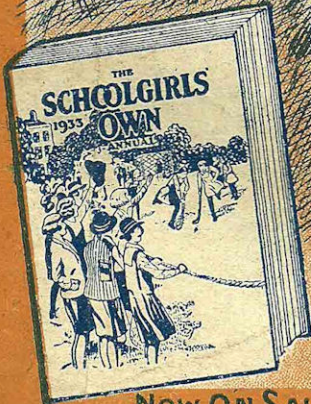


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# The SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN 2<sup>d</sup>



## DOLLY'S DRAMATIC DISCOVERY!

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# DOLLY DELANE'S DILEMMA!



*A robbery at Morcove School! The collection for the Hospital Christmas tree—missing! No wonder the chums of the Fourth are amazed—and disgusted! Yet it is Dolly Delane, the homely day-girl, who is fated to be more involved than any other member of Morcove School! And all because of "Mike the Mysterious"!*

## Such A Sensation!

"IS that rain, girls?"

"I should say, it is!"

"Oh, dear—"

"Most twyng, yes, wather!"

"What on earth will the games-field be like to-morrow!"

And one of the girls who were in Study 12 at Morcove School jumped up to go to the window.

It was Polly Linton, madcap of the Form—and yet so often the Form captain's best adviser. Betty Barton, the captain, did not look in need of any advice at present; she wanted to look serenely happy, only the weather wouldn't let her.

As for that amiable member of the Study 12 coterie, Paula Creel, she seemed to feel that the weather wouldn't leave her any looks at all, not, at any rate, those pretty looks which were Paula's chief concern.

"Bai Jove, geals, it wenders one's hair as straight as a wat's tail for the time being!"

Polly rubbed the window-pane.

"Oh, what a shame! I can see poor Dolly Delane coming in at the school gateway, half drowned!"

Betty hitched back a chair and rose from the study table.

"What, is Dolly coming into school this afternoon? I thought she would be taking the whole day off, as it's to-day her people go away for a whole month."

Then that dusky imp, Naomer Nakara, joined in the talk, having sufficiently crunched up a large lump of toffee to render speech possible.

"Eef I were Dolly, I would jolly well have taken ze rest of ze week off. I would jolly well do as I like—left at home like zat! I would cook myself some gorjus meals, I would."

"You!" said the madcap witheringly. "You'd be found in a state of collapse on the pantry floor, we know that. I say, girls, I'm off down

## By Marjorie Stanton

to meet Dolly before we go into afternoon class. I want to hear her news!"

"So do I!" cried Betty heartily. "Want to know if that aunt of Dolly's has turned up to look after her, and if she's as nice as Dolly hoped."

"Wait for me!" yelled Naomer, although she was doing a dash that placed her in front of her chums.

Then Paula put away her pocket comb and mirror, sighing.

"Bai Jove, I wouldn't be a day-girl for worlds, geals! To and fwo, wain or shine!"

"But Dolly loves it," Betty remarked, as they hastened along to the stairs. "She doesn't care about the rain. What's rain to a farmer's daughter who enjoys feeding the pigs even on a snowy morning."

"Race you downstairs!" challenged the madcap.

They reached the door to find Dolly Delane—Morcove's only day-girl—coming with a final breathless flounder to the porch, the rain lashing her, the wind blowing her about.

"Dolly!" they yelled together. "Fancy turning up for school on a day like this—when there was no need to!"

"Why not?" laughed back Dolly, rosy after her mile-long scamper from her cottage home on the Barncombe road. "Dad and mother were off by eleven this morning," she puffed on, "and the place is all nice and tidy—everything done. So I couldn't think of missing afternoon school."

Having reached the shelter of the large porch she was now unbuttoning a streaming mac. Off came a dripping oilskin hat, exposing a mop of dank hair, through which Dolly ran combing fingers. Her large gumboots, when she moved a step, went plop, plop!

"Has your auntie turned up, Dolly?" clamoured Betty.

"Not yet," was the light answer. "There was a telegram saying she'd be in about five. So after school I must scoot back to get a nice late tea ready for her. I say! I've got a note for Miss Somerfield."

"Something thrilling in Dolly's way of saying this caused a general:

"You have?"

"Guess what about," she laughed. "Girls, you never could! But dad and mother, just before they went off, had a sudden idea. They are so anxious for me to be happy whilst they're away and not feel—well, lonesome."

"We won't let you feel lonesome," declared Betty. "Besides, your aunt—"

"If she's anything like your mother she must be a dear!" interposed Polly.

"Yes, wather, a weal sport!"

"Bekas, look how well your mother cooks, Dolly. Gorjus ze meals we have had at your home!"

Dolly was taking off her mac.

"I haven't seen Aunt Ada since I was a teeny weeny," she murmured. "Neither have mother and dad. She's lived at such a great distance—right up there in the Highlands. That note? Ah, here it is." And she produced it, all damp, from a pocket of the mac.

"You were going to tell us, but haven't!" said Polly. "Say, I can't guess, though. Your people have asked Miss Somerfield to pop in now and then when passing the cottage—"

"Wrong!" cried Dolly merrily.

"I know!" shrilled Naomer. "Zey say can we be allowed to have you to tea as often as we like, bekas—"

"Wrong! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Then what?" demanded Betty blankly.

Dolly resumed the thrilling voice.

"Now I'll tell you. The note is to ask if I may have a chum to stay with me at home—"

"Sleep at the cottage?" jerked out Polly.

"Ooo!" capered Naomer. "Me, me! Bekas, zen we can cook—"

"Dolly, who are you going to have?" Polly asked imploringly. "Oh, Dolly, don't you want me?"

"No, bekas, she wants me, of course."

"You! Shoo!"

And the madcap elbowed Naomer so violently out of the way that that dusky one toppled against Paula, who, losing her balance, fell backward—Flop!

As this was the moment for a very furious gust of wind to rush through the doorway, girls who were coming downstairs could be pardoned for thinking that Paula had been blown in, after being blown off her feet.

Polly, who knew better, said at once virtuously:

"Now see what Naomer has done. Dolly dear, you couldn't, you simply couldn't have her about the place at home. I'm the one!"

"If I," said Betty, with pretended weariness, "haven't earned the right to a bit of peace at last. You won't forget me, will you, Dolly?"

"As if I haven't been thinking of you all and wishing I could have you all," laughed Dolly, entering to pass to the cloak-room. "It's such a bother to know whom to chose, I'm sure I shan't be able to decide."

"Yes, bekas—queek, is it me, is it, Dolly?"

She burst out laughing.

"I don't know which of you it is to be yet, and that's a fact."

The chums howled: "What!"

"Miss Somerfield asked me to decide, and I just couldn't. No, I simply could not," laughed on Dolly; "you are all such rippers. And so then Miss Somerfield said she quite understood, and was rather that way herself about it."

"And so?" clamoured Polly, stamping restively.

"An so—what?"

"Yes, Dolly, what?"

"Bekas—"

"The best thing, the fairest way, so Miss Somerfield said, will be to draw lots."

And Dolly, as she paused, burst out laughing again, her chums looked all so astonished, staggered, pleased.

### One Will Be Lucky!

"DRAW lots!"

"Bai Jove, that's wather a bwight idea, yes, wather!"

"It's great!" shouted Polly. "It's grand!"

"Only no cheating, bekas—"

"Shoo, you! Hoocray!" cheered the madcap, waltzing round the crowded study. "If only I draw lucky!"

"When?" questioned Betty eagerly. "When do we draw, Dolly?"

"Soon as you like."

"Now? Now?"

"Ooo, gorjus! Queek, zen, bekas—"

"Order!" chuckled the captain. "Come on then, girls, let's get going. Slips of paper, and that vase from the mantelpiece."

"Vase!" Polly vociferated, slapping the piece of china on to the table. "Paper!"

"Hi, whoa, bekas, zat is my exercise-book!"

"Doesn't matter," said the madcap, ripping out several sheets. "You keep quiet, Naomer."

"I like zat. Bekas—"

"All stand back!" requested Betty gaily.

"We'll manage this in a couple of minutes."

"And then," rejoined Dolly Delane, "the one who has picked lucky must report to Miss Somerfield for instructions."

"Good!"

"Bai Jove, geals, on weffection it will be wather a tweek, yes, wather!" beamed Paula. "Pwesuming that on weally wet days one needn't twouble to attend school, what?"

"Names!" cried Betty, sitting down to prepare a list for the draw. "Initials'll do!"

And down they went on paper whilst Polly and one or two more folded slips of paper for the vase.

Then Betty jumped up, turning to Dolly Delane.

"Will you draw, Dolly? Please."

"Winning slip marked with a cross," announced Polly, shuffling all the slips of paper together in the vase.

"Wait ze bit, though, bekas are zey all ze same?"

"Do you think we want to cheat?" the madcap stormed at the imp, who retorted:

"All I know is, you all want to be ze one. So I am going to watch it."

"You can do that," grinned the captain, "so long as you keep quiet. Ready?" And she called the first name.

"Naomer!"

Dolly Delane drew out the first slip.

"Blank!"

"What ze diggings, not fair, bekas—"

"Sh'rrp, Naomer."

"Polly Linton."

The day girl drew out a second slip.

"Blank!"

"Oh!" grimaced Polly.

"Good job, bekas—"

The rest was a bang, whallop! as the madcap got rid of the dusky one by bundling her under the table.

"Helen Craig," shouted Betty, as if thousands were present at the draw.

"Blank!"

"My—self!" bawled the captain, and she eagerly watched another slip come out of the vase.

"Blank!"

"Oh, blank!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Well then," said Betty, "now for it, Paula Creel!"

Dolly Delane drew out another slip, and it bore the cross that meant the winning "ticket."

"What!" gasped Polly incredulously.

"Paula—she's won!"

"Bai Jove! Er—"

"Good job, and I hope it will be fine for you!" cried Naomer, crawling out from under the table. "Bekas, at ze present eet is pretty wet."

Dolly was laughing, sparkling her eyes at Paula.

"Perhaps after all, Paula, you'd rather not have won?"

"Oh, no, bai Jove; most gwatifying, yes, wather!" beamed the beloved duffer of the chummery. "Wefweshing change. A little peace and quietness, too, at last."

"You had better go and report now," the captain advised the lucky one, "and we'll get some tea ready for you both. You can't go along to the cottage in this pouring rain."

"Oh, but we must!" cried Dolly. "My auntie will be turning up, don't forget. I must be there. But Paula can come along afterwards."

"Nothing of the sort," said Polly. "Paula has got the job, for better or for worse. She's really off rations in the study from this moment. Besides, Paul darling, you want to go, don't you?"

"Er—yes, wather! That is to say—er—if this wain—"

"Rain? What rain?" questioned Polly, striding to the streaming window. "You don't call that rain? A mere drizzle!"

"She much better let me go, bekas—"

"I'm sorry," said Polly, laying hands on Naomer again to put her under the table, "but— And don't kick, either."

Naomer, however, put up a struggle sufficient to tax all the madcap's resources, and it was in the midst of a grand dust-up that Betty quietly counselled Paula to hurry away and see the headmistress.

Paula obeyed with all the

more alacrity, fearing that to stay meant getting involved in the set-to between madcap and imp. Somehow it was generally Paula's fate to come in for a kind of backwash from all that sort of turmoil.

She was soon back. Miss Somerfield had not had nearly as much to say as the chums had. But Paula had only time to drink down a cup of tea—"most wefweshing, yes, wather!"—and then she had to be off again to get some things packed.

Five minutes after this their chums joyously escorted both Paula and Dolly down to the porch, where Miss Somerfield's car awaited them. The headmistress, although she was no molly-coddler, had said they must have the car, on account of the luggage.

The chauffeur had drawn the fine motor as close as possible to the porch. Even so, Paula gave a mild scream as she came in for a sharp bespattering.

"The dwenching wain, Dolly! Howevah," as she subsided upon the luxurious upholstery, "this is all wight, yes, wather!"

With horror she saw Betty and others standing bareheaded in the rain to wish her good-bye.

"Geals, geals, you'll be dwenched!"

"Good by-ee, Paula," they dinned. "You've got all your books for prep., haven't you? Ha, ha, ha!"

"And don't forget," yelled Naomer. "Up early in ze morning to help milk ze-jolly old cow."

"Milk-o!" bawled the madcap. "Leave ours



"Paula—she's won!" Dolly Delane cried as she withdrew the slip with the cross on. Heartily the chums congratulated Paula who was the lucky one to stay with Dolly at her home for some time.

on the doorstep, Paula, if we're not up when you come round with it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The car glided away, and Dolly laughed whilst Paula beamed; they were receiving such a send-off. Lots of other girls had rushed downstairs to the porch, having heard the latest. The parting advice to Paula would have filled pages.

"Widiculous cweatures!" chuckled Paula to Dolly. "And weally, I'm not sowwy there is to be an opportunity for a little peace and quietude at times, Dolly. I hope I shall not be a twouble. Er—did I bwing— Oh, yes, at least, I think so."

"If not," smiled Dolly, "you can get it to-morrow. Lovely car, Paula."

For homely Dolly was not used to luxury. It was only by saving that her adoring parents—now parted from her by circumstances beyond their control—had been able to keep her at Morcove.

In five minutes the car was at the cottage, but not drawn up close to any sheltering porch. It had to stop opposite the tiny wicket gate, and although the chauffeur very obligingly rushed the luggago indoors, both girls had to dash up the flagged path through sheeting rain.

"But the fire's kept in," was Dolly's gratified remark as soon as she and Paula had darted into the cottage. "And there's time to do everything before Auntie Ada turns up. Make yourself at home, Paula."

"Er—thanks, thanks! Can I healp in any way, Dolly deah?"

"No, you just see to your unpacking. I'll show you your room straight away. Mind your head as you go up, Paula."

It was a necessary warning, for in so small a dwelling the staircase was cramped and head-room was scanty. Above, on a little landing, Dolly threw open the door of the spare room.

"There, Paula, I hope it will be all right for you. Very small; but you can see the school from this window. Gracious, there's wet all down that wall! That's new; the thatch must have sprung a leak. Still, you don't mind, do you? It won't kill you."

Paula looked as if she hoped not, anyway.

"Auntie Ada will have dad and mother's room whilst there're away. Mine's next door to this, Paula, and the wall is very thin. So if you want me at any time in the night I shall always hear even a whisper. Well, I'll be downstairs when you come down."

"Extwaowdinary geal!" Paula gasped to herself. "Howevah, heah I am, and—er— Oh, yes, it's a wealcome change, bai Jove! Quite wewfeshing!"

Next moment, stepping to a mirror to tidy her hair, she recoiled in fresh horror—of herself this time. Her face, it was all "funny."

Nor did Paula realise until a few moments later that there was the simplest explanation; the mirror was old-fashioned and cheap enough to have wavy glass.

"Bai Jove!" she chuckled. "Gave me quite a turn at first, but it's quite amusing weally. Although haow a geal is going to dwess in fwont of that glass—"

Meantime Dolly was stirring the fire, slamming on a kettle, getting a cloth out of the dresser—slam!—as the dresser draw went shut again, and then clattering out crockery. The real live wire in the home, Dolly.

"I hope you won't mind waiting to have your proper tea with auntie?" she remarked, when Paula came down. "She should be here any minute now, Paula."

"That's quite all wight, Dolly. Can I be of healp?" inquired Paula, looking about for the best armchair.

"No, you sit down. You're my guest."

"Extvemely nice of you to say that; but, you know, Dolly deah, I want to be a healp, not a twouble. Howevah"—blissfully sinking into a winged armchair at the fireside—"this is vevy wealcome, this west before one stawts. Ow!" she shouted next moment, drawing up her feet.

"There's a wat!"

"Was it a rat?" Dolly calmly demurred. "Or only a mouse, Paula? We've heaps of rats round the sheds, of course. But they seldom come into the house. And it's ages since we had one upstairs, anyhow. Listen!"

Her keen hearing had picked up some sound coming through all the hurly-burly of wind and rain.

"A car! The same one that took dad and mum to the station this morning; I know it by the noise it makes," said Dolly, flying to a front window. "Oh, and it is Aunt Ada! There she is, at the gate!"

#### Not Quite So Good!

**D**OLLY, darting out by the trellised doorway, ran bareheaded through the pelting rain to the wicket-gate. Opposite it stood one of Barncombe's worn-out hiring cars, shuddering violently as the engine jerkily "ticked over."

The driver was already down from his seat, off-loading a lot of luggago, and now a door swung open to let out the passenger.

She stooped forth, hopped down awkwardly, and was fully revealed to Dolly, whose heart suddenly missed a beat. This her Auntie Ada? Oh, dear! Not very pleasant to look at.

"Auntie Ada—"

"I knew—I knew that luggago would get wet!" cried out the passenger, ignoring Dolly completely and giving a bridling look to the driver as he bravely grappled with the trunks. "The man's a fool. The people down here, they seem to me to be— That's right, drop it!" the voice rose to a shriek. And then suddenly Dolly came in for attention.

"Lend him a hand, can't you, girl? Don't stand there! Gracious me, this is a nice way to welcome your aunt!"

With that Auntie Ada rushed, empty-handed, to the cottage. She burst straight into the sitting-room, there being no entrance-hall, and she saw a schoolgirl resorting to pocket-comb and mirror. The explanation being that Paula had felt that she must see if she looked quite all right, now that she was to meet Dolly's aunt.

That lady stiffened as she stared.

"And who—who are you, girl?"

"Er—haow do you?" faltered Paula, floundering up from the winged armchair. "Er—wather wet to-day, what?"

Paula's heart started a sudden palpitation. She was as frightened as all that—the woman looked so bad-tempered. Whilst Aunt Ada tore off a damp hat with one hand, she flourished the other towards the open air.

"My luggage! Help, can't you? And I will not tip that driver! He has charged me enough, in any case. Give him this!"

And Paula, on her way to the door, was

handed two half-crowns, the bare passenger fare, as she knew, and nothing for the luggage.

"Hurry up and get rid of him, and then come in, both of you, and shut that door!" was the cry that followed Paula to the trellised porch, where she found Dolly and the driver already dumping the luggage. Paula, under the galvanising effect of that nagging voice, wanted to help; but all she did was to fall over one portmanteau and so flatten out a paper bag.

Two half-crowns, rolling away into a puddle, were retrieved by Dolly, who understood what they were for. The driver was shambling back to his car, and she went after him.

"Driver, the fare."

He looked at the two coins disgustedly; but when Dolly made as if to supplement the five shillings with a sixpence or so from her own pocket he very quickly checked her.

"No, miss. All I can say is——" He paused. "Is that there person going to stay with you, miss?"

"Yes; she's my auntie."

"Then all I can say is you 'ave my sympathy!" And he drove away.

\* \* \* \* \*

DOLLY RAN back into the house with a kind of desperate jollity.

"Oh, Auntie Ada, what a shame you've had such a bad day, for——"

"Will that girl show some sense!" Aunt Ada cried, indicating Paula. "You, I mean! Don't you see my luggage?"

"Et—yes, wather, hai Jove!"

"Well, take it upstairs."

"I am—er—just wondering, howevah, whether it will all go upstairs," Paula could not help demurring.

"Oh, I think it will!" said Dolly blithely.

"It must!" cried her aunt.

And then, as the two girls started to lug the first trunk between them to the steep stairs, she herself brushed past to go in front of them. She looked round upon them most indignantly.

"Rude!" she said. "Is that the best manners they teach you at your school, Dolly?"

"I'm sorry, auntie. But we——"

"Actions, Dolly, speak louder than words. Now bring up that luggage both of you!"

\* \* \* \* \*

"SEEMS FUNNY without Paula," said Polly.

Tea was not quite over in Study 12, where chairs had had to be set close together to accommodate a few "extras." Study 12, especially in the winter term, usually began by laying for five or six and ended by fetching out the last chipped and cracked cup.

"I wonder how she'll like it," Madge Minden mused aloud. "She should love it, of course; but Paula is—Paula."

"And Dolly is Dolly the Doormat," rejoined Betty, quoting the nickname that had been found for Morcove's only day girl a good while ago. "That's what I'm afraid; that Dolly will simply wait upon Paula."

"It may," said Helen Craig—"it may do Paula good."

"Yes, bekas, eef she has to feed ze peegs——"

A laugh went round the table.

"Can you imagine Paula feeding pigs?" chuckled Betty. "But perhaps it was just as well she did pick lucky. It may, as you say, make her self-reliant and all that. I suppose the aunt has got there by now."

"It would be a fine idea," nodded Polly, "to ask Dolly's Aunt Ada to tea one afternoon, when Dolly is staying on for a bit with Paula."

"Yes, bekas, zen she will ask us back. And she will give us a grand spread; bake a special cake and scones, and——"

There was a rather dramatic interruption. Somebody, having burst into the study, was addressing an agitated inquiry to the captain.

"Betty, do you know anything about the cash-box?"

It was Etta Hargrove who stood in the doorway, drawing all eyes upon her in amazement.

"Cash-box?" echoed Betty. "Do you mean——"

"There in the study, yes!" cried Etta distressfully. "Or it should be there—the one which I have been keeping the collection for the hospital's Christmas tree. But it's gone!"

"Gone?"

There was a general pushing back of chairs; a rising up in consternation.

"Gone?" several of them repeated incredulously. "But it can't be."

"But it is!" insisted Etta ruefully. "I thought some girl or other must have hidden it in my study for a joke; but I've searched, and it's not there!"

"Well, we haven't got it."

"No, but—— Oh, you know how I feel!" was Etta's cry. "Upset! There was such a nice bit of money in it; several pounds by now. Girls in all the Forms have been so good in sparing coppers again and again, since I took on the collection."

An uncomfortable silence followed these breathless remarks. Betty and the rest were well aware that the collection had been "going strong." Etta had started collecting a good while in advance of Christmas, and it was like Morcove to have responded both steadily and generously. Some scholars had a way of firing themselves for being last up, and so on, and of popping the penny fine into the box.

"Two pounds fourteen when I last counted the money," said Etta.

"But can it possibly have been stolen?"

"By someone outside the school?" chimed in Helen Craig. "But how would an outsider know that there was a cash-box in that particular study?"

"Yet could it have been taken by anybody inside the school?" argued Pam Willoughby.

"Could it?"

"No!" most of them very emphatically agreed.

"We must do something," the captain decided aloud. "I'll come along to your study, Etta. Some of you others come; but we mustn't leave the tea-things about too long."

"I clear away!" Naomer offered eagerly. "Wiz a few to help me. Bekas, I know where everything goes."

Polly smiled grimly on the way out with Betty and one or two more.

"I know where those left-over cream-buns will go. But we can't bother, and Naomer must eat 'em, that's all. This is serious."

"Rotten," muttered Betty, "if there has been a theft. Told anyone else yet, Etta?"

"No. I—I came straight to your study, you being captain."

"Just as well!" nodded Betty. Every girl under Morcove's great roof would be upset when the news got round, especially if these first investigations established a theft. But would

they? Or was it, after all, only somebody's idea of a 'jape'?

"Here we are," said Etta, as they arrived at the threshold of her study. "Pat Lawrence doesn't know yet, either; she's having tea a few doors off."

Pat Lawrence was Etta's study-mate; a nice enough girl, and very, very modern.

"The place was turned upside down?" questioned Betty. "As if—"

"Oh, no! But then anybody coming into the room would see the cash-box at once. So if they wanted to steal—Hallo, though!" Etta broke off excitedly. "I didn't see that before!"

And she signed to the girls to stand clear of the doorway whilst she pointed to the floor just there.

"Mudmarks!" exclaimed Polly.

"Oho!" exclaimed Betty. "Somebody's been here: who came in out of the wet with very dirty boots."

"Hobnailed boots!" cried Pam Willoughby.

"So they were!" nodded several.

Next second they were looking along the corridor floor in both directions. It was all bare linoleum. Only the seniors' quarters had carpet.

"Plain as my face!" declared the madcap. "You can see where he came along from the stairs—"

"He?"

"Well, surely a man was wearing the boots that left marks like those!"

Pam was one who suddenly looked the other way—down the corridor.

"I'm wondering if he went on, or only—Goodness, no!" she cried. "See, he went farther down to other studies. Oh, he's been to ours, Helen!"

"I say!" was the chorus of increased indignation, whilst they all darted along to the study shared by Pam and Helen.

Plainly enough the man had turned in there. There were tell-tale marks on the floor.

"Can't you see how the wretch was tip-toeing at times!" commented Polly, who was always great on detective work. "But his boots were so clumsy and hobnailed, the more he tip-toed the more clear were the marks he left."

Pam whirled into her and Helen's study, stopped dead for a moment to cast an anxious look around, then flew to a corner cabinet.

This study was unique for its furnishings and decoration. From time to time Pam had brought along things from that palace of treasures, Swan-lake, which was her ancestral home.

She peered in through the glass panels of the cabinet doors then gave an angry exclamation as she turned round.

"Too bad! He's had something out of here as well!"

"Never!" cried the other girls, as with one voice.

"Some gold coins of dad's from India, that were very rare."

"Shame!"

At this moment some girls from other studies turned up, having divined that something was amiss. But the chums felt that it did not matter so much now if the affair did become generally known. It was so obviously a theft committed by someone who had sneaked into the house during school hours.

Some further amateur detective work resulted in the captain and others tracing the lawless intruder's movements. He had sneaked in by a

side door downstairs, giving entry from the grounds, and had gone off by the same way.

As soon as this had been established the excited girls agreed that it was high time to notify the headmistress. So Betty, Etta and Pam sought out Miss Somerfield.

In that lady's private room the whole case was made known to her, and after she herself had taken a look round the schoolhouse, having all the "clues" pointed out to her, she was not slow in taking action.

"There must be a bad character lurking in the neighbourhood," she summed up gravely. "He took the cashbox, needing money, and the gold coins, hoping to turn them into funds. I will ring up the police, girls, and get them to come come along at once."

And Morcové's headmistress was, at her telephone even as the girls withdrew, still in a very excited state.

#### Pity Poor Paula!

PAULA CREEL reached her bed-room under the thatch after quite an energetic yet stealthy rush up the steep stairs.

She closed the door quickly and quietly, gasping:

"Howwows!"

That aunt of Dolly's was proving a "tewwor." Not much more than an hour had the lady been in the cottage, but what an hour it had proved for both girls.

"An uttah shwew, bai Jove, that's what she is, yes, wather!"

And Paula swept a hand across her forehead.

"She jumps down one's throat; it's tewwible! I don't know wheah I am half the time. I—I should want to wun away, only I feel so sowwy for Dolly."

At this instant the nagging voice sounded again from below. Aunt Ada was "on" at Dolly again.

"You don't want to do that, girl!"

"But, auntie, before it gets quite dark, I ought to—"

"You're not going out again, trapseing about. Haven't you got some homework? And where's that Paula? Has she tried sneaking out?"

"She's upstairs, auntie."

"Fetch her down. Both of you, you'll do your homework."

Again Paula, looking "seared stiff," passed a hand across her forehead. There was the appalling prospect of having to be under the eyes of that terror until bedtime. Oh, for Study 12 again!

Dolly came up, slipping in with a understanding smile for Paula, who made frantic signs: "Shut that door!"

Then they looked at each other dolefully.

"I am so sorry, Paula darling. I can't make it out," Dolly whispered. "She must have changed greatly in the last ten years. Mother and dad would never have liked her to come to look after me if they had known she was like that."

"Bai Jove, she most cewtainly has not got your mother's disposition, Dolly dear. Yet they are sisters. Or, bai Jove," was Paula's sudden thrilling theory, "is she a fwaud?"

"Someone, do you mean, impersonating my aunt? Oh, no," smiled Dolly. "It's her right enough; I remember that scar on the neck, where she was operated on as a child. What it means, Paula, I think; something has happened to change her."

"Er—"

"A disappointment in love, yes," Dolly whispered on. "I believe there was, as a matter of fact, something of the sort. It may have been why she went right away from all her relations and friends to live in that lonely cottage in the highlands."

Paula pondered.

"Bai Jove, Dolly deah, in that case one must—er—make allowances, what? Twy to treat her as if she didn't mean it all."

"That's good of you, Paula. There may be a lot to excuse her irritability. Only why should you have to bear with it, Paula?"

"Fow the simply weason, Dolly, I am your friend."

"You are a dear!"

"What wot!" beamed Paula, speaking rather louder now. "What I do feel, Dolly deah, is that I am hawdly the sort of geal to—er—go down weall with your aunt, so to speak."

"What about me?" returned Dolly, with a rueful smile. "I haven't done a thing to please her yet, and—"

"Now, you two, up there!" that sharp voice ascended the stairs. "I won't allow that; talk, talk, talk. Come down!"

Paula felt her forehead dampening with a kind of cold perspiration. But for Dolly's sake she strove to keep the growing dread of Aunt Ada out of her looks.

"We'll go down and do our prep," Dolly whispered, softly turning the knob of the bed-room door. "Only I should have gone out at twilight, just to see that everything is—"

"Do you hear me, up there!"

"Yes, auntie, coming."

And down they went, to rejoin Aunt Ada in the lamplit sitting-room. Now that the tea-things had been cleared away and the hearth tidied for the evening the homely room was as pretty as a Christmas card. Only Aunt Ada was there, her criticising eyes following the one girl or the other, whilst behind the close-pursed lips a tongue was ready to let out some cross remark.

There was oppressive silence after Dolly and Paula had settled down to their school-books at the table. Aunt Ada had the winged armchair at the fireside, and was knitting. In the dim light, where she sat, those steel knitting needles glittered, yet no brighter than her eyes constantly glittered at the girls.

Suddenly, however, they heard the wicket clack and then voices sounded. They were gruffish voices, and they were manly steps that came from the flagged path.

In a few moments, and whilst Dolly and Paula were holding their pens in suspense, there came a knock at the outer door.

"See who it is!" snapped Aunt Ada. "Some grocer or other? What a time to come."

"Oh, no, auntie, it can't be anyone like that," said Dolly, crossing the room to lift the latch.

She drew open the door, recoiling a little as beheld two uniformed men. The police!



"The cashbox I've had in my study—keeping the collection for the hospital's Christmas-tree! It's gone!" cried Etta Margrovs. "Gone!" echoed the chums in amazement; and Etta nodded.

"Good-evening, missie!" said one genially, and Dolly noticed that he was a sergeant. "Father at home?"

"Father and mother are both away. They've gone away for a couple of months, and—"  
She got no further, being suddenly brushed aside by Aunt Ada, who had bundled aside her knitting to come striding to the doorway.

"Yes, what is it? I'm in charge here."

"Oh, good-evening, ma'am! There's been a complaint from Morcove School—"

"About Dolly?"

The sergeant stroked his moustache to hide a grin.

"Oh, no, ma'am," he said heartily. "A nasty case of robbery. Somebody slipped in by daylight and took a cashbox and some gold coins. May have had other things besides, for all we know at present. So we're just having a look round like."

"Well? You don't want me to help you?"

"We'd like just to have your permission, ma'am, to look round the premises. This time of year any bad character that's homeless is apt to favour an outbuilding for a night's sleep. But I'll leave my man to look round, so long as you don't mind."

"I don't mind."

"Auntie," ventured Dolly very gently, "had I better light a lantern and show the policeman round?"

Aunt Ada turned upon her niece in amazement.

"Why, girl, should you—"

"Well, auntie, the policeman won't know the



sheds that house livestock. It would be awkward if—"

"Ay," interposed the sergeant amiably. "If you could permit it, ma'am, it would help to get it over quicker and better, so to speak."

"Go on then, Dolly. But there's no need for you," Aunt Ada flounced round upon dumbstruck Paula, "to stand staring. Go on with your work. What's the lesson?"

"Er—French."

"I'll hear you presently," was the appalling threat under which Paula subsided into her seat at the table, whilst Dolly ran to the scullery to light a hurricane lamp.

She slipped out by the back door into the black, dark night. The sergeant and the constable had withdrawn from the front door, and she met them coming round to her. Very gratefully the sergeant thanked her for the offered services and then trudged away, leaving his man to go round the place with her.

"A robbery at the school!" exclaimed Dolly, lighting the way for the constable. "How horrid! Is it much money that's gone?"

"A matter of two pounds or more, miss; but that's bad enough when it's money the girls have been giving towards the Christmas tree—"

"What! Oh, Etta Hargrove's collection?" was Dolly's understanding cry. "How beastly of whoever it was!"

"There's one thing, anyhow, miss; they know it was nobody in the school."

"Oh, it couldn't have been!" Dolly declared, with all a Morcovian's pride. "Here's the old cartshed, and next to it the Dutch barn, where we keep our hay."

Nodding, the constable now switched on his own electric torch, and going in front of Dolly, shone the bright beam into all likely lurking places.

He prowled about, sometimes leaving Dolly for a moment, to return and let her conduct him to yet another part of the premises. Although the Delanes' home was such a small cottage, as usual where some land goes with the dwelling there were numerous outbuildings.

They came to the pig-styes, and the fat old sow came out to wink up at them in the lamplit darkness.

The constable suddenly half-turned to peer towards a shed on the opposite side of the small yard. A rustling sound came from inside the ramshackle building.

After listening a moment or so he turned an inquiring eye upon Dolly.

"The calves," she said. "They've heard me and have got up."

"Oh, ay! So you've some some calves, miss?"

"Two. They're such darlings."

She stepped across with him to the door of the calf-pen and opened the top half of it to let him look in.

Close to the bottom half of the door stood the two calves, their wondering eyes jewel-like in the lantern-light. Dolly reached in a hand and stroked first one upheld face and then the other. They breathed loudly and chewed their cud, until the policeman made them back sharply by holding the lantern inside the doorway for a look round.

"Everything all right in there seemingly," was the constable's gratified comment. "I've never reared any calves, miss."

The constable, returning her the lantern, moved on, and she was going to conduct him to other

buildings when she heard the calves murmuring. She knew what that meant. They would be "hollering" half through the night unless she gave them a fresh rackful of hay, now that they had been disturbed.

"I must just give those calves something, or else—"

"Right-ho, miss!"

Turning back, she let herself into the shed, closing the door behind her. There was some reserve hay, out of reach of the calves, and she had only to pull down enough for them.

On the deep, clean mattress of straw she stood, with the lantern hung upon a handy hook, clawing down the fodder; but suddenly she gave a violent start, then stood quite still.

The calves were close behind her, and it could not have been they who had caused the faint sound which had startled her. A rat? It should have scampered away before ever the door was opened. What then had caused the sound?

She was, of course, all the more suspicious, because of this idea about a bad character in the neighbourhood.

Taking down the lantern, she crossed towards that straw-heaped corner from which the sound had come. And then she saw.

She saw a booted foot belonging to a figure that was huddled under loose straw. The shiny hobnails gleamed in the lantern-light.

"Here, come out of that," Dolly ordered briskly. "If you don't: I'll—"

The rest went unsaid. Speech had died upon her parted lips as two arms pushed a lot of the straw aside, freeing the head and shoulders of a mere boy. He was too young even to be called a youth in the accepted sense of the word.

Dolly stared down at him in the lantern-light; gazed down into his eyes as they gazed up into hers. In spite of his tousled hair and rough clothes she did not feel repelled. And something made her subdue her voice when at last she said:

"There's a policeman here, looking for a thief."

"I'm not the thief," the boy protested in a low, steady tone.

"Then who are you?" jerked out Dolly.

"I'd rather not say; in fact, I'll refuse to say," he informed her flatly.

"You have no right to be here!"

Then he flushed.

"That's so. And if you order me to go away, then I'll have to go. But don't you get the idea into your head that I'm a wrong un, because I'm not."

Followed a very tense pause, whilst each still met the other's eyes. His were nice dark eyes, Dolly thought, and eyes were everything where character was concerned.

"You must be homeless, though?" she whispered at him, compassion creeping into her voice.

He shook his head.

"No, I'm not, miss. But my home's a long way from here."

"Then where would you sleep the night if I made you go? I mean," she added hastily, "after the policeman has gone."

He shrugged.

"Anywhere. I can rough it worse than this. In fact, I don't call this roughing it."

"You don't."

"No. I was jolly comfortable, until I heard you outside with that police johnny. I've slept far rougher in camp."

"What camp?" came Dolly's eager question; but he shook his head again, looking finely stubborn.

"Sorry, but I can't explain myself," he pleaded next moment. "And you want me to clear out, do you?"

"No. At least, not yet."

She was entirely dominated by an instantaneous liking for him in all his strange state. Her extended hand was motioning him to get down under the straw again, whilst she looked away to the closed door of the calf-pen. The calves had found the fresh lot of hay and were muzzling into it with relishing sighs.

"Sh!" she cautioned him. "I'll let you stay, since you say you're not the wanted person."

"Well, miss, do I look like it?" he protested.

"But I suppose I do," he realised, and she saw him smile grimly. "And so I rather wonder that you believe me, after all."

"Well, I do," she returned softly. "So for goodness' sake hide down again. I must go out."

"You're a sport," he whispered after her, as she drew away to the door. "Thanks! I say, do you go to the big school that's not so far off?"

She turned round.

"Yes, why?"

"Oh, only my curiosity!"

"You make me tell you about myself; I can't make you tell me anything about yourself."

"It's a fact, you can't, not at present, any rate."

He rustled the straw as he snuggled down into it once more; then kept still, to whisper across to her.

"I say, miss."

"Well?"

"Are you going to tell anybody else that I'm here? I don't mean the policeman, but anybody with you in the cottage?"

"Don't you want me to?" she breathed back at him, standing ready to slip out.

"I do not, miss. If you only knew what it means to me."

"Very well then, I won't!"

Not another whisper was exchanged. Dolly unlatched the door, in its two halves, and made her exit, afterwards making everything fast again.

Then in the pitch-black shed the boy lay quite still, with the straw drawn all over him, except that his head was alertly raised.

He must have been strong-nerved not to be breathing rapidly and audibly as he listened. The calves munched on, and there was the continual whisk of hay pulled out by eager mouths. But any sounds made by them were very faint, enabling this mysterious co-tenant of the shed to hear Dolly Delane completing her round of the place with the policeman.

At last the boy heard them parting over at the wicket fronting the main road. He heard the

policeman tramping off, heavy-footed, and heard Dolly run indoors.

After that he could let his head sink back upon the pillowing straw, but he did not assume the attitude of one trying to get to sleep. Very likely it was much too early for him to feel sleepy, whatever the fatigues of the day had been.

The calves, having taken their fill, came and nosed towards him in the darkness, wondering why he was there, and he shoo'd them away in an amused manner.

They settled down at last, and for a long, long while he heard nothing but their steady chewing the cud.

A few seconds later and he knew that the top half of the shed door was being opened from outside.



"I'm in charge here! What is it?" Aunt Ada demanded sharply. "We want permission to look round the farm, ma'am. There's been a robbery over at the school!" the constable answered seriously.

"Boy—here!" the whisper came from one whose head and shoulders were silhouetted to him against light shining a little distance away.

He heaved up from the straw and darted across to the doorway.

"Hungry?" the befriending girl whispered in to him, offering something between two plates. "Sh! Quick—"

"But look here, I don't want you to—"

"I felt I must, in case you were hungry."

"It's not fair," he protested under his breath.

"Tell me," she implored, "will you be gone by the morning?"

"Is it going to worry you, if I'm not?" he cross-questioned anxiously. "For if possible I did want to stay—"

"Stay in hiding? Why?"

"There it is again, I can't tell you—er—miss. But look here, would you mind telling me your name?"

"You tell me yours then, first?"

"Mine's Mike to my pals. Don't like Michael."

"Oh, why not? But I like Mike better. Mine's Dolly—better than Dorothy."

"Then, I say, Dolly—"

"Sh!" she checked him, looking away to the lamplit cottage. "I've got my auntie staying to take care of me, and she's—she's rather strict. I must go back."

"Here, though. Have you got a sister?"

"No-o-o! That's a chum of mine from Morcove to keep me company whilst my people are away. Bye-bye," Dolly finished, darting away.

But she came back next instant.

"I say, we have an old man comes and does a bit about the place most days. He's supposed to be here at eight, but he's very lame and slow now. Still."

"Thanks," came guardedly to her from the deeper darkness of the shed. "I know all about old Dan'l."

There now; the boy knew all about old Dan'l! That looked as if he had slept there other nights.

"Sh! I say—"

Again she turned back.

"I won't keep the calves awake," was all he wanted to tell her a jesting remark that compelled her to retort with:

"I hope they won't keep you awake. Good-night, Mike."

"Good-night, miss—Dolly."

"Dolly, will you come in!" yelled Aunt Ada from a back doorway. "Taking all that time to find wood for the morning, when you know very well there are rogues about."

"Coming, auntie!" responded Dolly from the woodshed.

#### The Morning After I

"NO play to-day, girls. It may clear up—it may—And then again," said Polly, "it may not."

She and others had come upon Betty, standing in front of the school's barometer.

"What's it doing?" inquired the madcap, and she gave the glass her own special impatient tap.

"Looks like clearing up, that does."

"There's all the morning," remarked Madge hopefully.

"There's all the afternoon—a halfer," retorted Polly. "For it to go on raining, raining."

"But we'll get out, anyhow," said Betty. "What about trying to track down Old Hobnails?"

"He may be Young Hobnails," submitted Helen Craig. "After all, his boots weren't as big as all that."

"Old or young," cried the madcap, "we want our money back, and Pam wants her coins."

"The police," said Tess, "must have been about in the night. I looked out to see what the sky was doing, and I saw a light out on the moor—not a car-light, either, from one of the by-roads. It was an electric-torch, I think."

"And you didn't wake us up!" Polly rounded on Tess playfully. "When we might have dressed and gone down, and gone out and—"

"Oh, yes, and caught the very man!" chuckled Betty. "But whereabouts on the moor was the light, Tess?"

"Seemed to me to be coming from the old Round House, as they call that old ruin!"

There were nods from the others. They knew the roofless, ivy-clad pile of ancient masonry that stood like a ruined tower out on the lonely moor, about a mile from the school. It was one of Morcove's favourite spots for "tea out" in the summer term.

"Five to nine!" was Betty's sudden appalled comment. "But I don't need to go upstairs for my books, do any of you? Well, then, how about a pop down to the gates to meet Dolly and Paula?"

"Yes, bekas, eet has stopped raining now."

"Wonders will never cease," said Polly. "For a moment it has actually stopped. Oh, but here they are!" she added gaily, as they got to the front porch. "Morning, you two. Got the milk, Paula?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Gold medal, for being on time!" cried the captain. "Much trouble to get her out of bed, Dolly?"

"Auntie Ada did that."

"What!"

"Yes, wather!" panted Paula. "You must not think, Dolly dear, I want to cast reflections on your aunt; but these geals must be appraised of the—er—the dreadful time we've had."

"What dreadful time?" was the wondering chorus.

"Bekas, no worse than we have had!" shrilled Naomer. "Wiz burglars in hobnailed boots breaking in and stealing from ze studies."

"You didn't have a visit from Hobnails, Dolly, in the night?" inquired Polly half seriously. "We call him that—the thief—because he left marks of his hobnails boots. What's the matter?"

The matter with Dolly was—but she could not say so—was that suddenly she had a vivid recollection of that hobnails' boot which had been the first bit to be seen by her of the boy hiding in the straw.

Luckily she could change the subject.

"Girls, Auntie Ada is so—so different. I must say it, in fairness to poor Paula, who has had a terrible time."

"Not at all, bai Jove!" the beloved duffer's good nature made her disclaim. "Wather a joke, if anything. A slight touchiness, geals; a certain iwascibility, that's all."

Betty and the rest were staring aghast.

"You mean, Dolly, she's different from your mother?"

"Diffewent!" gasped Paula, before Dolly could speak. "They are poles asundah, yes, wather! Geals, am I a dweadful weck, to be going into class? I—I was wanting to do my hair pproperly, but I—er—"

"Paula had to escape, or she would have had her hair combed with the leg of a chair," said Dolly.

"Never!"

"Well, nearly as bad as that."

"How lovely!" Polly clapped. "Ha, ha, ha! Do you good, Paula."

"Bekas, just what you needed."

"That will do," protested Paula with dignity. "If some of you geals had been through what we have been through, pewhaps you wouldn't wegawd it as quite such a source of mewwiment."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We must meet your aunt," Betty said to Dolly. "Have her to tea in Study 12."

"You had far better spare yourselves the treat," smiled Dolly. And after slight hesita-

tion: "Er, have the police done any good? They came to the cottage last night to look round."

"No, but wait until we get going," the madcap cried. "Morcove's Flying Squad. Look out of your window this afternoon, Dolly, and you'll see us crawling over the moor, examining every inch of ground with microscopes."

"You'll find it rather wet," said Dolly, plopping across the hall in gumboots, to change them for indoor footwear.

Paula followed her to the cloak-room, and whilst they were getting rid of outdoor equipment the bell went for morning school. There was no time for more gossip, and in secret Dolly was rather glad.

She was doubtful whether she could bear the talk turning constantly upon the thefts by "Hobnails," as it was bound to do, without changing colour.

Overnight she had placed implicit faith in that mystery boy's denials about the robbery, and she had woken up this morning feeling strangely confirmed in her belief in his honesty.

No one with eyes and looks like his could be dishonest. His clothes were in keeping with his clumsy, hobnailed boots—oh, why—why did he wear hobnailed boots! But there he had been, with everything to drag him down in her eyes, and yet—

No; that boy, mystery though he was, had seemed a young gentleman, even though his people might be workaday folk.

There he had been overnight, and this morning—gone!

She had walked to school with Paula since then, chatting with that chum about one thing and another, whilst saying nothing about the boy, but thinking about him all the time.

And now in class she was living over again the sensations of last evening and the sensations of first thing this morning.

Before Auntie Ada was awake—at the first peep of day, indeed—she had crept down. He must be given some breakfast in secret. There were many customary tasks for her to do about the place, connected with livestock, that would enable her to smuggle a good breakfast to him. First a jug of piping hot tea, then a good thick slice of ham between the top of a loaf, cut into two. But she had let herself into the calf-shed to find him—gone!

Was he coming back? She believed he was. The way he had spoken overnight about wanting to go on in hiding there if possible. Only perhaps he had changed his mind since then? This business of the theft by someone supposed to be lurking in the neighbourhood—it might have scared him away.



Your Editor is always delighted to hear from you whenever you care to write. His address is "The Schoolgirls' Own," The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. A stamped, addressed envelope must be enclosed for a reply.

I WANT to open my letter to you this week on a very happy note of hearty congratulation to every one of the three thousand readers who won a beautiful Annual in our recent coupon-collecting competition! And many, many thanks for the letters I received from those readers telling me how delighted they were with their prizes!

Miss Ellen Edwards, who lives at Leith, Scotland, collected the highest number of points. And what a total—35,000! Wasn't it perfectly marvellous!

**To My Sporting Readers!**

Then, to the readers who were unsuccessful, I sent just a tiny letter to show they had not been forgotten!

And what thorough "sports" those readers were! Hundreds of letters poured into the Den for several weeks after—from those who didn't get a prize.

I was astounded and delighted at such a marvellous response, and I want now—though it's rather late, I'm afraid—to take the opportunity of thanking every single one of you who wrote so charmingly to me saying that—although naturally a wee bit disappointed—you joined with me in congratulating the lucky prize-winners, and would try your best to be among them in the very next competition!

For many years now I have known that you, my readers, are the most splendid ever, but I do want you to know that this proof of your "sportsmanship" has given me many happy hours, making me terribly proud. And I am honoured to think of all of you as my schoolgirl friends!

**Treats in Store.**

So now we're all such chums, I want to prepare you for the dazzling delight of reading that await you next week in our little paper.

Mention of chums makes us think of Study 12 and its inmates, of course, so I'd better tell you the title of next week's Morcove story right away.

"STUDY 12's BIG 'BLUNDER'!" is the intriguing title, though even that doesn't give you an idea of the thrills and excitement this fine story of Marjorie Stanton's contains. But read it next week for yourself, and you'll agree with me that it's one of the finest ever!

And now—such sad news! Sylvia Newton and her chum, Jill Merryweather, will be leaving us! Too bad, isn't it? But even the best of serials must end, so tuck those hankies away and cheer up, for there's a perfectly lovely story coming to take its place. (I'll tell you more about it next week!)

Another instalment of our up-to-date serial by Elise Probyn will, of course, appear, together with a charming COMPLETE story.

You all remember Jasmin, the heroine of that wonderful Eastern serial "Jasmin—Waif of the Desert," don't you? No one could ever forget the exciting way in which Jasmin found out that, in spite of the scheming of the Princess Mithriti, she was really Sylvia Daverell, sister of Beryl Daverell.

Well, next week you'll meet these characters again in another of Joan Inglesant's powerful stories. Look out for "THE BEGGAR-GIRL FROM THE DESERT."

And now all good wishes until next week.

Your sincere friend,

YOUR EDITOR.

"Not that he looked," thought Dolly, thumbing over the pages of a lesson-book, "the sort to be frightened of anybody. Not even Aunt Ada."

She had to smile as that whimsical afterthought came to her. Goodness, if he should fall into the hands of Aunt Ada. Old Dan'l would be pottering about the place this morning; but he could be easily dodged. But Aunt Ada!

"He must; he'll have to tell me more about himself," she made up her mind on the way back into class. "Or I won't help him."

But her mind was soon unmade again by her heart. She knew that he might still refuse to confide in her, and yet she would still befriend him.

"Dolly Delane," called out Miss Everard presently, "you are not giving your mind to your work."

The truth of which reproof Dolly's cheeks admitted by going crimson.

STILL TORRENTING down at twelve o'clock when scholars came out of school for the rest of the day. And what a tribe of boisterous juniors it was that gathered at the front porch to see the two day girls dash away to get their "bikes" from the shed and be off back to the cottage.

"Pick 'em up there!" the madeap bawled after Paula, running not quite so fast as Dolly. And then, in the imagined voice of Auntie Ada:

"Paula Creel, look alive!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And look out for Old Hobnails, bekas you never know!" was Naomer's parting cry.

"Hi, Dolly!" was another shout that went through the rain, "don't be surprised if we come to tea at the cottage this afternoon."

"Bekas, we are going to be detectives. And he might be in ze jolly old cowed—you never know."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Gosh," said Polly, on the point of turning away after they had all watched the two day girls pedalling down to the gates, "this is pretty awful weather. What's the glass doing now?"

She and her boon companions went to have another look at it, with results that drew groans.

"But we're going out," insisted Betty stoutly. "We'll manage to do something, girls."

Betty & Co. had no sooner slopped out of doors in mackintoshes and high boots than they found the rain giving over.

Even so, their protection against drenched stockings and clothes remained as necessary as ever, for they were trudging across the moor, where the springy heather was all raindrops. There were, too, some big puddles to jump.

Inevitably the girls sent a glance towards the cottage home of the Delanes, where it nestled snugly beside the high road. They wondered what Paula would be doing with herself this afternoon. She would not have cared to come for this ramble. Dolly was certain to be much too busy.

"I don't think I've ever known Dolly stay around on a halfer, except for games," remarked Betty. "She'll be limewashing or something or other."

"Zen I zink we ought to call in and ask them to come back to tea with us at ze school," Naomer suggested. "Eet give us an excuse to get a look at Auntie Ada. She can put ze wind up Paula, but she can't frighten me."

"Hark!" said Madge, throwing up a finger as she checked amidst the heather.

Then on the wind blowing in from the distant sea they distinctly heard a nagging voice. It the first faint remnant of what could only be the hounding cry of Aunt Ada, as she kept at Dolly and Paula, away yonder at the cottage.

The chums looked at one another and grimaced. "She doesn't give them much peace," murmured Polly. "Fancy being able to hear her from this distance away."

"We'll do as Naomer suggests, and see if we can't take Dolly and Paula back to Study 12 for tea," Betty said. "We'll have to do all we can, girls, to make up to them for Aunt Ada, since she's such a terror."

Meantime they floundered on over the rough, undulating moorland with the old Round House for their objective. It loomed before them even now, under the lowering sky, a round-walled building, all gone to ruin, so that it was not nearly so high as it must have appeared in olden days, dominating a low hill.

"Was it really as late as one in the morning when you looked out of the dormi window?" Polly turned to exclaim at Tess. "If it was, I'm surprised at your seeing that light, Tess."

"Yep," put in one of the others. "You'd expect the police to have given up the search by then."

"I know what we are going to find," Betty half-jokingly predicted. "Etta's cashbox, empty and thrown again. Really, though, the Round House it the sort of place Old Hobnails might make for."

"Bekas, eef it is a gang with guns—bang, bang!"

"If it is," laughed Madge, "then we'd better keep away."

But there was no real fear of gangsters in the minds of any, and so they plodded and floundered on, having the heather to wade through up to the very walls of the ancient relic.

Long since the oaken door had rotted from its great iron hinges and to-day it lay, as it had lain for years, rotting amongst the nettles. Betty and her chums passed inside and then still had the open sky above their heads. The roof was utterly gone, and there never had been any intervening floor above ground.

Now that the girls had gone in jackdaws were flying out, making a great to-do about this invasion. For a minute or so Morocco could hardly hear itself speak, there was such a "yakh, yaa—king!"

Then suddenly Polly gave a shout: "Whoa!" spreading her arms in a way to make others stand clear of ground in front.

"How's that!" she followed up her arresting shout, and pointed to the ground.

At first none of the others saw anything to get excited about; saw only some of that fallen masonry and broken timber which covered the earth, inside these crumbling walls.

"Look!" said Polly exultantly. "Oh, you're blind, the lot of you!"

Then they saw that her finger pointed more exactly towards a spiked metal stud, such as countrymen hammer into the soles of their boots to make for longer wear.

"That's a hobnail, that is," said Polly triumphantly.

She picked it up, and they gathered round the find. It was shiny, otherwise it would not perhaps have caught even Polly's sharp eyes.

"It's come out of a boot quite recently," Betty reasoned promptly. "Or it would have had time to grow rusty and dull. They do fall out of boots, we know. How many punctures have we had from lost hobnails on the Barncombe road."

"Which reminds us," rejoined Tess; "plenty of people have hobnails. So—"

"Oh, this isn't as good as getting Etta's money back for her," Polly conceded. "Still it's interesting. That light, last night, and now this."

She suddenly pushed her chums apart.

"Look about, girls. We may find something else."

"Yes, queek, queek!" shrilled Naomer. "Bekas, even if he has stuck to ze money, he may have hidden ze gold coins somewhere here."

"Morcove's Flying Squad!" cried Polly gaily.

"Dweadful—dweadful!" Morcove's languid junior groaned inwardly, whilst looking around the outside premises for her chum. "The woman appears to think we don't do any wovk at school, bai Jove! Er—Dolly deah."

"Oh, that you, Paula?" exclaimed Dolly, making a rather startled turn on the way from one shed to another, and she said a flustered: "Er—er—"

"Er—it's all wight, Dolly deah; if you could tell me where you keep the metal polishes and all that, bai Jove?"

"They're on the top shelf of the scullery cupboard, Paula. But what do you want?"

"She wishes me to clean the bwasses, yes, wathor. Don't look like that, howeveah!"

But Dolly did look like that. Troubled.



All at once the chums caught sight of the elegant Paula. She was wearing a coarse apron, and in her gloved hands she held a duster. "Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the chums.

"Come on, girls. You've got brains; use them. As Dolly's aunt would say."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

For Mike's Sake!

"YOU'LL need an apron, girl."

"Er—"

"Apron!" Aunt Ada repeated sharply to Paula Creel. "Haven't you ever worn an apron?"

A hand whipped a sack-like apron from a nail behind the scullery door and tossed it towards Morcove's elegant junior.

"Put that on. I found a clean place when I got here, and it is going to stay clean. All the brasses will be tarnishing this weather, so get and do them, girl."

"Er—bwasses."

"Dolly will tell you where the metal polish and rags are kept. Ask her; but don't stand talking."

Paula, at any rate, now had liberty to escape into the open air, even if it were only for a minute. With considerable relief she fancied that Aunt Ada would have withdrawn to the sitting-room by the time she, Paula, got back to the scullery.

"It can't go on, Paula; I mean, for you. It isn't fair. Mother and dad never meant this—on halfers, too."

"It's quite all wight, deah," beamed Paula. "After all, you are always on the go at home."

"I'm different. Dan's past doing as much as has to be done outside. He's had to go home this afternoon, his rheumatism is so bad—poor old Dan'l. But, Paula, when it comes to your having to—"

"What did I say, you two!" called Aunt Ada from the back-door. "Not so much talk, talk, talk! Paula, come in. And you, Dolly. How much longer are you going to hang about out there?"

"I'm being as quick as I can, auntie."

"I shall want to see you tidied up by tea-time, Dolly; you can't be about like that."

No pleasing her. If one didn't rush for an apron there was a row. If one did get into a coarse apron it was called "being about like that."

Under the eyes of the virago the two scholars could only exchange commiserating glances as they parted, Paula to return indoors, whilst Dolly—

"I just can't go in," she sighed to herself, rather frantically, "until I know if he is anywhere on the place again or not. Oh, that boy; why did he ever come butting in—with Auntie Ada here to make it so much worse!"

To harassed Dolly the one consoling feature was that really necessary tasks, out of doors and in one outbuilding and another, gave her an excuse for spending this afternoon as she was doing.

So they were all useful, admirable tasks that homely Dolly was carrying out, whilst making them serve as a reason for going here and there, on the look-out for Mike the mysterious.

Bucket in hand, she dived into another of the many ramshackle sheds. It was one where they kept the bins of meal and linseed cake.

The heavy-lidded metal bins took up most of the floor space, except one corner, where swedes had been heaped, close by the machine that pulped them. A steep ladder was reared to a low loft where other stores were stowed away.

Dolly, after a rueful look at the root-pulper, which Dan had not found time to work to-day, decided to make that her next job. She must bundle some of the swedes into the hopper and turn away at the big handle, making enough chop for the cattle. But first of all, what about up in that loft? Was he perhaps—

He was! Even as she looked up the ladder, intending to climb it, over the opening in the loft floor appeared the head and shoulders of Mike.

"Hallo!" said he. "I guessed it was you!"

"Hallo!" said she. "I wondered if you might be there. But have you been under cover since I saw you last, or getting wet?"

"I'm all right, thanks. I say, I'm awfully sorry, but I pinched one of those swedes."

"To eat!" she said in horror.

"To sort of help out my rations, and please don't look like that. I say, you're not worrying about me, are you?"

"Course I am. But don't you look like that," she pleaded, with an anxiety for him similar to his anxiety for her. "I've got you to look after, as well as the cattle, and you can't eat pulped roots."

"They're quite good," he smiled down upon her. "We chaps at school we often used to help ourselves to one of Farmer Brown's turnips on halfers."

"School?" she echoed, looking up quizzically. "What school would that be?"

"Oh, I'm afraid I can't—"

"Oh, you never can!" she pouted. "All right. But if I bring you a—a different pair of boots will you change into them?"

"Mine aren't wet; at least—"

"That's not the reason, Mike. I mean—"

"Then what is, Dolly? You did sort of give me permish, didn't you, to call you Dolly?"

"Did I?" she considered. "Anyhow, stay where you are. Oh!"

She broke off, for suddenly he was coming down the ladder.

"I'm going to work that machine for you," he whispered engagingly. "No one will come."

"I hope not. But I've an aunt—"

"I know you have!" he sympathised, at the same time filling the hopper of the pulper with mammoth swedes. "I've heard her. But you've a nice chum staying with you, anyhow. By the way, have you told her about me?"

"No, how could I? You said not."

He looked so unhappy at that, she felt bound to add quickly:

"Besides, I don't feel it would be good for you if I said a word, even to Paula or any other of my best friends. It's this rotten business of the thefts from the school, Mike."

"They would think I did it? Oh, you couldn't blame 'em for that, either," he shrugged. "I wonder you don't."

"Suspect you? Well, I don't."

A pause. He seemed to be going to start working the machine without another word; and then suddenly he spoke to her in a queer, almost emotional tone.

"I say, it's awfully good of you to take my word for it. I—I'll never forget."

Then he turned the handle that was attached to the big wheel and the sliced roots fell. Dolly drew back to the closed door, to stand in a sentinel-like attitude. Whilst her ears remained on the alert for warning sounds she gave her eyes to him as he worked away steadily.

A well-grown, well-cared-for boy. A bit unkempt and vagrant-like now, and yet he still had such an air of being a boy with a "code."

What was the motive for his submitting to all the hardships and loneliness—and so cheerfully? A runaway from school or home? No. Somehow his mood did not imply anything of that nature. He would be unhappy, bound to be, and he was not. No, he was extraordinarily cheerful, as if all would be quite well if only he could go on in hiding.

Suddenly she whispered:

"Mike, I'll be back in a jiffy. You can't work the machine while I'm gone, and that's quite enough roots, too."

She slipped out, taking the still empty pail with her.

Dolly rummaged out a pair of her father's old boots from the scullery cupboard, put them in the pail to hide them during transit, and was next minute back at the shed.

"Here, get into these, Mike."

"What! I say, you mustn't fuss."

"I must look after you!" she insisted. "You've got no one else, have you?"

"Not to depend on at present, so to speak. But there's no reason why you should—"

"Well, I think it is. Thanks for pulping the roots. Where can I find you, Mike, last thing before dark?"

"But you don't want to—"

"How silly you are!" she cut him short, whilst filling the pail with the sliced roots. "You must have a good meal to go through the night. I shall leave it in this shed for you, if you're not here."

She was now going away with the laden pail. But a cautious thought made her pause.

"Here, I'll have your own boots, Mike, and take them away."

"What!"

"Hurry up and kick them off; I want them."

"Well, you are a funny kid!" he breathed; but he was submissive to her orders, and in a few moments, standing in his socks only, he was handing her his discarded boots.

She received them with a happy smile.

"Thanks! Socks damp? I must find you a pair. But now—sh!" as she opened the door to slip out. "Good-bye!"

There was a responsive murmur from him; she did not catch the words. Outside the shed she had the pail with the boots in one hand, whilst

latching shut the door with the other, when she got a bad shock.

Betty and others were not a hundred yards away, sending up merry, hailing cries now that they had seen her.

And in the bucket was that pair of hobnailed boots—his boots!

Dolly kept her head. In the one moment that was left to her she darted out of sight of all her oncoming chums, and then tipped the pair of boots out of the pail on to a rubbish heap.

She had just time to kick some rubbish over the boots to hide them, and then she had to turn back and appear as calm and blithe as ever, whilst the girls careered towards her, crying:

"Hallo, Dolly! Where's Paula?"

#### Triumph of the "Detectives"!

"PAULA indoors, Dolly?"

"Er—yes—er—"

"We've all come along," rattled out Betty, "to see if you two can go back with us to the school for tea in Study 12."

"Bekas, ze best zing, a day like zis—have a jolly good spread; a gorjus spread!"

"But I don't know!" stammered Dolly. "Auntie may not like it."

"We've been tracking," the madcap gaily interrupted. "The Flying Squad of Morcove, hot on the trail."

"Yes, bekas—"

"We have established one fact," the madcap claimed, with mock importance. "The thief was at the old Round House at one in the morning. I tell you, Dolly, we are the ones. You and your police."

"They are not my police," disclaimed Dolly.

"This!" cried Polly, displaying something on an upturned palm. "A hobnail, Dolly, that worked out of the thief's boots."

"Bekas, you know he was treading about ze schoolhouse in nasty, dirty, hobbernailed boots," chimed in Naomer. "So he didn't bunk from ze district directly after ze thefts."

"And at any moment," Polly carried on the talk, "we hope to make an arrest. Can we go indoors, Dolly, and meet your aunt?"

Dolly could feel her cheeks going red and white by turns.

What with the secret presence of Mike the mysterious in that shed and the castaway pair of hobnail boots on the rubbish heap and Aunt Ada's irascible nature, poor Dolly knew not what to say.

As it chanced, a diversion occurred, to render her embarrassment unnoticed. Suddenly her chums caught sight of Paula Creel, as she came forth from the back door of the cottage, still in her coarse apron, and with dusters in her gloved hands and smudges on her cheeks.

Polly let out a yell of amusement.

"Goodness, just look at Paula! Ha, ha, ha!" "Bekas, ze jolly old lazybones, made to work at last, hooray!" Naomer cheered, and went capering to meet Paula.

"It's too bad," Dolly turned to say with a rueful smile to Betty and the rest. "Auntie has given Paula all the brasses to— Oh, and I think auntie is coming now!"

Sure enough there was that lady's strident voice, preceding her into the open air. At sound of such hostile cries Polly for one first gave a grimace and then jokingly turned to dart out of sight, pretending to be afraid. There was some

smothered laughter; but Dolly could not look amused. Hardly, when the madcap had skipped round to that rubbish heap.

"What—what is all this!" cried Aunt Ada, coming at them all with a rush. "Paula Creel, how dare you leave your work, and be seen in that state! Dolly—"

"Some of our chums from school, auntie."

"I don't care. Have they no better sense than to come here, making others as idle as themselves?"

"If you please," spoke Betty smoothly, "we only called in to ask—"

"I don't care—"

"If Dolly and Paula could go back to have tea with us at the school? Hope that you—"

"What! No, certainly not!" came the flat refusal. "The idea! Isn't it a half-holiday at the school? No work being done? Well, then, why—why should these two girls go trapseing across again?"

"Oh, only for the sake of—well—"

"Idleness, and I won't encourage it. Paula Creel, come indoors at once. Say good-bye to your friends immediately, the pair of you, and come in."

Walking away Aunt Ada fired a parting shot over one shoulder.

"I mean it, mind. I'll be out again in a minute, if there is any hanging about."

Then she herself returned to the cottage, leaving silence behind her. Betty and the others were experiencing something of that dazing effect which Paula had been undergoing all the afternoon.

But Polly—Polly had been out of sight whilst Aunt Ada was upon the scene. Having dodged off like that Polly had not cared about suddenly presenting herself.

Now she came creeping out to her chums, and as they all turned towards her their mouths opened wide in amazement.

"Yes," smiled the leading member of Morcove's Flying Squad, "see what I've found now."

And she held out at arm's length a pair of hobnailed boots.

#### What Can Dolly Do?

"PHEW!"

"Yes, bekas—"

"Sh'rrp, you!" Polly silenced the dusky one. "Do you want her to hear. But, I say, girls, isn't it a find? On the rubbish heap round the corner—you know, Dolly?"

Dolly nodded. Yes, she knew.

Then Betty turned to Dolly.

"Should they have been there, Doll?"

"No!"

And that again was true enough.

"But let's look," said Helen, eagerly taking one of the shabby boots. "Boys' size, I notice. But it strikes me, girls; if the hobnails we found came off one of these, then—"

"Gosh, yes," said Polly excitedly, "then there should be a place where one is missing. And there is."

"I wouldn't get too excited, Polly," advised Tess tersely. "You're rather apt to forget that heaps of people wear—"

"Oh, I know all about that!" the madcap exclaimed impatiently. "But you yourself saw that light at one in the morning, didn't you, at the Round House? And we found this hobnail lost from a boot, and here's a boot—a boy's boot—"



that has lost a hobnail. So what more could you want."

"The cashbox," suggested Helen with a short laugh. "Perhaps that's here, too?"

"Perhaps it is," said Polly, quite seriously.

"Yes, bekas, you never know."

"You sh'rrp! But this is my idea—"

"I say, though," Dolly desperately interposed, "hadn't you better get along?"

Polly's brows went up.

"What, before we've searched further? Dolly, how can you! Oh, no, after all, we're doing no harm. If we can run the thief to earth, I think people should be thankful."

"Bekas, Dolly, he might rob the cottage next. You never know."

Betty, like some of the others, had glanced away to the cottage. After a pause she said:

"Your aunt isn't coming, Doll. If Paula would go in, then you might just wait and have a look round with us? I do think we ought to—"

And there the captain broke off, looking freshly staggered.

Naomer had not seen why she shouldn't go ahead with the "look round." It had been her turn only a couple of moments ago to run round to the rubbish heap, and now she had sent up a yell.

"Ooo, queek—queek! All of you—queek!"

Dolly was with them as they rushed round the corner. It was her secret fear that Naomer must have caught sight of Mike. By mounting to the top of the rubbish heap perhaps the little imp had been able to peer in at the shed window.

But that fear was instantly dispelled. They found Naomer at the foot of the rubbish mound, casting aside a garden fork to snatch up some object which she had come upon.

And it was Etta Hargrove's cashbox, the lock broken, the box itself empty.

"Look!" said Naomer proudly. "Bekas, zat is my find, zat is."

"My goodness!" gasped Betty. "It was there, with his boots?"

"As soon as I looked at ze heap," Naomer panted, "I see something bright, shining amongst the litter. So I get hold of ze fork and dig, and out he comes. Eet was ze brass handle of the box that caught my eye at first."

"Great goodness!" said Polly. "We're getting warm. Yes, the scent is hot. He's been here, Dolly. But what on earth made him throw away his boots and the empty cashbox as well on your rubbish heap."

"I know," burst out Pam. "He slept in one of the outbuildings last night."

"He stole out at one in the morning," Betty excitedly carried on the chain of reasoning, "to meet some confederate at the Round House. Then

he came back, changed into fresh boots, and threw his old ones away, where he had already thrown the cashbox."

"That's it!"

"Bai Jove, mawvellous, the way you geals— Ow, gwacious, though," Paula broke off, with returning horror. "Here she comes, geals, again! Er—"

"Er—yes," blurted out Dolly. Little did any of her chums suspect the state of mind she was in.

"Er—come away."

But it was too late. As close as ever to the very shed which harboured Mike were all the girls, when Aunt Ada swooped towards them once more.

"I thought I told you!" she stormed.

"Yes, Aunt Ada, and they're going," said Dolly hastily; but Betty protested.

"See these finds we have made at this spot!" the Form-captain appealed to the irate lady. "It's the cashbox that was stolen yesterday. And these hobnailed boots must have been the thief's. Dolly says so."

"No, I don't!" cried Dolly rather wildly, and the others stared at her.

"You don't, Dolly? But you said they weren't anybody's belonging to the place."

"Oh, no—I mean, yes; that's right enough. Only—"

"What is the girl driving at!" cried Aunt Ada pettishly. "But it doesn't matter. Enough that the cashbox has been found on these premises, never mind the boots. The thief has been here then. He was probably hiding around here last evening, and those fools of police never caught him."

"But—" began Dolly.

"Oh, don't talk to me! Is the thief in hiding now?"

"Shall we have a hunt round?" clamoured Polly joyously. "Please, please do!"

"Yes, bekas, you won't sleep to-night."

Aunt Ada treated Naomer to a bridling look.

"That is enough of your impudence, girl! To suggest that I am a coward."

"No, bekas—"

"Silence! You girls shall search everywhere, every hole and corner, to make sure. And to prove that I am afraid of no one, be he thief or even worse than thief, I myself will head the search."

Ah, how Dolly's heart was pounding now!

"This shed—what's in here?" cried Aunt Ada, striding to the door of the shed where Dolly had last seen Mike.

And in she strode, with Morcove's "detectives" close upon her heels.

END OF THIS WEEK'S STORY.



What a shock for Dolly!

There is her aunt! And the boy with her—he is no other than 'Mike the Mysterious'!

But what can he be doing here? And what will happen when he and Dolly come face to face? You'll read the answer to all these perplexing questions in

"STUDY 12'S BIG BLUNDER!" in next week's issue of **SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN—2D.**