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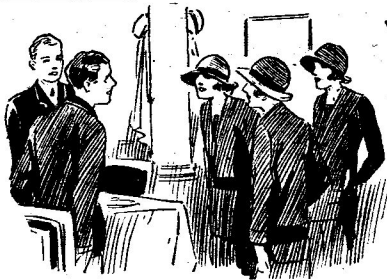


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THE 'MUDDLER' OF MORCOVE!

By MARJORIE STANTON.

Morcove School, under the regime of the new headmistress, is going from bad to worse! The chums of the Fourth do their best to prevent the school going entirely to ruin, but they are up against a harder task than they imagine. What the task is you will learn when you read this grand complete story.

The Chums Take Advice.

"TELEGRAM—" "For me?" guessed Polly Linton, making an excited dart at the parlour-maid who had suddenly appeared in Study 12's doorway. "I'm expecting one from—"

"Yes, miss, for you." "Oh, thanks! We know who this is from, don't we, girls?"

"From your people, ordering you to leave Morcove School at once!" Betty Barton jested, rather grimly, and Polly protested, whilst she ripped open the buff-coloured missive:

"Don't say such things, Betty! No, this from— It is, it is—hurrah—from my brother Jack!"

"Bai Jove, haow gwatifying!" was Paula Creel's beaming comment from the depths of an armchair. "I think you were wise, Polly, deah, to wite and tell him about—"

"Listen, all! Oh, I say! Jack says in this tally-wag that he'll be at the Barncombe Creamery at four o'clock this afternoon!"

Polly screwed the "flimsy" into a ball, which she aimed at Paula, whilst at the very same instant Naomer Nakara dashed at that oft-teased duffer of the Fourth Form, to haul her up from the chair.

"Naow then, Naomer! Careful, careful! My fwock—"

"Queek, queek, for eet is past ze three o'clock now!" clamoured the dusky one. "We shall be late, and all ze ices melt that Jack is going to order!"

"Ices, this time of year!" laughed Helen Craig. "But I believe you would eat ices in a snowstorm, Naomer!"

"Ooo, yes! I love him—how they make him at Barncombe!" Naomer said, smacking her lips. "Or perhaps eet will be ze cream-bun? No matter, I love him, too!"

"Haw, haw—ow!" Paula changed her pleasant simper into a wail of protest, as she was now propelled towards the corridor. "All wight, all wight, Naomer; I'll huwwy! Don't you suppose I'm as eager as any of you to get an afternoon cup at the Cweamewy?"

The voices of teaser and teased died away in the passage, whilst those other girls who did not really

belong to Study 12 promised Betty and Polly to be ready in "two ticks."

Polly glanced to the window.

"Macs., I suppose, although it isn't raining at present! What with the weather of late, Betty, and the school half empty, my word, I shall be glad of the cheer-up it means to meet my brother! Wonder if Dave Lawdor will be with him?"

"Somehow, I fancy he will, Polly."

"So do I!" that madcap suddenly declared blithely. "They've both got motor-bikes."

And, sure enough, there were two motor-bicycles stabled in the little courtyard adjoining the Barncombe Creamery, where Betty & Co., just after four o'clock, deposited their own "push-bikes."

As the girls trooped into the teashop two public schoolboys stood up at the large table which had been reserved for the party. Jack Linton chose to look very aggrieved.

"You're late!" he grumbled. "I do think, when Dave and I give up a footer match so as to respond to your appeal for a little sound advice, you might be punctual!"

This being received with bland looks and smiles, he further remarked huffily:

"Humph! Anyhow, whatever the trouble is at Morcove, you don't look bad on it! Shall we give 'em tea, Dave, or just a talking to?"

"Tea, bai Jove—a stwong cup, thanks!" Paula entreated before quiet Dave could answer.

"And ze cream-bun, please! Two for me!"

"Quiet, child!" Jack bade Naomer. "You confuse me. Let me see," he pursued, as the waitress came up. "Seven and two's nine. Tea for nine, miss, please, and I suppose these kids may be allowed—what shall we say? A plain bun, yes! Then you might bring a few lobster creams for me and my friend, and some of those fancy pastries."

"As I shall probably have to pay, let me order!" Polly interposed serenely. "You weren't going to pay, Jack?"

"Well, I'd rather thought of letting Dave do that!" the madcap's brother airily answered. "But you can, if you like, Polly."

"Tea and pastries for nine, please," Polly addressed the amused waitress sweetly. "And—Oh, you know, all the usual!"

"I am not sure that we ought to have come, Dave," doubted Jack, shaking his head. "Never can get Polly to behave in public. But look here—and don't eat lumps of sugar, Naomer! Be a good little girl and don't worry your Uncle Jack. What's wrong at Morcove, girls, that I had such a gloomy letter this morning from you, Polly?"

At that all seven girls sighed in no mock-serious way.

"To begin with, Jack," his sister began ruefully, "it's really no exaggeration what I said in my letter. The school is losing scholars every day."

"Only five girls left in the Sixth," remarked Helen Craig sadly.

"And our Form, the Fourth, is down to fourteen," was Betty's sorrowful rejoinder.

"Dweadful, dweadful!" lamented Paula, as she now finished tidying her hair. "Evevrything's gone wong. There's no contwol. I could wun the school bettah myself—yes, wather!"

"The Fifth Form—the only girls still left are those who treat it all as a joke," came from Polly.

"But why—why?" questioned Jack, after exchanging a look of genuine concern with Dave. "Morcove School—well, we all know that for years it has been the finest in the land!"

"And now it's worse than third rate, and, really, you can't wonder that some of those girls who loved it most have been glad to be taken away," sighed Polly. "You can't wonder, either, that as fast as parents find out they fetch their daughters home. I'm living in dread lest dad and mater suddenly wire for me!"

"As bad as that?" Jack exclaimed, raising his brows. "My word, what a change there must have been all at once!"

A necessary pause ensued, whilst the waitress set down the dainty tea-things and many a tempting platter.

"Yes," Polly resumed as soon as possible, "and all because the school governors took it into their heads to benefit Stormwood School at the expense of Morcove. We've lost Miss Somerfield and all the rest of the staff that built up Morcove, and we've got a new headmistress, new Form-mistresses, new matron—"

"Some of them not so bad," escaped Betty's lips. "Our Miss Allardyce, she's a ripper! But—"

"But," Polly again took up the talk, "of all the flighty, nervous, absent-minded, helpless muddlers, our new headmistress is the limit!"

Dave Lawder spoke at last in his usual quiet, earnest tone:

"We saw it in the paper about the robbery at your school a few nights ago. It certainly read as if Miss Danvers had been very careless for a headmistress. She had to admit, hadn't she, that she went up to bed that night leaving her ground-floor study window unfastened?"

The talk flowed on, Jack and Dave being given numerous examples of how Miss Danvers' inefficiency had told disastrously upon the school.

More in sorrow than scorn were Betty & Co. describing the fatal mismanagement of what used to be such a perfectly organised establishment. With their habitual love for fair play, they took care to credit the new headmistress with qualities that were likeable.

If mistakes were occurring, at least she was not trying to lay the blame on others. Nor had she once been known to lose her temper. It was certain, also, that she was a brilliant scholar, being entitled to write several degrees after her name.

Altogether, Jack and Dave gathered that Betty & Co. only wished that excuses could be found for

her utter failure up to now. The girls as good as declared that in a minor position Miss Danvers would have been a great success. But she was headmistress, and the multifarious responsibilities of that big post seemed to be more than she could manage.

"Nice state of things, I'm sure!" grimaced Jack, whilst he passed along some of the cups for Betty to replenish. "Anyhow, make a good tea, girls. Then you can go ahead and say what you want me and Dave to do about it all."

"Do?" echoed his sister witheringly. "What can we girls do, let alone you boys?"

"Oh, then, you're not going to ask me and Dave to run along to the school and give Miss Danvers a lecture?" grinned Jack.

"Now, don't be funny!" said Polly, at the same time forking a cream-bun on to her plate. "All I want out of you, Jack, is a bit of advice."

He shot his cuffs, then made pretence of twirling a moustache, with the result that half the girls nearly choked over their tea.

Polly took umbrage at that, and promptly addressed herself to Dave.

"My poor brother, alas, being in his usual idiotic state," she said sweetly, "perhaps you can say, Dave? If you were a girl at Morcove School—"

"Which, thank your stars, my son, you are not!" interjected Jack. "Tea up—yes, please, Betty!"

And he passed his cup. "Would you feel you ought to let your parents know, Dave?" Polly pursued, stonily ignoring her fun-loving brother. "Or would you feel it right to—well, just stick it out?"

"Your majesty, my lords, ladies and gentlemen, pray silence," quoted Jack pompously, "for the right horrible David Lawder!"

And he gave the table a whack with a spoon. "Give me the dagger—spoon," said Polly, taking it, and she fetched her facetious brother a rap over the knuckles with it. "You'd better not have come! Yes, Dave?"

"You'd better ask Jack."

"Good man!" exclaimed that youngster, fingering his tie. "Ahem! Well, then, I say, mum's the word. Writing home doesn't seem sporting. School going down? Stick together, then, and do all you can to get it up again. I have spoken! Finis! And what do I get? This last cream-bun, eh?"

He yanked it on to his plate, and Polly, suffering a sudden spasm of admiration for him, simply had not the heart to call him greedy. Instead, she gave a happy sigh.

"Thanks, Jack! I felt you would advise doing just what, as a matter of fact, I and the others had made up our minds to go on doing. But it's nice to have it from you."

For a good half-hour they sat over their tea, letting little touches of seriousness and sentiment mingle with much nonsense talk. Other subjects cropped up, but in the main the talk was of Morcove School in its present unhappy plight.

Jack and Dave, they were on such a brotherly footing with all the girls never did they all come together like this without a stirring of emotions lying deep down in the heart. And to-day, although Betty & Co. were not themselves in any serious position, they did feel greatly helped by this little consultation in the teashop.

It had been a real perplexity of late to know whether, after all, it was doing the wise thing to "carry on." So many other girls had decided that it was really better to "clear out."

The two lads were able to ride with the girls

as far as the school gates, for Morcove was not much out of the way back to their own big public school, twenty miles distant. As they all hopped down from the saddles at the Morcove gates, Jack peeped into the grounds, then exclaimed.

"My word, you do look deserted, to-day! Where's everybody?"

"Gone—or going!" grimaced Polly. "But we girls, anyhow, are not going!"

"Not if we can help it, no!" chimed in Betty stoutly. "Morcove did us well in the old days; we'll do our best for it now."

"Yes, wather! And, weally, it has been such a healp to see you this afternoon!" beamed Paula, as she took her turn at shaking hands with Jack and Dave. "I shan't be a bit depressed after this!"

But she was. So were they all as soon as Jack and Dave had phu-phutted away on their speedy motor-cycles.

Seven girls of Morcove School, wheeling their machines up the drive and round to the cycle-sheds, felt their spirits droop again, so lifeless indeed the once teeming place seemed.

Only one other member of the Fourth Form did they see as they finally made for the schoolhouse porch. That was handsome Cora Grandways, flaunting out to seek some spot where, no doubt, she could enjoy a cigarette on the quiet.

Then suddenly, just short of the schoolhouse entrance, Betty & Co. were rather startled to see a very stylish and beautiful lady come gliding forth into the open air, alone.

No parlour-maid attended her to the porch, which seemed to the girls very unusual. The young lady—she could not have been more than thirty—was a complete stranger to them, and somehow she did not look to be the mother of any scholar, come down to Morcove to-day for the same reason that so many other parents had paid surprise visits of late—because the school was in a bad way!

Who was she, then?

The girls were giving her an interested yet inoffensive glance, when the lady looked towards them, smiling. But they could not be sure whether she had started that smile for them or whether it was a sort of gratified smile with which she had come away from the school. Anyhow, it was not a pleasing smile.

She walked down the drive, and Betty & Co., as soon as they were indoors, might have dismissed her from their minds, but now a strange thing was to happen.

Barely had the chums got to Study 12 before someone appeared at the doorway. It was their Form-mistress, Miss Allardyce, and in a tense, eager tone she asked:

"You girls, did you see a young lady going away from the school a minute ago?"

"Yes—oh, yes!" they all exclaimed, looking amazed at the strange inquiry. "Why?"

Before answering, Miss Allardyce came into the study and closed the door behind her.

"There is something I want you girls to do for me, if you will—two or three of you, that is. The fewer the better."

"Yes?" they exclaimed again breathlessly.

There was a pause, as if Miss Allardyce were hesitating, after all, to state her wishes. Then, in a cautious whisper, she spoke again.

"I want you," she said impressively, "to follow up that woman—carefully, secretly—and find out where she goes!"

After Her!

STRANGE entreaty indeed for Miss Allardyce to have voiced!

No explanation, either, as to why she had come to Study 12 to make the request, one that had already resulted in Betty, Polly, Helen, and Madge making a hurried exit from the school!

Down the drive hastened these four girls, never doubting that one or another of them would soon be shadowing the woman.

She had had but a few minutes' start of them, and there was no reason to suppose that she had made haste to leave Morcove School behind her. Certain it was that she would never imagine anyone "scouting" after her.

Nor did the four chums feel uneasy when they got to the school gateway and were able to see nothing of her.



CAUGHT OUT! "Come here!" cried Miss Danvers to Betty and Polly. "What are you two girls doing here? What does it mean?" The two chums did not answer. What could they say when it meant dragging their Form mistress into the affair?

Guessing that she had gone one way or another along the high road, they promptly divided into couples, so as to make a simultaneous search in either direction.

Madge and Helen went to the right, working in the direction of a lonely part of the countryside seldom visited by the scholars. As for Betty and Polly, their route lay along the high road to Barncombe, every inch of it so familiar.

With their quarry still not in sight, Polly soon broke into talk as she and Betty footed it briskly along the road.

"But wasn't it an extraordinary thing for Miss Allardyce to ask us to do, Betty! Who is the woman, then?"

"That, I think, Miss Allardyce might have told us!" was Betty's dry rejoinder. "Or perhaps she herself doesn't know!"

"But she must know something," argued Polly. "I mean to say, it even looks as if she knows something against the woman. So I quite agree—she might have explained."

"What puzzles me even more is this," Betty resumed, after a brief pause. "Why on earth didn't Miss Allardyce follow up the woman herself?"

Polly stopped dead on the roadway, left agape by her chum's astute remark.

"Well, now you mention it, Betty, that is the strangest part about it! Oh, come on, and I do hope we spot the woman! Madge and Helen mustn't have the fun, the thrill, of tracking her down!"

Yet again shrewd Betty had a reasoned remark to make before the pair of them had gone another hundred yards.

"Polly, I'm thinking——"

"Yes, dear?"

"As to why Miss Allardyce herself did not scout after the woman. It may be that our Form-mistress would have had to let the headmistress know that she was going out in a hurry, and perhaps——"

"Betty, I see what you are driving at! Perhaps it didn't seem—— What's the word that Paula would have ready if she were here?"

"Expedient."

"Didn't seem expedient to Miss Allardyce to let Miss Danvers know that the woman should be watched. In which case—I say!" Polly rushed on, working herself into a great state of excitement. "In that case, the woman has something to do with Miss Danvers!"

"Anyhow, let's find her!"

"Betty, we must! If we don't, I shall feel——"

But Polly was never called upon to say how exasperated she would feel if they failed to get on the track of the mystery woman.

At that very instant both girls, cautiously rounding a bend in the road, saw the woman going on before them, a good distance ahead.

Polly breathed an exultant "Hurrah!"

She and Betty had stopped dead at sight of the distant figure. In a case like this there was nothing better than to let the person who was being shadowed keep well ahead, left in utter ignorance of how she was being followed.

"Now I wish Madge and Helen were with us!" deplored Polly, waiting during these few moments with Betty. "I feel it is going to be an adventure which they should be sharing. But we simply had to divide, in case—— Hallo! Betty, do you see?"

That last came from Polly with some excitable finger pointing, and Betty nodded. She, too, had suddenly realised that the woman was turning off the high road, to strike across open country.

A few moments more, and only the woman's head and shoulders were visible to the watching girls as she fared across the rough moorland, picking her way daintily amidst the gorse and bracken.

At such a late season of the year the yellowing fronds of the bracken were at their full height, and now Betty and Polly experienced an anxious pang as they hurried on again.

Unless they were pretty smart, they might easily find the woman giving them the slip amidst such deep cover as abounded on the moorland.

There was no talking now. Taking the bit of scouting as seriously as Miss Allardyce must have meant them to do, the two girls warily prowled across the moorland. If they lost the woman for a moment they felt another pang of dismay, whilst

a fresh sight of her head in the distance meant big breaths of relief.

At last Betty whispered:

"Where is she taking us, Polly? Going due south she is, and you know that the moorland gets lonelier and wilder the farther inland you get."

"It must be some short cut of hers—but where to?" wondered Polly. "Or is she keeping an appointment with someone out here on the lonely moor?"

Her chum looked over one shoulder at the western sky.

"It won't be long before the daylight gives out, Polly. The evenings do come on so early at this time of year."

Then, still looking slightly to the rear, she gave a smothered gasp.

"My goodness, Polly, look behind, over there! Our new headmistress!"

"And she has seen us!" was Polly's quick rejoinder, voiced in the very instant that she beheld Miss Danvers, and no other, passing through the waist-high bracken. "Oh, dear, she's making signs for us to go to her!"

Imperative though the beckoning gestures seemed to be, the two girls found themselves standing motionless.

The sudden appearance of their own headmistress as a darkly-clad figure, traversing such a desolate part of the moorland as this, it had left them completely staggered.

Could it be that she, seeing them go away from the school a while since, had set off to follow them? But why should she wish to follow them, unless, indeed, she had guessed that they intended to follow up the mystery woman?

Now, however, it flashed upon Betty and Polly that Miss Danvers did not appear to have followed them. She was not directly in their rear, but had come near them from quite a different angle.

Was it possible, then, that she herself had been going after the mystery woman, but was now stopped, simply because two of her scholars had cropped up, as it were, in her path?

"Polly, we've got to go to her," whispered Betty very uncomfortably. "I wouldn't be surprised if she is highly annoyed at our—well, butting in like this!"

"But we were asked by Miss Allardyce to follow that woman!"

"Yes! For goodness' sake, though, don't let's say anything about that, Polly! It might mean trouble for Miss Allardyce."

Polly's answer was a look which gave assurance that she was all in favour of keeping silent about Miss Allardyce. The two girls—with the mystery woman already vanished from their view, thanks to this stoppage—waded through a small expanse of heather to get to their headmistress, whose slim, dark form was sharply defined against the evening sky.

Stranger Still.

HER erect and rigid pose, the pallor and sternness of her thin, aristocratic face, the tight clenching of her hands, all this gave Betty and Polly, as they hurried towards Miss Danvers, a sense of her being greatly annoyed, if not furious.

"Yes, come here!" came the tense exclamation, in keeping with her highly-strung bearing. "What are you two girls doing here at a time like this? Tell me, what does it mean?"

"It is not yet time for us to be indoors, please," Betty ventured to say appeasingly. "We are not out of bounds, either."

"That is no answer!" flashed Miss Danvers, with such a kindling look as they had not thought her capable of giving.

The "muddler" of Morcove had been given credit for being, if anything, almost too mild.

"Well, what is the explanation?"

There was silence now. Betty and Polly were not going to explain, since it meant dragging Miss Allardyce into the affair. And it had suddenly occurred to them, rather joyfully, that Miss Danvers would not be able to press them with questions as to whether they had been tracking the mystery woman. If she did she would be giving away her own interest in that woman's movements, surely the last thing she wished to do!

That this was the case our two girls soon discovered. Miss Danvers, when she spoke again, seemed very anxious that they should not connect her presence on the open moorland with the other lady.

"It so happens that I—I came this way!" she exclaimed lamely. "The beauty and solitude of this moorland—and I am very fond of the country. But you two girls?"

"We are very fond of the country, too," Betty answered truthfully enough, "especially the scenery around Morcove."

Miss Danvers could not have been satisfied with that answer, but she was unable to cross-examine any further. With a sudden softened look, as if she regretted having betrayed such irritability, she signed to the girls to walk with her.

"You must come back to the school now," came in a far gentler voice. "The sun has set, and the twilight does not last long at this time of the year."

Half a minute later she cast a glance behind her, in what was the probable direction that the mystery woman had taken. In doing this Miss Danvers pursed her lips, as the girls noticed, as if angry with herself at yielding to the desire to look back.

Thereafter it was a strange walk for two scholars to be making with a headmistress. She seemed to be no longer angry with them, and yet there was tense silence.

No talk of school doings enlivened the way. Betty and Polly thought of the numberless occasions on which, having fallen in with Miss Somerfield during a ramble, they had wandered back with her, in happy conversation about school work, games, and so on. But this new headmistress—

Silently she stepped along with them, puckering or biting her lips, as if her stress of mind were great. In the twilight, she became a pale, almost tragic figure for Betty and Polly to have stalking beside them. What to make of her they knew not. There was something about her that they liked, and yet—

How could they forget that here was the person primarily responsible for Morcove's sudden ruinous state? If she, the new headmistress, had been equal to her task, those serving under her would never have made such a hash of things.

They were not all muddlers who had been engaged to form the entirely new staff. Miss Allardyce—there was a capable young lady, right enough. And Miss Prosser, of the Fifth Form—if anything, she erred on the side of masterfulness. But so long as the school had a principal who was not functioning nothing could go right.

Uneasily they wondered how she would dismiss them at the school porch. Would she have thought out some way of pressing for an explanation without betraying what her own intentions had been?

Still worse, would she place them under such orders as would forbid their doing any more "scouting"?

It was getting dark, under a fast-clouding sky, when at last the embarrassing walk ended at the schoolhouse porch. Miss Danvers halted, and, of course, Betty and Polly did the same, thinking: "Now for it!"

But for a moment or so the new headmistress stood mute and still, and during that painful pause Betty and Polly got the impression of her being intensely sad, worried, hard-driven.

Then suddenly she went from them, without having said one word.

She was gone from them, as if far too worried to bother about them any more, and they thought they heard a deep sigh or two attend her weary drifting away.

A Little Peace for Paula.

"WELL, girls, now you've heard all about it, I suppose Polly and I had better go and report to Miss Allardyce!"

Thus Betty, ten minutes later, in Study 12.

She and Polly had found Madge, Tess, and Helen on hand when they got upstairs. Madge and Helen had got back from their bit of scouting, feeling that they alone were the unlucky ones. Now they could sympathise with Betty and Polly at the way in which, when the mystery woman was actually being followed up, the bit of amateur detective work had been frustrated.

"Wonder what Miss Allardyce will say?" exclaimed Helen.

"I wonder!" echoed Betty glumly. "By the way, where's Paula?"

"There's been a bit of a rumpus between Paula and Naomer!" grinned Tess. "I believe Paula, in quest of peace and quietness, has decided to occupy one of the studies that are 'to let.'"

"Oh!" laughed Betty and Polly as they went out, and on the way past one of the vacant studies they were induced to investigate, hearing certain sounds that told of Paula's presence in there.

"Hallo!" chuckled Polly, as she and Betty looked into the room to find Paula lying back in an arm-chair, with cushions heaped behind her and both feet extended to an ordinary chair. "Comfy?"

"Yes, wather! At last, geals! Bai Jove, this has pproved a gweat inspiwation! No more twying to put up with that fwisky Naomer. In future, beamed Paula, without bestirring herself, "I pwopose to weside here on my own!"

"Dear, dear, we shall miss you!" sighed Polly. "Is that really your decision, Paula?"

"I gweatly wegwet that it is my inflexible wesolve," said the elegant one, with extreme feeling. "It may seem wather cwuel of me to withdwaw my company fwom your society. Howevah, my life cannot go on being wendered unbeawable. The stwain is too tewwific. Pway close the door gently when you wetire, geals!"

"This," said Polly, "is tragic!"

"Weal," sighed Paula, "I must wemind you, Polly, you yourself have often dwiven me to distwaction. But do not think that this is a quawwel. No, no! At all times I shall be pwepared to weceive you in my new study."

"Oh, thank you so much!"

"And if evah," continued Paula, shaking up a cushion—"if evah you should wish to consult me, pway dwop in!"

"We will, certainly!" Betty said blandly.

And she and Polly went on their way, bubbling over with merriment.

"What a scream!" commented Polly. "I can



SURPRISING THE GOVERNORS!

The school governors broke off their conversation as they caught sight of the girls with the valuables which had been stolen from the school. "Er—where did you get those?" gasped the chairman.

just imagine how long Paula will enjoy her splendid solitude. She'll have the 'howwows' in next to no time, with the school as quiet and half empty as it is."

Now that the desolate air of the place had been alluded to, both girls felt another sudden lapse of spirits. So strange and sad, so incredible, it seemed, to be passing to Miss Allardyce's room, on a floor below, and meeting no one, hearing hardly a sound!

Betty's gentle tap brought Miss Allardyce to the door, which she flashed open with all the eagerness of one who had been waiting in suspense.

"Yes, girls, how did you get on?" she asked, even as she signed to the girls to enter. "Did you do any good?"

Next moment her face was falling as the two chums blurted out, almost in one sentence, what had happened. As the Form-mistress listened to the rueful report, she brought her hands together and held them clasped dismayedly.

"How unfortunate—oh, how very unfortunate!" was her exclamation. "But you could not help it, of course. And I never dreamed that Miss Danvers would go out like that. She was still indoors when you went off—that I know. She must have rushed away a minute after."

After an agitated turn about the room, Miss Allardyce gave the two girls a look of friendly concern.

"I hope you have not got into Miss Danvers' bad books over this," she murmured uneasily. "If so, I must go to her and—make a clean breast of my part in the matter."

"Miss Allardyce—no, please!" both girls exclaimed as with one voice. "We have managed

not to let her know that you—you sent us on that bit of 'scouting.'"

"And," Polly added eagerly, "her anger soon passed. You know what Miss Danvers is—not the one to be very severe."

It was as if a light had shone across Miss Allardyce's face, and then suddenly it seemed to cloud over with trouble.

"Perhaps I do know what Miss Danvers is—better than any of you scholars," she exclaimed softly, "better than any of my colleagues! I say it in fairness to them and to Miss Danvers herself. You two girls, shall I tell you something?"

"Oh, yes, do," they breathed together again eagerly, "if it is anything that will help to—account for the way things have gone!"

"I feel I must speak out," Miss Allardyce said, rather hoarsely. "You are girls who have loved and taken a pride in this fine school. You must be heartbroken, I am sure, at the way it has gone down rapidly. I am not talking treason against my superior, Miss Danvers. I am only feeling my way to asking you to believe—"

"Yes, what?"

"Something that, unfortunately, cannot be proved at present, but it is this," the Form-mistress continued in a confiding whisper. "If only Miss Danvers were having a fair chance, she would do wonders at Morcove! I am sure of it. I am the only one who knows how perfectly justified the governors were in engaging her, what great talents she has. But she has not, since the term began, had a fair chance."

"And why?" broke from Polly eagerly. "Now and then we have wondered how the governors could have been so mistaken in her. But you say that they were not?"

"No, they were not!" insisted Miss Allardyce vehemently. "Only they are going to believe that they must have been!"

She wrung her hands again.

"Oh, it is awful! In confidence, I may tell you that the governors are coming down to hold an investigation. Miss Danvers—how she will emerge from the inquiry I dread to think!"

"Yet, if you know there is a good excuse to be found for her," began Betty wistfully, "couldn't you—"

"Put in a word for her?" chimed in Polly. "Couldn't we?"

Again the bright look passed across Miss Allardyce's face. She was sensing these two girls' sudden heartwhole support for the new head-mistress, the readiness to take her on trust.

"If only it were possible!" the Form-mistress answered emotionally. "But the governors will look to Miss Danvers to defend herself, and I am certain she will be unable to do so. There is something, a secret trouble, which she dare confide to no one."

Miss Allardyce added sadly:

"As for me, I am in the awkward position of one who is trying to get at the heart of a mysterious state of affairs which does not concern me, except that it concerns the welfare of the school."

"Well, if that isn't good enough excuse for trying to find out, I don't know what is!" came Polly's impetuous rejoinder. "After this, Betty and I mean to do what we can—"

"And if we have the luck to see that lady again, we shall follow her up!" Betty struck in resolutely. "For we take it that that may help you to help Miss Danvers?"

"I feel sure it will, girls," was the impressive answer. "Listen to one last word, and then you

must go. Any information concerning that woman, or—"

She paused for a moment. Then:

"I think you remember, on the day Morcove School reopened, yours was the very car that nearly ran down a man at the gates? It was his own carelessness—"

"Yes, we do remember quite well!" exclaimed Betty. "He behaved very nastily to the chauffeur, and we thought him a shady sort of fellow."

Miss Allardyce suddenly advanced a step and spoke in a deep whisper.

"Watch out for that man as well as for the woman," she counselled the girls. "Whatever you find out about either, let me know. Can I trust you to do that, girls, on the quiet?"

"Yes—yes, certainly!"

"Then I trust you!" was the almost solemn phrase with which the youthful mistress attended both girls to the door.

Next second they were on their way back to the Fourth Form quarters, suddenly realising that once again they had been asked to do something for Miss Allardyce without being given any real reason. It was rather trying, but was it not simply because she herself was working in the dark?

Back in Study 12, they found Madge, Helen, Tess, and Naomer all waiting to hear how the interview had gone off. But Betty and Polly had only just begun to gratify the others' curiosity when Paula Creel showed her pretty but troubled countenance round the edge of the door.

"Hallo!" Polly greeted the amiable duffer. "Thought you had a study of your own now?"

"Yes, wather! And it's weally most peaceful, bai Jove! Howevah, I wondah, geals, could you spare a minute?"

"What for?"

"I don't know if it's a mouse or a wat or what," said Paula, "but in my study—being wather quiet, you know—there are little cweakings now and then. I—er—I'm not afwaid, but I would like the noises investigated."

"Then you jolly well go and investigate them yourself!" shouted Polly, gaily hurling a cushion.

"Out of here!"

"Ooo, yes; queek—queek!"

"But—Ow!"

Slam!

And Paula presumably went back to the repose of her own new study, for nothing more was heard of her during the next ten minutes.

Betty and Polly repeated the talk that had taken place with Miss Allardyce, and they were all debating the puzzling aspects of the case when suddenly their minds were switched back to Paula.

"Hark!"

A very dismal groan had been heard, emanating from a study a few doors off.

Chuckling with anticipation, they made a rush for the room in question. Polly, leading, sent the door wide open, then stood still to explode with laughter, in which her chums instantly joined her.

"Ha, ha, ha! Ha, ha, ha!"

"He, he, he!" capered Naomer.

"Healp!" Howwows! Oh, geals," gasped Paula, now that she had managed to claw unfolding blankets from about her head, "what was it?"

"What was what, duffer?"

"Don't you wealise I have been the victim of a most we remarkable occuwence?" palpitated the ruffled one. "This study—"

"So peaceful, so reposeful!"

"Nothing of the sort, and I've had enough of it!" declared Paula, flouncing to her feet. "It's too cweepy for me. I was weclining theah in that

armcheah. Nothing was to be heard but a mysterious bweathing sound—under the table, I thought. But when I looked—"

"Yes, when you looked?"

"It was not theah. On the contwawy, what do you think happened?"

Polly hazarded a guess.

"A couple of blankets were suddenly thrown over your head. You were tipped back into the armchair."

"I was pweecipitated with extweme violence, let me tell you!"

"No doubt! Those Fifth Form girls would not mind doing it thoroughly!" laughed Betty. "Oh, Paula, why did you ever forsake our company?"

"Fifth Form geals? Bai Jove, so—so that is the explanation!" cried Paula, sweeping a hand across her forehead. "You know, the whole thing awose in such a we remarkable way—in fact, without warning!"

"It would!" chuckled Polly. "Nice thing you've done, allowing the Fifth to make a laughing-stock of you! After this, Paula, you must not be allowed out alone. Your place is in Study 12."

"Ooo, yes; queek—queek! He, he, he!"

And Paula now found that the teasing solicitude of her friends was hardly less flustering than the late "japing" of her by the two Fifth Form girls who must have been concealed in the study.

Paula by the time she had been accommodated in her usual armchair in Study 12 was limp, breathless, and ruffled. One feeble attempt she made to filch out her pocket-comb and mirror, but the effort was beyond her. And so Polly and Naomer, still so anxious for her well-being, kindly put her through an alleged tidying-up process, from which operation the long-suffering victim emerged with more hair over her eyes than ever.

"Ha, ha, ha!"



TO SHOW HER GRATITUDE! Silently Betty watched the headmistress from her bed. From one sleeping chum to another the new headmistress went, bedding over each girl to kiss her lightly in her sleep!

"Dweadful, dweadful! Dwoop it!"

"Well, we will, Paula, darling!" Polly bleated at last. "You must forgive us. The present state of the school is so inclined to give one the hump, one simply must break out sometimes!"

"I gwant you there has been a large depwession—er—centwing over Morcove. Yes, wather! I have felt it, geals. And what I say is"—Paula suddenly beamed—"let us hang together!"

"But a while back you talked of keeping to yourself!" they reminded her.

"I do not pwecisely wecollect using that expwession, geals—no! I— Yes, wather! A study to wetire to occasionally, just occasionally, that was more my idea—what? But, of course"—Paula beamed, settling herself very comfortably—"I could not dweam of wobbing you of my company! Wather not, bai Jove! As for those Fifth Form geals, I twust that their wecent wough tweatment of me, Betty, deah, will be the subject of a pwotest."

"We'll do more than protest," said Betty.

And so they did.

On the way up to bed that night the chums of Study 12 made a great capture. The leading spirit of the enemy faction in the Fifth Form was finally shot into her own dormitory, nicely "guyed up."

This achievement was timed so accurately that the Fifth had no chance of retaliating there and then. They could only vow vengeance at some future date, the earlier the better.

But the certainty that their ancient rivals had registered such a fierce resolve did not trouble Betty & Co.

In a dormitory that had so many beds unoccupied these nights, alas, they laid themselves down to rest. And after their little interlude of fun they all found themselves prone enough to start wondering again—what was at the bottom of Miss Danvers' disastrous failure as a headmistress?

Above all, what would be the outcome of the school governors' coming inquiry into the grave state of affairs?

Dismissal for Miss Danvers?

SAD it was for Betty, a day or two later, to have to send a note to the Fourth Form captain of Barncombe House School, "scratching" the return hockey match that should have been played next "halfer."

But there was no help for it.

The only important fixture which Betty's team had played this term had been almost a fiasco.

Such was one depressing result of the school being in a muddled state and so largely depleted.

It had now become impossible for the Fourth Form at Morcove to put a creditable team in the field. But this was not all.

Betty and her chums could not help feeling that visitors in the way of hockey teams from other schools were best avoided at present. The match in question was a home fixture for Morcove, and the girls were simply ashamed to have Miriam Haste and her chums coming here to observe the prevailing state of chaos.

So Betty posted a frank and regretful letter which drew a most chummy answer by return of post from Miriam Haste.

That girl must have tried her hardest to write a kind letter, but the well-meant phrase "I quite understand, Betty!" gave the latter girl a stab of pain.

No doubt, Miriam Haste did understand! The sad thing was that Morcove's rapid decline this term had become the gossip of the entire district.

"How I wish it could have been possible for us

to let Miriam come over with her team!" Betty exclaimed mournfully to Polly, folding away the Barncombe captain's letter. "But we have really got down to the stage when a team cannot be mustered."

"Besides," added Polly, looking anything but the madcap just at present, "the day for that match happens to be the very day on which the school governors are holding their inquiry!"

Tess Trelawney, looking up from one of those numerous pencil-sketches which so often occupied her spare minutes, joined in the talk.

"I am sure it was right to wash out the match," she agreed. "We didn't want Miriam and the others to be here when perhaps the news flew around that our headmistress had got the sack!"

Then Madge looked round, where she was standing pensively at the study window.

"I wonder if it will come to that," she exclaimed sadly—"the sack for Miss Danvers? Well, I for one am going to feel awfully upset if that happens. Somehow—"

"Yes, wather!" came Paula's opportune cry of agreement, as she suddenly floated in. "Ah, geals, what a thing it is that we are still hanging together! Such a welief to know that one can always find a few fwiends in Study 12!"

And she sat down—no need to say where! The others exchanged sudden smiles, but they did not comment on Paula's greater liking than ever for Study 12 ever since she had sampled the doubtful delights of a study to herself.

Naomer frisked in, and Helen followed, with the result that the talk turned upon the coming "halfer" and how best to spend it.

Wet or fine, it seemed almost imperative to Betty & Co. that they should get away from the school on the day that had been fixed for the governors' meeting.

There was the uncomfortable feeling that a big row was coming off, so no wonder the girls preferred to keep out of the way. For all they knew, the governors might be inclined to call upon some of the scholars to give evidence, and that sort of thing was dead against the chums' fancy.

It was just after morning school on the fatal day that several cars drove up, setting down this and that august member of the board of governors, and Betty & Co. were by no means the only scholars to make themselves scarce.

The distinguished visitors were, it was understood, to partake of luncheon before starting their grave proceedings. Whether that lunch in itself would satisfy them that Morcove had got into a thoroughly low state was a question the chums glumly debated.

It was certain that the catering as a whole at present was still very haphazard. In other words, the threatened appearance of the governors upon the scene had not enabled Miss Danvers to pull herself together and look into things.

If anything, she had gone to pieces worse than ever, and her attempts to function in her very responsible position had been so spasmodic that those under her had been kept in just the same state of indecision and fluster.

More and more Betty & Co. were inclined to make allowances for Miss Danvers' failure, in the belief that she was a woman utterly distraught by some secret trouble. Nor did they fail to give her credit for one thing. That was that she had never once tried to excuse her failure on the grounds of ill-health.

To the chums this seemed to argue a very straight nature, opposed to a cowardly casting about for lame excuses.

They did not see anything of the new headmistress between midday and two o'clock, when they all hastened away from the school. But as they were going from the schoolhouse Miss Allardyce went by, and they thought how very worried she looked.

Not a word passed, and it was only the faintest of smiles that she was able to call up.

"Oh, dear," sighed Polly, walking down the drive with her chums, "I shall almost dread coming back later on! To think that we may find a notice on the board announcing Miss Danvers' dismissal!"

"Dreadful, dreadful!" lamented Paula, although as she stepped along so sprucely she did not look as if her spirits were at a very low ebb. "That will mean another wretched change, *hai* Jove!"

"And who will be the next headmistress?" wondered Helen. "It isn't every day the governors can find a headmistress like Miss Somerfield."

"I don't know what to say!" exclaimed Madge in her sober tone. "I would love to see Miss Somerfield and all the old staff back again, and yet—"

"My feeling exactly!" put in Betty perplexedly. "How can any of us want to see Miss Danvers sacked on the spot?"

"I believe that all the girls who have hung on feel she is more to be pitied than blamed," said Tess—"except Cora Grandways."

"Oh, Cora!" grimaced Polly.

And then Betty chimed in:

"Just fancy Cora's hanging about, as we saw her doing before dinner, trying to put herself in the way of the governors when they were sauntering round the place! She'd like to give evidence, I know!"

"And not in favour of Miss Danvers, either!" was Helen's scornful rejoinder. "Anything but!"

Thus the uneasy talk went on whilst the chums, passing out by the school gates, fared away on the lengthy ramble which they had decided to make.

Nor was it by any means an aimless afternoon which lay before them.

They were not forgetting that this was a chance for them to keep their eyes open for those two persons about whom Miss Allardyce desired information. If only the chums could have the luck this afternoon to see either the mystery woman or the mystery man, they would know what to do.

But some scouting over the moorland, with the one idea of perhaps encountering the mystery woman in the locality where they had last seen her, it proved a disappointment.

For a couple of hours on end Betty & Co. scoured that part of the countryside, and not a soul did they encounter. By four o'clock they were in such a weary state as would have made them on any other afternoon take the shortest cut back to school—and tea!

Even Paula Creel, however, was reluctant to go back at present. No, the return to school was a painful necessity which must at least be deferred for as long as possible.

"Anyhow, I tell you what!" proposed Betty. "Let's take it slowly, by going down the cliff-path near the bungalow and then working along the shore."

"Ooo, yes; queek—queek!"

"We can't do better," agreed Polly, whilst the others murmured to the same effect. "Come on, then!"

This decision to go the roundabout way home

was likely to keep them out a good deal longer. From where the chums set off it took them fully half an hour even to come nigh the little bungalow which adorned the headland about a mile or more from the school. As they skirted the grounds of this lonely dwelling, they saw that the "To let, furnished" board was still up, bearing an agent's address in Barncombe. The owner of the place looked like having it on his hands for some time, now that the holiday season was past.

By the steep zigzag path down the cliffs, so often used by the girls, they descended to the shore, where a fine sea was booming along the shingle, expanses of foam marking the rocky shallows.

A stiff wind was blowing, and now and then the spray, as fine as a drizzle, damped the girls' cheeks. Out came Naomer's pocket-handkerchief, the usual repository for those seashore finds which she never could resist taking back with her to the school. And, with the usual dismay, poor Paula beheld her study mate swiftly acquiring baby crabs, which were certain to escape from Naomer's so-called aquarium—a bowl of sea-water, which was always getting upset.

Little did Naomer or any of them dream what the finds were to be this afternoon to be taken home with them to Morcove School.

Hidden—by Whom ?

THE tide was running high, and so they had to keep close against the base of the steep cliffs. In this way they very soon brushed past the lattice-gates that rendered the seashore cave under the bungalow headland a private boat-house.

Never could Betty & Co. come by this romantic cavern without pausing to look through the wooden bars of the two great gates. This afternoon they stood to peer into the dim, cool recesses of the cavern, seeing the boat that "went" with Cliff Edge Bungalow laid up on greased blocks.

"Jolly convenient place, that it is, for anyone renting the bungalow," remarked Polly. "Not bad to get a boat thrown in with the place you are renting!"

"Yet no one is renting the bungalow now, and I suppose it will stay empty until next spring," said Betty. "Sad to see the house on the cliff all locked up and empty, and this cave padlocked and chained. Hallo, though! Ought this to be, girls?"

That wondering exclamation came as Betty, fingering the large padlock, found the ring hasp drawing open, letting the chain ends free.

There was a moment's silence amongst the girls as they all stared at the open padlock in Betty's hands and at the chains dangling free.

"No, that doesn't seem right!" exclaimed Polly. "We know that when the bungalow is standing empty this cave is always kept fastened up. I wonder if the agents in Barncombe know?"

"I say! This padlock!" burst from Betty, now that she was examining it. "I do believe it has been forced open! It doesn't show very much, but if you look closely— Yes, someone has forced it!"

"So as to break into the cave?" was Polly's excited rejoinder. "Shall we take a look round, then, inside, to see if anything has been stolen?"

"We would soon know," murmured Helen. "No harm, anyhow."

"The agents might be grateful if we dropped them a line by-and-by," Betty said, setting open one of the lattice-gates. "We will just have a look round."

And in they went, instantly coming under the chilly influence of the dim cavern, where their voices rumbled hollowly.

So far as they could tell, nothing had been taken from the stout old boat. They went on further, however, determined to look into the long wooden box which served as a locker at the far end of the cave.

Then it was that Polly noticed a little circumstance which the others were going to overlook.

"Queer!" she suddenly exclaimed, stopping dead in front of the locker. "Look at this oblong patch of sand, girls, pressed flat and hard, just as if the locker had been stood there for a time and then lifted back!"

"Well, to be sure——"

"Bai Jove!"

"It is rather strange, that," nodded Betty, "and it looks as if it had been done just recently."

"Within the last week or two, anyhow," declared Helen. "Yet the bungalow has been up 'to let' since the end of the summer."

"This, on top of the forced padlock!" put in Tess. "I mean to say——"

"Yes, wather!"

"Let's think," proposed Polly. "Why would the locker be lifted out on to the soft sand of the cave floor and then lifted back? Could it be—— But, of course, it must have been for that reason! Somebody wanted to hide something underneath the very spot that is covered by the locker!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Then supposing we lift the locker away and look!" exclaimed Betty. "No harm!"

"Ooo, yes; queek—queek!"

In a flash two of them at either end were starting to shift the locker away from its normal position against the rocky wall of the cave. Great exertion was needed, for the long box was full of tackle, which the girls did not care about removing.

"Depend upon it," Polly panted, whilst she helped in the dislodgement, "no one has broken into the cavern to steal anything—only to *hide* something!"

"And a jolly secure hiding-place it must have seemed!" puffed Betty. "Only we have chanced to—— Yes, heave again! That's the way!"

"And again!" gasped Polly joyously. "Good!"

Hot and breathless, the four straightened up now that the long box had been shifted far enough. Where it had been standing the dry sand was, of course, pressed flat and hard. But was there only sand in that spot?

Betty & Co. had their doubts.

After one flick at her hair, Polly dropped to her knees and began to scoop away the pressed sand. As many of her chums as could conveniently join in the work did so. In a brace of seconds five or six of them were all kneeling there, scooping and scraping carefully, eagerly, feeling sure that something was going to be unearthed.

Suddenly Polly gave a shout that rang loudly in the dim cavern:

"Hurrah! I say, my hands are on to something! I can feel—— Wait a bit!"

She scooped again, then fairly yelled:

"Girls, look here—look!"

Up she sprang, both hands clutching the find. And, dim as was the light at that remote end of the cave, at a glance they all recognised it. A handsome vase of solid gold—one they should indeed have recognised as quickly as they had, for it was one belonging to Morcove School!

"The Temperlev Trophy!" they gasped

astoundedly. "One of the valuables stolen from the school a few nights ago!"

"Bai Jove! My gwacious!"

"Then is the other stuff here—is it?" clamoured Polly. "Oh, carry on, some of you! Dig away!"

"Ooo, yes; queek—queek!"

"Yes, wather!" beamed Paula, making it her restful task to hold the trophy whilst Polly dropped down again and joined in the further search.

At every second moment after that some valuable article or other came to light.

A more thrilling discovery Betty & Co. had never made.

Within five minutes they had unearthed every one of the missing items!

There they all stood now, mostly with loaded arms. Gold and silver, it gleamed and shimmered in the dim light, whilst they stood drawing breath after the exciting work. But neither gold nor silver sparkled brighter than Betty & Co's own delighted eyes.

"Wonderful find!"

"Yes, wather! Geals, geals——"

"But who was the thief? That is still a mystery!" cried Helen.

"One thing at a time!" chuckled Polly. "This afternoon we have found the stolen things. With luck, we may yet discover the thief. But now to get along to the school!"

"Ooo, yes; queek—queek!"

And twenty minutes later the news was spreading like wildfire through the place.

The chums of Study 12 had come home in triumph, bringing back every bit of the booty with which the unknown thief had made off a few nights ago!

Their Reward!

"WHAT'S that you are saying? Betty & Co. have found the stolen articles? Get out!"

Cora Grandways derided the girl who had just imparted the news.

"But it's true! If you don't believe it, go and see!"

Cora, of course, knew that there must be something in the sensational report. Her derision was simply the outcome of the old malice against Study 12. She did not run away, as others were doing, to meet Betty & Co. as they came into the schoolhouse with the valuables. Instead, she stamped about in the Fourth Form corridor in a sudden passion.

"Bother those Study 12 girls! Just the sort of thing they would do!" she fumed disgustedly. "But, anyhow, they won't get made a fuss of, for far too much else is happening just at present—the sack for Miss Danvers, for one thing!"

That deplorable result of the governors' inquiry had, indeed, leaked out by now.

Miss Danvers was to leave!

Even as Betty & Co. came rushing to the schoolhouse with the recovered loot, their joy was suddenly dashed by what they were told. Verdict, unanimous! The school governors recognised that Miss Danvers had been nothing but a muddler from first to last, and she was to go—at once!

Their schoolfellows' congratulations over the great find were wasted upon Betty & Co. after that. It was only an annoyance to be mobbed around by twenty or thirty girls, all firing off questions as to where the loot had been discovered, and had the chums found out who was the thief?

"Miss Allardyce—where is she?" pleaded Betty. "You tell us that, girls, and we'll be grateful. At a time like this it is no good our reporting to poor Miss Danvers."

"Poor Miss Danvers—pooh!" jeered Cora, suddenly joining the crowd, and Polly turned upon the malicious one fiercely.

"Yes, poor Miss Danvers!" repeated Polly hotly. "For we girls feel sorry for her, anyhow, and—"

"Sh!" was the sudden warning whisper from a number of scholars, as the opening of a door let out deep, masculine voices. "The governors!"

Rather pompously, the half-dozen directors of the school were emerging, in talkative couples, from the room where the fatal conclave had been held. At sight of them some of the girls faded away. Others, on the contrary, were all eagerness to see the staggering effect that the sight of Betty & Co., with all the gold and silver trophies and other valuables, would have upon the governors.

One portly gentleman, the chairman, was making some smiling remark to a companion. Evidently they both felt how their august presence was subduing the scholars. And then suddenly the chairman broke off in his talk and stood open-mouthed.

"You have found them—you? But where?"

The chairman turned ponderously to gather his equally astounded fellow-governors behind him.

"What do you think of this?" he cried. "These youngsters—see what they have here!"

"Amazing!" gasped one. "Incredible!" exclaimed others.

"We have yet to hear your explanation, young ladies, as to how you have recovered these valuables," resumed the chairman, his smile causing a fold in his round chin. "But one thing is obvious. The school is under a great debt of gratitude to you! I myself, as governor—"

He coughed richly.

"Yes, as chairman of the governing body, I shall find it hard to express my personal gratitude to you girls. Splendid of you—excellent!"

"Then, sir— Oh, please," was Polly's impetuous cry, "will you—I mean to say, if you feel we deserve a reward, may we beg a favour?"

Betty knew what was in Polly's mind now. So did the others. They all raised a pleading chorus:



PAULA IN A PUZZLE! Polly and the others simply exploded with laughter. "Healp! Howwows!" gasped Paula when she had managed to get the enfolding blankets from about her head. "What was it?"

At the selfsame instant one or two other governors put up horn-rimmed spectacles, the better to eye a certain group of girls who stood loaded with valuables.

"Bless my soul!" jerked out the chairman at last. "Er—you there! What— Where did you get those?"

"Go and tell him, Betty," whispered Polly.

But before Betty could respond to this advice Miss Allardyce suddenly appeared, exclaiming as she ran to get a close view of the girls' armfuls:

"The stolen stuff! Oh!"

"Yes! Please, Miss Allardyce," all the chums burst out, thankful to have her to deal with, "we have got it all back!"

"Yes, wather! Bai Jove!"

"Hem, hem!" coughed the chairman, as a warning that he was stepping forward to take command of this sensational scene. "Do I understand that you girls—"

"Yes, sir; the things belonging to the school, that were stolen!"

"Please, yes! In return for what we have done, do let Miss Danvers stay on—do, do!"

"Ooo, yes; queek—queek!"

"Yes, wather!"

Then there was sudden silence, the girls looking up into one face and another that had assumed a staggered, almost scandalised expression.

Nor were many of Betty & Co's schoolfellows free from blank amazement at such a plea having been raised.

Nothing, however, was going to shake the chums in their sudden resolve to "beg off" the new headmistress.

They felt that it was going to be an unmerited hardship and disgrace if the dismissal held good. Even more so than Miss Allardyce, they were powerless to justify one who had been unable to defend herself. But this one thing they could do out of their desperate faith in her. They could beg that she be allowed another chance in return for what they themselves had done this afternoon!

So, both there in the presence of what remained

of the once great host of scholars and, later, during a private interview with the governors, the chums of Study 12 maintained their plea.

If any reward was due to them, then let it be that—a fresh chance for Miss Danvers!

And at last the united entreaties of Study 12 carried the day.

Betty & Co. came out quietly enough from the council-chamber, but as soon as they were upstairs how they let themselves go!

Joyfully they congratulated one another on the way they had made one proud achievement serve to bring off another.

That they had acted with a kind of blind faith in Miss Danvers they were ready to admit. It was taking her completely on trust, when her record so far had been one of dismal failure. Never mind! They had Miss Allardyce's own word for it, backed up by their own vague sense of having done the right thing. Miss Danvers deserved another chance, and she had got it.

By-and-by some of the other girls came in to say that, on the whole, they thought Betty & Co. had done a very decent thing. Ethel Courtway, head girl of Morcove, one of the very few seniors still at the school, was warm in her praise.

Then there was the almost emotional burst of gratitude for which the chums came in from Miss Allardyce.

As that youthful mistress spoke her mind about it all Betty & Co. felt doubly happy. In doing so much for Miss Danvers they had evidently done something to take a great weight off Miss Allardyce's mind and heart.

But the strange thing was that Miss Danvers herself did not send for the chums to thank them.

Was it because she simply did not feel equal to facing them just at present, or was it only another example of her remissness? Cora lost no time in suggesting that "it only showed."

"Fine lot of thanks you'll ever get from her!"

she jeered in upon Betty & Co. late that evening. "Idiots you were to go and beg her off! She hasn't got it in her to—"

Bang! landed a hurled dictionary against the door from which Cora had sharply stepped away. She went off, giving her loud, malicious laugh, and in the study Betty & Co. scorned to make a single remark on her spiteful comments. They knew that she was wrong.

And how greatly Cora had been in error was to be proved ere another day had come.

That night Betty Barton awakened quietly out of her deep sleep, with a sense of having been gently disturbed.

There was moonlight in the dormitory, and as she opened her eyes, without lifting herself up in bed, she saw a tall, dark form gliding from bed to bed.

The headmistress!

Betty watched her.

From one sleeping chum of Betty's to another the new headmistress went, bending over each to kiss her lightly in her sleep.

A minute more, and, with a deep sigh, Miss Danvers had passed from the moonlit dormitory. Betty did not wake the others, but as she closed her eyes again she thought of the joy it would give her chums in the morning to be told.

Above all, she felt a grand, a deepened confidence in "the muddler of Morcove."

How could there be anything radically wrong with one who at dead of night had stolen in like this upon them all, to let that secret kiss for each convey the undying gratitude she felt?

(END OF THIS WEEK'S STORY.)

So the girls have discovered that it is really not Miss Danvers' fault that she is unable to run Morcove School as it has hitherto been run! But can Betty & Co. do anything to help? Do not miss next week's splendid long complete tale, which is entitled: "Shall Morcove be Saved?"



Reef Knot Relay.

IT is very awkward sometimes in Company meetings, isn't it, to think of a really jolly, useful team game. Well, here is one that I am sure you will all enjoy as a game. And it is useful, too, especially for the recruits, because for it they have to tie a reef-knot correctly and quickly.

The first thing to do is to get the Company in Patrols facing one end of the room. Have them as far back as possible, so they will have a good way to run round the four chairs (one for each Patrol) which are placed at the other end of the room for the purpose.

The first person in each Patrol ties a bandage round her left arm, and at the whistle runs up the room, round the chair, and back to her own Patrol, where she unties the bandage and fastens it with a reef-knot round the arm of the next Guide. She does the same thing, and so on until one Patrol has finished. This game can be played twice through, the bandage being tied first on the

left and then on the right arm. Try this game next meeting, Guides, and see how you enjoy it!

Ending Meetings.

IT is often very difficult to think of a new way to end up your Company meetings, for some Guides, especially those who cannot sing very well, get very tired of a Sing-song round the camp-fire every time.

For a change, why not have Charades? If there is not time for each Patrol to do one at the same meeting, two can perform one week and two the next. These Charades can be either spoken or dumb, and if the Guides are good at acting I think the latter way is the most amusing.

Of course, I expect some of you will think they are babyish and silly, but remember they can be useful, too, because they teach you to think ever so quickly. The Captain may tell the Patrol-leader that she will give her five minutes to think out and arrange a Charade for her Patrol with which to entertain the Company before they dismiss. The hardest thing to do is to think of a suitable word to act, and, as it is meeting-time, the word ought to have some connection with Guides. I will just suggest a few to you which can be divided syllable by syllable very easily, such as: Tenderfoot, Officer, Patrol, Company, and Inspection.

If you like this idea, Guides, try it and see how the whole Company enjoys it as a change!