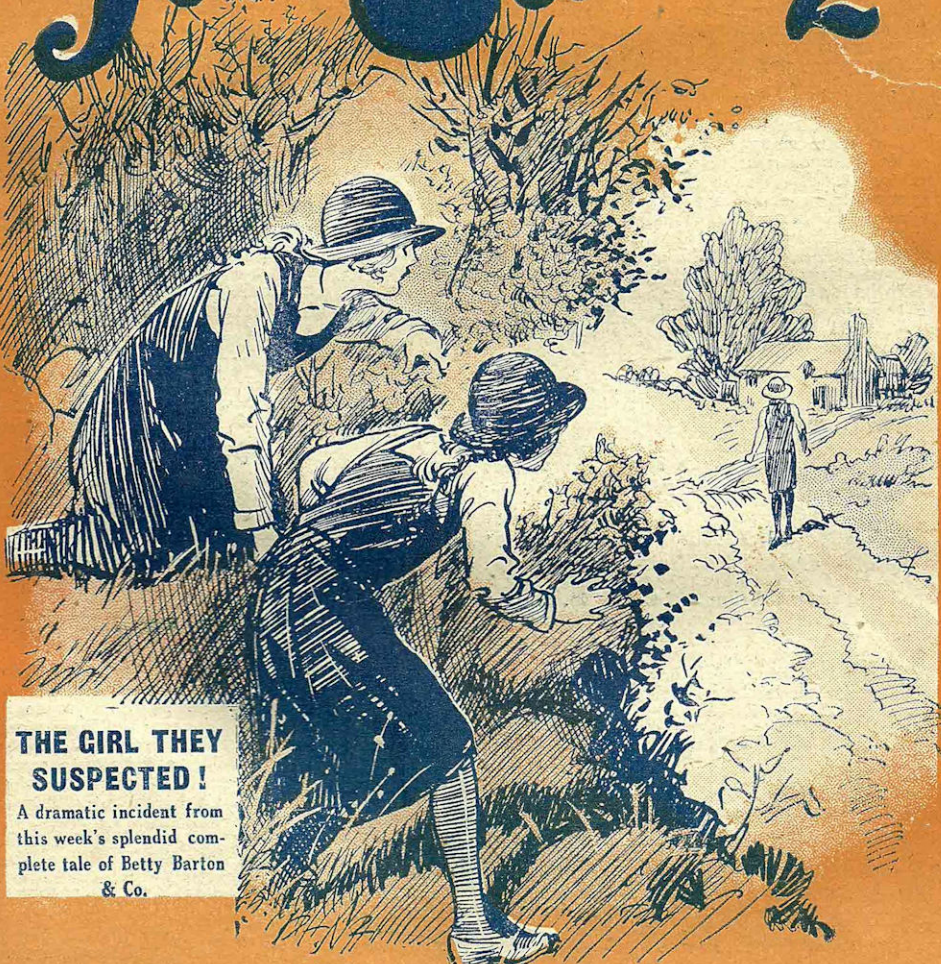


IN THIS ISSUE:
TWO GRAND SERIALS; TWO FINE COMPLETE TALES;
NEEDLEWORK NOTES, COOKERY HINTS, etc,

The Schoolgirls' Own 2^d



THE GIRL THEY SUSPECTED!

A dramatic incident from this week's splendid complete tale of Betty Barton & Co.

A Magnificent Complete Tale of Betty Barton & Co. of Morcove School.



THE BLUFFING OF BETTY AND CO.!

By
MARJORIE STANTON.

Little does Zonia Moore, the runaway schoolgirl, realise that the people who are pretending to be her parents are merely impostors! Can Betty & Co. help her? Or will Fate intervene, as it has done before?

Paula Creel—Prisoner.

"WELL light a fire on the seashore—"

"And boil a kettle!"

"And make a pot of tea—"

"Tea, bai Jove! Yes, wather; haw, haw haw!

Nothing like a cup of tea—"

"Queek, then—queek! Let us be off at once!"

It was Morcove's impish African scholar who voiced this last cry, whilst she clapped her brown hands and did an excitable caper.

"Carried unan.!" declared Polly, and she dived for a corner of Study 12 where, amongst other odds and ends, a picnic-basket could be routed out.

Her study-mate, Betty Barton, darted to the cupboard that did duty as a larder, and threw the door wide. In a twinkling eager hands were swiftly getting out all the requirements for tea on the shore, around a fire of driftwood.

Cups and saucers for half a dozen, cake and biscuits, buns and bananas—on to the study table they were rushed, there to tax all Polly's skill in fitting them into the basket.

At the same time, some of the girls who did not belong to this study—although they never seemed able to keep out of it!—scurried away to forage in their own larders. Naomer Nakara whisked off, so did Madge Minden and Tess Trelawney, so, too, Helen Craig and Dolly Delane.

Polly yelled out:

"More cups, girls! We shall want—"

"Right-ho!" came back the ready response from the Fourth Form corridor. "In two minutes, Polly!"

"And now," said that inveterate teaser, turning to cast a withering look upon languid Paula Creel, lolling in the easy-chair, "what are you doing?"

"Weally, Polly, I am—er—weal, you know, just vesting, what? Just pweparing for the little jaunt, bai Jove!"

"You are coming with us?"

"Wather!"

"You feel you would like a cup of tea by-and-by, dear?"

"How can you ask, Polly deah! Tea, bai Jove!"

"Then you jolly well make yourself useful—sharp!" laughed Polly, with a sudden swoop upon the occupant of the easy-chair. "Out of that!"

"Ow!"

"Jump to it!" commanded the teaser, playfully hauling elegant Paula on to her dainty feet, "or else—no tea!"

"My gwacious!" palpitated Paula. "Wobbed of bveath as I am, how can I lend a heaping hand? Pway gwant me a wespite, Polly deah—a brief moment—"

"Burr, you are a fraud! Outside!"

And now Polly, to Betty's great amusement, playfully rushed the aristocrat of the Form head foremost into the passage, and slammed the door upon her.

Dazedly Paula straightened up and puffed for breath. Her bland face held a look of mild protest, but she thought better of her first impulse, which was to open the study door and express her opinion of Polly.

Instead, Paula suddenly broke into smiles, gave a chuckling laugh, and sauntered away.

The study door opened and a head was put forth.

"Paula!"

"Oh—er—"

"What are you doing now?" demanded Polly.

"Er—weally, you know, I was wather thinking of putting myself to wights, what? I feel considerably wuffed, Polly deah. I do not complain. I realise that you will never appreciate the fact that I am a fwaal thing. I—"

"I give you five minutes in which to gaze at yourself in the glass!" Polly warned the chum with whom she was in such a perpetual state of mock indignation. "In five minutes we shall

all be off. If you are late—on your own head be the blame!"

"Haw, haw haw!"

"How dare you laugh! Avaunt, thou sluggard!"

And the door slammed again.

The mock-serious warning was not without effect. Paula made a really praiseworthy effort to get her toilette done within the time limit. Five minutes later, to a second, she was re-entering Study 12, looking all spick and span, to hear Polly agreeing to some suggestion of Betty's.

"Yes, Betty darling," Polly was exclaiming; "it would be a nice change to go along the cliffs and down to the shore by way of the second path—the one just past Cliffedge Bungalow. Ready, Paula? Not really?"

"Yes, weally and twuly!" beamed the elegant one. "Bai Jove, though, I—yes, wather, I find one of these new shoes a twiffe uncomfowtable, geals. There is a twiffing pweasure on my—"

"Don't say bunion," Polly pleaded prinly.

"We don't allow such expressions in this study."

"On my left foot, I was going to wemark."

Paula said, backing away to the door again.

"Howevah, I will not be one minute."

"You'll find us gone!"

And she did!

That, however, was because Paula's one minute had become a good ten. She had meant only to make a lightning change into an easier pair of shoes, but somehow she felt ruffled after bending over to change her footgear, and that meant a fresh visit to the mirror. When at last she was really satisfied with herself, she had the horror of realising that—out of pure fun, of course!—the others had all slipped away!

"The wascals, haw, haw, haw!" Paula was soon chuckling to herself. "No mattah; I know where to find them, and I shall certainly reach the picnic spot by the time tea is made!"

Which, needless to say, was Paula's chief consideration.

The fates, however, were intending cruel sport with the amiable Paula this hot and sunny afternoon in late spring.

Light-heartedly Paula directed her dainty steps down the school drive, and then to the left along the road to Barnecombe. She had just under a mile of the highway to traverse before she struck aside on to the grassy headland, to seek the pathway down through thecombe.

It was highly probable that her chums would be found, with the fire going and the kettle already on the boil, just where the zig-zag path gave on to the sunny beach. Paula; at any rate, devoutly hoped that this would be so.

"Yes, wather!" she said as she at last left the dusty highway to go across the headland. "Weally, it is quite far enough to have to dwag oneself, bai Jove! One gets thirsty—vewy thirsty!"

A few seconds later she was sighing again.

"Bai Jove, the sun's a gwiller to-day! Had I realised how overpowering the heat is I would have pwoposed tea first and then a wamble! Tea," Paula murmured thirstily—"tea should pwecede a walk, even if one has another cup, bai Jove, when—"

"Hi, hi—Paula Creel!" was the loud hail that suddenly halted her on the sunny headland. "Paula Creel!"

It was none of her chums. The cry was not friendly enough to be Betty's, or any of the

others'. Moreover, it came from the porch of Cliffedge Bungalow, the boundary fence of which she was passing on her right.

"Corwa Gwandways and the new geal, Mjwiam Loveless," Paula instantly realised, surprisedly. "They are calling to me, bai Jove, and yet what they can want with me—"

"Paula, just a minute!" This was Cora Grandways, running forth from the pretty porch to beckon urgently. "You must come!"

A feeling of mistrust that was not surprising seized Paula. She was one of the easiest girls in the school to be "caught napping." But even Paula was always instinctively on her guard where that inveterate enemy of the Study 12 circle, handsome Cora Grandways, was concerned. Nor was Cora's present crony, Miriam Loveless, bearing Betty & Co. any goodwill.

But, being the polite girl that she was, Paula could not pass on unheedingly. She diverted her steps towards the fence.

"You require me, Corwa? I would like to inquire why?"

"Come inside—you must, for a second," Cora answered, with an evasiveness which Paula failed to detect. "Now, don't be nasty—"

"I have no wish to be nasty evah, Corwa. I think you will agree that whenever you have shown a disposition to be nice, we geals have always been weady to let bygones be bygones. But—"

"Your chums have just gone by, down to the shore," Cora spoke on, quite cordially. "Aren't you tired—thirsty?"

"Thirsty, 'bai Jove! It is why I am in a huwvy, Corwa—to get a dwop of tea down my thwoat!"

"Miriam and I have a cup going," Cora said. "Now that the Spenlows are away in London, Miriam has the key of the bungalow to mind. We come across from the school to air the place every day, and we make a pot of tea—"

"Bai Jove!" Paula commented. "How-evah—"

"Oh, if I can be friendly for once, can't you?" Cora pleaded. "The gate is just over there; come along in!"

"Thanks, I will! Er—no, I won't!" Paula changed her mind abruptly. "Wather not, Corwa. On weflection, I—I weally cannot rely upon this sudden wemarkable— Heah, what are you doing?"

There was no mistaking what Cora was doing. She was coming over the fence!

Her manner suddenly changing to one of baffled cunning, she scrambled over the low ash fence. She was down to the ground, and making a rush to seize Paula before that girl had retreated a dozen paces.

"Corwa—"

"Got you—ha, ha! Mirry—Mirry, I've got her!" the exultant Cora now yelled out. "Quick—come and help me!"

"Dwop it, Corwa!" Paula protested, starting a feeble struggle. "Look heah, I guessed it was a cwafy wuse, and I am not going to—"

"Oh, aren't you! We'll see about that! Whoa back! Ha, ha, ha!"

At whirlwind speed Miriam came out by the gateway and tore across to where Cora was holding the writhing Paula fast and tight. In vain the elegant member of the Form, at the risk of figuring in a humiliating light, wriggled and squealed. She was in close custody now. With a triumphant captor on either side of her, she was

marched to the gateway, and then hustled up the garden path to the porch.

"Ha, ha, ha!" Cora's vindictive shriek of laughter rang out. "Now for a bit of fun, Mirry dear! This girl——"

"Corwa, dwop it, please! You weally must——"

"Whoa, my beauty! We have the run of the bungalow, Mirry," Cora tittered on, "and now we have a servant, all complete! Ha, ha, ha!"

"A what?" gasped breathless Paula. "Look here——"

"A servant—so in with you, sharp!" sniggered Cora.

And she and Miriam, between them, propelled their hapless captive across the threshold with such violence that she tumbled all asprawl in the passage.

Next second—slam went the bungalow's front door, and snick went a key in the lock.

Paula scrambled up, ruffled and indignant, to find Cora and Miriam poising triumphantly in front of her, with mischievous malice in their peals of laughter.

The "Fun" Goes Wrong.

"GOOD-AFTERNOON!" giggled Cora mockingly. "So you have come after the situation, have you? Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ready to start at once, I hope?" grinned Miriam. "We can provide you with a cap and apron."

"Lovely!" Cora commented on this idea. "Have you a maid's uniform, Miriam, anywhere about the place?"

"Oh, yes! Half a sec.!" So saying, Miriam darted off along a passage that led to the room occupied by Mrs. Spenlow's maid. That girl was away in London with her master and mistress, but had not taken all her things with her.

With scant respect for the maid's wardrobe, Miriam whirled into the room and began to rummage through a chest of drawers. Meantime, poor Paula made a sudden spirited dash for freedom by darting off along another passage serving the kitchen quarters.

Her idea was to escape by the back way out of the house, but Cora's mocking peal of laughter might have warned the would-be fugitive that there was no hope of bolting.

A moment, and Paula was diving at the back door, only to find it locked fast and the key gone.

She flashed about to face Cora again, panting out protests that only met with continual bursts of laughter.

"Look heah——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Corwa, if you play me any more twicks——"

"He, he, he!"

"Will you unlock this door?"

"No, I won't!" Cora said viciously. "And don't give me any of your airs, Betsy Ann! Just remember your position, or we shall sack you without a character! You have come here to work!"

"I have been dwagged here——"

"Same thing!"

"Under pwotest!" Paula panted on wildly.

"I—I— Look heah——"

"No, look at these instead!" Miriam came running into the kitchen to say gaily, whilst she displayed a cap and apron. "All nicely ironed! Put them on, Paula!"

"I'm calling her Betsy Ann," grinned Cora. "Go on, Betsy, look alive! You can't wait at table without a uniform!"

"Corwa—and you, Miriam——"

"Here, let's put them on for her, she doesn't know the way!" chuckled Cora. "Hold still, Betsy Ann!"

"Dwop it, I say! You are wuffling me about, you wetches! I won't—I pwotest——"

"Pwotest away," laughed Miriam, now that she was holding the captive, whilst Cora quickly tied the apron about the slim waist. "How can you be so bad-tempered, Betsy Ann, when everything is being done for your comfort—he, he, he!"

"All wight, you wetches!" gasped Paula, whilst her school hat was taken off and the starched cap

quickly put in its place. "But understand, you—you will—— Oh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Paula had become incoherent with humiliation as she was shown her reflection in a small mirror that Cora had snatched from the wall.

Poor Paula, famed for her elegance! The white apron was all awry, and the cap was even more so. But perhaps the bitterest part about this cruel jape that was being played upon her was that she was being kept apart from her chums—and without any tea!

"Now," Cora said gloatingly, walking round the captive, "I will instruct you in your duties. Miriam and I, being ladies, will take tea in the drawing-room, and you, Betsy Ann, will bring in everything for our tea. All the doors are locked, and we have the keys in our pockets, so you can't get away."

"I wefuse! I——"

"You need not trouble to light a fire," Miriam



WHO WAS SHE? "Heah, stop!" Paula cried. "Let me see you properly! Stop!" But that, apparently, was the last thing the girl intended to do. She kept her face turned away from Paula and ran off like a frightened deer.

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"I wefuse! I——"

"You need not trouble to light a fire," Miriam

said sweetly. "There is a spirit-stove in the drawing-room already boiling the kettle. You'll bring in everything else."

Paula's sudden secret hope that she would be able to brew herself a cup, on the quiet, suddenly died within her. She lost her temper and stamped a foot.

"Let me go! I want my tea!"

"Oh, tantrums! We shan't give you that reference, Betsy Ann. Now then, just you carry on!"

With a commanding wave of the hand Cora walked out of the kitchen, and Miriam followed, in fits of laughter. In the drawing-room, the two cronies flopped down into the first chairs that came to hand and kicked up their feet as they indulged their merriment to the full.

"Ha, ha, ha! What a brilliant wheeze it was, catching her away from the other girls," exulted Cora. "I say, there is time for a smoke, eh, Mirry?"

They lit up, lolling back in the armchairs, and alternately puffing their cigarettes and chuckling. Now and then they listened together, to make sure that Paula was keeping busy. An occasional rattle of crockery seemed to suggest that the unwilling prisoner had resigned herself. But presently there was silence when Cora and Miriam listened.

"She's very quiet all at once," Cora said softly, silently getting to her feet. "I wonder if she is— Oh, she's off! Quick, she's off out of the kitchen window!"

"Yes, wathah!" was Paula's defiant cry, as they came charging into the kitchen, to find her trying to wriggle out through a small casement. "I won't— Ow, drop it! Leave off!"

"No, you don't—oh, no!" chuckled Cora, now that she and Miriam had seized the escaping prisoner and were dragging her back. "No outing for Betsy Ann until we have had tea and she has cleared away and washed up and made all tidy. Ha, ha, ha!"

It says something for Paula's spirit that she did not burst into tears of vexation then. She was in the exasperating state of being outnumbered, and her tormentors took care not to leave her alone after her desperate bid for freedom.

She neither broke down before the girl bullies, nor would she allow them to be able to say afterwards that she had resigned herself to their merciless bidding.

In vain the couple stormed their orders at her; not a finger would Paula move to carry out any of the humiliating demands. Infuriated by this spirited defiance, both girls pushed her about and slapped her, and still Paula remained as stubborn as a mule, growing paler and paler with anger.

So at last, impatient as they were for their tea, the two cronies had to load the tray themselves.

Miriam took it into the drawing-room, whilst Cora stood by the prisoner to see that she did not make another bolt for the window. Miriam came back, and then the pair of them seized their captive and hustled her into the charming room where they were going to have tea before her eyes.

"Stand there!" Cora commanded. "Now, Betsy Ann, you will not, of course, take any notice of what your mistresses talk about. Well-trained skivvies never do! Mirry, darling, isn't it a scream?"

"I wouldn't have missed it for anything," de-

clared Miriam, sitting down in readiness to dispense tea. "Didn't we say it would be great fun, Cora, having the run of this place whilst my people are away?"

"Hope they jolly well stay a month!" said Cora, taking the teapot to the kettle that was boiling on the spirit-stove. "There is some talk of their going abroad, isn't there?"

"Oh, yes. I don't really expect they'll ever come back to Morcove. They will just let their term for this bungalow run out, and— Cora— oh! Cora, what have you done?"

"Oh, oh!" was Cora's own wild, gasping cry of dismay, as she suddenly skipped away from the spirit-stove, dropping both kettle and teapot. "I've scalded my hand, I think! I—"

"Heah, look what you've done!" Paula now cried out in great alarm. "Look, bai-Jove!"

The spirit-stove was overturned, and suddenly a lake of methylated spirit was all alight on the carpet!

Exciting Times for Paula.

"PUT it out!" Miriam screamed. "Fire! Oh, the whole place will be burnt to the ground! Cora—Paula—"

"All right, all right; keep calm!"

There was a commendable calmness about Paula all at once. The pity was that the others did not follow her example.

In the same instant that Paula snatched up a cushion as being something to dump over the flaming patch, Cora and Miriam simply fled as if for their lives.

They came back after a few seconds, feeling reassured. But the blaze was not extinguished. Some of the fiery spirit had splashed very inflammable material, and the flames were flaring high.

For an instant the cronies gazed in horror from the doorway, and then panic came upon them again. Once more they bolted off, aghast with terror. Reaching the front door, they would have dashed out into the open air; but the door was locked against them.

"The key!" panted Mirry. "You've got it!"

"No, I haven't! At least—"

"Oh, look sharp!" urged Miriam, as Cora fished out two or three keys that had been taken from doors they had locked against Paula. "That one—that one! Quick!"

Cora agitatedly slammed it into the hole and turned back the hasp. Sending the door crashing open, the pair of them dashed out into the bungalow garden, then stood still. They were safe, but—what about the blaze within doors?

Suddenly Cora darted to the drawing-room window, to peer inside.

"My goodness, Mirry—"

"Oh, how awful! Come away, Paula—come away!" Miriam shrieked to the girl who was still fighting the flames. "You can never manage!"

Then she turned, white to the lips, to Cora.

"The nearest fire-alarm—where? Cora, what shall we do? The whole place will be gutted! Where—"

"There's an alarm at the school. The engines have to come from Barncombe. It's three miles—"

"Three miles!"

"Well, come away, anyhow! Look here, Mirry," Cora panted, as they both ran off in dire panic, "we didn't do it! We must say that Paula—"

"Yes, but—" Miriam glanced behind as they ran out by the garden gate. "Look—look at the smoke, Cora! And that girl is still—"

"No, she isn't," was Cora's breathless cry of relief, as they saw Paula in the bungalow porch all at once. "She is as safe as we are. Come on, then!"

And on they ran, with what idea of doing any good in the sudden emergency they themselves never could have said.

As for Paula, taking it for granted that the two were going to give the alarm, even if they had to run all the way to the school to do so, she felt that her duty was to go on doing her best to fight the sudden conflagration.

The fire was spreading, yet it might be kept under after all, she hoped, by her getting to work with buckets of water.

To her joy she saw a water-butt standing close handy against the house wall. Dashing back to the scullery, she seized a pail and came running out to plunge it into the tub.

Another instant and she was running back into the house with a brimming pail.

Sluish, sluish! She flung the water into the once-beautiful drawing-room—now packed with smoke.

The fluid must have drenched some of the burning material, for instantly there was a loud hissing and clouds of steam mingled with the smoke. Paula staggered back, taken by surprise, agasp at the sudden stifling atmosphere that she was trying to breathe.

Bravely, none the less, she rushed out to the water-butt again and refilled her bucket. Then back once more—sluish, slop, sluish! This way and that she flung the pail's contents.

Was she doing any good?

It seemed impossible to tell, so densely was the whole place packed with pungent vapour now. In any case, she knew that she could be doing no harm. She had better keep on—she must! It was doing one's best, until other help came.

"My gwacious, yes, wather!" she gasped to herself, charging back with another brimming pail. "I know none of the other geals would ever give in."

The other girls! If only they could know, and could come rushing to lend a hand! But they were far below on the seashore, and would never have an inkling of what was happening up here on the headland.

Nor did anybody appear to be going by on the high road. With Cora and Miriam gone, she was left to carry on alone. Well, so she would carry on; but how awful the stifling reek of the smoke and steam was becoming.

She spared a moment to whip off the maid's apron that had been so teasingly tied about her. Plunging it into the water-butt, she wrung it out, and wound it about her mouth and nostrils as a respirator.

Then on she went again with the bucket. Time after time, in and out of the imperilled bungalow, rushing bucketful after bucketful to the burning room. Surely, now, she was actually gaining on the fire! Another bucket, then, and another after that! No use giving up!

But suddenly—perhaps because she was more exhausted and dazed than she had realised—she stumbled on her way out of the house, and fell crash to the lobby floor, with the empty pail jangling away from her.

Nor did the poor girl struggle up after she had gone down like that—with a heavy thump,

striking her head against a bit of the lobby furniture.

There she lay, stunned by the fall, and one shudders to think what Paula's fate might have been had no other help been coming at last.

Suddenly, however, a girlish figure came dashing into the house—only one girl, and she was not a Morocco scholar.

Hardly was she across the threshold before she stumbled upon the overturned pail, and then beheld Paula lying there, senseless.

With a startled cry, the newcomer quickly stooped and took the prone girl by the shoulders, dragging her out into the open air.

Leaving the unconscious girl on the grass, she rushed back into the smoke-filled bungalow and shouted:

"Anyone there?"

No answer came, and she felt assured that the place was deserted except for herself. So, snatching up the pail, and making a muffler for herself out of a handkerchief, she took on the desperate task that had been Paula's.

Sluish, sluish, slop! Another bucketful was flung into the burning room, where the fire had seemed to be gaining all at once. But with another bucketful the last wicked bit of lurid flame was smothered out, and then the girl could bring more water to give a final drenching to the material that had been smouldering.

It was a minute after this that Paula, revived by the fresh air, opened her eyes and began to look around.

"Bai Jove! Wheeah—what— Oh, healp, I remember! But—"

She lifted herself upon one elbow weakly and stared.

Evidently the fire had been got under, the damage being confined to the drawing-room. She could hear someone moving about indoors, and she wondered who it was. A pail rattled as it was set down.

Paula-fetched a breath, and managed to call out:

"I say, you in theah! It's all wight now, what? My gwacious, though, it was wather a scare, bai Jove! Yes, wather! Er—er—can you heah me, please?"

No voice answered her. Instead, it amazed her to realise that her own weak cries had caused the person inside the house to come bolting out by the front door—the only one unlocked.

Then Paula saw that it was a girl of her own age who had completed the timely bit of fire-fighting. Not Cora, and not Miriam—no. In fact, this was no Morocco scholar, but a stranger. Stay, though, was she after all—

"Heah, stop!" Paula suddenly yelled, whilst she began to scramble up from the ground. "Let me see you pwoperly. Stop, stop!"

It was the very last thing, evidently, the other girl meant to do.

With the lower half of her face still muffled by the wetted handkerchief, she kept her eyes turned from Paula and bolted off like a frightened deer.

Paula got to her feet, but swayed about, almost swooning again with the violence of the fresh shock she had received.

It was impossible for her to pursue the fleeing figure, but that was not what was worrying Paula.

"Bai Jove, am I dweaming?" she gasped astoundedly. "That geal—as sure as I live, it was our missing Zonia!"



PLAIN SPEAKING. "It's as well to be quite plain," said Betty. "We followed Miriam Loveless here because we believe she knows something about a chum of ours who is missing. Are you Miriam's mother?"

Proud of their "Duffer."

"NO, girls, I can't see her coming!"

Betty Barton voiced the disappointed remark as she came running back to where her fellow-picnickers were gathered round their seashore "spread." She had just taken a run as far as the gap in the cliffs to see if Paula was coming down thecombe path.

"Her tea will be rather well drawn-by now," Madge commented with a smile. "But we simply couldn't go on waiting—"

"I should think not, indeed!" exclaimed Polly, popping the last inch of a chocolate éclair into her mouth. "If Paula has been all this time looking at herself in the glass—well!"

"It will be a record—even for Paula!" laughed Tess. "Let's leave her a good big tea, anyhow."

"Certainly, the poor dear," grinned Polly. "She shall have her fair share, so she shall, after doing such a lot to help us fag the things here! Hands off that Swiss-roll, everybody! Reserved for Paula! Here, I tell you what!"

In a flash Polly had fished out a pocket-book, leaves from which she tore out and handed round. "New parlour game?" wondered Tess.

"Get your pencils and write," commanded Polly blithely. "Reserved for Paula!"

Betty laughed along with the rest.

"Oh, I see! A sort of 'coals of fire' stunt! When Paula does turn up she will see labels on everything."

"That's the idea!" said Polly.

"Don't forget, Paula will begin a long speech," warned Helen. "Her apology will be miles long. Still, we can always go to sleep until it's over."

Then a silence fell, whilst various labels were hastily hand-printed with the bold announcement:

"RESERVED FOR PAULA!"

As soon as the tickets were completed, the fun-loving girls quickly stuck them here and there amongst the items that comprised their spread.

The Swiss-roll and the almond cake; the last cream-bun and a jar of shrimp-paste; a round of scones and a jar of jam—these were some of the delicacies "Reserved for Paula!" To complete the effect, Naomer and Polly stuck spare labels upon the kettle and the teapot, and laid one apiece upon her waiting cup and saucer and her plate.

"Ha, ha, ha! How good!" chuckled Polly, sitting back a bit to admire the general effect. "When Paula does turn up—"

"Sh! Here she— But, my goodness," Betty broke out in blank amazement as she gazed, "what on earth has happened to her? Paula, why—"

The picnickers rose up astoundedly. Paula—their usually spick-and-span Paula—she was suddenly hurrying towards them in a grimed and dishevelled state. Still more extraordinary, instead of the school hat, she was wearing a maid's starched cap!

"She—she's gone mad!" gasped Polly.

"Yes, wather, bai Jove! Geals, geals, the most remarkable thing—"

"You are that, and no mistake, Paula," said Betty. "Er—what are you wearing, Paula? On your head, yes!"

"On my— Bai Jove! Haw, haw, haw!" Paula herself exploded as she put up a hand and felt the servant's cap. "Weal, I'm dashed, geals! I have come all this way—"

"Wearing that? Then I wonder you weren't taken up by the police," Polly said. "But perhaps when they saw you the police ran away. Ha, ha, ha!"

"It would have been a great relief if police had been on hand just now, geals," Paula said, hastily removing the cap. "Also the fire brigade. Yes, wather! Bai Jove! You geals know Cliffedge Bungalow? Weal, geals, I— In fact, geals, I have come to tell you there has been a bit of a conflagwation."

"What! At Cliffedge—"

"Yes, wather! However, keep calm. It was weally nothing. That is to say, it is all over now. It—it was put out, don't you know."

"By Cora and Miriam?" hazarded Polly. "They were at the bungalow. We saw them from a distance as we came along. But how did you—"

"Oh, weal, nevah mind! But geals, a most remarkable thing—another weally inceddible happening, bai Jove! I—I— You won't believe me, though!"

"Oh, do get on!" they clamoured with laughing impatience. "Well?"

"Weal, geals, the fact of the mattah is, I have just seen Zonia!"

There was the sort of pause that evidences utter stupefaction. In round-eyed amazement Paula's chums stared at her.

"Seen Zonia? You have seen Zonia? Where—where?"

Paula sat down.

"If there is a cup of tea, geals, I assure you I have earned it. Yes, wather! I— What's this I see— 'Weserved for Paula'? Haw, haw, haw! Haow wicidulous you geals are! Must have your little joke! I say, excuse my gwimed

appearance, won't you? Oh, for a cup of tea! Putting out that fire has made me—I mean to say—

"You have been putting out that fire at the bungalow?" cried Betty.

"Er—practically speaking, yes," Paula modestly confessed, thankfully accepting a cup of tea at the hands of Madge. "Nothing to wite home about, no. I—I got wather thirsty, though. Yes, wather!"

"Paula, dear, do tell us—"

"Oh, about Zonia! Yes, wather! Weal, there was I, just coming wound after I had drooped insensible in the bungalow, and so she had dwagged me out—that is to say, you know—"

"Who had dragged you out? Explain!"

"Why, the geal I am talking about—our Zonia! As I wegained consciousness I saw her wun off. She had finished putting out the conflagration, which might otherwise have weached distwessing pwportions, what? In fact, geals," Paula said, in between her thirsty sips at the welcome cup, "the bungalow would have been weduced to wuins, only Zonia must have wushed in and—"

"And finished the splendid bit of work that you were doing when you were overcome," Betty shrewdly divined. "Paula, you have been playing the part of a heroine! You—"

"Yes, yes—bravo, Paula! After this, Paula—"

"Anothah cup—yes, wather! That's all the weard I require. Thanks ever so! Haw, haw, haw! But, bai Jove, it weally was Zonia, you know! She wan away, wefusing to wespand when I called. Didn't want to be wecognised, bai Jove!"

"Zonia, as near to us as that within the last few minutes!"

Betty was gazing around distractedly as she muttered the words.

"Which way did she go, Paula? Oh, if only we could follow her up—find her at last—find out why she has been a runaway for such a long time!"

"I weally couldn't wun after her myself just now," Paula pleaded earnestly. "You will wealise, geals, I had only just come wound; I was pwactically pwostwate—"

"Dear, you have done wonders," Polly said fervently. "Do make a good tea! And I never, never will tease you again! But about Zonia—"

"Yes, wather! She wan off—weal, you know, she simply wan in the diwrection of the moors, bai Jove!"

The others exchanged hopeless glances. Looking for a fugitive on the open moorland was always like looking for a needle in a bundle of hay.

"Come on, though!" Betty exclaimed desperately. "We must have a hunt round—we must. Not you, Paula darling. You stay and rest, dear. You've done enough!"

They set off instantly, leaving Paula to go on making the sumptuous tea that she had certainly earned. At a breathless pace Betty and some five or six of her chums ran up the steep path and emerged upon the headland. Then they scattered for the search, the arrangement being that they would return in half an hour to the vicinity of the bungalow to hear one another's reports.

As they ran off in varying directions upon the desperate quest, they were aware that Cora and Miriam had returned to the bungalow. The two culprits were, in fact, just then sneaking back to

the porch, having found out, by observation from a distance, that the fire had been extinguished.

"What idiots we were to run away!" fumed Cora, as they both prowled forward into the entrance lobby. "Paula managed all alone, and we shall never hear the last of it!"

"Oh, hang what the girls say!" snapped Miriam. "What will the Spenlows say when they know, that's more to the point. My goodness, just look at this drawing-room!"

It was in ruins.

Fire and water between them had made the usual devastation of handsome furnishings. Nothing was undamaged, and in most cases the furniture was only fit for firewood now, and the soft furnishings for the bonfire. The whole bungalow reeked of burnt material.

"The Spenlows are an easy-going sort, aren't they?" suggested Cora.

"No, they are not. I don't know what I shall do," Miriam almost whimpered. "They'll want to know how—"

"Well, it was an accident! Goodness, who is going to blame you for an accident? One thing," Cora added consolingly, "with a bit of luck it may be kept from the headmistress's ears. You can lock up, and—"

"Paula and her friends will tell."

"Not they," shrugged Cora. "I know them better than to think that. Cheer up, Mirry!"

But that girl was beyond doing that. After a while she suddenly turned her still scared-looking face to her cronny.

"We saw some other girl rush in—who was she?" Miriam asked uneasily. "She—she didn't look like a Morcovian. The dress—"

"No; I wonder who she was?" pondered Cora. "We were too far off to tell. Funny, the way she ran off. Another of your modest heroine sort!" she sneered.

Miriam remained wrapped in thought for a long



A STRANGE AWAKENING. "Get up Zonia," said Mrs. Loveless. "You are to come with me." "Go with you, mother?" gasped Zonia. "At this time of night! Where?" "Never your mind," was the reply. "Come, no rebelling against me!"

time after that. She often had whole minutes when her mind was busy with matters that were never to be divulged to Cora. Cora was a crony, not a confidante.

"Well, I don't know; we must do something," the Spenlows' graceless protégée exclaimed at last.

It was the signal for both girls to start clearing up as best they could. In ordinary circumstances a fire ravaged room is not touched until the insurance people have been communicated with. But Miriam and Cora were not giving a thought to that. Their one idea was to clear up the mess and then turn the key upon this room, never speaking a word about what had happened until the Spenlows came back.

"Anyway, if they are made liable for the damage," Cora remarked by and by, "they have plenty of cash."

This again hardly consoled Miriam. She was in a highly strung state as an after effect of the catastrophe, and her mind was reacting to all sorts of nervous apprehensions.

It was all very well to be reckless and flyaway, she was thinking, but there was something that was going to make the Spenlows more disappointed in her than ever. Even if the fire was plausibly accounted for, they would still feel that it was an accident that need never have happened.

Of a sudden Cora came back from the rubbish heap in the garden looking rather flustered.

"I say, Mirry, some of those girls are coming here to inspect the damage, I suppose."

"Will they!" Miriam exclaimed fiercely. "They'll just keep out of here. They have no right here!" she fumed, stamping a foot, as she looked out and saw Betty and two or three others coming up the garden path. "What a sickener it is!"

Sulkily both culprits took their stand in the porch, scowling at the oncoming chums resentfully. It made no difference; Betty and her companions advanced serenely, feeling that they had every right to do so.

"What do you want?" snapped Miriam.

"A word with you, for one thing," Betty answered composedly. "Apparently, Miriam, this affair has not become known at the school. Paula and some other girl got the fire out—"

"Yes, well?"

"How did it happen?"

"That's our affair, not yours!" Cora said tartly.

"You'd be sorry, both of you, if the girls let that answer suffice," said the Form captain.

"What do you propose to do? Lock up the place and say nothing until the Spenlows return and have to be told?"

"Yes."

"That's all very well, but we can't hold our tongues—"

"I told you so!" Miriam rounded on Cora angrily. "They want to make a song about it all! They—"

"Nothing of the sort," Betty interposed. "But we want to know—we insist upon knowing—whether it was a pure accident."

"It was!" Miriam cried. "The spirit stove got knocked over when Cora was filling the teapot from the kettle."

"The steam scalded my hand a bit," said Cora. "You can see the mark."

"But there was a lot of acting about?" Betty pursued steadily. "It's evident that you got hold of Paula and were bullying her. She has said nothing about that, but we have put two and two together. Look here, can you two girls get

exonerated from all blame if the headmistress is told?"

"Yes, we can, so see!" the culprits declared vehemently. But their guilty looks belied the words, and Betty and her chums shook their heads in disbelief.

"If you could have faced an inquiry," the Form captain said, "it would have meant that we could have told the headmistress that a certain girl had a hand in putting out the fire. As it is, we shall have to keep silent about that, I suppose, just to spare you. It's a jolly shame!"

"You want a lot of fuss to be made of Paula at the school!" sneered Miriam.

"Not at all," Polly answered hotly. "What we would like to do—but we can't, thanks to you—is to tell Miss Somerfield that the girl who helped to fight the fire was Zonia Moore."

As the name left Polly's lips Miriam reeled backwards as if she had been struck a blow.

"Zonia Moore!" she gasped faintly.

"Yes; and why—why do you look so upset? Why are you so—so frightened all at once?" was Betty's excited comment on Miriam's agitation. "Answer, Miriam—answer!"

In her sudden excitement the Form captain even took hold of the frightened girl and shook her.

"Come on, tell us why! You wouldn't have looked like this, only there is something about the mystery of Zonia Moore that is known to you. It's in your eyes. We girls—"

"We have suspected something of the sort just lately," panted Polly. "Cora, what do you know?"

"I know nothing!" cried the girl astoundedly. "I don't understand you. I know nothing."

"Then you, Miriam—what do you know?" clamoured the chums. "Come on—tell us!"

"Nothing!" Miriam hoarsely answered, shaking off Betty's hand. "Get away! You are talking rot!"

Betty sternly eyed the girl for a few moments, and all the time Miriam was quailing guiltily. Then at last the Form captain turned away with a disgusted shrug.

"Come along, girls. She won't say, and so we will jolly well find out."

"After this," Polly said in a tight-lipped manner. "Yes, we will never rest until we have got to the bottom of the mystery."

They walked away, and Cora Grandways, as she was left staring at her crony, beheld a face that was marble white with guilty fear.

"Look here, Mirry," Cora said softly, after a moment, "you had better confide in me, you know. You had far better tell me."

"Ah, I can't, I can't!" was Miriam's distraught cry, and she turned about and ran into the house, to put herself all alone behind a slammed door.

"Detectives" on the Trail.

AS soon as she and her chums were out of sight of the bungalow, Betty Barton spoke in great excitement.

"I think that between us we ought to keep that girl Miriam Loveless under constant observation now."

"Yes, wather!" was Paula's own contribution to the general murmur of assent. Paula had come up from the beach considerably "wefwashed" by the big tea she had made. She and Naomer between them had packed up the picnic things and brought them along.

"Then this is what I propose," Betty went on

tensely. "Let me and Polly hang back here and hide. The rest of you go on to the school—"

"That will help to delude Miriam into thinking that we have all gone back to the school," Madge approved. "But what do you expect to gain, Betty, by stalking Miriam?"

"Gain a clue to Zonia's own whereabouts perhaps," was the grave answer. "Zonia is somewhere in the district, and we are now convinced that Miriam knows something. It is up to us to find out, since she won't tell us."

"The wretch of a girl, how I detest her!" Polly exclaimed fiercely. "But we will be a match for her sooner or later."

Little more was said, but in accordance with Betty's suggestion all excepting that girl and Polly now wandered on homewards to the school. Nor had Madge and the rest gone a dozen paces before the couple remaining behind were darting off the roadway to get to cover.

After that Betty and Polly waited, amply screened by clumps of gorse. With grim patience they crouched there, hardly ever exchanging a whisper, but giving their minds to this sinister suspicion that somehow Miriam Loveless was concerned in Zonia's disappearance.

It must have been ten minutes after the two girls had gone into hiding that they glimpsed Cora Grandways going by in the direction of the school—alone.

Betty and Polly nudged each other excitably.

Was it a promising thing that Cora had parted from Miriam? It might be that the two had simply separated on account of a tiff. But supposing it was not so? Supposing Miriam had found some excuse for remaining on at the bungalow? Supposing Miriam had some urgent reason for having the rest of the evening to herself?

Thrilling with suspense, the Form captain and her chum waited and waited. If they raised their heads a little to venture a peep, they had the bungalow in sight. So Miriam could not possibly leave the lonely habitation without their knowing.

And suddenly they saw the girl act most suspiciously as she came away from the dwelling.

After slinking forth to spy around, she went back to lock up, and then came quickly to the garden gate and hurried away.

"Not going to the school, anyhow," Polly instantly commented under her breath. "Betty, this looks—"

"Yes! Why, she must be going into Barncombe!"

"After her!"

"But wait," Betty entreated her always impetuous chum. "She is only walking; we can easily keep her in sight, and yet be well behind."

Patiently they waited. A minute—two minutes—then it was safe for them to follow up the suspect.

Avoiding the roadway, they scouted along on the inland side of it, where there was always ample shelter. Alas, was it not the self-same rough land that had enabled Zonia herself to make off just recently! There had been no finding a trace of their dear, long-missing chum. But now—

Who could tell in what this latest venture might result?

Working along at the same rapid pace that Miriam was adopting, they kept her in sight as much as seemed necessary. For apparently she was going to fare along the high road on a visit to Barncombe, and it would only be when she was

on the outskirts of the town that they would need to be extra vigilant.

This, at least, was the chums' belief. That they were in error was suddenly brought home to them in dramatic fashion.

After a couple of miles they looked ahead for the twentieth time since the tracking began, and now it was their sudden utter dismay to miss the trim, girlish figure they had seen before.

The open highway was still winding away towards Barncombe, but Miriam—where was she?

"My goodness, she has given us the slip after all!" Polly burst out wildly. "She has dodged off the road!"

"Impossible that she can have guessed we were following her," Betty muttered. "If we have lost her it is because she has turned off—"

"Down that lane to the left, perhaps," Polly whispered, all a-quipper with excitement. "I say—"

"Steady!"

"Look, there she is! Did you see her, Betty? She is in the lane. Down, down!" Polly jerked out, throwing herself on all fours. "She will see us!"

Betty was instantly lying as flat upon the ground as was her chum. There was just time to get behind a small gorse bush.

By pushing the bush a little to one side they were able to see Miriam again without being seen. She was hurrying down the lane, and her slight figure showed every now and then through a gap in the hedge bordering the lane.

"Where can she be going?" Polly whispered. "That lane ends up in a moorland track. But there is the old farmhouse down yonder."

"I'm wondering," Betty nodded, "can she be going there? My goodness, Polly, is that where Zonia is in hiding?"

"Phew! But—look, though, it is a fact, Betty! Miriam is turning in at the farmhouse gateway!"

"Give her a few seconds, Polly."

They gave their suspect a full minute at least.

Then, very warily, they crawled forwards, meaning to work down into the lane and suddenly present themselves at the lonely old farmhouse, taking Miriam by surprise.

Baffled by Bluff.

AT that moment the woman who was the mother of Miriam Loveless was giving a violent start of surprise as her schoolgirl daughter let herself into the farmhouse.

"Why, what's brought you here, Miriam?"

Mrs. Lovelless burst out, rushing from a dim parlour to confront the girl in the gloomy hall.

"The arrangement was that you—"

"Mother, is Zonia here?" Miriam interrupted anxiously. "She has been out this afternoon."

"Ay, I know she has. I said she might take an airing, providing she was careful. It's always safe to let her go; she has her own good reason."

—Mrs. Lovelless smiled sourly—"for keeping out of people's way."

"She has been seen by one of her old chums, mother. Oh, it is simply awful what has happened!" Miriam gasped out wildly. "She must have been wandering near Cliffedge Bungalow, and a girl called Paula Creel declares that she saw her. I—I felt I must come and tell you. It's getting so critical, mother."

"If it's been as you say, Miriam, the girl deserves a thrashing for her carelessness," was Mrs. Lovelless's agitated comment. "What does it mean, then? Is she beginning to feel that it is not worth while to— But no! Only to-day she

was saying again she will keep out of the way of her former friends so long as we hold the threat over her head."

The woman added exultantly:

"Zonia imagines that it is up to her to prevent our victimising the Barton people by our offering to let them have her back on payment of a sum of money. She little knows that it suits our book to have her showing such a spirit."

"But where is she now?" Miriam clamoured uneasily. "She has not come in from her outing? Oh, and perhaps some of the Morcove girls will yet come upon her."

"No; trust Zonia to dodge them," Mrs. Loveless said, recovering from the alarm. "But I shall pitch into her. I only wish that your father and I, Miriam, could have got her away from here. He's trying to find some place where— Hark!"

The wicket had clicked.

"That must be Zonia coming now," Mrs. Loveless exclaimed. "You'll see how her appearance has altered so that even her best fr— No, it isn't Zonia!" the woman broke off, falling away from the window out of which she had peeped. "Miriam, there are two girls—scholars—coming to the porch."

"Betty and Polly," Miriam panted, after giving a lightning glance out of the window. "They have followed me here. Oh—"

"Now, keep calm. We must find a way to—"

"Mother, I know!" the quick-witted girl exclaimed in a tense whisper. "I'll pretend I have come to see if you will do a day's cleaning at the bungalow. You be a woman who goes out charing at odd times. You have been dressing as a poor woman, and so—"

"Very well. Pull yourself together then," Mrs. Loveless whispered. "You look like a ghost. Confound those girls!"

There was a knock at the porch door.

Mrs. Loveless darted away silently to the kitchen, where she gave herself a few lightning touches that made her look more poorly dressed than ever. In a moment she was coming forward to the door with a slatternly step.

Miriam tip-toed out into the hall so as to be found standing there with her mother when the door opened.

Steadily Mrs. Loveless lifted the latch and drew the door wide open.

"Well, my girls," she asked, with a friendly leer that went well with her slatternly appearance. "What can I do for you?"

Betty and Polly lost their breath for a moment. Beyond the threshold they saw their schoolgirl suspect looking as bold as brass. She was pale, but that was not surprising, considering the upset she had gone through over the fire.

"We came here," said Betty at last boldly, "because Miriam Loveless made for this place. It's as well to be quite plain. We believe she knows something about a chum of ours who has been missing from school for several weeks. That girl, we believe, has been seen to-day. Are you—"

"Am I what?" Mrs. Loveless asked, with a sharp laugh.

"Are you Miriam's mother?" Polly questioned bluntly.

"What, this gal's mother? Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the crafty woman. "Well, if that isn't good! Miss Loveless—"

"You interfering duffers!" flared out Miriam. "This is a woman I came to see and to arrange for a day's cleaning at the bungalow. She has worked for Mrs. Spenlow once or twice, and you girls know what a state the place is in now. Can't I do a simple thing like this without you nosing around?"

Here was a facer for Betty and Polly. Remembering the state of the bungalow, they could well believe that Miriam was very anxious to get the effects of the fire dealt with as soon as possible.

At the same time, vividly they were recollecting a remark of Mrs. Spenlow's made a few days before she went to London. That lady had owned to the uneasy fancy that Miriam's god-forsaken parents were secretly in the neighbourhood of Morcove.

Miriam now turned to her mother, as if anxious to conclude what had been a purely business interview.

"Then you think you can come in to-morrow, Mrs. Jennings, to clean up the bungalow? I will arrange to be at Cliffedge at a quarter to nine, so as to open the house for you. And shall I pay you, or—"

"Oh, my dear, that can wait till Mrs. Spenlow comes back! All right, I'll be there, and not scrry to have the day's work," Mrs. Loveless said, with her leer, "my 'usband being out o' work. He's away looking for a job now, as I were saying."

"Good-evening, then!" Miriam said brusquely, and she boldly walked past the two girls into the open air.

What were Betty and Polly to do now? What else could they do but wonder? Were they being bluffed, or was this indeed the reason for Miriam's call at the ramshackle house—that she wanted to engage a charlady?

"Surely, my dears," Mrs. Loveless exclaimed at them, with a sort of leering smile, "you didn't suppose as I had anything to do with that chum of yourn being missing? I've heer'd about her case, and I'm sure I'm very sorry it is so! You didn't suppose I was harbouring of her here, belike?"

The bewildered girls did not like to say what they had supposed. It was going to be expedient, perhaps, to reserve a doubt about this woman's bona fides. Meantime, they were in the awkward and humiliating position of appearing to owe the woman an apology.

"You can tell for yourselves, my dears, there's no other girl here," Mrs. Loveless said daringly. "She would have heard you speaking about her, and would have come for'ard. Or do you think she's being kep' a prisoner?"

The speaker grinned.

"But she couldn't very well be kep' a prisoner, could she, and yet be free to roam around and be seen, as you say she has been?" was the crafty woman's sly argument. "No, my dears; I should say you had better leave it to the police."

"We'll go," they both said lamely.

That was all. The woman had the laugh of them, without doubt. All the same, Betty and Polly felt that the apology might well stand over for a bit.

Miriam was going on before them up the lane,

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with an air of absolute indifference as to what they might be doing or thinking. More bluff, was it, or were they really misjudging her?

What an exasperating uncertainty there was! "The best thing we can do, Polly, is to keep our own counsel for a bit, and yet keep our eyes and ears open," Betty said, half an hour later.

Polly nodded glumly. "One could feel so sure that there is some connection between Miriam and the disappearance of Zonia, if only one could think of a reason for it, Betty. That's what beats me!" Polly exclaimed ruefully. "Why on earth should Miriam be mixed up in the mystery of Zonia's strange disappearance?"

"There is something," muttered the Form captain—"something that we don't understand, Polly, and at this rate we don't look like ever finding out!"

"How did you know, mother, that I—"
 "Ah, you're surprised!" Mrs. Loveless snapped on. "Well, I am not going to explain, my girl. But if, as you are always saying, you'd rather go on with life here with me, your own mother, than let the Barton people give me money to abandon all claim to you—"

"And so I would rather go on!" Zonia burst out, with tragic resignation. "Haven't there been heaps of opportunities for me to return to all the friends I had at school, only I won't do the thing that means your swindling the Bartons! They were good and kind to me, and it would be a wicked swindle—"

"That's enough! Now you get up to your room, and get to bed!" the woman said fiercely, looking as if she would strike the girl. "You're a little humbug, that's what you are! Pretending to suffer for others' sakes, and all the time you are



"RESERVED FOR PAULA!" As soon as the tickets were completed, the fun-loving girls quickly stook them amongst the items that comprised their "spread." "Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Polly. "Paula will get a surprise when she sees these!"

And that, alas, was perhaps a truer remark than even the girl who made it realised!

What is Her Fate to Be?

AT nightfall, someone came creeping into the farmhouse by way of the back door.

It was Zonia Moore.

Her pale, pretty face had an expression that was very touching in its pathos. She looked as if, after being out and about for a long while, like some fugitive in fear of capture, she had now come back to the woman she knew as "mother," expecting to raise a storm of anger.

Quickly, too, the storm of wrath broke upon the poor girl.

"You are a nice one!" Mrs. Loveless began at her duped victim in a snarling tone. "You call this going out for a bit of an airing! Hours and hours you've been away, and a nice thing you very nearly did for yourself, my girl, letting yourself be seen by one of the scholars!"

indulging the longing to keep in touch with your schoolfellows!"

"No, mother! Oh, I have never once taken any risk!" was Zonia's earnest outcry. "This afternoon, I—I couldn't help what happened. I would never have been seen, but—"

"But you were seen, so don't tell me! You'll have no supper, girl! As your own mother, I've got to take all the airs and graces out of you that life at that school put into your head. Get along to bed!"

Again the cruel, crafty woman was giving that menacing gesture of the hand. The wonder is that poor Zonia did not cringe in fear of a blow as she had to go close by the threatening hand to pass across the kitchen and out to the stairs.

After all this time, however, the spirit of the girl was still unbroken. Dry-eyed and outwardly calm, she ascended the dark old staircase to her equally dark bed-room, and there closed the door for the night. Poor girl, she was hungry, but she had often known hunger in her childhood, and was

not going to make herself miserable because "mother" had denied her supper. But, oh, the unending misery of this wretched, bullied life—how it was wearing her away!

Never, though, never should it quite wear out her resolve. The spirited resolve to go on enduring whatever life those who had claimed her as their daughter might decree for her, rather than rush to the sheltering care of Betty Barton's people. Letting herself be made the means of the Bartons being so cruelly victimised was a thing against which her whole mind and soul were in revolt.

So, at the end of another day of it all, poor Zonia sat on the edge of her shabby bed, pondering the hard fate that was hers, whilst downstairs, in the lamplit kitchen, crafty Mrs. Loveless sat in deep thought, too.

Of the two minds, the victim's and the victimiser's, the latter was the more uneasy.

For now Mrs. Loveless was realising that it had not been good enough to get rid of those two schoolgirls by such a bit of pure bluff, however well it had served its purpose for the time being. She could imagine how obstinately suspicion would stick in their minds. For all she knew, they might have all sorts of reasons for that suspicion. And so it all came back to this—that Zonia ought no longer to be in the district, even though the girl was anxious, for reasons of her own, to avoid being traced.

Sooner or later she would be run to earth, and then the game would be up so far as Mrs. Loveless and her husband and daughter were concerned.

It had been their hope that the Spenlows would be going abroad on urgent business, but so far they had only got as far as London. They might come back to Cliffedge Bungalow, to finish their brief period of the tenancy. If only there had

been no risk of that, all would have been well, but they might come back any day, any hour. A mere flying visit from London might mean disaster!

Mrs. Loveless sat on in the lamplit kitchen, her face hard and set with the worrying thoughts she was experiencing. No, it was not good enough to go on like this! So she was saying to herself. But what else to do with the girl—where to take her? Somehow, it seemed terribly risky to go away with her to a town. One could often hide with safety in a populous district; on the other hand, Zonia was a girl who was bound to excite interest, and perhaps it would become suspected that she was being duped.

Ten o'clock went by—eleven. Still the guilty-minded woman was racking her brains. The more she considered the critical situation, the more panicky she felt. It was those girls at Morcov School! Supposing they kept a watch upon this lonely farmhouse? Supposing they made inquiries to find out more about "Mrs. Jennings"?

At last, when the midnight hour was almost upon her, the woman suddenly stood up with an air of having reached some desperate decision.

A few quiet turns she took to and fro in the kitchen, still debating the idea, whatever it was, with herself. Then, with a final nod, she took up the lamp and padded upstairs to Zonia's room.

The poor girl was asleep—dreaming of her old happy days at school, maybe—but she stirred and opened her eyes directly the lamplight shone upon her pale, lovely face.

"Get up, Zonia—get up at once!" Mrs. Loveless said in a quiet, stern tone. "You are to come with me."

"Go with you, mother, at this time of night? Where?"

"Never you mind! You can't stay on here, and it's just as well that I have had an idea as to what to do with you. Come, now, no rebelling against your own mother!"

"I don't want to rebel, mother. Only——"

"Then do as I say. Dress yourself, and be downstairs in five minutes!"

With that peremptory command, Mrs. Loveless lit a candle for the girl, and then padded away, taking the lamp with her down to the kitchen.

Zonia sat up in bed, then slid her feet to the floor. She felt she must be dreaming still. That sudden, brief sight of her mother at the bedside was more like a vision than reality. The candle was a little spot of golden flame in the dingy bedroom. Out of doors, how quiet it was! And no wonder. Midnight!

"And I am to go with her at once," Zonia said, under her breath, amazedly. "Strange that she cannot wait until the morning. She is my mother, though, and I must not go against her wishes. And yet——"

Ah, poor Zonia! Well might she be excused the bitter, tragic thought—if only she had had any other mother but this!

(END OF THIS WEEK'S STORY.)

If only Zonia knew the truth! If only she realised that this woman is not her real mother, how different things would be! But, knowing nothing of this, will Zonia fall into this new trap which has been prepared for her, and be parted for ever from the real parents who are seeking her? Do not miss next week's splendid complete tale, which is entitled: "In Search of Their School-Chum!"

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