

Extra-Long Complete Morcove School Story Inside!

The SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN 2^d



**NO COSTUME FOR THE
FINAL REHEARSAL!**

(A gripping incident from
the extra-long COMPLETE
tale by Marjorie Stanton
inside.)

An EXTRA-Long, EXTRA-Thrilling Story of the Fourth Form at Morcove School,
ENTIRELY COMPLETE in this Issue!

When Madge Was a Mystery!



Picked For the Pageant!

"WERE just on time, girls!"

"Yes, round about four o'clock was what Lady Lundy asked us to make it."

"And didn't we move, too!"

These comments were voiced as several girls of Morcove School strolled their bicycles at the main entrance to Barnecombe Castle.

Betty Barton, captain of the Fourth Form, with several of her chums of Study 12, had an appointment to keep with one of the greatest ladies in the county.

Entering an outer courtyard, where an aged porter saluted them, the juniors hastened to the visitors' porch, and there a few hands gave tidying touches to hair and clothes, whilst Betty dabbed a finger at the bell-press.

A footman appeared, and promptly ushered Betty & Co. through ancient halls to the grand drawing-room.

Throwing open the door, he announced:

"The young ladies from Morcove School!"

"Oh, come in—come along in, girls!" was the cordial cry with which charming Lady Lundy came towards them all. "How are you, Betty? And you, Polly Linton—as much the madcap as ever, is that it? Well, Madge Minden—Pam Willoughby—Paula Creel? Ah, here's impish Naomer. How well you're looking, you young scamp!"

"Yes, that is bekas I keep feet!" was Naomer's own way of answering.

Lady Lundy laughed.

"Diet, is that it?"

"A liberal' one, yes!" madcap Polly Linton answered for that dusky imp who was Morcove's royal scholar, the girl-queen of Nakara, in North Africa.

"Ah," sighed her ladyship, "my days for cream-buns are over now. But sit down, girls, and we'll go straight to business while tea is being brought in. No need to ask; you really want to help me over my pageant?"

"Rather, Lady Lundy!"

"Yes, wather, hai Jove!"

"Bekas—gorjus fun!" Naomer added her delighted cry to others. "Eat like a play—having to dress-up!"

Although this was the drawing-room, in a window-bay there was a large leather-topped table bearing such a litter of papers and jumble of books as is usually only to be seen in a study or library. Lady Lundy went to that table, fumbled out a sheet of paper, and came back with it.

"A few notes, girls! I'm making notes all day long, as ideas come to me. And, of course, friends of mine are making suggestions all the time. We shall, I hope, have a varied programme—the trouble is to know how to get it all in!"

She let the girls scan the paper, but as the notes were very hieroglyphic, some explanations were necessary.

Already the chums knew—for the news had been given out to the whole school—that Lady Lundy was organising a pageant to be held at the Castle, in aid of a new wing for the local infirmary.

The affair was to take place on a date yet to be fixed, but it would not be a far-off date, as the weather had to be thought of. One day this September—a day that would be gloriously fine, it was hoped—all Barnecombe, and folk from round about that quaint old town, would flock to see the show.

With the stately castle precincts for a setting, scenes would be enacted that were founded on fact.



:: BY ::

MARJORIE STANTON

Betty Barton, captain of the Fourth Form, Polly Linton, her madcap chum, elegant Paula Creel, impish Naomer Nakara, the girl-queen, and other famous chums of the Fourth were delighted at the prospect of appearing in a local Pageant, and when quiet Madge Minden was chosen to take the leading part, the rest of them were thrilled. But they little knew what trouble and worry such an honour was to bring upon their music-loving chum.

Lady Lundy and a few zealous friends had turned back the pages of local history, and rich was the mine of incident they were going to draw upon.

"As for you girls," Lady Lundy chatted on, "I believe I have one item in the programme that should just suit you!"

Betty & Co. were enthusiastic.

"I mean, for you juniors in particular," her ladyship specified. "Morcove as a whole is going to figure prominently, I hope. There is one scene for which we cannot have too many girls; but I won't go into that now. The item I mean is, 'The Seven Maids of Morcove'—if that sounds attractive? Does it, girls?"

"'The Seven Maids of Morcove'! Oh—"

"Gorjus! Bekas—"

"Most intriguing, yes, wather!"

"But, Lady Lundy, who were they, then?" cried Polly eagerly.

"Well, I'll tell you. Ages ago, there was someone in the Lundy family—a young and beautiful girl—whose lover went to the Crusades. He never came back."

In a moment Betty & Co. had become rapt listeners.

"For a long, long time the girl waited and waited, here in Barncombe Castle—for she was a daughter of the house. Then, when at last all hope was gone, she decided to go away and live a life withdrawn from the world.

"She did not become a nun, but she retired to Morcove. Her idea had been to live quite alone; but she was greatly loved by all, especially by the girls of the neighbourhood. And when the day came for her to give up home and family, there proved to be a certain number of young girls who insisted upon going with her. Those girls afterwards became known as the Seven Maids of Morcove."

"Fancy!" murmured Polly Linton. "That must have been ages before any school was thought of at Morcove!"

Lady Lundy nodded.

"And yet," she rejoined, "the one thing may have led on in time to the other. There was possibly a brief break, but something was done, no doubt, by that poor, broken-hearted girl and her seven devoted followers which formed a foundation for others to build upon later. Anyhow, girls, what do you say to your taking that scene from local history?"

"Lovely!" cried some. "Just the thing!"

"My belief is it will be one of the most effective acts," declared Lady Lundy. "You will find the costumes of the period most picturesque."

Polly was suddenly striking off the names of girls upon her fingers.

"Betty, Paula, Naomer, Pam, Madge, then Tess Trelawney and Helen Craig—who are not with us, at present—and, I suppose, myself? But that's eight!"

"It's just right," smiled Lady Lundy. "One of you, don't forget, has to be the Girl Who Went Away. If I may say so, I think Madge should take that part. Somehow, Madge, you seem—you seem cut out for it!"

"It would never do for me to play a broken-hearted part, I'm sure!" cried Polly. "But Madge—"

"Yes, wather! Always rather sewious, Madge deah!"

Staid Madge Minden smiled.

"Madge it is," decided Lady Lundy, and she laid an affectionate hand upon that girl's shoulders after rising.

"Our broken-hearted girl used to play the harp, and the Seven Maids would sing to it; and I don't know anyone who could learn to strum on a harp sooner than you could, Madge. Oh, by the way!"

At this moment the girls were noting the footman's entry with tea.

"The story had a most happy ending, girls! For, after all," remarked Lady Lundy, crossing over to preside where tea was being set down. "the lover did come back from the Crusades. So

we have a last scene, with the Seven Maids all rushing in one day to cry out that he is on the doorstep, so to speak!"

Betty & Co., quite excited now at the delightful prospect in view, were on their feet.

"So—tea! Help yourselves, girls, and sugar for all, of course? Except Naomer—"

"Yes, plis—two lumps—"

"What it is to be young!" sighed her ladyship, rattling loaf sugar into cups. "I am so sorry my daughter will be away for the pageant. She's in Italy—an old school chum of hers, very ill, and so Evelyn doesn't like to leave her. But we are hoping for a recovery before very long now."

The cups went round. From trays and cake-stands the scholars were continually urged to go on helping one another. Tasty sandwiches, the daintiest cakes and the richest of fancy pastries—they sampled them all!

All tea-time the girls and their charming hostess chatted away about the pageant. Afterwards, the girls were taken across to a littered table, to look at valuable books, drawn from the Castle library, dealing with the history of the neighbourhood, and with the period costumes.

"There, Madge!" said Lady Lundy, throwing open one volume at a coloured plate. "That is the dress you will wear! Don't you think it should suit you?"

"I'm not so sure!" smiled modest Madge.

But the others were very sure, and they said so. "Gee," cried Polly, "what a picture you'll make, Madge!"

"Gorjus!"

"I can lend you this book, girls, to look at in your studies—provided you take great care of it. Oh, and that reminds me!"

Now, what the fresh sensation to be? Something delightful, the girls were certain.

"I do believe I can rout out the very thing for you, Madge—a dress suited to that very period. It was made at least two hundred years ago, for some bit of pageantry, and it's one of my treasures. You'll find it very heavy to wear, I warn you! We could have a copy made in lighter material, but to wear a genuine antique would be so much better, don't you think?"

The question being put to all the girls, they gave their heart assent in chorus.

"Splendid, Lady Lundy!"

"If you don't mind entrusting the dress to me!" was Madge's serious rejoinder. "But I will take great care of it, of course."

"My dear, as if I could have any doubt about that! What is it, Jennings?"

The footman had reappeared.

"Mrs. Penburthy, if you please, to see your ladyship about the pageant!"

"The mayor's wife—mustn't keep her waiting!" whispered Lady Lundy, with a roguishness that made her like a schoolgirl herself. "You won't mind?"

"We'll be off, and thank you ever so much!" said Betty heartily. "The book—oh, you are bringing it, Madge? Right!"

"I'll send along the dress as soon as I have had it hunted out," was Lady Lundy's remark while saying good-bye to them all. "And now let me thank you girls, in advance, for all the help I'm sure you are going to be!"

"We'll do our best, Lady Lundy—"

"Yes, wather! Throw ourselves heart and soul into it!"

"Bekas—gorjus!" shrilled Naomer, capering on the way out with her chums. "Espesherlully that last scene, when we all shout: 'Hooray! He has come back!'"

"Madge's knight in shining armour!" Lady Lundy laughingly called after the girls. "Oh, and by the way—you never asked me who is to take that part. I rather thought—your brother, Polly."

The chums flashed round in the huge doorway. "Jack?" jerked out the madcap. "My brother Jack?"

"Yes, why not?"

"Oh, Lady Lundy—oh, how thrilling!"

And with that final cry of delight at its climax, Betty & Co. trooped away, to return to Morcove School.

To Other Girls!

THERE was a girl at Morcove School named Cora Grandways. She and her sister Judith had a study, with Hetty Carson to make a third in it. Cora and Hetty were great "pals," never so happy as when they were enjoying some little spree on their own, or a joke at someone else's expense.

Sometimes they had to make it a stolen pleasure.

Round about five o'clock on the same afternoon that Betty & Co. had been having tea with Lady Lundy, Cora and Hetty were alone together in their study. Having made themselves sufficiently annoying to long-suffering Judith, that girl had gone away late to read or work in the library.

"Choo, Hetty?" offered Cora, tossing across a large carton of the Barncombe Creamery's special mixture. "Oh, dear"—with a restless sigh—"how I wish Saturday were nearer! I am so looking forward to going to Joyce Marshall's for that fancy-dress affair."

"It will be nice," conceded Hetty, nibbling her sweet. "The Marshalls make such a splash when they do anything!"

"Yes!" Cora agreed, with a gleam in her eyes. "They are my ideal! With them, a party is something guests are meant to enjoy—not sit patting back yawns and pretending they feel good because it's for a good cause, when all the time they are bored stiff!"

Hetty laughed, lolling in an armchair.

"That's a dig at this Barncombe Castle affair we've been told about, Cora! Ha, ha, ha! Trust you to be a scoffer there!"

"Well! Other girls may see fun in a silly pageant that's all rehearsals, and then a muddle on the day itself; can't say I can!"

"But we are both to be in it—"

"Oh, we shall have to be in it, I suppose! They can leave me out, if they like," shrugged Cora. "And if it were left entirely to Betty Barton, you may be sure I would be left out. So would you, Hetty, for that matter!"

Hetty nodded, batting a pill of silver paper into the wastepaper-basket. Then she settled herself comfortably again.

"We shall be hearing the results of Study 12's visit to the Castle, Cora. My word, don't you feel jealous?"

"Not a bit! Whilst you and I can come in for an invite to the Marshalls' place, what do we want to bother about Barncombe Castle? Hark!"

There were scampering sounds in the corridor. A number of girls had swarmed upstairs. Now, with chatter and laughter, they were surging into one of the studies.

"That's Betty & Co.," scowled Cora. "And aren't they pleased with themselves, too! Now to hear how they have arranged everything, oh, so nicely—to suit themselves! They are to be in the spotlight at the pageant, of course!"

Hetty tossed the carton of chocolates on to the

table, then got up, standing tall and stroking her side hair caressingly.

"Meantime, Cora, I suppose we must do a spot of work?"

"Nothing else to do," grumbled the Grandways girl. "I've made that alteration to the fancy dress I'm going to wear. I'm not altogether satisfied with it, even now; but I shan't fiddle with it any more!"

"It fits you beautifully, Cora!"

"I'm sorry I chose it. Wish now I had had something specially made. I mean to say, anybody can be a Pierrette or a Columbine—"

"I'm going to be a Pierrette!" Hetty smilingly reminded her boon companion.

"Well, you know what I mean; there are some fancy dresses everybody goes in for. Mine's like that. But what choice did that list offer? I ask you! Too late now, Hetty, but how I would have loved to go in something really sensational!"

"My dear, you never are content," rippled Hetty, throwing out books for prep. "You have got permission to go to the Marshalls' place on Saturday—and you're going to stay the night; you know you are!"

Then Cora gave her wide grin.

"So are you, come to that! It will be a lark, Hetty! Joyce Marshall, getting her mother to ring up Morcove during the evening, and please can we be allowed to return in the morning? What, come home before the finish?" Cora flouted the idea. "Not if I know it!"

Sullenly she set out her books and settled down to evening prep. She had not made a start, however, before she was complaining savagely: "I can't work with all that row coming from Study 12! Why can't they shut up?"

It was the old, undying malice against Study 12 working in this girl. Jumping up, she went with stamping steps round to that other study. Viciously she sent the door wide round, yelling at the chums:

"Less row, can't you!"

They all pealed with laughter. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"Is it funny?" snapped Cora.

"Your face is at this moment—very," chuckled Polly Linton. "Oh, Cora, take it away!"

"I'll box your ears! I want to work!" Cora turned to concentrate her fury upon the captain. "But you and your lot—"

"Sorry!" Betty Barton pleaded lightly. "Perhaps we were rather shouting one another down."

"And perhaps, as captain, you'll keep order in your own study first—before trying to boss others!"

"That will do, Cora. Now go—"

"Yes, bekas—strictly private!" shrilled Naomer.

"A great secret—and wouldn't you like to know!—what we are going to do in ze pageant, hooray!"

Cora glowered upon the imp.

"As if I can't guess what you girls are going to do! Puh! Going to bag the best—"

"Wrong!" cried Polly. "No, we have not been able to 'bag' the best act for ourselves. We were not given the chance—or else, of course, we would have! By special request of Lady Lundy, we—"

"I don't want to hear!"

"Then that's all right; you can scoot all the quicker," Betty waved. "Don't block the doorway, Cora; there are others who want to hear, if you don't!"



Joyce Marshall, dressed as Columbine, was speechless with admiration for the beautiful frock Cora Grandways was wearing. "Cora, where did you get it?" she asked. "Borrowed it!" answered Cora, without a blush.

Now it was the turn of Tess Trelawney, Helen Craig, and a few others to smile at the sight of Cora's malicious looks as she stamped away whilst they themselves entered.

Slam!

That was the other study door, after Cora had rejoined Hetty. With a raised foot Cora closed her own door like that.

"Oh, how I hate them!" she raged, flouncing down in her chair at the table. "Just what we guessed, Hetty! Study 12 is to have a special part in the pageant."

"In what way—do you know?"

"No—and I don't care!"

But it was not to be long before Cora, whether she cared or not, heard all about "The Seven Maids of Morcove." Later in the evening—when all lessons were done and there was the usual gathering together in the studies—the whole Form could talk of nothing else.

Betty & Co. were under no suspicion of having put themselves forward. It had been by special request that they had gone to see Lady Lundy, and it was known that her ladyship had a warm corner of her heart for Study 12.

Her own daughter, when at home, was very chummy with the girls. In any case, the captain and her friends had never yet been guilty of putting themselves in the limelight.

But Cora stuck to it that they had worked things very nicely for themselves—of course they had! At the same time, she ridiculed their particular feature in the programme, although as she gleaned more details she was raging inwardly with jealousy.

Next day she went to the library and looked out a book dealing with the Crusade. She wanted to see what the dresses of that period looked like. A certain picture supplied the information, and she fairly boiled with rage, visualising the admiration which Madge and her "Seven Maids" would create on the great day.

She closed the book and walked away, thinking:

"What a dress to wear at an affair like the Marshalls! Why didn't I go in for something like that, instead of simply hiring! It might have been the sensation of the evening—First Prize. Oh, dash, I begin to hate that rubbishy Columbine thing. Some factory girl probably wore it last!"

Then she reached the Fourth Form corridor, to find quite a crowd round a certain doorway. Girls who could not get inside the study—the one shared by Madge and Tess—were tiptoeing and craning necks, as if to get a glimpse of something.

Cora wanted to flaunt past, affecting disdain; but curiosity got the better of false pride, and she, too, joined the crowd.

"What's up, then?"

"It's Madge's frock for the pageant," Cora was answered. "It has just come—from Barnecombe Castle. Lady Lundy has sent her the real thing to wear."

"Oh, really!"

Cora was passing on; but now there came a burst of admiring cries from the study, and she turned back to look again over the heads of the crowd.

The Envy of All!

MADGE MINDEN had carefully opened the parcel, lifting from a stout cardboard box the wonderful old dress. With a reverent care she was letting the garment fall out of its folds. Despite great age, the material was still good and the colours were still brilliant. There

was, in particular, some very fine brocade. The whole thing was probably worth hundreds of pounds.

"Oh, Madge—oh!"

"How perfectly wonderful!"

"Gorjus! Ooo—"

"Try it for size, Madge!"

So Madge held the frock against herself; but the garment was such a trailing one, she would have to put it on before she could see how it fitted.

"Still, it looks as if it will be just right, Madge," remarked one of her chums. "And oh, you will look fine!"

Cora strode away, her face contorted.

"Stuffy, moth-eaten relic—puh!" she was heard to remark.

But neither Madge nor those who thronged there could see anything to justify such scornful criticisms.

Apart from its great weight, Madge's only misgiving was that it felt damp. It may not have been so; great age may have given it that texture. She came to the conclusion, however, that it might very well go into one of the school's airing-cupboards.

"I must be awfully, awfully careful with it, Tess," she remarked when alone at last with her study-mate. "I don't think I ought to wear it except on the actual day."

"There'll be a dress rehearsal?"

"Yes," nodded Madge, "but don't you think I might wear something then that will feel the same upon me? I mean, just so that I can get used to moving about freely in a dress of that kind?"

"Not a bad idea that," Tess approved. "It won't stand much knocking about, that's certain. My word, it must have been wonderful materials they used in those days. All hand work."

Whilst folding away the frock in the exactly suitable box in which it had arrived, Madge was thinking about harps, being booked to play one at the pageant—or to pretend to play one.

It was Madge's hope that she would be able to learn to thrum sufficiently well between now and the great day. There was a harp standing in Miss Somerfield's drawing-room, and the headmistress would certainly let her try it as often as she liked. Then, for the real thing on the day, Barnecombe Castle could meet the need. Lady Lundy had said so.

"I shall find matron, Tess, and arrange about putting it in one of the airing-cupboards at once."

"But aren't you going to try it on to-day?"

"Oh!" demurred Madge. "It hadn't occurred to me."

On her way out with the box, however, this hesitancy about donning the frock gave place to the impulse to try it on—at once. She was alone, and she saw a chance of doing everything quite by herself upstairs.

Hastening up to the Fourth Form dormitory, she found conditions there as favourable as she had anticipated. Not one of her schoolmates was there, and very likely she could do the whole thing undisturbed.

After taking the dress out of its box again, quickly she divested herself of her tunic, and then—oh, so carefully!—she fumbled her way into the ancient garment.

Bodice part and skirt were all in one piece. In spite of cautious slowness, there she stood, a minute later, able to see herself in the glass, dressed like this! She had only to put on the headgear that had been sent with the frock and she was all complete, except for suitable shoes. But they didn't matter at present; her feet did not show.

If Madge had been a vain girl, what admiring twists and turns she might have taken in front of the full-length mirror!

It was enough for her to note that the dress hung upon her quite nicely. The matter of an inch or so too long was nothing to bother about. She had only to accustom herself to the weight and fullness of the garment, and the effect would be most realistic.

So, carefully as ever, she took it off and folded it away once more in the box. Her attention was gravely concentrated upon this task, and she remained ignorant of prying eyes over by the doorway. Not a sound came from there, where Cora Grandways had taken her stand a few minutes since, having crept after Madge up to the dormitory.

Not a sound had there been, yet all this time Cora had secretly witnessed the trying-on of the dress. Peering through the chink on the hinge-side of the door, she had seen Madge array herself in that rare old garment—one belonging to a most picturesque period, the days of armoured knights!

Stuffy! But Cora, as she sneaked away, knew



It seemed to Cora Grandways that the camera was levelled straight at her. For certain she would be in the centre of the picture when it appeared in the local paper! But—would Morcove recognise the frock she was wearing?

only too well that hers was the stuffy garment—the one she had hired from London for the fancy-dress affair at the Marshalls' home a few miles from Morcove. That was the dress that held the faint odour of moth-balls!

"Why didn't I have something made specially?" she was upbraiding herself. "Why didn't I go in for something out of the ordinary? I might have had a copy made of a dress like that, and—"

Voices came to her suddenly, when all had been silence.

"All right, Madge—yes, certainly; you may put it in one of the airing-cupboards for the time being."

"Thanks, matron—"

"You'd better make it the right-hand cupboard in the linen-room. There's a top shelf that's

empty. It's hard to reach, being so high up, but you can manage."

"Oh, yes, matron! And I shan't be having it out of the cupboard until—until close on the day of the pageant, anyhow."

"Very well, then."

Amiable matron was bustling away now. Having stood still in an upstairs passage to listen, Cora heard the good woman's brisk, departing step.

Then the crafty girl of the Form heard Madge go to the linen-room. Presently there was the screech of sliding doors.

Cora let a quick, silent step put her out of danger of encountering her schoolmate. Thoughts had rushed into a mind always fertile with cunning that made Cora not want to be seen just then. So the dress was to be left undisturbed in the airing-cupboard, was it?

Not a word did Cora have to say to Hetty about the great temptation that had arisen so suddenly. It was not that Cora lacked faith in her "pal," or feared that Hetty would be all for saying "No!" to such a daring deed. Did for the sake of giving Hetty a big surprise did Cora keep silent about the reckless intention.

And with the arrival of Saturday afternoon came the moment for Cora to spring the big surprise upon her study-mate and companion in mischief.

Judith was down on the field at games. Cora and Hetty had been allowed to leave the field before all others, having received permission to start for Gorselands—the Marshalls' country mansion—in time to get there for tea.

Whistling gaily, Hetty was tying the last knot to the parcel holding her own fancy-dress, when into the study whisked Cora, secretive-looking, grinning excitedly.

"Sh! Aha, now, Hetty! I'm ready if you are!"

"I'm ready. Thought you would never come. I've packed your fancy dress for you, by the way."

"Very kind of you," sniggered Cora, "but I shan't want it, after all, Hetty, thanks all the same!"

"What, not going?"

"Oh, I'm going right enough! But I've got

something better to wear than that beastly hired dress! I've got— What do you think, Hetty, is in this parcel? Give you three guesses!"

Hetty simply stared open-mouthed.

"Madge Minden's pageant dress!" confided Cora, still grinning exultantly. "I've got it—'Sh! That's what I'm going to wear Hetty, and

"But— My goodness, Cora—"

"Shut up and come away! It's all right. Anyhow, borrowing isn't stealing, and I happen to know that in any case it will never be missed!"

"It's madness!" gasped Hetty.

"It's me," retorted Cora, chuckling, "when I choose to be more clever than you, Hetty. Don't look like that, but come!"

"That wonderful old frock—you've got it there?"

"Yep."

"Well!" Then Hetty burst out laughing. "Well, Cora, if you aren't the limit! Yes, I simply must give you best after this. Ha, ha, ha!"

And ten minutes later a hired car was speeding them to the scene of to-night's festivities.

In Fancy Dress!

SEVEN o'clock that evening found Cora Grandways and Hetty Curzon getting dressed for the grand affair in the bed-room which had been allotted to them at Goselands.

If that bed-room was not by any means one of the best in a very lavishly-furnished country house, that was only because the place held so many guests. Joyce Marshall, pampered only daughter of wealthy parents, had offered this perfectly reasonable explanation to her Morocco friends on their arrival. For even then it had been the secret resolve that Hetty and Cora must stay the night, although the existing arrangement was that they were to be fetched at ten o'clock.

"The number of people in the place!" exclaimed Hetty, hurrying on with her pierrette toilette. "We can't say that Joyce's people do things by halves, Cora!"

"It's jolly!" chuckled the handsome one. "There'll be some marvellous sights to see presently, and now I'm glad I didn't stick to my hired costume. Not good enough by half for an occasion of this sort."

Hetty pouted.

"Thank you! So I suppose I look—not half good enough?"

"Oh, you're not so bad, Hetty! But you can't deny there's no novelty in that dress. Now mine

"You mean, Madge's!"

"Oh, shut up! It isn't Madge's—"

"Any more than it is yours, come to that!"

"All right—jealous! I say, Hetty, lend a hand here, will you? I have to be jolly careful not to damage it."

"I ought not to offer the least assistance," smiled Hetty, crossing over to help Cora. "Ha, ha, ha! I can't help laughing!"

"Why? Doesn't it look right?"

"Oh, it looks wonderful! But I hope Lady Lundy herself won't be here to-night, Cora!"

"Is it likely? The Marshalls aren't stuffy county people. Their friends are people like themselves. Careful, Hetty!"

"Yes, and it jolly well needs care!"

Presently the door was tapped, and in came Joyce Marshall, dressed as—a Columbine!

"How are you girls getting— Oh!" broke off Joyce at sight of Cora in that wonderful period frock. "Oh, I say!"

"What do you think of it, Joyce?" grinned Cora.

Joyce Marshall, for the moment, was at a loss for further words. She could only walk all round Cora, admiring her at various angles. At last:

"Where ever did you get it?"

"Borrowed it."

"I have never seen anything like it before! It looks old, too, as if it were the genuine thing worn ages ago! Well, I'm awfully proud that a chum of mine has produced such a novelty," said Joyce. "Not but what you look awfully pretty, Hetty. After all, a pierrette dress is always effective."

Hetty gave her bland smile. She was not the least bit envious of Cora in the antique dress. The mirror had told Hetty that she looked extremely charming, and she was not going to be bothered with a cumbersome skirt, anyhow. Cora would find her dress tiresome when it came to dancing!

"Columbine," said Hetty silkily. "I hope I'll get one dance with Columbine, Joyce."

"Oh, rather! I know how well you dance, you two."

In due course they answered the gong's summons, and they reached the main staircase of the house to find other fancy-dressed guests descending in very hilarious mood.

There was all the usual babel and laughter as friends and acquaintances recognised one another in surprise attire. Mephistopheles promptly partnered a bishop; a Dutch fisher-girl was made to dance in her clogs on a half-landing with a skittish sailor-boy brother. Louder and louder became the roars of laughter as comic effects increased in number.

But Cora—she had only to be seen by other guests, and all their hilarity changed to sensational silence. Eyes remained fixed upon the wearer of a dress that was so remarkable.

"Who's that, then? was whispered more than once.

"Pretty wonderful, isn't it? And she's only a schoolgirl, I fancy—a friend of Joyce's."

"Oh, one of those Morocco girls! Well, fancy!" To those who came last of all downstairs, very dazzling was the effect of the hall below, thronged with such a merry crowd of people on the point of trailing in to dinner.

Mr. Marshall, as Bluff King Hal, had become rather noisy as a host. Success had gone to his head, and he shouted remarks in the same way that he was used to shouting his bids for wool at the London Wool Exchange. Mrs. Marshall, who hardly made an ideal Madame Pompadour, was also loud.

"It's the worst of mother," said Joyce, sitting down to table between Hetty and Cora. "She does get so noisy."

"I say, what a sight it is!" was Hetty's admiring comment. "Some people would be glad to pay to see us all."

"Yes, everybody has done very well, I must say," responded the daughter of the house. "There's to be a flashlight after dinner—for the papers."

Cora's heart missed a beat then. A flashlight photograph—coming out in the local paper for a certainty! She had never thought of that!

"Melon, miss?"

"Er—no thanks, I never take it."

She felt herself going hot and cold by turns; trembling in her seat at the table. Supposing the photograph in the paper got looked at by Morocco? Supposing Lady Lundy gave it a glance? "Oysters, miss, or hors d'œuvre?"

"Er—neither, thank you. I—never—"

"Corá, you must make a start, what next!" cried happy Joyce. "You won't last out the evening."

Desperately Corá pulled herself together, a few gulps at ice-cold lemonade helping her. But throughout the banquet-like dinner she could eat nothing with any real relish.

At last that dread moment came!

She saw the apparatus being set up in a corner of the room.

"Ahem, ladies and gentlemen!" shouted Bluff King Hal, rapping with a spoon. "If you would kindly face the camera and keep still when the word is given. Thank you!"

Then those who had need to turn round did so, whilst the rest took the waiting period more or less seriously. Comic characters tried to look as comic as possible. Mephistopheles sat with an arm flung carelessly around the neck of the bishop.

As for Corá, it seemed as if the camera had been levelled at her and her alone. She would certainly be in the middle of the picture!

A deepening silence; a breathless pause; then:

Bang!

"Thank you!" bowed the photographer, and all the chatter and laughter began afresh.

Corá took more iced lemonade. Phew! Oh, well, she was going to enjoy herself! After all, what harm had she done?

On the way out of the dining room after dinner she had Hetty at her side, teasing her.

"We shall have to have one of those photos, Corá—to show Morcove!"

"Don't be silly!"

"I'm not! Surely you'd like Study 12 to see how well you came out—you, in your prize dress!"

Corá would have taken stamping steps away from the teaser, but the "prize dress" was too much for furious actions. Soon, too, she found how awkward it could be to dance in! She was "given a miss" by other girls and by several fellows who were here, as they could tell what an awkward partner she would make. Whereas Hetty was in great demand!

The ball, in fact, had been in full swing more than an hour before Corá got a change from sitting out. At last a very handsome lady, dressed as a china shepherdess, came to the schoolgirl ingratiatingly.

"You dance, surely? Come along, then! I've been admiring that dress of yours all the evening," added the handsome lady, as they took the floor together. "So unusual!"

The lady did not impart to Corá that she was connected with a syndicate of dealers in antiques of every description. Neither did the china shepherdess say one word about all that she knew as to the rarity and value of Corá's dress. To Corá the lady remained almost the only fellow-guest who had taken pity upon her in the ball-room.

"Yes, you must be proud of yourself to-night!" smiled the lady, on the point of leaving Corá after their one dance. She carelessly fingered the fabric. "They don't make stuff like that to-day, do they? It must have been made years ago."

Then Joyce came up with Hetty. Both girls were flushed and bright-eyed. They were thoroughly enjoying themselves.

"Corá, it's all right about staying the night. Mother has rung up the school," panted Joyce, "and the headmistress says you may return in the morning. Enjoying yourself?"

"Er—yes, of course!"

The band played again, starting one of the dreamy waltzes that are fancied as a change from two-steps.

"Blue Danube! Oh, come on, Hetty!"

And away floated Columbine with pierrette, leaving Corá once more to one of the vacant chairs that were ranged round the crowded floor!

It was past two in the morning when the last car departed with its pleasantly-tired guest, whilst those who were being housed for the night yawned their way up to bed.

As late as this had Gorselands kept up its revels: and yet one of its guests was not inclined to go to bed even now.

The china shepherdess of the fancy-dress ball—she sat about in her room, smoking a cigarette, waiting patiently. For as soon as she could feel sure that everybody else in the great country house was fast asleep, she had a daring deed to carry out.

Mr. and Mrs. Marshall had no idea that their successful gathering had included at least one acquaintance whose scruples were none too fine.

At last the woman's wrist-watch told her that it was half-past three. She was in dressing-gown and slippers by then, and as silently as she opened her bed-room door, as silently she crept out into a richly-carpeted passage, making her way to one of the guest chambers on the floor above.

Sound asleep were Hetty and Corá when their bed-room door opened noiselessly, letting in the china shepherdess.

On a chair near the dressing-table there was a large box made of stout cardboard. The woman guessed that the wonderful dress must be in that box when she peered all round the room and could not see it. Gliding across, whilst her eyes kept a sideways watch upon the sleepers, she reached the box, lifted the lid, and gave a satisfied smile.

The dress was there. She lifted it out, folding it over one arm, then sought for something of similar weight that could go into the box. It seemed to her there was just a chance that the box would be wrapped up and tied in the morning without being looked into. In that case the foolish girl who had worn the dress would not discover her loss until she got back to her school.

A small rug, taken from a corner where its absence was not likely to be noticed, served the purpose.

Into the box went that folded rug; the lid was replaced, and then this thief in the night crept away, smiling at her success.

"I'm to Blame!"

MADGE MINDEN, back from Sunday morning service with the rest of Morcove School, sauntered into Study 12 to ask Betty Barton a question.

"Betty, will we be doing anything special after school to-morrow? Shall you want me?"

"We are going to push on with the pageant business all next week, I hope, Madge. Every minute we can spare from work or games. But why?"

"I thought I would take the pageant dress into Barncombe to get some shoes made to match it. Timmin's is the only shop, of course, that's likely to be able to supply anything suitable. If not, I shall have to send to London."

"Old man Timmin will fit you up," predicted Betty confidently. "He's an artist in his line; he'll make you up the true medieval shoe!"

"I shall go in by train and catch the one back at five-eight; so it's not long to be away if I'm needed."

"Right-ho, Madge!"

Then, as Madge turned away to seek her own study, she encountered Hetty and Cora, both with parcels. These two girls apparently had just returned in after being run to the school by a Gorselands car.

Madge gave them a cordial nod, and was nodded at in return. Afterwards, in their own study, the revellers of overnight laughed softly.

"Funny we should run bang into Madge," chuckled Cora. "Anyhow, it told us one thing; she hasn't missed the dress. She wouldn't have looked as serene as that if she had!"

"A nice sensation there would have been in the school," was Hetty's subdued remark. "Well, Cora, I hope you are satisfied. You took a prize, anyhow!"

"Now, Hetty, I can take the dress back to the airing-cupboard. I'll slip up after the gong has gone for dinner—when all the girls have trooped down. Will you stand by the door for a minute? I just want to see that the dress is folded away in the box exactly as I found it. I was so tired last night I couldn't trouble."

"It was a perfectly topping evening, Cora."

This went unanswered. Cora may have been disinclined to agree, or it may have been that she was giving all attention to a wary opening of the parcel.

Off came string and the brown-paper wrappings; then she lifted the lid and peeped beneath it.

"What's the matter, Cora?"

A queer and startling sound had come from Cora; a kind of strangled cry.

"Hetty! My gracious! Oh, my goodness! The dress!"

"Well?"

"It—it's not here! It's not here!"

"What!"

"Keep by the door!" hissed agitated Cora, for Hetty had started towards the box on the table.

"Oh, my goodness, what shall I do? Someone's taken the dress—stolen it!"

"Never!"

"It's gone! It's gone! There's only a rubbishy mat in this box to give it the same weight, so that I wouldn't notice!"

A pause ensued.

Cora stared aghast at Hetty, and Hetty, hardly less dismayed, stared back openmouthed.

"Stolen in the night!" Cora whispered at last.

"A thief at Gorselands—that's what it means! And now, what am I to do? Hetty, what am I to do? Don't stare—"

"I don't see what you can do, Cora, except—except do nothing."

"Oh!"

"Keep calm, anyhow."

"It's all very well to say 'Keep calm!' But—"

"Put back the lid, anyhow, Cora. Judy may come in. Do the parcel up again, and—and—Look here, I tell you what."

But the same idea was even then occurring to Cora.

"Put the box back in the airing-cupboard empty. Isn't that the idea now, Hetty? Yes, that's what I'll do. It's awful! Oh, it's terrible! But I shan't get the blame if I do that, anyhow!"

With guilty haste she hid the rug that had been in the box, then replaced the lid and rushed brown-paper round the whole thing again.

That done, she moved about the study shakily, fingers plucking a lip.

"I never meant any harm to come to the dress—was it likely? Cosh, there will be an awful do-when Madge finds the box empty! That dress was worth a lot of money, Hetty."

"Hundreds, probably."

Cora sat down, gasping. Then she got up again. "Dash! Oh, hang and dash! But I don't care, so long as I don't get the blame!"

And that being essentially her nature, she was a good deal easier in her mind when presently she had managed to return the box to the airing-cupboard—empty!

"I don't see why I shouldn't be all right, do you, Hetty?" she quavered later in the day.

"Oh, no, provided you don't come out too clearly in that flashlight!"

"Oh, shut up!"

Meantime, Madge was as blissfully ignorant as ever of what had happened to the dress.

Some girls in her place would have been constantly looking at it, if not putting it on to wear again and again. It was like staid Madge, however, to be taking her important rôle in the bit of pageantry very modestly.

Nothing could turn Madge's head! She had been warned to take great care of the dress; she had put it away in a perfectly safe place—an airing-cupboard which was bound to do it good!—and that sufficed.

Nor did she look inside the box when she fetched it away from the airing-cupboard on the Monday afternoon after school. Classes had not ended until half-past three, and she was in a great hurry to catch the three-fifty from Morcove Road Station.

After running to put on her outdoor things, she hastily wrapped the box in brown-paper, tied it with string, then sped away to get her bicycle. To go part of the way by train was what Morcovians often did when they wished to make a lightning trip into town without having to "bike" hard.

She was alone, for although one or two chums had offered to accompany her, Madge had advised them to stay behind. The midday post had brought a typed "scetario" from Lady Landy, addressed to Betty, and Study 12 had a lot to work upon now. Madge herself meant to return to get "prep" done at once, and then go through that outline of "The Seven Maids of Morcove."

Ten-past four found her hurrying with her parcel to the long-established business of "Timmin—Bootmaker," in the High Street. As Betty had said, old Mr. Timmin was an artist in footgear—saddlery as well. He could do anything with leather.

Madge did not want to be over-particular or extravagant, but if she could get something made that looked historically accurate, it would be better, she felt. She meant to show Mr. Timmin the dress, to give him an idea of what she wanted.

But now, as she came in sight of the small, old-fashioned shop, she found it closed. Astonishment as well as surprise seized her. It was nowhere near closing-time in Barcombe, yet Mr. Timmin had his shutters up.

Then she saw a card tacked on to one shutter, and, going close, she read:

"This establishment will be closed to-day (Monday) on account of the STAFF OUTING."

So that was that. Mr. Timmin, worthy man, had doubtless treated his workmen to a day trip to London.

Madge accepted the disappointment with perfect good-humour, not begrudging Mr. Timmin and staff their well-earned annual jaunt. She must come some other time, that was all. A cup of tea and a roll-and-butter at the famous Creamery, and she returned to the station for the five-eight.

The short "local" was in the station, although it would not be going for ten minutes yet.

Having placed the parcel on the hat-rack of a selected empty compartment, she strolled away to the bookstall to purchase a cheap edition of a "Life of Schubert."

Madge dawdled back to her train already absorbed in the book. She glanced up to her parcel on the hat-rack as she took her seat, then began upon the book in earnest. No one else was in the compartment, and she had it to herself all the way to Morrove Road.

In good time Madge got back to the school. She reached her study, to find it deserted. Tess, evidently, had been called in by Study 12 to help debate that "scenario." Discarding her outdoor things, Madge placed the book on one side for further reading, then untied and unwrapped her parcel.

It was a leisurely moment now, and so at last she felt inclined to look at the dress again. Her hands lifted away the lid, and then she stood like one turned to stone.

Not there!

Instead of the wonderful dress, all that the box held was a lot of old newspapers.

Her brain had reeled; now it went dizzy. She lifted her hands and let them fall again—a gesture of sheer horror.

Gone! Stolen!

After the first moment or so of blank dismay she felt the impulse to rush from the study crying the terrible news. But she forebore. It was against her nature entirely to create sensations. Her brain functioned again, and she felt she must stand there, asking herself calmly—how had it happened? When? By whom had this dreadful thing been done?

By someone in the school, whilst the box was in the airing-cupboard?

No! She had that unhesitating answer instantly to that question. True, she had not looked inside the box since she put it away last week in the airing-cupboard. But was it to be imagined that Morrove held anyone who would do such a wicked thing? In any case, what temptation was there for a girl or servant to steal the dress?

What, then, was the explanation? When—when had the trick been played? The box had been in her care all the time she was going to and from Barncombe.

"No!" Madge remembered aloud. "I left it on the hat-rack whilst I went to the bookstall. And I— Oh, I suppose I was away long enough!"

"She pulled out all the newspapers that had been stuffed into the box to give it the right weight. They were old London dailies, and, as such, they were quite unhelpful as a clue.

"I wonder if Madge is back yet!" came a voice suddenly from further down the corridor. "Madge, you there?"

Madge clapped the lid over the box, flung brown paper round it again, and hastily thrust the whole thing under the table.

"Not a moment too soon! Polly put her head round the edge of the door.

"Oh, you are back, Madge? Come on, then! We are going ahead now that we have something to work upon. But what's the matter, Madge?"

"Why?"

"You look pale. But perhaps you're tired."

"I—I'll be with you all in a minute, Polly."

"Right-ho!

Where's the wonderful dress—and how did you get on with old Daddy Timmin'?"

"His shop was closed, Polly—for a staff outing."

"Oh! So you had all your journey for nothing. Rough luck, Madge. Never mind, though, so long as you haven't lost the dress!" joked the madcap. "Let anything happen to that, Madge, and it will just about put the lid on everything!"

"Yes, bekas—"
"Who told you to come here, Naomer?"

"Bekas. Lady Lundy would have ze fit of anything—"

The rest was a shrill "Eecce!" from Naomer as she found herself taken by one ear, to be playfully conducted back to her study proper by the madcap.

"You leave Madge to look after herself—and the dress!" Polly was gaily counselling the imp as they went back to Study 12. "Madge is quite capable of doing that, Naomer, without any help from you!"

And Madge, alone again, drooped her head, as if such playful remarks had been coals of fire. For the tragic conviction had seized her that she, by her own carelessness, had allowed the theft to take place.

She must have been watched, followed! It must have been, then, at the railway station; it could only have been then!

"And how can I tell my chums? How can I let it be known," ran her frantic thoughts, "when it will put an end to their part in the pageant? For that's what it will mean."



Madge Minden stood as if turned to stone. Instead of the wonderful and valuable dress, all that the box held was old newspapers!

They Can't Make Her Out!

S AID Polly a few days later:

"I can't think what is the matter with Madge, girls! She seems almost miserable! Quite a mystery to me!"

"Oh, nothing of the sort, Polly!" dissented Betty Barton lightly. "It's only that she is taking her part in the pageant seriously."

"A welcome example to othahs, bai Jove!" chimed in Paula from the depths of Study 12's best armchair. "If only othahs would pwofit by it."

"Eef you mean me, Paula—"
"I mention no names, Naomer deah; I merely wemawk that there has been a fwivoly about—
Ow! A mere levity, I mean; a— Wowp! Ow! Off me!"

"There they go again!" commented Polly. "They are nice ones to be two of 'The Seven Maids of Morcove!'"

"Naomer," said the captain, "stop it, or your part will be given to some other girl!"

"No, bekas zere is no time now for any sacking!"

The great day, in fact, had been fixed, and it seemed all too close for Betty & Co. Posters were out, bills were in every shop window in Barncombe. There was one on the notice-board of the school. And whenever Study 12 caught sight of the printed date there were heart-throbs.

Not that Morcove had yet to get going properly with its own preparations for the pageant. Crowd parts to be taken by girls in general were being rehearsed daily out of doors. And the episode of "The Seven Maids of Morcove" was shaping well.

As planned by Lady Lundy, this effective item was to be dealt with in three scenes, all in dumb show, except for some singing. Scene 1 pictured the touching farewell of the heroine (Madge Minden) to home and parents, with the dramatic decision of the Seven Maids to go into retirement with the young lady.

Scene 2 showed her and the faithful seven living their sequestered life at Morcove, and the chums felt that, no matter how often they rehearsed this scene, the harp music and the singing would stir every heart in the great audience on the day.

Then, for Scene 3, there was the dramatic change from sorrow to joy. The return of the long-lost knight (Jack Linton) was to give the girls an outlet for their youthful spirits.

Polly had heard from Jack this morning. He had been to Barncombe Castle, by invitation, from Grangemoor School, and had tried on a suit of armour!

"Quite a decent fit, Polly; but, goodness, the weight! Better not let me tread on your dainty toes when the great day has come."

"I'm writing to Jack presently," Polly now remarked. "Shall I order him to attend our dress rehearsal next Wednesday?"

"You might ask him, Polly—"
"One doesn't ask a brother," corrected the madcap. "One just tells him what to do. He must attend, complete with armour—"

"Give him a chance!" laughed Betty. "Although it would be nice to see how he looks clumping about. Next Wednesday. I suppose our dresses will be quite ready by then? But they've got to be!"

Then Pam Willoughby drifted in with a newspaper.

"I say, girls, the local paper is full of talk about the pageant."

"Let's see!"

"Yes, queek—"

"Half a sec. Here is something to interest you

all," smiled Pam, directing their attention to a large and rather smudgy photograph. "Puzzle, find Hetty and Cora!"

"What?"
"Bai Jove—"
"Oh!" laughed Polly. "The fancy-dress ball at the Marshall place!"

The picture page, spread upon the study table, came in for close attention.

"Very nice," Betty declared. "It must have been a big success."

"Yes, bekas, look at that fat man wiz ze eyebrows!"

"Hush, that was Mr. Marshall, the host—Bluff King Hal," Polly said, identifying the character from the list of names. "But where are Hetty and Cora? Oh, there's Hetty—pierreette."

"Bai Jove, she looks pweety, too!"

"She does! And Columbine?" continued Polly. "Cora went as Columbine, we know. Oh, there's Cora!"

But Polly was making a mistake this time. It was Joyce Marshall in the smudgy picture at whom the madcap had dabbed a pointing finger.

"I suppose Cora made a big hit," said Betty. "She got a prize?"

Polly nodded.
"Let's see the prize list, girls, and see what she got. Here we are! Mrs. Elderson—whoever she may be—china shepherdess, first prize for ladies. Cora Grandways, as— What? A lady of long ago?"

"Bai Jove—"
"That's what it says here!"
"But I thought she went as Columbine!" cried Betty.

"Oh, they've got it all mixed up—just like the local rag!" said Polly, consigning it to the wastepaper basket. Then she retrieved it to look at pageant gossip.

"Bother Cora, anyhow! What do they say about little us?"

They were still reading when the bell called them down to class.

At half-past three Miss Everard sent them careering away, well laden with prep, it was true, but that work would get itself done some time during the evening. Meanwhile, tea, and then a jolly good go at the pageant. That was the idea, so far as Betty & Co. were concerned.

Only the rightful occupants of Study 12 sat down to tea at that table. The rest of the chums would be coming in later. As soon as tea things had been washed up and put away, Polly dashed off her letter to Jack. It was probably as expressive as it was brief. Then, thumping a stamp on to the addressed envelope, she jumped up.

"Do I give the fall-in for the rehearsal?"
"Yes, you might let the others know we are ready, Polly."

"Yes, bekas we want to get ze jerk on!"
So Polly, on her way to shoot the letter into the school's post-box, looked in at one study and another. Pam and Helen were the first to receive word that their presence was desired in Study 12, then the madcap called to tell Tess and Madge.

"Ready? Hallo, though, where's Madge?"

"Gone into Barncombe, Polly."

"What?"
"She took it into her head to go off suddenly," said Tess, getting up from what had been a solitary tea-table. "Miss Everard gave her permission."

"But why?" wondered Polly. "Did Madge say? I thought she understood the arrangement; we were all to take a good spell at 'The Seven Maids' after tea."

"Oh, yes, Madge knew all right! But I couldn't quite make her out," shrugged Tess.

"Well, now it's funny you should say that," said Polly, coming right into the room. "I have been feeling that Madge is not—herself."

"No. Usually so calm, isn't she? Perhaps her being cast for such a leading part has made her nervous."

"Being cast for a leading part should make her stick to arrangements," grimaced Polly. "We shall do no good without her."

Nor did the subsequent gathering in Study 12 get on at all well, Madge being absent. "The Seven Maids of Morcové" were badly handicapped without the heroine of the piece.

"We might just as well be getting on with prep," said Polly glumly.

"Or having a refr—"

"H'rrrp!" the madcap silenced her Majesty.

Polly got up then, energetic as ever.

"Our parts call for rehearsal—and we are not rehearsing! Oh, bother Madge, what did she want to go flying off into Barncombe for?"

"She should soon be in now, anyhow," remarked Betty appealingly. "I suppose she has caught the five-eight back."

This took one or two of them to the study window to watch for Madge's return. The chimes had just marked the half-hour. Out of doors there was still a light good enough for games, and a number of girls dotted the field.

"We might be getting a bit of hockey practice, since we are not rehearsing," muttered Polly at the window. "We are just doing nothing."

"Yet such westfulness can be very soothing."

"Soothing? Who wants to be soothed?"

"You do!" cried Naomer. "Bekas—"

"There's Madge!" spoke Tess suddenly from the window.

"At last!" And Polly threw up the bottom sash to wave and call: "Madge! Hey, hurry up—waiting!"

Then Madge's head went lower over the handle-bars of her bicycle, and she pedalled faster than ever to the cycle-shed, there to put her machine away for the night. Three minutes later she entered Study 12, looking pale and tired.

"You're a nice one!" exploded Polly, but there was already a forgiving smile to rob the words of any bitter reproachfulness. "Why on earth did you want to go chasing off into town?"

"Sorry," pleaded Madge breathlessly. "I—I—"

"Ze question is, has she had tea?" interposed Naomer. "Bekas, eef not, what about laying something for Madge queek, and at the same time we can—"

"Oh, not for me, thanks!" declined Madge hurriedly. "Has it put you about very much, girls? I'm sorry. Can we start now?"

"I don't think we ought to start now, Madge," said Betty gently, thoughtfully studying the other's face. "You're tired. Girls, I propose that we leave it until to-morrow."

"Yes, well," said Pam, "it would be best, perhaps."

"Been to the castle, Madge, or what?" asked Polly. "Why such mystery?"

"Oh, no! I—I— As a matter of fact, I called on Mrs. Marlowe, the dressmaker, at Tanner's Lane. I felt I must get—something made."

"For the pageant?" was Betty's surprised cry. "Well—yes, in a way."

"What ze diggings, when you have got that wonderful dress already!"

Little did her chums suspect how hard Madge was fighting to keep calm.

"I am having something made like it," she faltered. "You know I said that I felt I ought not to wear the dress at rehearsal? So I am having it sort of copied."

The chums stared their surprise. "Tall order, isn't it?" suggested Tess. "Mrs. Marlowe is the one to do a clever job at dress-making; still!"

"And have you left the red dress with her?" Betty inquired a little anxiously.

"Lady Lundy warned you to be so careful with it, Madge," added Polly.

"I know!" was Madge's hard-driven cry. "Oh, I know what I am about!"

"Well, that's all right, then," smiled Polly.

"Bekas cet is more than we do, yes! Madge, you are a silly old stupid, getting ze wind up about the dress and missing tea and putting us all in ze muddle! So that now there is muzzing else to do but prep—blow eet!"

"There is something in that," agreed Polly grimly.

Madge, after turning to go away alone, faced round in the doorway.

"Well, I'm sorry, girls, to have upset your arrangements."

"Good enough!" cried Betty. "Now let it drop!"

A long sigh escaped Madge as she went to her own study. How it grieved her not to be able to confide in her chums!

Speak out, and for a certainty the news would be as a bombshell, wrecking the whole project. "The Seven Maids" item would be cancelled. Lady Lundy might even dispense with Morcové altogether.

On the other hand, it was equally certain that the stolen dress could not be recovered, even if the theft were made known and the matter put into the hands of the police.

So then she could only go on in silence, and hope to contrive to work things in such a way that the other girls would not suffer.

Tess must have lingered in talk with Betty and the rest, for she did not come into the study. Madge dropped down into a chair, thankful to be alone, her mind going over again all that she had done in the last hour or two.

The girls imagined that she had taken the dress to show Mrs. Marlowe; but it was only the book loaned by Lady Lundy, with its fine coloured plate illustrating that style of dress, which she—Madge—had left at No. 5, Tanner's Lane.

Her idea was to get something made resembling the original as closely as possible in time for the dress rehearsal.

The plea that she did not want to use the actual dress until the day of the pageant would account for her wearing the copy. Then, on the great day itself, she must simply put on the copy again, and, although the theft would have to become known then, the piece would still be acted. It would be too late to alter the programme, however upset Lady Lundy and others might be.

Suddenly the study door opened, but it was not Tess who came in—only Cora Grandways.

"Hallo, Madge!" was the cry. "All alone?"

"Yes—why?"

"Oh, nothing! I only wanted to ask Tess something, but another time will do."

Withdrawing, Cora went round to her own study. Judith, as well as Hctty, was there, hard at work, and so Cora said nothing then. But an hour later, when her sister had made the usual departure to the library—place so often sought by Judith—Cora explained to Hctty:

"I saw Madge just now. She knows by now,

that's certain, Hetty. She's worried out of her life."

"Has she told the others?"

"Couldn't have done!"

"Then I don't see what you've got to worry about, anyhow," was Hetty's grinned comment.

"Oh, no, I'm not going to worry!" shrugged Cora, suddenly smiling in a heartless way. "If the blessed dress is never heard of again—that's her look-out, not mine!"

And they talked of other things.

"The Seven Maids of Morcove!"

WEDNESDAY afternoon—the appointed time for Study 12's dress rehearsal—found Madge Minden making an anxious inquiry of one of the parlourmaids.

"Ellen, has a parcel come for me?"

"No, miss; the post isn't in yet."

"It was a parcel to come by hand—from Barncombe. Let me have it, won't you, as soon as—"

"I will, miss, certainly."

On that understanding, Madge should have felt free to return upstairs to the studies; but she only went up half the first flight, to come down again. Terrible suspense was hers to-day. There was a rumour that Lady Lundy would be looking in to witness the rehearsal.

In any case, Madge knew herself to be in for a most uncomfortable time, even if the new-made dress arrived. And if it didn't—how on earth would she manage then? Her chums would be urging her to wear the dress, after all!

"Miss Madge, here's some boy with a note for you," she heard Ellen calling to her suddenly, and her heart went heavier than ever.

Only a note from the dressmaker—no parcel.

"Dear Miss Minden"—Mrs. Marlowe had written—"I'm sorry, but it has been quite impossible to get the dress made in time for your rehearsal this afternoon. As you know, the materials have been very hard to obtain, and I only got the most important of them by the eleven o'clock post this morning instead of at breakfast-time. It would be useless sending you the dress as it is, but I will work hard at it now and send it at the earliest possible moment."

Madge did not crumple up the note savagely. Cruel disappointment though it was, she remembered that good Mrs. Marlowe was not in the least to blame.

Ding-dong! went the school chimes. A quarter-past two, and now she should be joining her chums upstairs. It was a fine afternoon, and that had put them all in grand spirits. Two of the scenes, to be rehearsed properly, needed to be performed in the open air.

Up to the Fourth Form quarters Madge made her way. She encountered Etta Hargrove and some others going down to games, since they were not concerned with "The Seven Maids," and they remarked:

"Betty and the rest have been shouting for you, Madge!"

"I'm going to them now," Madge explained, forcing a smile.

"Come on, come on!" she was being hailed by Polly half a minute later. "Oh, and you are not dressed yet!"

"What ze diggings, Madge! Bekas—look at me!"

Naomer was certainly worth looking at. The moment they were up from dinner they had begun the change into pageant garb. Madge had

before her, in the Fourth Form corridor, seven chums all dressed alike in flowing raiment that was most becoming.

"Bekas," said Naomer, and she began to sing and dance:

"We are ze 'Seven Maids of Morcove,' O!"
"Well, Madge, we are only waiting for you!" smiled Betty. "What about it?"

"My—my dress hasn't come from the dress-maker's. It won't be along until the morning."

"Well, we can't wait for that!" broke in Polly. "Jack will be here any minute now—and, besides—"

"What does it matter, Madge?" argued Helen. "Wear the real dress, that's all! It can't come to any harm!"

"I can't see what you wanted to have a copy made for!" mumbled Polly. "There's nothing rough in the show to get it torn."

"Madge, you go up and put on the real dress now," urged Betty, "and we others will get down to the open and—"

"Oh, I—I can't wear the real dress, girls!"

"Can't? Why ever not?"

"Weally, Madge deah, isn't this being wather too careful?"

"You do that, Madge," Betty made it a final encouraging remark to Madge as they walked off.

A little after this Jack and his great chum, Dave Lawder, arrived from their school in a hired car. They had called at Barncombe Castle on the way to collect a suit of armour, and the unloading of this "antique," with all the metallic clangour that it meant, brought a crowd round.

"This jolly old suit of armour is going to do for me—absolutely!" Jack predicted. "Where do I get into it, girls, so that my squire— Forward, squire!"—and he looked round for Dave again. "My squire sees to all preliminaries, don't you know!"

"The gym," advised Betty gaily. "We rehearse near the gym, so you won't have far to walk."

"Good!" said Jack. "Well, sir squire, better get a move on, eh? Lot Ninety, a genuine suit of armour, twelfth century, complete with sword. Loo-o-o-ook out!"

And the crowd of girls scattered, squealing in mock terror as Jack flourished the massive weapon.

"Ass!" said his sister.

"Gadzooks, by my halidom!" Jack retorted. "Thou shalt pay for that word, Mistress Polly, quotha! I will e'en take thee by the neck—so!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But, tarry," Jack continued his swashbuckling after Polly had eluded him, "where is my squire? Ho, varlet, hither! Hallo, Madge!" he broke off in a normal voice. "I salute thee!"

And he dropped on one knee and made chivalrous passes in the best operatic manner; but Madge did not burst out laughing, nor were her chums as amused as they should have been. Madge had not changed into that dress, after all!

"Well, you are!" cried Polly. "If Jack can go to all the trouble of getting into a suit of armour, surely—"

"Oh, don't keep on!" pleaded Madge wearily. "I can rehearse as I am—"

"When it's a dress rehearsal! Oh, all right!" gave in Betty, but her tone showed that she fully shared the others' feelings.

Madge really was—a mystery!

Then most of those who were only onlookers went back to games, the remainder attending the chums to the rehearsal ground by the gymnasium.

Jack and Dave vanished into the gym, taking loads of armour with them, and the Seven Maids and their heroine tried not to take any notice of

the clangour that came from that building, whilst they began the rehearsal of Scene 1. The knight in armour did not want to appear until Scene 5.

Suddenly word went round that Lady Lundy was here. Betty & Co., on the point of starting Scene 2, paused. Onlookers made way for her ladyship, who was with the headmistress and Miss Everard.

"Well, girls, you are hard at it. Don't stop for me," smiled the visitor. "How nice our Seven Maids look, don't they, Miss Somerfield? Quite a picture! But why aren't you wearing the dress, Madge?"

It was the dreaded question, calling for a definite explanation, and, with a beating heart, poor Madge had to go up to Lady Lundy to make answer.

"I was having a copy made, Lady Lundy, for rehearsals." But it has not come in time for this afternoon."

Lady Lundy's brows went up.

"Having the dress copied? My dear girl, why?"

Then Madge stood mute and flustered, and some of her chums felt so sorry for her in her nervousness that they themselves mirthfully offered an opinion.

"She is afraid to wear such a wonderful dress, Lady Lundy!"

"Oh, is that it? So long as you haven't lost it, Madge. But that is taking care of it with a vengeance to have a duplicate made for rehearsals! I am sorry, though, I am not to see you in the dress. Couldn't you run indoors now and put it on?"

"I—"

"But never mind," Lady Lundy decided lightly. "It would be hindering the performance, of course. Well, I have brought along a harp, Madge—not a 'property' one, either. I don't expect you to be able to learn to thrum it by the time the great day comes —"

"I will see what I can do." Madge was only too glad to offer in her relief at the change of subject. "The chants are very simple."

"Madge has been giving herself a lesson or two on my drawing-room harp," remarked the headmistress. "And really I think she has made quite good progress."

At this moment the Barncombe Castle chauffeur came up, pottering the real thing in ancient harps.

"There, Madge," said Lady Lundy, after the chauffeur had placed the harp by Madge. "I have had it restrung, so you must see what you can do. But I am only joking; we are not going to expect you to master even simple tunes by the day!"

Nothing was thought of Madge's nervous retirement with the instrument except that she was as shy and serious as usual. But, ah, how ill-at-ease and unhappy she was in secret—utterly wretched!

She might be going to scrape through this afternoon without being driven to disclose the loss of the dress. But it was only putting off the dreaded day. And that day was to be—the day of the pageant!

She and her chums resumed the rehearsal, and Scene 2 was one in which there was harp music and singing. Madge, of course, could not "pick out the tunes" at such short notice, and her chums had to sing the lovely, simple chants unaccompanied.

But, before they sang, Madge plucked the strings after seating herself with the harp, as she



Madge Minden entered, looking pale and tired. "Why have you let us down again, Madge?" the girls demanded. "You know we can't rehearse without you." Madge was silent. For their sakes she could not tell her chums where she had been.

should be seated for this scene; and although they were only a few simple chords that she sounded, every listener was thrilled. There were admiring cries:

"Why, Madge, you've got it!"

Scene 2 closed with a burst of applause from all who had looked on. Neither Lady Lundy nor the headmistress had any criticisms to offer, and so the girl-players—all so happy excepting Madge!—went straight on with the third and final scene.

This was the scene that brought on Jack Linton, as the long-lost lover returning. It helped Betty & Co. a great deal, and it helped to stir the hearts of bystanders that everything was founded on fact.

Then came the dramatic change to boundless joy. Jack was a striking success when he made his knightly entry upon the scene. Fine lad that he was, with the heart of a knight for all his love of nonsense, he did his part in that suit of shining armour without one false movement.

The joyful climax of the happy reunion left the onlookers spellbound. They forgot that this was only acting, and only a rehearsal of a play at that. For the moment they and the performers were actually living in those far-off days.

"Bravo, bravo!" came with vigorous hand-clapping from scores of Morogians who had watched. "Well done, the Fourth!"

"And Jack Linton!" smiled Lady Lundy, conferring a delighted look upon Polly's brother. "Splendid! I hope they are going to give you some tea," she joked, "after such a strenuous time!"

"He and Dave must have tea with the girls in Study 12," Miss Somerfield declared. "They'll look after the boys."

Then it was a face as schoolboyish as ever that grinned out of the helmet, with its raised visor.

"Glad it was O.K., Lady Lundy! And thanks for what you say about tea, Miss Somerfield. I'll just get my squire to get to work with a tin-opener. Hi, varlet!"

At which stentorian cry, Dave came running up. Lady Lundy walked away with the headmistress and others.

Jack and Dave retired to the gym to grapple with the armour once more. "The Seven Maids of Morocove" cared for the schoolhouse, intending a "gorjus" tea as a fitting close to a most successful afternoon.

And only Madge was secretly ill-at-ease, her heart aching—horribly.

Her Secret Still!

SLEEPLESS on her bed, whilst others slumbered so peacefully in the dark dormitory, that night Madge asked herself once again—had she done the best for all concerned in not making known the loss?

And again she was answered by that which was best in her: Yes!

So long as she was not keeping silent out of cowardice—and she knew that she was not! All the personal disgrace that it meant she was prepared to suffer sooner or late. And she could honestly tell herself that she would far rather have made a clean breast of everything ere now, only there was that terrible certainty of the disaster reacting upon her chums and upon the success of the pageant itself.

Once again, too, she had to think how useless it would be to speak out from the point of view of getting the stolen dress traced. Alas! that there was such hopelessness there.

Morning school, afternoon school—she struggled through somehow. And out of school there was

even a far, far greater battle to be fought. She had to mingle with Betty and the rest, affecting the same lightness of heart that was theirs, whilst all the time she was feeling unhappy and miserable.

Early that Thursday evening the new-made dress came from Mrs. Marlowe. It was brought up, in its secure wrappings, to Madge Minden when she was alone in the music-room giving herself a lesson on the harp.

She let Ellen, the parlourmaid, lay the parcel down and go out as if it were nothing of particular importance. No sooner was she alone again, however, than Madge put the harp aside and made a dart for the parcel.

There and then she opened it, and at first sight of the new dress she experienced a thrill of relief. Mrs. Marlowe had done wonders, and Madge, in that first moment, could almost believe that the one dress would pass muster for the other.

But commonsense put an end to such a thought. Just as if Lady Lundy and her own chums could be so easily deceived! Colour and style might have been imitated with rare skill; but the fabrics themselves were not the fabrics of ages past.

Nor was Madge long in finding out that the new dress would have to go back for alteration. It did not fit her well enough, remembering that she would have only this makeshift dress to wear on the day. Mrs. Marlowe was not to blame. Madge should have been able to go to Tanner's Lane to be fitted, but that had not been possible.

Up there in the dormitory, where she had tried on the dress, she hastily took it off again and wrapped it up. Then she considered the best thing to be done, bearing in mind school rules.

The awkward fact confronted her; she must now not appear to be in any state of fuss about the dress made by Mrs. Marlowe. It had only been intended for rehearsals—and what matter slight misfits, in any case? So the girls would say, little suspecting that she had to think about the actual performance.

"I must send it back by post to-morrow—Friday," she said to herself distractedly. "That means, Mrs. Marlowe will get it Saturday morning. I can't go into Barncombe on Saturday afternoon; I'm down for a match, and then they are going to rehearse the school's other parts in the pageant, and I must be there. What does it mean, then?"

It meant, as she tragically realised, that she would not see the new dress again until after school on Monday, at the earliest. She might be able to run into Barncombe at tea-time. "Almost at the last hour!" For the pageant was to be performed on Tuesday. Morocove School was being given a special holiday next Tuesday on account of the pageant.

So, before the evening was out, Madge wrote a long letter to Mrs. Marlowe, doing the best to explain the very necessary alterations. That letter went into the parcel which Madge put in the post first thing next morning.

Afterwards she had moments when she wondered if she might have made a dash, at all costs, into town, instead of trusting to written instructions. But she came to the conclusion that it had been wiser not to do any more dashing-off at present. She had tried the patience of her dear chums badly enough as it was; and there was always the dread prospect of her having to go dashing off at the very last moment!

Poor Madge. If ever a girl's luck seemed to be dead out, so hers seemed to be.

Monday brought a fresh blow to her. She could not go into Barncombe! Afternoon school closed

with an announcement by the Form-mistress that, as soon as tea was over, the whole school would attend a special muster in the Hall.

The headmistress wished to give scholars some last special advice about to-morrow. All must be present.

How Madge got through that last evening before the pageant she did not know. Morcove was in high spirits. There was a full day's holiday in prospect, on account of the pageant, and there were parts in the pageant that Morcove was going to fill!

As for "The Seven Maids"—there they were in Study 12, after the special muster, bubbling over with fun, full of confidence about to-morrow, chaffing Madge about looking so worried, when the affair was going to be such a huge success!

She withdrew from the joyous gathering as soon as she safely could, and went down to the music-room to get some more practice with the harp. Bell for prayers found her still there, but no longer thumping the strings.

She was looking again at a letter that had come this morning from Mrs. Marlowe, saying that the alterations would be done at once and the dress would be ready for trying-on at tea-time Monday. But it had come to this in the end; Madge would have to give her chums the slip in the morning—at the very last hour!

The Way of Fate!

"GIRLS, we have just an hour before we start for the castle. What about getting Madge to go through the chants with us—last time, for luck?"

"Yes, Betty."

"Yes, wather!"

"Bekas—"

"Any girl who has got a hoarse voice this morning had better let us know it at once!" was Polly's jocular rejoinder to the Form captain's suggestion.

It was half-past nine on Tuesday morning—the great day at last! And it might have been a breaking-up day at Morcove, there was such a hurry-scurry everywhere. Every girl in the school would be at the pageant. With few exceptions, girls were to take part in certain items as well as look on at all the rest.

"Where is Madge, then?" questioned Polly, dashing out of Study 12 into a teeming passage. "Madge! Anybody seen Madge?"

"She went downstairs only a minute ago, Polly," the information was cried.

Then a girl who had at this moment come upstairs gave supplementary news.

"Madge was going across to the cycle-shed when I saw her a minute ago."

"What! Now, why—why?" Polly gave the impatient cry, at the same time sprinting off.

Down through the schoolhouse she whirled, out by the main porch, and across to the cycle-sheds. Her mop of hair flopping up and down as she flew along, the madcap got to the sheds just in time to find Madge mounting to ride away.

"Whoa, stop! Madge, you are not—not off anywhere?"

"I'm running into Barncombe, Polly——"
"But," gasped the madcap, "we are all off to Barncombe in an hour's time! You can wait and go with us."

"No, Polly. I—I must——"

"Oh, I can't make you out! Madge, what is the matter with you that you're like this?"

"I'm sorry, Polly. I must be off, though. I'll see you later—meet you all at the castle——"

"But we have an hour to spare, and Betty thinks we should go through all the singing parts again. Isn't that a sensible idea, Madge? Well, then!"

"Polly dear, I'm sorry, but——"

"Oh, go your own way, then!"

And in annoyance Polly wheeled about and returned towards the schoolhouse.

"What about the dress?" she turned to call out to Madge, now riding away. "You'll have that with you at the castle?"

Madge did not answer, merely acknowledging that she had heard by

giving a shake of the head.

Down to the school gateway pedalled Madge. This was going to be a glorious day for the pageant; the sun, now drying up the last of the morning mists, would be shining presently from a cloudless sky with summer-like intensity. But, oh, what a day of storm it looked like being for Madge!

Out on the main road she got into her fastest pace, whirring towards a quaint old town that was certain to be beflagged for the great occasion. Soon she was encountering printed slips that said: "To the pageant," with a directing hand after the lettering.

Riding into Barncombe at last, she saw banners strung across the High Street, along with much



"What, off to Barncombe again, Madge!" Polly exclaimed. "I just can't make you out these days." Madge's heart was heavy; if only she could explain.

bunting. People seemed to be getting their shopping done early. Every heart was light—so thought Madge, whose own heart was as heavy as lead as she made for the dressmaker's, there to pick up a new-made frock that would be only such a makeshift.

Tanner's Lane—that narrow by-street of working folk—was as much agog as the rest of the town. Children were already being called in by their mothers to be got ready for the whole day in the grounds of Barncombe Castle.

Madge reached the front door of No. 5 and knocked. Now to see how the dress fitted, and whether good Mrs. Marlowe's skill had been equal to such difficult conditions and special needs.

The door opened, and instantly Madge got an impression of great excitement from Mrs. Marlowe's looks.

"Oh, good-morning, miss!"

"Morning, Mrs. Marlowe. I couldn't call yesterday, so I've come as early as possible this morning. Is the dress—"

"Come inside, miss. Yes, I hope I've got everything right for you at last. I was working up till ten on it last night. But, miss, such a strange thing has happened! I simply must tell you!"

Madge, already ushered into the dressmaker's front room, faced round sharply. What was coming now? Had Barncombe Castle been making inquiries here?

"There's your dress, miss!" Mrs. Marlowe added, indicating a garment draped over the back of a chair. "But, first of all, about this tremendous surprise—shock, in fact—that I've had this morning. A lady who called upon me a day or two ago to say she would be sending a dress for alteration; she is staying at Gorselands—where they had the fancy-dress ball the other Saturday, you know. She said she would send the dress along in a parcel, and this morning a parcel came. But when I opened it—"

"Yes, what?" jerked out Madge.

"Some mistake must have been made, miss. Either the lady herself, or a maid, must have sent off the wrong parcel. The one I opened this morning held—this!"

With the word, Mrs. Marlowe drew aside a curtain screening a row of pegs and coat-hangers in one corner of the work-room. And there, hanging all by itself on a coat-hanger, was—the stolen dress!

A great cry broke from Madge, for she knew the dress at once for what it was.

"My dress! Oh—oh, Mrs. Marlowe, there it is; the real dress—the one that was stolen—"

"Stolen, miss?"

"Yes, stolen—stolen! And I have been worried out of my life about it!" Madge spoke on wildly. "Your client has no right to it!"

"But she is a Mrs. Elderson, staying at the Marshalls—"

"I can't help that! That's my dress—or, rather, it is the one lent to me by Lady Lundy to wear at the pageant! Oh," Madge exclaimed again, a terrible thought striking her, "the Marshalls, did you say—where they had the fancy-dress ball?"

"Yes, miss—"

"Then I understand! Oh, please don't ask me to explain, but I can see it all! Mrs. Marlowe, I can only tell you this; tell you how I thought the dress had been stolen, but that I was all wrong."

In few words Madge told of her journey to Barncombe with a parcel that she imagined contained the dress, and of her leaving it unattended for a few minutes on the hat-rack of a railway carriage at Barncombe Station.

But it is doubtful whether Mrs. Marlowe followed the half-incoherent narrative.

"Oh, you'll never understand!" Madge wound up with an excited laugh. "And I can't say more than that, except that the dress must be handed over to me, Mrs. Marlowe now—this instant! I want it for the pageant! Then I shall be all right! Just fancy, I shall be all right, after all, and no one will be upset. Lady Lundy will never—"

"Just a moment, miss, please," implored flustered Mrs. Marlowe, "although I'm sure it's as you say! For, of course, what amazed me was that the dress which came to hand from Gorselands this morning seemed almost to match the one you had been getting me to make!"

"Yes, there you are! Don't you see?" laughed Madge. "Because the dress has been stolen, I had to get you to make as close an imitation as was possible! I knew I would have to explain the loss in the end; but there were big reasons why I have felt bound to keep silent all this while. But now I'm saved! The real dress has come to no harm. Oh, what a blessing!"

And Madge, half-laughing and half-crying, took down the genuine dress and held it lovingly.

"If you doubt me, Mrs. Marlowe, I can prove everything in a moment! You have only to come with me to Lady Lundy—"

"My dear young lady, that isn't necessary! I wouldn't dream of doing a thing that would make the whole trouble known when it's far better hushed up. But I do feel, all the same, you must have had a terribly worrying time that should be—"

"Oh, that doesn't matter—now! Chums of mine at the school have been feeling cross with me, I've been so mysterious. But I can tell them now. They can be trusted not to tell others. What happened to the dress, I can guess, Mrs. Marlowe, but it must never be made known. For the sake of the school, you'll not say anything, will you?"

"Not a word, my dear."

Trembling with relief and happiness, Madge now made the real dress into a secure parcel. One distressing thought intruded into her joyful mind when she was on the point of leaving. Mrs. Marlowe had had the trouble of making that copy of the dress all for nothing!

But the dressmaker laughed. Madge's joy was hers as well.

"As for Mrs. Elderson—I doubt if she will have the nerve to show her face here, miss! When she finds out that the stolen dress was sent to me by mistake, I should think she would be in a hurry to get to the other end of the kingdom! But if she does come here, I shall refer her to Lady Lundy!"

"Or to me!" smiled Madge, hopping up to her cycle-saddle to ride away. "Good-bye, Mrs. Marlowe. But you are coming to the pageant, aren't you? That's right! Oh, I am so relieved—so glad!"

And Madge looked it, riding away in the sunshine.

Cheers for the Chums!

TWO hours later—were there any girls belonging to Morcove School who would rather not have been in the grounds of Barncombe Castle for the great pageant?

Yes, two girls there were. Cora Grandways and Hetty Curzon!

Even Hetty, with all her audacity and her skill at dodging the blame, was feeling very "jumpy."

As for Cora, she was in a trembling state of dread.

In vain had she boasted to her study-mate that she was not going to worry. Guilty fears of the loss of the dress being brought home to her had haunted Cora all along.

She could not forget that flashlight photograph which had appeared in last week's local paper. If nothing had come about then as the result of the picture being seen at Morcove and the castle, that was only because the loss of the dress had not been made known! How could the pageant take place, however, without the loss becoming known at last?

That was the question haunting the minds of Cora and Hetty both to-day, making the girls feel nervous. Gladly would they have absented themselves, and they had even made an attempt to get excused not being performers. But authority had said "No!" very firmly.

Even if a girl had no part in it, she must at least witness the show. After the trouble that had been taken with it, and considering the good cause for which it had been got up, the least any scholar could do was to look on and applaud.

Not that Barncombe Castle depended upon the school for any audience! Girls had arrived by the

people close by naming that item on the programme as being the next. There was a heightened interest everywhere.

"Morcove is in this!"

"Yes. This should be one of the big hits!"

And so indeed it proved.

For the first time the multitude of onlookers became hushed. At the very commencement of "The Seven Maids of Morcove," old and young alike were under a spell. People at the back stood on tiptoe, not to miss a single detail. The booklet-programme gave the true story of the piece now being performed by Morcove scholars.

"Cora!" whispered Hetty, suddenly nudging her study-mate excitedly.

Cora Grandways tore her gaze from the effective scene being enacted out there on a velvet lawn, and met the eyes of Hetty. The one girl was as amazed as the other.

"She—she has got it on, somehow!" blurted out Cora.



Among the thrilled spectators Cora nudged Hetty, her study-mate, excitedly. "Look, Midge is wearing—the dress!" she blurted. "Or can it be only—a copy?"

score, to find the whole town flocking into the castle grounds. A car park was packed out with motors and motor-coaches that had brought people from all over the country.

A military band supplied music prior to the opening of the pageant. The sun shone brilliantly upon historic walls and gorgeous flower-beds and trees in their autumn glory, and upon thousands of people massing for the show.

Then the well-rehearsed pageant started, and Cora and Hetty must have been the only on-lookers paying but moody attention to the ever-changing scenes, with all their romantic touches and historical accuracy.

Deafening cheers, constant bursts of hand-clapping, did the vast audience give again and again, so splendidly was everything being done. But Cora and Hetty—they knew that the rendering of these first items, without a hitch, was bringing on "The Seven Maids" episode all the more quickly.

All too soon for the uneasy pair they heard

"Sh! Yes," breathed Hetty. "But how on earth—"

"Or is it only a—a copy?"

Cora tiptoed again and peered harder than ever. "No, it's the—the real thing right enough! Oh, I say, Hetty! But—are we all right, even now?"

"You need to say 'we.' It was all your—" Somebody close by turned impatiently upon the whisperers.

"Don't talk, please! You spoil it for others!"

Then Hetty and Cora extricated themselves from the crowd, abashed. They would not be there to see how faultlessly Study 12 played "The Seven Maids of Morcove."

Thousands of people remained under the spell of the whole impressive spectacle; thousands were moved almost to tears by the chants sung to harp music in Scenes 2 and 3.

Thousands felt the violent change from sadness to joy at the happy climax which brought on Jack Linton, as the long-lost knight home from the



—❁—
**IN
 ANSWER
 TO
 YOURS!**
 —❁—

Olive (Birmingham).—So glad to know you're a constant admirer of my paper, Olive. I can promise you the Morcove stories will grow even more thrilling yet. What do you think of the extra-long ones? I can just imagine what an exciting time you're having in that bungalow.

Jean le Cornu (Jersey).—What a lucky girl you are to live in such a sunny spot as Jersey, Joan! You've no idea how I envy you—and I expect my other readers do, too! Yes, I should like a snap of you when you have one to spare. Best wishes!

"Bob" (Leeds)—No reply by post this time, Bob, as you didn't put your full name! Methinks Cuthbert would scorn to trip over the carpet, whether new or otherwise in his present new-found dignity. But I'll certainly mention it to him. By the way, he sends you his good wishes. The kind of story you like best is on its way! Look out for it!

Dorothy (Seaford Road, Sussex)—What bad luck about that scholarship, Dorothy! I am indeed sorry. But, still, you must enter for it next year—and WIN! What was the toffee and Turkish delight like? I hope it didn't stick! Write to me again, won't you?

"Champion" (Clydebank).—Congratulations, Champion, on achieving such a splendid record in your school sports! I admit it is difficult to know which of the Morcove chums is most charming; they each have such an individual appeal, you'll agree? Best wishes!

"A Jolly Reader" (Halifax Road, Ainsdale).—It certainly is a long time since you wrote last, but I hope you intend to make up for it now! I shall look forward to hearing from you very often in future, don't forget! I'll make a note of your request, and see what I can do about it. Meanwhile, what do you think of the new Morcove Stories?

"Freckles" (Beckenham, Kent).—Aren't you excited, Freckles? Your chief request granted already! How do you like "Jasmin—Waif of the Desert"? The chums' ages range from fourteen to fifteen years. Naomer is the youngest of the coterie. I'm sure the patients in the hospital will appreciate your kind thought. All good wishes!

"Bubbles" (St. Edmund's Avenue, Porthill).—So glad you've got over that attack of tonsillitis, Bubbles. I'm afraid your latest "brain-wave" is not practicable at the moment, but I will certainly consider it. Here's a secret! There's a dog story on the way—by a favourite author, too! All good wishes!

Crusades after all! But Hetty and Cora were remote from that multitude of onlookers when storms of applause came at the end.

"There she was," Cora panted again, in allusion to Madge Minden, "wearing the real dress right enough!"

"Then I don't see what you've got to worry about, Cora."

"Oh, so you said before! But—but supposing— Oh, dash, I don't know how it has happened! Was the dress sent back to her at the last moment?"

"Must have been."

"And, in that case, isn't it known that I—"
 "No use asking me, Cora! I say, hadn't we better go back? We're supposed to look on—"

"Hang the pageant!"

"What a success Study 12 has made—"

"Hang Study 12!" raged Cora, whilst the roars of applause still went up. "I want to know how she got that dress back to be able to wear it, after all!"

"You'll know soon enough, I dare say!" was the far from consoling answer, given with a forced laugh.

But Hetty Curzon was wrong there.

Neither she nor Cora ever found out how such a marvellous thing had occurred!

Throughout a day that was so idyllic for everybody else, the guilty-minded pair were in terrible suspense. They mingled with other girls from the school in the castle grounds, and heard not a word said about the dress, except that it had looked so wonderful worn by Madge. They came upon Betty & Co. now and then—encountered Madge herself when she was being handed an ice by her knight errant, and still there was not a word!

Then, at the day's end, they were alone together in their study when they heard the Form captain and all her chums come roystering upstairs.

"Hooray—hurrah!" the Seven Maids were cheering madly. "Come on, Madge dear!"

"Yes, bekas—refreshers all round, queek! Hoo-jolly-ray! He went with ze bang!"

"Most gwatifying, yes, wather!"

"And what were the takings, did they say?" Polly could be heard blithely. "Seven hundred pounds odd! Jolly good!"

"Splendid! Hooray!"

"Hark at them," smiled Hetty rather sourly, as the joyous hubbub still went on in Study 12 after that door had been banged shut. "Proud of themselves, aren't they?"

"They would be!" sneered Cora.

Hetty felt it best not to speak, and they were still glumly silent when the door opened, letting in Betty.

The Form captain held a newspaper, folded so as to display a certain large photograph on the picture page.

"We saw this last week, you two," said Betty tersely, placing the newspaper upon the table. "We could not quite understand at the time; but to-day Madge has told us something."

Cora and Hetty stood up, feeling that the reckoning hour had come.

"You ought to be expelled!" said Betty.

And she walked out, closing the door behind her with a scornful bang.

THE END.

You've enjoyed this story, haven't you? Another long, entirely complete tale of the chums of Morcove School appears in next Tuesday's **SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN**. Don't miss "ONE GIRL TO BLAME," by MARJORIE STANTON. And tell your chums about these splendid tales!