

In this issue: **"RISKING EXPULSION!"** A splendid story of the Girls of Morcove School

The Schoolgirl's Own



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The Truants!

A dramatic incident from the new long complete story of Morcove School contained in this issue.

This great Morcove School Story will hold you enthralled!



RISKING EXPULSION!

By **MARJORIE STANTON.**

Naomer the Naughty.

"I SAY, Betty! Have you heard about Jess?"
"What, Jess Lingard, the day-girl?"
Polly Linton, the madcap of Morcove, nodded.

"Yes, Jess of the little shop in Barncombe; she won't be at school to-day, I'm told. She is crooked up!"

"Oh!"
"Bai Jove!"
"What hard luck for Jess!" was the feeling remark which several of the girls made, now that Polly had explained the situation. "So keen she is, too, for the work!"

"Yes, wather!" drawled pretty Paula Creel, the aristocrat of the Fourth Form, as she shook up a cushion, and then lolled back against it. "A wewular tewwow for work, bai Jove!"

"Just as another girl that I know is a regular terror for sitting in other people's easy-chairs, and wearing out their cushions!" cried Polly teasingly. "Out of that chair, Paula, or else take me on your knee!"

"My deah Polly— Yeowp, you duffer, get off me!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" went up the laughter, as the madcap, knowing how such antics always aggravated the spic-and-span aristocrat, dumped herself in that girl's lap. "Mind your hair, Paula! There won't be time to comb it out again!"

"Polly deah, pway wewfain! Pway wewlieve me of your far-fwom fwagile form," poor Paula groaned, as the madcap continued to bounce up and down upon her lap. "Polly, do you heah?"

"Rock-a-by, baby—" Polly began to sing mirthfully. "Rock-a-by, baby—"

"Yes, wather! Howewah, you are not a baby, Polly! You are a most wicidulous cweature, sent to twy me, I'm afwaid. I— Yeowp, gerrup— ooch!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Betty Barton, the Form captain, thumped the study table for order.

"When all this levity is ended," she said lightly, "I would like to say a word about poor Jess. Crooked up, is she? Then—"

"I shall be crooked up, too, if this foolwry continues," came the half-smothered complaint from the long-suffering Paula. "Geals, pway wescue me! Healp!"

But now Polly got off the aristocrat's lap, mop-

ping her hair to rights with a laughing "Pouf! I enjoyed that!"
"Yes, girls," Betty went on, becoming serious for the moment. "Miss Redgrave mentioned to me that there is a note from Mrs. Lingard this morning, saying Jess hurt her ankle yesterday evening, so she is keeping to her bed to-day, to rest it."

"Then I think some of us ought to look in at Jess' home during the day," spoke up Madge Minden, in her sober voice, "just to show our sympathy."
"Heah, heah! Geals, naow that I am pwactically wecovered fwom the distwessing indignities I have been subjected to at the hands of Polly Linton, I may, pewhaps, be allowed to wemark that I thowghfully appwove of Madge Minden's pwoposal!"

"It was the sort of thing I was going to suggest," Betty said heartily. "Only, how are we going to work it in? Lessons this morning; the tennis tournament this afternoon. How can we work in a visit to Barncombe?"

"I vote we run over on our bikes early this evening," Tess Trelawney proposed promptly. "The tennis won't be over by then, it's true; but at least some of us will be free."

"That's the wheeze!" applauded Polly. "Talking of lessons, though, has anybody realised that it is just upon nine o'clock, and yet the bell hasn't started?"

Morcove School consisted of a great range of buildings, housing very many scholars, and so something more than the usual boarding-school tinkle of a handbell was needed to give the scholars warning of the time to get-up, and the time for meals or lessons.

"Nothing," went on Polly Linton, after they had all listened for a moment; "nothing was to be heard except Paula Creel's sighs of 'welfare! Aren't we to have any school to-day, then, or what?"

"Bai Jove, it would be a welfare!"

"I am surprised—shocked!" said Polly, with a mock-withering look at the languid aristocrat. "Such laziness, Paula, is unworthy of— Hallo— hark! Gracious!"

Instead of the pleasant dong, dong of the big bell that should have been sounding forth at this moment, the chums of the Fourth Form heard a most peculiar jangling and clapping, emanating from the belfry.

"The bell must be cracked!" said Paula.
 "You must be cracked, to think we can't guess that for ourselves," chuckled Polly. "Oh, hooray, what a lark!"

"And won't Naomer be glad!" smiled Betty.
 The remark was greeted with hearty approval. They all knew that the school-bell had been the very bane of pretty Naomer Nakara's life ever since she was sent from far-off Morocco to England to be educated at Morocco School.

Into the open air surged half a hundred scholars, anyhow; and what an amazing sight was to greet them, after all.

For, as they ran out to stare up at the belfry, they saw a girlish figure perched high up there, with the bell jiggling about within arm's reach of her.

"Oh!" shouted most of the girls, in amazement.
 "Why, good gracious!"

"Look!"
 "It is Naomer herself! Naomer—she has climbed up the ladders!"

"Weal!" said Paula after drawing a big breath.
 "Of all the wemarkable fwreaks! Gweat goodness, geals, what a wiculous thing to do, bai Jove!"
 Polly Linton whistled.

"Phew! The little monkey! It is a fact, she threatened to stop the bell!"

"Yes, wather! I wecollet, geals—"

Paula Creel broke off abruptly, whilst the rest of the girls put a bit of a check upon their merriment, as they saw two or three of the teaching staff come hurrying forth from the school porch.

"Miss Somerfield—too—oh, my hat!" breathed Polly.

"Naomer! Oh, you naughty, naughty child!" was Miss Somerfield's almost panicky cry, as she herself now took in the whole extraordinary situation. "Come down this instant!"

"I not come down if you give me feefy line!" shrilled the dusky scholar. "I not take any more feefy line—no!"

The Headmistress of Morocco wrung her hands.
 "What shall we do with that girl?" she breathed despairingly. "Oh, if I don't send her back to her grandfather's palace in Nakara! Naomer—Naomer!"

"Elo, present!" shrilled down that saucy youngster. "You say to me, 'I not give you feefy line—'"

"Very well, Naomer," The Headmistress thought it best to compromise at once. "I will not give you any lines! I will—"

"Elo, present!" sang out Naomer again. "You say to me, very nice, 'Please to come down—'"
 "Yes, yes Naomer! Oh, do, do come down, before you fall!"

"Elo, present! You say, 'Naomer, I love you—'"

"Yes, yes, Naomer, darling! We all love you! That is why we don't want you to break your neck!"

"I not break my neck," Naomer called down, starting to clamber about with great agility. "I break the bell, though, if he wake me every morning!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" exploded all the girls once more. And even Miss Somerfield and her colleagues had to join in the merriment.

They knew enough of Naomer by now to understand that she could not be dealt with like an ordinary scholar. She was just a wild little barbarian, and not for many a day yet would Morocco succeed in taming her!

She clambered out of sight down the interior

ladders of the handsome belfry, and was seen no more for a couple of minutes. During all that time, however, there was no lull in the laughter and talk. And what a huge shout of merriment went up when at last the little miscreant came rushing out of a doorway, crying:

"Elo, present!"
 With a hop, skip, and a run, Naomer came at the dignified Headmistress, and almost knocked that good lady off her balance by hugging her.

"You say you love me? Yes, then I love you, too!" the little minx cried gleefully. "But I not love that bell! Oh, the row he make!"

And since the bell was now ringing again, with all the usual force, Naomer stopped her ears to the dong, dong.

"Such a fright you gave us, dear!" Miss Somerfield said, affectionately stroking the girl's glossy hair. "Oh, if anything should happen to you, whilst you are under my care in England, what would your grandfather, the Sultan, say?"

Naomer put her head on one side, very prettily, to ponder a moment.

"He say, 'Take feefy line!'" she decided at last, and once again the air filled with a peal of laughter from all the girls:

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Off for the Day!

THE morning's classes had just commenced, and Miss Somerfield had retired to her private room for some letter-writing, when her door was softly tapped.

"Come in!" she called with her usual geniality; and next moment two Fourth Form girls were advancing into her presence.

"Well, Audrey? Well, Stella?"

It was Audrey Blain who was ready to explain the reason for the visit. Her companion, Stella Munro, looked nervous.

"If you please, Miss Somerfield," said the belle of the Fourth Form, very demurely, "Stella and I asked permission to come and see you about that request we sent in—"

"Ah, yes, to be sure," exclaimed the Headmistress, singling out a nicely written note from the litter of correspondence on her desk. "You sent me this request for leave of absence from the school? A day Wednesday—that is, to-day—"

"If you would be so kind, Miss Somerfield!" purred Audrey.

The Headmistress was one of the kindest, most indulgent ladies that any school could wish to own as its presiding authority. At this instant, however, a shade seemed to pass across her face, as if she was suddenly ruffled.

"No, you girls," came with a slight sigh, at last. "I am sorry, but I really don't feel disposed to grant you the day off. You say you wish to go and see certain friends of yours—"

"Friends of mine," corrected Audrey gently. "Stella does not know them yet, but I do so want her to meet them! They are such nice people!"

"As to that, Audrey—really, I am afraid I must hold a contrary opinion," Miss Somerfield said regretfully. She got up and took a turn about the room.

"They are a family from London, staying at a furnished country house for a few of these summer weeks—"

"Yes, Miss Somerfield. Mr. and Mrs. Callowby move in the best society in town," urged Audrey.

"I am thinking of their two daughters—for it is Vanessa Callowby and her sister Muriel with

whom you wish to spend the day," the Headmistress pursued. "I have seen them about the district, and I am bound to say their general conduct has not impressed me favourably!"

Audrey said in a pained tone: "Oh, Miss Somerfield! Of course, they are on holiday—"

"And they have a right to be jolly, certainly," the Headmistress rejoined quickly. "But there is a vast difference between holiday fun and the sort of behaviour those girls indulge in. I saw them smoking cigarettes in the garden of that country house, as I went by in my car the other day."

"Miss Somerfield, we would never think of—"

"No, Audrey, I hope and believe you and Stella would never be guilty of such conduct. All the same, I think it better to withhold my permission for the day's leave. I am sorry, but there it is."

And the Headmistress handed back the note that Audrey had penned, as if to end the matter. Stella Munro had changed colour as the talk showed that Miss Somerfield had got the Callowby girls pretty well "weighed up." Audrey, however, possessing all the artfulness in the world, was looking perfectly self-possessed. She gave a little sigh of resignation.

"Very well, Miss Somerfield, and thank you," she said silkily. "Er—may we put another matter before you, please?"

"Certainly, girls."

"We have just heard that Jess Lingard is kept at home to-day—laid up," Audrey went on, quite sympathetically. "Stella, here, is very concerned about it—all—aren't you, Stella dear?"

"Yes," that girl blurted out, as nervously as ever. "I—you know, Miss Somerfield, I am a—relation of Jess'. Only a distant one; still, I—I feel—"

"Quite," nodded the Headmistress. "We are all concerned—very sorry indeed for Jess Lingard! In the short time she has been at Morcove, as a day-girl who entered on a scholarship, I am sure she has won favour all round. And you, naturally, are specially devoted to her, Stella."

"Stella is so nervous, Miss Somerfield," Audrey interposed, secretly dismayed at her friend's changing colour and shifty looks. "She has not got over being a new girl yet. She is afraid to speak out—"

"Oh, I hope I am not such an ogre as all that!" laughed the Headmistress. "But to come to the point—what is it, Audrey, that you wished to say?"

"Only this, please," went on the demure voice. "If you had granted us the day's leave, Stella and I would have gone to see Jess in Barncombe, before going on to the Callowbys' place, Miss Somerfield. I—I suppose you couldn't let us go over to see Jess, after all?"

Miss Somerfield's face lit up.

"Ah, that is a very different matter!" was her immediate answer. "Most certainly you may run over, and convey my, and the whole school's, sympathy to Jess and her mother!"

She wished them a smiling good-bye at the door of her sanctum, then turned back to her desk, still looking extremely pleased at having been asked to let the two girls go upon such an errand of compassion.

If there was one good thing Miss Somerfield liked to encourage more than another, it was the Samaritan spirit.

"Now, you go on upstairs, and start getting ready!" Audrey whispered elatedly to Stella, as

soon as they were outside the room. "I must just pop in and tell Miss Massingham we have leave of absence. Sha'n't be a jiffy!"

And away she sped, whilst Stella Munro went rather less viciously up the stairs to the Fourth Form quarters.

Turning into Study No. 8—the one she shared with Audrey—the girl who was Jess Lingard's wealthy relation simply stood about in a sort of dazed manner. Only when she heard her handsome, fascinating friend whirling along to the study did she go to a corner where some outdoor clothes were hanging.

Then the door flashed open, and Audrey came in. She pushed it shut behind her with a light-hearted bang.

"Ha, ha, ha!" she burst out laughing. "Didn't I manage it beautifully, Stella?"



SILENCING THE BELL! As the girls ran out of the school building to stare up at the belfry, they saw Naomer high up there, with the bell jiggling about within arm's length of her!

"Yes, I suppose even a run into Barncombe, and a day at the shop, is better than stewing in class," Stella agreed. "It gives us a chance to pop out into the town now and then, and—"

"Oh, stupid!" broke in Audrey mirthfully. "You don't really imagine that we are going to your poor relation's wretched shop, in that dirty old back street? Stella, we are going over to the Callowbys' place—and who is ever to know?"

In the act of putting on her hat, Stella stood transfixed with surprise. Audrey, on the other hand, was all activity. She darted in front of a mirror.

"No, this won't do!" she said breathlessly. "I am not going to visit the Callowby girls in these clothes! And you, Stella—you must change!"

"But—"

"Your best frock, white silk stockings—not those you've got on," Audrey decreed. "The girls will want to have some tennis. They'll want to have lunch out of doors—tea in the garden, too! They've got hammocks and things! Oh, we are going to have a top-hole day!"

And, with a breathless "Come on, dear!" she rushed from the study and up to the floor above, there to indulge her love of dressing to her best!

Drawn On and On!

IT was Audrey who was quite ready to be off before another ten minutes had sped. This, too, although hers was a far more elaborate toilette than the one Stella Munro was indulging in.

Stella, in fact, was still in a bewildered state. The hankering after pleasures that would vary the monotony of school life was just as strong in Stella Munro as it was in Audrey Blain. Only, Stella had not Audrey's audacity.

So now she made her reckless friend quite impatient by the sort of half-hearted way in which she prepared herself for the secret visit to the Callowby girls.

"Oh, come on, Stella! Look at me—I'm ready!" fumed Audrey.

She might have added, "Look at me, and see how nice I look!" for she was certainly inviting an admiring glance from her hesitant chum as she piroquetted in front of a mirror.

"Audrey, I—I suppose—I do hope it will be all right?" Stella broke out uneasily, fastening her frock with nervous fingers. "But supposing we are found out, after all?"

"It is a mistake to stand talking," Audrey silenced her still hesitant friend, and she went up to her to help the girl finish her toilette.

Over their summer frocks the miscreants had artfully put on light raincoats, and, although Audrey had talked of white stockings, none were visible. The white stockings and shoes to match for both girls were at present rolled up in brown paper!

So if the two had chanced to meet anybody on their way, they would not have appeared to be dressed up for any special occasion. As it happened, they encountered no one, and presently saw them speeding away by means of the motor-cycle and side-car that the reckless Audrey had hired for the day.

"Was there ever a better day for such a spree?" Audrey cried out joyfully, after they had turned out of the Barncombe road and were going slowly up a pretty lane. "We are nearly there, Stella dear, and you'll see such a sweetly pretty place in a jiffy!"

The promise was made good.

All at once they turned another bend in the leafy lane, and Audrey brought the "outfit" to a standstill at the entrance-gateway to a small country house, which boasted a very paradise of a garden.

T-t-trump, trump! Audrey blared at the motor-horn, to announce their arrival, and instantly some shrill talk sounded from the house. Whilst Audrey and Stella were still quitting their seats, the Callowby girls came rushing forth and down the gravel path, laughing delightedly.

"Audrey! Oh, how perfectly spiffing of you!" was the cry. "We were just wondering if you would be able to manage it!"

"When I make up my mind to do a thing, I do it," smiled Audrey, tossing aside the motor-gloves she had worn for the journey. "How are you, Vanessa darling—and you, Muriel?" she asked lightly, shaking hands with the sisters in turn.

Then she introduced Stella. They were simply delightful, was all Stella could think. Vanessa was about eighteen; her sister Muriel perhaps a year younger and just out of school.

"What a lovely place you have rented for the summer!" Stella exclaimed. "Glorious!"

"We all like it!" Vanessa said, with an air of being used to tip-top places. "Last year we were travelling, but this year dad and mater thought a place in Devonshire would be good fun."

"And so it is," agreed Muriel, whilst they all sent roving glances over the spacious grounds. "So quiet at night, after London. And, oh, you should have seen the garden in the moonlight, last night!"

"You ought to stay the night," Vanessa said to Audrey. "That would be jollier than ever! But come along indoors!"

Audrey, however, had to dispose of the "outfit" first of all, and the end of it was that Vanessa got into the side-car, and Audrey got into the saddle again, to drive on round to the garage.

Stella, meanwhile, was taken indoors by Muriel to be given a seat in the handsome drawing-room. It was beautifully furnished, but rather untidy. Stella noticed a smashed vase in the fireplace, and Muriel made a laughing comment about it.

"Yes, I did that, half an hour ago. Van was playing some dance music, and I was waltzing round, and swept the vase off the mantelpiece. Such a smash—ha, ha, ha!"

"Was it a valuable one?" Stella asked. "It looks—"

"Oh, I expect so! There is some decent stuff in the house," said Muriel airily. "But the dad will pay! Did we tell you that dad and the mater are away to Exeter, and won't be back until mid-day to-morrow? Great fun, isn't it? You chose just the right day!"

Then Vanessa and Audrey came whirling in through the open French-windows, full of laughter over the fun they had had, getting the motor-cycle and side-car into the garage.

"Ha, ha, ha! Did you girls hear a bit of a smash, and some screaming?" Vanessa wanted to know. "Audrey ran into the wall!"

"Your fault!" laughed Audrey. "You were making me laugh, by standing up and acting about in the side-car! I say, this is rather decent, this room!"

"What's the brown-paper parcel—a present for a good child?" asked Muriel, playfully snatching the package from Audrey. "I must see what—Oh, dear! Ha, ha, ha!"

Vanessa also pealed with merriment as her sister unrolled two pairs of white stockings, whilst two pairs of white shoes flopped to the floor.

"I see; one pair for me, and one for Van!" laughed Muriel. "Catch, Van!"

She rolled a pair of stockings into a ball, and hurled them at her sister, who dodged to avoid them, and they shot out into the garden.

Then, as Audrey laughingly darted out to retrieve them, Vanessa retaliated upon her sister by throwing a white shoe at her.

"Missed me—ha, ha, ha!" Muriel chuckled. "And now you've broken another giddy ornament!" she added. "What a lark!"

It was quite true; the hurled shoe had landed

on top of a small table, and knocked a handsome vase to the floor—smash!

"Well, what do you girls want to do?" Vanessa said, getting up to ring the bell for a maid.

"Tennis—is that the idea?"

"Oh, yes!" cried Audrey. "Tennis will be something like, out in that beautiful garden!"

"My be-yootiful garden of reo-oses," sang Vanessa, just as the door opened and a maid appeared. "Ellen, sweep up the pieces! Come along, you girls!"

Then they all four went upstairs and in a spare bedroom—which Vanessa said the schoolgirls could have had for the night, if they had been stopping—Stella and Audrey changed their stockings and shoes, and put themselves to rights after the untidy journey.

They were left to themselves to make their toilette, and whilst Audrey was fiddling with her hair in front of the mirror, she asked Stella what she thought of her new friends.

"Aren't they the limit?" chuckled Audrey. "Of course, when you are done with school, as they are, you can go in for a bit of fun! Ah, well, we are done with school ourselves, for this one spiffing day!"

"Yes," said Stella, coming away from the open casement window. "I'm not going to fidget—"

"You had better not!" laughed Audrey. "Or else off you can go, to walk the whole six miles to Barncombe, and spend the day with your precious poor relation!"

She came across to Stella, taking her by the shoulders.

"But poor relations are some use, after all, aren't they, dear?" smiled the shallow girl. "When they get crooked up, and going over to help mudder in the shop is an excuse for getting a razzle! Ha, ha, ha!"

The Home of the Day Girl!

THE hanging bell in the doorway of Mrs. Lingard's little shop gave its warning tinkle-tinkle.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Lingard! A packet o' tea, please. And if you've got one o' them penny packets o' stationery, I'll have one. And how is Jess now, ma'am?" asked the customer from a few doors down the street.

"Thank you, Mrs. Perkins; Jess is not so bad," was the widow's cordial answer. "If I can only keep her resting, her ankle will soon be all right again, let's hope!"

The bell tinkled again as Mrs. Perkins went out, after expressing a sincere wish for Jess' speedy recovery; and then Mrs. Lingard, rattling the few coppers into the till, bustled back into her kitchen.

From above stairs came a gentle call:

"Mother!"

"Yes, my lamb—coming!"

"I don't want you to come, mother; only, I believe you are fidgeting and fussing about nothing!" came the loving voice of Jess, from her little bedroom under the leaky skies. "What are you doing now, mother darling?"

Mrs. Lingard, at that very instant, was sipping a spoonful of hot beef-tea with great relish.

"Ah!" she murmured happily. "There's some goodness in that!"

Thereupon she took up the tray, and ascended the creaking stairs.

Tinkle, tinkle!

"Oh, bother the shop!" was Mrs. Lingard's thought; but poor folk cannot afford to be independent. She might feel a little put about now

and then, but she knew perfectly well that there was no help for it. To-day she had simply got to have two pairs of hands, as the saying is, and two pairs of legs!

"Shoo-op!" cried a small child's voice, whilst the counter was rapped with the edge of a penny.

"Yes, coming!" Mrs. Lingard cried down the stairs, and then made quite a rush with the tray to her daughter's bedside.

"Oh, mother!" Jess sighed, flicking back her hair as she sat up. "Now, what's all this? As if I were an invalid!"

"Every drop of it, my lamb; 'twill do you a world o' good," said the good woman, setting the tray just right for Jess to help herself without difficulty. "And I'll be up again in a—"

"Shoo-op, please!"

Tinkle, tinkle! Another customer. Mrs. Lingard ran a hand caressingly over Jess' glossy head, and then hurried away.

It was with mixed feelings that Jess spooned away at the delicious beef-tea, and nibbled the toast. She could not get it out of her head that her being laid up with a crooked ankle, and being waited on hand and foot like this, was very unfair to mother.

Just as if the shop was not a tie and a trial enough, even when things were at their best!

Nowadays, especially, when she, Jess, was attending Morrove School as a day scholar, her mother was single-handed week in and week out. How often did she get an hour in the fresh summer air and genial sunshine? Hardly ever, except on Sundays.

Bother those two steps leading down from the little shop into the dingy back parlour! The hundreds of times—thousands, it must be—that Jess had gone up and down those two steps, and yet she had come a cropper over them at last! It had been a nasty stumble that had served her ankle such a bad turn yesterday evening.

"Well, my lamb, was it nice?" Mrs. Lingard wanted to know when she came up to her pretty patient, a few minutes later.

She stooped to take up the tray, but Jess said, "Half a second, mother!" and then reached both arms about her neck and hugged her.

"But if I hear you making a start with the ironing," warned the devoted girl solemnly, "I'll crawl downstairs somehow, and take the iron away, I will! Mother you—must not—do so—much!"

"Dear child, what nonsense you talk! When I am that strong—"

"I don't care. I won't have you do so much!"

And so it began all over again—the old, loving wrangle between loving mother and devoted girl, each so full of tender concern for the other's well-being.

"The kind friends of neighbours that are inquiring about you to-day, Jess dear," remarked the mother, during a later visit to the bedside.

"It is wonderful how kind and thoughtful folk are! I shouldn't be at all surprised, either, if your Headmistress sends a letter through the post, saying how sorry she is about you!"

A musing look, very pretty to see, came into Jess' face then.

Yes, she could quite believe that there were many at Morrove School to-day sincerely sorry to have heard about her misfortune. Some of the girls were perhaps missing her, just as she was missing the joy of their comradeship. Betty, Polly, Paula—all the chums of the Fourth Form—they were such good friends to her!

And then suddenly, after her mother had bustled



A FOOLISH FROLIC: "Faster, Van!" cried Muriel, swirling round the room in a wild dance. The next instant she had collided with the wicker table, scattering the crockery to the floor.

off downstairs again, because of more tinkle-tinkle, that smiling, dreamy look of Jess' gave place to a sadder one.

She was thinking of Stella Munro now. Did Stella care because her "poor relation" was crooked up like this, and it meant more to do than ever for dear mother?

"Some girls in her position would want to come over and see me and mother, when we are placed like this," was Jess' poignant thought. "But will Stella come? I shall be very surprised if she does!"

And she added, sadly: "Poor Stella!"

For she knew that the girl, in spite of her fortunate position in life, was to be pitied in many ways—pitied for her weakness of character; pitied for the false start she had certainly made at Morcove School, by becoming so intimate with Audrey Blain; pitied because she was certainly going along a wrong path in quest of the same delights that Audrey hankered after.

If only the reckless career could be stopped in time! But, ah, with the best will in the world now, Jess knew that it was going to be a hard thing indeed for her ever to influence Stella.

It was mere make-believe when Stella was nice to her in front of the girls in general. In secret, there had been a fatal rupture. The moment had come when Stella was bound to choose between Audrey and Jess, and she had chosen—Audrey!

Slowly the beautiful summer's day dragged itself out in that humble little home in one of Barncombe's by-streets. Like every other bedridden person, Jess dozed now and then, although the constant tinkle-tinkle of the shop-bell precluded her

going right off to sleep, as she might otherwise have done.

In and out, in and out were the customers for their penn'orths of this and packets of that; and in and out, in and out of the shop bustled the cheery mother all the livelong day. Jess, hearing the bell go so often, might have fancied that mother must be making her fortune at the counter all at once, only the girl knew that the trade was all in "tuppences and thruppences."

Not much of a fortune to be made at that rate, with the wholesalers' big bills always coming in!

And now it was getting on for five o'clock—the time when Jess could usually be found cycling home from Morcove.

The sun had worked round to the back of the house, and was sending his golden rays into the little bedroom, giving new life to the faded flowers printed upon the cheap wallpaper.

A sadness came upon Jess all at once. Partly, it was the sadness that almost always comes over bedridden people as the long day draws towards its end. And partly it was merely the old regret that mother should have had such a lot to do to-day, and still a couple more hours of hustle before the shop would be closed for the night.

Lying back upon her pillows, Jess was starting some fresh dreamy thoughts of Morcove, and the girls who had been so nice to her, when—

Gracious, what a commotion it was in the shop, all at once! Several customers must have come in together, for there was a sudden buzz of talk as the bell still tinkled a way.

Customers? But that was not the case. Oh, surely, Jess knew whose that amiable drawl was—Paula Creel's!

"Yes, wather!" the girl in the bedroom heard the aristocrat of the Fourth Form exclaiming effusively. "We'll go up with the greatest of pleasure, bai Jove! Won't we, Madge deah-Polly?"

"What ho!" was the madcap's cheery answer; and, of course, it was the madcap's feet who first pounded up the steep stairs, whilst Madge and Paula came on behind, more sedately.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! How's the poor patient?" Polly cried, sailing into the bedroom. And Jess fairly shouted:

"Polly! Oh, how good of you! And you, Madge—you, Paula! You've come on purpose—"

"Pweiscely, bai Jove!" simpered Paula, her pretty face wreathed in smiles. "Don't flop on the bed, Polly deah! Pway remember the sufferer is not to be mauled about!"

"You don't call that being mauled about, do you, Jess?" chuckled Polly, kissing Jess a second time. "Well, dear—"

"Yes, weal, bai Jove, haow are we?"

"Betty would have given anything to come, but she didn't drop out of the tournament as we did," Madge explained, quietly depositing a parcel on the chest of drawers.

Jess now realised that Polly also had a parcel, and Paula, too! In all, three parcels were thus dumped upon the chest of drawers, and so the day girl stared.

"Er—a few twifles, don't you know?" beamed Paula. "We twust that they will prove acceptable, Jess deah. You like chicken jelly, I twust? As regards the tinned lobster—"

"Don't you make fun of my tinned lobster, just because I bought it!" protested Polly. "Finest thing in the world for sprained ankles—tinned lobster! And what you are looking so weepy for, Jess, I simply don't know!"

"Because you are—oh, so kind!" burst out Jess, almost sobbing the words, whilst she swept tears of happiness out of her eyes. "You girls—"

"But you have had other visitors from the school, haven't you?" Madge put in lightly.

"Other visitors? No—oh, no!"

"Not?" exclaimed Madge, falling back a step in sudden surprise. "Oh—"

"Bai Jove!"

"Hum! Well, never mind," Polly said hurriedly.

"No, wather not! It is quite all wight!" agreed Paula.

But that was only said to avoid awkward questions from Jess.

At head, these three good chums who were at the bedside had a sudden nasty fear that certain things were quite all wrong!

Supposing they Tell!

AT that moment, at the beautiful country house that was six miles out of Barncombe, the Callowby girls and their two guests were just getting up from tea.

"Well, and now we simply must be off!" exclaimed Audrey, glancing at her wrist-watch.

"We—"

"Oh, stay a few minutes longer—do!" entreated Vanessa Callowby, flashing out a silver case.

"Cigarettes! Have one, Audrey? And you, Stella?"

For Stella to see the alacrity with which Audrey helped herself was quite sufficient. She herself took one of the perfumed virginians that Vanessa favoured, and, with a little laugh, lit up with the rest.

"What a day we have had!" she exclaimed, sinking back into one of the verandah chairs. "Oh, how I would love to sit here for the rest of the evening! The sun goes down behind those trees, and then I can just imagine how romantic the grounds look!"

"Yes," Audrey said, with the cigarette drooping from her pretty lips, "the shop in that back street in Barncombe will be a bit foggy after this! But we really must look in there for a few minutes, worse luck!"

"Cheer up! You are coming again another day," Vanessa consoled them; whilst Muriel exclaimed vivaciously:

"You are coming back by and by, to sleep the night—you know you are! It will be quite all right, won't it, Van, darling?"

"Oh, spiffing, if only they can manage it!" was the hearty answer from the elder sister, as she went in through the French windows to seat herself at the piano.

Next moment her dainty fingers were beating out some lively dance music, and Muriel promptly bounced out of her wicker chair, and started whirling about.

"My wonderful skirt dance—watch!" she laughed, floating around in the confined space. "I got a prize for this at a country house last Christmastide. Faster, Van! There, Stella, could you do—"

Muriel's mirthful talk changed to a sudden yelp of "Horrors!" as she knocked against the wicker table on which the tea-things were still standing. It rocked violently, and too late all three girls tried to avert the disaster.

With the table almost capsizing, several cups fell to the tiles—crash!

"Oh, dear! Ha, ha, ha! How we are breaking up the happy home!" Muriel commented lightly.

"Never mind the pieces, Stella; the maid will pick them up! You girls dance, surely!"

"Stella and I, we just love it," said Audrey, still puffing at the cigarette. "Oh, to be able to get back here and have some dancing in the moonlight!"

"Oh, for a business government!" laughed Muriel. "One that would pension off all the Miss Somerfields there are in the world, and shut up all the schools! Boarding-school—I've had some!"

All this time Vanessa was still crashing away at the piano, and at last the lively tune proved too irresistible for Muriel and Audrey both.

Flinging away their cigarettes, they ran down on to the grass, and began a two-step on the lawn.

Vanessa wound up at last with a crash of notes that must have been ruinous for the fine piano, and then Audrey and Stella went upstairs to make the artful change back into more everyday attire.

In a few minutes they came down, with black shoes and stockings showing below their plain raincoats.

There was great fun at parting, Vanessa and Muriel running a race to see which could keep up the longer with the motor-cycle and side-car. Muriel won, by not being left behind until the entrance-gates were reached. Above the hum of the engine, Stella and Audrey heard confused shouting, to the effect that they simply must come back by and by!

Could it be done? It was like Stella to wish that it were possible, without starting to scheme how it could be done. And it was just like Audrey to set her clever brain to work at once, with the daring intention of getting over all obstacles somehow!



CAUGHT WITH THE TRUANTS!

Betty faced the indignant mistress, but she did not utter a word. She would not give the foolish girls away.

Not a word passed between the two as they hummed along to Barncombe at twenty miles an hour. It was not that Audrey preferred not to talk whilst driving the motor-cycle. The clever brain was busy; already it was working out a plan!

Out of the open country highways into the main street of the town they came with all speed, and it was but another minute then before they were going sedately down the street where Jess lived.

The children of poor people were playing about in the road, and Audrey had to go slowly and cautiously, trumpeting the horn all the time. She was glaring resentfully at one shabby child and another, when she heard Stella give a little cry of horror.

"Oh, Audrey—look!"

Only a few yards further on, three girls were coming away from the Lingards' shop—three Morcove scholars!

Audrey whistled softly:

"Phew! That's awkward!" Then she brightened again. "Oh, well, these girls won't make mischief, even if they know we ought to have been here all day. Betty's lot never blab—I will say that for them!"

She pulled up at the kerb outside the shop, where Polly, Madge, and Paula had come to a standstill.

"Hallo!" Audrey said, with all her usual loftiness. "You have been to see the patient, of course? I have brought Stella to see her. Being a relation of Jess', Stella wanted to come!"

"You have been a long time getting here, haven't you?" Polly remarked, looking Audrey straight in the eyes. "Ever since ten o'clock this morning!"

"Oh, we stopped on the road!" Audrey answered airily. "Anyway, is it any affair of yours?"

"I suppose not," said Polly curtly. "If you two choose to get a day's outing by false pretences, that is a matter between you and the Headmistress, if ever it is found out!"

"Meantime," added Madge, "I should think it is certainly a matter between you and your conscience, Audrey—if you have one!"

"Bai Jove, I quite agree!" said Paula.

And then the disgusted three took their bicycles out into the roadway, and pedalled off, whilst Audrey, looking after them, put out a tongue tip.

"Oh, Audrey," Stella broke out miserably, "we—we are in for it now! Supposing they tell?"

The Audacity of Audrey!

"GOOD-EVENING, Mrs. Lingard! Stella and I have come to inquire after the patient! And, please we would like to stay and make ourselves useful!"

Thus Audrey, as she passed in under the tinkling bell, to find the hard-driven widow stocking some shelves behind the counter with goods just delivered by a wholesaler.

"What, more of you?" exclaimed Mrs. Lingard, at sight of these two other Morcove scholars. "Well, to be sure! You must have met Miss Polly, and Miss Paula, and the other young lady?"

"Yes. They couldn't stay long, I suppose?" broke in Audrey composedly. "But we can stay, Mrs. Lingard, because we have special permission from the Headmistress. And, please, we were to tell you, Miss Somerfield is so very sorry about poor Jess!"

"How is Jess now, auntie?" Stella asked nervously. Mrs. Lingard was not, strictly speaking, the girl's aunt; but the term seemed to be the best Stella could think of—it sounded affectionate!

"Thank you, my dears; thank you for your own kindness, and for the kind message from the school," was the earnest response. "You shall come upstairs and see the dear lamb. This way—and mind the two steps, won't you?"

Almost every word of this dialogue in the shop had been audible to Jess, and now, as the two latest visitors could be heard ascending to her room, she lay back upon her pillows, breathing fast.

Stella and Audrey!

It was amazing, and to guileless Jess the visit could have but one explanation. It meant that the two girls were better girls than she had been inclined to believe, after all!

And almost the first thing she said, when the artful pair were at her bedside, was something in the nature of an apology.

"Stella, I am afraid I've been unjust to you to-day," Jess owned distressfully. "I took it for granted that you would not come—that you wouldn't really care if I was in pain, and mother so put about. And now—"

"I'm sorry, Jess. I am awfully sorry we didn't get here before," Stella gulped, causing Audrey to turn her face aside to hide a grin.

"So this is your room—hum!" said Audrey. "Well, I am glad you are better, Jess! Now, you and Stella must have a nice talk, whilst I slip round to the post-office."

It was a remark that surprised Stella just as much as it disappointed Jess.

The post-office? What had Audrey to do at the post-office? She had said nothing about having any business to do there, Stella was reflecting, whilst Jess thought:

"She can't bear me or my poor little room, after all! Oh, she is not a nice girl—it is no use trying to think she is! But Stella—Stella really is being kind at last!"

That girl, in fact, looked quite upset all at once, as if the plight of mother and daughter was too distressing to be thought of without emotion. With quite the bedside manner, she drew a chair close to where Jess was lying, and began a whole series of faltered questions about the bad ankle, and hadn't "auntie" had a most trying day?

"You are right, she has," said Jess, with a deep sigh. "People coming in and out of the shop all day long—oh, I think there have been hundreds! I tell you, Stella, it makes me want to be about again, oh, so much!"

"Your mother should have help, Jess—"

"I'm afraid we can't afford it, Stella. You see—"

"I don't mean paid help. If someone could just stay around, and make herself useful. I—if I could—"

"Oh, Stella, how good that is of you!" Jess burst out instantly. "That's like Polly and the others; they wanted to stay awhile, and serve in the shop until closing time, only mother wouldn't dream of it. See the lovely things they brought me, too!"

Jess wished, in the next instant, that she could swallow back that last remark. She was suddenly realising that Stella and Audrey had not brought any chicken jelly, nor yet tinned lobster, for the invalid!

"I'm sorry, Jess. I am awfully sorry, but I forgot to bring you anything," Stella owned, changing colour with the shame that was upon her all at once. "Next time, though—"

"I'm hoping there won't be any next time,"

Jess said, with a laugh. "I must get up to-morrow. I shall not be at school, but I can have a chair behind the counter—and there you are! Mother can then leave the shop to me!"

Stella got up from the chair suddenly. The level rays of the evening sun were striking in upon her, and although Jess did not find the strong light any embarrassment, it was otherwise with the girl who had spent the day with Audrey. She felt she wanted to hide away in some dark corner.

Meantime, Audrey had got to the post-office, and had rung up the school from the public call-office.

"Hallo! Hallo!" she was speaking into the instrument. "Is that Morcové School? Oh, is that Miss Somerfield?"

It was, and Audrey adopted her most respectful tone. She wished to know, please, could she and Stella remain the night at Mrs. Lingard's. Because, although Jess was going on very nicely, there had been such a lot for Mrs. Lingard to do all day, and—

"Stay the night? Audrey, how can you imagine that I would ever—"

"Please, Miss Somerfield," the wily girl cried back over the wire, "we know it would be a great favour. You see, our idea was—"

"One moment, Audrey. Would Mrs. Lingard find it a benefit if you and Stella stayed the night?"

"Oh, I am positive she would! You see—"

"Very well, then, you shall stay," came the answer that sent a thrill through Audrey. "Knowing the circumstances—"

Miss Somerfield heard the exchange suddenly asking if the call was finished, and, in fear of being cut off, she said the rest at a rush.

"All right, Audrey, then you and Stella will not be back to-night! Tell Mrs. Lingard I quite understand. She has not asked you to stay—it is simply a kindly thought of your own! Good-bye, then! Tell Jess that I—"

Zzzz-zip! went the telephone, and Audrey and her Headmistress were cut off.

Back on to the instrument the daring schoolgirl crashed the receiver, then flung off out of the sound-proof "box," looking wildly elated.

It was done!

Now—now she and Stella could go back to the Callowbys' place, and spend the night there, and no one would ever be one whit the wiser!

Where are Stella and Audrey?

EVENTS were going along at a great pace now. There was Audrey's rush back to the humble home of Jess and her mother, and then a hasty leave-taking by Audrey and Stella both.

Nothing was said to Stella by her friend about that telephone talk. Nor, needless to say, had either Jess or her mother the faintest notion of what Audrey had been up to.

Even when the two miscreants were ready to drive away in the motor-cycle and side-car, Audrey was still keeping her companion mystified as to why the visit to the Lingards' home had been cut short.

"Are you all right, Stella?" Audrey lightly inquired of her side-car passenger, when the engine was started. "Then off we go!"

Up the mean street they purred, at a safe pace, and so on round into the main thoroughfare. There was a lot of traffic now, and Audrey had to give close attention to her duties as a driver.

Had she been less occupied, and had Stella been less confused by the rapid whirl of events, the two girls might both have seen a familiar figure ride

by on a push-bike. But that girlish figure and its Morcové hat went unnoticed by the reckless two, and they were not to know that they had just gone past—Betty Barton!

Betty, the Form captain, just arrived in Barncombe, after a red-hot spin on her cycle!

Breathless and heated, that girl pedalled the last hundred yards or so to the Lingards' home, sprang off her machine and was in the shop in a twinkling.

"Good-evening, Mrs. Lingard! Are some of my chums here?" Betty panted gaily. "Polly, and Paula, and Madge—I couldn't get away when they started, but I've come on as soon as I could!"

"Well, to be sure!" Mrs. Lingard beamed.

"How many more of you young ladies? Not that I mind—oh I think it most kind of you all! And Jess—Jess will be so glad to see you, Miss Betty! Go up, my dear!"

So up the steep stairs raced Betty, to make another cheering visitor for the occupant of the little bedroom under the leaky tiles. Jess fairly shouted with delight. This flow of sympathetic visitors from Morcové was doing her all the good in the world, and she said so.

Betty dumped a certain paper bag from the Barncombe Creamery on the chest of drawers, without saying what was in the bag; but Jess could guess, and again her eyes watered as she tried to express her thanks for the kindness that was being loaded upon her.

Then they had a nice chat, Betty occupying the bedside chair which Stella had vacated only a few minutes since. After talking about Polly and Co.'s visit, Jess mentioned with delight that Stella and Audrey had been to see her, and that they had only just gone.

"Yes, dear, I saw them," Betty nodded. "They were going back to the school, of course—and I myself mustn't stay long, Jess, darling, because I've got to get back at the proper time. They have been here all day, haven't they?"

"They? Who?"

"Audrey and Stella—"

"Oh, dear, no!" laughed Jess. "Whatever makes you think that? They were only here a half-hour at the most!"

Betty did not think it desirable to say what had made her believe that the two girls had been there all day. In slight confusion she turned the talk in other directions, whilst all the time she was thinking—wondering. If Stella and Audrey had not been here all day, then where had they been?

The same question that Polly, Paula, and Madge had already asked themselves! And that question came up for discussion when, round about eight o'clock, Betty got back to the school and rejoined her chums.

What had Stella and Audrey been up to all day? There was another unanswerable question, too. Where were those two girls at the present moment? For they had not returned!

Then Tess Trelawney came into the study, where the girls were debating matters, and she had a startling bit of news for them all.

"So Audrey and Stella are staying the night at Jess Lingard's?" Tess remarked casually.

Betty and the rest cried:

"Wh-a-at!"

"Oh, it is a fact, right enough," Tess assured them. "Miss Rodgrave mentioned to me that the Headmistress has given them permission to stay at Jess'. It was all arranged over the 'phone'!"

"Was it really?" Betty said in a queer tone. "Well, all I know is that Stella and Audrey had

left Jess' home before I got there! They had said good-night—"

"Bai Jové! I say, you know—"

"It is serious," muttered Madge.

"It is disgraceful!" Polly exclaimed hotly.

"Where are they now?"

And again, for the troubled chums of the Fourth, that was a grave question which none could answer.

Touch and Go!

WHERE were Stella and Audrey?

Where else but at the Callowbys' lonely country house sitting down to a belated banquet with the Callowby girls, in the handsome dining-room.

To look at them, no one could have believed that the errant schoolgirls had had such a crowded day.

But then, excitement agreed with these girls. Stella may have come over a bit pale when she was making herself look nice for dinner, an hour ago; her face may have blanched, then, at the thought of the enormity of this thing that she had been enticed into by her reckless friend. But all uneasiness was gone from her now; once again all scruples were thrown to the winds.

As for Audrey, her dainty loveliness was enhanced at present, as it always was when she was in her element. And certainly she was in her element now!

Done with the irksome discipline of school! Sitting down to this lavish little dinner with friends after her own heart. Between now and midnight, too, what a revel they would have!

The sun had set. In at the open French windows wafted the delicious warm air of the summer twilight, whilst a rising moon shed her silvery radiance upon the Persian carpet. Audrey and Stella both sent another glance out into the twilight grounds, where the birds were still singing, and then, meeting each other's eyes, the two miscreants smiled.

"Rather better than seeing the moon come up from a horrid dormitory window!" Audrey chuckled. "Just think, you girls," she said to Vanessa and Muriel. "It is almost bedtime at Moreove—bah!"

"We know; we have had some!" nodded Muriel. "Cheer up, though—"

"Oh, I feel topping!" Audrey hastened to declare. "And so do you, don't you, Stella?"

"We have done a risky thing," Stella said, trying to force a flippant laugh. "But it was worth it."

"You've burnt your boats now, no mistake!" said Vanessa. "And a nice row I shall get into, if you are ever found out!"

"Oh, stop it! They won't be found out!" cried Muriel impatiently. "No one will ever—Gracious, who is that at the front door?"

She and her sister had a pretty good nerve, or they would not have been the girls they were. But they turned pale at the sound of that sudden ring at the front bell. Audrey held her breath. As for Stella, she looked like swooning with sudden fright.

"I—I thought I heard a car going past just now," Muriel exclaimed uneasily, whilst they heard the maid hurrying to the front door. "Did it stop? I thought it seemed to die away, as if—"

"Hark!" Audrey panted, suddenly starting up from her chair.

But the talk she had begun to give ear to did not go on. Instead, the door opened, and Ellen, the maid, came in.

"If you please, miss," she said to Vanessa. "there is a lady here, in trouble with her car. It is just outside—stopped on account of engine trouble. She is Miss Somerfield—"

Miss Somerfield!

The Headmistress of Moreove—here! Perhaps forced to ask if she could be put up for the night!

Ellen, the maid, saw the whole dinner-party fall into dire panic. There was no other word for it. Vanessa and Muriel sat speechless; Audrey and Stella simply bolted for the way out through the French windows into the grounds.

"Oh, Audrey!" moaned Stella. "What shall we do? Oh!"

"Come on—quick! We must get away in the bike and side-car, at once," Audrey hissed excitedly. "Just as we are, yes!"

With fluttering hearts they sped round to the garage, where Audrey, in the faint moonlight, made ready to start the engine without an instant's delay.

"Miss Somerfield will hear it!" gasped Stella, with increasing dismay. "Oh—"

"Hold your row! She won't know it is my machine," snapped Audrey, "even if she does hear it!"

But Miss Somerfield, as she talked with Vanessa Callowby in the hall of the house, was not to hear the motor-cycle being started up, for the simple reason that Audrey could not start the engine!

At the end of two or three minutes of feverish fiddling about on the part of Audrey, she and her fellow conspirator were suddenly terrified by seeing a vague figure rushing towards the garage. But it was only Muriel Callowby, with her belongings.

She had slipped up to the bedroom they had been going to occupy, and had grabbed the twilit scholars' things.

"Here you are, and you'd better get away at once," she palpitated. "What a howling fiasco, isn't it?"

Audrey and Stella each had a worse word than that for the upset. It was a dire calamity, and it meant—oh, no use hoping for anything less terrible, as punishment. It meant certain expulsion!

There in the garage they kicked off their white shoes, pulled black stockings on over their white, clapped on their black shoes, donned the rain-coats—and fled!

Not a bit of use hanging about to try and get the motor-cycle to go. Audrey said that it had often taken her an hour to find out what was wrong when it refused to start. With hardly a word of good-bye to Muriel, the panicky pair scurried away, with whole miles to go in the moonlight back to Moreove School.

"I'm sorry. Oh, I am so sorry we ever did this thing!" Stella almost whimpered, when she and her fellow miscreant had been padding along in utter silence for a full half-hour. "We might have known—"

"What do you mean—'might have known'—?" snapped Audrey. "Who was to dream that Miss Somerfield would be coming that way to-night? She often goes out to dine with different people in the neighbourhood; but to think that her car should come back that way—"

"We might have known something would happen!" Stella persisted miserably. "And now we shall be expelled!"

"Well, if we are—hang, I don't care!"

"It is all very well, Audrey. My people—"

"Mine, too, come to that! But if they don't

like it, they must just lump it!" Audrey exclaimed fiercely; and then silence fell again.

Mile after mile! On and on they trudged, with all the moorland country lying around them, bathed in brilliant moonlight. It was not until they had come in sight of the school, and had just heard the chimes dining out eleven o'clock, that Audrey suddenly spoke again.

"Look here, though. We are going to slip in through a gap in the hedge, instead of knocking up the gatekeeper. And if we can get into the house somehow, and go up to the dormitory without rousing anybody, we—perhaps we can bluster things out in the morning!"

Stella did not respond. No talk of that sort could cheer her up. Get into the house at this time of night—a likely thing, she was thinking!

Miserably she crawled after her friend when that girl wriggled through the boundary hedge. With a heart as heavy as lead, Stella sneaked on again, going with Audrey by a roundabout way through thick shrubberies and along hedge-bound paths to the schoolhouse, so as to avoid the open moonlight.

"No! Miss Somerfield may have told the servants they could all go to bed, and that she would let herself in."

"Then the door will be locked!" argued Stella. "If Miss Somerfield meant no one to wait up for her, she has a key! Oh, it is no use, Audrey. We shall have to knock up someone, and—"

The miserable whispering ended abruptly.

That sudden rasping sound over by a back door—oh, it was as if someone was drawing back a bolt as stealthily as possible. Had the girls' lurking presence outside become known to a mistress, then? What were they to do—what say?

They huddled together, staring aghast at the door, whilst the faint squeak of a lock followed that click of the bolt. Now they were in for it, that was a certainty!

The door opened a few inches—opened wider still—and then a white face showed in the moonlight.

"Quick—come on!" urged a guarded voice. "Quick!"

And the speaker was Betty Barton!



SPLENDID CHUMS. Jess stared in astonishment at the parcels the three girls carried as they entered the room. "Er—a few twifles, don't you know!" beamed Paula. "You like chicken jelly, I trust?"

Not a light to be seen anywhere on this side of the house! No doubt a light was still burning in the hall, because Miss Somerfield had not yet returned; but the culprits dared not venture round to the housefront.

When they had prowled past the back of the great building, and found no means of ingress on the other side, they could only turn back. Looked up and bolted for the night was every window and door, and, whilst Audrey's handsome face began to wear a more desperate expression than ever, Stella's moody despair deepened.

At last, after leaving the wretched Stella for a minute, Audrey came back, and now she was obviously resolved upon a desperate course.

"Look here," she whispered to Stella: "there is a light burning in the hall, because Miss Somerfield is not yet back. Perhaps the hall door is on the latch—it may be! I haven't tried it, but I am going to!"

Stella's face lit up for the moment, then she shook her head despairingly.

"It is certain that a servant has waited up," she exclaimed tragically.

How will it End?

THEIR Form captain!

There she stood, in her dressing-gown and slippers, gesturing urgently to them to enter by the door that she herself had stealthily unbolted.

A sort of sobbing gasp of relief came from Stella. Somehow she felt saved—saved! She made a rush for the way in, and in a flash she was past Betty, and ready to slink on upstairs.

Audrey was less panicky now. It may have been that all the old, undying enmity against the Form captain made her affect composure, for she advanced into the dark passage of the house with something of her usual haughty composure.

"I saw you from the dormitory window," Betty said tersely, in a guarded tone. "I couldn't sleep—I was thinking about you—and—"

"Much obliged," Audrey broke in softly. "I expect you feel you have done us a great service, Betty? But we have an excuse to offer for being so late!"

"Oh, I have no doubt you are ready with

excuses," was Betty's scornful answer. "You are a great hand at excuses, Audrey! I can tell you this, though. You will go one step too far, in the end!"

"I'm tired, and don't want to be lectured," was Audrey's insolent response. "Wait a bit, Stella. No need to be in such a tearing hurry!"

She stepped quietly after her fellow culprit, who was all of a shake with eagerness to get upstairs. Betty, meantime, was hanging back to make the door secure again.

At that moment, Betty was probably more genuinely miserable than the two culprits themselves. It had been right, she felt, to yield to the impulse to creep downstairs and do her best to help the culprits out of their terrible plight. But, supposing Audrey managed to get out of the whole scrape with artful excuses in the morning, was the matter to end here?

Was it right that this sort of thing should go unpunished?

Such was the harassing thought she had, whilst she stole after Audrey and Stella along the dark passage. No, it was not right that this sort of thing should go on! Even if Audrey could not be taken in hand, something must be done to stop Stella's fatal friendship for that girl.

And yet, how to grapple with the situation, without figuring in the despicable light of a tell-tale, Betty was at her wits' end to know!

Without a word, and creeping on as stealthily as possible, the three girls came to the end of the passage. There they had to emerge upon the great entrance-hall, where the light was still burning. Stella was all too eager to reach the dormitory, and it was her panicky rush for the stairs that caused disaster.

Her agitated movements made tell-tale sounds, and all at once a door somewhere on the ground-floor opened, and a voice spoke softly:

"Who is that? Is that one of the maids?"

Neither Betty nor her guilty companions dared answer, and before they could slip on up the stairs, the speaker glided into view.

Miss Redgrave!

"Oh!" she gasped, recoiling in amazement as she beheld three scholars in the act of ascending the first flight of stairs. "Three of my girls! But—but—Betty—all three of you—come here!"

There was nothing else to do but return downstairs, to stand before the astounded, horrified mistress.

"Betty, you must have slipped down to let in these two girls!"

"Yes, I—well, I felt I must!" gulped Betty.

"As to whether it was right or wrong of you to do such a thing," the youthful mistress said sternly, "I will leave the Headmistress to say in the morning. What I must have explained to me at once is this. Why is it that these two girls have come slinking home to the school at this late hour?"

She added, eyeing the culprits very sternly:

"Before Miss Somerfield went out for the evening, she told me that you two girls had obtained her permission to stay the night at Mrs. Lingard's home in Barncombe. Well, then—why this?"

Then Audrey took her desperate chance.

"If you please, Miss Redgrave, we found it was not exactly convenient for us to stay, after all! It was a mistake to think of spending the night there. I'm sorry—"

"So am I, Miss Redgrave!" blurted out Stella abjectly. "I am awfully sorry, please!"

"You decided to come away?"

"Yes, we—we—"

"Well," said Miss Redgrave, "you had better go up, and I will report the matter, and give the explanation to the Headmistress in the morning. Betty—"

"Yes, Miss Redgrave?"

"I take it that you knew Audrey and Stella were to have stayed the night at Mrs. Lingard's, and when you saw them coming back in the moonlight, you merely wished to let them in without other people being roused?"

Incredible luck! That was what it seemed to all three girls. To be waved towards the stairs with that even-tempered "Good-night!" as if nothing more was ever to be heard of the business!

Betty—in a way, yes, she was just as relieved as the culprits, although she burned with indignation at the brazen impudence with which Audrey had faced things out.

So intense was Betty's disgust, she put herself in advance of the two girls, rather than have them start talking to her.

False to poor Jess, whose sad misfortune they had merely used to their own selfish advantage; false to the Headmistress—false to all! Nothing but deceit and trickery all along the line! Oh, was Betty's disgusted thought, as she reached the dormitory, if ever a pair of girls deserved expulsion, surely Stella and Audrey did!

But they had evaded the consequences of their day's breach of faith and violation of discipline, and Betty was sure that she had only to look round now to see both girls come swaggering into the moonlit dormitory.

There, however, Betty was mistaken.

She did not know it, but Audrey and Stella knew—they were not out of the wood, even now!

In vain was Audrey trying to allay her fellow culprit's dread by whispering:

"It is all right, Stella! We shall never be found out now!"

Even as Audrey spoke the words, just outside the Fourth Form dormitory, she herself was secretly trembling with dread—dread of the morning, and of what might yet come to light!

And, what was the husky whisper which Stella was voicing, whilst she shook from head to foot?

"Oh, Audrey—Audrey, I am sorry we ever did it! I am so afraid! For, supposing Miss Somerfield has got to know that your motor-cycle is at the Calhobys'!"

With that fear still weighing upon their guilty hearts and minds, Audrey and Stella got to their beds at last, and for hours after they still remained awake, wondering—fearing—was expulsion yet to be their fate?

(END OF THIS WEEK'S STORY.)

(And what is to be their fate? Certainly they deserve to be expelled, for such girls bring no credit to a school! But Audrey is artful and may yet save herself and the girl she has led astray. On no account must you miss next week's splendid long complete story of Marcové School entitled: "The Fourth Form Runaway!")

ANSWERS
EVERY MONDAY...PRICE 2: