

“KEPT SECRET FROM THE SCHOOL”

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KEPT SECRET from the SCHOOL

BY

MARJORIE STANTON

MISS KITTEN has never been popular with her Form at Morcove; time and time again she has driven the chums almost to the point of rebellion. And yet none of them know Miss Kitten's guilty secret—a secret she is desperately anxious shall never be revealed.

CHAPTER I.

Storm in the Night

"GOODNESS, what a night!"

"Yes, isn't it!"

"Tewwible, bai Jove!"

"You can hear the waves—hark!"

"And the wind—blowing great guns!"

"So I zink, everybody; no use trying to get to sleep yet! I zink we better all keep awake, and presently see about a snack! Bekas—"

"Is that Naomer, talking about snacks?"

"Yes-s-s! Ha, ha, ha!"

For a moment, in this big dormitory at Morcove School, the laughter of a great many girls overrode the noises of the gale.

Then the hurly-burly of the storm came again; the howling and shrilling of a wind blowing straight in from the tempestuous sea, with a harsh under-roar of the breakers that were crashing along Morcove's rock-walled shore.

"I don't know about snacks," madcap Polly Linton called out gaily, in the darkness. "But some of us will be snacked at if Miss Kitten turns up and finds you jabbering away. When you know I want to go to sleep and be fit for work, really hard work, in the morning!"

"Oh, yeah!" the madcap's mock-virtuous complaint was received, with more merriment.

"Bekas," shrilled that dusky imp, Naomer Nakara, "who was eet got feefy lines from Miss Kitten, for slacking in class—booh!"

"Who was it got a hundred lines, kid—"

"Not for slacking!" Naomer fairly yelled.

"Only for saying what I thought of her!"

"You didn't say anything of the sort!"

"I did, Polly—under my breath!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" from all over the dark room

once again, and then it was playfully suggested by the madcap:

"Hands up all those who have got lines to do for Miss Kitten!"

"Hands up the whole Form, at that rate," laughed jolly Helen Craig.

"Hands up everybody in favour of going on ze strike bekas of Miss Kitten!" cried Naomer, suddenly standing up in bed to count the voting.

"I can see, so come on—queek!"

"And I can see a certain girl getting herself expelled—"

"It won't be me, Polly!" the dusky imp asserted, holding up both her hands—such was her present enthusiasm for a general rising in the Form.

The resultant pose—a most unsteady one—was too tempting for Polly to be able to refrain from hurling a pillow.

Whizz! and Naomer was knocked neatly and harmlessly off her balance, to the cry of:

"Well bowled, Polly!" from various hilarious juniors.

"Wow, hark to that!" said the madcap. The wind had buffeted the great schoolhouse harder than ever, and a burst of rain came against the windows like thrown gravel. "And kindly return my pillow, kid!"

"Not ze bit of eet! I could do wiz another pillow, just nicely! In fact," Naomer announced,

"I shall soon be 'able to do wiz a new bed altogether! Bekas, eet is all in such a muddle—"

Hi, Paula, are you asleep?"

"Asleep, bai Jove!" wailed the occupant of a bed neighbouring the imp's. "Some prospect of—"

Owch! Gah, stalp eet! Geraway!"

"Oh, sorry," the madcap apologised sweetly, having swooped upon the wrong bed—by accident,

as she would have oft-teased Paula Creel believe.

"But I must have my pillow!"

"Your pillow," cried Naomer, kneeling up in bed to hurl it—"your pillow, Polly, is over there!"

Vigorously the dusky one must have hurled it—too vigorously! There seemed to be an instantaneous belief that it was going to flop somewhere with devastating results, and there was an anticipatory:

"Ooo!"

Sure enough, the wildly-hurled missile—large and white in the darkness—came down flop! on a dressing-table, scattering hair brushes and other oddsands to the floor in a noisy cascade.

But that noise was rendered almost negligible, as it happened, by the far greater commotion due to Naomer's bed finally giving away under her violent activities.

The madcap, casting about for Naomer in the darkness, to make her go and retrieve that pillow, could not find her. The madcap, like the rest of the girls, could only hear Naomer's half-smothered voice protesting:

"Hi! Bekas, I am all wound up; I can't move, what ze diggings! I am on ze floor!"

The peals of laughter now! Only a few girls endeavoured to stifle their hilarity, by burying their faces in bed-coverings.

Moment, this, for Pam Willoughby, the Form captain, to take action in that calm and efficient way of hers!

Pam always kept a pocket torch under her pillow, in case of emergency. She switched it on, and the brilliant ray illumined a scene so chaotic, as regards the locality of Naomer's collapsed bed, the laughter rose to another crescendo.

"Yes, well," Pam herself laughed; "look sharp, over there, and get to rights. We don't want any more trouble with Miss Kitten."

"Get to rights!" shrilled Naomer. "How can I?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Polly, able to locate Naomer now, took hold of her by one ear.

"My pillow, dear, please," requested the madcap sweetly.

"Eeeeee-eee-eee! Let go!"

"The sooner you get me my pillow, the sooner I shall let go!"

"And help me to get my bed to rights?" Naomer stipulated.

"Paula will do that for you," said Polly, giving the held ear an extra tweak. "That's right," she sweetly approved the dusky one's capitulation. "How good you can be when you like! A little firmness—"

"Eeee-eee-eee!"

"That is all that is required! I think," Polly remarked to the highly amused roomful of girls, "I should be the Form-mistress!"

"Sweetie!" Naomer protested, picking up the pillow to return it to Polly. "Bekas, you began oet! And now, what about my bed! Bekas, look at eet!"

Volunteers, however, were forthcoming. Pam, out of bed, held the torch so that the collapsed bed was in a spotlight, and some four or five mirthful girls got busy.

They began by heaping aside all the bedding and bedclothes on to Paula Creel, in an adjacent bed, probably as a playful rebuke for her having failed to get up and render aid.

As Paula objected to being temporarily buried alive, she endeavoured to voice protests that were likely to become much too loud in the end. So Polly sat on the bedding to keep her quiet.

"Goodness, though," someone now discovered,

"this bed of Naomer's is broken on one side!"

"Good job, bekas, eef Miss Kitten comes in —"

"And—hark! Miss Kitten IS coming!" warning came from a girl over by the door.

There was just time for Polly to nip back to her own bed, and then the door opened, letting in the Form-mistress.

In spite of this suddenness, did Miss Kitten find hilarity prevailing? Did she discover a scene that could only be attributed to an overplus of high spirits, after lights out? Not at all!

Miss Kitten, ever ready to find an excuse for dealing severely with her charges, found them at this moment in varying states of gravity and concern.

"Well?" the Form-mistress rapped out. "You were not as quiet as this a minute ago!"

"No, bekas, zat was when my bed has just gone bust!"

"We are putting it together again, Miss Kitten," Pam calmly announced. "There's a rail broken, but a chair will keep it in place for tonight."

"I'd like to know how it occurred!" And a quick step brought Miss Kitten fiercely across the room. Her eye singled out tall Pam with that particular disfavour which the Form so often noticed.

Other girls might be snapped at and "lined"; but it was against the Form captain Miss Kitten's animus was chiefly directed.

"You don't keep order, Pam Willoughby!"

"A night like this, Miss Kitten, you could hardly expect us to go to sleep at once."

"I expect the Form to go to sleep—storm or no storm!"

Pam received this with a shrug, implying regret that any Form-mistress should say such a thing. It only gave the Form another excuse for saying that Miss Kitten did not understand girls—or, at any rate, Morcove girls!

Now the raging wind set window-hangings fluttering like flags, for the Form-mistress had left the door wide open, and that created a strong draught.

Even to-night some of the windows had been left open six inches at the top—for Morcove gloried in fresh air and plenty of it. But now the door banged in the wind, and although that was really Miss Kitten's fault, she at once strode to one of the windows to close it.

"Of course you can't sleep!" she muttered peevishly, "if you will be so silly, all of you! And the rain coming in, too! Shut that other window as well, one of you; push the sash right up, I tell you!"

So, whilst certain girls, in fits of silent laughter, were still reconstructing the broken bed, one who was over by that rain-whipped window set about closing it.

This girl was Tess Trelawney, one of the chums of Study 12. It was like her to have drifted to the window, to see what sort of effects the stormy night was providing for an eye as artistic as hers.

She knew that a full moon was somewhere in the cloudy sky, and sure enough the shrieking gale was so tearing some of the clouds to bits that gleams of moonlight came and went.

All was by no means pitch darkness outside. Vividly, indeed, moonlight illumined the heaving sea beyond the cliffs, and the drowned moorland to the left of the coast road to Barncombe.

For just a couple of seconds the moon shone out as clearly as that from between one silver-

edged cloud and another—and then Tess, her eyes studying the marvellous effect—noted something that held her spellbound.

"Girl!" Miss Kitten called out angrily; "did you hear what I said about that window!"

"Yes, Miss Kitten; but—it's strange. I fancy there is somebody out there—"

"What!"

"Down by the gateway; standing about—"

"Ooo, hooray! Bekas, gorjus!" Naomer clapped. "Bekas—burgillars!"

If Naomer didn't get another hundred lines for that! The Form was thinking. But Naomer didn't, after all! Apparently, Miss Kitten had become so startled by what Tess had remarked, she had paid no heed to the imp.

Some of the girls saw the Form-mistress, at the window she had just closed, set her face very close to the glass, peering out and downwards.

The moon was going behind black clouds again, however; it was inky darkness that prevailed out of doors next moment. She turned away from the window, and as if in great agitation she hastened across to the door.

Only when she was at the room's threshold did she check the hasty step and face round, a strange flutter taking a good deal of the tartness out of her voice.

"You—you must have been mistaken, Tess. I am sure. A night like this, it couldn't be anyone out there. Back to bed, all of you! Pam, keep your Form in order! I—I don't want to have to come up again!"

Then she was gone—with a haste that so astonished the girls, some of them remained agape.

"Turned rather queer, didn't she?" suggested Helen Craig, with a little laugh.

"Got ze wind up, I zink, bekas, she thinks eet may be burgillars!"

"But she made a point of saying that there couldn't be anyone!" Polly remarked. "And then scooted away as if—as if—well, as if she meant to go and see!"

"Are we to have those windows closed all night, as she said, Pam?" inquired Etta Hargrove.

"No, I don't think so—much too stuffy!"

A subdued cheer from the Form! Pam had to smile. It was with such a joyous determination that the two windows were opened again, almost as wide as before.

Storm, to-night, raging all along the rugged Morcove coast. And storm, before long, in Morcove School itself, unless Pam and her chums were misreading the portents!

MISS KITTEN made her way downstairs with great haste, turning aside into a first-floor passage that led to her own private sitting-room.

Any of her colleagues would have been surprised to see her doing this. It was an

hour since the girls had been trooped upstairs to the dormitories, and by now the great school-house would have been silent for the night, only the wind so boomed around it.

The headmistress had retired to rest; so had other teachers and all the servants. But here was Miss Kitten, coming silent of foot back to a room where the fire was nearly dead.

Closing the door, and leaving the room in darkness, she crossed to the window and peeped round one edge of the lowered blind.

Perhaps the moon was shining forth again; perhaps she saw something out there in the stormy night to intensify the nervousness which had seized her just now. For, drawing away from the window, she gave a lift and fall of the hands, muttering tensely to herself:

"It's she; it's she! And on a night like this!"

CHAPTER 2.

The Meeting in the Darkness

NOW Miss Kitten clicked on one of the lights in her private room, so as to be able to give frowning eyes to a note which she drew from a pocket.

"After the wrong you have done me" (ran the few lines of writing), "it is cruel of you to want me to stay out of your life. But I warn you, I am spending my last penny to come



Despite Paula's lamentations the girls gaily continued to pile bedclothes upon her. They were unaware that Miss Kitten was approaching the dormitory only too willing to catch them at something which would merit punishment!

down to Morcove. Penniless when I get to my journey's end, I may have to take shelter in the school, and then—the school must know all—"

There was more, written on cheap notepaper in a feminine hand; but the Form-mistress only read as far as that. Then, in a sudden fury, she crumpled up the note and took it to the dying fire.

The paper would not catch at once, and she poked it closer to the last red embers, blowing upon the latter to revive them.

Their glow did revive, and then the paper took fire, giving a flicker of flames that brought out the expression of the face set so close to the bars—a hard, ruthless expression. As if Miss Kitten, at that moment, were feeling anything but pity in her heart for someone!

What, then, did all this mean? What was this, about the Form-mistress, that was her own guilty secret, unsuspected by the school!

Miss Kitten, lately appointed to such a fine position in the school, on the strength of excellent credentials; and yet—who, seeing her at this moment, could have said she was a fit and proper person to be mistress of a Form!

Sighing heavily, she rose up from the hearthrug and passed out of the room, silently clicking off that one light.

As silently, too, she now went down to the ground floor, where all was darkness. From a peg in the coat-room used by her girls she took down things that would equip her for a walk in the rain.

Hers was the desperate feeling that she must steal out and then return, unbeknown to all other inmates of the vast schoolhouse, whether teachers, scholars or servants.

A few minutes' secret talk, and perhaps she could stave off exposure, disgrace—the loss of all that imposture had brought her!

At the end of a dark side passage she unlocked and unbolted a door that opened on to the grounds. The wind swirled in furiously as she drew the door open, and with panicky haste she slipped forth and dragged the door shut.

If an inner door in the schoolhouse had banged, just then! The noise might have brought the headmistress herself downstairs—and she, a Form-mistress, in this position!

Another heavy rain cloud was passing over, letting down sheets of rain. Before she had prowled a dozen yards in the deep darkness her waterproof things were streaming.

Could there have been a worse night for having to creep out like this! So she raged in her mind, thinking only of herself, and as for the hapless creature whom she had to meet—"serve her right!"

The high wind carried that lowering cloud away, and there was a lull in the rainstorm, the moon glimmering forth once more.

Then, suddenly, it gave the guilty-minded woman a dreadful shock to see her unwelcome visitor—a young woman—sheltering in the porch itself.

It became Miss Kitten's fear that at this very moment there was a hand at the bell press, giving a despairing "Let me in!" ring that would rouse half the school.

She rushed along rain-soddened gravel to the porch, and the person who huddled there faced round, emitting a little cry that was easily lost in the noises of the wild night.

"Have you been ringing?" panted Miss Kitten,

her face showing as white as a death-mask in moonlight.

"No. But I—I was going to," was the response in a weak voice. "I felt I must! It's such a terrible night, Julia."

"Then why couldn't you put it off, at any rate?" hissed Miss Kitten. "Ah, you have no consideration, that's evident!"

"I had nowhere else to go," was the piteous plea that seemed to leave the listener unmoved. "My note told you; it was going to take my last penny to come all this way to Morcove. I got out of the train in Barncombe, two hours ago, to find the weather like this!"

"Very well, then," muttered Miss Kitten harshly. "If I give you a little money—you will go away?"

Very likely the uncharitable tone, as much as the actual words, had such an upsetting effect upon this poor storm-beaten young woman, whom the moonlight revealed as about the same age as Miss Kitten, but with far nicer looks—if only exhaustion and sorrow combined had not done their best to ravage them.

She cried quietly for a half-minute or so, finding it all the harder to conquer the paroxysm of grief as Miss Kitten stamped impatiently.

"Oh, that'll do, Hetty! Pull yourself together—you must! And I tell you, Hetty, you must go away—"

"How can I!"

"I'm going to give you—a few shillings—"
"But what will be thought if I turn up to ask a night's lodging somewhere in Barncombe!" was the anguished murmur. "Any respectable lodging-house would close the door in my face!"

"You shouldn't have come!" Miss Kitten stamped again. "There was no need!"

"Oh, there was—you know there was!" she was sobbingly answered. "How can you be so—so cruel, Julia—towards me, your sister!"

"That's rubbish! I must think of myself, mustn't I? Here, take this money—quickly, now! I can't stay out here! I suppose I must meet you again, somewhere."

But the offered money did not change hands. Instead, the homeless, destitute one gave a firm shake of the head.

"No, Julia; you must do more for me than that to-night—yes, to-night," came in a steadier voice. "The alternative is, my going to the police-station—"

"What! To make accusations against me, your sister?"

"Oh, no—no! But I would have to ask the police to get me shelter, as an honest person who is simply—down and out. I tell you, Julia, I will not undergo the shame of trying to get in at some respectable lodging-house, in the state I am."

"Very well, then—do that! I can't do more than give you the money for a decent night's shelter. I can give you more money as time goes on. I suppose I'll have to keep you now, in secret! But to-night—"

"Listen, Julia—oh, please, you can do better than that, to-night?" was pleaded distressfully. "Take me in; save me from having to trudge all the way back to the town—"

"How can I?" the Form-mistress seethed. "Are you mad, Hetty!"

"If I am, then there has been enough to make me so. I was really not fit to make the journey; but you would do nothing for me by letter and I saw that I must come to see you. I was ill for a time, as you know. And all the while I have been thinking about the way you have served me, cheated and robbed me!"

"Sh! There, don't begin about—"

"Are you ever going to acknowledge what a terrible wrong you have done me, Julia?" the sister exclaimed, greatly wrought-up of a sudden. "That was what your letters implied, and that is why I felt bound to see you! You're ashamed to have the whole thing mentioned; you hoped to have lost sight of me for ever! Hetty Kitten was to be as one dead to you, whilst you were down here at this school, using her name and her qualifications to keep you secure in a good position! Your sister's name; your sister's character and her hard-earned testimonials—all stolen by you, from your sister! Oh, it was a wicked, heartless thing you did, Julia! Leaving me stripped of everything I held so dear, everything I needed to get my living in the work I love!"

"You're doing yourself no good by carrying on like this!" blustered the guilty sister. "Will you take the money I offer now? I warn you, Hetty! You'll not profit by exposing me! Don't think that they'll take you on, after turning me out. If you've a sister who did what you say I have done—well, then, they'll say that the relationship debars you from a place in the school—if that's your idea?"

"Nothing of the kind!" Hetty disclaimed strenuously. "Your disgrace will be mine, too, right enough; I know that! But I must live! I—I—"

"Then do as I say; for to-night, at any rate, take this money—"

"Very well, then." And so, after all, the money changed hands. The tragic weariness had come back into Hetty's low voice. The wind, swirling about in the porch, seemed to set her reeling.

"I'll go back to the town, Julia," she quavered faintly. "Understand, though, this wrong must be put right. Not only in justice to me, but in fairness to this school. I did not qualify as a teacher without hearing of a school as famous as Morcove. Its girls must not be left to—to—"

She was swaying again as her faltering voice trailed into silence. One tottering step she took, and then her sister saw her face turn chalk-white, whilst the eyelids dropped and a gasping sigh came.

Just in time the poor girl was saved from falling, in a swooning state due to strain upon mind and body alike. The Miss Kitten of Morcove School held up this other Miss Kitten, panting alarmingly:

"Hetty!"

The faintness was passing off; but now the Form-mistress realised that it would be fatal in her own interests to let her sister go away, after all. She would never get back to the town.

What to do with her, then? That was the distracting problem now.

Hide her in the school?

It could be done—yes, that could be managed, and with very little risk. Only, there was this to be considered; once in the schoolhouse, even as someone temporarily in hiding, Hetty might obtain such a good idea of what it meant to be a mistress in such a great and famous school, she might be all the more tempted to put her case before the headmistress!

But perhaps Hetty could be relied upon to resist that temptation? She had said, just now, even though she would figure as the injured party, she would expect to be disgraced by simply



"I feel sure Miss Kitten was out of doors during the night," Helen Craig said. The others' looks proclaimed their surprise. Was it possible that the mistress had been meeting that furtive figure who had been seen hanging about near the gates?

having a sister who had done such a thing. In any case, it was not a point that could be considered now. The situation was too desperate.

"Listen, Hetty," the bogus Form-mistress whispered tensely; "I—I suppose I can't let you go, after all. You nearly fainted just then."

"I'm sorry, Julia. I have been all day—"

"But listen! You'll come with me now, to the side door by which I slipped out to see you. I'm going to smuggle you indoors—"

"Smuggle me?" gasped Hetty. "You mean—not let the headmistress know until the morning?"

"As if I can let her know, even then! Oh, be sensible, Hetty; one thing you must understand now! Since I did—what I did—we must go on

as we are. I tell you, we must! I'll smuggle you indoors—up to one of the attics. I'll get you something to eat, a warming drink, and you can make yourself comfortable for the night. You're not wet under your outdoor things?"

"Not very."

"Well, I can find you some dry things to change into. It can all be done," rushed on the Form-mistress, with that fertility of mind which had played such a big part in the daring deed that had hit this sister of hers so hard. "So, come along now—quietly! Not a sound, mind!"

"Oh, but Julia, I—I don't like the idea of—"

"And I don't choose to have you found lying half-dead somewhere in the morning; so come!"

It was a snappish whisper closing all talk. With a sigh that had as much weariness as helplessness resignation in it, Hetty crept after her sister, round to that side door in the schoolhouse.

The moon shone out again, high in a clearing sky, blanching their faces. Waiting for a momentary lull in the fierce gusts, Miss Kitten at last opened the door and passed inside.

Safe for the venture, was it? Yes, quite safe!

And so, with a fierce gesture, she caused her homeless sister to come in out of the wild night.

Hush!

Morcove, sleeping all the sounder now, after being kept awake to an untimely hour by the wildness of the night, would hear nothing, know nothing of what was happening.

Nor, if only its bogus mistress could have her own desperate way, would Morcove ever find out!

CHAPTER 3.

Trouble in Class

POLLY LINTON, with only five minutes to go before morning school, came whirling into Study 12.

"Have you seen Miss Kitten, girls?"

"Why, is she missing?" asked Pam Willoughby lightly.

"Gosh, how I wish she was!" sighed the madcap. "No; what I should have said: Have you noticed her, this morning?"

"At breakfast—she seemed rather taken up with her own thoughts, whatever they may have been," was the Form captain's airy response, whilst Paula Creel exclaimed:

"And I, bai Jove, wefwained as far as possible from noticing Miss Kitten—yes, wather!"

"Same here!" shrilled Naomer. "Bekas, ze mere sight of her, only takes away my appertite!"

Polly found a perch for herself on the edge of the study table.

"That's the funny thing about Miss Kitten, this morning; worried, I would say! Moody at brekker—and I came round a corner, just now, and ran bang into her, and she never said a word!" The madcap chuckled. "But, my word, the look she gave me! I thought she was going to hit me."

"We haven't quite come to that, at Morcove!" Pam said, with a faint smile.

"Even though we have come down to a Form-mistress like her, always on ze nag, nag, nag! Ah, bah, zere will be such a bust-up presently, and zen Miss Somerfield will know what a mistake she made to appoint Miss Kitten!"

"Bai Jove, it was a mistake—yes, wather!"

"And yet, of course, Miss Kitten's credentials and so on must have been all right," Pam quietly carried on the debate.

"Credentials be blowed!" cried Polly, sitting legs a-dangle. "It's Miss Kitten's horrid nature

that is the trouble—although I haven't really thought her so wonderful even on the teaching side! She's in a state of nerves about something, I'm sure."

"Zen, hooray, bekas—perhaps she is to take ze sack at ze end of Term, gorjus!"

"Anyhow, girls," counselled Pam, "better be all the more careful, in school, if that's the state she is in. Bear and forbear—"

"Oh, that's Betty over again!" Polly exploded.

Pam smiled.

"Well, as I'm acting-captain in place of Betty—until she returns to school—I only want to advise, at any time, as I think Betty would."

Then Polly hopped down from her perch. She looked penitent.

"I said one of my usual idiotic things, Pam! The Form wanted a captain who would be Betty over again, and it got just one in you! And no one more glad than I have been, either! I could kick myself—when, of course, it is particularly rotten for you, at this time; having to put up with so much yourself, from Miss Kitten, and having to save other girls, twenty times a day, from—"

"Hi, is zat a hit at me, Polly?" butted in the dusky one, coming out of the corner cupboard with an apple. "Bekas, eef so, you ought to know by now; nuzzing Pam says to me, even, will keep me from going on ze strike at any meenit now!"

"Oh, you!" snorted the madcap, with playful disdain. "You can do as you like—"

"As I jolly well mean to," declared Naomer, taking a huge bite at the apple. "One more injustice from Miss Miaow, and off I go—up to ze attics, for ze grand bar-out!"

"Pam smiles, bai Jove!" chortled Paula, getting up from the armchair. "I don't wondah! Perfectly wiculous, to talk of going on strike!"

"Not ze way I shall do it!" insisted the dusky one. "With plenties of provisions, and water to drink, and zen pile zings against ze door after you have locked yourself in, and zen— See if zey can get me out, zat is all!"

"Do you hear all this, Pam?" gasped the madcap, with well-pretended dismay; but the captain laughed, starting to collect books for class.

"Let's be fair to Miss Kitten, even if she can't be fair to us," Pam quietly advised, whilst Helen Craig, Madge Minden, and others drifted in, so that all could go down together. "If her nerves are bad—and I think they may be—then make allowances."

Polly grimaced.

"Oh—all right!"

"As you seem to be talking about Miss Kitten and her nerves—was it some scare or other, early in the night?" asked Helen Craig suddenly.

"Scare?" stared Polly.

"She was out of doors, I feel sure, in the night."

"Miss Kitten was?" several of them exclaimed together. "Never!"

"Bai Jove!" gasped Paula.

"Ooo, zen—I know!" burst forth Naomer. "Bekas, in zat case Miss Kitten went out to see if zere was a burgillar, after all. Bekas, you know Tess said she thought she saw a burgillar!"

"Didn't say anything of the sort!" objected Tess curtly. "All I did say was that I fancied there was somebody hanging about the school gateway. It must have been somebody sheltering, although at that time of night it's most unusual for anybody to be out this way who doesn't belong to the school."

"Anyhow, I don't know anything about that!"

Helen said, shrugging. "All I do know is that Miss Kitten's mac and things, in the coat-room, were hung up wet during the night. It hadn't rained at ten o'clock; and there was no more rain after daybreak this morning. One of the maids told me that."

"Gee!" said Polly, who liked to borrow from her brother Jack's stock of slang. "Then Miss Kitten really must have gone out when everybody else was in bed!"

"If she did—is it our affair?" Pam interposed. "The bell has stopped, anyway, so we'd better hurry."

Polly and Naomer did that, right enough, making it a high-spirited race downstairs, with a resultant spilling of primers and exercise-books all down the last flight.

Roguish pair that they were, they then achieved a traffic-jam by taking a long time to pick up the books, and it was Pam's amused belief that both Polly and Naomer would have liked Miss Kitten to appear.

At the same time, Pam could not help deploring this inclination to provoke the Form-mistress. In her best moods, Miss Kitten was a bad change from that charming predecessor of hers who had been the Form's adored mistress, her understanding of girls enabling her to be chummy with all of them, indulgent, and yet—how easily discipline had been maintained!

Easy to lead, but not to be driven—that was the Form all over. And Miss Kitten's was just that goading manner which human nature the world over so deeply resents.

But Pam, with that clear-mindedness which some others perhaps lacked, had faced up to the fact that Miss Kitten must be accepted. She was the appointed mistress, and to rebel was only to ask for trouble.

No sooner had the captain and the rest passed to their places in the big class-room than it was apparent that trouble might come this morning without any asking.

Never had the girls seen Miss Kitten looking so irritable. Her expression was a particularly "nervy" one, bearing out all that Polly had said upstairs. Work started under most ominous conditions, the Form-mistress proving very snappish.

Only by Pam and a few other shrewd girls was it realised, as the morning went on, that there was a subtle difference between Miss Kitten's present impatience with the entire Form and her sharpness of former occasions.

Pam found herself seizing a moment now and then to try and analyse this trying mood. She came to the conclusion that it amounted to this: Miss Kitten, this morning, was worried about something else, but was venting the irritability due to that worry upon the Form.

Hard on the Form, that! But Pam, who liked to be fair, decided that one must not feel too aggrieved, being in ignorance of the private anxiety that was Miss Kitten's.

It might, Pam reflected, be of such a nature as to redound to her credit. The Form-mistress might be carrying on, with her nerves in rags, when anyone else in her place would have asked to be relieved.

But if Pam wished to be quite fair to the Form-mistress, she wished to be just as fair towards the Form itself. She saw things going from bad to worse as the trying morning wore away, and in her calm, capable way she was saying to herself at last:

"It's more than the Form can stand. So—I must be prepared."

It was the last half-hour before the midday dismissal. The class had a lesson to do now that meant a silent room, except for the scratching of pens. Nor was any attempt being made at whispering. Girls had to be in good spirits for anything like that; and Miss Kitten, by her fault-finding, had caused a general depression.

There was simply a sulky pushing on with the work now, to get it done—and the sooner dismissal came, the better! Many girls had been "lined" most unjustly; and time after time Pam had found herself being glanced at appealingly. "You're the captain, Pam!" those glances had said. "Are you going to stand for this?"

Pam did not like the exceptional silence in the class-room. To her, it seemed the hush before a storm.

She looked up under her fine brows to pay attention once again to Miss Kitten, sitting at her desk in front of the class.

The Form-mistress was sitting sideways to her desk—ignoring some correcting that should have been occupying her just then. She was lost in thought, plucking a lip—frowning heavily.

Worried! If only, then—if only one could know whether it was some private worry over which she deserved sympathy! In that case, how readily could the Form be persuaded, after school, to—

Bang! Miss Kitten's hand suddenly smote her desk, causing girls to jump in their seats.

She leapt up, flaring out at one of the girls. "Biddy Loveland, you are talking!"

"I'm sorry, Miss Kitten; I did speak—"

"And now you are being impudent—boasting that you spoke in class, when I have said 'Silence, and I will have—silence!'"

Miss Kitten, in an access of rage that was causing sheer consternation, strode between some of the desks to tower over Biddy Loveland. That girl stood up; a bonny girl, easily upset, anxious to show an appealing look.

"I— Etta Hargrove's blotter fell to the floor, under my feet. I picked it up for her and handed it back—"

"Calling my attention to it; that's all, Miss Kitten," spoke up Etta, having risen, as politeness demanded.

"Silence! You have done your best, all of you, to try me beyond all patience this morning!" cried the Form-mistress, her face almost convulsed with ungovernable rage. "You'll drive me silly! Sit down—you!"

She took Etta by the left shoulder, to force her down into her seat.

Instantly Etta jumped up again. A red spot showed in either cheek; she flicked some disarrayed hair away from her eyes.

"Don't treat me like that, Miss Kitten!"

If there were any girls not keeping their eyes fast upon that part of the room now, they were girls who were looking towards Pam—looking to her, the captain! "Now—now, Pam; you are captain—"

Miss Kitten, before paying further attention to Etta, was beating Biddy down into her seat with a slap on the head.

Poor Biddy; she was not like Etta; she burst into tears.

The Form murmured. "Silence, all!" And now Miss Kitten's voice seemed to have a wild note in it. "Go on with the work!"

Then she noticed Etta, on her feet again.

"I said sit down!"

"Yes. But I'm not going to be treated like that," Etta panted.

"How dare you! Sit down, I tell you!"
Again the hand fell upon Etta's shoulder,
forcing her down.

She writhed and rose up again!
Then it was realised that Pam, the captain,
was standing up.

"Etta!" said Pam.
Sensational silence! Even Miss Kitten stood
mute and still.

"And Biddy," said Pam, just as quietly as
ever; "you'd better both come with me. Miss
Kitten, I must ask you to exc—"

"What! Who do you think you are?"
"I happen to be captain," Pam answered
calmly.

She left her desk, to go towards the door. Out
in front of the class, she turned to wait for Biddy
and Etta. They came out to her, Biddy sobbing
violently, Etta very pale but steady.

Then suddenly, it seemed as if all other girls
were standing up—to follow the captain out! It
was not so, for there were at least two exceptions
—Fay and Edna Denver, a pair who had been
inclined to gain favour with Miss Kitten.

But, out of so many, those two counted for
little. The effect was the same; and it was one
of the most sensational things that had ever hap-
pened at Morcove—in class, at any rate.

The Form, as a protest, was marching out!

CHAPTER 4.

A Problem for Pam

NOT a voice to be heard; not one disorderly
step!

For, in the very instant that so many
girls stood up to follow their captain out
of the class-room, this one great thing had been
realised: Pam's example must be followed, with
something at least of Pam's dignified composure.

So, in the strict sense of the word, the Form
had marched out, just as if the "Dismiss" had
been given—when it hadn't!

As for Pam herself, she would have given all
her attention to distressed Biddy as soon as the
class-room doorway had been passed; but other
girls quickly gathered round that upset school-
mate, murmuring:

"Never mind, Biddy dear. It was a shame!"
Then Pam felt free to face nigh a score of
other girls, all of them, now that they were out-
side the class-room, looking inclined to burst out
laughing.

"Bekas—pipooray, zat has done eet now!"
Naomer began to exult. "Fall in for ze grand
strike, everybody!"

And she stood to attention, quite expecting
others to come into line with her. In that
soldierly posture, the dusky one treated Pam to
a magnificent salute with the right hand; but
the captain—not surprising—failed to heed it.

"I didn't mean you all to walk out," smiled
Pam.

"You didn't!"

"Oh, well—we did!" Polly stated the obvious,
and then the laughter came.

"Yes, well," Pam said quietly, "I hope you
won't hang about here now. I'm going back to
the class-room—"

"What!" gasped her hearers.

"But, of course! I must have this business out
with Miss Kitten. She may be a little less exci-
ted now; if not—I must come away, that's all."

For every girl who stared amazedly, there was
one to murmur:

"Oh, Pam, how you do things! Go on, then
—and best of luck!"

"Yes, wather!"

"What ze diggings, though! Bekas—hi, no
dealings with ze enemy, Pam! Zat is giving in,
after winning ze first round!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" went off a dozen of them—
so loudly that they took alarm at the noise of
their own laughter and fled.

Pam's graceful step took her back to the class-
room doorway. Looking in, she saw the Denver
sisters standing in talk with Miss Kitten—or,
rather, listening to passionate utterances in a
fawning way. But the Form-mistress instantly
noticed Pam, and came a few strides in her direc-
tion, saying fiercely:

"Don't show your face here, girl!"

"Miss Kitten, in your own interests—"

"I can look after my own interests, Pam Wil-
loughby!"

"Then there remain the interests of the Form—
just as important to me. As captain—"

"That is a position, Pam Willoughby, which
you are not likely to retain another hour!" raged
the Form-mistress. "You—you have led the
Form in this rebellious act! I have witnesses,
mind! Here are two girls who will bear me
out!"

There were significant smiles from Fay and
Edna, as they drifted past, which meant: "Won't
we just!" And Pam remained completely in-
different, having eyes only for the Form-mistress.

"Miss Kitten, I don't think you quite knew
what you were doing; I'm sure you're not well
this morning. If you care to—"

"Care to what? Apologise?"

"Oh, no; as if I am out to humiliate you," was
the gentle answer. "I am thinking of you as
being—well, quite ill—worried—"

She got no further, being checked by the stamp-
ing outburst:

"Go away—go! None of your plausible talk
for me, Pam Willoughby—now that you know
you have done an unpardonable thing! Go, I
tell you!"

Then Pam turned on her heels and walked out
again. Some of her Form-mates were waiting
about outside. She went straight on to the stairs,
to mount to the Form quarters.

A getting-together instinct had already caused
numbers of girls to rush upstairs and begin exci-
table talk in the long corridor. They broke off
as Pam came along, and some cheering started.

"Hurrah! Bravo, Pam!"

"Nonsense," Pam dissented, laughing, and hur-
ried to Study 12 at the far end of the passage,
where Polly and Naomer had become self-ap-
pointed doorkeepers, ready to keep out the
crowd.

The study was certainly crowded to its limits,
for, in addition to all the captain's usual inti-
mates, there was Etta—waiting to see if the cap-
tain wanted to speak to her—and there was
Biddy, feeling comforted now.

Madge and Judy, and one or two others of a
tender, earnest nature, had united to bring back
the dimples to Biddy's tear-wet cheeks.

"Feel all right now, Biddy dear?" asked Pam.

"Oh, yes, and I'm sorry I—I gave way—"

"No need to feel sorry, Biddy; it was enough
to upset you. Perhaps you'd like to be off now—
out into the open?"

So the doorkeepers opened, to let Biddy pass
out.

"And don't forget," Naomer whispered glee-
fully, "as soon as you get ze 'Fall-in' for ze
strike, come along and join in! Bekas, once ze
great bar-out has begun, zose outside must stay
out!"

As confident as all this was Naomer that a great revolution was but a matter of minutes now!

"Yes, well, girls," Pam affably addressed the gathering. "When I went back, Miss Kitten was still furious. So I couldn't do what I hoped to do."

"And what was that?" asked Polly grimly.

"Oh—simply offer to overlook it; keep the whole thing from Miss Somerfield, if possible."

"Um!" the headstrong one grimaced. "Mustn't she have taken that as a sign of fear on your part?"

"As a matter of fact, she did; but I can't help that," Pam shrugged. "It was up to me to give her a chance. Why, she was quite beside herself; doing things that would get her suspended straight away."

"That's what I thought," Judy gravely murmured.

"Then why on earth," cried Polly, "not let the whole thing come out, and get her suspended? It's her own doing!"

"But if she's ill?" came Pam's weighty retort. "If it's a breakdown?"

"Oh, I see!" Polly responded drily. "So you only marched us out, in case she should become really dangerous!"

"A wproper pwecaution, yes, wather—as far as it went," Paula rather uneasily commented. "But, Pam deah—haw about afternoon school?"

Polly gaily answered for Pam.

"Oh, we just go into class, as usual, and if Miss Kitten is her sweet self again, we just do the work. If she has—another attack—then we just march out again. That's all!"

"Sweendle! Bekas—you never know! Next time, she may be—"

"Oh, there isn't going to be a next time," Pam serenely assured her chums. "It's like this, girls; if Miss Kitten lashed out like that because of a sort of attack, she'll soon be here, apologising."

"Oh, Pam—Miss Kitten, apologise?"

"I'm sure of it. She'll realise what she's done. But if she remains in that state, then, before we

go into school, I shall simply have to see the Head, that's all."

"Look here, though—" Polly was starting to demur, when Naomer voiced a call for aid.

"Bekas, zey won't keep out!" yelled Naomer, struggling all by herself to resist somebody who was trying to come in. "No parking yourselves in here!" she shrilled. "Bekas—What?" was the change to gaping inquiry, as Polly suddenly made frantic signs.

"Stand away!" Polly whispered. "I believe it's Miss Kitten!"

And Miss Kitten it was—sweeping the door round as she strode in, whilst Naomer discreetly moved round with, and behind, that same door!

The other girls fully expected the Form-mistress to pounce about, to see who had resisted her entry. Instead, she came to a standstill, with all the rage gone out of her. There was something almost abject in her present looks.

"Pam Willoughby," she said stertoriously, "I—I have come to you—"

"Yes, Miss Kitten?" Pam said gently.

"I was not myself in class, just now—"

"No, Miss Kitten. That is why I thought it best—"

"Yes, I understand—now," the husky voice went on. "I—I didn't know what I was about. It was—of course it was—wrong of me to treat any of you like that. But I—I had a bad night; I could not sleep on account of the gale. My nerves are in a bad state."

Miss Kitten finished, looking down to the floor, and there was a dramatic silence, quickly ended by Pam.

"Are you going to ask to be relieved of your duties, Miss Kitten? If so—"

"Oh, no!" was the agitated answer. "I—I hate the idea of having to explain to the head-mistress. Besides, I'm better now. It has all passed off—like an attack. Whatever you must have thought of me!" she quavered, drawing a hand across her forehead.

"But that is just what some of us did think,"



The sequel to Miss Kitten's harsh behaviour was one of the most dramatic things that had ever happened at Morcove. The Form was marching out—as a protest!

Pam's clear voice came again. And since you say you are feeling better—

"Yes, yes; I'm better now. And so—there it ends, does it?"

"It won't be my fault, Miss Kitten, if it doesn't. And if you should feel like resting this afternoon, I'm sure the class will be on its best behaviour; I mean, if—"

"But I shall be in school, this afternoon, as usual," the Form-mistress struck in tensely. "That is all, then!"

She blundered into the door as she turned to pass out. Those who watched her, felt that her steps were reeling ones, as if she were in a most unstrung state.

She drifted away, omitting to close the door behind her, and Pam pushed it—very gently.

"Gosh!" Polly breathed then. "You were right, Pam! An attack of nerves."

"And she won't be like it again," Helen rejoined confidently. "Her coming here to apologise is a guarantee of that."

"Swendle!" said Naemer, causing Polly to round upon her with a withering:

"What do you mean?"

"I mean—swendle, zat zere is to be no strike after all! Ah, bah, what ze diggings! I did zink, at last, we would all be going up to ze attic!"

"You be thankful we've got Pam for a cap," smiled Madge.

"We may all be thankful, I think!" said Judy, whereupon Polly stated, with emphasis:

"We are!"

CHAPTER 5.

Suspicious Aroused

MISS KITTEN had stalked along the corridor of studies almost like a dark spectre passing by some of the very girls who had followed their leader out of the class-room such a little while since.

Not a glance for any of them! They saw her in such a strange, rapt state, her silent passing left them agape. What WAS the matter with Miss Kitten this morning? they wondered. In class, giving way to such terrible irritability; and now going about the place as if it were an empty house and she its ghost!

They saw her then, and wondered. They did not see her when she had reached the privacy of her own room, or they would have wondered still more!

Behind her closed door this young woman, whose proud position as a mistress of a Morcove Form had been secured by fraud which left her own sister the chief victim—she paced to and fro, to and fro, like one at her wits' ends.

"Fool—fool that I was!" she sighed to herself at last.

But those words referred only to the exhibition she had made of herself, in class; the outburst of violence, due to all the secret anxiety and dread which had played such havoc with her nerves.

Abjectly, she had had to go to the captain and apologise, after all. The only thing to be done, unless some account of what had happened was to reach the headmistress' ears.

Yes, unquestionably, it had been just as well to offer that apology, for a girl like Pam Wiloughby could be trusted to see that the matter ended there. Only, what a dreadful thing it was, to have given way in class like that! There might have been a riot. If that captain of theirs had been like other girls.

But it was all right; that affair was closed. If only—ah, if only one were as well out of the other difficulty!

This maddening problem of what to do about Hetty, now that she had turned up at Morcove—was even housed in the school at this very moment, in secret!

To and fro, to and fro the impostor walked the floor of this fine room to which her position as a Form-mistress entitled her, thinking of the sister who was wretchedly smuggled away in one of the attics upstairs.

No remorse was the wrongdoer's yet.

"What I have done, I have done—and I must go on!" That was the dominant thought in her fear-haunted mind. "*Morcove must never know!*"

But how to go on; how to escape the hour of reckoning, when Hetty herself was in no mood to submit to the loss for ever of what had been taken from her—that was the problem now.

Pausing for a moment, Miss Kitten glanced at the clock. She was wondering when it would be safest to make her way upstairs to the attics. To-night Hetty must be got away from the school-house as secretly as she had been smuggled in; meanwhile, she must be given some attention.

Go now, or wait until a mere minute or two before the gong rang the girls to the dinner tables? Or make it after dinner, when possibly most of the girls would be getting before-school exercise out of doors?

So hard to decide which would be the safer course! In a building so teeming with life—WHAT a risk there was!

Suddenly there was a tap at the door, and even though it only meant, most likely, some girl wanting to ask about something, Miss Kitten had to delay a moment or two—had to take a grip on herself—before voicing a faint:

"Come in!"

Then, in secret, she experienced a little relief. The girl who entered was Fay Denver—the elder of those two sisters who had refrained from walking out with the rest of the Form, just now.

They had done that, Miss Kitten knew only too well, thinking to play up to her for favours. Still, it was something to feel that there were, in the Form, two girls at least who might be used to one's own advantage—in return for favours.

"Oh, Miss Kitten—"

"Yes, Fay?"

"Er—are you better now? If not, I—I can leave it until later," said excessively pretty Fay very demurely.

"I am much better now, thank you, Fay," the Form-mistress flusteredly answered, forcing a rueful smile. "I have explained to Pam—"

"Oh, yes; it's all over the Form by now, and I think most of the girls feel quite touched by the apology. But I'm sure that none can feel as sorry as Edna and I."

"You and your sister showed understanding and sympathy at the right moment, Fay! I am not the one to forget that! And now—is there anything I can do for you?"

"Why, yes, if you would be so kind, please! Er—it's like this, Miss Kitten," Fay continued prettily; "Edna and I have just had a note, by hand, from the Headland Hotel; from an uncle and aunt of ours, down here for a few weeks' rest and change. And they want me and Edna to go to dinner, this evening, if it could be granted?"

"I see no reason at all, Fay, why you shouldn't go," said the Form-mistress, managing to speak

calmly and sweetly whilst the secret anxiety still went on at the back of her mind.

"Thanks so much," gushed Fay. "I'll let them know? I might use the 'phone?"

"Certainly, Fay. This evening, then, and I presume you will be fetched by the hotel car? Really, the Headland Hotel does very well, by being so close to the school!" Miss Kitten added, finding that conversation of this sort helped her to become more at ease. "They have Mrs. Barton staying there, with their daughter Betty—a girl in our Form—"

"The captain by rights, yes," Fay nodded, "only she has had to be away all this term."

"Er—if you see Betty, you might remember me to her."

"I will, certainly!"

"I know her little better than by name only, being new to the school myself this term. Still, I wish her well, and—hope for the day when she will be back."

"As captain!" Fay daringly rejoined, drawing off to the door. "So that Pam can take a rest?"

Miss Kitten laughed feebly.

"Surely, Fay, you and your sister share the Form's admiration for its present captain?"

"I don't know that we do!" Fay boldly shrugged. "Not quite our sort—Pam Willoughby. But thanks ever so, once again, Miss Kitten, for the permission! You're—a sport!"

"I'm glad to be able to reward you and your sisters for the consideration you showed this morning. Er—by the way, Fay—"

"Yes, Miss Kitten?"

"I might have the name of your relations staying at the hotel. Denver, is it?"

"Oh, no; Mordaunt—Mr. and Mrs. Mordaunt. You see, Auntie Edith is a sister of mother's, who married a Mr. Mordaunt."

"I—see," said the Form-mistress, holding the back of a chair—as Fay noticed, and Fay wondered if Miss Kitten were feeling rather queer again! "Mordaunt!"

"They live in London, you know, Miss Kitten. Uncle Arthur is in business there—in fact, in quite a big way, on the Wool Exchange."

"I see."

Miss Kitten gave a nod that said: "Go now, Fay." But, although that pleasure-loving girl was eager to fly upstairs and tell her sister that it was all right for this evening, she found herself lingering at the doorway, studying Miss Kitten's queer looks. Goodness, how pale and shaky the Form-mistress was, once again!

"Run along, Fay."

"But, Miss Kitten—are you—"

"It is nothing, Fay—nothing; simply the bad night I had, on account of the gale."

"Oh, right, then!"

And the door closed at last between scholar and mistress; closed not a moment too soon for Miss Kitten, who instantly collapsed into the chair.

A moaning sigh—a glancing about in a hunted way—and then she heaved up from the chair, to take lurching steps to and fro, as before.

"Mordaunt!" she echoed the name huskily. "Mr. Arthur Mordaunt—of the Wool Exchange, London. Then it is—it must be!—the Mr. Mordaunt whose clerk I was."

A former employer whom she had hoped never to see again—never! An employer whom she had robbed, vanishing from that job of hers in the City, and from her lodgings to the suburbs, when discovery had been coming about!

The falsifications in the account books she had kept for him, the thefts from petty cash—all

known to him now, as the result of the annual audit by accountants.

And he—another victim of her unscrupulous conduct—was actually related to some Morcove schoolgirls. He was the uncle of Fay and Edna Denver!

Another victim of deception and robbery to have to reckon with—here at Morcove!

Icy cold were Miss Kitten's hands, because of this latest shock that had come, with hammerlike force, upon mind and heart alike. She chafed her hands as she drifted wildly about the room; she stopped in front of the fire to try to warm them.

That man, at the hotel, not a mile from Morcove School; and Hetty, one's other victim—actually in the school!

How to go on, then, now! If the situation had been desperate enough before, this latest development had made it a thousand times worse.

TAP-TAP! once more, and once more Miss Kitten nerved herself to face some pestering intruder.

"Come in!"

"Oh, Miss Kitten—"

It was Fay Denver again, smiling in upon the Form-mistress from the doorway.

"I've been on the 'phone with auntie, at the hotel. Now she says that she and uncle would be so pleased if you would come to dinner this evening, as well!"

"Oh—how kind, Fay. But I—I—"

"I'm afraid I said it would be all right! You must come, Miss Kitten! Do you good!"

Miss Kitten parted her lips to speak, but not a word came. There was that dismissing gesture, once more, to send Fay Denver away, and the girl backed into the passage, drawing the door shut.

But Fay's long-standing curiosity about the Form-mistress caused her to stand still just outside the room. In that listening attitude she heard one heavy sigh succeed another, and then came the burble of water being poured into a glass. Miss Kitten had resorted to a glass of water—to stave off faintness?

Upstairs sped Fay, a minute later, diving into the study which she shared with her equally pleasure-loving sister.

"It's all right, Edna; we can go, this evening!"

"Of course we can! I'd have liked to see Miss Kitten refuse us!"

"Only—it's rather rotten, Edna darling; now they want Miss Kitten to go with us," grimaced the elder sister.

"Doesn't matter," was the careless response. "She'll do for auntie and uncle to talk to, whilst we slip away to the ball-room. I'm going to get all the dances I can, to-night, Fay; a bit of life—for once!"

"Yes, it will be fun," agreed Fay, flopping into an easy chair. "So long as they don't push that Barton girl on to us?"

"We won't let them! Had enough of Betty Barton, last term, when she was captain of the Form. We don't want ANY of your Form captains, whether they are Pams or Bettys or others of that sort!"

"I say, Edna, a strange thing," Fay slewed round in her chair to exclaim softly. "When I gave Uncle Arthur's full name to Miss Kitten, it seemed to give her such a turn!"

"Oh, your imagination, Fay—"

"No! And besides, when I went back to give her the invite she almost fainted."

"Then what it means, Fay; her nerves are in a bad way to-day. The slightest thing—"

"But a pleasant thing, like an invite out for the evening, shouldn't have scared her stiff?"

Edna, pondering this, ended by returning her sister's impressive stare.

"You know," Fay said in a lower tone than ever, "from the first we have thought that there was something funny about Miss Kitten. It's as if—as if there were something in her past life that she is afraid will come out at last. So now, Edna, I am just wondering—was that why it gave her such a bad turn to hear uncle's name—Arthur Mordaunt—"

"Did you say what he was, Fay?"—quickly.

"I did, as it happens; in the City—on the Wool Exchange—"

"Ah!" And Edna brought her hands together with a little clap. "Then perhaps she herself was in the City—in some office or other, where—"

"But, Edna, how could she have been! When she has trained as a teacher!"

"She may have tried office life first?"

"I don't see how," Fay dissented, shaking her head. "To get such a good position at Morcove, she must have followed a scholastic career right on from her schooldays, surely!"

"Then—I don't understand!"

"Neither do I; but I'd like to find out," Fay laughed softly. "Shall we sound uncle about it, this evening? No, better not, perhaps—"

"Rather not!" Edna said excitedly. "For, come to think of it, Fay, if there should be something—something that would get her the sack if it were made known—then it would be far better for only us two to know?"

"Definitely!" nodded Fay. "So to-night, Edna—careful what you say!"

There was a sly laugh from the younger sister.

"I'll watch it, Fay darling. And I'll watch Miss Kitten, too!"

"Oh, so will I!" smiled Fay, settling her fair head against a cushion. "All the time!"

CHAPTER 6.

The Vanished Rations

PAULA CREEL, having enjoyed a few minutes' rest after dinner, in Study 12, was virtuously—one might almost say heroically—minded to go downstairs now and get some quite strenuous exercise, in the form of hockey practice.

But Naomer was here in the study, and although Paula had imagined that the corner cupboard, with its private stock of eatables, was already re-engaging the dusky one's entire attention, such did not prove to be the case.

Less than half-way to the door, the elegant member of the "chummary" came in for an arresting:

"Hi, whoa, Paula! Don't go away!"

"But, weally, Naomer deah—"

"Bekas, in a couple of minutes I shall be ready for you to lend ze hand!" Naomer explained, coming out of the cupboard with such a quantity of eatables that Paula had to gasp:

"Good gwacious, Naomer! So soon after dinner—stawting again already!"

"No, I am not starting again already, so see! I am not going to eat a single mouthful now—not even pick an almond off this Genoa cake, no! Bekas, we want all this stuff, Paula, as a re-serve—"

"A what!"

"In readiness for ze grand strike, yes! Bekas, eet is bound to come off," Naomer joyously in-

sisted. "Never mind apologies from Miss Miaow. Zere will be a strike, bekas, zere jolly well has got to be one! And I say, ze sooner ze better—yes!"

"Widiculous of you to talk like that, Naomer. And are you seriously pwoposing to—er—as it were, put by a stock of wations, as if in pwepawation fow a—siege, bai Jove!"

"You have said ze mouthful, Paula!"

"Weally, Naomer! Well, now that I have cowtively guessed your wash intention, then all I can say is— Owp!"

Paula said that, instead of what she had intended to say, finding herself slammed back into the armchair by Naomer, who afterwards closed the door.

"No going away, Paula! In two teeks, I have ze parcels of food made up, and zen you can help me to smuggle them upstairs, to one of ze attics!"

"I—I must wefuse; positively—"

"Sit down!"

"No— Owp! All wight, then, I will sit heah," Paula resigned herself, being thrust back into the chair. "But I wefuse to be a pawty to such an idiotic— Oooch! Such an idiotic— Gah, leave off, Naomer!"

Paula gasped this entreaty as Naomer worked a clenched, brown fist in front of her, Paula's, pretty eyes.

"Bekas, not anuzzer word, Paula! Zere must be secrecy, yes! And good job Polly is not here, bekas, as ze matter of fact, it is her Genoa cake! Although ze jam-sangwidge is mine, any old how!"

There must have been ample time for Paula, as she sat watching Naomer make up two parcels of considerable size, to reflect that this was the usual luck.

Just because the bursting in of Polly or anyone else would have been so welcome, no one turned up to put a firm stop to Naomer's freakish conduct.

"Now zen, I am ready, Paula! So you go first, bekas, your job, to see zat ze coast is clear!"

Thus Naomer, when at last she had the "siege rations" ready for portering upstairs to the intended stronghold.

Out in the corridor, Paula might have made off; but now she felt that her dusky chum, being so determined, must not be forsaken. So the one girl went before the other all up the corridor, adopting a really alert attitude when the staircase had been reached.

Few girls were about—there had been an after-dinner rush for the games field—and what few there were did not matter.

Paula understood her job to be that of scouting in advance for housemaids or mistresses whilst going still higher up.

All went well. The dormitory-floor was passed without any awkward encounters, and Paula, having arrived with Naomer at the landing serving the attics, hinted that she might now "wefire," perhaps?

"Not ze bit of eet!" whispered Naomer. "Bekas, you must wait here to give ze warning—you better cough twice—eef anybody is coming up. Bekas, you never know! Zis is where eet begins to get eggsciting."

For Naomer herself, the excitement certainly was to begin now, taking a form quite unexpected. All she anticipated was a possible warning from Paula, outside on the landing, not to reappear after dumping the rations, because somebody was close at hand on the stairs.

And instead, no sooner had the dusky one, hugging her parcels, tiptoed into one of the

attics, than she stopped dead in sharp alarm.

Why, she did not know, for there had been no distinct sound telling her that somebody else was already in this particular attic; but she had the vague sense of being—not alone!

She kept quite still, feeling rather keyed up, but what with her eyes getting accustomed to the deep gloom and the absence of any suspicious sound, at last the uneasy fear passed off.

Then she tiptoed on again, crossing the bare floor to make her way into a second attic opening out of this one.

"Bekas, ze further in, ze better," she was thinking. "Besides, zere is a tank in zat other attic, so we shall be sure of water when ze time comes!"

A floorboard creaked; but that was her own doing. Her peering eyes made out the communicating door between the two attics standing just off the latch, so she had not to shift her parcels to have one hand free for turning the knob.

Out went her right foot, to push the door wide open, and then—

Flump, whallop! fell the parcelled rations to the floor, whilst Naomer herself almost dropped with surprise.

A staggering surprise! Looming before her in the doorway was, of all persons—Miss Kitten.

One thought only was Naomer's; the odious Form-mistress had been lying in wait for her—knowing. In other words, it was a "fair cop"!

Miss Kitten's own terrified state went unnoticed by Naomer. Nor did the flustered imp have time to think it strange that no exultant cry of a "Caught you!" nature came.

Naomer stayed neither to stare nor think; she whipped about and simply streaked across the attic floor, to escape to the landing.

Out into clear daylight she dashed, and with a panted: "Queek, queek!" to Paula, started to drag her down the attic stairs.

Paula being never a good one to act with celerity at a moment's notice, became so unexpectedly hustled that she soon missed a step, on the way down with Naomer. The pair ended by half-falling, half-tumbling together to the bottom of the flight, and then it was a case of "On, still!"

Down more stairs Naomer pelted, dragging Paula with her. Into the corridor of studies, and still at a mad rush even then, all the way to Study 12—so they proceeded in this panicky fashion, with the result that Paula collapsed exhaustedly into the armchair. As for Naomer, after closing the door, she dived out of sight under the study table.

"Ow, my gwacious!" heaved Paula, fanning herself. "Ow, awful! Whew! Why did you do that?"

Then the door opened, admitting Polly and



"Did you say 'Miss Kitten'?" the Denver sisters' uncle asked guardedly. And his manner, as he put the question, seemed to confirm their suspicions that there was something strange about the mistress who had just walked away.

Pam, just come from the field. It was nothing surprising to these girls to see Paula lying back in the armchair; but when Naomer came crawling out from under the table—

"What's this all about?" demanded Polly, staring. "New parlour game?"

"No, bekas—sh, look out!" Naomer said in a thrilling whisper. "Bekas, Miss Kitten!"

"What about her?"

"Ah, bah, now I really am disgusted with Miss Kitten," panted Naomer. "Bekas, she was lying in wait for me up in ze attics—"

"Where?" gasped Polly incredulously.

"In ze attics when I smuggled ze rations up-stairs for ze grand strike! She knew! Someone has betrayed ze plan of operations!" Naomer inferred. "Sweendle, bekas—now she has got all zat food!"

Polly flew to the corner cupboard, gave one glance to depleted shelves, then rounded furiously upon Naomer.

"Where's that cake of mine?"

"Miss Kitten has got him!"

"What! You mean to say she has—"

"Eet not my fault! How was I to know she would be lying in wait? What else could I do but ze bunk?"

"And you?" the madeap now turned upon Paula, in the armchair. "What part have YOU played in this—this escapade?"

"A most reluctant one, Polly deah; a most—Owp! Ow! Stahp it, will you! I—I could hardly refuse; hawdly desert Naomer, when she—Owp!"

"Ugh!" Polly stamped. "You two goops! This is a nice thing, Pam, isn't it? We shan't see any of those cakes and things again! Worse still; Miss Kitten will imagine that you, the captain, have been behind it all!"

Pam smiled.

"Yes, well, don't worry. Wait till Miss Kitten speaks about it, that's all."

"And zen, Pam, will you plis ask eef we can have all ze cakes back? Bekas—"

"You wouldn't care to do the asking yourself?" Polly snorted.

"Oh, I'll ask, for what it's worth," Pam undertook serenely. "If she mentions the matter."

But, to the amazement of Study 12, there was not a word, not a sign of any sort even, from the Form-mistress about that encounter in the attics.

Such a singular failure to make the affair a case for punishment induced Naomer, for one, to cherish the sudden hope that the rations were still to be retrieved—had been left where they had been dropped by her!

But after school, when she got Polly to go up with her to the top landing—"not zat I am afraid to go alone, bekas I am not!"—they found the outer door of the first attic made fast against them.

So all they could do was to return downstairs to Study 12, with very little for the tea-table, for which deprivation Polly heartily blamed Naomer, whilst Naomer blamed—Miss Kitten!

CHAPTER 7. Temptation

IT was all over the Form that Fay and Edna had been given permission to dine with their uncle and aunt at the Headland Hotel that evening, and many girls were smiling!

They did not begrudge the Denver pair their treat, nor did they think that permission had been a big thing to ask of the Form-mistress.

But it was remembered that Fay and Edna had abstained from walking out with the rest

of the Form, thus siding against the Form in its dignified protest; and now Miss Kitten was going to spend the evening with the sisters, at the hotel. Rather significant!

The car was to be at the porch at six-thirty, and so about that time there was some mustering on the stairs to see Fay and Edna go down. They were great ones for dressing to their best for any important occasion, and this evening their toilettes were likely to be wonderful!

So they were, to such a dazzling degree that loud cheers were accorded the sisters when at last they came flouncing down, Fay in shell pink, Edna in palest blue.

Jewellery shimmered, dance shoes came in for special comment; and was there just a suspicion of a face-cream to account for that lovely school-girl complexion with which neither Fay nor Edna was endowed by nature?

It was mirthfully believed to be the case, and the Form was only inclined to laugh, tolerantly, when it had become certain that Miss Kitten was not going to say a censuring word about these and other "grown-up" touches.

Oh, it was a nice game the Denver sisters were playing for themselves now! But if they liked to do it—let them!

Such was the general feeling, Naomer shrilly stressing one thing:

"We take jolly good care, though, they don't have any share in ze strike, when he comes off—as he is going to, and never mind about zose lost rations! We can get some more!"

Embarrassed, were Fay and Edna, by all the eager attention paid to them on their way down to the car? Not they! It was just what they liked. The embarrassment only came when they were in the car with the Form-mistress.

She was ill at ease; forcing an amiable remark now and then, but with the Something, they could tell, going on in her mind to keep her all on the other.

Then what could that Something be? Would the coming meeting with Uncle Arthur and Auntie Edith throw light on the mystery? It made Fay and Edna feel very keyed-up to think that there was the possibility.

From the luxurious car they passed through some revolving doors into the entrance lounge.

The Headland Hotel, in the short time that it had been established, had won a great name for itself. Now it was enjoying a highly successful winter season. Guests were coming down from their rooms to muster in the lounge, where all was brightness and warmth and luxury. Gorgeous frocks were being worn, and priceless jewels flashed and shimmered.

"Oh, there they are, Fay!"—and that girl twitched her gaze away from a notice which announced "DANCING IN THE BALL-ROOM THIS EVENING," to see Uncle Arthur and Auntie Edith coming across to greet them.

"So here you are, Fay dear—and you, Edna darling! How are you, my dears?"

"Splendid, thanks, auntie! Hallo, uncle!"

"My word—growing!" he commented, as they submitted themselves to be kissed.

Mr. Arthur Mordaunt was stout for his age, and rather bald, whilst Auntie Edith was tall and as flat as a plank. Her evening toilette and her diamonds, and his immaculate "tails," evidenced abounding wealth.

"Morcove suits you, evidently, young ladies!"

"Oh, does it!" pouted Fay prettily. "But I ought not to say that, I suppose, in front of—
— This is our Form-mistress, yes; Miss Kitten!"

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"Oh—Miss Kitten?" echoed Uncle Arthur, in a taken-aback manner, so that he almost forgot to bow as she bowed to him. "Er—h'm, yes! Well—er—shall we just sit down for a bit, before going in?"

"It would be nice to wait, don't you think, until everybody is down?" drawled Auntie Edith, sauntering very grandly with Miss Kitten to a group of lounge chairs. "The band won't have begun playing."

"Oh, yes, I—I should love to sit down," the sisters heard their Form-mistress falter.

They nudged one another whilst walking beside their uncle. Miss Kitten, watched as they were watching her, was looking ready to drop!

"Did you say, girls—Miss Kitten?" their uncle asked in a guarded voice, halting them whilst he lighted a cigarette.

"Yes, uncle!" Fay nodded blandly. "Why?"

"Oh, but it can't be the same Miss Kitten I'm thinking of," he laughed, striking a match. "A lady clerk I had, in the City. She absconded with a good deal of cash—"

"She—did!" gasped the sisters.

Their uncle flourished out the match, nodding. "And afterwards," he nodded, "we found serious falsifications in the books that she had kept. But don't say anything about that in front of your Miss Kitten," he entreated in a lower voice than ever. "As a matter of fact, I've since suspected that Kitten was an assumed name—"

"But what was the Christian name, uncle?"

"Of the Miss Kitten at the office? Er—Julia, I fancy."

"Oh! Our Miss Kitten is—let's see—Catherine, isn't it, Edna?"

"Something like that. But—"

Edna put a check upon her tongue just there. She had been going to say: How strange, when "Kitten" must be such an uncommon surname! She and her sister, however, had agreed to hear all and say little.

It was one thing to keep a still tongue, but it was quite another thing not to betray excitement. They wanted to slip away together, for a talk, and could not; or could only exchange glances, and then, as the party re-formed in the lounge, pay close attention to Miss Kitten's looks.

Those thin lips, when they were not forcing a smile, puckering themselves in such a nervous fashion; the eyes, never at rest and always avoiding Uncle Arthur's!

It was a fact, then—it must be so! In this strange, fateful way had they, two of Miss Kitten's own scholars, discovered her guilty secret!

Before Morcove came to know her as one of its Form-mistresses, she had been a City clerk, and a dishonest one at that. An embezzler, a thief!

No wonder Aunt Edith's voice seemed to Fay and Edna to come from far away, saying:

"Now I think we might go into dinner."

Their brains were almost reeling with excitement. The Form-mistress—an impostor! A thief who had only missed being sent to prison by absconding just in time.

Fay and Edna were not the sort of girls, in ordinary circumstances, to be at all shy amidst such grand surroundings as the dining-room of the Headland offered, with several waiters in attendance and other tables all taken by grown-up people of wealth and distinction. Ordinarily, the sisters would have started to attract attention; but the evening, for them, had gone to bits.

Such a chaos had their minds been thrown into, they felt that all the chatter-chatter in the dining-

room had Miss Kitten for its one topic! The band seemed to play music as an accompaniment to a jingle of thoughts about her.

And then, suddenly, Miss Kitten said to them both:

"Look, you girls; there is Betty Barton, with her mother!"

"Er—oh, yes, so it is!" Fay responded dully. She merely fluttered a hand, and so did Edna, by way of "Hallo, Betty!" as that girl—still a little lame from the motoring accident which had kept her from returning to school—went with her homely mother to the table reserved for them.

But Miss Kitten asked her host and hostess to excuse her, and rose quickly to go across to speak to the former captain and her mother.

After dinner, it seemed to Fay and Edna, would have been quite soon enough, and so they guessed—the Form-mistress was glad to be able to get away from this table, if only for a minute or two!

"Well, my dears," said Aunt Edith, "your Form-mistress speaks very highly of you, I'm sure! She seems nice, although there is something about her—now and then—"

"There is!" muttered Uncle Arthur. "But perhaps that's only my fancy. At any rate—h'm!" he broke off.

Miss Kitten came back, forcing another smile. "I felt I must ask at once how Betty feels. She seems to be going on splendidly; hopes to put in the last few weeks of term at the school, after all. After dinner, you two would like to get a talk with her?"

"And can we go in to see the dancing, auntie?" pleaded Fay demurely. "I expect there are some splendid dancers amongst all these people."

"Certainly, my dears. No doubt Miss Kitten would like to dance? Your uncle and I find it such adorable exercise!" Aunt Edith worked the word "adorable" very hard.

After that, Fay and Edna could calm down a bit, inwardly, about Miss Kitten. They were going to get a dance! Glorious! Of course, they would have to start together; but it wouldn't be their fault if they didn't get partners.

Anyhow, there would be a "Paul Jones," most likely—that ball-room gamble for partners, when everybody has equal chances, whether they are schoolgirls or septuagenarians!

Uncle and auntie, liking all the good things of this earth, wished for coffee and so on in the lounge, for themselves and Miss Kitten, before going to the ball-room; and this resulted in Fay and Edna being told to find Betty, if they cared to do so.

Off they went, roaming the whole place through; other lounges, the palm-court, the ball-room—they explored them all, glad to find themselves being looked at, and whispering excitedly with each other as they paced about in their grand frocks.

"There's not the slightest doubt, Edna!"

"Not the slightest! Uncle doesn't think it's she, simply because—well, he just can't imagine such a thing being possible!"

"But WE know," Fay whispered on; "from the very first, Miss Kitten has been strange."

"Oh, and never quite the trained mistress—I've said so, often!"

"Then how on earth did she obtain the position?"

"Goodness knows!" with a shrug. "Must have given false references, or something like that. Hallo, here's Betty, bother her!"

Directly after this, Edna said to Betty, who had come limping towards them:

"Nice to see you, Betty! How are you going on?"

"Oh, fine, thanks! You two are having a nice evening? It's a jolly place, isn't it? Would you like to see the ball-room?"

"Oh, we've seen it!" Fay loftily explained. "But isn't it time we went in for the dancing? I suppose the dance will be starting any minute now? Your foot won't let you dance, I suppose, Betty?"

"But I enjoy watching. Shall we go in, then?" Betty cordially suggested. She had never liked these two girls; but she was too good-natured to be anything but affable in present circumstances.

"Betty dear—"

She turned round sharply. It was her mother, speaking so distressfully that it was startling to hear her.

"My little handbag, Betty—with all my ready money in it—I'm afraid I've mislaid it!"

"What! Oh, mumsie!"

"Or didn't I bring it downstairs with me, before dinner, after all?" Betty's mother began to wonder hopefully. "Perhaps I left it behind in my room, although I usually do keep it about me."

"I can soon run upstairs and find out, mumsie! It won't take me a minute—"

"Oh, not you, Betty, with your poor foot. No, I'll go up myself and—"

"Mother, I can take the lift," Betty cried, hastening away, whilst Fay and Edna put on sympathising looks for Mrs. Barton.

"Was there much money in the bag, Mrs. Barton?"

"Why, I'm afraid there was—quite twenty pounds in notes, for I cashed a cheque only this morning. Dear, dear, careless of me!"

Meantime, Betty had decided to go up by the staircase after all, suddenly remembering that she and her mother had walked down instead of using the lift, before dinner.

And on the way down—yes, Betty remembered this also now—her mother had stopped on one flight of stairs to ease a shoe. Whilst doing this, the handbag had possibly been laid aside and then forgotten?

There was something of Betty's old agility of the days before her accident in the way she

rushed up the broad flights of stairs. In her eagerness she almost forgot her temporary infirmity.

But fate itself had decreed that she was to come upon no mislaid handbag on the staircase.

At that very moment, "Aunt Edith" was taking Miss Kitten up to one of the bed-room floors, to show her what a beautiful room husband and wife had been given. They came out of the lift on the third floor, to cross a big, carpeted landing and then go up a few shallow stairs into a wide corridor.

"Auntie Edith," smoking a cigarette, did not notice a black satin handbag lying upon the broad sill of a stained-glass window, just below those few stairs; but Miss Kitten saw it, and in a flash her bespectacled eyes had glanced around to see that no one was looking.

No one! And her hostess was a pace or so in front of her.

The old, true saying: once a thief, always a thief! Miss Kitten gave a quick snatch, and the handbag was hers, to be as quickly smuggled out of sight.

Barely five seconds later, Betty came breathlessly to that place where her mother had stopped for a moment or two, before dinner, to ease the shoe. It was here that she might have thoughtlessly put the bag aside—on this handy window-sill. But the bag was not here now.

Left behind in the bed-room then, after all? No! A hasty search soon disposed of that possibility, and so, in a few minutes, Betty was downstairs again, at the ball-room entrance, ruefully announcing to her waiting mother and the Denver girls:

"Can't find it, where I thought it might be! And it's not in your room, either!"

"Ay, well, we mustn't fret about it now, Betty dear," came with a cheerful smile of resignation. "Folk are honest, and if it's found it'll be taken to the hotel office. I had better just give notice, though, that I have lost an evening bag with some money in it."

"Twenty pounds—just fancy!" said Fay. "But let's go in now—the band is tuning up. Quite a decent floor," she conceded grandly.

"They say it's perfect," Betty remarked. "They are going to have a dance hostess, too—they find that people living round about like to come."

"Nice job for some lucky girl or other!" Edna laughed. "I wouldn't mind it—not half! Oh, a foxtrot to begin with! Come on, Fay!"

They were the first couple to take the floor; other intending dancers were only now drifting in. Betty, waiting by the wide entrance to the ball-room, was soon rejoined by Mr. and Mrs. Mordant and the Form-mistress.

"Where is your mother, then, Betty?" asked Miss Kitten.

"Oh, she has gone to the manager's office, to report the loss of an evening bag—one with twenty pounds and more in it, too!"

"Twenty pounds!" jerked Miss Kitten. "But how awful!"

TWENTY pounds in the bag that she had snatched up unseen, and had so quickly and cleverly concealed. Twenty pounds and more in the bag that was even now in her possession!

"Twenty pounds!" an inner voice seemed to be dining at her, above the strains of the band and the flurry of the ball-room. "Twenty pounds for you to use—to get your sister safely out of the way!"

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