

Complete 66 "Morcove's Greatest Mystery" By Marjorie Stanton
Within

The SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN 2^d



**"BETTY! THE
STOLEN PEARLS!"**
See this week's thrilling
long complete Morcove
School story.

MORCOVE'S GREATEST MYSTERY



A Thrilling Story of School Life, Complete in this Number

ESTHER HOPE and Mabel Stoddart—are they one and the same? That is but one of the questions which are perplexing Betty Barton and the other chums of the Fourth—questions which must be answered ere the mystery of the Phantom Schoolgirl is finally solved.

The Silver Mask

AFTER school, Betty?"

"After school!"

Just a look passing between a couple of all these juniors who were quietly at work in the Fourth Form class-room at Morcove School. Polly Linton, madcap of Study 12, was the one who had asked that question with her eyes; Betty Barton, the Form captain, had answered it—mutely, yet with emphasis!

The last class of the day would soon be ending. Pens had perhaps another dozen lines or so to run in all the various exercise-books, and then for that welcome word—"Dismiss!"

"Yes, Ada Sharrow—what is it?"

"Can I have a word with you, please, Miss Everard?"

"Come on, then," conceded the Form's youthful mistress, with rather less good-humour than she usually manifested. But this was the new girl, Ada Sharrow, who had suddenly risen at her desk as a sign that she wished to consult Miss Everard about something, and Ada, by now, had become known as a tiresome girl.

She walked out from amongst all the desks with that pertness which so frequently jarred upon her mistress' and schoolfellows alike.

"Don't stand like that, to talk to me!" the Form-mistress felt bound to censure the new girl. "Well?"

"May I go across, after school, to the hotel?"

"What, again? You had special leave to go over this morning, Ada."

"My mother sent that note asking me to go across—"

"Yes, I know. But she doesn't want you again, Ada, surely?"

"I want to find out if there is any fresh news about the robbery at the Headland Hotel. By now, perhaps—"

"Oh, I think the news, if there were any, would soon be across to the school. I will, if you like, Ada, 'phone through and inquire for you presently. But you can't always be trapezing across."

"I don't see why I shouldn't go as often as I like!" pouted Ada. "My mother is staying there, and the hotel is quite handy."

"Granted, Ada. The point is, however, that it makes you little better than a day girl. It can't be good for you, as a boarder, never to be on the games-field."

"What's the use of my being on the games-field? I can't get a game!"

"You can't? Why not?"

"They won't play me. There's a dead-set against me!"

"Oh, I can't believe that, Ada! At any rate, as soon as we dismiss I will see that you do get

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—some hockey practice, shall we say? Understand, you're not to go across to the hotel, but I require you to be on the games-field ten minutes after dismissal."

"But I don't want to——"

"Ada, when I say a thing, I mean it! As you go back to your desk, tell Betty Barton to come out to me."

For a moment Ada Sharrow stared rebelliously. Then, shrugging sulkily, she heeled round and returned to the body of the class. Sweeping past the Form captain, she sullenly muttered:

"She wants you!"

Down went Betty's pen. There was the swiftest exchange of glances between her and Polly once again. The exciting exploit planned for "after school" seemed to be menaced now!

But it was only Polly who grimaced; Betty, a far better hand at meeting disappointment cheerfully, walked out to take her stand in front of the Form-mistress with an unruffled countenance.

"Oh, Betty, are you doing anything special after school?"

"Er—as a matter of fact, I and a few others were er—going out——"

"Just going out, is that all?" Miss Everard inquired. "Well, Betty, I wish you to hold some hockey practice, and you are to see that Ada Sharrow plays. She complains that you don't give her a chance on the games-field; that there is a dead-set against her."

"No, Miss Everard. It's not the case——"

"I felt sure of that, Betty."

"I refused to play her in the hockey match last Saturday for the simple reason that she wasn't good enough for the team, considering whom we had to meet. But I've asked her, time after time, to come out to practice, and so improve, and then——"

"I quite understand, Betty. But to put an end, once and for all, to the grievance, however imaginary it may be, you must include her in a practice game after school. I don't often insist upon practice, but I do this time. Her idea is to be off across to the hotel again, and I have told her that must stop."

A dismissing gesture followed this, and Betty turned away.

"One moment, Betty!"

She faced round again.

"You must be there on the field, as captain. But I don't insist upon the whole Form turning up. So if it clashes with anything you intended, perhaps you can arrange it amongst yourselves."

"Thank you, Miss Everard."

What a good sort she was, really! Oh, and of course, it was all through Ada Sharrow that this decree had gone forth—bother the girl! But there; it wouldn't do to give way to these feelings that came of the constant annoyance caused by Ada. One had to take her as she was.

"Pens down, all!" Miss Everard was calling, as Betty got back to her desk. "Books together. I didn't say drop them all over the floor, Naomer!"

"No, zey just slipped," that dusky imp. Morcove's royal scholar from Africa offered the excuse. And then, to long-suffering Paula Creel:

"Queek, pick zem up for me, Paula!"

"Er—weally, Naomer——"

"All right zen, I do eet myself!"

But Naomer, to do her own picking-up of the books, seemed to have to shunt Paula a good deal out of the way, with the result that somebody suddenly went flump to the floor—whallop! And that was Paula, as her mild scream proclaimed.

"Eeccc-ovp!"

"Paula Creel, how dare you! Stand up!"

The time taken by Paula to rise erect was so considerable, and she looked so dishevelled when, at last she did stand up, the whole Form pealed its merriment.

"Extwemely sowwy, Miss Everard!"

"I should hope you are! Don't let it occur again!"

As if Paula had wanted it to occur at all! Poor oft-teased member of the Study 12 "chummery"! And what an irreclaimable little rascal, Naomer, that she simply chuckled when Paula, sitting down again, conferred only the mildest look of reproach.

Naomer, however, showed how much she really adored the elegant duffer, by hugging her on the way out of class so tightly that another squeal was inevitable.

"Yowp, ow!"

"Less noise, there!" commanded the Form-mistress. "Go quietly, girls—quietly!"

Whereupon Naomer, for one, went tiptoe, whispering:

"Bekas, not a sound, or we wake ze Fifth Form—still in class, good job! Booh! ze rotten old Fifth!"

"Your manners, bai Jove, Naomer, do not improve!" Paula commented sadly. "As for your woughness—— Yeeow-rah, oop!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Never mind those two lunatics," Polly said, although usually she could be counted upon to intervene in any dust-up between Paula and the imp. "What did Miss Everard say to you, Betty?"

"You won't be pleased, Polly!" And the captain explained, a trifle glumly. "But there is this about it: you needn't be on the field."

"All very well, but you have to be there!" Polly grimaced. "I don't know that any of us were anxious for games after school to-day. Ugh! All because of that Ada Sharrow—bother her!"

"Never mind, Polly——"

"I do mind, Betty!" the madcap fumed on, going along to the stairs with the captain and several other intimates. "It's a shame you're to be tied to the field, even if some of us can be free to—do as we planned."

Polly dropped her voice over those last words. Nor did she and the rest consider it safe to continue the conversation until the privacy of Study 12 had been obtained.

"I mustn't stay," Betty said then. "I'm off to rope in those most willing to play; perhaps two or three of you will come along with me?"

"As a gesture, yes!" smiled tall Pam Willoughby. "I'll be one, Betty."

"And there is Paula," Polly pointed out; "dying for a strenuous game, I'm sure! And Naomer— anxious to work up an appetite for tea!"

"No, zank you, bekas, I have already got ze appetite!"

"You're not coming with me, anyhow!" Polly declared, with mock sternness. "If Betty can't do with you on the field, then stay up here and get a good tea ready against our return!"

"Wiz ze greatest of ze pleasure!" sparkled Naomer. "And extra helpings of Sweess-roll, Polly, eef you solve ze mystery before you come back!"

"Some hopes!" said Polly. "But we'll have a good try, anyhow. There's a clue at last, and we need to follow it up. I hope you'll come with me, Tess, and you, too, Judy."

Tess Trelawney and Judy Cardew gave eager nods, and as quickly as all this it was settled

that those two should be the only ones to go with Polly.

It was like the Study 12 "chummary" to adapt itself to conditions that would be the best for a particular objective, never mind how much personal giving-up or dropping-out there had to be.

Betty, her hand upon the door-knob, ready to pass out, lingered a moment longer.

"Well, best of luck, you three!" she said guardedly. "And if you do manage to clear up the mystery of the Phantom Schoolgirl between now and tea-time—splendid!"

"But you don't imagine that we will?" smiled Judy.

"I shouldn't wonder if you make a helpful discovery, anyhow," the captain responded. "Dolly Delane found that mask early this morning, out on the moor between the school and her home; and that mask was certainly worn by the girl who has been flitting about so mysteriously after dark of late."

"Bekas—all silvery white, like zo face of zo Phantom Schoolgirl, when we saw her!" Naomer whispered in a thrilled way.

"The mask accounts for her face," said Polly. "But how do you account for her Morecove clothes? And why on earth should she have been flitting about in the schoolhouse, scaring some of us stiff?"

"Especially if Betty's theory is right," rejoined Helen Craig, "and the girl who has been up to such tricks is simply that chambermaid who vanished from the Headland Hotel last night! But, Betty—"

But Betty, with a "Can't stay!" shake of the head, was passing out, and those who were agreeable to hockey practice followed her into the corridor.

It was the signal for a general dispersal, and five minutes later Polly Linton, with Tess Trelawney and Judy Cardew, reached the open air.

"We know where Dolly Delane picked up the silver-painted mask, for she showed us at midday," Polly said, hurrying along a side-path with her two chums. "We'll go to that spot again, making it our starting point for a good hunt round."

Meantime, the Form captain had mustered all who were going to play on the game-field. Ada Sharrow was there, swinging a hockey stick in a very bored and sulky manner.

Play was on the point of starting, with Ada chosen to do the bully-off with Helen Craig, when Miss Everard came across the grass.

"Just one second, girls, please! Ada, I have rung up your mother at the Headland, and she says there is no fresh news about her stolen valuables."

"Oh! And so they

haven't caught that girl yet—the young chambermaid who stole the things and made off with them?"

"If she did steal them," Betty softly qualified; and then Ada Sharrow turned upon her scornfully, Miss Everard having turned away.

"If!" sneered Ada. "If she didn't steal the money and jewellery, why did she bolt from her job at the hotel last night and catch the train to London—as it is known she did—from Barncombe Junction?"

"That I can't say," Betty answered blandly. "But I will say that I liked the look of Esther Hope, and I just can't believe she's a thief."

"Mother says that from the very first there was something very strange about the girl!"

"That I can easily believe," Betty nodded. "Strange, yes! But dishonest—no! And now, what about this spot of hockey?"

On the Trail

POLLY, with Tess and Judy, had a perfect right to go out of bounds by way of the wooden gate they used, at the end of the shrubbery-path.

"But this was the gate that Miss Everard found unbolted late last evening, when it is supposed to be fastened every evening at dusk," Polly remarked. "So, aren't we right in our theory, as far as it goes? Madge saw the Phantom Schoolgirl in the Fourth-Form passage last evening. The next thing was that all the lights went out. Then, a little later—"



"Betty," said Miss Everard, "I wish you to hold hockey practice, after school—and you are to see that Ada Sharrow plays."

"That cry from the foggy moor, as if a girl were needing help!" Judy carried on the thrilling recollections. "And when Miss Everard and some of us went out to the moor, by that gateway which we have just come through—unbolted, as she noticed at the time!"

"The Phantom Schoolgirl managed to slip out of the schoolhouse," Polly summed up. "She let herself through on to the moor by that gateway, and couldn't bolt it up again on the inside, of course! It was a filthy, foggy night, and she'd gone no distance—scared stiff, you may reckon—before she was lost. Then she dropped the mask she'd been wearing, and that's how it got found by Dolly this morning."

"But look here," argued Tess. "The Phantom Schoolgirl may have dropped the mask that she used to hide her face. But what happened to the Morcove clothes she was wearing?"

"She changed out of them!" Polly reasoned triumphantly. "Got back into her ordinary things in a flash!"

"So that the girl who was discovered wandering about aimlessly in the foggy darkness was just a young chambermaid from the new hotel, taking her evening outing! Right-ho!" Tess conceded, with a sceptical grin. "But I'm sorry for her if she had to change clothes out here in the open, and the night what it was!"

"She was probably sorry for herself," Polly retorted calmly. "She looked to be so; Miss Everard would agree as to that! Oh, but why—why the girl has been doing such strange things; don't think I imagine it is a mystery we can easily clear up, because I don't!"

"Neither does Betty, for that matter," Judy laughed. "Betty is only so certain that the Phantom Schoolgirl WAS that young chambermaid in disguise."

"Queer business, if ever there was," Tess muttered. "Uncanny!"

The talk lapsed. They were hurrying for what Polly had called the starting point for the intended piece of amateur detective work.

Through the ragged heather they waded; between one clump of blackberry bushes and another they passed, putting aside scratchy wands that threatened their faces. A puddle or two had to be jumped, a patch of lying bracken traversed, and then—

"Here we are," Polly exclaimed with gratification. "It was just here!"

There had not been time, at midday, to hunt about for indications of a trail, but now these three would be free to do so until the light should fail, if necessary. They were not bound to return for tea.

Once again they stared down at the exact spot which Dolly Delane had pointed out as being where, first thing this morning, she had found that mysterious mask. The girls themselves had trampled the ground a good deal; that could not be helped at this dank season of the year.

On the other hand, the autumnal dewyness of everything was all in favour of a trail having been made by the girl who had been out here in the foggy darkness last evening. Nothing had dried during the day. Heather and bracken and every blackberry bramble glistened with moisture, and cobwebs looped this way and that beadily.

Tess was the first to start peering around, with a hand shielding her keen eyes from what little brightness there was in the cloudy sky.

"You can see plainly enough where Dolly came across the moor from her home on the Barncombe Road, first thing," Tess remarked. "Well, now,

in the fog last night everything must have been drenching wet, which means that however carefully that girl with the mask trod about, she couldn't help treading down stuff to make it stay down."

By now all three girls were peering around.

"Girls, here's a sort of trail—"

"That's a rabbit run, Judy," Tess instantly said. "I had noticed that. What we need to find is the much wider trail that a couple of feet would make; not footprints, but a sort of crushing down of grass and bracken."

Polly nodded.

"I know, but—"

"Half a sec! What's over here?"

Tess was moving out as she said it, in a slightly stooping manner, so as to be able to look more along the ground.

"I say, girls, I think it looks as if somebody went this way!"

"Oh, good!"

Polly and Judy, stepping after Tess eagerly, took care to keep at her heels when they had overtaken her. Now Tess was like a trained spaniel in her "nosing" over the rank ground.

Her two chums realised how much sharper her eyes were than theirs at this sort of work. It was not surprising. Tess' passion for outdoor sketching had taught her to be very observant of detail.

The course she followed was anything but a straight one. Again and again she turned to right or left, but all the time she was working further away from the spot where the mask had been found.

Then, of a sudden, the difficult trail started to lead Tess and her followers back to that spot. Or, rather, the searchers were taken back to good half-way, and then again the zig-zagging about was resumed.

"I see!" Tess muttered. "She dropped the mask by accident in the darkness and the fog, and was desperate to find it again, but couldn't! Can't you picture her, girls, wandering about quite at a loss!"

"And, knowing the size of the moor, she'd begin to fear that she was working right away from where she should be!" Polly rejoined. "Is that why she cried out—so loudly that we heard the cry in Study 12 last night?"

"Poor girl!" Judy murmured, visualising the state of mind that must have accounted for that wailing cry; but Tess had nothing more to say as she kept on the prowl.

There must have been a couple of minutes more of this bewildering wading about in the rank growth of the moorland waste, and then suddenly Tess stopped dead.

"Look," she said, pointing.

They had come to a clump of hollies. The shiny dark foliage and the berries made a pleasing change from so much that was dead-looking. Down to the ground grew the prickly-leaved branches, making it hard for anything to be seen underneath. Yet Tess had seen—something!

"What—what? When—" Polly gasped as she stooped to peer in under the holly leaves. "Clothing!"

"So it is!" Judy excitedly cried.

Polly dropped on to both knees and reached in a hand. She had to reach in the whole length of her right arm to fetch out the bundle of clothing.

Not a parcel; no wrapping! Just a bundle of garments, instantly recognisable as the day dress of a Morcove scholar!

"WELL I'm bothered!"

Polly said it, ending a dramatic silence during which she and her two chums had stared at one another astoundedly.

"And yet," Tess said, "I don't know why we should be so surprised! If we found anything at all, wasn't it likely to be just this?"

"The Phantom Schoolgirl's disguise!" whispered Judy.

"The clothes she put on, along with the mask," Tess nodded. "She wore Morcove clothes so as to pass for a girl if seen at close range. She had on the mask so that on no account should her own face be seen."

"I wonder if she meant to be mistaken for a—a ghost!" said Judy.

"Should say not!" Polly exclaimed. "The Phantom Schoolgirl idea is simply one that we fell back upon because there was no other explanation! She was flesh and blood right enough! And still we don't know why—why she had to creep into the schoolhouse!"

"Doubt if we're going to find out why, either," Tess muttered. "We can only tell from this how she carried on the whole thing. Had this place out here on the moor, where she could dress up as a Morcove girl and put on the mask. Only, last night, everything went wrong with her, I reckon. She got lost—couldn't find her way back to the hotel after she had changed back into her proper things. Besides, she had already lost the mask."

Polly stood as tall as possible, to gaze over moorland in the direction of the new hotel.

"Yet she was not far away!"

"Fog is fog, and when you get it by night out here—well!" Tess shrugged. "We know what it can be like. Not a bit of doubt; that's how it was with her."

A thoughtful pause on the part of all three only resulted in Polly's giving an impatient stamp.

"A chambermaid at that hotel has to disguise herself as a Morcove girl to creep about our schoolhouse! I don't understand! I want to know why—why!"

"Not forgetting," added Judy, "that that same chambermaid has since vanished from the hotel—and is believed to be the thief who robbed Ada Sharrow's mother!"

"It's—it's too absurd!" fumed Polly.

"It's a licker, anyhow," Tess grinned. "But we're ruling out that the girl had anything to do with the theft?"

"Yes! We are all agreed about that," Polly said with relief and emphasis. "The girl may be a mystery. She is not a thief! After all, has anything been missed from the schoolhouse? Yet she has been creeping about there time after time, with every opportunity of stealing!"

"I'd like Ada Sharrow to know that," muttered Judy.

"Oh, but don't say anything to Ada—"

"Not likely, Polly! It's been nasty to hear her so slanging that maid, as if the whole thing were proved up to the hilt."

"I know this," frowned Tess: "it's a bad look-out for Esther Hope—that was the chambermaid's name, wasn't it?—if she gets taken up for the robbery. Her bolting off, after a guest had been robbed, makes the case against her as black as ink."

"Well," Polly sighed, "we must take these things along with us to the school; better take them up to Study 12 and let Betty decide what's to be done about it all?"

Neither Tess nor Judy answered. The one girl

was suddenly watching, closely, as the other as suddenly dropped a pouncing hand into the rank grass on the verge of the holly clump, as if to pick up something.

"And what's this?" cried Tess, who had been the one to see that something in the grass. "A locket!"

"Oh!" gasped her two chums. "Let's look, Tess!"

She offered it for close inspection. It was a gold locket with a fine gold chain that was broken.

"A locket!" Polly echoed, in great excitement than ever. "Does it open?"

Tess was trying, with a thumbnail.

"All this was the result, you may be sure, of the flustered state she was in last night, girls. She broke the chain, and so the whole thing dropped off unnoticed."

"Whilst she was changing her clothes?" Polly inferred. "But there—you've got it open, Tess! Oh—"

"Yes, look; a miniature," the Fourth Form's girl artist said with enthusiasm. "That's a lovely miniature—hand painted on ivory—of her mother, I dare say."

"Girls," panted Polly as they stood, heads together, looking at the find, "there's an engraved inscription on the inside of the lid—or whatever you call it! A name—"

"Mabel Stoddart," Tess read aloud; "and a date. When the locket was given to her, I suppose. Or when she was born, it might be."

"Mabel Stoddart?" cried Polly. "Mabel Stoddart? But who is Mabel Stoddart? That chambermaid at the hotel is named Esther Hope! Yet Esther Hope was wearing, up to last night, a locket engraved—MABEL STODDART!"

TESS TRELAWNEY closed the locket with a sort of reverent care.

"Mustn't let this damp air or any dust get to that miniature," she remarked. "A real beauty."

"And what a lovely face that was, Tess!" exclaimed Judy. "Such a sweet expression."

Tess nodded.

"Yep. If that was the girl's mother—well, a woman with a face like that doesn't have a thief for a daughter."

"Mabel Stoddart!" Polly repeated.

"More mystery! Esther Hope, a chambermaid at the hotel, is the girl whom we called the Phantom Schoolgirl. Yet she wears a locket that must have belonged, by rights, to Mabel Stoddart—whoever she may be!"

"Mabel Stoddart, I reckon, IS Esther Hope!" said Tess tersely.

"What?"

"Assumed name, Esther Hope—"

"Oh! You mean, Tess," gasped Polly, "a name she took when she got a job as chambermaid at the Headland? I begin to see! She became a maid at the hotel—because the hotel was near our school! But still, I don't see why she need to be near the school; why she needed to creep into it, in disguise!"

Once again all three girls looked at one another in utter puzzlement.

"Mabel Stoddart was the Phantom Schoolgirl," said Polly at last. "But who—who is Mabel Stoddart? That's the next thing to find out!"

"And you think we will?" Tess returned, with a feeble smile.

"We can try!" cried Polly.

"Oh, we can try! No harm in trying. Good fun, in fact!"

Then Judy Cardew smiled to see Polly Linton looking so very determined as she answered:
 "Very well—you wait!"

"Late Night Final"

IT was a wet night in London. Cabs and cabs, as they rounded this corner, formed by two West-End streets, extracted a loud swish! from the glistening roadway.

A paper-seller in sodden boots and a mere rag of an overcoat had his pitch at that particular corner; and to-night his placard, held apronwise, had become so tattered and mud-bespashed, he could be excused his raucous bawling of the contents.

"Late night final! Extry! Missing girl traced to London! Extry. Hotel robbery—latest!"

A passerby, hurrying to get out of the rain, stopped with an offered penny.

"Fank yer, missy!" as a copy of the evening paper was whisked out from a sheltered batch. "Late night fi-nal! Extry!"

"You won't sell all those, surely!" the passerby was moved to remark.

"No, missy; bad night, this. Nobody abaht!"

"Well, as soon as you can—get yourself something with this."

"Missy, you're a good 'un! Fank yer, young lidy. I c'n do wiv a cup of corfee, no mistake! Goo'-night, missy!"

"Good-night!"

She walked on rapidly as far as the next lamp-post, then stood beneath the light to open the paper and read the banner headlines.

"POLICE HUNT FOR ESTHER HOPE
 'SOMEWHERE IN LONDON'—says Scotland
 Yard."

The dirty rain was rapidly damping the newspaper. After glancing at cross-headings to the columns that had been written up "By our Special Investigator," the girl folded the sheet and carried it, safe for reading indoors, as she walked on.

Only a couple of hundred yards did she have to go, and then she stopped at the stone steps leading up to the front door of a typical old-fashioned town house; high and narrow, with arca steps serving a basement kitchen.

The girl mounted to the front door and dabbed a finger at the bell-press.

After a few minutes a light came on in the hall, shining out through the old-fashioned fan-light. The door was opened by a wholesome-looking woman—a servant long in the service of any family that tenanted the house, as a stranger would have guessed.

The woman looked the sort that would be in a job for life, and it was quite in accord with this pleasing exterior that she smiled upon the girl in a devoted way.

"There, Miss Mabel, nice and wet you've got yourself by going out!"

"Oh, no, Jane; my raincoat kept it all off," was the blithe assurance. "But I'll change into dry shoes, to save dirtying the place."

"I'll run and fetch—"

"Jane, you won't! I wish you wouldn't try to be always waiting on me hand and foot!" laughed Mabel Stoddart, hanging up her wet coat.

"But why shouldn't I, miss? When it's only what I have to do for Miss Ada, when she's at home—thank goodness that she has gone to that school down there in Devonshire, and won't be home until the Christmas holidays!"

"Oh, Jane, Jane, how you dislike—"

"Well, miss, so I do dislike her, and must be expected to show it! You've got an evening paper, I see. Any news in particular, miss?"

"I've only glanced at it, Jane. You shall have it presently."

"My! 'Police hunt for Esther Hope—in London!'" the old soul gathered from a glance at the headlines. "Then I shouldn't wonder if Mrs. Sharrow turns up here to-night—think of that! She's furious, I know, about being robbed like she has been, down there at that hotel near where her daughter is at school!"

"Yes."

"What's more, Miss Mabel—although this I ought not to say, perhaps!—but if you ask me, Mrs. Sharrow can ill afford to lose a penny these days, either by robbery or any other means. There's been plenty of cutting down expenses up here in Town. I do know that!"

"Lots of people who had money, Jane, are feeling the pinch these days."

Mabel Stoddart said it, taking off her wet shoes in the hall. Then, in stockinged feet, she passed to the dim staircase. She had the evening paper under one arm.

"I'll get into slippers upstairs, Jane—"

"And then come down for your supper, miss; that's right! I've got it all laid ready in the dining-room!"

"Jane, what nonsense!" the girl spoke down from half-way up the first flight. "I might very well have supper with you, in the kitchen—"

"The idea!"

"Whyever not? I'm not Ada Sharrow, to be wated on hand and foot. What's more, the Sharrow's have always given me to understand that my place is in the kitchen!"

"And don't you believe it, miss! You know what I've hinted to you more than once, miss, out of my love for you! My belief, there's more money to your name, if only the truth were known, than there will ever be to Miss Ada's!"

The words had an arresting effect upon Mabel Stoddart. But she said nothing, going on up to her room after she had stared down upon Jane for a good half minute.

The room that Mabel entered, on the second storey, was very shabby in comparison with the hall and staircase. The switched-on light revealed all that the girl herself had done to brighten up a bed-room for which anything, like much-needed paper-hanging, had been refused.

If there was now no large hole worn in the faded carpet, that was only because Mabel, with needle and silks to match, had done some wonderful "invisible mending."

She clapped on some slippers, then opened out the evening paper again.

Terrible, to know that this hue-and-cry was for HER! Appalling, that "Esther Hope" was being sought in connection with a robbery at the hotel at Morcove!

And Mrs. Sharrow the woman who had been robbed!

Mabel Stoddart, as she read down the columns of print, had to winnow facts that so vitally concerned her from a lot of stuff that was mere padding—the "writing up" of the day's sensation.

This particular evening paper had sent its own man down to the Headland Hotel at Morcove, to interview Mrs. Sharrow and generally nose around. He had telephoned reams to his editor, and it was all here. "I am just back from a look at Morcove School—"

But, thank goodness, the reporter had not got

hold of the scholars with a story to tell about a girl who, in the fog and darkness of last night, had called out in distress!

"Stupid of me, as it was, to give that cry; but I felt myself falling, and I thought I was done for, although it was only a shallow gravel-pit after all!" Mabel said to herself.

She read to the bottom of another column, then remembered to look at the "Stop Press" space. Nothing there—thank goodness!

"And, after all," she commended with herself, laying the paper aside, "why should I feel windy? They can never trace me! I got into the train at Barncombe Junction, last night, as Esther Hope. I got out at Waterloo, at dawn this morning, Mabel Stoddart. And I had sense not to take a cab at that quiet time, but to walk."

She got up from her chair and strayed to the wash-stand. Oh, she was safe enough! The thing to worry about, really, was that she had been forced to abandon her activities down there at Morcove.

"Just when I looked like succeeding!"

Having washed hands and face, she went to the dressing-table to tidy her hair and look herself over in the glass. Her frock, at the neck, could do with a little straightening touch, and fingers were conferring this when:

"Goodness!" she gasped aloud, and clacked down the hairbrush. "My locket!"

Her left hand fumbled farther down, between frock and chest. "No, the locket was gone!"

"And that's a nice thing! she gasped, collapsing into a chair. "Awful! It's got my proper name inside—Mabel Stoddart!"

After a moment she emitted a "Phew!" of increased agitation and dismay, putting up a hand to her head.

"It must have been on the moor that I lost it!" she was realising. "When I changed out of those school things, in such a hurry, in the fog and the darkness. I know I was all of a dither. I— Yes, it must have been then!"

A growing horror made her rise up and step about the room wildly.

Could the lock have come undone, or got broken, at any other time? No! Not the slightest doubt, that was when it had occurred.

And so, out there on the moor at Morcove, where she had left the bundle of schoolgirl attire poked under the holly bushes—there was that locket! A locket with its owner's name engraved inside; her true name, Mabel Stoddart.

Supposing it was found—along with the bundle of clothing? The one thing, found along with all the rest!

"Oh, what shall I do? What can I do!" she



Mabel Stoddart, hurrying to get out of the rain, stopped with an offered penny. "Fank yer, missy! Hotel robbery—latest!" the man said, little dreaming that the report referred to her!

asked herself frantically. "This is terrible! Go down to Morcove again, by the first possible train, and hunt for the locket in secret? But——"

Hark!

That sounded like the rat-tat-tat! of a telegraph boy. It was not the regulation time for the post-man's evening delivery. Was there a telegram, then—from Mrs. Sharrow? A wire, saying that she was arriving in London to-night, after all?

Mabel wondered! She knew that Mrs. Sharrow had intended coming up to town to-day from Morcove. For what other reason, except that Mrs. Sharrow had announced that intention, over night, had she, Mabel fled back to London!

After a moment, she went from her bed-room to the stairs and called down:

"Jane, is that a telegram?"

"Yes, miss! For you."

"Oh, I'll come down."

She raced down the several flights of stairs, to receive the telegram from Jane in the hall.

Tearing the flimsy from its buff-coloured envelope, she read:

"Send at once by registered post sealed packet marked MS., in top left-hand drawer my bureau."

Her first sensation was one of relief that Mrs. Sharrow was not coming home after all. Then excitement seized Mabel. She showed the telegram to elderly Jane.

"That'll be the bureau in the drawing-room, miss."

"Yes. I must go and look, at once."

Mabel glanced at the hall clock as she went towards the drawing-room door. It was late for getting a letter off. She was sure that nothing could be done as to registering.

Clicking on the drawing-room light as she entered, she crossed to the bureau—a rather fine antique. She was to find a packet, a sealed packet marked "MS." That usually meant a manuscript; but Mrs. Sharrow was not "literary." Nor had her daughter Ada been taken that way, so to speak, or one might imagine the mother asking for the MS. to be sent on, to be shown round proudly at the hotel!

Suddenly, in the very act of pulling open the top left-hand drawer, Mabel's own mind gave her a shock. MS.! The post-office people had run the two letters together, but they should be separated by a full stop—M.S.

"And those are my own initials!" was the thought that had excited Mabel. "Is the sealed packet something to do with me, then? It must be—oh, it must be so!"

She tugged open the drawer. After some rummaging, she fished out the packet—a bulky lined envelope, not only gummed up, but heavily sealed. All that was written upon the envelope was:

"M. S."

A great trembling came upon Mabel Stoddart as she handled the sealed packet. Papers concerning herself! And this, at a time when she was governed by the definite suspicion that Mrs. Sharrow was not dealing fairly by her, was keeping something from her.

A paper knife lay ready to hand. Rip the sealed flap of the envelope with that, and then one could go through the bulky contents oneself—now! But no; such a desperate action was not to be entertained for a single instant. One must play the game, even if others were intending to—cheat!

Only, surely one would be entitled to try and get a glimpse of the papers in this sealed envelope? Nothing unscrupulous about that! Considering the suspicion that had existed of late in one's mind, it would be perfectly justifiable. The thing one must not do was to slash open the envelope, here and now.

A gust of wind in the street brought the rain against the window-glass. Somehow, that dreary sound switched Mabel's mind back to last night, on the moor at Morcove. Then she thought again of the lost brooch.

From that, it was a sudden leap of her mind to a thrilling decision. Go back to Morcove in one's rightful name!

"I'll do it!" she whispered to herself fiercely. "This packet that she wants so urgently—it will serve as an excuse! I'll go down to her at the hotel. No one can possibly recognise me as the same girl who was there as Esther Hope, the chambermaid. I shall be Mabel Stoddart—and as Mabel Stoddart I can hunt for that brooch!"

Closing the drawer of the bureau, she took the sealed envelope with her out into the hall.

"A time-table, Jane! Oh, here it is! And now"—as her finger flicked over the pages—"to see if there is a train down to Morcove—to-night!"

They Wonder Why

RAINY night in London; rainy night at Morcove, where the wind, in its unopposed rush across the open sea, was at its very wildest.

So, as the occupants of Study 12 put finishing touches to some belated prep, they heard the rain

lashing against their window, whilst the gale boomed and shrilled around the great schoolhouse.

"Pipooray, bekas, feenished!"

"I haven't, kid, so a little less row!" requested Polly. "Hi, and who said you were to go to the corner cupboard?"

"What ze diggings, he is as much my cupboard as he is yours!"

Madcap Polly jumped up and, just for fun, darted to the cupboard, securing its key.

"Sweendle!" Naomer promptly complained. "When it is ze right time for a hand-round! Bekas—here are all ze others!"

The door, in fact, had opened, letting in Pam, Madge and two or three more of those girls who, every evening after work, could be expected to drift into this, the favourite rendezvous.

"Rough night," said Madge. "I'm sorry for the sailors at sea."

"Tewwible, bai Jove! I gweatly fear whether we shall get any west ourselves, geals," sighed Paula Creel, putting her books together.

"Zen Betty, in ze morningk, will get a day off for all of us."

"I can see Betty doing that," said Betty herself, pulling open her table drawer to slam some books away.

Then, glancing towards the door, as if to make sure that it was closed and nobody about to enter, she drew out the silver mask.

Her chums all gazed at it in a fascinated way.

"Strange business!" murmured Helen Craig.

"Weally extwaowdinawy, yes, waten!"

"And stranger still," added Polly extracting something from her frock pocket, "since we found—this!"

It was the gold locket that she displayed. Like Betty, she glanced towards the door in a precautionary manner, then, with her thumbnail, she pressed open the locket.

"Mabel Stoddart," she quoted the engraved name aloud once more. "And the girl who lost this on the moor was passing under the name of Esther Hope!"

"So we presume!" said Betty.

"But is there any doubt?"

"Well—no!"

"Bekas—"

"Your opinion is not asked, being not worth having! The best thing you can do, kid," said Polly, "is to see about cake and clove cordial. There you are!"

Naomer caught the key.

"Ooo, zank you!" Sit down zen, everybody, bekas, ze performance is now to begin—gorjus!"

"I was down in the wireless-room, girls," Tess remarked, "when the first news bulletin was given out. They broadcast a description of Esther Hope—by request from Scotland Yard."

"They did! Um!" grimaced Polly. "Any rate, that means she hasn't been arrested yet—up in London."

"Yes, well, let's hope she won't be," came from Pam Willoughby. "She never vanished from the hotel down here because of anything to do with the theft. We may be sure of that."

"We are sure!" Betty agreed heartily. "One doesn't need to be a special judge of character to have faith in that Esther Hope girl."

"It's surprising how you do sort of sense a girl's character, bang away," said Polly. "There was that Ada Sharrow, when she turned up at Morcove at the start of term! didn't we feel—"

"We did!" laughed several.

"And it was so," grimaced the madcap.

"Zen what about my character?"

"You haven't one."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But you have an appetite that makes up for the absence of character."

"Yes, wather, haw, haw, haw! Owch, oop! Na-ow-mer!"

"Zen what do you want to laugh for?"

"Ow! I suppose I can laugh if others laugh, can't I?"

"No, you can't!"

A certain amount of dust was being raised in consequence of a little scrimmage between Paula and the imp, when the door opened, letting in Ada Sharrow.

"Er—Betty—"

"Oh, yes, Ada?"

"I supposed I had better ask permission first!" the new girl said tartly. "Can I telephone to London?"

"A trunk call to London?"

"Mother has sent across from the hotel—a note—asking me to ring up our house in Town. She can't get through; the hotel line is out of order."

"That's the wild night," Tess remarked. "I'll be surprised if you can get London to-night, Ada."

"Anyhow, it's not for me to give permission," Betty laughed. "You only need to ask Miss Everard, Ada."

"Oh, I thought—she leaves so much to you!"—sneeringly.

"If it's important, Ada, there'll be no difficulty."

"Well, it is!" the good-humoured remark was answered as tartly as before. "Mother wants me to ask Mabel Stoddart, over the 'phone, if she caught the post with a registered letter that is important."

Mabel Stoddart!

Study 12 had all it could do to repress violent starts. That name had come pat from the lips of the new girl. Mabel Stoddart!

"I see," Betty managed to respond carelessly. "Who is Mabel Stoddart, then, might I ask, Ada?"

"Oh—she is just a girl who lives at home. Mother has sort of brought her up, more or less out of charity. She was left with very little when her parents died."

"Doesn't go to school, then?"

"No," said Ada Sharrow, turning to go out. "She finished last year. A bit older than me, you know."

"But you are great friends, of course?" Pam inquired.

"Oh, I don't know about that," was the shrugged response.

Next moment Ada Sharrow had withdrawn, in her own self-important manner, and the door closed after her exit.

Silence in Study 12—a dramatic, thrilling silence!

At last:

"I say!" Polly fairly exploded. "What do you think of that, girls? Mabel Stoddart!—lives at home with the Sharrowes!"

"Bai Jove—"

"The mystery deepens!" Betty smiled queerly.

"It does!" agreed others.

"Bekas—"

"Now there IS something to puzzle about!" gasped Helen. "I—I shall have to sit down and think!"

Polly, for her part, had to take fuming turnings about the study.

Then suddenly she stood still abruptly.

"But, in a way, girls—is it a bigger mystery

than ever? Is it? I mean to say, supposing Mabel Stoddart had some reason for making secret visits to the school which Ada Sharrow entered this term? Wouldn't that account for—the Phantom Schoolgirl?"

Her chums' expression made Polly speak on, at once:

"See what I mean? You don't see! Mabel Stoddart must creep into this school in secret for a reason that is only known to herself, but it all has to do with Ada's being a scholar. So, what does Mabel Stoddart do—left behind up there in London? She comes down—"

"Takes a situation as chambermaid!" Betty broke in. "I get you, Polly!"

"Under the name of Esther Hope—"

"Bai Jove! The ewdution of some of you geals—wemarkable!"

"But there's nothing in it!" Polly rashly cried. "It's all as plain now as Naomer's face! Or almost as plain! Mabel Stoddart got the job at the hotel, as being the best means of—"

"Not so loud, Polly dear," Betty warned. "I say, we have got to be careful what we say now. And in front of Ada—nothing!"

"Good job we've kept this silver mask business and the locknet to ourselves!" Tess muttered. "For all we know, it might do Mabel Stoddart a big injury, if the Sharrowes knew!"

"It does look as if she has been forced to act unknown to them," Pam put in, with a reflective nod. "But why, I wonder?"

"There is this, for a certainty," said Judy Cardew. "Ada isn't friendly towards Mabel. Yet at home they are under the same roof! That's bad."

"It's like Ada, I would say," grimaced Polly. "Oh, it's no use; I dislike that girl!"

"She is hardly a geal of pwepossessing character," Paula deplored. "Extwaordimawly lacking in anything appowching chawm, yes, wather!"

Stress of mind was taking so much out of Betty, she had to sit down.

"If only, girls—if only we could get in touch with this Mabel Stoddart!" she presently exclaimed. "But I don't see how we can do that, except by writing."

"And how could one put this business into writing?" said Polly. "Besides, it might scare Mabel Stoddart stiff, to get a letter saying such things!"

Betty looked up, after staring hard at the carpet in further deep thought.

"Simply return her the locknet? I might get the Sharrowes' London address on the quiet, and do that? But it's too late to do anything like that to-night. The post has gone."

She jumped up.

"I know what! No harm in asking Ada a little more about this Mabel Stoddart. I'll find Ada in a minute or two. I shall know how to put it."

This resulted in the Form captain missing all share in the traditional "hand-round." But even those who hung about in Study 12, during this last ten minutes before Assembly, felt too mystified and anxious to care much about a "snack." Naomer was the only one who manifested any real zest for cut cake and a glass of the famous clove "corjool."

"Bai, Jove, though," Paula drawled, "it is a wemarkable imbwohlo."

"A what?" cried Polly.

"A conglomewation of extwaowdinawy occuw-wences."

"Personally," said Polly, "I prefer to use only words I can spell. Hark! Here's Betty, coming back."

The door opened and Betty whirled in jubilantly.

"Hip, hip!" she cheered softly. "What DO you think?"

"What, Betty—what?"

"Bekas, you say—queek!"

But Betty, first of all, had to close the door behind her.

"Mabel Stoddart," she said then, "is even now on the way—to Morcove!"

"Wha-a-at!"

"I've just had it from Ada. When she got through to her home in London, a servant there said that Mabel Stoddart had left only half an hour ago, to catch a train to Barncombe, for Morcove. The girl is bringing a sealed packet to Mrs. Sharrow, instead of posting it."

"So she will be at the hotel in the morning! We may meet her!"

With that rejoicing comment Polly did a waltz round the study.

"This is great!"

"Yes, wather!"

"Did you get anything more out of Ada, about Mabel Stoddart?" one of the others eagerly questioned Betty.

"Very little. I have never known Ada Sharrow nastier than she was, just now, talking about Mabel Stoddart."

"Is that so?" smiled Polly. "Then all the more reason, if you ask me, for not letting Ada know—what we know!"

And, after another fascinated peep at the locket, Study 12's madcap returned it to her pocket, still smiling like that!

Betty Leaves a Note

AFTER breakfast, next morning, Betty Barton went up to Ada Sharrow.

"About that girl you mentioned last night, Ada; shall you be bringing her across to the school?"

"Bring her across to the school?" Morcove's new girl echoed incredulously. "Why should I?"

"I thought you might like to show her over the school."

"Then you thought wrong! As a matter of fact," Ada added tartly, "mother will send Mabel Stoddart back to London by the first train."

"You don't mean it!" cried Betty.

"Why shouldn't I? You seem to think that Mabel Stoddart is on a level with me! And, anyway, what concern is it of yours!"

Betty was not going to answer that bridling remark. She walked away, and was soon in talk with Polly and others.

"Bit of a snag, isn't it?" Betty summed up glumly. "If we miss seeing the girl whilst she is down here—"

"Dash it all, we mustn't miss her!" was Polly's headstrong cry. "Come to that, why not slip across to the hotel at once, Betty? There's just time before school."

"I think I will! She will be there, having come by that night train."

Polly whispered:

"Do you want the locket?"

"No," Betty decided, after considering for a moment. "I don't see how there will be time for a proper talk. What I must do—try to arrange a secret meeting before she goes back to London."

A minute after this the Form captain had her bicycle out of the shed and was pedalling down to the gates. Dolly Delane, the day girl, was

just turning in at the gateway, and there was a blithe exchange of greetings.

Then Betty put her head low over the handlebars and raced her hardest the short distance to the hotel. It was a fine morning after the wild night, and she quite enjoyed the spin.

At the hotel, few of the guests were in evidence. Betty surmised that they were mostly in the dining-room, at breakfast.

It was a quiet interval for the hall-porter, now that the rush to claim letters from the racks was over. Betty found this important personage in a very obliging mood.

"Miss Stoddart, miss? No such name—"

"Oh, but I'm not inquiring for somebody who is staying here. I— She was due to arrive from London by that all-night train."

The hall-porter shook his head.

"Hasn't turned up yet, miss! Perhaps she decided not to come any farther than Exeter during the night?"

"I shouldn't wonder if that's about it!" Betty exclaimed.

"Care to leave a message, miss, for when she does arrive?"

"I think I will."

"Page!"

And Morcove's Fourth Form captain found herself being shown, by a boy in buttons and white gloves, to where she could sit down and scribble off a note.

On a sheet of the Headland's own letter-paper she dashed off:

"Dear Miss Stoddart,—I am a complete stranger to you, but hope to prove your friend in need. Can you look out for me, on the moor, at mid-day? I shall be out of school then. A good place would be the clump of hollies—"

"She'll know which clump I mean," Betty smiled to herself, and wrote on:

"Do not inquire for me at the school, as Ada Sharrow might wonder what it all meant. Mrs. Sharrow does not know that I am leaving this note at the hotel. Yours sincerely,—BETTY BARTON, Cap., IV Form, Morcove."

But Mrs. Sharrow soon did know. Whilst Betty was speeding back to school, Mrs. Sharrow came down from her bed-room at the Headland to saunter grandly across to the hall-porter's counter, near the entrance.

"Morning, madam!"

"But what a night!" grumbled Mrs. Sharrow. "Hardly a wink of sleep! No letters for me?"

"None, madam."

"And has nobody inquired for me—somebody from London? Oh!" Mrs. Sharrow exclaimed, her eye falling upon an envelope addressed in a girlish hand to "Miss Stoddart."

She coolly picked it up.

"Who left this, John?"

"A scholar from Morcove, madam—"

"Not my daughter?"

"Oh, no, madam. I didn't ask her name. She expected, it seems, to find a Miss Stoddart here."

"Miss Stoddart is the person I am expecting. I wonder she hasn't got here by now." Mrs. Sharrow remarked touchily. "I will take charge of this note, John."

"Very good, madam!"

A little after this, at the breakfast-table, Mrs. Sharrow most unscrupulously opened the note and read it. And as she read her face darkened.

"Excuse me, madam—"

"What!" she snapped, starting out of a brooding state to find a pageboy at her elbow.

"A Miss Stoddart has arrived. She is in the front lounge."

"I'll come!"

Mrs. Sharrow said it, taking up the intercepted note to put it out of sight, whilst rising. Never yet had other guests and the waiters seen Mrs. Sharrow looking more irritable than she looked at this moment.

In the front lounge sat Mabel Stoddart, fagged and pale after her all-night journey. But there was to be no cry of kind concern from Mrs. Sharrow as she marched up to the girl. Instead: "Huh! Piece of madness, Mabel, if ever there was! But have you got the sealed packet all right?"

"Yes. There you are," Mabel said quietly, handing over the bulky linen-lined envelope.

Mrs. Sharrow took it with a bad-tempered snatch.

"It could have come just as safely by registered post!"

"But I couldn't have posted until this morning, and your telegram seemed to mean that it was very urgent."

"Rubbish! The truth is, Mabel, you wanted the excuse to invite yourself down here for a week or so—at my expense! Well, you just can't stay, so there! You—you would get on my nerves! You must catch the next train back. John!"

He came up smartly.

"The next train to London that this girl can catch?"

"The ten-fifty is a slow——"

"Never mind the slowness. You'll catch that train, Mabel. Meantime, I suppose you want some breakfast?"

"No, thank you," Mabel answered distantly. "I broke the journey at Exeter and got some breakfast before coming on. I would rather take a stroll and get a breath of sea air."

"Please yourself, my girl! I must have MY breakfast, anyhow!"

And Mrs. Sharrow marched back to the dining-room, taking the sealed-up package with her.

"If they knew!" Mabel was thinking, now that she was under this roof again. "If they knew!"

Same hotel where she, up to as late as the day before yesterday, had been in service as a chambermaid!

A member of the staff then; and now—simply Mabel Stoddart, a girl—she almost hoped she might be described as a young lady!—down from London on a flying visit. Someone connected with Mrs. Sharrow, the very guest who had been robbed!

"But it's funny, too!" Mabel suddenly smiled to herself. "It really is!"

The hall-porter, appearing to approve of her, offered a polite remark as she went by.

"The way down to the seashore, miss—a zig-zag path, very pretty!"

"Oh, thanks, but I think I prefer to take just a stroll around, up here—on the moor. The sea air is just as good up here?"

"Better, if anything!"

He bowed her out through the revolving glass doors.

"And that"—Mabel smiled again to herself—"is the same hall-porter, John, whom 'Esther Hope' phoned down to on Sunday night, inquiring about a train to London!"

She laughed inwardly, then looked very grave.

"But it will be no laughing matter," the thought had come, "if I don't find my locket!"

"There's the Girl!"

A BATCH of eager chums awaited Betty as she came whirring in at the Morcove gateway on her machine.

"See her, Betty? Was she there?"

"No! She hasn't turned up yet."

"Um! Rotten!" said Polly, with her usual inability to endure a check.

"But I left a note for her, girls, so she will know when and where to find me—at midday."



Mrs. Sharrow spoke in an impressive whisper: "Find out, Ada—at all costs! And for a reward you shall have anything you ask—even if it has to come out of Mabel's money!"

"Only thing you could do," nodded the mad-cap. "But it means going into class for a morning's work in this state of suspense—ugh!"

The bell was even then ringing, and Betty had to whirl on to the cycle sheds, to leave her machine there. At the last moment she came bounding into the schoolhouse, rejoicing her chums during the march-in to class.

Polly had brought all Betty's requirements down from Study 12—or thought she had. It was not until half an hour later that the Form captain found herself minus one book that the current lesson rendered vitally necessary.

So, for once, it was the Form captain who had to request leave to run upstairs for that book. Miss Everard, whilst conceding the request, sighed.

"Careless, Betty! And you, the captain! Don't be a moment longer than you can help, anyhow."

Away went Betty, to mount the stairs two at a time and then race down the Fourth-Form corridor to Study 12. That book—where was it? Now, why on earth wasn't it here, where it should be, on the study table?

The answer seemed to be, "bekas" Naomer had used the book as a handy missile for hurling at Paula probably. At any rate, Betty at last found the book lying upon the floor behind Paula's favourite armchair.

Then Betty, in spite of wasted time, stepped to take a look out of the window before rushing down to class again.

She wanted to make sure that the day was keeping fine. To her joy, it was. Pale autumn sunshine was upon the moor, and—

"Hallo, who's that out there—my goodness!—just near the holly clump?" she said excitedly under her breath.

A girl! A well-grown girl, and to watch her was to feel certain that she was pretending to saunter just there quite casually, whereas she really wanted to search for something. And this, too, at the very spot where the Morcove clothing and the locket had been discovered by Study 12!

Betty forgot the urgent need to return downstairs. She gazed fixedly at that distant figure, Mabel Stoddart? Of course, it was she!

So there the girl was, and if only one could run out to her now—this instant—

Not to be thought of! The delay, however maddening, must be endured. And, after all, there was the comforting conviction that she must have received that note, so she would be almost certain to be at that spot again at midday.

"She would go to the hotel first, before coming out for a stroll," Betty reflected, still watching.

Suddenly she saw the girl go upon her knees at the holly clump and reach a hand far in below the lowest branches. Expecting to find the bundle of clothing, of course!

"Phew!" Betty fumed, although it was not like her to get so agitated. "And we've got that bundle of clothing in this study. The locket, too! Poor Mabel, she'll be in a dither, wondering what it all means!"

Already Betty could see the distant figure, out yonder on the moor, making anxious movements, just as if a dismayed: "Not there!" had thrown the girl into utter panic.

She was casting about amongst the heather and dying bracken and rank grass, trying to find—what had already been found by others!

Reluctantly Betty withdrew her eager gaze at last. If only—oh, if only one could have ended that girl's suspense at once by running out to speak with her! Somehow, it seemed so certain that she was one who deserved to be befriended. But school was school. The note had said midday, and midday it must be!

Arrived at the ground floor, Betty was going to streak for the class-room, and then—she stopped dead.

Someone, reaching the open front door at that very moment, had called out to her—Betty—instead of ringing the visitors' bell.

Mrs Sharrow!

"Just a moment, to save trouble," was the curt remark that took Betty across to the threshold.

"I have come across from the hotel, girl, to see my daughter."

"Yes, Mrs. Sharrow. She is in class now; but will you come in, and I'll let them know in the class-room."

"I'll wait here."

"Very well," Betty said, and ran round to the Fourth Form class-room, where Miss Everard was ready to exclaim:

"The time you've been, Betty!"

"Yes. And please, Miss Everard, Mrs. Sharrow is at the porch, wanting to see Ada."

"What? Dear, dear!" sighed the Form-mistress. "Ada Sharrow! I suppose you must go. It is your mother; but I hope she won't keep you too long."

Betty went to her desk; Ada Sharrow marched out of the class-room with an air that seemed to say: "I shall be just as long as I like!"

The new girl found her mother pacing about on the gravel at a short distance from the porch.

"Come on to the grass, Ada," was the first testy remark. "There is something that is very important and very private. You know that Mabel Stoddart took it into her head to come down to Morcove during the night?"

"Yes. Is she here?"

"She has turned up, and it is a pure fluke that this didn't come into her hands the moment she got to my hotel. Ada, what do you know about this?"

The note, written by Betty and intended for Mabel Stoddart, changed hands. Ada, as she glanced it through, sucked in a lip. Her eyes, when she raised them from the sheet of paper, were round with amazement.

"Nothing, mother! I—I can't make it out!"

"Neither can I! But," said Mrs. Sharrow, taking back the note hastily to put it away, "it is something that we must get to the bottom of—at once! You must help me there, Ada. You are in this school—in the same Form as the girl who wrote this note!"

"Yes! But I—I— Well, there, I'm just staggered!" Morcove's new girl panted. "Why, until last evening, when I was doing that bit of telephoning for you, I don't believe Betty or any other girl had ever heard of Mabel Stoddart!"

"That only makes it all the more—disquieting. I wish, in any case, Ada, that Mabel had not come down here! I can't stand the sight of her."

"She brought the packet you wanted?"

"Oh, yes. But it was not as urgent as all that. I merely wished to send up some securities to my broker in London, for him to sell."

Ada sucked in her lip again, looking more perturbed than ever.

"Mother, are you getting hard up?"

"You mustn't ask me such questions, Ada! I am no better off for having been robbed, anyhow!"

"And they haven't caught—that chamber-maid?"

"They've done—and will do—nothing!" Mrs. Sharrow snarled. "Even if they did catch her, would I get back the money and the jewellery? Would she be likely to have the stolen valuables upon her? But what you have to think about, Ada, is—that note from Betty Barton to Mabel Stoddart! I don't like the look of it."

They drifted, in a worried silence, farther across the grass, then Mrs. Sharrow halted Ada to give her a full look.

"Are you dead sure, Ada, that you have not babbled about Mabel—about her being left all that money some time back?"

"Mother, just as if! I've never breathed a word to Mabel herself, because you said that she had better be kept in ignorance. Is it likely I would gas about it to the girls down here?"

Mrs. Sharrow looked relieved, but only slightly so.

"There's one thing, Ada; that meeting at mid-day will not come off! I have ordered Mabel to return to London by the first possible train. A car is taking her to Barncombe Junction in a quarter of an hour's time."

"Is she at the hotel, waiting?"
 "She went for a stroll. "I thought I saw her wandering about on the moor. But she will be walking back to the hotel by now, and I, too, must go back, Ada. Not that I mind if I don't see her when she goes."

"About—Betty Barton, mother. I suppose I had better keep my eye upon her?"

"You must, Ada! And keep your ears open, too! Perhaps you can manage to overhear talk that may take place in that girl's study."

"The mother added in an impressive whisper:
 "Find out, Ada! At all costs, find out! And for a reward you shall have anything you ask, in reason—even if it has to come out of Mabel's money."

Then Ada Sharrow knew how it was with her mother. She knew—understood in a flash! And the desperate recklessness that those words had implied, the realisation of threatened poverty that could only be averted by inroads upon Mabel Stoddart's own fortune—it all combined to send her back to the class-room, presently, in a crafty mood.

BUT for "break" along with the rest of the Foam, Betty & Co. were in no mood for games.

They had strayed, with an innocent appearance as could be assumed, to the boundary hedge run-

ning between the games-field and the open moor.

"She was there at the hollies—Mabel Stoddart, for a cert!" Betty whispered. "But now—no, she's gone!"

"Or you could have slipped out to her," Polly fumed. "Ugh, this delay! When she's surrounded with such mystery that—well, I've never known anything like it!"

"Wather not, bai Jove! Considering that it began with her d'vessing up as the Phantom School—"

"St! Careful what you say about that business," Betty warned softly. "Oh, bother, and here comes Ada Sharrow!"

The obnoxious new girl came straight at them all, a provoking smile on her face.

"Hockey pracer after school, I suppose, Betty?"
 "Er—no, Ada; not this morning."

"Oh, you surprise me! There's been such a fuss about games!"

"You caused that bit of a fuss to be made," was the captain's bland retort, "by always wanting to be off to the hotel."

"I shan't be wanting to go across at midday," Ada said, her eyes glinting. "No need! I've seen mother this morning. As for Mabel Stoddart—"

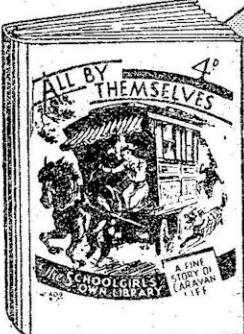
The crafty speaker paused, watchful for any start of quickened interest on the part of her schoolmates.

"Mabel will soon be in the train for London!"


"Oh, will she?" Betty managed to respond mildly, whilst her heart seemed to sink like a stone. "Not staying long, after coming such a distance from Town?"

(Continued on the next page.)

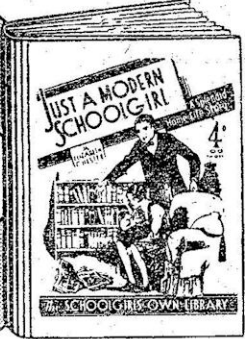
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"No, well"—tartly—"mother was cross with her. I told you what it would be! I can't make out why Mabel wanted to come—wasting other people's money on fares!" And, after a pause: "What are you girls doing at midday?"

Betty, recollecting a snappish retort of Ada's after breakfast, might have used it now. "What concern is it of yours?" But she preferred to say, carelessly:

"Oh, we shall be about—some of us, anyhow."
"But not at games? Huh!" Ada sniffed and walked away humming.

Instantly Polly plucked the captain by the sleeve. "Betty, has that girl smelt a rat? She seemed to me to be very interested in our movements—after being so stand-offish."

Others murmured that they thought so, too. "It will be all right if we don't go out as a crowd at midday," Betty said cheerfully. "Hadn't Polly and I better go alone?"

This was agreed to immediately; another instance of Study's 12's fine team-spirit. Accordingly, after the midday dismissal, Betty and Polly quietly slipped away, whilst the rest of the chums showed themselves on the games-field.

"I'll never believe that anyone saw us just then," was Polly's comment, after they had passed out by the side gate on to the moor.

"But, Polly," muttered Betty, with returning uneasiness, a few minutes later, "SHE isn't in sight near the hollies, as she should be by now!"

"Don't worry," counselled Polly, who was all elation now that she was out on the adventure. "Like a sensible girl, she has got there early and is lying low!"

"Or has she had to catch a train back to London already?" the captain pondered. "Ada talked of the girl's soon being in a train again."

"In which case you may be sure, Betty, Mabel has contrived to leave a note for you—at the hollies."

"Oh!" And Betty's face brightened. "Of course, there's that! And we know for certain that she was at the hollies shortly after nine. I saw her there! She must have had my note, and if she couldn't keep the appointment she would surely try to leave a message."

They scurried on over the rough ground. Less than five minutes later they were at the clump of hollies, and the disappointment at failing to encounter Mabel Stoddart gave place to an eager hunting about—for a scribbled note.

Stooping low, both girls routed and looked in all likely places.

Under the hollies themselves, where the bundle of clothing had been found yesterday; all amongst the tufts of heath and between the drooping bracken-fronds; under largish stones lying loosely at the spot—so they searched desperately, and in vain.

Polly soon lost her temper.

"Dash! She was not here, and there's no message, and we are never going to get to the bottom of this mystery! Ugh, hang, what a sickener it is!"

"Awfully trying," Betty sighed. "Especially as it seems to have something to do with the Sharrow now! I don't know, Polly, but it looks as if Mabel Stoddart is not getting fair play. Fancy Mrs. Sharrow ordering her back to London at once, when a few days down here would have been such a treat for any girl."

Polly straightened up, beating peaty soil from her hands.

"Well, we've looked everywhere, Betty, and— Oh, heck, Betty!" she changed to a seething

whisper. "See who is coming towards us! Dash the girl!" Polly stamped.

For it was Ada Sharrow—again.

"Hallo, you two!"

The voice had a sort of reedy laughter in it, most unpleasant.

"But what on earth are you two girls up to then?"

"Nothing!" Polly said furiously and then wished she had said almost anything but that. Ugh!

"I wondered," tittered Ada Sharrow, "if you had made some wonderful discovery—of mother's stolen jewellery, he, he, he!"

"Oh, don't be funny!" flared out Polly.

"Seems to me it's you two girls who are being that," Ada sniggered. "Seriously, I suppose the thief might have buried the jewellery out here on the moor? To come back for it at some future time, when all the excitement is over. I know one thing, anyhow. It doesn't look as if that thieving chambermaid is going to be taken up by the police. Her catching that train to London last Sunday night did the trick!"

"No, well—"

"Talking of trains to London," Ada smiled on, "Mabel Stoddart caught the ten-fifty all right. A taxi ran her to Barncombe from the hotel just in time."

So there it was then! The girl herself was on her way back to London, and there had been no hastily pencilled message left behind by her. The note, it seemed to Betty and Polly alike, might never have been written, for all the good it had accomplished.

"I say," Ada suddenly smirked, "got time to come with me to the hotel? It's only just across —"

"No, why should we?" Betty said, with something of Polly's irritability.

"Oh, well, just to be a bit friendly for once!" Ada said in a fawning tone that was new to her. "I'm afraid I have been rather to blame myself; but— Look here, would you two like to be friends with me now?"

"I'm sorry," Betty said, looking the odious girl full in the eyes, "but I don't think I would."

"As for me," said Polly, "I'm quite positive that I wouldn't!"

"Nasty as ever, is that it?" Ada instantly sneered. "Oh, all right!"

"As captain, I'll give you fairplay, Ada Sharrow," Betty was quick to add. "As a school-fellow, I'll do my best for you in all ordinary ways. But when it comes to friendship—no!"

"Not likely!" Polly chimed in grimly.

And they both walked away.

After Dark

"NOW we know!"

Polly said it fiercely, after a disgusted look in the direction of Ada Sharrow, who was sauntering off towards the hotel.

"She is spying upon us, Betty!"

"Not the least doubt. Her mother has set her on to it. And why?"

With the next breath Betty said:

"Polly—goodness! Did Mrs. Sharrow get hold of my note to the Stoddart girl? Did Mabel Stoddart never see it? Has she gone back to London knowing nothing about it?"

"Betty, that's it, of course!" was the other's emphatic cry. "And there's artfulness for you. There's unfairness!"

"Cruel. We'll manage, though!" said Betty.

"We'll beat them yet. What time will Mabel Stoddart get to her home in London? A little after five?"
 "About that."

"Then, Polly, I'm going into Barncombe after tea, to ring her up in London."

"What!"
 "I can get Mrs. Sharrow's 'phone number by inquiring at the Barncombe Central Post-office. If it takes my last penny of pocket-money—"

"It needn't do that, Betty! We're all in this. Here let's hurry back now and look up a time-table to see exactly when the Stoddart girl gets to London."

The railway A.B.C. was ready to hand at the school-house. Betty, with a finger picking out small print, read aloud to Polly:

"Ten-fifty from Barncombe, change at Exeter—arrives Paddington four-fifty. Paddington is in the West-End. So is the Sharrows' home. By half-past five, at the latest, Mabel Stoddart should be there!"

Betty clapped shut the time-table and hung it up again.

"So after tea, Polly, you and I will be off. And we will take jolly good care that Ada Sharrow, if she is on the spy, doesn't get a chance to follow!"

But that precaution did not have to be exercised.

When the time came—feverishly awaited by the entire chummary—Betty and Polly could go off quite openly.

They had found out that Ada Sharrow had obtained permission to go across to the hotel for tea with her mother.

There was, however, the hotel to pass on the ride into Barncombe; but this did not present any great risk of being seen. The grand new building was set well back from the road, which ran between banks just there.

Nor was the feeble daylight, at that late hour of the autumn afternoon, favourable to anybody watching from, say, an upper window of the hotel.

Betty and Polly were going to have to race back, after telephoning, to get in before dark.

The town post-office was at its busiest when they got to it; clerks from banks and other establishments having registered letters to hand in, and so on. Not until half-past five did Betty get the call put through, and then she was warned that there might be some time to wait.

There was! She and Polly—they stood kicking their heels in the post-office whilst the minutes crept by, and out of doors the last of the daylight left the quiet High Street to approaching night.

"Oh, dear!" Polly fumed. "Why don't they hurry up?"

"Yet it's pretty wonderful, Polly, that you can telephone at all, such a great—"

Tr-r-r-r-ring, ring, ring RING!

"Oh—"

"Your call, miss! Number One box!"

"Thanks!"



"I couldn't get her on the 'phone, Polly," said Betty ruefully. "Mabel Stoddart is not returning to-night!"

Betty flew to the sound-proof box, leaving Polly on watch outside.

Three minutes, the call. Three minutes for Betty to introduce herself to a girl who had never even heard of her, and try to go into all this mystery—one that might be called the 'Mystery of the Phantom Schoolgirl.' Polly did not envy her chum the job.

At last Betty came out of the box, and her expression was a glum one.

"I didn't get her, Polly."

"What!"

"I only spoke to somebody—a servant called Jane. She said that Mabel Stoddart isn't expected home. There has been a wire to Jane saying: 'Not returning to-night!'"

"Come outside," heaved Polly, as if afraid of exploding in the post office. "Oh, hang! When ARE we going to get hold of this girl and find out—everything!"

"But there's just this," Betty whispered after they had reached the twilight pavement. "If she isn't returning to-night—that means, perhaps, she is still down here, after all!"

"You mean—unbeknown to the Sharrows? She let them think she caught the train, but she—Betty"—and Polly's hands came together with a little clap—"that's it, you may depend!"

"Then we may see her to-morrow? Perhaps she has written to me in reply to my note, which she did receive, after all. A letter may be arriving by the evening delivery at the school."

"Oh, let's away on the bikes, Betty—hard as we can go."

They did so, whirring out of the town just as some of the dimmer shops were showing lights in their old-fashioned windows.

Half-way to Morcove it became evident that the rest of the run could not be completed without lighting-up. Betty had remembered to bring matches—in case. They got the cycle lamps going and then purred on again, soon leaving the hotel behind them on their left.

The palatial new building had looked bigger than ever, looming blackly in the falling night, with so many lit-up windows on all the many floors.

After such a cheery sight as that, the lonely road and the open moor upon its right seemed to be very dark indeed. Yet the night had not so completely enshrouded the scene that Betty, all at once, failed to discern a figure, going on before them both—on foot, and hastily.

Betty put her brakes on hard.

"Whoa, Polly!" she said softly. "Polly! Supposing that is Mabel Stoddart? For she seems to be going in the direction of the holly clump."

"Whew! I say, shall we?"

"Leave the bikes and go after her? I'm for doing it—yes! Can't help it if we're in late, Polly. This business comes before everything else now."

"And nobody can say it doesn't concern us and the school," Polly rejoined as they both turned out their cycle lamps and then wheeled the machines to the roadside grass, "when it began with a Phantom Schoolgirl in our school!"

Silently they laid the machines upon the grass, then padded off on to the rank and dewy wilderness once more.

In the darkness, by peering hard, they could just make out the head and shoulders of the girl who hurried fast in advance. The rest of her figure was obscured by intervening gorse and brambles.

Suddenly they realised that she had started to run, and they felt sure that she had glanced behind and taken fright, knowing herself to be followed.

In a few moments they could tell that they were gaining, although the girl ahead of them had put on speed and was dodging this way and that as she ran. It encouraged them to put every ounce of energy into a final overtaking rush, but what brought the flight and pursuit to an end with unexpected suddenness was the fugitive's dropping something that she had to stop to recover.

Betty and Polly dashed closer, as she was still having to peer about frantically, the dropped article being lost in the heather.

Then, realising that these two girls were almost up with her in the darkness, she turned and ran on again.

"Oh, the silly!" Polly panted. "Mabel Stoddart!" she called out beseechingly. "Stop, stop! Friends!"

At that instant, Betty struck something with her foot. It was so certainly the object that the fugitive had dropped and had been compelled to abandon, she fetched up sharply with a little cry that arrested Polly.

"Something she dropped, Polly!"

"What is it, Betty?"

"Feels like a small, flat case of some sort, wrapped up in brown paper. The string's coming off! I say, Polly—"

"Look and see! Why not? I would!"

"Somehow, I feel entitled to."

Betty clawed away the brown-paper wrapping, and could tell that she was then handling a leather-covered case.

"Feels like a jewel-case, Polly. Jewels!" Betty spoke on in tremendous excitement. "And jewellery was part of that robbery at the hotel."

"Let me see," clamoured Polly, standing closer in the darkness. "Yes! Look, there a monogram in gilt on the lid—'L. A. S.'"

"Sharrow! 'S' stands for Sharrow," breathed Betty. "It was Mrs. Sharrow who was robbed. Polly, we've got the stolen jewels!"

"If they're inside. Are they? Will it open?"

"No—yes! Oh," Betty gasped as pressure with a thumbnail released a catch, so that she could raise the lid, "Polly, look! Mrs. Sharrow's stolen jewels!"

"Then," the madcap said grimly, "that girl who had them just now—she had no right to them! And the girl was Mabel Stoddart, you think?"

"It must have been," Betty answered huskily. After all, Polly, remember: Mabel Stoddart was Esther Hope, the chambermaid. And the chambermaid disappeared just before the robbery became known."

Polly gave a dejected sigh.

"It is so," she agreed. "The robbery took place whilst the girl was down here as Esther Hope. She has been back at Morcove to-day in her own name, and we know she did not catch that train home to London. She has been hanging about, waiting for darkness—"

"So as to be able to get the jewels from some temporary hiding-place, perhaps—and hide them on the moor?"

It was Betty's turn to sigh.

"Yes," Polly muttered at the end of another rueful pause. "And wouldn't Ada Sharrow have the laugh of us if she knew? We have been going to all this trouble to help the Stoddart girl when she is only a thief, after all!"

END OF THIS WEEK'S STORY.

Complete Next Tuesday

You MUST read of Betty and Co.'s determined efforts to solve the amazing mystery surrounding Mabel Stoddart. Next week's fine long complete Morcove School story entitled:

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