

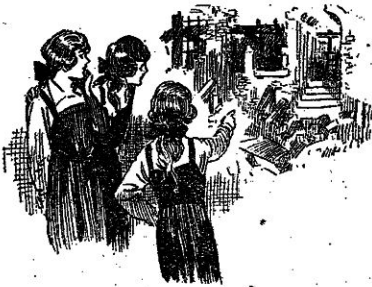
The Schoolgirls' Own



A STRANGE "CATCH"! (An incident from the grand long complete story of the girls of Morcove School in this issue.)

2^D

A good school story has a very strong appeal. That is why you will enjoy this "Morcove" tale.



THE TREASURE OF THE WELL!

A magnificent new long complete story of the girls of Morcove School which deals with the mystery surrounding a prefect—Myra Marshall.

By MARJORIE STANTON.

Settling Down.

"IS this where the Fourth Form meeting is to be held, Betty?"

"Yes, this is the room, girls. Come in! I hope we shall find every girl in the Form turning up in the next minute or so."

Betty Barton had answered the half-dozen or so scholars who had suddenly appeared at the open doorway looking rather bewildered.

Betty herself was at the top end of the long room, where a small table and some chairs had been set. Polly Linton, Betty's bosom chum, was perched on the table-edge, swinging her legs.

"Anyone seen Paula Creel?" she lightly inquired of the girls who now drifted in from the passage.

"No, we haven't, anyhow," answered Sybil Farlow, for herself and her friends. "We've been wandering around all over the place, getting lost in the attempt to find the right room."

Polly gave one of her hearty chuckles.

"The old house is a maze, and no mistake! It's a lick for having such twisty-turny passages, and queer old rooms and—and— This room, for instance! Look at the beams in the ceiling."

As Polly paused, another batch of girls could be heard coming along the dim passage, exclaiming: "Here we are apparently! This seems to be the room."

"Yes, come along in!" Betty cried again gaily. "I say, there seems to have been some confusion as to where the meeting was going to be held. My fault, I suppose, when I made out the notice."

"Oh, no!" said Madge Minden. "You said Room Eighteen on the notice in the hall. But the trouble was to find Room Eighteen."

"Especially," added Audrey Blain, whilst she set a stray wisp of hair to rights, "as some mischievous person has been going round, it appears, chalking eighteens on all sorts of doors that hadn't got numbers at all."

This was news to the Form captain and Polly, and they gave a laughing, "Oh!"

"That will be the Fifth Form's little jape," asserted Tess Trelawney. "Now that they have been quartered with us in this old house, pending the rebuilding of Morcove School, they simply live to jape us."

"Two o'clock, Betty," cried Grace Garfield. "Aren't you going to begin?"

"Yes, do!" pleaded Audrey Blain, with her rather grand air. "We don't want to be kept indoors longer than necessary."

"But where's Paula?" asked Dolly Delane. "Hardly nice to make a start without our beloved aristocrat."

"Beloved aristocrat!" echoed Audrey, nose in air.

All the same, there were plenty of girls who knew that she would have gloried in having that phrase applied to herself. They exchanged winks and smiles. Audrey, as a Miss Airs-and-Graces, was not popular. Paula was. It was just a question of varying dispositions.

"Hear, hear! Get on with the meeting!" exclaimed Cora Grandways, her usual hostility towards the captain asserting itself. "I, for one, can't see what we wanted a meeting for at all."

"We'll begin," said Betty, "and Paula will—Hark, though!"

"Yes, here she comes!" went up the general cry, and next second Paula Creel was confirming the news by her own breathless:

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove, geals, I wealise I'm late! Howevah—"

"Oh, no speeches!" Cora snapped irritably. "Now, then! All present, and so fire away, Betty!"

"Hurrah! Cheers for the Form captain!" yelled Polly, swinging off the table. "Morcove for ever!"

"Yes, wather! Hooway, geals—hooway! In spite of my being wather out of bweath," said Paula, beaming, "it gives me gweat pleasure to demonstrate my wegard for the Form and its captain. Yes, wather! Howevah—"

"If you'd kindly hold your noise," sneered Cora, hoisting herself on to a wide stone window-sill, "somebody might say something sensible. They might; I don't say they will!" she added, grinning maliciously at Betty, who was standing at the table waiting for silence.

"Quite all wight," Paula assured everybody affably. "I meahly wish to wemark, howevah, that the weason why I am out of bweath is the same weason that I—"

"Oh!"

"Pwecisely the same weason, geals, that I was late. You wealise that the woom wanted some discoweving, bai Jove! I wegwet to say, too, I was led astway by some geals who shall be nameless. In fact, they—"

"Order—order!"

"Quite all wight, geals! Howevah—"

"Gracious, Paula—"

"I wealise I have twespased upon your patience," said Paula, who had to be polite if she could not be brief. "Now, wealising that Betty is waiting to address a few wemarks to us, I—"

"Turn her out!" groaned Cora. "Ugh!"

"Order—order!"

Amidst the burst of laughter that went up, Paula could be heard making more affable explanations; but at last Polly Linton got silence by pounding the table with her fist.

"Well, girls," began Betty, looking very good-humoured as she stood up before the assembled Form, "Miss Massingham said I had better call a meeting at short notice, as I had a letter from our Headmistress just after midday—"

"Hurrah for Miss Somerfield!" put in Polly, and a cheer was given heartily enough.

"A letter," went on Betty, "that I think should be read to you all, and then we can consider what steps to take. Shall I—"

"Yes, yes, read it, Betty!"

"Yes, wather!"

And so Betty, unfolding the letter, began in ringing tones:

"To the captain, Fourth Form, now in quarters at the Old Priory.

"MY DEAR BETTY.—You will readily understand that I have been very busy ever since the regrettable fire at Morcove School, three nights ago.

"Now that I have a moment, however, I am sitting down to address all my scholars through their respective Form captains.

"The Fourth Form is at present installed at the Old Priory, along with the Fifth Form, under conditions that can only be described as makeshift. I know that, in spite of every effort that is being made, you are bound to find life altogether different from the ordinary routine of Morcove School—"

"It's all the more fun!" Polly could not help interjecting gaily.

"Yes, wather! Howevah—"

"Oh, she's going to start again!" howled Cora.

"If you are wewerwing to me, Corwa Gwandways, I twust—"

"Order—order! Go on, Betty."

"Well," said Betty; and the gist of what still remained to be read was that Miss Somerfield trusted the girls would all keep together, and keep up their games, and make the best of things generally—Polly breaking in with more cheering now and then.

Whenever Polly started a cheer, most of the girls took it up. Out of pure malice, Cora Grandways always made a point of jeering: "Yah!" But as it was Cora, no one took any notice apparently.

"Just the last line now," Betty announced, still holding the letter before her. "Miss Somerfield sends her love and best wishes to all the Form."

"Hurrah! Hooray!"

"Yes, wather! Geals—"

"Yah-h-h-h!" came the inevitable jeer from the sneerer on the window-sill. "Why didn't Miss Somerfield send us all home, instead of—"

Cora had no chance to say the rest. That latest jeer had been too much for Polly. She darted through the crowd, seized Cora by one foot, and simply yanked her off the window-sill on to the floor—

Thump!

"Now say 'Yah!'" panted Polly, causing a delighted "Ha, ha, ha!" to shake the ceiling.

"You little—" choked Cora, flouncing up from the floor. "I could smack your face for that!"

"You won't!" said Polly.

"Hurrah! Go it!" chortled Grace Garfield and a few others.

"Yes, wather! I mean, geals, pway-wocollect," palpitated Paula, "we do not want the meeting to bweak up in disordah, bai Jove! Betty deah—"

The rest was lost in a chorus of "Oh, look out!" as Polly and Cora now "went" for each other, causing the crowd to scatter.

Betty wanted to intervene, but she could not do so for laughing. The same with other girls. They simply staggered about, holding their sides, as they saw Polly hustling Cora across the room to the door.

"Out you go!" was Polly's breathless decree; and next moment Cora really did leave the meeting with more haste than elegance!

She, in fact, was propelled from the room with such force, she would have gone all asprawl in the passage, only she shot full into the arms of someone who seemed to have been hovering outside the door.

This was a girl whose superior age and height proclaimed her a senior. She was, in fact, a Sixth Form scholar who had come to the Priory to do duty as a prefect.

"Now, then!" was her angry comment on Cora's headlong plunge into her.

"I couldn't help it! Polly Linton pushed—"

"Oh, sneak!" exploded the meeting; and then Cora gave a defiant toss of the head and a shrug, and shambled off, whilst the girl prefect came into the room.

She was silent, and silent were Betty and Co. for a few moments. It was going to put a restraint upon them all, that was evident, this far from popular prefect suddenly turning up amongst them.

Myra Marshall—for that was her name—stood well back against one wall, aloof from the meeting, yet plainly interested in it. Her whole expression was an unfriendly one. She looked as if she would like to quash the whole proceedings, out of pure tyranny.

But the scholars' right to hold a meeting was one she dare not tamper with. She was not indeed, entitled to be present, according to school traditions, and Betty was not the only girl who felt like telling her so. A more dignified thing seemed to be, however, to ignore her!

And that was what they did. The spell of embarrassment gave place to orderly talk amongst the girls. It became quite a business-like meeting. Betty proposed that they send Miss Somerfield a letter, assuring her of their intention to "carry on" as usual, and the suggestion was hailed with cheers.

Then Tess brought up the question of sports. They had no proper sports field at the Priory, but there was a bit of meadow adjacent to the neglected grounds. Couldn't they get a bit of hockey there, if they got together some of their old hockey "tackle"?

"Good notion!" exclaimed Polly, whilst Paula mingled her hearty "Yes, wather!" with others' approving comments.

Then Betty carried things a step further. "If some of us went over to the old school," she said, "I'm sure we would find plenty of hockey stuff amongst the salvaged things."

"The school is out of bounds!" came a curt warning from Myra Marshall.

Betty proceeded as if she had not heard that remark.

"The building is out of bounds," she said, "but the official salvagers have been getting out

heaps of stuff, we know. 'Tis all dumped about on the lawns."

"Then let's go this afternoon."

"Yes, wather!"

Myra Marshall came away from the wall.

"You must get permission first," she reminded them, quite needlessly.

"We are going to get permission," Betty said sweetly, "from the right quarter!" Which was like saying: "Not from you!"

"Hurrah—yes!" was Polly's jubilant shout; and in her madcap way she set off towards the door, taking it for granted that the meeting was closed.

Eagerly enough, the other girls swarmed away—partly to escape the pestering oversight of Myra, and partly to avoid wasting a single moment of this extra "halfer" which had been granted them to-day.

The afternoon was gloriously sunny, but this was the latter end of the year, when days are short. There was no doing anything out of doors after tea; it was almost twilight by then.

Just as Betty and her chums had expected, they soon got permission from the right quarter to make a visit to the school. At the same time, a good many others asked if they might run into Barncombe town, on the plea that lots of little things could be got at the shops that would make the school in the woods less rough-and-ready. This request was also granted by Miss Massingham, and less than five minutes later very few Fourth Form scholars were still indoors.

The majority were round at the stables and loose boxes, scrambling for bikes.

What with some still being at the school proper, and others being out of order, there were not enough to go round, and the upshot of it was that Betty and Co. decided to walk to Morcove. It seemed only fair to let those girls have the machines who were bound for the town.

"After all," said Betty, "it is only a couple of miles across country to the dear old show."

"And what's a couple of miles—eh, Paula?"

chuckled Polly, digging the aristocrat in the ribs.

"What's a ten-mile tramp to a girl like you?"

"A twamp, geals, I am constwained to admit," sighed Paula, "is always a stwain upon my fwear resources. Howevah—"

"Yes, best foot forward!" was Polly's exuberant cry.

And away they went—six good chums in all. Betty, Polly, Paula, Madge, Tess, and Trixie—off they set in great good spirits, little dreaming of the strange adventures which were to be theirs before the jaunt was ended!

Suspicious Confirmed.

THERE are few sights sadder than that of a once handsome building reduced almost to a mere shell of brick and mortar by fire.

Not for the first time, this afternoon, were the chums of the Fourth Form gazing at all that was left of the school they loved—the beautiful range of buildings which had been a second home to all of them.

Sadly they had gazed at it with almost tearful eyes on the morning after the fire, taking in all the devastation which the blaze had wrought. And still it was a sight to distress them keenly, on this return visit.

They felt they would never be without pangs of sorrow for the old school's cruel fate, even if they came a hundred times to the scene of havoc and desolation.

"Our poor old studies!" murmured Polly. When

she and her chums were approaching the ruins across the playing-field. "I wonder how much is left of them. Will they ever be the same again, even if a whole army of workmen set to between now and next term?"

"Give me the same old chums," said Polly then, "and I can put up with a new sort of study!"

"Hear, hear, to that!" agreed Tess. "All the same—"

And she had to sigh again, as she let her gaze dwell upon the smoke-blackened walls and the lines of burnt-out windows.

"Well, I think we shall get what we came for," Madge remarked, to strike a cheery note. "Just look at the stuff that has been got out from parts of the building that were not charred to nothing."

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove, geals, it is a gweat



AN INTERESTED SPECTATOR!

The freman stood behind Paula, who, all unconscious of his presence, went on arranging her hat in front of the mirror, smiling sweetly the while at her reflection!

credit to the fire-bwigade to see so many tweasures wetwieved! Why, I do decl Leah," added Paula, in delight, "I see a dwessing-table, with a miw-wor!"

"Go on—scoot to it and put your hair to rights!" chuckled Polly. "I thought so! Paula!" she called after the aristocrat. "You had better cart that dressing-table back with you! We are rather short of furniture at the Priory."

"We are, wather, bai Jove! Howevah, don't be ftrivulous, Polly deah!" said Paula; and very gravely she took her stand in front of the table, there in the open field, and got out her pocket comb!

"If she isn't the limit!" was Polly's chuckling comment, as they turned aside and left the aristocrat smiling at her reflection. "Now, about those hockey-sticks!"

They drifted apart in their search amongst the

dismal mounds of furniture and fittings that had been dumped around. Here and there a tarpaulin had been used to cover some pile of more valuable stuff, and, of course, curiosity tempted the girls to take peeps under the sheeting.

Then suddenly Polly, who was with Madge and Betty, again whispered mirthfully:

"Oh, do look! Over there—Paula!"

They looked, and what they saw almost sent them into screams of laughter.

A few yards behind Paula, who was still at the dressing-table, stood a member of the Barncombe fire-brigade—a big, fatherly sort of man.

He was standing with arms doubled at his hips, waiting for Paula to turn round and see him. But Paula, for a time, did not turn round. She just went on arranging her hat in front of the mirror, smiling sweetly at her reflection all the while.

"It's a scream!" tittered Polly. "What must he think of her, vain thing?"

The fireman, who was in salvage uniform, drew a deep breath, then coughed pompously.

"Hem!"

"Polly dear, is that you?" simpered Paula, giving another touch to her hat. "Now, no frivolous twicks, Polly. Do you think I look quite all wight now? Ow!"

That "Ow!" came from Paula as she floated round and found herself face to face with a reproachful-looking man in uniform.

"Oh, bai Jove! Er—pway, how do you do?" Paula faltered sweetly, at last. "You are—"

"I'm sorry, miss—fair' sorry, I am, to see a young lady as should know better admiring of herself in a glass!" said the salvager, shaking his head.

"Bai Jove, I gweatly wegwet distwessing you," Paula apologised, quite seriously. "Howevah, you will wealise—"

"Miss," he broke in—"young ladies all, I hope you realise as how you are all trespassing? My orders are—"

"But, excuse me," Betty now ran forward to say, "we have special permission to come here this afternoon. We are Morecove scholars; of course, you knew that! Well, we were told we might come and look around for a few hockey-clubs, if any are to be found."

The fatherly salvager softened his expression. It had never been a surly one, only comically grave.

"Why, young ladies, if you tell me you have permission, then that's another matter altogether," he agreed. "Only they haven't all got permission as comes poking around to see what can be taken. Only last night—"

"In the night?" exclaimed Betty, with encouraging eagerness, whilst she secretly nudged Polly.

"Yes, young ladies, in the very middle of the night," pursued the worthy who was on guard over the ruins, "I were keeping my watch when I heard summun poking about. Not out in the open, either, but hinside the building."

"Oh, fancy!"

"Bai Jove!"

"I tell you, it was the sort of thing to make a man in my position hindignant," said the self-important worthy. "A mean thing, I call it, to come dodging around at midnight!"

"Did you see her? I mean—"

"Her?" the man echoed, looking hard at Polly. "What makes you think it was a her? As a matter of fact, it was a young woman, that I know, because I saw her in the moonlight. The

pity is," he finished ruefully, "I didn't catch her!"

Paula threw out a murmured: "Howevah—"
"Exactly, miss! However, as you say, it's nothing to do with you, for I can hardly believe as the trespasser last night could ha' been a scholar. No. Hockey-sticks, were you saying? I think I can find you a few."

And he did.

Not only that, he very kindly offered to save the girls the fag of carrying them back. A lorry was to run over to the Priory first thing in the morning, with a whole load of wanted stuff, and he said he would make a point of putting the sports things on board.

The girls thanked him, cementing the good understanding by presenting him with a tip. Paula did the handing over of a two-shilling bit, she chancing to be the girl with just the right coin.

"Thank'ee, miss—thankee, all!" said the fireman, saluting. "I'm sure if there's anything more I can send along at any time, I'll be pleased. It's all the difference when folk come along with proper permission, instead of sneaking round at midnight and—er—"

He came to a flustered stop, suddening eyeing the coin dubiously.

"Er—"

"Gwacious, you don't mean to say that's a bad coin!" Paula cried, in dismay. "Not another, bai Jove, surely!"

But it was! Yesterday it had been Betty who found herself in possession of two bad half-crowns. Now Paula had passed over a bad two-shilling bit!

"Most distwessing!" she sighed. "Howevah, pway have this one, my good man! Geals, wheah do all the bad coins come fwom? That's what I want to know, don't you know!"

"Ah, you may well say so, miss!" nodded the fireman. "There's a rare lot going about just now. Barncombe's full of 'em, which makes some folks say there must be a gang o' coinets working in the district."

"Gwacious!"

"How romantic!" from Polly.

"Womantie!" echoed Paula, whilst the others laughed. "I call it a most disagweeable state of things, bai Jove!"

They said good-afternoon to the old chap again, and turned to go, taking many a backward glance at the forlorn school buildings. The sun was sending his last red rays across the moorland world of Morecove, and the half-ruined buildings, exposed to the lurid glare because of their bold position on the great headland, seemed to be on fire again.

"A pretty cheerless job for that old chap, after nightfall," Polly remarked. "I expect it did give him a start when he found there was someone prowling around at midnight."

"Of course, we know who the someone was," said Betty, very quietly. "Myra Marshall!"

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove, we were wight, geals!"

"Dead right in our guess last night," chimed in Tess. "When we saw Myra stealing home to the Priory in the moonlight, we felt sure she had paid a secret visit to the old school."

"My word, if she had been caught!" muttered Polly. "She was too cute, though. And she got what she wanted, too."

"That box we saw her with—yes," rejoined Madge. "The box she hid—"

"And the box we are yet going to find!" ex-

claimed Betty, with a sudden determined gleam of her fine eyes. "That little hunt round in the shrubbery this morning doesn't count. What we want is a chance to search for the box when there is no risk of other girls butting in."

Madge glanced at her watch as Betty said that. "We were an hour at the old school," she remarked softly, "and it will be almost twilight at the Priory by the time we get there. Down in that hollow, amongst the woods—"

"Oui, oui—yes," put in Tess. She had brought her alleged French with her when she changed quarters along with her chums. "We shall be what you might call dans l'ombre—in the dark."

"We are in the dark now, in one sense, if you ask me," grimaced Polly. "We badly need some light to be let in on the whole strange mystery of Myra Marshall."

Madge brought them back to the point. By not being in too much hurry over the return journey, they could time themselves to arrive at twilight. And so there might be just the right conditions for a hunt for that box.

It was, indeed, a twilight world of woodland hollows into which they meandered by-and-by. Still better for their purpose, an autumn mist was beginning to blanket the rank grounds of the Priory.

The girls who had cycled to Barncombe were not back yet, apparently. Betty and Co. turned in at the wide-flung gateway, and found the place looking very lonely and cheerless. They could not see as far as the mansion, but the grounds were empty, and even the lodge just inside the gates—let off to a lady and gentleman whom the scholars knew as Mr. and Mrs. Carnay—was not as inviting as usual.

No lights had been lit inside the cosy residence, nor was the fitful blaze of a sitting-room fire shining in the windows.

"I suppose they are away for the day," Betty remarked, for she and her chums had all given an interested glance at the lodge as they went past it. "We saw such a lot of them yesterday, but I have not seen them to-day."

Nor had the other girls, as they now remarked; but that fact did not become a subject for much comment. By following the weedy by-path into which they had turned, they knew that in a few moments they would reach the bit of shrubbery where they suspected Myra Marshall had hidden her mysterious package last night.

Was it still there? Of course, the girls could not be certain. All they knew was that, at dead of night, they had seen Myra creeping back from some midnight excursion with a package of some sort in her hands.

Instead of bringing it with her into the mansion, she had slipped into the shrubbery, and when she reappeared the package was no longer in her hands!

"Now!" breathed Betty, rather excitedly, halting on the edge of the shrubbery. "Surely this is our chance!"

"Yes, wather! Howevah—"
"Some of us should keep watch out here," Madge suggested. "I will, for one."

"And I," volunteered Trixie. "We'll cough to give you warning of anyone coming."

"Right-ho!" exclaimed the others gratefully; and then Betty said, cautiously; "Sh! Let's listen a moment!"

They did so, and a great stillness assured them that they had this part of the mist-laden grounds to themselves.

"Come on, then!"

And next second Betty, Polly, Paula, and Tess were in amongst the bushes.

An Important Discovery.

SWIFTLY the daylight was fading now. The excited girls swished through rank grass that was sopping wet with the evening mist. Every laurel branch they swept past, as they penetrated into the old shrubbery, was ready to shed drops of condensed moisture.

So deep was the twilight, indeed, and so dense the rank growth that encompassed them, the girls could well have done with a lantern. But they had to do without, peering their very hardest through the gloom.

Betty picked up a bit of stick and used it for prodding here and there, in the hope of striking the box if it had been merely dumped amongst the bushes. What the girls all expected, however, was to come upon some bit of ground, overhung by shrubs, which showed signs of having been dug a little.

"If Myra buried the box," whispered Betty, "she must have been jolly quick about it. So we ought to be able to spot any bit of ground where—"

"In here!" Polly suddenly interrupted eagerly, bending to peer along a short alleyway between some of the shrubs. Their branches were so interlaced the girls looked like having to crawl on hands and knees, as they would have had to crawl along a low-arched tunnel.

"We didn't go along here that other time," Polly added. "Shall we, then—"

"Yes. Half a sec., though!"
And again Betty took the precaution of getting them all to stand still and listen.

No warning cough from Madge or Trixie, so the coast was still clear.

They ducked low and set on along the dripping retreat, only just able to see a yard in front of them. For a dozen paces they proceeded, and then Betty, who was foremost, suddenly agitated the others by giving an excited gasp.

"Look—look here!"
With a stumbling rush the others were alongside their leader, and then they saw the reason for her excitement.

She had stopped dead in front of a slab of stone that was edged about with rank grass. The wet blades should have been lying over it if it had not been moved in recent times. But it had been moved.

Within the last day or so, at least, the grass had been parted away from the stone, as the result of its being raised.

"It's the place!" declared Betty triumphantly. "You see—"

"Yes, wather!"
"Up with it!" proposed Polly gleefully. "Oh, this is thrilling! I say, though—just fancy!"

"Well!"
"Fancy Myra knowing that there was an old well here, where she could hide the box!" was Polly's amazed ejaculation.

"Bai Jove!"

"It is odd, when you come to think of it," said Tess. "Myra must have been pretty quick to explore the grounds when she came here with us from Morocco."

"Either that," said Betty quietly, "or else Myra has been familiar with the Priory and its grounds all along."

"Greatest goodness! But—"
"Let that wait, anyhow," Betty pursued. "I'm like Polly—all for turning up this stone."



A LUCKY DISCOVERY! There in front of the girls was a slab of stone, an iron ring embedded in it. "The box must be hidden here!" cried Polly.

"Yes, wather!"

And they gathered around for the purpose, wondering all the time how the one girl—Myra Marshall—had been able to raise the heavy slab unaided.

In a few seconds, however, that was no longer a matter for surprise.

To their astonishment, it cost them no effort at all to raise the slab. Any one of them could have done it herself.

Straight upright they had it all at once, and held it so, whilst they stared in an awestruck way at the cavity which was now uncovered.

"I tell you what," whispered Betty. "The stone must be counter-balanced in some clever way. And that's queer—for a well to have such an extraordinary sort of cover."

"Down there," muttered Polly, peering into the dark, unfathomable depths, "is the box that Myra brought away from Morcove. It is certain—"

"Yes, wather!"

"We saw her enter this jungle of a place and come out again without the box. Well, then—"

"Who is going down?" Tess asked jestingly.

"I am," said Betty, quite seriously. "Not at this moment, perhaps, but—"

"Why not now?" urged Polly, in her headstrong way. "Oh, come on! It's safe."

"Is it safe?" demurred Betty, with more shrewdness. "What about bad air? No, we have got to be careful. We shall need a candle to test the air, and we shall need a rope, so that one of us can be lowered down by the others."

"No!" Polly broke out excitedly. "Look closer, girls! Surely there are—"

"Bai Jove!"

"Iron spikes—all the way down, no doubt!" was Tess's delighted whiaper, as she and her companions all saw at least a few horseshoe-shaped footholds that were driven into the brick lining of the shaft.

Betty murmured thoughtfully:

"Is it a well, after all—an ordinary well? It seems so strange—the funny cover, and then those iron clamps! Of course, country mansions often have elaborate fittings to the wells that supply the water. But—"

"What a lark if it is the way into some secret passage?" Polly burst out gleefully. "The Priory is ages old, and in olden times people had lots of reasons for keeping secret passages in readiness."

"Yes, wather!" agreed Paula. "But the remarkable thing is that Myra Marshall hit upon this place to drop the box into."

At that instant they all heard a cough!

"Oh!"

"G'wreat goodness!"

"Sh!"

Motionless they stood for a moment, holding their breath. Then, with great stealthiness, Betty and Polly lowered the stone slab back into its usual position over the mouth of the shaft.

The action was performed without a sound. So silent were the girls themselves, they quite clearly heard either Madge or Trixie give another faint cough—warning to them to be careful!

Betty peered around anxiously. She wondered if, instead of going back, they could silently make their way out of the jungle of shrubs on the other side. With her eyes she asked her chums:

"Shall we?"

There were ready nods of assent, and next instant all four girls were snaking forward in Indian file between the bushes.

Their greatest difficulty was to avoid rustling any of the evergreen foliage. But they managed this, and all at once they emerged upon open ground, with the evening mist shrouding them in friendly fashion.

Away, now, to the house! That was the thing. They hurried along as quietly as ever, whilst suddenly their straining ears picked up the murmur of girls' voices and the tr-r-ring, tr-r-ring of cycle-bells!

Evidently the scholars who had been into Barncombe were just back from their jaunt.

"Is that why Madge and Trixie warned us?" wondered Betty. "My fear was that Myra Marshall herself had—"

She broke off with a sharp "Hallo!" as Madge and Trixie both suddenly appeared from out the misty darkness.

"You got the warning, then?" exclaimed Madge. "We heard the cyclists, and so—"

"Yes, wather!"

"No one except the cyclists?" questioned Betty anxiously. "Myra Marshall—"

"No. Had any luck?" Madge asked.

"Luck? Yes, rather!" the four answered, with huge satisfaction.

And whilst they walked with Madge and Trixie towards the mansion, they told those two girls the result of their search in the shrubbery.

"So to-night—" said Betty; and Polly broke in:

"Yes, to-night, we must slip out somehow, and get to the bottom of that well!"

"Get to the bottom of the whole mystery, too," added Tess.

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove, it stwikes me, geals," said Paula, fiddling with her damp hair, "mattahs are getting pwetty thwilling."

Then they got to the house porch, and there was Myra Marshall, hanging about with an air of irritable impatience.

"Back at last! How late you are!" she snapped at Betty and Co. "Surely it hasn't taken you all the time to get to the old school and back again!"

"We put in an hour there," Betty said, blandly and truthfully. "Hark! Here come the girls who went to Barncombe. And how excited they all seem about something!"

They certainly were chattering away in a most animated fashion as they came in one party towards the house entrance. It soon transpired, however, that they were more disgusted than excited.

"It's shocking!" announced Grace Garfield breathlessly. "The town is full of bad money."

"I got gulled up at the shop for paying over some bad money that must have been given to me as change at another shop," said Ella Elgood dolefully. "And now poor Bluebell Courtney—"

"Bluebell finds she has come home with three bad half-crowns!" chorused several of the girls. "Never mind, Bluebell! Present them to the school museum when Morcove reopens!"

"Bad coins don't seem to be rare enough to go into a museum!" was Bluebell's rueful answer. "What awful swindlers some people must be to go in for making bad half-crowns!"

Myra Marshall gave a sudden commanding wave of the hand.

"That's enough about that!" she snapped. "In to tea, all of you!"

They swarmed away, hungry enough for the meal; but Betty, for one, gave a last backward glance at the unpopular prefect, who was hanging back.

"How pale she looks!" thought Betty.

A Plan of Action.

THAT evening all the girls of the Fourth Form were very busy and very happy taking over their temporary "dens" in the old Priory.

And who, catching a glimpse of Betty and Co., would have imagined that they had anything like an unsolved mystery weighing upon their minds?

That, however, was just like the chums of the Fourth Form.

At one moment they could be deeply absorbed over some matter that had excited their detective instinct. The next, they would be entering heart and soul into a game of hockey, or a bit of schoolgirl fun!

There was fun this evening—lots of it—over the getting to rights in the studies, and Betty and Co. took care to enjoy their share.

The girls had divided up for "dens" on much the same basis that had been in force at Morcove before the fire.

Betty and Polly were in possession of a nice, roomy study, once a handsome guest-chamber, on the first floor.

Next door, to one direction, they had Paula and Bluebell for neighbours. On the opposite side, Madge was sharing a fine room with Tess and Trixie.

Nor were any of the Fourth Form far from one another. They had, in fact, taken over a whole corridor, with an extra batch of rooms "round the corner," so that they were almost as

nice kept together as they had been at Morcove.

Some "prep." was to be done this evening, but it looked very much like having to stand over until before brekker in the morning. The articles in demand were not pen and ink and blotting-pads, but hammers and nails, and any chairs or bookshelves, if any well-disposed girl had such to dispose of.

Such a hammering and a banging as there was all that evening! Such a squeaking of chair-casters, as the girls set out the comfortable "saddlebags" which they had had the luck to acquire. And, mingling with all the bang-bang of hammers and the thump-thump of furniture that was on the move, there arose a general singing of girls' voices.

Some of the scholars were, in the proper sense, singing away at their happy task of getting to rights. Polly, for example.

"Ours is a nice house, ours is!" Polly was singing away lustily for the twentieth time, whilst she stood on a chair and plied a hammer, when the door opened and Paula appeared.

"Bai Jove!"

"It's got no rats or mouses!" sang on Polly. "Oh, the front is at the front—"

"Yes, wather! Howevah—"

"And 'the back is at the back!' Hallo, Paula darling!" Polly at last greeted the visitor.

"I'm finished, so catch!"

And she tossed the hammer for Paula to catch.



A TROUBLED CONSCIENCE? Betty Barton gave a backward glance at Myra Marshall as the girls swarmed in to tea. "How pale she looks!" thought the Form Captain.

Paula leapt about a yard high instead.

"How frivolous you are, Polly! Howevah, I am extremely relieved to know that you have finished."

"How is your own room looking, dear?" asked Betty.

"Wipping, bai Jove! I have had the great good fortune, geals, to appropwiate an old couch. You will wealise that it is a great welief to me to have a couch. When my stwength gives out—"

"Paula," said Polly gravely, "that couch must come in here!"

"How fwiv—"

"I am not frivolous at all. That couch, Paula—"

"It is an extremely hard couch, Polly deah, I— Weally, don't you know, I could not recommend it."

"Bring it in here!" said Polly.

"She can't very well do that, Polly!" laughed Betty. "And, after all, if Paula bagged it—"

"Yes, wather! Howevah—"

"You know very well, Paula darling," Polly said artfully, "you will always be in this study instead of in your own. Very well, then! Where are you going to recline whilst you watch Betty and I pursuing our studies, like the industrious couple we are!"

"Industwious, bai Jove. I do not wecollect any great industry on your part, Polly, at Morcove! Howevah," Paula said, with her usual affability, "yours is not a bad pposition, bai Jove! Wealising that I may have wecourse to your frivolous society now and then, I— Yes, wather! Let's have the couch in!"

"That's better!" approved Polly. "Come on, then; I'll help you get it in."

Paula looked rather dismayed.

"It is wather a heavy couch, Polly. Weally, I—"

"We'll manage," Betty said, stepping with Polly to the door.

"It's a weally twemendous couch," the aristocrat warned them. "A downright monstwosity, in fact! Howevah, I don't mind lending a hand, bai Jove!"

So the three of them went in next door, where Bluebell was hard at it getting the place in order. Betty and Polly had a shrewd suspicion that Bluebell had done most of the work all along, whilst Paula had merely been well finding out how hard the couch was!

"My word, it is a whopper!" said Polly. "But take hold, Paula! Hustle up!"

"Yes, wather! Howevah—"

"Lift it your end."

"With pleasure, Polly! Howevah—"

"Now!"

For some reason or other, as Polly said that, she staggered with the weight of the couch at her end, and next instant Paula was being squashed between her end of the couch and the wall.

"Ooo!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Geals, why do you laugh? Help!" yelled Paula. "This is—weally, don't you know—most distressing!"

"Push, then!"

"Yes, wather! Howevah—"

"You are not pushing!"

"Polly deah, you must wealise I am stwaining ewery muscle to— Oooo! Theah you go again!"

"Oh, come on!" Polly said, keeping a straight face. "Try again, Paula. Easy—steady!"

"Yes, wather!"

"Gently!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Now!"

And again the couch received a sudden heaving motion from Polly, causing Paula to give another yelp.

"Now what's the matter, dear?"

"Quite all wight!" the aristocrat said politely. "Howevah, you nearly cwashed my foot, that's all!"

Then they started to shift the couch in real earnest. Out of that room they steered it, into the passage. Then they took a "breather," whilst Paula flopped along the couch to rest her aching back.

In a moment or so Betty and Polly were ready to go on again. But Paula showed a great reluctance to get off the couch.

"Come on, duffer! You can't sit there all the evening!" said Polly, with mock impatience.

A small crowd had gathered, and these on-lookers wanted to know what Paula was sitting there for.

"She's helping to shift the couch," Polly said. "It's her way."

"Yes, wather! You will wealise, geals—"

"We realise you are a great hand at sparing yourself any exertion," Betty told her, with a laugh. "Here, in with it, all. One, two, three—"

"Geals—"

"Go!"

And the couch "went." Also, Paula went with it!

As some half-dozen of the girls ran the piece of furniture into the captain's study, Paula flopped back violently, waving her hands wildly.

She tried to struggle up again, almost succeeded, and then—

Bump! went one end of the couch against the wall, and down went Paula again—flop!

"Ha, ha, ha! Thanks for your help, Paula dear!" Polly chuckled. "Most kind of you!"

"How frivolous you are!" sighed the rumpled aristocrat. "Weal, geals, I must wealwin ffrom giving further assistance now. My stwuggles with this couch have left me pwostwate."

Thereupon, she coolly settled herself along the couch, and reclined there until the bell went for call-over.

All this time the Fourth Form had enjoyed a welcome respite from Myra Marshall's pestering oversight of them. Rather strange, Betty and her chums thought it, that the tyrannical prefect had not "buted in" during all the commotion. It would have been just like Myra to come along with a snappish: "Less noise, you girls!"

The general opinion was that, having secured a most cosy study for herself, she had kept to it all the evening. But Betty, with the detecting eye which she was acquiring, noticed during call-over that Myra was wearing boots, not house-shoes or slippers.

And the boots showed signs of having been wiped clean only a few minutes since!

"A girl who settles down for an evening in her study gets into light shoes," Betty said, mentioning the matter to her chums as soon as they were in their bedroom. "Myra was still wearing boots, because—"

"She has been out of doors this evening," Tess took the Form captain up, with a nod. "You are a great one, Betty, at spotting these little things!"

"And supposing," rejoined Polly, "Myra has

been down the well, or whatever it is—fishing up that box?"

"I know," responded Betty glumly; "that's just the point. All the same, we are going to slip out presently, and see just what is down the well besides water."

Polly rubbed her hands together, grinning. There had been plenty of fun during the evening, but her thirst for either fun or adventure was still as great as ever.

Nor were her chums less keen than she upon the daring exploit which was soon to be embarked upon. Even sober Madge looked excited for once.

They all prepared for bed—or rather, were getting undressed, when a sudden diversion occurred.

The door flew open, and into the room sallied a band of Fifth Form girls, for a little skirmish with pillows.

Paula was "bowled out" at once by a hefty swing of a bolster, wielded by the Fifth Form leader; but Betty and the rest put up a valiant stand against the onslaught. In fact, within a minute the Fifth Form's onslaught had been changed into a rout.

In wild confusion the mirthful raiders were driven back into the passage, and when the battle was all over and the chums were again in peaceful occupation of their bedroom, they even found two pillows to the good.

"Bai Jove, how whipping!" was Paula's delighted comment. "The weward of bwaerwy—what!"

"Whose bravery—yours?" teased Polly. "I like that! You sat in the corner all the time."

"How distwessingly aggwavating you are," sighed the aristocrat. "You surely realise that, pwicr to being wendered pwostrate by a remarkably stwong bolster, I did my best—"

"You went down like a ninepin, first go! That's what you did!" Polly said witheringly. "Well, good job the attack has come off early, anyhow," she added. "No joke if those girls had come along a bit later and found us—not here."

Betty nodded and laughed. She, too, was very glad that the pillow-fight was a thing of the past. Now they could all go to bed and count upon being left undisturbed.

In due course Miss Redgrave paid her "lights-out" visit to the various bedrooms, and after that the whole great house hushed itself for the night. There would be no school chime to proclaim the passing of the dark hours, but Betty's wristwatch had an illuminated dial, and so she could tell the time at any moment, without striking a match.

They had agreed that it was best not to indulge in any whispering, but now and then, as time passed on, Polly had to voice a soft:

"You awake, you girls?"

For awhile Paula's murmured "Yes, wather!" always came in response. But Paula was really fast asleep when the critical moment had actually arrived.

It was exactly eleven o'clock by Betty's wristwatch when she gave the signal by throwing back her bed-coverings and stepping down to the floor.

Polly flashed from her bed in an instant, and Madge and Tess were quite ready, too, for the midnight exploit. But Paula—

"What shall we do about her?" pondered Betty, as they gathered round the aristocrat's bed and found how soundly asleep she was.

"Leave her," suggested Polly scornfully. "I would!"

And they did.

Much as they loved Paula's amiable society, they were bound to feel that this was one of those occasions when she would perhaps help them best by slumbering on. It would be just like Paula to miss a stair in the dark, and thus rouse the whole house by a blind stumble!

And so, when they had put on their things and were boots in hand, they stole away—a stealthy party of four. Trixie had her bed in another room, and so had had to abandon all idea of taking part in the venture. And Paula slumbered, overcome, no doubt, by her exertions with that couch!

A Midnight Exploit.

"THE candle in that lantern is burning brightly. The air must be good, or the light would have gone out."

Betty Barton had spoken. Her subdued whisper broke the tense silence which had lasted whilst all four girls, kneeling around the uncovered wellhead, gazed into the depths.

Down there glimmered the lantern, as it hung by the string which Betty had been playing out, almost inch by inch.

"I can see the water now," whispered Polly. "How far down, do you think, you girls?"

"Thirty feet," hazarded Madge.

"Not quite so much," murmured Betty, "according to the length of line that we have used. But deep enough, anyhow."

"Never mind; I'm going down!" was Polly's eager rejoinder. "You are not going to talk about risks, Betty?"

"I'm going to take any risk there is, myself," said Betty. "So that's that! Seriously, though, let me go first, and one of you can come after me. You'll agree, it is just as important for two to remain on watch up here, as it is for two to go down?"

"More important," approved Madge, with her usual good sense. "But it isn't to be supposed that Polly would miss the scramble down the shaft. So Tess and I will stay above ground. Shall we, Tess?"

"All serene," was the prompt reply.

Betty had been holding the line by which the lantern was suspended. She now gave it over to Madge.

"Sh! Let's listen a moment," advised the astute captain; and so they all stood mute and still, with straining ears.

Not a sound came to them from round about in the moonlit grounds. In a few moments they were exchanging delighted smiles. Splendid, the way everything had gone, they were thinking. Not a hitch, so far; not a scare!

Swiftly and silently they had made their exit from the mansion less than half an hour ago. In a few minutes they had possessed themselves of the lantern and string, previously hidden for the occasion by Betty. There was an old garden rake, too, which they had brought along to the shrubbery, so that whoever went down the well would have something with which to drag the waters.

"I tell you what," Betty now whispered, getting ready to clamber down the narrow shaft; "either Polly or I will keep a hold of the lantern's string down there. If you get a scare, give three jerks as a signal."

"Splendid!" exclaimed Polly. "But there won't be any scares. Every soul in the old house is fast asleep, Myra included. So get on, Betty!"

"Nice way to speak to your Form captain,"

jested Tess. "My advice is, Betty—take it slowly!"

"I mean to," was the smiling response. "Well, ta-ta for the present!"

Polly, for her part, chuckled a flippancy "Good-by-ee!" when she was proceeding to follow down the well.

Slow indeed was Betty—slow but very sure. She was taking the old rake with her, and the hand that held it found a difficulty in also grappling with the iron spikes which were the girls' only means of descent. If Polly had been leading, she would probably have scrambled down as fast as possible, regardless of the risk of a spike being loose. Betty was cautious, and every spike was tried by one foot or the other before she let it bear any real weight.

Down, down! An eerie, thrilling experience, for all there was the light of the lantern below to banish the awful darkness. What Betty did not fancy at all was the sight of the water below the lantern, looking so still and icy-cold.

From the very instant when she had begun the descent, her gaze had been drawn downwards in a fascinated way to the water. But now, when she was still ten feet or so from the bottom of the shaft, her attention was called to something else by Polly.

"Here, I say, Betty!" her chum whispered down to her, "did you notice what is fixed to the wall of the shaft just here? A plate of iron!"

"I didn't notice it—no," Betty answered, glancing up. "Oh, I see it now! That must have been put there to repair the side of the shaft, I suppose."

"It might be a door," declared Polly.

"It might be, but isn't," answered Betty. "How could it be, down here?"

She had not paused in the descent, and now she was far enough down.

"Steady—whoa!" she whispered up to her chum. "You keep the lantern-string between your fingers now, Polly. I am going to get busy with the rake."

And in a few moments she was reaching the iron end of the rake into the water, whilst she clung by one hand to a wall-spike, with her feet set upon others.

"Any luck?" whispered down Polly presently.

"No, not yet, dear."

"Can you touch the bottom of the well?"

"Oh, yes! The water is only a couple of feet deep. I expect the spring has silted up after so many years, and—Hallo!"

"Yes—what?"

"Polly, I'm on to something! The rake, it has hooked on to—Oh, look, here we are! My word, but it's frightfully heavy!"

Betty gasped the words excitedly, as she heaved at the rake and so brought its other end clear of the water.

For an instant both girls saw the object which had been fished up. It was a small japanned cashbox. A prong of the rake had hooked into the brass handle, but now the weight was too

much for Betty, and she let the thing fall back into the water—plop!

"It's all right!" Betty whispered to Polly. "I'll get it again."

But it almost seemed as if there had been luck about the first "catch" that would not be repeated.

Carefully at first, then more wildly as her efforts went unrewarded, she raked about here and there in the water. At last she struck the box. Even then, however, it seemed hopeless to catch it by the handle.

Then suddenly she got a hold.

"Yes, here it comes!" she panted, quite exhausted by her exertions under such hampering conditions. "It is so heavy, though." Oh, Polly darling. "I—I don't believe I shall ever keep my hold of it!"

"Can I help?" Polly asked eagerly. "Bother! If only I could—"

"No, I'll manage! Look!" Betty exclaimed reassuringly.

With wonderful dexterity she had drawn in the rake, and was thus able to swing the toothed end up and round to her, with the box hanging on to it.

She got a hold of the box with one hand, letting the rake slide free and fall with a dull splash into the water.

Polly, overjoyed at her chum's success, was on the point of breathing a jubilant "Hurrah!" when there came a signal from the girls on watch above!

The lantern jerked about as the string was pulled at three times.

"Betty!"

"Yes, Polly. Up with you—quick, and I'll follow!" was the Form captain's steady answer. "I wonder what—"

Again the string was jerked three times.

In the most urgent way, Madge and Tess were signalling: "Come out of it, sharp! There is danger, and we must get away!"

"Can we manage without the light?" panted Betty.

"Yes, I'm all right, if you—"

"Let it go!" broke in Betty.

So Polly tugged violently at the string, snapping it, and the lantern plunged into the water, leaving them in pitch darkness.

Then up they clambered as fast as possible, yet wondering all the time if they would not surely be too late.

It all depended upon what the danger was. Why—why had Madge and Tess taken alarm?

How desperate the situation was a faint whisper now made all the more evident to the climbers in the shaft.

"Quick—quick! We have only a few seconds!" That was Madge's thrilling warning. "Someone coming!"

"Myra Marshall!" guessed Betty and Polly, and their hearts pounded with the thought of what an encounter with that girl would mean, at this spot, and at this midnight hour!

But they were wrong.

Polly was the first, of course, to reach the surface. Tess fairly hauled her clear of the well, whilst Madge knelt there, ready to help out Betty.

"Here, take it—the box!" panted the captain; and Madge seized it, giving a startled gasp as she felt its weight.

The thick mist of this autumn night was illuminated by the moon, and so the two girls were

ANSWERS
EVERY MONDAY....PRICE 2:

able to give Madge and Tess questioning looks which that couple could discern.

"Well—what?" was the anxious question Betty and Polly expressed.

For answer, Madge and Tess both gestured, to indicate the direction in which danger lay.

At that very instant, Betty and Polly picked up very significant sounds. Sure enough, the four of them were not the only people out and about in the grounds at this midnight hour. The girls plainly heard—whispering!

So it was not Myra Marshall whom they had to reckon with. One voice was that of a woman; the other, a man's.

Mr. and Mrs. Carnay!

An utterly astounding thing, this! But there could be no pausing to think what it meant, no daring to loiter here and see the couple without being seen by them.

Already Madge and Tess were backing away from the well. Betty and Polly crept after them,

Betty made a sudden sign to her chums.

"Come on—back to our bedroom!"

Nor did even headstrong Polly oppose the advice. Spy upon the couple's movements they dare not, without grave risk of betraying themselves. Another night, perhaps! That was the girls' unanimous thought as they stole off.

For one thing they had at least accomplished to-night, and surely it was gratifying enough. They had recovered that box which they had always felt certain Myra Marshall had guiltily consigned to the bottom of the well!

Into the house crept the four girls, and, having made fast the outer door, were successful in regaining their bedroom without making the least noise.

In the whole house no one else was awake; that was practically a certainty. Not a soul knew how they had made this daring exploit at dead of night—one that was surely justified.

Strange things were happening at the Priory, and Myra Marshall was closely associated with



PAULA ASSISTS! The onlookers wanted to know why Paula was sitting on the couch. "She's helping us to shift it!" Polly explained, with a grin.

striving their hardest not to rustle any of the dense bushes which they had to pass between.

Silently they emerged from the shrubbery upon the mansion side, and they were sure that the stealthy retreat had been executed without any betrayal of their presence to that man and woman.

In a few moments, indeed, they heard the couple stealing into the shrubbery from its opposite side, whispering to each other ever so faintly.

Then, as the girls stood stockstill, listening, a brief silence was followed by a sharp gasp of dismay.

It had come from the man, and was there any doubt as to what had agitated him?

No.

The stone slab of the well—the girls had omitted to replace it! Or, rather, they had felt there was not time to do that. And so Michael Carnay and his wife, visiting the shrubbery for some mysterious motive that would yet have to be fathomed by the girls, had found the old shaft uncovered!

the whole great mystery. Therefore Betty and Co. felt that they had no choice but to pursue secret investigations.

Back in their bedroom they closed the door without a sound. Paula was still fast asleep. Her measured breathing was the only sound that broke upon the others' hearing. For, of course, they were listening all the time.

Madge set down the box, and Betty took it up again.

"Now!"

"Yes, open it," urged Polly, trembling with eagerness. "It's heavy, you say?"

"Feel the weight of it."

"My word!"

"Yes, wather, geals!" came a sudden sleepy murmur from Paula Creel, as she turned over as if to rouse up. "Howevah—"

"Sh!"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

Paula was suddenly wide awake. She sat up in surprise.

"Geals, is it time to make a start?" she whispered. "I've been wondewing—"

"Time to make a start, duffer?" Polly derided her. "We started ages ago, and now we are back!"

"And you've not been wondering at all," grinned Tess. "You've been sleeping hard."

"Bai Jove! Have I weally, geals? Howevah, I feel all the fwesher as the wresult of a little wese. Yes, wather!"

And Paula certainly nipped out of bed with great alacrity.

Then all five girls set about opening the box. The room was bright with moonlight, and they did not need a candle. Feeling perfectly justified in doing so, they tried various small keys upon the cheap lock.

The first four or five keys failed to have any effect, but then Madge Minden produced one key that belonged to her music-case.

It fitted. The hasps of the lock turned back, the lid was flashed open with eager swiftness by Betty, and then—

"Oh!"

"Great goodness!"

"Well!"

"Bai Jove!"

For the box was full of coins!

This Must Be Solved!

"SILVER coins!" exclaimed Betty softly. "Half-crowns!" said Paula. "Bai Jove, what a remarkable collection!"

"Very remarkable," rejoined Madge drily. "All the more remarkable, too, if—if they are not silver, after all."

"Just what I was going to say," breathed Polly. "Are they genuine coins?"

They were not!

The girls had only to take each a sample of the half-crowns, wipe them dry—for they were wet, of course, after immersion in the well—and examine them closely, to know for certain that they were a spurious make.

It was a discovery that left all five girls too astounded for speech.

Amazing enough, if they had merely fished up from the well a box of bad coins whose ownership they did not know; but that was only half the case.

This box—they knew that it had belonged to their own prefect, Myra Marshall!

They knew that it had been in her possession prior to the fire at Morcove School.

This was the box that she had fetched away in secret from the burnt-out building at dead of night. A box crammed with bad half-crowns!

And what about all the bad money that was in circulation in the district? What about all the talk of coiners being at work somewhere in this quiet world of North Devon?

"It is terrible!" Betty breathed at last, softly closing the lid of the box. "Did Myra Marshall simply find a boxful of bad coins by chance, and feel tempted to use them by degrees?"

"Or—" suggested Polly, with a deep breath.

"Yes," put in Tess, in a whisper, "that's another question. Is Myra Marshall absolutely associated with a gang of coiners?"

"A Morcove girl—a prefect!" murmured Madge incredulously. "One of a gang of coiners! Oh, surely, it is impossible!"

"Bai Jove, I twust so!" sighed Paula. "I twust it is not as bad as that. Howevah—"

"What are we to do? That's the point," Betty broke out gravely.

"Do?" It was Polly who answered so promptly.

"Say nothing to anybody for the present. Keep quiet about our find—"

"Yes—"

"And carry on."

A pause followed Polly's bold suggestion.

"You mean," Madge broke out at last, "carry on our—investigations?"

"Yes."

Betty suddenly took up the box, carried it to the fireplace, and hid it up the chimney.

"Polly's right," she said decisively. "Whether Myra Marshall was only in chance possession of the coins, or whether she is actually in league with their makers, is a point we had better clear up before we breathe a word to anyone. Another night, girls—"

"Well?" they questioned, as the Form captain paused.

"Another night, perhaps, we can follow up—not Myra Marshall," said Betty, with slow impressiveness, "but Michael Carnay and his wife!"

[END OF THIS WEEK'S STORY.]

Slowly but surely Betty Barton and her chums are piecing together the clues that will enable them to solve the mystery connected with Myra Marshall. Next week's long complete Morcove story is entitled:

"MYRA MARSHALL'S FEAR!"

Don't miss reading how Betty joins action with Michael Carnay and his wife. There are surprising happenings at the old Priory. The reproduction of next week's cover, given below, illustrates only one of many thrilling incidents that occur. Order your copy of THE SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN immediately and make sure of obtaining it.

Next Week's Cover?



ORDER YOUR COPY NOW!