

"THE PLUCK of the MADCAP"

Enthralling Long Complete Tale of Morcove School Inside

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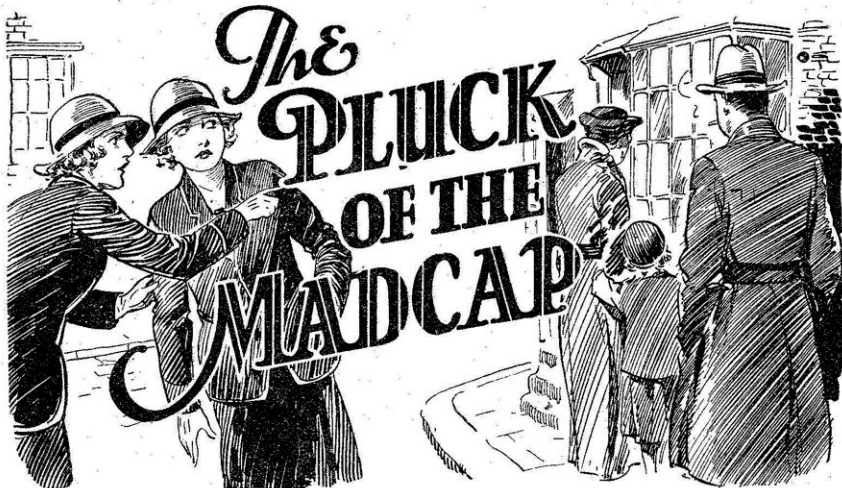


THE DENVERS' CRUEL 'JOKE'

One of many dramatic incidents from this week's complete Morcove School story.

DODO WREN IS BACK AGAIN: See Within

By MARJORIE STANTON



THE knowledge that her brother is in such disgrace makes it hard indeed for Polly Linton to carry on with her production of the end-of-term play. But though it causes her such deep concern, this sudden crisis gives the Madcap of Morcove a chance to show her indomitable courage.

CHAPTER 1.

Polly Wants to Know

ANYONE in sight? Anyone belonging to Morcove School?
No!

So Polly Linton, having looked this way and that in the quaint old High Street of Barncombe, passed into the famous cake shop and café known as the Creamery.

There had been ample reason for her acting so warily just then.

She wanted to be quite sure that no schoolmate of hers would come sauntering into the shop, just after she had entered.

Nor was it a mere playful desire for secrecy—anything but that! Normally, Polly's actions were governed by a certain roguishness, for which she was adored by the Form! Polly, their own inimitable madcap!

But there was little of the madcap about her at this moment. One or two of the café waitresses, recognising her as a Morcovian who often looked in for tea and cakes with a batch of jolly chums, smiled a "Good-afternoon!" Then they realised that she had to force a smile in return.

"Tea—for just yourself, miss?"

"Er—no, thanks. I want to buy one or two things at this counter."

Polly very nearly rounded off the remark with a simple: "That's all." She remembered in time, however, that that was to be by no means

all. A cake or so; a few cream-buns—the purchase of these, for once, was a mere ruse.

In a few moments—when the counter attendant would be tying string about the cardboard carton—then one must put the first question, and so manage, perhaps, to draw her into talk.

"Will that be all, miss? Two-and-six, please; pay at the desk, if you will?"

"Thanks." The string was being tied now. "By the way," Polly ventured, with a horrible sense of speaking in a half-suffocated voice, "were you in the shop, the other afternoon, when—when there was a sort of upset?"

"You mean, miss, when a schoolboy snatched some pound-notes from the cashier's desk, over there, whilst she was not looking? Oh, yes, I was here!"

"But did he really?"

"Well, miss, all we know is, there were two witnesses to say that they'd seen him do it. He was taking his turn at paying, and they were waiting whilst someone they were with should take next turn."

"Two girls, were they?"

"Why, yes, miss, and from your school, too! I suppose they've been telling you about it, after all?"

"Yes, they did—"

"What a pity, miss; I'm sure everyone concerned has wanted the whole thing to be kept quiet. The schoolboy belongs to Grangemoor,

Polly Linton Stars in This Powerful, Long Complete Story of Morcove

and one of our waitresses says she has often seen him with some of you Morcove girls."

"He's my brother—"

"He is, miss? Oh, I—I'm sorry—"

"That's all right," Polly's voice quivered.

"It's like this; my parents and others who care for my happiness have been agreeing amongst themselves to keep the whole thing from me. But those two girls who claim to have witnessed it—they told me—"

"What a shame! Mean of them, I call it, miss."

Polly received this with a grim smile.

"They had a grudge against me, and so—there was their chance to pay me out. I thought I'd look in here, on the quiet, to find out what I could for myself. My brother, of course, didn't take the money. He just couldn't have done such a thing. But—"

"Well, miss, what we all think, in this shop, is that he seemed the very last sort of fellow to act like that. But that was how it was; the cashier suddenly called out that some pound-notes were gone from her desk; then the two girls said that he—your brother—had grabbed them; and then—they were found in his jacket pocket!"

Polly nodded.

"Yes, I've been told all that. And still I simply refuse to believe—"

"I should think you would, miss! If I had a brother, and such a thing were charged against him—well! And all of us here are only sorry that somehow or other everything pointed to your brother's having—"

"Only, he didn't! Oh, of course, it's little use my saying it, any more than his denials were any use at the time," Polly spoke out fiercely. "Somebody must have played a trick on him. Who else was in the shop—I mean, as customers?"

"Why, miss, there was a gentleman in front of your brother, paying at the desk. And there were two girls who belong to your school; they were standing by, whilst a fellow who was with them waited to pay for teas they'd had."

"Another Grangemoor fellow?"

"Yes, miss; I think he said he was a prefect."

"I know; their cousin, Bertie Denver. And he didn't make it any better for my brother?"

"He didn't, miss, and that's the truth. Our manageress thought he might have shown a nicer spirit."

"Could the theft have been anything to do with the customer who was paying, just before my brother?"

"Nothing whatever, miss—we are all certain about that. The gentleman had paid and gone out before ever the first upset occurred. Besides, he was such a nice gentleman; so pleasant!"

"A regular customer here, perhaps?"

"Why, no, miss; now you mention that, we'd never seen him before. But we have seen him since. We fancy he is just a visitor from London, like we get in Barncombe all the year round."

"Can you describe him?"

"Oh, there's nothing particular about him to describe. He's just a middle-aged gentleman, smartly dressed, and very polite and all that."

For a few moments Polly stood mute and reflective, a heavy frown puckering her brows. She must get a description of that man! Perhaps Jack could supply one? If so, she would have to try to find out a bit more about the stranger.

Yes, another task to

be taken on, in addition to all the work upon the play, and rehearsals; a bit of private-detective work!

And Polly suddenly gave a fuming sigh—
"whew! What she had to do, one way and another!"

Suddenly she became aware of the extreme sympathy with which the counter assistant was regarding her; a silent sympathy which only had the effect of irritating Polly.

It was not that she felt ungrateful; but it was a trying reminder of the acute distress which chums of hers at Morcove would suffer, on her account and Jack's if they got to know about the appalling affair.

Well, at present they knew—nothing! And the longer they could be kept in ignorance, the better. It would be a most unfortunate time for them to have their peace of mind so shattered.

"Thanks," Polly suddenly emitted, ready to turn towards the very pay-desk from which her schoolboy brother was alleged to have snatched the money.

Then she hesitated.

"Er—by the way—"

"Yes, miss?"



"Could the theft have been anything to do with the customer who was paying, before my brother?" Polly asked. "Nothing whatever," answered the assistant, and Polly's heart sank as she realised how difficult it was going to be to prove that Jack was not a thief.

How Polly hated to put her request!

"I wonder if all of you belonging to the Creamery would mind not saying anything to any girls from my school—unless, of course, they come asking questions, as I came just now?"

"The managers advised us not to say anything about it at any time," the assistant answered. "So unless questions are put—"

"Thanks ever so," Polly exclaimed fervently. "I am not asking for my own sake, or for my brother's, even. The fact is, I've so many chums at school who would be terribly upset if they found out. And I don't want them to be worried, or made miserable on my account and Jack's. It's so very important, just at this time, when we're getting ready for breaking-up day—the concert, and so on."

"I quite understand, miss."

Polly, flashing another grateful glance, moved to the pay-desk. She had no doubt that the girl there was the one who had been on duty at the time of theft; but she did not put any questions to her. What was the use! The other girl had said all there was to be said—sorrowfully bearing out what Fay Denver had found such spiteful delight in saying, only a couple of hours or so ago.

Of all the times she had passed out of the Creamery, into Barncombe's quiet High Street, generally with a crowd of her best chums, and always in tip-top spirits; and now—this!

The café had become the very place which must for ever be associated in her mind with that dreadful business!

Never again, after this, could she resort to the Creamery in the old happy way. How could she when her own dear brother had been marched out of the shop, a few days since—with a policeman's grip upon his arm!

Polly drifted away, slowly, her eyes cast down. Once again she was feeling quite heartbroken; the blow dealt to her happiness was such a recent one.

Then, with a big sigh, she rallied her drooping spirits. "This won't do!" With the play for the end of term concert in rehearsal, and herself so particularly responsible for its success—any giving way to private grief would never do.

"Hallo, Polly!"

She glanced up, and there were several of the very chums from whom she had slipped away, half an hour ago, dismounting from their bicycles.

CHAPTER 2.

Her Secret sorrow

"SO here you are, Polly! We wondered what had become of you! Had quite a look round for you," said tall Pam Willoughby, the Form captain, "before we set off."

"Thought you might have gone to the libe, to push on with the alterations to the play," smiled Judy Cardew. "Anyhow, you can wait and go back with us, Polly?"

"A bit of shopping to do—for the play," Pam remarked. "Tess is going to buy some of the tinted muslins that we want for stage effects. Then I suppose we can all pop into the Creamery?"

The Creamery—

"Oh, I must get back," Polly pleaded, forcing a cheerful smile. "Let me push on with the alterations—"

"Not before you've had some tea?" Tess Tre-lawney urged. "You haven't had tea already, Polly?"

"No. But—"

"Look here, to save time—since you're eager to get back," Tess spoke on quickly, "I'll slip along to the draper's and do the buying whilst you others are in the Creamery. A cup of tea will do for me—"

"Rabbits!" Polly protested. "No; I'll bike back now, and you others follow. See you later—ta-ta!"

And she turned off into the bakehouse-yard, which was Morcove's recognised parking place for bicycles.

No misgiving had Polly that her refusal to stay on and ride back later with those chums would cause offence. She had more to do, of an urgent nature, than anyone else in connection with the play—that ambitious project which had been her one thought, until the crash came about Jack.

At all costs, too, she must continue to devote her mind to "The Morcove Mimics." She must, or not only would she be letting down the Form, she would also be doing the very thing to make them wonder what had so upset her. She, their Polly, not the same as ever! Their Polly, the very writer of the play—losing interest in it! Why?

Once let them start asking such questions as those, and they could never cease until they had found out—the terrible reason why!

But, for the life of her, she could only pedal slowly upon her homeward way to Morcove School.

"I'll feel better presently; when there's been time to get over it."

It had been a cruel, devastating blow, utterly wrecking her peace of mind! And how doubly unfortunate that it should have happened—at such a time! It meant a load of grief and anxiety to be endured, in secret, whilst the Form must see her throwing herself heart and soul into all the nonsense of a farcical play—and she herself cast for a comic part.

Maddeningly, at this moment when grief and indignation assailed her, she saw Fay and Edna Denver coming along on bicycles from the school; those two, the very pair who had witnessed against Jack!

They were going to twit her, she could tell. Already, having recognised her, riding alone so unusually, they were exchanging amused remarks.

Yet if she got down from her machine and, as it were, showed fight, that would only afford them proof of the extent to which she was smarting under their spiteful treatment.

She steered close in to her left as they came riding by, her eyes looking stonily along the road.

"What, you didn't stay for a cup of tea at the Creamery?" Fay called out mockingly. "Why was that?"

Then Edna sniggered:

"You know she won't answer, Fay; too proud to speak to girls like us!"

"Proud! A fine lot she has to be proud of now! Ha, ha, ha!"

Now that they could not see her face—because they had passed her on the road—she let furious rage come into her looks, whilst riding a little faster. As for their looks, just then—Ah, how sweet this revenge of theirs was tasting, to both girls!

One could tell, by the gleaming eyes and the wide grins. Their revenge for the bad turn which they made out she had done them, the other day—although they knew quite well that she was not to blame.

"Polly! Coo-ec, Polly!"

It was a sudden hailing cry from behind, and she slowed so as to be able to look round. To her surprise, the chums she had met in Barncombe were coming after her full pelt, on their machines.

"Decided not to get tea at the Creamery, after all!" Pam serenely explained, when she and Judy and Tess had overtaken Polly. "So we got what we wanted at the shop and then set off back."

"You saw the Denver sisters?" Judy remarked to Polly. "I suppose they had something nasty to say. Why, Polly, you look quite pale."

"I—I didn't answer them, anyhow."

"That's much the best way, Polly," murmured the captain. "We all know they've got their knife into you, trying to make out it was your fault that Miss Somerfield has refused to have them back next term."

"Cheer up, Polly; they can't do you any harm," said Tess tersely.

"Oh, it's not going to affect me." And Polly laughed. Never had she said a truer word than that. The harm was already done, only these chums of hers—most fortunately—did not know that.

"About the play, Polly," voiced Pam, a couple of minutes later. "Lots of the girls were saying they would love to rehearse this evening. Could we, after prep, run through some of the bits that have not to be altered?"

"Yes, of course," agreed Polly striving her hardest to sound enthusiastic, yet with her thoughts still on that unpleasant encounter with the Denver sisters.

"But look," serious Judy quietly exclaimed, nodding directly along the road, "there, at the entrance to the Headland Hotel—isn't that Betty?"

"Betty it is, right enough—waving," Pam said delightedly. "I say, I wonder if we can get her to come along with us to the school?"

"She's to have a part in the play; we'll see what we can do!" Polly cried, in what she hoped was her normal blithe way.

All four of them pedalled harder, and next minute they were down from their machines where Betty Barton had awaited them. Doubtless she would have come running to meet them, but running was not much in Betty's line, at present.

She still suffered from a rather lame foot, tiresome sequel to that taxicab accident which had kept her away from school all this term. Recently her mother had brought her down to the Headland Hotel, to get the benefit of that wonderful air which Morcove School enjoyed.

"Had tea, girls? You haven't? Then—come on in!" was Betty's sparkling commencement. "The bikes will be all right here—"

"But Betty—"

"I'm alone. Mumsie has gone up to London for the day. I was very nearly coming across to the school, to find some company; but I'm always in and out—"

"And why shouldn't you be?" smiled Pam, as she and her fellow-cyclists parked the machines. "If we have tea with you, will you come on to the school afterwards—for the play?"

"Rather! And chance being told to go!"

"I can see you being told to go," chuckled Polly. "How's the foot, Betty darling?"

"I'm not answering!" Days ago, Betty had stated that she would not answer further inquiries about the foot.

"More to the point—how's the play?" she gaily questioned Polly. "And have you heard from

Jack yet? Last time I saw you, dear, you were feeling rather cross with Jack—his not coming over, or writing?"

"I know. But—"

"That mystery is cleared up, Betty," said Pam, noticing that Polly had let a shrug imply the rest. "It seems that the boys are not allowed to come over—"

"Not!"

"And won't be able to take any part in the play either," the captain ruefully continued. "Owing to some sickness going about in the district, it's considered best for the two schools not to mix."

"Oh, how rotten!" Betty cried. "And you'd written parts for Jack, and Dave, and Jimmy and Tubby, hadn't you, Polly?"

"They must come out, that's all," said Morcove's playwright, shrugging again. "My next job, as soon as I get in."

Meantime, here she was, being taken by Betty into the wonderful hotel, along with Pam, Judy and Tess. The revolving doors received them, and in one of the well-warmed, brilliant lounges they settled themselves in "comfy" chairs, with a table in their midst for the teatray.

A band was playing, and plenty of people down here for the winter season were sitting about.

Strange it was for Polly to be contemplating so many carefree folk, and even listening to her chums' carefree talk, whilst that dreadful train of thought still ran on in her brain.

Once they touched upon the part she was to play, in her own clever little farce. Yet all unbeknown to them she was acting a part now, only it belonged to the drama of actual life. The part of a girl who must be silent about the blow that had smashed her happiness, and even pretend to be as happy as ever.

Barely twenty minutes did they sit over the dainty tea. Then Betty went along with the others to Morcove School.

"I know somebody who'll feel fed-up when she hears where we have been," Pam lightly remarked. "Naomer! Those pâte-fois sandwiches—don't breathe a word, Polly, when we get back to Study 12."

"But I've a peace-offering," Polly jested, whilst her heart ached. "In this carton of stuff from the Creamery!"

The old study awaited her, even as the stage awaits the actor or actress who must go on and take every cue, no matter the secret sorrow, the private anxiety.

As it chanced, there had been a rather meagre tea-table for Naomer, dainty Paula Creel, Madge Minden and Helen Craig. They were clearing away when the returned cyclists entered, bringing in Betty.

"Bekas," shrilled dusky Naomer, "you have been having tea at ze Creamery, of course—sweendle!"

"Wrong," Polly retorted, keeping the Creamery carton out of sight. "We had tea at the hotel!"

"What!"

"Such lovely toasted scones—oh, and muffins, all hot in a dish—"

"Of all ze sweendles!"

"Simply running with butter—"

"All right, Polly, zat will do; bekas—"

"And pâte-fois sandwiches; so delish, we scooped the lot!"

Thus Polly, in her rôle of madcap, and what did it matter, she was thinking, though she did have to force nonsense that came so naturally at other times? So long as it kept these chums of hers from suspecting that her heart was heavy.

as lead—and so far, thank goodness, they were none the wiser.

"Owing to sickness in the district, the part of the Man with the Dancing Bear will be played by Mademoiselle Polly Linton—"

"Not ze bit of eet, Polly! Bekas, zat is a boy's part, and you can't be a boy!"

"Can't I?" retorted Polly. "You don't know what I can be, if I like! Now, rehearse your bit, come on! Stand on your hind legs, as the dancing bear—"

"I'm blowed if I do!"

"Then you won't get a bun thrown to you!"

"What ze diggings—bun, where?"

"Aha!" said the madcap, at last producing her carton of purchases from the cake shop. "A cream bun, too! In fact, several cream buns!"

"Ooo, gorjus! Bekas, queek—"

Peals of laughter went up from the other girls; they thought it so like the madcap, at the top of her form, to be tantalising greedy Naomer with a bun, held out of reach.

"Dance, Naomer, and you get it; dance!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"No, I won't dance, so zere; but I will rehearse—I don't mind doing zat," said Naomer, feeling that she was saving her face by calling the performance a rehearsal. "Only, I haven't got my hearthrug on, to pretend I am a bear!"

"Dance, anyhow!" Polly commanded, and was next moment speaking lines that had been written for her brother Jack, where he was to have been a foreign peasant, going round his native country with a dancing bear.

The amusing patter, all in broken English, flowed from Polly's lips now, whilst she pretended to have Naomer upon a chain, using the ebony ruler to prod "the Bear" into livelier gambols.

"Bai Jove," chortled Paula, lying back in the easy chair, "haow extwoordinawily funny, yes, wather—haw, haw, haw!"

"You had better leave that part in, Polly, and play it yourself," Betty urged delightedly.

"How many more parts am I to be expected to play?" retorted the madcap. "Oh, but I don't mind! Carry on then, kid; hey, ho, allez-allez!"

"No, bekas, now for ze bit where I get ze bun!"

"G'rrt, you; greedy! Take it, then," said Polly; but she purposely threw the cream bun so that Naomer, in spite of a wild leap, failed to catch it. The round of puff-pastry, frothing cream, plopped full in the face of Paula Creel, who promptly doubled up, emitting a panicky:

"Owch! Gah! Naow look at me!" wailed the oft-suffering victim of the madcap's roguishness.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"New kind of face cream," said Polly. "But I wouldn't leave it on, if I were you, Paula."

"The twouble is to get it off, bai Jove!"

"And now, Betty," rattled on the madcap, "I wonder if you will do my prep for me, so as to let me push on with the play?"

"Of all ze cheek! Bekas—"

"Thank you," said Polly, taking Betty's readiness for granted. "For the next hour I shall be in the libe. It is no use trying to work here. Too many disturbances; too much nonsense!"

"If I have to go before then, I'll look in to say good-night," Betty promised gaily. "Best of luck, Polly darling!"

"I can do with it," grimaced the madcap, making her exit with the MS.

Then, like a comedy actress who has left the stage after "bringing down the house," she puffed for breath and let her smile fade.

The library was no favourite haunt of hers.

Of all the girls who avoided the book-crammed room, because of its "SILENCE" notices on the walls, she most seldom visited it.

Her happy, mirthful nature was opposed to all idea of solitude; but she had to seek solitude now. "A rest between the acts"—and yet, where was the rest for her, in having to go at the play again, making drastic alterations?

With the big, well-warmed room to herself, she sat down at one of the writing tables and slammed the manuscript in front of her on the pad.

Instantly, and with a look of stern determination, she turned her attention to those pages which contained matter written in to provide parts for Jack, Dave, Jimmy and Tubby.

Jack's was to have been the really versatile part, with lightning changes from one character to another—providing a feast of mimicry, at which he was so good. With a blue pencil she slashed away at the typewritten lines; some of the best stuff she had ever done, but it had to be taken out ruthlessly.

And then suddenly she flung down the blue pencil, pushed the MS. aside, and seized pen and notepaper.

Even if she had to come back quite late, to make up for lost time over the alterations and re-writing, she was going to get a letter off to Jack by this evening's post.

Dating the sheet of notepaper that bore the embossed address of Morcove School, she began:

"Dear Jack,—I am sending this to your school, as I am not supposed to know that you are at home. It will be sent on to you, no doubt.

"I was wondering why I could see or hear nothing of you, and then—only to-day—Fay Denver told me.

"How I wish I could catch the first train home, Jack darling, to be with you. But I can tell that mother and dad, like your chums at Grangemoor, will be all the more unhappy if they know that I know.

"So I'm going on pretending that I don't know!

"You mustn't let it upset you all the more, because, in secret, I'm letting you know that I have been told. I am writing this to try to comfort you. Also, I want you to understand that I am going to do all I can to get this great wrong righted.

"It may be possible, for Fay and Edna are mixed up in it, as their cousin Bertie is. We know what they are, all three of them, don't we!

"Jack, it is a cruel, wicked shame! But don't let it get you down. At times I feel a sort of awful misery swamp over me, so I can imagine how you feel. But I've made up my mind to keep smiling and to carry on here at Morcove just the same as usual. So, I hope, Betty and all the rest of them, who think all the world of you, will not have to share in the upset.

"If you write to me, dear, better send it via Grangemoor. Or our home postmark might be seen by one of the girls here.

"Oh, Jack, how I could go on writing page after page, but—"

But the tears were dimming her eyes even then—poor "madcap" with her aching heart!

She placed the unfinished letter under the blotter, and simply sat for a little while, elbows on the table and clenched hands supporting her drooping face.

Then the library clock ting'd the half-hour. Sighing, she drew out the letter and added a

few more lines, then gummied it up in an envelope addressed to Jack—at Grangemoor School.

Back on the blotter came the wad of MS. Once again she took up the blue pencil, deleting lines that Jack or one of the other boys would have spoken, if only this thing had never happened! At such a time, too; the end of term at hand, the Christmas "hols" drawing nigh.

"POLLY darling—"
"Hallo, Betty!"

"Haven't come to say good-night, after all!" was Betty's rejoicing remark as she came forward from the library doorway. "Ethel Courtway says I can stay on until eight, when there's a car going to Barncombe that will drop me at the hotel."

"Oh, splendid!"

"And the girls want to rehearse, Polly! They're in the music-room now. I said I'd let you know, and most likely you'd come along."

"Rather!"

Polly, jumping up from her seat at the library table, was going to carry away the MS., but her best of chums, with a fond smile, took it from her.

"Let's see, Polly—may I? Oh!" Betty's tone was one of dismay as she fluttered the pages and saw so many deletions. "What a shame it is, dear. And you not only have to cut out all that stuff, but have to write in fresh stuff!"

"Can't be helped, Betty!"

Betty handed back the MS., smiling lovingly again.

"There isn't another girl in the Form, Polly, who could have done this. What we should do without you! If you fell ill, for instance, or—something, anyhow, prevented you from carrying on."

"Nothing is going to prevent me," smiled Polly. "I'll take jolly good care about that! So now for a spot of rehearsal. But I must just pop down to the post-box first, Betty. A letter—"

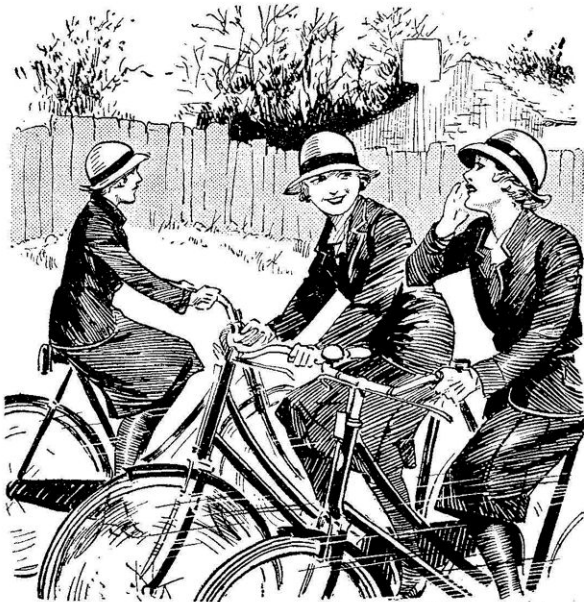
"To Jack?"

"Why, yes; I thought I'd send him a line."

"He and his chums must be jibbing against this ban on their coming over," Betty commented, limping away with Polly to go downstairs to the post-box in the front hall. "They love to lend us a hand over anything like a play. Don't you think it strange, Polly—this fuss about sickness in the town?"

"It's a bit unusual, Betty. I was furious, at first; but now—"

"Well, of course, dear, we know that Mr. and Mrs. Challenor, over there at Grangemoor, would be likely to consider only what's best for both schools. And, after all, it would be rotten for sickness to occur, just when the hols are coming



"So you didn't stay for tea at the Creamery?" Fay taunted, riding past Polly. And Edna added, spitefully: "Too proud to speak to us!" How these two were joying in this chance of revenge, thought Polly bitterly.

on. The hols, Polly! Oh, isn't it jolly to think how fast they're coming now?"

"Yes, not a long now!" smiled the madcap, whilst her heart knew another pang.

THE hols—Christmas! And even at Christmas, at whatever fireside she might be, with Jack, she would be with a brother who was still under such a heavy cloud of undeserved disgrace!

CHAPTER 3.

The Madcap Makes Them Laugh

"HORAY, everybody! Bekas—here is Polly, hip-pip!"

"Oh, Polly, come on—"

"Yes, Polly, we want you!"

It was such a tumultuous welcome, Madge Minden—at the music-room piano—promptly ran off a grand sort of introductory chord. Whereupon, the Form's talented playwright and great "stand-by" for comic relief—their madcap Polly—took a few prancing steps as if to face the footlights, and bowed.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen—"

"There are no gentlemen," chipped in Helen.

"Bekas, 'on account of sickness" zat is going about," Naomer gratuitously reminded the crowd. "And talking of zat, how about a snack, before we rehearse? Bekas, ze best way not to catch ze henflewindow—"

"Kid!" thundered Polly. "Your place, until

you are wanted as the dancing bear—in that corner!"

"Not ze bit of oet! Bekas—"

"Paula, take Naomer and put her in the corner, and see after her!"

"Er—er—"

"Hurry up!" Polly stamped at a very hesitant Paula.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Er—Naomer deah, do you gweatly mind—er

"Yes, I do!" said the imp, filching out an apple to chew, as she walked away.

Then Polly went after Naomer. Amidst great hilarity—for this diversion was nearly as good as anything in the play—the madcap finally pushed the dusky one into a corner, and fenced her in with the fire-guard.

As Naomer, behind the fire-guard, bore some resemblance to a caged animal, quite a number of girls crowded round to admire the exhibit and to offer anything that might be going in the way of sweets.

Such fun resulted, it was not until Polly came up with a huge, hastily scrawled placard: "DO NOT FEED THE BEAR!" that she was able to get the crowd to come away.

"Now then, girls, if you want to rehearse!" came at last in Polly's most business-like tone.

"This end of the room is the stage. Keep off it, until I give the word! Madge, you might be tinkling off the overture. Everybody on stage for the opening chorus! Not you, kid!"

"What ze diggings!" shrilled Naomer, already clambering over the fire-guard. "I am in ze chorus!"

"Go on, then; one more for the Noah's Ark," Polly grimly jested, in allusion to the way in which the girls were marching on to the imaginary stage. "Hurry up, please; more room further down the car!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But next moment some of this laughter was changing to scornful booing. Many of the girls had become aware of Fay Denver, taking a look at them all from the doorway.

"Clear out, you!"

The Form had no intention of allowing either Fay or her sister to look on at rehearsals. As the Denver pair had "disdained" having any part in the production, the present request that Fay should "beat it" was not unreasonable.

"Oh, is it a rehearsal?" Fay grinned, feigning surprise. "Sorry! But don't quite smash the piano, over there; I might want to practice later on!"

She minced away, just as several of the rehearsalists dashed across to the door and banged it shut.

Fay went upstairs, to rejoin her sister in the study which they shared. She was still grinning as she entered.

"You should just see Polly Linton, Edna, trying to carry on the same as ever, he, he, he! What do you think, though? She has been writing to her brother—sending the letter to his school."

"Oh! To be forwarded on, of course," Edna promptly inferred. "That's rather interesting."

"When I went down with that letter of mine, for Cousin Bertie, I was only just in time for the post. The maid was clearing the box. She had the heap of letters on the hall table—and I just happened to see Polly's, addressed to Jack Linton, at Grangemoor."

"You know what it means?" Edna exclaimed, narrowing her eyes. "She doesn't want her people or anyone else to know that she knows."

"That's it!"

"Then, at any rate, Fay—she doesn't want any of her schoolmates to know?"

"Oh, is it likely, Edna! I could tell, when I looked in at the music-room just now; her one idea is to keep the Form from finding out."

"Because of the disgrace?"

"Yes; but there's probably another reason as well. She doesn't want her best chums to feel as upset as she feels—and they would be, of course."

"Yes," Edna sneered. "That's Study 12 all over. But if Polly is anxious to keep them in ignorance, we could give her another bash by letting them know?"

"We're going to," Fay said heartlessly. "Oh, we haven't finished with her yet, Edna. I can see what her object is now; not to let her brother's business interfere with the production of that precious play. For the sake of the Form—you know the sort of nonsense they hold to, in Study 12. Polly's full of it. And that's where we've got her! Well, what?"

Edna was suddenly a-dance with an idea that had occurred to her.

"I say, wouldn't this be a scream, Fay! Supposing we burst in upon the whole Form now, whilst they are at rehearsal, and 'act' Jack Linton's being taken into custody by a policeman! You be Jack Linton; I'd be the bobby—oh, lovely, ha, ha, ha!"

"Dress up first, do you mean? Here, what about some togs downstairs in that cupboard where a lot of things are kept that have been used for amateur theatricals? There might be some suitable things!" Fay said gleefully. "We can go and look, anyhow."

"Come on, then!"

Conditions could not have been more favourable for a raid upon the cupboard in question, downstairs, the sisters being the only girls of the Form who were not attending the rehearsal.

Within a minute they were at the cupboard, which opened on to a side passage. As the girls of other Forms were mostly upstairs in their studies, Fay and Edna had little fear of being interrupted.

The electric light in the passage was strong enough, just there, amply to illumine the cupboard. Fay went in, whilst Edna hung about the doorway.

A most commodious place it was, long since set apart for the storage of stage costumes that were likely to come in useful some other time.

Numerous coat-hooks held each a couple of garments or more, to say nothing of weird dresses that had simply been bundled into the cupboard, to lie in heaps upon the floor.

In addition, room had been found for the putting of various stage "properties."

"Doing any good?" Edna soon whispered in, impatiently. Now I think of it, didn't Polly have a policeman's helmet once, and a tunic?"

"I expect those things were sent back. No!" came Fay's rejoicing whisper next moment. "Edna—joy! Here IS—a bobby's helmet!"

"Really? How splendid! Then you ought to find the rest, Fay."

"I think I'm coming to them now. There's an old macintosh and a bobby's cape here."

The imitation helmet, passed out to Edna, was joyfully hugged by her, whilst Fay continued her rummaging. Soon other things were passed out, comprising some attire of a comic nature, used in a former production.

Finally, Fay came out of the cupboard with an armful of other stuff. Both sisters scuttled away to do the dressing-up. For this purpose, they resorted to an alcove on the first floor, quite close

to the music-room. As they struggled into the things, putting them on over their own garments, they could hear the rehearsal being taken quite seriously.

And shrieks of laughter which came from the music-room, now and then, were simply due to the funniness of some of the turns.

"Not much light to see by, Fay," tittered Edna. "How do I look?"

"You're all right. Anybody can see what you are. I don't know that I am going to look Jack Linton to the life. Here, help me into this rain-coat, Edna."

"Just a sec." Edna was trying to get the sham helmet to rest upon her head more comfortably. "That's better. Oh, how I wish I had some hair comings, to make a moustache—he, he, he! Want some help, do you?"

"Oh, I've managed now. Why not pencil a moustache? It'll look just as good."

"So I will!" Edna's use of a lead pencil upon her upper lip produced such a heightened effect, her sister doubled down in convulsions of suppressed laughter.

"Hark," giggled Edna, having completed the moustache. "We want to burst in just when they're quiet, for that will mean the 'stage' is empty, most likely. They're going it good and hearty just at present."

"Well, let's creep along, and be ready—shall we?"

"But look here, we haven't arranged—"
"I go in first, as Jack Linton," Fay whispered. "I'll soon make them understand who I am. But you must come on almost immediately, for the whole thing will misfire."

"That's it," grinned the younger sister.

CHAPTER 4.

The Price of Their Joke

WARILY, so freakishly dressed up as they were, the spiteful pair crept towards the music-room, to which there were two entrances. Being a very long and spacious room, sometimes used for entertainments, it had a middle entrance with a doorway of good width; then, at the top end, there was a less conspicuous doorway—serving the stage, when a concert was being given.

To this latter door the sisters crept, and Fay, trying the knob, found that she could burst in whenever she pleased.

Nor did she have long to wait. As if the rehearsal of a certain scene in the play had come to an end with general satisfaction, there was clapping, and then silence, except for a pleasant murmur of happy voices.

Fay threw open the door, saw all the rehearsalists standing clear of that end of the room which was treated as a stage, and with a rush she reached the centre of that open space.

"Good-evening, everybody; this is Grangemoor calling!" she shouted at an audience too astounded to give tongue. "I have run all the way from the Barncombe Creamery—whew! Where, where is my sister Polly!"

What nonsense was this? the startled rehearsalists were wondering. Fay Denver, dressed up as a schoolboy—and pretending to be Jack Linton!

"None but she must know!" Fay spoke on dramatically, and walked about the stage in feverish excitement. "But stay! Who comes?"

"Here, clear out of it!" some of the other girls began to shout, feeling much more annoyed than amused. "Fay Denver—"

"Oh, heck, it is the police! I am caught!" gasped the impersonator of Jack Linton, letting her knees knock together. "Polly! Save me, sister—save me!"

Edna, as the policeman, had rushed on. "I am a police officer!" she shouted gruffly, swooping upon trembling Fay. "Jack Linton, I arrest you for theft! Come on! You grabbed those pound-notes—"

"You did!"
"Please, sir, let me off! Think of my sister Polly!"

Uproar drowned the rest. A dozen of the rehearsalists were shouting:

"Turn them out! Shame! Turn them out! What do they mean by it! Booh!"

Pam, as captain, walked towards the detested pair. But someone else, always more apt to act with violent haste, dashed at Fay and Edna.

It was Polly. In a flash she was striking out at both girls. Edna's cardboard helmet went lopsided under a wild, open-handed smack that Polly had meant for the wearer's face.

Then Polly grabbed at that helmet and pulled it from Edna's head. For an instant it dangled by the chin-strap in Polly's grasp; then, whirling it, she brought it down upon Fay's head—whack!

Some yells of laughter came from girls who were in delight over Polly's spirited onslaught. At the same time, other girls went on shouting their indignation at the sisters for having interrupted like this. It was pandemonium.

Polly dropped the helmet and "went" for both sisters again. She got them each, in spite of their wild scufflings, by a shoulder, and at long last she banged their heads together—as she had so often longed to do.

Then, in spite of Pam's quelling gestures, a dozen of the rehearsalists surged to join in the meleé.

They got both girls away from Polly and set about hustling them all round the "stage." Fay and Edna could not have known whether they were standing on their feet or their heads.

The clothing they had put on for the purposes of the "guying" was fairly torn off them.

Such a tremendous commotion would, in the ordinary way, have brought Ethel Courtway—the temporary mistress of the Form—running to the music-room. But she knew that a rehearsal was in progress—or supposed to be!—and doubtless she would imagine that all the rioting was one of the amusing "turns" in Polly's play.

"Out them! Out them!"

"Yes, bekas—booh! Rotters!" shrieked Naomer, by no means playing a minor part in the lively scene.

Fay was sent headlong into the passage, with even some of her own clothes in dreadful array.

As for Edna, as she retained part of the policeman disguise—the nether garments, so to speak—she looked a still worse object when bundled out to join her sister, all asprawl on the passage floor.

Slam! went the door upon the pair of them, and then a good many rehearsalists had to stand and get their breath back, whilst putting themselves to rights.

Triumphant laughter over the way Fay and Edna had been treated soon gave place to indignant remarks.

"Wretches, to butt in like that!"
"Did they think they were being funny?"
"What was the idea, anyway?"
"A drive at you, Polly!"
"Oh, I know!"
"But you gave them the right answer, Polly!"

"Yes, gorjus! Eef only we could have something like zat in ze play, and me be ze one to whack Fay on ze head with ze constabubble's helmet!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But why—why the posing as Jack, Polly?" asked Helen Craig. "Why the 'arrest'?"

"Oh, their idea of a joke. You know what they are."

"I don't see why they should have made Jack out to be a thief," frowned Madge. "Abominable!"

"What made them think of such a thing?" Betty said, with similar indignation. "Never mind, though, Polly—"

"Oh, I don't mind. Come on, let's get on with the rehearsal."

"There's one thing," Pam calmly remarked; "this business won't end here. I shall demand an explanation from Fay and Edna, and an apology to Polly."

Appreciative murmurs greeted this. Pam could be trusted to mean what she had said. The fact that she had taken no active part in the "lynching" of the obnoxious pair did not mean that she was lacking in spirit. But her course of action was always the dignified one. Many of her followers could anticipate the Denver sisters having an even more uncomfortable time at the hands of Pam, in due course, than they had just now!

Madge went back to the piano, and soon the rehearsal was in full swing again. So far as others could tell, Polly was thinking no more about the recent "drive" against her by Fay and Edna. Any further condoling remarks were received by the madcap with a shrug implying:

"Oh, what does it matter!"

But at heart—ah, how sick with disgust she felt. And worse than the disgust was that dread which had come upon her; Pam's going into the matter might cause Fay and Edna to explain, spitefully, that the bit of "guying" was founded on fact.

Later in the evening, when Betty had gone back to the hotel, after a fond good-night all round, and when studies had filled up again for a "spot of prep," Polly approached Pam about the latter's intention.

"You said you were going to take the matter up with those Denver girls?"

"Yes, Polly."

"I'd rather you didn't, Pam."

"Hi, what ze diggings!" Naomer looked up from her alleged "prep," to exclaim. "Bekas—"

"Yes, bai Jove! Weally, Polly, after such an outrageous piece of—"

"Oh, you two—keep quiet! Don't you think, Pam—"

"No, Polly, I don't! As captain, I'm going to see that those two—"

"But if I ask you to let the whole thing drop?"

"Still I shall do as I said I would," Pam insisted, with that serene smile of hers. "It was a disgusting insult, for which they shall be made to apologise—in writing."

"They'll refuse."

"Very well; I shall know what to do in that case."

"They're to leave at the end of this term. What threat can you possibly use that will matter to them?"

"Polly darling, I must get on with my work," Pam again smiled, taking up her pen. "As a last word—if I may be allowed to have it—what would Betty have done in the same circumstances?"

"Ze same as you, Pam; bekas—"

"Yes, wather! And, weally and twuly, Polly deah, I do think you should wecognise—"

"Oh, be quiet, be quiet!" Polly stamped. "I am going down to the libe again—to push on with those alterations—"

"It's awfully late, Polly. You won't sleep to-night."

"That's all right, Pam."

And Polly went away, her own "prep" being finished, to work alone in the library, where her best chums sought her when the bell had gone for the last Assembly of the day.

"You've been sticking at it too long," they told her, never suspecting how idle her pen had been, although her brain was working so hard.

All the secret misery and anxiety had got the better of her desperate stoicism for once. Not a line of re-writing had she done; the new "stuff" simply would not come.

Yet it had to be on paper without delay; the other girls were now needing the play, very urgently, in its final, revised state.

For a while, after lights out in the big dormitory, Polly had that anxiety to help keep her awake. As if there were not enough, without it, to banish sleep from her pillow, she experienced this extra wretchedness of worrying about a task that should have been tackled by now, whilst feeling that she could not write a single line of humour, even if she were offered a thousand pounds.

Then, with a sudden recurrence of her grimly determined, headstrong mood, she decided to slip out of bed, dress and go down to the study—now!

No sleep for her, in any case; so she might just as well force her active brain into the right channel, down there in Study 12, whilst Morcove slept.

In a warm dressing-gown and slippers she padded away from the room where all her Form mates were sleeping peacefully.

With the moonlight illumining the way for her, down the two flights of stairs she crept, then round into the long corridor of studies, dark and eerily silent.

She, who had bounded into Study 12 so boisterously, how many hundreds of times in the course of her happy life at Morcove—she came, at this late hour of the night, to that same study, treading silently, shutting the door after she had entered without a sound.

Switching on the light, she drew a chair up to her side of the table and sat down. From her table drawer she drew out the manuscript, and then she took a pen and dipped it.

Ding, dong! went the familiar chimes of Morcove as she began to write. Ding, dong—half-past ten!

HARK! There were the chimes, ringing once again over the sleeping world of Morcove. The four quarters, this time. Eleven o'clock?

Bong! the iron-tongued hour-bell began to strike. Polly had returned her pen to the tray, and she sat counting the strokes of the bell as they came. Nine—ten—eleven—

TWELVE!

Midnight, and she was still here.

But her task was finished now. Yes, at last, and in spite of all the distracting worries and anxieties—she could say:

"Finished!"

Good stuff, too. She could think so, without being conceited. She knew what was wanted. Strange, how it had come from her, at such a time as this; a steady flow of just the sort of comedy stuff the Form always expected her to provide.

"It is no effort to Polly," they were accustomed to say.

Neither was it, at all ordinary times. But now

Polly patted back a yawn. Tired! And yet even now she might well wonder whether she would get to sleep when between the sheets again.

The one great anxiety was at an end; but the other—the other still remained.

CHAPTER 5.

Telling the World

AFTER morning school, next day, Pam Wiloughby went to the Denvers' study.

She knew that they had gone up to that study as soon as the Form was out of class.

"Come in-n-n!" her polite tap was answered by Fay, in the usual impudent mood.

"Oh, the captain!" was said with the same impudence, next moment; and both sisters stood up, mockingly deferential.

"A word about last night," Pam requested, closing the door behind her. "The Form let you see, I think, what it thought of you both for interrupting the rehearsal so disgracefully. Now, as captain, I require an explanation."

"Oh, do you?"

"And more than an explanation," Pam steadily answered Fay. "An apology is due to Polly Linton, against whom, of course, the 'joke' was directed. I'm going to see that you send her a written apology."

Fay smiled aside at her sister.

"Do you hear this, Edna?"

"Yep! But, Pam Wiloughby," said the younger miscreant, "aren't you rather forgetting that Fay and I are leaving at the end of this term?"

"In other words," Fay flared out, "we don't care a hoot for you, as captain, or for the Form, or anyone else! Get that? If it were Miss Somerfield herself, we'd tell her the same thing."

"You wouldn't," Pam dissented, with that composure which always took effect. "You can't want to go home even sooner than the end of term, and with a worse report than you are in for already."

"Anyway," Fay blustered, "you're not Miss Somerfield!"

"You're not even a mistress," sneered Edna. "Just a tuppenny-ha'penny Form captain!"

"A little more than that!" Pam calmly submitted. "Polly's chum, remember. There was something in your 'joke' particularly offensive, hurtful to Polly. The other girls saw the insinuation—that Jack is dishonest. So you will explain, and you'll apologise."

Suddenly, then, Fay laughed.

"Right, if you will have it so! In writing, I think you said? Edna, just sit down and write what I dictate, will you? Don't go, Pam Wiloughby!"

"Is this to be another 'joke' of yours?"

"You'll soon see!" Fay fairly hissed. "Ready, Edna? We, the undersigned, hereby REFUSE to apologise to Polly Linton—"

Pam stayed to hear no more of the dictation, in all its studied insolence. Wrenching open the door, she walked out.

She had gone only a yard or two in the direction of the stairs, when Fay herself came out into the corridor, followed by Edna.

"So we do refuse to apologise!" Fay shouted, so that every other girl in the Form quarters was bound to hear. "And if you want to know why—here's the reason!"

"Yes," Edna shouted, just as loudly. "You shall have the explanation, right enough!"

Doors came open all along the passage. Tenants of studies flocked forth, their looks expressing wonderment. And Fay and Edna laughed together, realising what a fine audience they were to have.

"All of you!" Fay resumed loudly. "If my sister and I did make out Polly's brother to be dishonest—so he is, there!"

A scandalised gasping came from the astounded listeners.



To the great amusement of the others Polly got Naomer into a corner and fenced her in with a fireguard. Little did her chums realise that Polly's fun was only pretence—hiding an aching heart!

"You're not the only 'Morcove Mimics'!" Fay laughed at them all. "Edna and I can do something in that line, as you saw last evening!"

"With a jolly sight more reality in it than you'll ever get," Edna chimed in. "Even though you have a Polly Linton to write the stuff for you!"

Pam turned back. Her expression was doing more than anything else to keep other girls silent. She looked so efficient.

"You two have said that Jack Linton is dishonest—"

"So he is!" Fay and Edna voiced together. "As all Grangemoor knows," Fay added; "and if Morcove doesn't know, that's only because it has been hushed up."

"What has been hushed up?"

"That he grabbed some pound-notes from the pay-desk at the Creamery, and was run in for doing so! At least, he had to go to the police station in custody."

"Are you mad?" Pam panted.

"Mad?" Edna retorted. "We were there and saw it done!"

A sensational silence gave place to a wild outburst of incredulous talk. In vain Pam gestured for less excitement; the thronged corridor remained in a state of hubbub—until someone came along from the stairs to make one more in the crowd. Polly!

Then the dramatic silence came again; the stillness that makes you fancy you could hear a pin drop.

Polly had stopped dead just where Fay and Edna were poised insolently in front of the captain. It was instantly noticed, however, that the madcap did not seem to wonder what the scene meant.

"So you have been telling them all, have you?" the crowd heard her say to the sisters fiercely. Fay bowed mockingly.

"Your captain would insist upon an explanation, Polly Linton. Well, she's got it!"

"But not the apology!" Edna rejoined. "Not likely!"

Pam thought she would need to restrain Polly from flying at them again; but this time the victim of the merciless vendetta neither spoke nor struck back in anger.

Instead, she continued on her way to Study 12, pushing past girls who were eager to display sympathy, but she let them see that she wished to be alone.

A brace of seconds after this, half a dozen of them made an ugly rush at Fay and Edna. Just in time the sisters skipped back into their study and banged the door; and then Pam stood before that closed door, with arms spread defensively, saying calmly:

"No! No; all of you—let them be."

"Let them be!" raged Helen Craig, in a white-heat of anger. "They should be turned out of the school now—this instant! The wretches!"

"Yes, Pam—"

"I know," the captain quelled a general outcry. "But it's for Miss Somerfield to deal with them."

"No, bekas—"

"Even if it were true, what they say about Jack," Judy struck in, "it's cruel spitefulness to repeat it."

"Yes, bai Jove; disgwaceful! But, geals, geals—haow can it be true?"

"Well, is it?" cried several then. "Can Polly tell us?"

"Ask her!"

There was a rush to Study 12. Polly, over by the window, faced round to see the throng.

"Polly! What those hateful Denvers have said? It isn't true?"

Polly drew herself up.

"It is true that Jack was accused of taking the notes," she admitted. "It's true that the money was found upon him, in the shop. But it's not true that he took the money," Polly added fiercely.

"Of course it isn't!"

"No, bekas, what ze diggings—Jack, a thief! Abominabubble!" Naomer gave her rendering of Paula's word for the accusation.

"But he has not been able to clear himself?" Pam inferred.

"No. And so he has been taken away from Grangemoor, to be at home. I've not seen him, nor heard a word from anyone, either at Grangemoor or at home. I went to the Creamery and they bore out all that Fay had told me."

"So Fay told you?" the captain frowned. "Out of spite, of course."

"Shame, shame!" the shouting began afresh. "Mean things, both of them!"

Pam, who had passed through the crowd to enter the study, turned in the doorway.

"I don't wonder you all feel like this," she said quietly. "But we musn't make it worse for Polly, when we all feel so sorry for her. She has been carrying on, girls—I mean, with the play and all that—in spite of this terrible upset. Just imagine!"

"Oh, that's all right," Polly shrugged. "The play has helped me to—think less about the wretched business."

"All the same, it's splendid of you to look at it in that light," Pam declared. "It's one of the finest things I've known a Morcove girl do. Just as the thing Fay and Edna have done has been—the worst."

"Hear, hear! You've just about said it, Pam!" girls dinned. "Bravo, Polly—bravo, for not giving up!"

"Bekas, without you, Polly, ze Form could never have gone on with the play!"

"Oh, rabbits!" the madcap laughed. "It was up to me, that's all. I've made up my mind to carry on, just as if all this had never happened. So will you do the same, now that you know? You won't find me failing you," Polly added, with a sudden lumpiness in her voice. "You see, I—I just keep on telling myself: Jack's not guilty—and that's everything."

"Of course it is, Polly! Oh, don't you worry!" A dozen voices were making a fresh hubbub of consoling remarks. "And we won't let it make any difference to us—"

"Bekas, just what Fay and Edna wanted—to smash up ze play! Sweendle, to try and spoil —"

"Yes, well, they'll find they haven't brought it off after all," Pam cut in, gently. "Now we musn't crowd around like this, making such a row. But before we disperse—cheers for Polly, girls—"

"Hurrah! Good old Polly—hurrah—"
"And one more jolly good cheer for her brother!" Naomer yelled. "Bekas—"
"Hurrah-h-h!"

"Oh, go away, the lot of you," Polly pleaded, so emotionally that the crowd did instantly break into dispersing twos and threes.

"Those Denvers!" seethed one girl, as she and a couple of companions went by the closed door of Fay and Edna's study. "I'd like to go in there and simply rag the place to bits. Wreck it!"

"So would I—and I!"

They stopped before the door.



"If my sister and I did make out Polly's brother to be dishonest—so he is!" Fay almost shouted. "He's nothing better than a thief!" The secret that Polly had tried to keep from her chums was known to all—at last!

"Can we get in?"

One of them tried the door. Keys were not allowed; but the Denver sisters had made this door fast—probably by wedging a chair against it on the inner side.

"Bust our way in—come on!"

"Yes, let's! Come on, girls!"

Between them, they soon drove in the door, and then mobbed into the study. Half a minute later, Pam had to step along from her study, to quell such a riot as most captains would have been unable to deal with. But her calmness and her prestige worked wonders.

Fay and Edna had escaped, half-torn to bits again. The study was turned upside down by now. Pam got the infuriated wreckers to rest content; significantly, she did not suggest their putting it to rights. Serenely, she merely suggested that that was enough; whereupon Polly's avengers seemed to think so, too, and went away.

Then Pam returned to Study 12, to resume some conversation with Polly and other members of the "chummycry."

"Now, of course, Polly, I know why you didn't want me to demand the apology from the Denver pair. You knew they would only end by telling me and everyone else. If only you had warned me, Polly!"

"I wasn't going to interfere with what you knew to be your duty, as a captain. It would have made you look like a weakling in the eyes of the Form. No," Polly said gloomily, "I was in a cleft stick there."

Suddenly she brightened again.

"But if the girls are going to carry on, just the same—what does it matter? And they will! I'll see that they do!"

"Polly—"

"Yes, Polly deah, haow about the stwain? Weally, I don't think you should have to conduct wehearsals and play your own comedy part, bai Jove, at a time like this!"

"Is zere anyzing Polly can take," Naomer artlessly suggested, "to keep her up to ze mark? Eef it were me, I know what I would do! An extra cup of cocoa or hot milk, or—"

"Wowoh, gow!" howled Paula, finding Naomer suddenly planted on her lap, in the easy chair, by a Polly who looked as boisterous as ever. "Theah you go!"

But as Paula's discomfiture was due entirely to recovered spirits on the part of her beloved chum, she could easily beam forgivingly:

"Yes, wather, Polly deah! Only too delighted, weally, to find you are yourself again!"

"Well, I am—so look out, some of you!" the madcap threatened, plumping down into a chair at the table. "Pam, may I call a proper rehearsal for to-night?"

"So far as I'm concerned—of course! But do you really think, dear, that you—"

"I do!"

And, five minutes later, Polly had an attendant crowd of cheering girls behind her as she affixed upon the green baize board, in the front hall, this formal notice:

"THE MORCOVE MIMICS."

"There will be a full REHEARSAL in the music-room at 7 p.m. this evening, conducted by "POLLY LINTON."

CHAPTER 6.

"We Can't Go On!"

"HALLO, Madge! Here already, then!"

"Just running over a few of the airs before the other girls come in, Pam."

It was only a little after half-past six, and the Form captain had sauntered into the music-room to find Madge Minden enjoying a piano practice, all by herself.

The room was well-warmed, but only half-lit

"May I stand around? Don't let me hinder you, Madge; but I've finished prep."

"Mine is waiting until the morning," smiled the music-mad member of the Form, lightly fingering the keys.

"Polly hasn't been here?"

"No. Isn't she in Study 12?"

Pam shook her head.

"I suppose she has slipped away to the libe, to take another look at the MS. Not that she had much to do to it, since she told me, at tea-time, it was quite finished."

"Alterations and all? How she must have slaved, Pam!"

"Much too hard. I'm not at all happy in my mind about Polly. This business about Jack must be worrying her dreadfully."

"Awful. There's a lot of tittle-tattle going on in the school, too. It was bound to get about."

Madge dropped her hands away from the keyboard. Her clever face was charged with a look of compassion.

"I've been finding myself thinking about it every now and then," she admitted. "So what it must be for Polly, who is answerable for so much!"

"The play itself, and several parts in it now. She is taking one of the parts that her brother was going to play—so as not to disappoint Naomer, she says."

"Good old Polly! It seems as though we can all do nothing better than carry on, just as if there had never been that bombshell. 'The play's the thing!'" Madge quoted, with a sad smile. "That's Polly's slogan at the moment."

"Yes, well"—and Pam gave her faint sigh—"I only hope she won't crash, as the result of it all. There's no telling. It may even be the best thing for her, and then, again—it may not. 'That thing you were playing just then, Madge—'"

"This? It's the tune I've sort of made up, to go with the song that now comes into the middle part," Madge answered, softly running off the air once more. "Polly let me have the words of the song first thing this morning. When she composed it, goodness knows! In bed, before she went to sleep last night, perhaps!"

"Sleep," murmured Pam. "I wonder how much sleep was Polly's, last night."

WELL before the appointed time, they all came romping in, eager for the first "official" rehearsal.

Many a girl would have been ready to admit, on the quiet, that she was not half as high-spirited as she was trying to make out. But there was the general understanding—one that witnessed to the team spirit of the Form—and also to the Form's admiration of Polly. They were going to behave as though that amazing scene caused by the Denver sisters had never happened.

Suddenly a cry went about that Polly was coming, and all talk broke off. There was a readiness for the burst of cheering which Polly came in for, next moment, as she whirled upon the scene.

"Bekas—'Author, author!'" yelled Naomer, anticipating the audience's "call" for the madcap, at the fall of the curtain on the great day.

"You keep quiet!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Polly, manuscript in hand, was ready to get to business. She did not propose to read the substituted items, but her brisk explanations, occupying five minutes, convinced the others that the play had not suffered by the enforced alterations.

"In fact—gorjus! Bekas, I still come on as ze dancing bear!"

"With me," the madcap supplemented. "So no mulling the turn, or you'll hear about it afterwards! Girls, I hope you won't think I'm taking on too much. It isn't that I want to play more than one part; but—"

"If you can, then, for goodness sake do!" cried Helen. "It's you or nobody, Polly, for the sort of stuff that your brother was to have acted."

"Yes, wather, bai Jove!"

"Or shall Paula—"

Peals of laughter greeted this, from Polly—one of those playful suggestions which revealed her in an effervescent mood.

Even as a suggestion, however, it was playfully resented by Naomer, who promptly hustled Paula out of the way, in case that amiable duffer should be given a really responsible part.

"Bekas, quite had enough to have you in ze chorus, Paula. You know you can't sing!"

"I can healp to make a wow, I twust—haw, haw, haw, haw!"

That Paula was not the only one who could modestly lay claim to doing this, the next ten minutes evidenced. Polly had the company "on stage" for the opening chorus, she standing in front to conduct. They sang the chorus once—not good enough for Polly. They sang it again—still not good enough!

"Let it RIP, can't you!"

A third time—and then, grimly, she wanted to know: were they all going to stand still like that, just staring into space?

"Can't you show some life?" she thundered. "Can't you— Oh, let me show you what I mean!"

With a rush, she put herself amongst them all, and then called upon Madge to strike up again. A fourth time the chorus started, and now there was Polly, not merely singing away with all of them, but letting them see what movement could accompany the singing.

She was all liveliness and fun whilst the singing went on. So they got the right idea, and presently she was out in front again, conducting—shouting as she beat time:

"That's more like it! Not like a lot of dummies! Keep them moving—that's it!" meaning their feet.

Naomer, wishing to excel, tried a high kick, and nearly fell over. This caused laughter to mingle with the singing; but Polly, for once, was quite seriously pleased with the dusky one.

"Jolly good, Naomer!"

A little later, girls who were "off stage" had many an ardent remark to exchange, about Polly's real genius for "getting the thing to go."

Without her to superintend and infuse vivacity into the various turns, they would never have been getting anything like such a bustling performance. Amateur players are always inclined to forget to be animated. Polly was a driving force keeping her schoolmates never still for a moment.

Then came the part that she was to take, more or less as it had been written for her brother. She had cut out a lot of the stuff that he would have been doing, but this one bit she had retained.

The scene was a Continental village, into which some Morocove girls had strayed whilst on holiday with their parents. Morocove mimicry was to provide specimens of native life, one being the strolling peasant with his dancing bear, and a wife who played the accordion. Pam was the "wife," complete with accordion—and she could play it, too!

But although Pam was such a success with the accordion, and although the dancing bear executed such gambols as reduced onlookers to convulsions,

Polly as the jabbering peasant was going to be the one to "bring down the house."

That was evident from this first rehearsal. Her patter in broken English was screamingly funny. It was noticed, too, that she seemed to have become Jack as much as she had become the character he would have acted.

In other words, she was taking the part just as he would have taken it. So well she knew him, with his gift for creating a humorous character!

And then, suddenly, Polly began to laugh at something she herself had said, as part of the patter. Amateurs, at rehearsals, often do burst out laughing over the nonsense in their own lines. But it was not like Polly to do that. She was too much the born actress.

She checked the laugh, then had to let it come again. She turned to Pam, who was with her on the stage, and Pam saw tears in the madcap's eyes—even whilst she laughed like this.

Pam had rarely experienced anything more distressing. She went close enough to Polly to put a hand lovingly upon those shaking shoulders.

"There, there, Polly; come away," Pam said. "You've done too much; borne with it all—too long."

"I feel I must stop for a bit," Polly said queerly. "Oh, I feel so—so strange!"

And Pam had to hold her as she tottered.

"She's fainted!"

That was the alarmed cry which was answered by Pam's quiet:

"No. But we must get her out of this. Come along, Polly dear. Lean on me."

"Oh, but—but it's so silly, my being like this," came the plucky attempt to make light of a collapsed state. "I'll just sit down, and you others just go on without me."

"Oh, no, Polly," many of the girls demurred. "You poor old Polly; go with Pam and one or two others—that's best."

With a grimace that had some of her usual comicality in it, Polly said resignedly:

"Suppose I'd better! Talk about helping you all; now I'm being a nuisance. I do, though, feel rather—muzzy."

The dizziness was evidently returning. Pam and Judy became the ones to assist her very slowly and gently away from the music-room.

"All the Denver girls' doing," Helen bitterly commented. "What a wicked shame it is."

"Yes! If ever a couple of girls had their revenge, they have! They'll just rejoice when they know."

"Wretches!" several of the girls stamped. "When they know very well there's been no excuse for any grudge against Polly!"

Madge, who had come away from the piano in the first moment of the upset, murmured gravely:

"I didn't like the look of Polly just then. They'll insist upon her going to matron, of course."

"Overwrought, bai Jove—yes, wather!" Paula deplored. "She has been cawying on—"

"With the school work on top of all else," nodded one of the others. "She's heard some of the gossip that's been talked in the other Forms. Enough to upset anybody."

"And not eating enough—I've noticed!" piped in Naomer. "So we better be careful not to make ze same mistake, bekas, zen, we shall all be ill!"

After some fleeting smiles, grave looks returned.

"We can't go on!"

"With this rehearsal? How can we?" was the very definite response from many. "And we were getting on so splendidly!"

For five minutes there was murmurous discus-

sion, and many a pair of eyes flashed angrily at the recurrence of Fay and Edna's names in the talk. Their doing, all of it!

Then Judy came back, alone.

"We took her to matron," she reported gravely. "Now Pam is going across with Polly to the sau. Matron thinks Polly will be best off there, for to-night, at any rate. Quiet."

"Did matron say—"

"Altogether overdone; must have a complete rest. Do you know, girls, Polly admitted that her head had been splitting all the evening."

"What! And yet she was taking charge—even rehashing her own part!"

"We shall never know," Judy murmured on, "how much she has been doing, really. She told me and Pam that 'perhaps it was a mistake to work at the play last night'—after we were all asleep."

"Good gwacious! Polly did that?"

"So it seems."

An impressive silence ensued. The girls did not realise, but their standing about like this, mute and still, after all the bustle and chatter and singing, was intensely sympathetic. They were feeling, lost without their Polly.

"I last Pam came back."

"I left Ethel with her, over there in the san. Nurse was awfully sweet and kind, as usual. Polly's going to bed at once, and we must all

Just a Few Replies From Your Editor



"Two Dusky Maids of Ceylon" (Colombo).—Thank you so much for your very charming letter. I'm so glad you are enjoying all our present features. Yes, as you will have read, Freda visits Colombo—and has an exciting adventure there! I will bear in mind your comment regarding the competitions. Best wishes!

"A Bookworm" (Shiphay, Torquay).—Many thanks for your nice letter, dear reader. The story you mention—"The Girl in the Purple Cloak"—appeared in our companion paper, "The Schoolgirl." I'm delighted to know that you are thoroughly enjoying all our present features. Do please write again.

"A Freda 'Fan'" (Weir Hall, N.18).—Billy Charters will probably reappear in a future Morcove series. How do you like the first of the new Dodo Wren series? The other characters you mention may possibly return to our pages in the future. Very best wishes.

"Dusky Reader" (Frimley Green, Surrey).—Yes, the Morcove tales are topping, aren't they? It is quite probable that in the future a Morcove series will appear in which the seniors play a big part. Renee Frazer will be writing for us again soon, I expect.

"A Norma 'Fan'" ().—In a few weeks I hope to have news for you concerning a series of delightful free gifts. The answer to your question regarding Morcove is "No." All good wishes.

"A Madcap" (Swansea).—Another Dodo admirer! I'm sure you'll thoroughly enjoy the new series in which she features. I cannot promise the immediate return of the "Cruise of the Sprite" characters, but I'll certainly remember your suggestion. Best wishes.

"Morcove Lover" (Rossendale, Lancs.).—I would advise you to write to Messrs. French, Publishers, Southampton Street, Strand, London, who may be able to supply you with the plays you require. I am so glad you like all the features in our paper. Very best wishes.

hope she gets a good night. Do you know what her last word was to me, before I came away? "Carry on with the play!"

"Without her?" exclaimed several of the players blankly.

"It's what she wants us to do, and I think we ought to try."

"Oh, rather!" was the chorus.

But the next rehearsal took place under conditions simply fatal to success.

Much as they tried, not a girl could do herself justice.

From the moment when they had been told about Jack Linton, they had felt greatly troubled in their minds. Now they had loving anxiety about Polly herself to contend with as well.

The doctor had seen her, and he had ordered her to rest. She was, he said, suffering from strain. She must be absent from class for the rest of the week, and certainly must not have anything more to do with the play in the meantime. Games in moderation, but what he wanted her to get, most of all, was plenty of fresh air without exertion.

Had the Form been preparing for a sports day, or for examinations, then it would have been far less hard, no doubt to "carry on" in spite of Polly's dropping out of everything and of all that was behind her doing so.

But "The Morcove Mimics" was a rollicking farce, of which she had been not merely the authoress but the life and soul of them all, as a company of amateur actors. To go on with an enterprise demanding tip-top spirits proved to be well-nigh impossible.

Yet the Form would not give up, if only because of the knowledge that an abandonment of the play would simply accentuate Polly's dis-

stress of mind. She would see in that abandonment a crowning triumph for Fay and Edna.

So, as best they could, they did carry on, although rehearsals now seemed only to serve the purpose of underlining the loss that Polly's absence meant.

"And the worst of it is," Helen exclaimed, during a pause in a part-rehearsal just before afternoon school, on the Friday of that week, "we can't exactly hope to be all right on the day. Will Jack be righted by then? Will Polly be herself again?"

"Some hopes!" gloomed one of the other girls. "Oh, but what a shame it is; when we had one of the very cleverest plays Polly has ever done for the Form."

"And the funniest," said Etta.

"It's the fun that has us whacked," Judy deplored. "We might do a scene from Shakespeare, without its being a flop, even though we didn't feel in the mood. But with 'The Morcove Mimics' you've simply got to have the high spirits."

"Still, we won't give up," Pam insisted, and again there were emphatic murmurs of agreement. "There's a few minutes yet, before we need get our books for class. Shall we try that chorus over again?"

"Rather!"

"Yes, come on!"

"And, another thing," Pam added, "Polly doesn't know how much the heart has been taken out of us. So, not a word to her about that."

"Oh, no!"

But Polly, at that very moment, had found out for herself!

CHAPTER 7.

"There's the Man!"

UNBEKNOWN to her chums, in the last few minutes Polly had been a listener, outside the music-room, to all that was going on inside.

There was, of course, nothing underhand in her listening like this. Except that it represented a very human flouting of doctor's orders, she was perfectly entitled to do so.

She tiptoed away, feeling all her fondness and admiration for her chums as acutely as she felt the tragedy of her brother's present position.

Yes, she knew now! With all the will in the world, the girls could not get the play to go with a bang—as it needed to do, if it was not to be that worst of all failures, a funny play, acted dispiritedly.

She found Ethel Courtway and obtained permission to go out for the afternoon—to call for Betty at the hotel, and get a walk with her. Polly rode her bicycle as far as the Headland, and then she and Betty set off together on foot for the town.

"I've a postal order to cash at the Central Post Office," Polly remarked, as they fared along the road. "Heard from mother this morning; but she didn't say a word about Jack."

"Still thinks you don't know anything about it, of course," Betty inferred. "Out of kindness to you—"

"Oh, yes, I know that, Betty dear. All the same, I am glad it was told by Fay Denver, out of spite. The affair happened so close to Morcove—perhaps I shall yet be able to get to the bottom of it myself."

"If only you could, Polly!"

"I had a letter from Jack, too; that came with the Grangemoor postmark, so I suppose one of his chums posted it on to me. Jack says—just

NEXT TUESDAY'S

brilliant long complete
story of Morcove
School, featuring Polly
Linton, is entitled:



BY MARJORIE STANTON

what I've suspected—it must have been the man in front of him at the pay-desk, that afternoon, who stole the notes."

"Don't see how it could have been anyone else," Betty nodded. "The puzzle is why, if that man grabbed the notes, did they turn up in Jack's pockets?"

"Supposing," Polly suggested, "the man had no sooner grabbed the notes than he realised that he had been seen? And so, being a sort of professional daylight thief, he managed to get rid of them by slipping them into Jack's pocket?"

"That's quite all right as an explanation, Polly—quite understandable! Only," Betty regretfully demurred, "if somebody saw the man snatch the notes, then why didn't that somebody speak out and accuse him? Instead of letting Jack be as good as run in for the theft!"

Polly's eyes looked straight into Betty's.

"If Fay or Edna had witnessed the actual theft, Betty—would either of those two girls have been likely to speak out, to clear Jack—my brother?"

"Polly!" gasped Betty. "Oh! And Fay and Edna were in the shop—standing by, close to the pay-desk—"

"Yes!"

"But that's awful!"

"It is only what they always have been—awful," Polly responded grimly. "Well, I've got a description of the man—from Jack. I'm going to be on the look-out for him."

"What was he like?" Betty said eagerly. "I'm often in Barncombe these days. Oh, Polly darling, how splendid it would be if your brother could be cleared!"

"Jack only saw the man sideways; middle-aged and sort of smart—a word for everybody, you know the kind."

"They're sometimes the worst kind, Polly. People who live by their wits—pickpockets, and so on—"

"I know. But it's no use pointing that out to the Creamery people. They're quite sure he had nothing to do with the affair. Jack says he'd know him again by his high cheek bones and rather bushy eyebrows."

"I must remember that."

"We may even find him in the Creamery, if we call there! They say he is a fairly regular customer—and so charming!"

That was Polly's bitter jest, to which Betty could only respond with a sympathetic look.

It would not be difficult, it seemed, to know the man when one met him. Nor did it appear likely that he had yet left the district. But supposing one DID encounter him—what then?

What step could one take? What could one do after all this time, and the man himself enjoying the complete confidence of everybody else?

Inevitably, such half-despairing thoughts as these were in the minds of the two girls, during that afternoon walk into the town.

Betty could tell; Polly was in that state, she would cheerfully have bartered ten years of her life, had it been possible, for the chance to clear her brother.

And perhaps Fate, in its own freakish way, was yet intending to reward Morcov's madeap, for such passionate devotion to a brother who was powerless to clear himself.

At any rate, one thing occurred, before another half-hour had sped, to give both girls a big thrill.

That was when, in Barncombe's quaint old High Street, Polly suddenly clutched her chum by the arm and whispered directly:

"Why, look—there IS the man!"

[END OF THIS WEEK'S STORY.]

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ELSEWHERE in this issue appears an important announcement regarding next Tuesday's topping new serial, which has been specially written for THE SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN by a new author, Miss Pamela Dawlish.

Knowing how fond you all are of mystery tales I suggested to Miss Dawlish that her first serial for our paper should be a mystery story, and the result is

"THE REBEL OF 'SECRECY GRANGE,'"

certainly one of the most gripping tales which have appeared in THE SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN.

Even Cuthbert—who, as a very "hardened" sub-editor, is naturally hypercritical—went into raptures over this story, and became so enthralled by the ingenious mystery which Miss Dawlish has created that he stayed late to finish the story! (Incidentally, I believe that for the first time since they have known one another he kept Angela waiting! Dear me!)

The extra-long first instalment will appear in next Tuesday's issue, together with the second of the new Dodo Wren series (a delightful Christmas holiday comedy) and a long instalment of Jean Emerson's great success, "A Spoilt Girl's Polly."

Next week's long complete Morcov School story, I think, deserves a paragraph to itself. It is the last of the present series featuring Madeap Polly Linton, and is entitled:

"LUCKY TO THE LAST!"

By Marjorie Stanton.

Polly is at her very best, and all the chums of Study 12 loyally back her up in her great fight to clear her brother of the false charge that has been brought against him.

You'll thoroughly enjoy this magnificent story. I expect you are all getting very excited about Christmas—wondering what presents to give your chums, arranging parties and planning all sorts of festivities for the long-awaited holidays.

But I do hope that although you are all so busy with Yuletide preparations you will find time to write to me and tell me just what you think of all our present features. My address appears on another page of this number, and I shall be delighted to hear from you whenever you care to write.

With so many new and excellent features in our paper I feel that the present time is opportune for you to introduce THE SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN to any of your chums who are not yet readers. I should be very grateful if you would help me in this way to widen our circle of readers. This is a request I have made from time to time during THE SCHOOLGIRLS' OWNS' long career, and I am proud to say that it has never been made in vain.

With best wishes.

YOUR EDITOR.