Serene Highness being just in the mood to demonstrate her affection for the other girl.

Many a breathless titter had Naomer given, and many a howl for mercy had the "victim" sent up, before the latter was allowed to sit up and claw the hair out of her eyes.

"Dweadful life," sighed Paula. "One wound of twials, that's what it is!" And she was continuing in this doleful strain, whilst her chums laughed until their sides ached, when suddenly Polly pointed a finger, and cried out:

"Look girls—look!"

Then all the merriment changed instantly to an outburst of delight. Even Paula was all smiles again, jumping up to smooth herself to rights.

"Bai Jove, geals, it's Zonia!"

"Zonia Moore, yes! Zonia dear—hooray! Fancy meeting you!"

That was the gist of the Morcovians' glad cries, as they ran to meet the girl who had taken them by surprise, cut here on the moor.

They gathered around her, so that anyone could have guessed in what affection she was held by the Morcovians. Excitably they bombarded her with questions. She was quite alone, nor were any of the other Stormwood girls with her? Would she like some tea? Could she eat a cream-bun—a slice of Swiss-roll—a couple of éclairs? And how was she, anyway, after all this time!

Judging by her looks, Zonia Moore was very well and happy. There was no laugh gayer than hers during the next few minutes, whilst she sat and chatted with the Morcovians and let them give her a cup of luke-warm tea and a cake or so.

"I know one thing," Polly remarked suddenly. "You have grown prettier than ever, since we saw you last!"

"Bai Jove, she has!" agreed Paula, beaming.

There was indeed something about Zonia Moore's looks so lovely that the Morcovians, not for the first time, felt quite fascinated.

Although she had been a scholar at Stormwood School for some time now, Betty & Co. always thought of Zonia Moore as having gipsy blood in her veins. This was because she had lived her life amongst some gipsies, before Betty's own kind-hearted parents as good as adopted the girl.

Yet no one knew better than the chums of Study 12 that it was all a mistake to attribute Zonia's striking looks to a gipsy origin.

Whose child she was remained a mystery to this day, but that she certainly was no born gipsy had been proved beyond all doubt.

Even so, school life had by no means robbed the beautiful girl of all that used to make her look so like a daughter of the wild.

Her hair was jet black and very glossy, and her skin was as brown as a nut. Her face, with

its clear-cut features and bright, dark eyes, was one that was made to express either the fearless gipsy look; or an expression as gentle as any girl's face can show.

At present Zonia as all smiles, and no wonder, when she was amongst friends who were even dearer to her than the many friends she had at Stormwood School.

"Well, I've said it before, and I say it again," said Betty, after musing for awhile—"you ought to be one of us, Zonia. What a shame it was they simply couldn't find room for you at Morcove when you were put to school!"

"And now, of course, one dare not suggest your leaving Stormwood and coming to Morcove," said Polly. "You are so settled at Stormwood, so popular—"

"I am very happy—yes," Zonia said, with a little sigh of great contentment. "It would seem wicked to want anything better. Sometimes I feel that my life is so peaceful and happy, after what it used to be, it must be all a dream!"

Her beautiful face grew grave as she said that, and so Polly burst out:

"You don't mean to say that you fear that this happy life will suddenly end, Zonia? Find yourself back in a gipsy camp again—is that it? Ha, ha, ha!"

"Zonia knows better than to fear anything like that, don't you, Zonia?" murmured Betty, sitting close to the girl to whom she was almost in the relationship of a sister. "Dad and mother would watch that! Besides—"

And Betty laughed at the absurdity.

With her small and deep-red lips parting in a smile that displayed her pearly teeth, Zonia said softly:

"When I was saved from those gipsies, I was saved for ever, I know. And yet—!" She gave a pretty shrug. "As I say, this life—sometimes it seems to be just too good to be true; that is all."

Nothing more in that strain was said. On the other hand, no one for the moment could start any other topic.

The girls found themselves sitting through a sudden heavy pause, as if something had been said that was very impressive and fateful.

Suddenly Madge took her eyes off Zonia's fascinating face, to turn to Tess with a bright remark.

"Tess, I know what you must do about the art show at Barncombe—send along that portrait you once painted of Zonia."

"Bai Jove—"

"The very thing!" applauded Polly blithely. "That's the idea, Tess! You have the portrait in your study somewhere, and you'll never do a better bit of work than that!"

Tess smiled in her own modest way.

"Perhaps Zonia objects," she demurred.

"Zonia's permission is not asked," ruled Betty gaily. "The point is that the Fourth Form has got to have something to be proud of in the show!"

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove, if it were my own powtwait, geals—"

"Oh, of course," derided Polly, "if it were your portrait, Paula, you would even pay to have it exhibited!"

"Yes, wather! I mean to say— What are you geals laughing at?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Order, order!" Polly said, still chuckling. "It's settled, Tess dear. Either you promise to send in that portrait of Zonia—"

"All right," was the girl artist's easy-going response. "I'll rout it out when I get back to the school. I don't mind, if Zonia doesn't."

Fateful decision, to be so lightly spoken! For the hour was to come when these girls would look back upon this moment as having been the beginning of many a strange adventure in which they had found themselves involved.

This moment, when they and Zonia alike were in such a happy holiday mood, never dreaming of what Fate had in store for them before many days were out!

Seeing the Show.

WHEN the next Wednesday "halfer" at Morcov School came round, the chums of Study 12 were quite decided as to how they would spend it.

They were going in to Barncombe, to see the annual exhibition of pictures by local artists.

For Tess had kept her word, and the portrait of Zonia Moore had been sent in. Rumour had it that the canvas had even achieved the honour of being "hung on the line"!

"If it has, then we girls are going to stand you a tea at the Creamery, Tess," said Betty, as the entire party of them went spinning along the main road on their cycles. "The Form owes you a vote of thanks for upholding its honour."

"Yes, wather!" simpered Paula. "And tea, bai Jove, is so vewy wewfeshing—what! In fact, geals, we might have tea before we go into the exhibition, if you are agreeable?"

"And another when we come out?" grinned Polly.

"Pwecisely! I am a gweat admier of art, geals. But I wather dwead the fatigue, don't you know. So if you geals will pwesently allow me to order tea all round—"

"An ice for me, please. I so love him!" pleaded Naomer.

"Naomer darling, you shall have the vewy wichest cweam ice that the Cweamery can provide."

Naomer, in fact, had two ices, the first being so delicious that she simply had to sigh for an "encore"!

And very glad were all the girls afterwards that they had partaken of refreshment in one form or another before going on to the show. For it was proving a tremendous draw, and the various rooms were thronged, making it a tiring business to "do" the exhibition properly.

Half the school seemed to be here this afternoon. At every other moment Betty & Co. were exchanging a smiling "Hallo!" with this Morcovian or that other. They encountered their own headmistress, with Miss Redgrave accompanying her. A minute after this the girls fell in with Ethel Courtway, the head scholar.

"Well, have you seen your picture, Tess?" Ethel asked in her nicest way, drawing a chorus of cries from all the chums, except Tess herself.

"No, where is it? Ethel—"

"Bai Jove!"

"Ooo, yes, queek, tell us where we can see it! We are so eager!"

"Of course you are!" smiled Ethel. "You don't care a rap about the other lovely exhibits that girls in the Fifth and Sixth have sent in."

This was only banter. Ethel knew full well that Betty & Co. were not the sort to pooch-pooch exhibits just because they emanated from other Forms in the school. She resumed genially:

"Tess's portrait of Zonia is in the next room—on the line!"

"Good!" exclaimed Polly; and Paula beamed: "Yes, wather! So we shall have that othah tea later on, bai Jove! Bwavo, Tess!"

"Oh, be quiet!" was that girl's modest protest, and she began to look truly uncomfortable as they took her along with them into the adjoining room.

The place was packed with visitors, and the girls had to await their turn for a sight of the picture, for it was attracting special attention. They noticed at once that people who were giving only a passing glance to other canvases made a pause in front of the portrait of Zonia.

"And no wonder," murmured Madge, waiting with her chums behind the crowd in front of the picture. "Tess painted the thing—didn't you, Tess?—soon after Zonia was saved from her life with the gipsies. She looks beautiful in the picture."

"Ooo, please, I want to see eet!" clamoured little Naomer, capering about restlessly behind a lot of grown-ups who obstructed the view. "Why don't they be queek?"

Perhaps this complaint was overheard. Anyhow, some of the loiterers moved on; allowing the girls to get a little nearer. But there were still two people—a lady and gentleman—who refused to budge.

Betty and her chums could not feel impatient with this particular couple. It was so obvious that they were fairly in love with the picture, and could not tear themselves away. The lady was handsome, richly dressed, and altogether charming, whilst the husband looked a man of leisure, who was greatly devoted to his wife.

She made some comment on the canvas in a very gentle, almost wistful voice, and he nodded and murmured, as if he, too, was equally touched by the loveliness of the portrait—by the appeal in Zonia's eyes, as they looked out from the canvas in their dark, brilliant way.

But at last this lady and gentleman moved on, and it was then that Betty & Co. realised that the couple had someone with them—a well-grown girl of school age. She had moved apart from her parents—if they were her parents—whilst they were lingering in front of that canvas; a good-looking, stylish girl with an "air."

Next moment the Morcovians were able to move forward in a party, to stand before the canvas, and their talk was all of the portrait that now held their gaze.

"A living likeness," said Madge, gazing earnestly. "Tess dear, how could you let that portrait lie about, almost forgotten, on top of the study cupboard at the school. It's beautiful!"

"Bai Jove, it's wemarkable! Geals—"

"Come away," pleaded Tess, blushing. "Surely you have seen it enough in the past."

"No, Tess—no!" came from Betty. "I can never look at it too often. It is Zonia to the life, as Madge says!"

"Zonia, as she was at the time she was saved from those horrid gipsies," chimed in Polly. "That look in her eyes—"

"Yes, wather!"

"One sees it in her eyes sometimes even now," murmured Betty. "As if she was feeling—afraid isn't the word. As if—as if—"

"Pwecisely, Betty, deah! I gwasp your meaning!"

"Good job you do, for I can't explain it,"



DID THEY SUSPECT? "I was thinking that someone, not of her party, was paying to the talk. "It is just as if Zonia was always thinking—wondering—"

"Who she really is," struck in Polly, nodding. "How she came to be reared by those gipsies, and whether her own parents are perhaps missing her to this day, searching for her—"

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove, if only her parents knew what a remarkably pretty geal their daughter is to-day!"

"And what a splendid character, too!" added Betty. "We know, anyhow, don't we, girls?"

The chums chatted on animatedly, all of them unaware of how their affectionate talk about Zonia was being overheard.

They were either looking at the canvas, or else turning to each other, as they talked, and so they never saw how the girl, who seemed to belong to the attractive lady and gentleman, was loitering near, taking in all that was said.

This girl, she was certainly doing her best not to attract the Morcovians' attention. But, strange to say, there were moments when she seemed so agitated by what she was listening to that it was impossible for her to look anything but very startled.

Whilst the chums were still talking about Zonia, the lady and gentleman looked round amongst the throng, to see what had become of the girl who was with them. Seeing her lingering nigh the canvas that had interested them so much, the couple would have worked back to her. In a flustered way, however, the girl instantly moved on to rejoin them.

It was as if she dreaded their coming close enough to the party of schoolgirls to overhear

their affectionate remarks about the subject of the picture.

The lady smiled in a dotting way as the girl came up.

"Well, Miriam, dear, were you wanting to spend a little longer in front of that beautiful portrait? You need not have hurried away on our account. I would not mind going back to have another look at it."

"Yes, it is a capital study from life," remarked the gentleman, gazing over the heads of other people, at the striking picture. "I am rather inclined to buy it."

"Oh, but—but it is not for sale!" the girl said hastily. "The catalogue says so!" she pointed out, flusteredly turning to a certain page of the booklet which she held. "Look!"

And she ran a gloved finger along the line of print that said:

"No. 156.—'Zonia,' study in oils, by Tess Trelawney. (Not for sale.)"

"Hum!" was the gentleman's rueful comment. "I suppose the artist really means it? Or would a very tempting price, perhaps—"

"No, I shouldn't think so!" the girl said hastily. "Would you, auntie? Most likely it is the portrait of the artist's best chum, and in that case—"

"It would not be nice to worry the artist to sell it," agreed the lady in her refined voice. "I think, perhaps, you had better not do anything, John dear."

"I won't!" he said promptly. "I'm the last person in the world to want to annoy anyone. It's a rare fine picture, though—a gem!"

"It appeals to me," murmured the lady, taking a last look, from a distance, "because— Ah, well!"

And she said no more, but turned to other canvases, with her husband and the girl on either side of her.

It was very little interest that that girl had for any of the other exhibits.

Again and again she shot an uneasy glance in the direction of the Morcove girls, and all the time she was remaining in a very nervous state. If the lady whom she had addressed as "auntie" drew her attention to a picture, she gave a careless, "Very nice—yes," without looking at it properly.

Nor was it long before Miriam Loveless, for that was her full name, had good cause for feeling more agitated than ever.

It was a sudden shock to her to realise that the girls from Morcove School had encountered two or three scholars hailing from another well-known school, with whom they were very friendly. And one of these other scholars was Zonia!

Anyone keeping an eye upon Miriam Loveless after that could have seen how she was yearning to give her companions the slip and sidle close to the schoolgirls again, to overhear more of their talk. She was vexed that she could not do so, biting a lip and knitting her dark brows. At last, indeed, she looked so irritable that the lady she was with commented on her appearance.

"You look cross, Miriam. Why is it?"

"I—I don't know. Tired, I suppose," was the evasive answer. "It is so hot in here."

"Well, we will just do this last room, and then go back to our hotel for some tea," the lady suggested soothingly.

But Miriam Loveless, when she and her adult companions came out of the exhibition, did not go along with them to the hotel.

The girls she was secretly interested in were also leaving, and she overheard some talk about their getting tea at the Creamery. In a flash, she had made up her mind.

She would go along to the Creamery herself, and sit close to those girls!

Nothing was easier than for her to find a pretext for parting from the lady and gentleman. Leaving them abruptly, she walked up the High Street in advance of the party of girls, then turned back when they had entered the famous tea-shop.

In she went, to find that they must have ascended to the tea-room over the shop, for they were nowhere downstairs. So she groped her way up the old-fashioned staircase, and suddenly had all the girls under her eye again, in that upper room.

Miriam Loveless sat down, and was relieved to see how little attention her presence excited. None of the scholars, it was certain, had the least suspicion that she had been lurking near them in the exhibition, and picking up all their talk. They now merely gave her a casual glance, and then resumed all their light-hearted chatter.

Soon their large table held its welcome pots of tea and plates of cakes and pastries, whilst Miriam, at her own small side-table, had her wants supplied.

Christian names were being bandied about by the scholars, and it was but a minute before she knew who was Betty and who Polly, and that a certain dark-skinned girl had the foreign name Naomer.

Then there was a girl whose name was Paula, an amiable, aristocratic girl, whom the others were teasing unmercifully.

At the best of times, Miriam Loveless had no use for girls who talked about sport, and were all so jolly with one another. And this was a moment when she was simply yearning to hear more—more about this Zonia, whose portrait was in the exhibition.

It maddened her to find the tea-time slipping by, and the girls either larking about with Paula or else talking about games.

If only they would get back to that vital subject! For vital it was to her, or would she have been here, in this fever of suspense?

Afraid—and No Wonder!

"MORE tea, anybody?" sang out Betty at last, from the head of the table. "Zonia, another cup, dear?"

"Dare I?" was that girl's laughing answer. "It will be my third!"

"You are excused," jested Polly, passing along the cup, "being a gipsy. For they are great tea-drinkers, aren't they?"

"Shame," said Madge, "to call Zonia a gipsy! We all know she hasn't a drop of gipsy blood in her veins. But you might be a gipsy, Zonia, dear, by your looks."

"I can't help my looks, girls!"

"Bai Jove, you wouldn't wish to help them, Zonia—what! Not looks like yours, bai Jove! Which you get them from I simply don't know!"

"From her parents, of course, duffer!" Polly answered Paula. "Zonia inherited her looks."

"The only inheritance I shall ever be able to boast!" put in the girl in question, smiling and blushing at being under discussion like this. "How I wish I knew the ones I had to thank for it—my own parents! If only I could meet them somehow, somewhere!"

Then a pause ensued, for Zonia had suddenly come out with one of those wistful exclamations that so often witnessed to her heart's great yearning—the yearning to know whose child she really was, instead of going on like this, year after year, only knowing nothing!

It was like Polly Linton to strike the happy note again.

"Well, cheer up!" was the madcap's blithesome cry. "You never can tell, Zonia! Something may happen!"

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove, geals—"
"There is that picture of you in the art show," Polly rattled on gaily. "Supposing it should be seen by your own parents, Zonia, and supposing it should lead them to wonder if—"

The rest was never said. A minor crash from the small table at which the lonely girl was sitting had made all the other girls jump in their seats.

Before they knew what they were doing, they were all looking at the girl, to see her hastily mopping up a spilt cup of tea. She had clumsily dropped her cup, without breaking it.

For a moment or so she looked angry with herself, and was biting a lip. Then she glanced across at the girls, and, finding them gazing at her in a friendly, amused way, she smiled. But it was a very forced smile.

"Sorry I gave you such a start!" she threw out.



A PLOT AGAINST ZONIA!

"Don't get jumpy, Miriam," said Mr. Loveless. "Leave this business to your mother and me." "Oh, you must not fail!" gasped the girl. "I can't be done out of all my prospects. You must get this girl Zonia out of the way!"

It was her sudden hope that she would be invited to join the girls at their table. But, no!

Already the forced smile, and something false in the voice, had warned Betty and the rest not to get friendly with this girl. She came in for a few genial responses to her friendly overture, but in another moment she was being ignored.

To be rebuffed like that, how it galled her! In that moment there leapt to life in Miriam Loveless a malicious feeling against the girls. She felt she would like to pay them out for their "stand-offishness", some day. Who were they, that she was not good enough for them?

And so presently, when she made her exit from the shop, after giving them a full minute's start, her eyes gleamed with malice as she came upon the girls once more. They all had bicycles, and, although some belonged to Morcove and others to Stormwood School, apparently they were going to ride together out of the town.

Miriam Loveless watched them pedal off, and not the least malignant look was the one she sent after Zonia Moore.

"Stormwood, her school!" the excited girl muttered to herself, walking on at last along the quaint old High Street. "And Stormwood is only a few miles from here! It is in the very district where uncle and aunt are thinking of spending the next month or two!"

She was biting her lips again, having some grave reason for feeling so worried, so afraid. Dejectedly she sauntered the short distance to the old-fashioned hotel where she was staying with her people. She must have known how gladly they would have welcomed her back to the private sitting-room which was theirs, for was she not the protégée on whom they simply lavished the love that an own daughter of theirs might have had? But Miriam preferred to avoid the sitting-room.

Going direct to her bed-room, she sullenly took off her outdoor things, then sat down, her mouth drooping at the corners.

For at least ten minutes had she sat there, brooding heavily, before she exclaimed uneasily to herself:

"It may be so—it may be! And if it is, and the whole thing is found out—how shall I stand, then!"

The Plotters.

ABOUT nine o'clock that evening Miriam Loveless was reading a book in the private sitting-room at the Barncombe Hotel, whilst her so-called uncle and aunt chatted quietly together.

Once again it was a very pleasant impression of a tender devotion to each other that the lady and gentleman created.

They were still young enough to be mistaken for the parents of this girl who was sharing their leisured life; and yet there was something of the Darby and Joan about them, due perhaps to a certain great sorrow they had suffered years ago—a grievous trial that had knit them together closer than ever.

At this moment the talk had lapsed, and on the faces of husband and wife alike there was a very pensive expression.

Whatever it was that held handsome Mrs. Spenlow in such a dreaming state, all at once, was also holding Mr. Spenlow. Of these two it could obviously be said with perfect truth—they were "two minds with but a single thought, two hearts that beat as one."

John Spenlow only ended the silence, at last, by

making a trifling inquiry that marked his devotion to his wife. He asked her if she wanted the book that he knew she had begun that day; if so, he would go and get it for her. When she said, smiling, "Thank you, John, but I am not in the mood for reading this evening," he nodded, and the silence fell again.

Miriam, sitting apart from her uncle and aunt—as she was accustomed to call them—went on skimming through the book that she had found for herself. But she raised her eyes from the print, unnoticed, when suddenly her aunt broke into speech, after heaving a sigh.

"I cannot help thinking of that picture we saw at the show to-day, John. Somehow it did make such an appeal to me!"

"And to me," nodded John Spenlow, in a musing manner. "I was just thinking, when you spoke, Mary; it is a wonderful study in oils for a mere schoolgirl to have painted."

The lady continued, after a pause:

"You know, John, I would like to seek out the schoolgirl artist—she is a boarder at Morcove, it appears—and ask her all about that picture. Is the subject of it another scholar at that school? I wonder?"

"Ay!" John Spenlow responded, drumming his fingers upon the table. "Well, there is no reason why we should not get a talk with the girl Tess Trelawney later on."

"When we are settled in that furnished bungalow which we have rented for a few weeks, along the cliff towards Morcove," said Mrs. Spenlow, "there will be a good opportunity then of getting into touch with the youthful artist."

"Yes, Mary. We might even have done something at once, only to-morrow we both have to run up to London again for a few days. When we get back, however, and have settled ourselves at the bungalow, we will do something then."

He suddenly looked round to where Miriam was sitting, to catch that girl with her book lying neglected on her lap, whilst she stared as if she had been a keen listener to the desultory talk.

"You are not going to mind being left here for a few days, Miriam?"

"No, uncle—oh, no!" she said hastily. "I—I shall be quite all right—quite happy. Barncombe is such a—such an interesting old place!"

"You should see if you can't make friends with some of the girls at Morcove School, Miriam dear," advised the aunt. "That would be nice for you. They might give you a game of tennis."

"Yes; well, I—yes, perhaps I will," Miriam said. She was ill at ease, as her floundering speech testified. Now she closed her book and stood up.

"I think I'll get to bed early," she remarked, coming forward to say good-night. "The air down here makes one feel so sleepy by the end of the day."

"Doing you good, my dear!" was her uncle's smiling comment. "But you look rather pale, you know, in spite of the Devonshire air and the clotted cream. Good-night, my dear; sleep well!"

"Good-night, uncle! Auntie—"

"Good-night, Miriam, my dear!" was the loving murmur that went with a kiss or two. "You certainly do look a bit off colour, dear. What's the reason? And how cold your hands are!"

Miriam forced a laugh as she snatched her hands away and then stepped across to the door.

"Oh, I'm all right, thanks! Good-night!"

But she was a white-faced, panicky-looking girl as soon as she had gained the privacy of her own bed-room.

That talk between her uncle and aunt had made her heart beat with wild alarm.

They were only waiting until they were settled in the furnished bungalow along the cliffs before getting into touch with the schoolgirl who had painted that fateful picture! And as soon as they had a talk with that girl—what would happen?

Miriam could guess.

It was the knowledge of what would happen, for a certainty, that kept her pacing about the bedroom in such a distraught manner. For all she was so young, she had the appearance of being one who was going through some sudden terrible crisis.

"What shall I do—what can I do!"

If the actual words did not escape her lips, that was certainly the desperate phrase running in her brain.

What should she do—what could she do to avert the calamity that would make utter havoc of her own life of ease and luxury?

Suddenly she ended her restless roaming of the room, as if a daring idea had seized her. She sat down at a bureau, seized a sheet of notepaper and a pen, and began to write.

With a shaking hand she penned this missive that seemed to be one she had decided to post without a moment's loss of time. For, as soon as it was ready for the pillar-box, she slipped off downstairs with it, and ran out of doors to post it.

"That's all I can do for the present," was her peevish murmur, as soon as she had returned from the secret dash out of doors. "I wonder if they will get it to-morrow? Hardly possible, I suppose, for the night mail must have left already! But I'm not going to throw away any chances; I will go to the place I named to-morrow evening, in case they are there!"

She did so, but in vain she waited about for the people to whom she had sent that urgent letter; they did not turn up.

The next evening, however, the case was different.

Just as twilight was falling upon the quaint old provincial town, Miriam Loveless quitted the hotel where she had been left in the care of the motherly proprietress, whilst the uncle and aunt were temporarily absent. It was but a short step the anxious girl had to go—merely as far as the central post-office. On the previous evening, as something to do whilst she waited about, she had gone into the building, bought a postcard, then spent a minute at the telegram desk, writing. She was meaning to do the same this evening, but there was no need.

Even as she came along the pavement in front of the post-office, where a few people were still passing to and fro, a hand touched her shoulder, and a woman's voice whispered:

"Miriam!"

She flashed about, gasping joyfully:

"Mother! Oh, and here is dad, too!"

"Yes, my girl," said the man who was with the woman who had laid that detaining hand upon the girl's shoulder. "Here we are—"

"Thank goodness!" was Miriam's fervent exclamation. "Now, where can we go, to talk? You mustn't come to the hotel. Uncle and auntie must never know that you—that I fetched you here, like this!"

"No, Miriam," her mother muttered very gravely. "From what your letter told us, it looks as if your father and I—"

"You'll have to do something at once—at once!" Miriam rushed on agitatedly, whilst they all three moved on up the street. "Oh, the suspense I

have been in! It's awful! As soon as uncle and auntie return from London, and are settled at the bungalow, they will be following the matter up!"

The girls' parents exchanged uneasy looks, but nothing was said until the three of them were going by the quaint, lamp-lit alleyway, leading to one of the back streets.

"Here we are—we can talk here," the man said then, and they turned aside into the lamp-lit passage and halted together.

The mother began at once, in a tense tone:

"Now, Miriam. You say that your uncle and aunt are going to get into touch with the painter of that picture? And if they do—"

"It's obvious what will happen!" Miriam exclaimed wildly. "They will be introduced to the girl Zonia herself. And she is their own daughter—I am sure of it, positive! I told you, in my letter, what I overheard the schoolgirls saying: All that about how this Zonia was brought up by gipsies, and—"

"Yes, yes!" the father cut in impatiently. "Well—"

"If you had seen, too, the effect that that picture had upon uncle and auntie!" Miriam spoke on agitatedly. "It was as if something was telling them—some instinct—"

"You said all this in the letter, Miriam!" her mother broke in, with the impatience that comes of tremendous anxiety. "Your father and I want to be on the safe side, and we are ready to do all we can in the matter. The question is—"

"Where is this girl they call Zonia Moore?" clamoured Miriam's father. "At Morocco School?"

"No, at another school in this district—Stornwood. But it amounts almost to the same thing, father. She is just as likely to be introduced to uncle and aunt—"

"Very well, then!" the man said fiercely, and he looked meaningly at his wife. "We must do exactly what we felt would be necessary the moment we got the letter! That girl must be prevented from ever being introduced to her own parents! She—"

"Sh! Don't use the word 'parents,'" Miriam's mother cautioned the last speaker, with a nervous glance around. "But I quite agree, Dick. The thing will be to get the girl away—"

"Unless she is got away, at once, from this district," Miriam interjected desperately, "my future is done for! Is it likely that the Spenlows will go on giving me such a fine life, and will still speak of me as their intended heiress, when they have found their own daughter?"

"They have been wonderfully good to you," Miriam's mother said slowly. "They have kept the promise they made, five years ago, that you should be quite as a daughter to them. They have never had any use for your father and me. Well, perhaps they had cause for disliking us!" the woman said, with a cynical smile. "But you, Miriam—"

"Oh, it has been such a happy, grand life!" the girl exclaimed. "And now—"

"Don't you get jumpy, my girl," came impressively from the father. "Your mother and me are the right ones to tackle this sudden upset. You leave it to us!"

"But if you should want me to help, I'm ready, you know," Miriam spoke on breathlessly. "Oh, I can't be done out of all my prospects! For two nights running I have lain awake, worrying."

"Sh!"

It was another warning whisper from Mrs. Loveless, as someone went by at the lower end of the lamp-lit passage.

The footsteps died away, and the parents and their daughter should have felt free to continue in talk. But guiltiness made them nervous, and they moved further up the alleyway before Miriam's father resumed, by giving her certain whispered instructions.

Again and again she nodded eagerly, as she took in his every word. He was talking now about some papers, asking her if she thought she could get hold of them, and vehemently she whispered back:

"Yes, father, I can do that! Auntie has them at the hotel, I know."

"You must be careful, Miriam," was the mother's grave warning. "It is all we are asking you to do—get these papers for us. As for the rest—"

A crafty smile completed the sentence, the same kind of smile of expectant triumph that was to be Miriam's when at last she went slinking back alone to the hotel.

For by that time all the wild dread had given place to a feeling of confidence.

It was going to be all right! she was able to say to herself. Her parents were no fools. Trust them to take good care that nothing ever happened to spoil her present happy life and all the golden future!

Miriam's father and mother were, in fact, a couple who had long since abandoned themselves to a shady course of existence. It was for the sake of giving the girl a better life than her parents lived that Mr. and Mrs. Spenlow had taken her under their wing.

To them—her so-called "uncle" and "auntie"—she was always on her best behaviour. But the girl herself knew to-night, even if she had never known it until now, that at heart she was just a second edition of her mother—as rascally as she was handsome, and absolutely ruthless where her own interests were concerned.

Such, then, were the three undisclosed enemies with whom poor Zonia Moore had yet to come to grips!

Poor innocent Zonia, who never once laid her head upon the pillow in the dormitory at Stormwood School without first praying that some day, somehow, she might know her own dear parents at last!

Face to Face.

It was on the following Saturday afternoon that Betty & Co. next had word with Zonia Moore.

On that sunny "halfer" the chums of Study 12 got their school motor-bus to run them over to Stormwood, for some tennis, tea, and talk.

Where the private bus set them down, outside the Stormwood porch, they found the friendliest batch of Stormwood scholars waiting to greet them.

Monica Munro, Fourth Form captain, was one of the nicest one could hope to meet. Then there was Joyce Willlass, Stormwood's counterpart of Morrove's own famous madcap. Others with whom Betty & Co. shook hands, as being friends of long standing, were Enid Allarby and Becky Willard.

And Zonia—she was here, of course, dressed for tennis, like the rest of the girls, and yet somehow looking a sort of being apart from all the rest!

More than once, during the bit of talk that ensued on the way across to the courts. Betty and

her chums thought how perfectly beautiful, as usual, Zonia looked this afternoon.

She was not boisterously happy, as were girls like Polly, Naomer, and Joyce. The impression she made upon the Morrovians was that of a girl in splendid spirits, feeling that it was good to be alive on such a perfect day.

Two of the tennis-courts were available for Monica's party and the Morrovians, and so eight girls in all had soon left the shade of a fine old elm, to go out into the sunshine and do brilliant work with the racquet. Zonia was one, and finely did she score, quitting the court at last, not the least bit breathless after a flashing game.

Whilst others took their turn, she and Betty sat about again, under the old elm, along with Paula and Madge. A thrush was piping lustily amongst the leafy branches, and it was like Zonia to look up, listening.

"This glorious weather," Betty suddenly exclaimed, "makes one think of the summer holidays, and camping out, and— Oh, I say! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove!"

And Paula was to be seen rolling sharply to one side, where she sat on the grass, to dodge a flying tennis-ball.

Naomer was the madcap player who had given a blind swipe with her racquet that sent the ball clean off the court.

"Nice boundary, Naomer, if it had been cricket!" Betty sang out, whilst Zonia jumped up to run and retrieve the ball.

"Yes, I tell you, I am in ze form!" her Serene Highness answered gaily. "Zat is only a beginning!"

"My gwacious!" was Paula's subdued comment on this, and she sat ready to do another sharp dive, if the need should arise.

Zonia, after returning the ball to the players, stood watching the game. Naomer's notions of tennis were pretty quaint, and as Polly was one of the opposing pair, there was rather more fun than scoring. Paula, jolling at ease under the elm, chuckled hugely.

"Haw, haw, haw! Just look at Naomer, goals! Did you ever see— Oh, bwavo! Bwavo, Naomer! Bwiliant stwoke, that!"

"Aha, I am in ze form, I tell you!" was again the dusky one's merry cry, and she flourished her racquet. "Yes, come on—play! I hit him—whoop, so! He, he, he!"

"Yow! Healp!" And over went Paula again, as another ball came flashing at her. "What's the game, Naomer?"

"Tennis, they call it!" sang out Polly. "Fine exercise, Paula!"

"Bai Jove, so I should think, played like that!" murmured the amiable duffer, as her madcap chum volleyed again. "Wather wisky for those who are looking on, howevah!"

And, as a precaution, she crawled round behind the elm, there to obtain that undisturbed "wepose" which her frail nature demanded.

Paula, in fact, was on the point of dozing when she heard some murmured talk close at hand that was of a rather startling nature. She sat up and looked around, to find that one of the Stormwood parlourmaids had come across from the house, to convey some message to Zonia.

"Two visitors wanting to see me, you say?" Zonia was exclaiming amazedly. "But who can they be? What name?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Jarvis, miss."

"Jarvis—Jarvis? I never— Oh, all right, I'll come!" Zonia decided.

She turned to Betty, whilst the girl in cap and apron started back to the house.

"Wonder who these people are, Betty? You don't know the name?"

"Haven't the least idea who they can be, dear. Hope they don't keep you long, anyhow."

"Yes, bother them!" laughed Zonia, going off alone across the grass. "Mr. and Mrs. Jarvis—funny!" she said to herself, twirling her racquet as she stepped along.

In the front hall she came upon the same parlourmaid who had stepped across with the news of the mysterious arrivals.

"I have shown them into the interviewing-room, miss."

"All right. Thanks, Katie!"

So saying, Zonia set down her racquet upon a hall-table, gave a glance to herself in a mirror,

Zonia at Bay.

THE shock of the words came like a hammer-stroke against Zonia's heart. She fell back a step, gasping loudly.

"My what?" burst from her huskily, after a moment. "My parents—you? Oh, no, no! I—how can it be? It isn't true!"

Then the common-looking couple—who were no other than Miriam's parents in disguise—moved together towards their intended victim. She waved them away wildly.

"Don't come near me—please, please don't! You have not proved it yet! You have given me an unfair shock—"

"We shall prove it, my girl. Come, come," the man wheedled, whilst he drew some papers from his breast-pocket. "Is this the way to behave towards your own father and mother?"

Zonia moaned, sweeping a hand across her forehead.

"I'm sorry. I can't help it, though. You—you



ONLY POLLY'S TEASING! "I want something respectable to eat!" complained Paula. "But you musn't have any rich oaks," said Polly. "Here, try this!" She shot a very plain bun on to Paula's plate. "We must think of your health!"

and then passed towards a certain door that was closed.

Even before she had entered the room she seemed to know that the strangers were going to be a nasty shock to her, for she heard them talking together, softly, and their voices sounded coarse.

Coarse enough, indeed, in appearance were the man and woman with whom she stood confronted a moment later. She felt she could not advance towards them, but must stand still just inside the room, with the closed door behind her. Her heart was beating fast.

In these two people she felt there was the sudden disclosure at last of some vague evil which had been haunting her of late.

"Mr. and Mrs. Jarvis?" she addressed them faintly. "I do not know the name. I have never seen you before. Who are you, please?"

And the answer came from man and woman in the selfsame instant:

"Zonia Moore, we are—your parents!"

are not a bit like what I have imagined my parents to be. I have had so many happy thoughts about them. I have longed and longed to find them! But now— Oh, please go away—"

"Ridiculous for you to talk like this!" exclaimed the woman who was posing as the mother. "But there, I suppose it is due to the life you have been given. You've had your head stuffed full with grand notions! You were saved from a pack of gipsies, we know, and as good as adopted by some wealthy people—"

"Yes; the Bartons, of Ribbleton!" Zonia jerked out faintly. "And I have grown fond of them. Their daughter Betty is like a sister to me. Oh, I don't want to have you—not you—for my parents!"

"But we are your parents, so what's the use of talking?" the man exclaimed, with a smirking smile. "Do you think we would have come here to-day, to tell you this, if we were not sure? Whenever you like to look at them, here are proofs!" he said, flourishing the papers. "Will you read them now?"

"No, I can't—I don't want to!" panted Zonia wildly. "All I know is that I am sorry you have turned up. I don't like you; I can't take you at all. It is very dreadful." And the tears glistened along her lashes. "A girl ought to love her parents, however poor they are. But it isn't because you are poor to look at. You are—I can't explain—"

"We are not good enough for you, that's about it!" snapped the woman. "Just what I expected, too. All right, my dear. But if you are going to stand out against us, then the Bartons will have to—"

"Have to what?" Zonia struck in, growing more dismayed than ever. "Pay you money to leave me alone—is that your game? I will not let them be victimised like that—no, I won't. I'll do something desperate first—run away—"

Her voice broke, and she said no more. She was wiping some tears out of her eyes, or she would have seen how the man and woman suddenly exchanged an excited glance.

They were, in fact, secretly delighted at what she had said in her extreme agitation. The man took his cue from it instantly.

"You have guessed aright, my dear! If you don't want to make your life with us, then you'll have to get the Bartons to pay us money to leave you alone!"

"I will not! I will do anything rather than that," Zonia threatened again, with an at-bay look in her white face. "I will go away from this school—run away from you and everyone! It will be so unfair to let the Bartons pay what you demand. It shows what you are, to intend doing such a thing! Oh, to think that my parents should prove to be crafty people like you!"

"Look here—" the woman began, in a coarse way; but Zonia would not listen.

Almost beside herself with the whole staggering upset, she suddenly flashed about and whipped the door open. For the moment she was ready to rush away without one word more to them; but she did check to a standstill to say wildly:

"I am not going to listen to you. I can't—I can't! It is so sudden! You must go away; give me a little while—"

"Oh, all right!" the man exclaimed appeasingly. In secret, he and his wife were overjoyed at the way things were going. "We don't want to be hard on you—"

"No, but you want to make money out of the Bartons, because they are kind, good people, who have grown to love me! If you had it in you to be loving parents to me, you would not think of profiting by the Bartons' desire to see me happy. It shows what you are, and I—I— Oh, I can't stand it!"

And next moment Zonia was out of the room, pulling the door to sharply behind her.

She fled—across the hall and up the stairs, then along a corridor to the dormitory. When she had changed her tennis clothes, she hurried to her study. The instant she had reached it she shut the door and locked it. Then she stood still, panting for breath, wild-eyed with fright, like a hunted creature.

Her parents—those people! And all her day-dreams, for months and years, had been of parents who were refined, good, gentle people!

What was she to do?

Distractedly she was wringing her hands, when suddenly there came up to her, from the sports field, sounds that witnessed to the happiness of life at Stormwood School. She heard the tennis players laughing blithely over their spirited games. And suddenly she was at the study-window, holding the curtain aside to look out.

For a long moment she stood gazing down to the sunlit courts where many a dear chum of hers was in such a light-hearted, care-free mood. Then she turned her eyes away from the happy scene. It hurt her, and her entire expression was that of a girl who knows that all her happy days, anyhow, are over and done with—for ever!

Once again, then, what was she to do?

She was to have no suspicion, alas, as to what utter impostors the couple were. How could the poor, duped girl suspect imposture?

They had talked as if they were ready to face the fullest inquiry; and there were those papers—documents that Zonia herself could have looked through, then and there, only she had felt too upset to give any heed to them.

Presently she again found herself gazing sadly out of the window, and this time she had the sudden shock of seeing the Jarvises going away.

Going—yes, but only for the present. What difference was that going to make in the long run?

Zonia's poor brain swirled suddenly, so that she could no longer think collectedly. And all at once she sank down into a low chair, moaning in her misery.

"What can I do—oh, what can I? Tell Betty? No, no; that will lead to the Bartons paying any price to save my happiness, and it is not fair—it is the very thing I have to guard against! So kind they have been to me all this time!"

But the alternative—to have to resign oneself to living with a father and mother who were obviously despicable, crafty characters—sheer "wrong 'uns"!

If only they had never turned up like this! It had shattered all her happiness—shattered the fond dream she had cherished of a father and mother who were all that was good and true.

And so, poor girl, she still sat there, bravely keeping all the trouble to herself; and well might she weep as wildly as she did, at last, in the throes of such a terrible crisis.

For a crisis it was, and she would be lucky indeed if ever she came through it with success.

(END OF THIS WEEK'S STORY.)

What will happen to poor Zonia? Will she run away, and thus play into the very hands of her enemies? Or will she stay on at Stormwood, and meet her real parents? Tell your friends about this splendid new series of Morcove School stories.

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