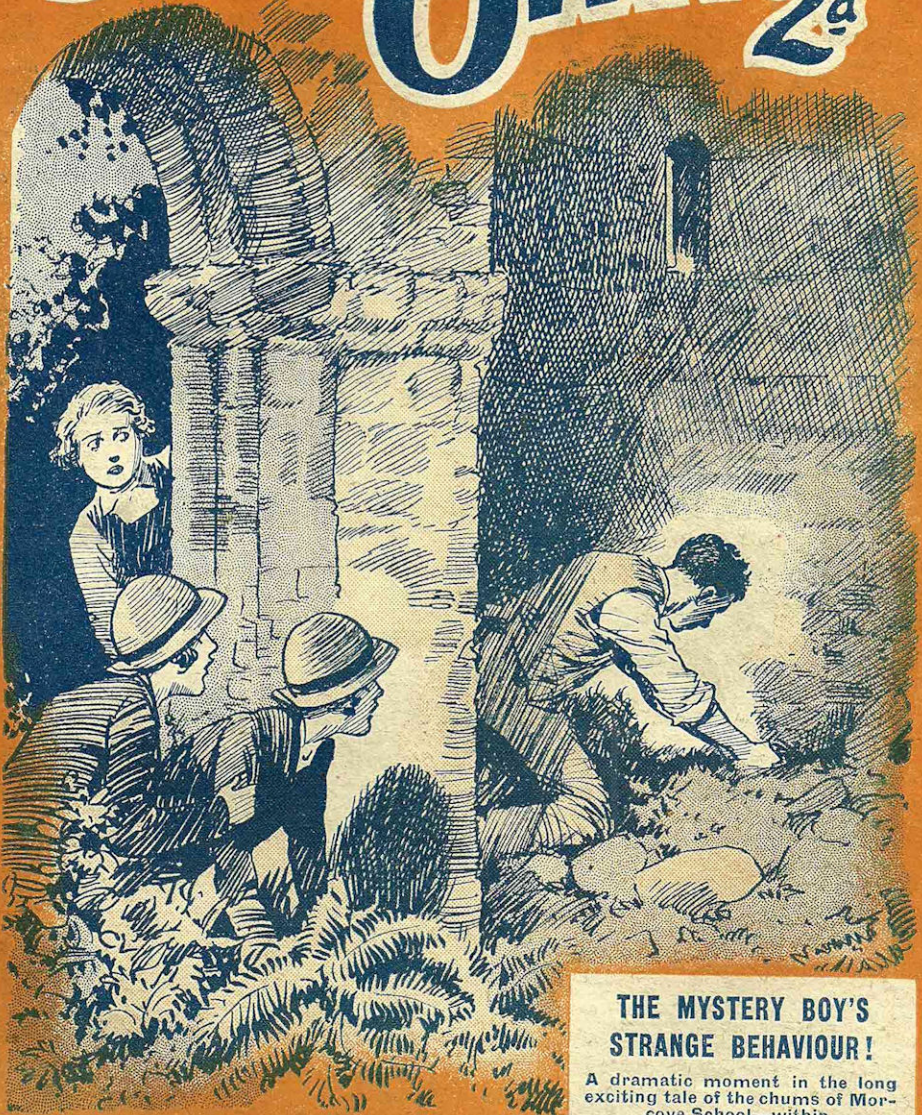


Don't  
Miss

"STUDY 12's BIG BLUNDER!"

By Marjorie  
Stanton—Inside

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



## THE MYSTERY BOY'S STRANGE BEHAVIOUR!

A dramatic moment in the long  
exciting tale of the chums of Mor-  
cove School—within.

Read How Betty and Co.'s Well-Meaning Investigations Led to—

# Study 12's Big



*Torn between her love for her chums, Betty and Co., of the Fourth, and her loyalty to the strange boy she has befriended, Dolly Delane's is an unenviable predicament. Try as she will, Dolly can find no solution to her difficulty. And then "Mike the Mysterious" himself comes to the rescue, but in the very last way the kind-hearted day-girl would have wished!*

## All the News!

"HERE you are, girls. All about the great robbery!"

"Oh, let's look—let's look, Polly!"

"Read it out, Polly."

"Yes, bekas, anything about us?"

Polly Linton, that madcap of the Fourth Form at Morcove School, had whisked into Study 12 flourishing the local paper.

"Silence then," she requested with mock primness, "while I read it out."

And she began:

"Robbery at Morcove School. Daylight Raid by Unknown Thief! Charity Collection Stolen."

"They might have left out the word 'charity,'" remarked Form-captain Betty Barton. "Still, go ahead, Polly."

"Last Tuesday, Morcove School, of which our district is so justly proud—"

"As it jolly well should be," put in Helen Craig. "But go on, Polly."

"I'm going on if you'll let me. Ahem!" Polly cleared her voice. "—was the victim of a daring robbery, committed in broad daylight, whilst scholars were in class."

"Which shows the mistake," said Biddy Loveland, "of girls always being in class."

"Hear, hear!"

"Yes, bekas, eef—"

"Order!" requested Betty, thumping the table. "How can Polly continue this dramatic and emotional narrative from the jolly old Barncombe Herald if you girls will interrupt. Start again, Polly."

## By Marjorie Stanton

"Last Tuesday—"

"Oh, when I said start again," interrupted the captain, "I meant go on from where you left off."

"Can't find the place," grumbled Polly. "'A cashbox containing nearly three pounds, forming a collection made by one of the scholars for the Christmas tree at—'"

"Half ze moment, Polly. What ze diggings, doesn't it say she was a Fourth-Former who was collecting ze money?"

"It does not."

"Shame!" cried the chums in mock indignation. "We'll burn the Herald."

"But read the rest first," said Betty sweetly. So the madcap, in her best dramatic style, resumed:

"It has been established that the theft was committed by a man or youth wearing hobnailed boots, and—"

"Whoa, half ze jiffy, Polly. Does it say that we girls found ze clue of ze hobbornailed boots?"

"It does not."

"Shame!" cried Study 12 again. "Booh! Ha, ha, ha!"

"I shall write to ze jolly oid editor, bekas—"  
"Shoo, you!" the madcap silenced that dusky imp, Naomer Nakara. "And listen, girls, to what it says about the police."

# Blunder!



"Ah, the police!" was the cry. "Go on, Polly; let's hear what they have done."

"The police," Polly read out, loudly and solemnly, "have the matter in hand—"

"They have the matter in hand!" exclaimed Betty. "What more could you want, girls."

"Eet would be better if zey had ze stolen money in their hands, and Pam's stolen coins, too. Bekas—"

"Or-der! Go on, Polly."

"At the moment of going to press, however," came the anti-climax from the local newspaper, "the matter remains a mystery."

"So much for the good old Herald."

"And so much for the police."

"And what ze diggings, nuzzing for us."

"Not even our money back," chuckled Helen. "Or your Indian gold coins, Pam."

Pam Willoughby was prevented from answering, as Polly, having screwed the Herald into a paper ball, suddenly hurled it at Naomer's head, for no other reason than that Polly liked to throw things at Naomer.

Next moment the paper ball was in play in the study, with Betty "in goal" at the open doorway. A scrum took place at one corner of the table, then Polly heeled out, and with a fine shot scored. Whereupon, great cheering.

Betty slammed the door, leaving the "football" in the passage.

"We musn't make all this row," she laughed.

"What it is," said Polly in excuse, "we haven't got Paula now. Ever since Paula went to stay with Dolly Delane, coming to school with her as a day girl, this study has not been the same."

The others laughed.

"I never noticed that Paula's presence ever made for peace and quietness," grinned Betty.

"That," said the madcap sadly, "was because you didn't know how to treat her. You were always teasing her. Poor Paula. How often have I—"

"How often have you teased her, Polly. Bekas you know very well, you were ze one."

"I? I was always a good friend to Paula," protested the madcap virtuously. "And she misses me now—ah! I could read it in her eyes only a few minutes ago, when she was going back to the cottage with Dolly for dinner. 'If only I had not drawn the winning ticket, Polly, when we drew lots as to who should go to keep Dolly company while her parents are away!' I could read that in her eyes."

"I don't see why," objected Naomer. "Bekas, she probabubly gets a better dinner zan we get."

"She gets bullied from morning to night at the cottage by that aunt of Dolly's who has come to look after her. We," continued Polly with eloquence, "have seen Dolly's Aunt Ada. Were there yesterday. Were we enamoured of her? Did we fall for her?"

"No, bekas—"

"Were we." Polly shouted, "tempted to envy Paula and Dolly? Perish the thought."

"Eef you ask me—"

"No one, Naomer, is asking you anything, except to be quiet. Dolly's Aunt Ada, girls, is a nasty, grumpy, nagging terror, that's what she is. Considering we ended up yesterday's 'halfer' with—ahem!—a triumph of detective work, proving that the thief had thrown his hobnail boots and the rifled cash-box on a rubbish heap at the cottage; and further—"

more—"

"Dinner!" interjected Naomer, hearing the gong from below. "Queek, come on, girls."

"What's the good of dinner?" demurred Helen glumly. "You have only to go into school again afterwards."

But although the chums in general could sympathise with this pessimistic view, it being a full working day at the school, they responded promptly enough to the gong's summons.

Drifting out of Study 12, they mingled with other juniors who were now going down to table. There was rather more of the usual boisterousness, due perhaps to girls not having got out of doors enough in the last few days to work off superfluous energy. The weather had been awful.

But on the way downstairs Betty and one or two others got left behind by the more riotous element and they were inclined to return to the topic of the recent robbery in serious tones.

"Joking apart," said Betty, "that aunt of Dolly's might have been a little less snappy with us yesterday afternoon. After all, if it hadn't been for us it would never have been known that the thief must have been hanging about the cottage's outbuildings the night after the robbery."

Madge Minden smiled faintly.

"Dolly's aunt seemed to be annoyed that we didn't find the thief himself, after finding out so much about him."

"Yes, well," said Pam, "that wasn't our fault. We searched everywhere, giving up the last hour of our 'halfer' to the search."

"And then had to come home to get tea for ourselves," laughed Betty. "Oh, Aunt Ada over there at the cottage is certainly grumpy. Only we musn't say anything much in front of Dolly, of course."

"It certainly must be a disappointment for her," nodded Tess Trelawney. "I thought she

looked quite worried when she came to school this morning."

"You can't wonder," said Pam. "Quite apart from Aunt Ada, it can't be nice for Dolly and Paula to know that the thief was hanging about that place. But he's gone right out of the district by now, let's hope."

"I hope so, for Dolly's sake," was Betty's finishing remark. "She always has to pop out last thing to give an eye to the animals. No joke to have to do that, thinking all the time that some bad character may be hiding amongst the buildings."

They were downstairs by now, and only another moment or so was left for serious talk.

"It would be a good idea," Madge exclaimed, "to get both Paula and Dolly to stay on for a bit after school—stay to tea with us."

The Fourth Form captain nodded in hearty approval.

#### A Little Domestic Science!

"COME back with the carpet-sweeper, Paula, when you've taken those things to the sink. Mind how you go now. If you drop that tray—"

"Ow!" gasped Paula Creel, feeling sure she was going to drop it even then. The eyes of Dolly's Aunt Ada were upon Paula.

"That, Paula, is not the way to go out of the room with a tray—raising a knee to balance it whilst you open the door. Most unladylike!"

"Et—I wealise—"

"Then knowing better, why don't you do so. Oh, you girls!" sighed Aunt Ada despairingly.

"Not one of you any good."

At any rate, here were two girls who were assuredly making themselves useful. Paula carried out the tray of used dinner-things to Dolly, who was already briskly washing-up at the scullery-sink.

"Thanks, Paula. You're sweet!"

"Not at all, Dolly deah. Chawmed, if only your aunt would kindly wefain frowm—"

"Now, you two out there. Not so much talk, or you'll never be in time for school."

With an expression of horror as this fault-finding cry came from the sitting-room Paula seized the carpet-sweeper and took it to that room. Again she was under the eyes of irascible Aunt Ada whilst starting to push and pull the sweeper over the carpet. Paula hit a chair-leg—whack; then she hit a table-leg—bash!

"That's not the way, girl! Look where you are going with the thing. And use some energy."

Then Paula, using energy, hit Aunt Ada's left shin—whack! It was not that Paula had failed to look where she was going; simply that Aunt Ada, whilst directing operations, had suddenly got in the sweeper's sway.

Out in the scullery Dolly heard a screech that would have made her burst into subdued laughter, but at this moment she was seizing the chance to do something urgent.

Already she had put by, between two plates, portions of the food that had comprised their own midday dinner. Now, feeling sure that Aunt Ada would continue to concentrate upon poor Paula, the daughter of this cottage home on the Barncombe road ran out by the back door into the yard, taking that saved-over meal with her.

Past a pig-sty she darted, the fat old sow grunting appealingly but in vain. The old sow could wait.

A few seconds later Dolly was inside one of the store-sheds.

She heeled the door close to behind her, then whispered towards the loft:

"Mike!"

Instantly a boy peered down through the hole in the loft floor, by which that upper half of the shed was entered, with the aid of a ladder.

"Your dinner, Mike."

"I say, you shouldn't!" he whispered, starting to descend the ladder. "You're always thinking of me, Dolly."

"So long as you're here, I must, Mike," was the murmur that made him exclaim:

"Then I'd better clear out, that's all."

"But you—you don't want to, do you?" she submitted. "Oh, I'm not trying to pump you, Mike. You said you couldn't explain, and I'm not going to interfere into your business. But you are still here. And isn't it risky after that robbery at the school?"

This good-looking boy gave Dolly one of those steady scrutinies which only eyes as honest as his could confer.

"I'll say this, Dolly," he whispered, a little huskily; "it may mean a terrible thing for— for someone else if I have to clear out of this hiding-place."

"And if you remain?"

"Ah!" he said, his face lighting up in the gloom of the shed. "Then perhaps if only I have a bit of luck, it will be a great thing for that same person."

"Someone dear to you?" she inferred quickly.

"That's it, Dolly. Still, you're nothing to me— What am I saying? I mean, you're not connected with me in any way, of course, and so it's not fair that you should be dragged into the business."

Dolly smiled at him.

"Hardly, when I don't know what the business is," she said softly. "But there it is, Mike. I can't let you starve."

"I wasn't starving when you found me," he remarked quietly. "I had enough food to last me for a bit. Not but what I'm glad of this"—glancing at the food she had smuggled out to him. "Only, I'm thinking of the risk to you, Dolly."

"And I'm thinking of the risk to you, Mike. You were so very nearly caught yesterday afternoon. All those chums of mine from the school turning up as they did, and then my Aunt Ada agreeing to let them search everywhere."

"I know; it was a bit of a scare that," he chuckled. "They jolly nearly had me, that's a fact."

Dolly was looking mirthful now.

"I still marvel at the way you dodged them. When they all swarmed into this very shed you slipped out of the loft up there by way of the trapdoor that overhangs the yard. When they were going up this inside ladder to the loft you were dropping down outside. It was too funny for words." She laughed at the memory.

"And I easily dodged them after that," he grinned.

"But it wouldn't have been anything to laugh at if they had caught you or even seen you, Mike," was Dolly's rejoinder. "They found those hobnailed boots on the rubbish heap, and they were your boots."

"Good stout pair, that I put on for the purpose when I—well, when I started out on this business."

Dolly pouted.

"I wish you wouldn't keep on about 'the business,' when you can't tell me what it is. Oh, and they had found the rifled cashbox, too, on the rubbish heap. Mike," she whispered tensely, "I can't understand about that cashbox being found on the place."

"I can," came the answer that startled her. "You go to Morcove School, don't you?"

"In between housework and looking after livestock, and you, I do," she nodded. "But what's that got to do with it?"

"This," he whispered. "It's my belief, Dolly, the cashbox was thrown on the rubbish heap so as to throw suspicion upon you."

"On me! Oh, ridiculous!" laughed Dolly.

"You may well think so," he smiled. "But the thief was very likely a rough chap, with not much intelligence. He might have thought that the school would be ready to suspect you. He wouldn't know, of course, that the marks of his hobnailed boots had been left behind in the school."

A sigh came from Dolly.

"I do wish you had never worn those hobnailed boots that I took away from you because they were damp. And look here, Mike, before I slip back and get on with my job. Those chums of mine at the school they're such keen detectives; they went and found a hobnail that must have come out of one of your boots."

"Yes, I heard them saying—"

"It's nothing to grin about. Mike," she pleaded in a deep whisper. "They found that hobnail over at a place called the Round House, out on the moor. They went there because Tess Trelawney had seen a light over there at one in the morning? Were you ever there at one in the morning?"

"If I was," said Mike the mysterious, "I did not show a light. Oh, Dolly, I don't like to see you looking so—"

"Sh!"

And with a thrown-up finger Dolly suddenly slipped out into the open air. Whilst talking with him she had picked up one of the big swedes that were heaped in a corner and she was dropping the huge round root into the pigsty when Aunt Ada called from the back door of the cottage:

"Dolly, I thought you were washing-up?"

"Coming, auntie," was the calm response. "But I had to give the old sow something to be going on with."

Twenty minutes later Morcove's two day girls parked their bicycles in the shed adjoining the games-field and then ran for the schoolhouse. It was striking two, and classes were mustering. Particularly breathless was Paula as she fell in with all the juniors who were making for their desks.

"How is lazybones?" Naomer greeted the oft-teased one.

"And how, Paula—oh, do tell us how is Aunt Ada!" said Polly. "Hallo, Dolly. Seen old Hobnails? But I am forgetting; it is young Hobnails. His boots proved that."

Dolly laughed about as feebly at this as Paula had smiled at the allusion to Aunt Ada. This was the nightmare that school-time meant for Dolly at present; nothing but talk about the robbery.

At any moment she expected to hear that Betty and the rest were intending a fresh burst of detective work. They had done so well yesterday

—worse luck for her, Dolly, and for that boy whom she had befriended.

The problem set in the afternoon lessons were as nothing compared with the problem that had been engaging her wits for nearly two days and nights.

Who, in fact, was Mike? Where was his home, what the school to which he belonged, and why—why was he neither at school nor at home. Why was he enduring discomforts, hardships, risks, persisting in this furtive life?

Was he innocent of all part in the robbery? Most certainly. He had given her his word, and the word of a boy like him was to be trusted. Should she then go on aiding him in secret?



"Mike!" Dolly whispered up. "I've brought you some dinner!" "I say, you shouldn't, Dolly," the lad protested. But Dolly only laughed softly.

She must. And say nothing to any of the other girls, not even to Paula? No, not a word. He had begged her not to, but had not exacted any promise.

And his reason for not getting her to promise silence was, come to think of it, rather nice. "He trusts me."

The school-room clock ticked its way round to the dismissal hour. She saw the hands at last at five-and-twenty past three, and thought: "In a few minutes off home again. And so perhaps I can see him again."

But if only that could mean that he would confide in her at last.

Then she was out of school with the rest of the Form, and suddenly the way to the cloak-room was barred to both her and Paula by an affectionate mob.

"Bekas—"

"You're to stay on and have tea with us!" Betty cried.

"Bai Jove!" beamed Paula, but Dolly faltered.

"Oh, how can I! Let Paula stay, but—"

"Both or neither," laughed the captain, and Dolly became a kind of captive, going under escort up to Study 12.

As for Paula, never had she beamed so happily as when she got to this her own old study and could sink into her own old armchair.

The madcap imitated a certain irascible lady. "Now, Paula, no sitting about. Now, girls, not so much talk, talk, talk! When I ask you to lay tea—lay it."

"Ha, ha, ha!" Dolly pealed, along with all the others. "Aunt Ada to the life!"

Then Polly, whilst the tea-things were being rattled out, adopted a different rôle. She became the motherly sympathiser towards Paula.

"My poor child, what have they been doing to you! Worn out, poor lamb!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Did they make her do the housework then. But never mind, pettums; take it quietly now."

"If you geals will let me—with pleasure," beamed Paula. "Bai Jove, this is a tweek, geals! This is a wealcome relief, yes, wather! Dolly knows I have been bearing up cheerfully for her sake; but it has been a stwain, a gweat twial."

"Do you good!" snorted the madcap, going off into yet another rôle. "It's high time you did learn to use your hands. And if I see Aunt Ada I shall urge her to carry on with the good work. I shall say we are deeply indebted to her."

"Bekas, after all," shrilled Naomer, "you are not having such a bad time. You have what you like to eat, and I suppose if you want to go into Barncombe in ze evening, you can."

"Chairs round," was the cry a minute later, whilst one of the merry band sped away for boiling water.

But it was agreed that Paula must be left to have her tea in the armchair. They would wait upon her. Cushions were shaken up and placed behind her head; such a fuss was made as would have been "most gwatifying" to the languid one, if only there had not been a good deal of teasing in it all.

They even provided her with a hassock, and it was Naomer who, whilst adjusting the hassock, suddenly lifted Paula's dainty feet as high as her tipped-back head.

"Owch! Dwp it, geals; stop it!"

"Ha; ha, ha!"

"But are you comfortabubble?" inquired the imp. "Bekas, eef not, we fetch down a jolly old bed for you."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Biddy Loveland's return with the boiling water put an end to the fun with Paula. Down sat the girls to one of those lavish spreads for which Study 12 had a reputation, and Dolly, sitting between the captain and Polly, was feeling less inclined to worry about the safety of Mike over at the cottage, when—

"Hallo!" came in a startled way from Tess Trelawney.

It was like Tess before sitting down to have gone to the window to study the sky. Her artistic

eye was always on the look-out for paintable effects.

"Police over at the cottage again, Dolly."

"What!"

They were all up from their chairs instantly, but none quicker than Dolly Delane. She almost "fell over herself" as she rushed to the window.

The others crowded there with her, and sure enough they all saw a couple of helmeted constables drifting about outside the cottage. They were on the ground at the back of the little thatched dwelling and appeared to be searching.

"Much good they'll do!" scoffed Polly.

"It's because they have heard about the boots and cashbox being found on that rubbish heap yesterday," Betty inferred. "Oh, well, let's wish them luck!"

"Yes, wather!"

"Come on, Dolly!" she was appealed to by those who were resuming their seats at table. "You want your tea."

She turned back to her chair, but oh, if only she could have been at the cottage now! It might have been all up with Mike, on the occasion of that first visit by the police, if she had not been there.

"Didn't see your aunt," remarked the Form-captain, pouring out. "I wonder she wasn't in sight. You don't mind our rather joking about your Aunt Ada, Dolly?"

"Oh, no!"—with a laugh.

"I thought you looked a bit—well, upset, just then," smiled the captain. "But it's only our fun, honest. Your tea, Dolly."

"And which will you have, bekas," cried Naomer, offering laden plates, "ze cream-buns are highly recommended."

"What's Paula having?" inquired Polly. "Oh, the poor child is being forgotten!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Several of them were out of their seats again, this time to wait upon Paula. She was offered a most embarrassing choice.

"Brown or white, Paula?"

"Cake, Paula? Almond or fruit?"

"Cream-buns, Paula?"

"Bai Jove!"

"Or Sweess-roll, bekas—"

"Macaroons, Paula?"

"Weally, geals, unless I am to spill my tea—Owp, theah it goes, all down my fwock!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You bad girl!" the madcap promptly scolded the oft-teased one. "Now you shan't have any tea at all."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"No, bekas—"

Naomer was adding to all the riot that it was, when the door burst open and there at the threshold stood—Aunt Ada!

#### Mike's Farewell.

THE merry hubbub in Study 12 changed to silence. Then someone gave a little laugh. It was Biddy Loveland, and Aunt Ada gave her a look. Such a look.

"I want," said Aunt Ada, with a kind of passionate composure, "no impudence! Dolly—Paula! What are you doing here?"

"Er—having tea, auntie," Dolly stated the obvious.

"Did I say you were to have tea here? Is there nothing for you two girls to do at the cottage that you must stay on here? Idling

about," cried Aunt Ada wrathfully. "Making so much noise; it is scandalous! And no one, it appears, to keep order!"

She turned to Betty.

"You, I think, are captain? Are you supposed to allow all this?"

"Why, yes, Miss Addison," said Betty. "I'm afraid we're always fairly noisy at tea-time. The headmistress doesn't mind at all."

"The idea!" cried Aunt Ada. "No wonder—no wonder Dolly and Paula impress me so unfavourably. They are taught no better. You two girls, go and get your things on instantly—"

"Oh, shame!" burst out Polly in her hot-headed way. "Surely

"What did you say, girl?"

"I said it's a shame," Polly answered bluntly. "And so it is!"

"Bckas, what zo diggings—"

"Silence!" stamped Aunt Ada.

"Or I will complain to the headmistress. I am sceing her, remember: That's why I am here. I had to come across about the robbery. The police are at the cottage again. I expected to meet you two girls on your way home to the cottage, and, instead, I find—this!"

"But, Miss Addison," pleaded Betty, "Dolly and Paula are our chums, and they've been in school all the afternoon, working hard. Can't they be allowed to—"

"Girls to-day are allowed far too much!" cried Aunt Ada. "No, they must go, the pair of them—at once. Don't wait for me, you two. Go home at once!"

"All right, auntie," said Dolly, so readily that some of the others gave her a surprised look.

Immediately Dolly realised what they were thinking; she might show a little more spirit. But they didn't know that she had such a desperate reason for wanting to go home—at once.

Next moment she was moving towards the doorway where Aunt Ada stood aside to let her go out, followed by Paula. The expression on Paula's face would have been comical if it had not been so pathetic. The "wealcome" cup denied her, dashed from her lips.

"I shall make a point of watching," said Aunt Ada in a tight-lipped manner, "to see that you get back to the cottage without a moment's waste of time. And please understand"—turning to the rest of the girls—"I want no more of this. Out of school hours, those girls are under me!"

She walked out after Dolly and Paula, and the door closed with a little vicious slam behind her.

"And if I were Dolly," burst forth the madcap, "I'm dashed if I'd stand for it!"

"To avoid a scene," said Betty.

"Oh, burr!" exploded the madcap disgustedly. "I'm surprised at Dolly."



"Just look there, Betty," said Polly, pointing. "I see him!" jerked out Betty excitedly. "Quite a young fellow, by the Round House."

"This wretched bike of mine, Dolly—oh, deah!"

Dolly darted to help her schoolmate extricate the machine from those with which it was all mixed up.

"There, dear, now you're all right, so let's get away."

"Weally, Dolly, you are awfully good, but I can't be washed," Paula's ruffled state made her say. "I hev had no tea yet, pway wemembah!"

"The sooner we get home, the sooner. But I know; I'll ride on, Paula. That'll be best."

And away went Dolly, feeling quite entitled to adopt this ruse. She had decided, days ago, that Mike must have the best aid she could give him, and never had he been in more urgent need of it perhaps than he was at this moment.

This moment, when the police were again at the cottage, with liberty and official right to search where they pleased.

Down to the gates Dolly whirled, and then on the high road she raced along as if it were a matter of life or death. Whirr, whirr, whirr, the pedals went, whilst her head hung low over the handlebars. Only a mile to go, if that, thank goodness, and then perhaps she would get her reward for having saved every possible moment.

Or would she be too late, after all? Reach home, only to find those policemen with Mike—in custody. If found, he would certainly be taken up.

Reaching home, she made a breathless pause,

A JANGLING crash in the cycle-sheds and then Paula Creel gave a weary-sounding sigh.

neither seeing nor hearing anyone. Going on to the shed where she had last seen Mike, she got no response to a whispered: "Mike!"

After a moment she came out again and walked about inquiringly. A low grunt came from the sow in the sty, and that was all.

At last Dolly called aloud:

"Anyone about?"

There was no answer. Then she could be sure that the police had gone. But where, and why?

Out on to the open moor perhaps in pursuit of a suspect who had been glimpsed as he made off?

She rushed to an old apple-tree and climbed it, knowing it to be such a good look-out point. She was able to gaze over a large expanse of the moorland and still she could see not a sign of life.

Then came an apprehension that made her blood run cold.

The police had gone back to the town, having captured Mike.

It was a moment for her to realise how greatly he had claimed her friendship.

"If he were anywhere about the place now he would know that the police have gone and that I am here by myself. He would come out," she reasoned sadly; "but he is gone. They took him by surprise, of course."

And yet in her longing to see him she went to all the different outbuildings where he might be hiding after all and whispered appealingly again and again:

"Mike! Are you there, Mike? It's safe for you now."

No answer ever.

So at last she went into the cottage, and pulling herself together, began to see about some tea. Poor Paula must have some. She was coming in now.

"Phew, bai Jove! Weady to dwop, Dolly deah, aren't you?"

"Tea'll be ready in two ticks," smiled Dolly, who had sticks blazing under the kettle. "Do you mind if I leave you to get yours, Paula, and have mine later?"

"Gwacious, Dolly!"

"I must pop out and see to a few things. Those calves are shouting!"

They had started their clamour for a bite of hay whilst she was seeking Mike, associating her hurry-scurry about the place with feeding time. For once Dolly was short with them as she let herself into the calf-pen and reached down an armful or so of hay.

"Greedy things! There you are; get on with that!"

Then as she stepped away after filling the hay-rack, she stopped dead. Something white, lying at the bottom of a wooden trough out of which the animals ate, had caught her eye.

A slip of paper—a sheet torn from a pocket-book.

Snatching it up, she read:

"You have been a pal. Good-bye. "MIKE."

Her eyes, when first they scanned those words, filled with wild relief and delight. He was not in custody then. He had gone before the police turned up; had gone away, simply to avoid burdening her any more. And what a fine fellow that proved him to be.

Then, as a check upon all the relief, there came

the thought; his lonely, arduous life in hiding was not at an end. "Good-bye" did not mean that his purpose was achieved and that now he had gone home!

Pensively she folded the little sheet of paper and put it away in her pocket, then set about certain routine jobs.

Somehow she felt that this was not the end of her strange, thrilling association with that mysterious lad. At any moment a new chapter might open, and so she must be prepared, must hold herself as free as possible.

The late autumn day was finishing when at last she went indoors. Her aunt had not come back, and Paula accordingly was looking extremely happy.

"Bai Jove, Dolly deah, I feel wondewfully wewfeshed. I'd like to clear away these tea-things as soon as you have had yours."

"I only want this," said Dolly, pouring herself out a cup of tea to take it upon her lap, with a slice of bread-and-butter. "By the way, Paula darling, I—er—I may go out again."

"Bai Jove, to the town, do you mean? But how about Aunt Ada, Dolly?"

"I can't help Aunt Ada," was the answer which would surely have delighted Polly Linton, if Polly had only been there.

The light was waning from the sitting-room even as Dolly sipped her tea. Afterwards, she went upstairs to her own little bed-room to change into some thicker stockings and put on stouter shoes.

This done, she went to the window and looked out, in sudden doubt as to whether after all she should be going. The twilight would be short. Away yonder on the moor was the old Round House, looming like a ruined tower through the bluish gloom. She could be there and back again within the next hour easily; but perhaps she had left it too late?

And yet there was something telling her that it was the place where she could hope to find him. Part of the mystery about the lad was that he had been there, on his own admission, at dead of night. Well, she could not do any lying in wait there by night. But if she slipped away now, what harm in that?

She sent a last glance out of window to make sure that her Aunt Ada was not coming, then passed downstairs and out by the back door into the gathering dusk.

#### Seen From Study 12!

"GIRLS, I believe—I believe—" "What do you believe, Polly?" "Yes, you say, Polly—queek! Bekas—"

"Someone out there on the moor—a young man or a boy; I'm certain!" Study 12's madcap breathed excitedly. "And he looks to me to be making for the Round House!"

"Never! I say, where? Let's look!"

And Betty flew to Polly at the study window, the madcap promptly handing over some field-glasses she had been using.

"Just there, Betty," she said, pointing. "It's funny; I only started to use these glasses to see if I could spot Dolly and Paula over at the cottage. Then I thought I'd take a look at the Round House out there on the moor, for I can't forget that it was there—"

"I see him!" Betty interrupted, peering through the glasses. "Quite a young fellow."

"Yes."



"And he does look to be sort of creeping through the heather, as if not wanting to be seen."

"He would never reckon with somebody watching with glasses," Polly commented. "It'll soon be dark, and I can't see him without the glasses."

Betty lowered them, looking very excited.

"Too late to go out and explore?" she questioned tensely. "No, I don't think so, do you?"

As if Polly would think so!

"Just the two of us," Betty spoke on quickly. "Naomer, you must be a sport and stay back."

"All right, I will be ze sport. So long as you collar ze thief."

"I don't suppose for a moment we shall do that," grinned Betty. "But we may do some good. Even if the money collected for the Christmas tree is gone for ever, it would be great if we could get back Pam's gold coins. They were very rare curios."

"Come on," urged Polly, already at the door. "We've time."

In a few minutes the pair of them were faring across the twilight moor with all possible speed. They could proceed with all this haste without fear of blundering upon their suspect. For he, seen, through the glasses, had been going towards the ruined Round House as from the direction of the Barncombe road.

"In fact, Polly," whispered the captain, as they zig-zagged through the heather and gorse, "he might have been sneaking away from the Delanes' place, by the look of him!"

Polly nodded.

"Yep," she whispered back. "And, come to think of it, that makes it all the more suspicious. The police have been to Dolly's home again in the last hour or two. Perhaps their turning up scared the fellow, and he sneaked away almost under their very noses."

The guarded talk lapsed. Already the two juniors were within a quarter of a mile of the Round House, and it was time to be extremely cautious.

Suddenly they both gave a violent start and then stopped dead, when they had been creeping on without making a sound. Somebody close at hand. Somebody going with much the same stealth as theirs across this ground that afforded such good cover.

They remained at a standstill, exchanging excited glances. Feeling sure that it must be their suspect and aware that the next few moments might produce an encounter, they felt very keyed up.

Then to their utter amazement who should suddenly come blundering right upon them but one of their own schoolmates.

Dolly Delane.

If they were amazed, she was utterly staggered—and more than that. In the half light they saw her looking quite upset now that she had writhed clear of some screening ground growth, to find herself face to face with them.

They gasped at her:

"Dolly! Why, what—"

"Oh—er—is it you?"

"That's us!" grinned Betty. "On the track again, Dolly."

"And this time we think we've got him!" whispered Polly, her eyes bright with expectant triumph. "Sh! You're on the same trail, Dolly? You've spotted him, then, from your cottage window, I suppose?"

"Spotted—him?" faltered the day girl.

"A fellow—only a lad," breathed Betty.

"Little more than a schoolboy, we made him out to be. Polly saw him first, when she was using those field-glasses of ours in the study. He seemed to be making for the Round House, too."

"So we rushed out to get after him, Dolly. You'll come on with us now, of course."

"Join forces, that's the idea," chuckled Betty. "But what's the matter, Dolly?"

"I do believe Dolly is afraid we're going to get him sent to prison," smiled the madcap. "Nothing of the sort, Dolly. But if we can get the gold coins back, not to say the collection money, we jolly well will!"

Poor Dolly! Never in her life had she been in a worse quandary.

Refuse to go on with these chums of hers, she dare not. Nor would she if she could. But what the upshot of it all would be now she could imagine.

Here were Betty and Polly, standing the very best chance of running to earth her Mike! She called him "her" Mike in her own mind, for the simple reason that he had been so dependent upon her.

"We mustn't waste a moment," whispered Polly. "Got to get back by look-up. Not like you, Dolly."

She thought to herself as she stole on with them, in far more senses than one, how differently were they placed from her.

Their chief idea—and it was one they were quite right to hold—was to achieve something in connection with the robbery.

Morcove School had been the victim, and so Morcove girls had every reason for doing what they could in the matter. But she, although she was a Morcove girl, how she was trembling again or that boy who was only known to her as "Mike."

Could these two chums of her, or any others, be expected to accept his denials as she had accepted them? Would they be likely to, any more than the police, supposing Mike finished up in the hands of the police?

So terribly was the ill-fated lad implicated now. Everything pointed to his being the culprit.

In the bluish gloom of the autumnal twilight the ivied walls of the ruinous Round House loomed close in front of them now.

They had got as close as this without even making so much sound as a scampering rabbit might have caused. They checked, listening intently, and in a few moments all three thought a faint noise had come.

It was as if someone inside the half-fallen, circular walls of the ancient building had started to dig.

Dolly noticed an exchange of glances between her chums, and she guessed what was passing in their minds. They had inferred that the thief was either here to make a hiding-place for his haul, or else he was now digging up what had been previously hidden.

Again she was nudged as a warning that the intention was to creep forward and see exactly what the suspect was up to.

Then Betty and Polly, the one behind other, tip-toed on again, and she could only follow.

So they got to the very entrance to the Round House, that ivied doorway from which the door itself had long since dropped away, to lie rotting amongst the nettles.

She found the two girls were were in front of her stopping as they peered in, thus enabling her

to see over their crouching figures. And what she saw, as did they, was a boy kneeling upon the weedy rubble that covered the ground in there, putting something into a shallow hole.

And it was Mike—it was Mike himself right enough!

Her mind was in miserable expectation of an immediate, denouncing cry from Betty and Polly; her heart was throbbing violently when she found both of them backing sharply.

Then she understood. They wanted to withdraw before he should look round in his guilty nervousness and see them.

How they all three contrived to do this successfully she was never to be able to understand. Her own feet seemed leaden, whilst her brain was dizzy, so that only some subconscious need of continued caution saved her from making betraying sounds, whilst Betty and Polly were keeping all their wits about them.

The next she knew she was standing with them in safe cover waiting for him to creep away. The light was almost gone now; in what little remained she saw Betty and Polly continually smiling at her.

They seemed to be wanting to say: "It's splendid! We can get what he has buried there when he's gone!"

But again—how could she have any share in this delight of theirs! With her own eyes she had seen Mike performing that tell-tale action.

Hearing him coming out by the ancient doorway they huddled low amongst screening brambles and bracken. Then they could just glimpse him as he came creeping forth, glancing uneasily this way and that.

But he did not catch sight of them, and in a moment he was darting away.

"Now!" Betty whispered, after allowing a minute for him to clear clear of the spot.

They rose up and trod back to the ruins. Betty and Polly had an eagerness that was not Dolly's. She was only sick at heart. Excitedly her two chhums, in advance of her, rushed to that part of the rubble-bestrew ground inside the ruin where they had seen the boy burying something in the shallow hole.

Polly instantly fell to work, with only her fingers for scraping away the patted-down rubble and brickbats.

"We must be quick!" she panted. "Ah, what's this? Here we are, girls!"

She got up from her knees, her right hand displaying a screw of white paper. It seemed to Dolly the one thing to be showing in the deepening darkness.

"Well, what is it?" clamoured Betty.

The madcap unscrewed the paper, revealing its contents.

"Pam's gold coins," she said.

#### Naomer Keeps the Secret!

"**B**ETTY and Polly not here, Naomer?"

"No, bekas—"

The dusky one said the rest in a whisper.

"Zey have gone out to catch ze burgiller!"

"They've what?" gasped the several callers at Study 12, as with one voice.

"Zere is going to be an arrest," Naomer supplemented with extreme pride. "I am in ze secret, only I was asked to stay behind and not say anything."

"Which is why you're telling us?" smiled Madge.

"Ah, bah, you are different—all of you!

Better come in and sit down and wait, bekas zey should be in any minute now," Naomer further whispered Madge, Helen, Tess and Pam. "And eef you would like a refresher, just to pass ze time away, I don't mind one myself."

But this hospitable suggestion went unheeded. "Naomer, what on earth is all this about catching the thief?" pleaded Helen amazedly. "They're far more likely to catch it hot from Miss Everard for being out after hours. It's almost pitch-dark out of doors."

"Eet not matter, bekas bejjer life zey bring him back in custhardy! Bejjer life zere will be no row, but Meess Somerfield will say: 'Bravo, ze teess.'"

"Will she!" grimaced Tess. "You must have got it all wrong, anyhow, Naomer."

"Hark—listen!" broke in Madge, and she whipped open the door.

Unmistakably then there were the sounds made by two or more girls storming upstairs in great excitement and jollity.

"Here they come!" was Madge's relieved whisper. "And they do seem to be frightfully—"

"Bekas, didn't I tell you zey went out to catch him, and zey have caught him, too. Hooray!" Naomer cheered, whilst darting out into the corridor. "But what ze diggings," as Betty and Polly came flying along from the stairs, "what have you done with him then?"

"Done with whom?" the madcap snorted at the end of the rush down the passage.

"Ze burgiller, of course."

"You're potty."

Saying which, Polly came striding into the study with Betty, to receive the bewildered looks of the other girls.

"I say, what on earth have you been up to!" said Pam uneasily. "Cutting it fine, isn't it?"

Betty, laughing breathlessly, nodded. "Another half minute and we'd have been locked out."

"And then," said Madge sadly.

"And then," said Polly lightly, "we should have rung the jolly old bell to be let in. Girls, it's grand. Pam dear, look! Look, all of you!"

"My gold coins!" cried out Pam joyfully. "Oh! Oh, but how wonderful! You've got them back—actually!"

"With the compliments of the Flying Squad," jested Polly, emptying the valuable coins into Pam's cupped hands. "No charge. But if you care to do our prep for us some time—well!"

"I will," agreed overjoyed Pam. "Oh, but I am so happy!"

"And the collection money?" questioned Tess.

"How about that?"

"Ah," said Betty, fluttering a handkerchief to cool a heated face, "that's gone for good, I'm afraid. You see, he could spend that any time, anywhere. It was different in the case of those gold coins."

"So he buried them, meaning, of course, to come back some day and dig them up again," Polly chimed in. "But we have got the better of him there."

"Bekas, we are the ones, yes."

The madcap glared at Naomer.

"I like the 'we'!"

"Bekas, didn't I stay behind and make it all right for you to go out?" argued the imp.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We must let it be known," said Pam, jing-

ling the much-prized coins. "You'll have to tell Miss Somerfield, Betty."

The captain made a face.

"I suppose so. She'll be glad about the coins, of course, but she may not exactly approve the methods."

"The police couldn't do anything, so we had to. That's the thing to tell Miss Somerfield," said Polly.

Betty went away to report, and whilst she was gone her chums did not fail to make the good news known all along the corridor.

From the Fourth Form quarters it spread like wildfire that Pam had got back her gold coins. The greatest excitement and delight prevailed everywhere.

Later, when Betty returned with a smiling face, the interview with the headmistress having passed off all right, she found Study 12 being mobbed out.

The full story of Betty and Polly's adventure was being demanded by girls who wanted to know exactly what the thief was like, and had the police been given a description of him?

The answer to all this was that Betty and Polly did not care about trying to describe the fellow.

They had seen him pretty clearly in the gloom, but they were, quite frankly, averse from circulating any information that might lead to his being clapped in gaol.

"It wouldn't help to get the collection money back, we may be sure of that," said Betty. "And somehow it seems rotten to get a mere lad sent to prison."

Etta Hargrove nodded.

"I think you're right, girls. Once in prison, always in prison. And a lot of you have been good enough to contribute towards a fresh collection, so I for one can go to bed to-night quite happy."

They could all do that, it seemed. The great thing was to have got back Pam's gold coins.

But over at the cottage there was a Morcove girl who would be in a state of great grief at the end of this eventful day.

Dolly Delane would be anything but happy, going to bed to-night, there to lie awake thinking of the one who had been aided and protected by her more than once, and now this shattering blow at her faith in him had come.

With her own eyes she had seen him secretly and stealthily burying part of the proceeds of that robbery at the school. So it had been his doing, after all, and his denials had been so many lies, his honest-seeming looks had deceived her utterly.

It meant that now she felt there had been the wildest folly on her part. Idiot to have taken his word in the matter. Stupid of her to have helped him in hiding.

"How he must have laughed to himself," was one miserable thought, "when I gave him some of dad's old boots, to replace those that had hob-nails. One of Morcove's own schoolars, doing her best to save him, the very fellow who had robbed the school."

Nothing but lies—all that he had

hinted about a chivalrous reason for hiding in the neighbourhood. And the truth was, as she must now conclude, he was simply a bad lot, a graceless rascal who had run away from home or school, causing terrible anxiety to those who cared for him.

"I'll never see him again, of course," she said to herself, when she got to her bed-room that night. "But if ever I should meet him, I'd have something to tell him!"

Then on the point of getting undressed she remembered that farewell note of his, left in the calf-trough.

She drew it from her pocket and for a long while stared at the few words. Not like the parting message from a deceitful, shameless young rascal. It would have been more in keeping with his proven character surely to leave behind some impudent, mocking message.

"Oh, but he was—he must have been!" she exclaimed to herself in renewed fury. "An utter fraud!"

And she tore the message up.

#### To School Again!

"PAULA darling—sh! Here you are."

A sleepy murmur from Paula, and then as her pretty eyes came open:

"Bai Jove! Dolly deah, haow good of you!"

"Sh!"

An upraised finger of Dolly's enjoined caution as she handed a morning cup of tea to Paula.

"It's only six, dear, so you can lie down again afterwards."



Too late came Dolly's warning shout. The pig, going straight for the pail of food, floored Aunt Ada like a ninepin! Aunt Ada screamed, the pig grunted, and Dolly simply could not help going off into a peal of laughter.

"Oh, thanks, thanks! Most wewfeshing!" sighed Paula blissfully, as she took the first sip. "But you're not going back to bed, Dolly?" "Oh, no!" whispered back Dolly, moving to the door. "Got a few things to do, you know."

She crept away, drawing Paula's bed-room door shut very softly. In this tiny cottage the few bed-rooms were very close together, and Aunt Ada slept in one.

"That howwid creature," Paula said to herself with the most disagreeable recollections of an overnight's nagging. "Howevah, there are compensations, yes, wather."

This cup of tea before rising was one of them. Paula felt that Dolly should have a prize for tea brewing. It really was the most delectable cup of tea.

Paula sipped and said: Ah!" and sipped again. "Most wewfeshing. The geal is a thowough bwick; always at wovk, always doing for others, yes, wather. It makes me feel that I must weally exewt myself after I've had a bwief lie down and—"

And there, to Paula's horror, she saw the door suddenly opening in front of a dressing gown'd Aunt Ada.

Paula, holding the teacup and saucer on her raised knees as she sat up in bed was instantly dumb.

"What's this?" demanded Aunt Ada furiously.

"Er—good morning, Miss Addison—er—"

"Tea!" said Aunt Ada. "In bed!"

"Er—I'm afwaid so, yes. But don't—"

But Aunt Ada did.

Next second Paula was having the teacup and saucer snatched away from her nerveless hand. She was having the bedclothes pulled off her and was being told:

"Get up! Out of bed, you lazy good-for-nothing! You impudent little minx, you!"

"Ow!"

"You get dressed in five minutes!" Aunt Ada stormed on. "Or I declare I will send you off to school without any breakfast at all. Morning tea, indeed. But I blame Dolly for encouraging you in idleness. Wait till I get hold of her!"

"As wegawds Dolly, Miss Addison—"

"Silence, girl!"

"But I weally must put in wovd for Dolly. She is a tweasure; she— Owp!" yelled Paula, coming in for a box on the ears. "I say, you know, I— Ooch, stop it, can't you!"

"Five minutes and you are to be down. I shall time you!" was the grim warning with which Aunt Ada departed, leaving Paula to wash and dress with panicky haste.

"Dweadful!" groaned Paula. "I weally think I must be the most unlucky creature. At school it is Naomer, and heah it is that wetch of a woman!"

As for Aunt Ada, she was down in less than the five minutes. She was down and at the back door, calling across to Dolly, just then busy at the pigstye.

"Dolly, how dared you give—"

"One minute, please, auntie."

Aunt Ada could not imagine any reason for her niece begging for time, except that that niece wished to show impudence. There was this reason, however; that Dolly had got the old sow half in and half out of the sty.

It was less arduous for Dolly to open the gate of the sty than to put the bucket of food over,

but sometimes Mrs. Sow made a rush, being eager for her victuals.

Aunt Ada ran across the yard angrily.

"Will you attend when I speak! I have had impudence enough already this morning. I will not—"

"Oh, auntie, do look out!" shouted Dolly.

Too late. The sow had come right out of the sty, and going for the pail of tit-bits, had floored Aunt Ada like a ninepin.

Miss Addison sat down with an overturned pail spilling a lake of "wash" towards her. She screamed. The sow grunted. Dolly tried not to laugh but had to. Dolly went off into one great peal of laughter.

"Howwows, WHAT'S the wow now!" gasped Paula in her bed-room.

She flew to the window.

Then she recoiled, with scarcely less "howwow." The sight of Aunt Ada floundering about in spilt pig-wash, with the pig itself wallowing close by, was not, to Paula, amusing. It was a catastrophe of the first magnitude.

"Bai Jove, now she will be in a wage for the west of the day!"

After a few palpitating moments Paula resumed her flustered dressing. She had a wild idea of rushing off to school without any breakfast and of never coming back again. Life would be too—"dweadful" after this.

Then as she opened her bed-room door she as hastily closed it again. Aunt Ada was coming up. Mercifully the disgruntled lady was in such a state she must lose not a moment in getting washed and dressed all over again. But Paula did not wish to meet her, even for a moment, on the stairs.

"Disgracefual pair!" she heard the infuriated lady raging to herself. "Well, I shall know what to do. I'll alter my will after this. Nothing for Dolly when I'm gone—not a penny now!"

As soon as it seemed safe to do so Paula crept down. Dolly at the kitchen sink was smilingly rinsing her hands.

"Good gwacious, Dolly, this is dweadful, tewwible!"

"Her own fault!"

"But did you heah what she said just now?"

"I didn't notice. I hear so much."

"She is thwreatening to disinhewit you, bai Jove!"

"Good job! Does she think I am ready to stand anything just for the sake of her money," said Dolly. "We'll get breakfast and get away, Paula."

"Yes, wather," said Morcov's adored duffer, through chattering teeth. "It—er—would be pwefewable, what?"

"And you, Paula, must not come back at midday. There must be an end to this life for you."

"Oh, no, Dolly; oh, no! I shouldn't dweam!" Paula's good nature made her say. "I am weall aweah that I am perfectly useless about the house; but I twust my company does pwovide—er—some comfowt, what?"

Then Dolly, putting the rashers on to fry, crossed over and kissed her chum.

"You're a dear, Paula."

"I am? What uttah wubbish! Pwefectly futile creature, as they always tell me, in Study 12. Howevah, I pwopose to see it through, Dolly deah, yes, wather! And with your permission I will pwocceed to lay the cloth."

There was another skirmish with Aunt Ada before they got away for morning school. But at last they escaped from the wrathful tongue, riding the mile together to the school gates.

"Bai Jove, we are early!" was Paula's comment, as they continued up the school drive. "The geals are not even out yet."

Dolly received this in silence. She was down at heart again, and she was far from relishing the idea of spending a half-hour or so with Betty and the rest, much as she loved them all, before school.

She could imagine; it would be all talk about the boy thief—how awful for one so young to have taken to crime.

The two bicycles were parked along with all those belonging to boarding scholars, and then both day girls crossed to the schoolhouse. Sounds from within told them what was taking place at this minute; the distribution of letters, with its usual accompaniment of much "whooping" by those who were in luck.

Suddenly a batch of juniors came dashing out by the school porch. Foremost in the joyous mob was Betty Barton, flourishing a letter wildly as she came galloping to the day girls.

"Gwacious!" gaped Paula. "These geals, Dolly, have not had the webuff to their spiwits that we have experienced."

"Dolly! Paula!" came Betty's shout at this instant. "What do you think!"

"Bekas—"  
"Wonderful, you two!" dinned the madeap.  
"Most sensational!"

"What is?" wondered Dolly blankly.  
"This!" And the Form-captain flourished the letter again. "Just arrived, Dolly. Posted in Barncombe last night, and addressed to me; I don't know why."

"Bekas you are ze captain, of co-urse."  
"And chief of the Flying Squad," chuckled Polly. "But tell these two, Basty. They think we've gone mad."

The captain took a big breath.  
"This letter, you two, is from somebody who signs himself 'Mike.' That all; simply 'Mike.'"

Dolly's heart leapt queerly.  
"And it's about those gold coins," Betty continued gaily. "This letter is to tell us where they could be found. Fancy that!"

"Only," burst out Polly, "we got them back last evening, as you know, Dolly. You were with us, of course. Still—"

"Supposing we hadn't done what we did last evening," gabbled on the captain. "Then think what this letter would have been to us. On its instructions we would have gone to the old Round House and dug up the coins."

"May I read?" faltered Dolly.  
"Of course!"

The letter came into her shaking hand and her eyes recognised the same writing—a schoolboyish one—that had been in the farewell message from Mike. And her brain reeled; she thought she would have to cry out in a weak, giddy manner.

"But who is 'Mike'?" clamoured Polly.  
"That's the question now. Is he the lad we saw last night burying the coins? Or is he someone



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.

OF course, you're all simply longing to know all about the wonderful new serial that's going to take the place of "Their Problem from the Mystic East," which ends so very happily in this issue. Isn't it nice to know that Sylvia and her mother are re-united at last? Isn't it splendid to realise that the scheming Armstrongs have failed completely?

Well, next week you're going to meet another heroine—an entirely different type of girl from Sylvia. But she's as true-blue, as staunch and as loyal; and her name is Lucy Devon.

Lucy Devon lives in a romantic old house on the very edge of the sea. This home of hers, which she shares with her old granddad and granny, Captain and Mrs. Benbow, is known as the "House of Ships." Isn't that a fascinating name?

But there is a mystery hovering over this strange old home on the storm-swept coast of Wystersea, one which the fisher-lass, Lucy, means to solve.

"Kit of the Caves! Kit of the Caves!" Captain Benbow murmurs one day. "Find Kit of the Caves, Lucy lass; she'll tell you all about—"  
Then not another word does the old man mutter. He has had a stroke. Poor Lucy. Poor old granny. Lucy now has a double task; that of taking care of the sweet old lady who has done so much for her, and of discovering the identity of the mysterious figure whom she knows only as "Kit of the Caves."

And how difficult this task proves and into what adventures it leads this dauntless daughter of the sea you'll read in the first instalment of a truly great story, "HER PHANTOM FRIEND OF THE CAVES!" is the title, and the author—no less a person than your own favourite, Joan Inglesant.

So, readers all, do take my oft-repeated advice and order next week's copy of the "SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN" right away in order to make sure that Mr. Newsagent will save you YOUR copy.

**OTHER TREATS**

"MORCOVE'S MOORLAND QUEST" is the title of next week's fine Morcove story. Excitingly it carries on the chums' quest for the thief who stole the collection for the hospital Christmas tree, as well as other valuables. Also you'll read more about "Mike the Mysterious" and Dolly Delane's loyal friendship for him.

Another gripping instalment of our fine serial featuring modern Daphne Gordon and her little sister Peggy will, of course, appear, as well as a jolly COMPLETE tale by Rhoda Fleming, entitled: "Jess of the Sawdust Ring."

None of these treats are to be missed, you agree? All good wishes for the present.

Your sincere friend,  
YOUR EDITOR.

else, who knew that some other fellow had taken them there, if you know what I mean?"

"Any old how, he is ze sport!" yelled Naomer. "Bekas, jolly-decent of him; he has gone to all ze trouble of telling us how to get ze coins back."

"Or is he," one of the others suggested, "the original thief after all, only he thought he'd better return the coins?"

"No."

That was Dolly, finding her voice at last.

"No," she flashed out again, so that her chums stared in surprise at her vehemence. "He had nothing to do with the robbery after all, and I've been misj—I mean, it's all a mistake for any of us to suppose that he—"

"But the collection money hasn't been returned," put in Helen gently.

"That doesn't matter!" Dolly protested quite hotly. "Can't you see, all of you? He's got back what he could for us—the gold coins. The thief had spent the money or wouldn't give up that, anyhow. So there is no need to think of Mike as being the thief."

"But we're not!" objected Polly warmly. "At least, we only wondered, not being able to make it all out."

"I zink ze best thing now; ze Flying Squad to start in again and find out about Mister Mike."

"Mike, the Mysterious," laughed Helen.

"Was it he we saw burying the coins last evening?" wondered Betty. "If it was, then we might know him again if we met him. He posted this in Barnecombe. Does he belong to the town? He doesn't give any address. Anyhow, Dolly, don't look like that."

"Like what?" she flushed.

"Like that."

There was some laughter, and then Dolly stamped in a hard-driven fashion.

"Oh, you're being silly."

"How are we?" laughed Polly. "I don't see. I think it's you, Dolly—being very touchy."

"I'm sure I'm not touchy. But—"

"Geals, geals, pway don't tease Dolly," interposed Paula. "She has had a twying time at the hands of Aunt Ada, yes, wather! We have both had a most frightful time; wow after wow, and Aunt Ada thwreatening to disinhewit Dolly, and weally I don't know whether I am on my heads or my heels."

#### What Will Happen Now?

THE day was turning cold and dark, with a threat of rain in the lowering sky, when Dolly rode home after morning school—alone.

She had entreated Betty and others to get hold of Paula for a game at the midday dismiss and if possible keep her at school for dinner.

Study 12 had understood, and at this moment the beloved duffer was in their hands; but when it had been said: "What about you, Dolly?" then there had been a smiling shake of the head.

"Oh, I've several things to do at home, girls. Besides, you're better without me."

"Now why?"—from Polly.

"I have been touchy."

"Oh, Dolly, that was only my fun!"

"But I am sort of humpy to-day, girls," had been Dolly's rueful admission. "Keep Paula if you can, for her own sake. And perhaps I'll be back well before two."

"Zen, kind regards to Aunt Ada," Naomer

had shrilled, "and next time she sits down to brekker with ze old pig I want to be there to see."

Mournfully indeed Dolly rode the homeward way, and slowly. Why hurry, when dad and mother were far from home these days, and only Aunt Ada there. And no stalwart young Mike to hurry back for now, with the thrill of being his friend in secret, his helpful, valued friend.

Just as well perhaps, for as a friend she had failed him after all.

"Now it's I who am the rotter!" ran her self-condemning mind. "Oh, yes, I did help him a bit, with a change of boots and a meal or so, and all that. But when he thanked me for being a pal he was thinking of me as someone who trusted him."

And again the humiliating thought came:

"What would he say if he knew?"

Yet she realised that if—if by any chance they should meet again she would be bound to tell him.

Impossible to meet those direct, candid eyes of his and not be as candid in return.

At the last moment before alighting at the wicket-gate she glanced up to the gloomy sky. How would he fare if another spell of bad weather set in? He was going on with his homeless life, that was certain.

His part in the return of the gold coins was a mere incident in a mode of life that was being lived for the present with some great object in view. There had been nothing to suggest that he had achieved his purpose, and so he would be carrying on—he was the sort to carry on.

If only then—oh, if only she could have gone on aiding him. He deserved the aid. But he had chivalrously put a stop to her helping him, and now if he knew he would want to turn his back upon her literally.

Pushing open the gate she was wheeling her bicycle on to the garden path when a big surprise halted her.

To her amazement she heard Aunt Ada, round in the back yard, using that strident voice of hers as if to give very exacting instructions to someone at work—not old Dan!, but someone new to the place.

"You'll stop for your dinner-hour when we have ours," she heard Aunt Ada saying. "And then, when you go on again, I want you to do this amongst other things. Come this way, and I'll show you."

Next moment Aunt Ada came round by the side of the cottage with the apparently newly-engaged odd-jobber, and at sight of him Dolly's eyes looked ready to drop from their sockets.

For it was Mike and no other!

It was Mike—Mike back again! Mike the Mysterious, no longer in hiding upon the place, but at Aunt Ada's heels, receiving that lady's torrential instructions.

A coldness passing over Dolly's face let her know how pale her cheeks must be going. Then she felt the blood surging back into them.

Very nearly she had lost her head and called out: "Mike!" But after that first moment of terrible agitation she recovered her presence of mind.

He was treating her as a complete stranger, and she had the wit to play up to this. Taking a grip on herself, she went forwards, wheeling the bicycle to its shed.

"A moment!" Aunt Ada checked her in passing. "Where's Paula?"

"They wanted her to stay for a game, auntie, she'll be staying for dinner."

"But I don't know that I wish the girl to come home some days for dinner and not others!" was the tart comment. "The truth is, Dolly—and you know it—that Creel girl is an indolent hussy!"

"Oh, no, auntie!"

"Don't contradict!"

"Paula really hasn't much energy. It's known at the school that she can't do as much as others."

"She can play games!" said Aunt Ada. "Go on in!"

Mike, during this skirmish between aunt and niece, had stood apart, using the few moments to get a few weeds from the edge of the path. He never even glanced at Dolly, who was brisk enough in taking her machine to the shed and then darting into the cottage.

There in the dim sitting-room she stood gasping for breath.

Dolly swept a hand across a forehead that was feebly feverish.

"Phew!" she breathed.

But to stand about like this in an appalled state would never do. She went downstairs, reaching the kitchen just as Aunt Ada came through to it.

"Now, Dolly, about that boy. He must be given something to eat when we have ours. It's a nice thing that Dan'll never turned up to work; instead, a message came that he couldn't get up from his bed."

"Oh, poor old Dan!! His rheuma——"

"His laziness, I dare say. Anyhow, there was I, having to put on my hat and go into Barncombe to get hold of somebody. I couldn't have the place going to rack and ruin in your parents' absence. And you two girls—well."

"As regards Paula Creel, Aunt Ada, she has never been used to this sort of life. She doesn't understand the first thing about——"

"Then she should do! But there it is; I chanced upon that boy between here and Barn-



With Aunt Ada was a boy she had evidently engaged to do jobs about the farm. At the sight of him Dolly could hardly believe her eyes, for he was 'Mike'—and no other!

What did it mean, his being here again, and in such changed conditions? What was going to happen now?

Suddenly she ran upstairs to her room to get a peep at him from the window. He was still with Aunt Ada, whose arms were flourishing this way and that as she reeled off further instructions. Dolly's window, open day and night alike, allowed the strident voice to reach her.

"And understand, boy, no idling in talk with my niece or with the other schoolgirl who is at present staying here. I don't allow that."

Dolly saw Mike throw up a finger to his forehead by way of an answering salute. Ordinarily, she would have backed away from that window, collapsing with laughter. How very funny! Oh, what a scream it was! Mike engaged to work about the place.

Then a dismaying thought struck in upon that one.

How about Betty and Polly? They had seen Mike at the Round House last evening. And supposing they called in here at the cottage?

combe and I took him on. I don't know if he's honest, but he looks it. He seemed to jump at the offer of work, I will say that for him. His home is in Barncombe, I suppose. Half-a-crown a day and two meals, Dolly."

"Ye-yes, auntie."

"And mind, no getting him to idle. He's not here to dance attendance upon you girls—mending bicycle punctures, and that sort of thing."

"No, auntie, I understand. Er—his name, auntie?"

"His name? George Something-or-other."

Ten minutes later Dolly herself took up the dinner, and she and her aunt sat down to it without Paula Creel.

"That had better go in the oven for George," said Aunt Ada. "Or no; let him have it now. He'll come if you call. And the sooner he has his dinner the sooner he can start again."

"Yes, auntie."

And Dolly went through to the back door with a plate of meat, vegetables, and bread.

"Er—George," she called.

"Yes, miss."

Up he came, saluting, his face impassive. But she could tell how his eyes would have twinkled if he had cared to let them.

"Are you George?" she questioned softly. In spite of her concern on his account she was yielding a little to the humour of the situation.

"Michael George," he said under his breath. "Oh, I haven't been telling any whoppers."

"This is your dinner—then, Michael George—Washington."

He smiled broadly.

"Thank you, miss."

He retired to a sheltered spot to sit down to his meal, whilst Dolly returned to her dinner and the doubtful pleasure of Aunt Ada's company.

Where Michael George sat down to ply knife and fork the two calves could see him as they poked their heads over the lower half of their pen door, the top half being wide open.

They did not seem to think he should be having something to eat whilst they were kept waiting. But they did not "shout," perhaps because Michael George spoke them softly now and again.

"You remember me, don't you?" he muttered to them once. "That night the bobby came."

And then to himself:

"Gee, this is a top-hole meal—at last! You're doing yourself too well, Mike. All this fresh air and the food you're getting now—they won't know you when you get home. But it can't be helped. I'd rather not be here, goodness knows; but if I can't make fifteen bob a week and still carry on with the other business, all the better!"

The calves, as they fell to chewing the cud, twitched their ears as if eager to pick up any further murmurings.

"And you two beauties," he again addressed them; "you won't be the everlasting bother and tie for that girl that I know you have been. Gee, yes," he quite exulted, "it makes things heaps better for her! I can clean her shoes on the quiet—and bother the old cat!"

"Michael George!"

"MIKE—I mean, George!"

A bad slip that on the part of Dolly, at the back door now with his pudding. She must forget that he had been "Mike" to her, now that he was "George" to her aunt.

He hastened across and saluted.

"Thank you, miss."

"There'll be some scraps when I do the washing-up," she said, "to go into the pig-bucket."

"Very good, miss. And—er—miss—"

"Yes, what?"

"If you could just show me where things are, if you've a minute by-and-bye."

She nodded that she would.

"The boy wants me to show him where things are kept, auntie."

"You may," Miss Addison conceded. "But don't have too much to say to him. Remember, Dolly, you are not working-class; he is. Your mother married a farmer; but her family and mine were people of position. I noticed you lowered yourself far too much towards that Dan'l."

The awful snobbery of it. That was Dolly's scornful thought as she sat listening to this and much more in the same strain. As if it mattered whether people had been born in castle or cottage, so long as they were honest, as old Dan'l was, and Michael George.

She was free to run out to him presently with just a few minutes in hand; then she must be off back to school.

"I'll take you round," she said in the tone of one who had only known him in the last hour or so. "The tool-shed"—pointing, as they went by it. "And this other sheds holds the larger implements."

She preceded him into the very shed where he had played hide-and-seek but a day or so ago with the Flying Squad of Morcove.

"This is a root-pulper," she said demurely. "You know how to work it?"

"I should do, Dolly."

Then their eyes met, and she had to burst out laughing, whilst he gave his broad smile.

"But 'sh!" she cautioned. "It'll be terrible if auntie finds out that—that we knew each other before. Oh, Mike," she exclaimed tensely, "ought you to be doing this? I mean, is it safe for you?"

"Safer, I dare say, than trying to go on as I was doing," he answered in a guarded tone. "I feel wild with myself, Dolly, but the truth is, I've been feeling whacked. It's too late in the year for sleeping in a seashore cave as I did last night."

"What! Oh," she breathed, "how awful! Why—why did you go away from here, though, if you still couldn't go home?"

"I saw myself making it rotten for you in the end, and that wasn't good enough. So I told myself I must quit. You found the note I left behind for you?"

"Yes." And how she wished she could have added: "I've got it now."

"Your aunt came upon me when I was going into Barncombe to some grub. I reckoned I'd better put on a bold face and shop by daylight," he said, "instead of being sly about it at night-fall. I was resting at the roadside when she came along."

"I'd be so glad, Mike, that you've got the job! I am glad for your sake," Dolly whispered.

"Only—"

"Only what?"

"I'll tell you presently; but let's go on with the round."

So a minute later they were in another of those outbuildings which it was necessary for him to know all about. Not that Dolly troubled to explain it to him.

"Mike, you know you went to the old Round House at twilight last evening and buried the stolen gold coins there?"

He started violently, staring.

"How do you know I was there at that time, Dolly?"

"Ah, that's the trouble," she sighed drearily. "I and two of my chums of Morcove kept watch upon you. It's difficult to explain, Mike—"

"It must be," he agreed in a changed voice that hurt her. "Well?"

"They felt sure they were tracking the actual thief. They went in, and I went with them, after you'd gone, and dug up what you had buried."

"Believing that I was the thief?" he exclaimed thickly. "And that I'd only hidden stuff I couldn't get rid of at once? Well, they know better by this time, don't they?"

"Yes, Mike."

"And so do you?"

"Yes, Mike," she faltered, more drearily than before.



A pause. Just as she had expected, dreaded, there was this sudden change in him. Offended, disappointed in her—and what wonder.

She hung her head as she stammered self-ashamedly:

"I can never forgive myself, Mike. Those two other girls, they're a different case altogether. I had your denial, and yet when I saw what you had been burying—the coins stolen from Pam Willoughby's study—"

"You simply reckoned that I had lied to you? I quite understand," he nodded, looking utterly dashed. "I was just a low-down thief after all."

Another pause.

"Hadn't we better go on?" he suggested dully. "And finish the round, so you can be off?"

She gave a drooping nod of assent, and after that they continued in step together round the place. He was silent, and Dolly only spoke when it was necessary to give him information relating to the jobs he would be doing.

"That's the lot," she said at last, turning away from the building that was farthest from the cottage. "So I—I'll leave you."

But although he was silent as she walked away she turned back.

"Mike," she gulped, "understand I'm not asking you to overlook it. But I'm sure now—sure that you are only doing it all for a good reason."

"But are you sure?" he smiled wryly. "There's been only my word for it. Oh, heck," he suddenly added fiercely, "I blame myself! I wouldn't tell you anything, and— Yes, dash it all, it was enough to make you doubt me."

"No," Dolly said, "I should never have doubted you. Never. There is no excuse for me."

"But there is!" he insisted strenuously. "Hang it all, a chap must be fair. You found me hiding on these premises. The robbery at the school had been committed by someone wearing hobnailed boots, like mine that I put on as part of my disguise."

"Disguise?" she echoed. "But, of course—"

"You don't suppose I go about like this ordinarily!" he protested. "I did all I could to make myself look like a rough country lad.

And, as I was saying, in the end you saw me burying those gold coins. Enough to make you doubt me."

But Dolly shook her head.

"That doesn't take into account something—I can't explain it, but—"

"You've been miserable, and you mustn't be," he struck in, for every moment was precious. "I say then, look here; are we as we were?"

"In which case would let me help you?" she caught him up very wistfully.

"No," he refused flatly. "It is good of you, Dolly Delane, but I just won't be so unfair, and that's all there is to it. Accept your help, whilst not confiding in you—not good enough."

"If only, Mike, if only you could confide in me. Can't you?"

"I can't, Dolly."

His voice was suddenly husky with that emotion which had troubled him at other times. He rammed his hands to the depths of his trouser-pockets and stood glooming at the shed wall with a dogged thrust to his chin.

"I want to carry on. You'd never believe how important it is, Dolly. But—"

"I will believe anything, Mike."

"Thanks; that's in your eyes right enough now, I can see," he muttered. "But I can't tell you. Only this, Dolly; this place is wonderfully handy for what I have to do, and the day work won't interfere. Besides, it'll bring me money, and I want some."

"Mike, I could lend—"

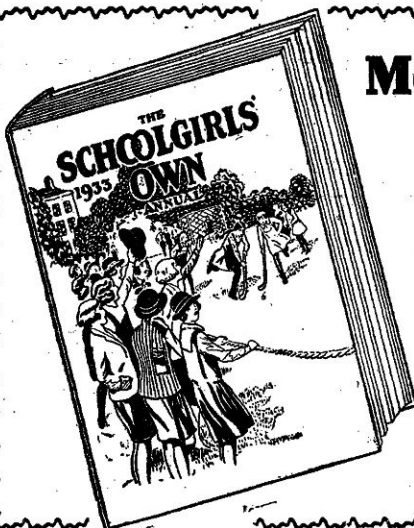
"No. You're one of the girls who were robbed. You gave to the collection, of course. What's the use of my borrowing from you to pay back that stolen money?"

She gasped as he said that.

"Pay back—"

"It's one of the things I've got to do—get that collection money returned, as I got back the coins for your chum Pam Willoughby. But all that's nothing compared with the rest that I want to bring off, if only— Oh, Dolly, if only I can carry on; not get arrested by the police."

"Now that you are in auntie's employment, Mike—"



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"Yes, I know," he whispered back eagerly. "That's where it all works in so fine, if only—"  
 "'Sh!" She was throwing up a silencing finger. "Oh!" she panted next moment. "I hear voices—some of the girls from my school. My goodness—Mike, it's Betty Barton and those others who—"

"I'll push off and get on with my work."

"No," she dissented wildly. "Stay here. Don't—don't let them see you. Fatal if they do. Stay here."

With a final imploring gesture she herself hurried into the open air, just in time to see Betty, Polly and two or three more of the Study 12 chums coming in by a back gate off the moorland.

They rushed towards her in a breathless, excitable way.

"Fresh discovery, Dolly!" burst forth Betty elatedly. "We've been for an after-dinner stroll to the Round House; but my goodness, how we have run from there to here."

"Bekas, got to be in time for school, blow it! And no time for a refresher, as it is."

"Tell her—tell Dolly!" urged an equally breathless Helen.

"There's a woman in the case," laughed the madcap.

"A woman?"

"A grown girl, anyhow; it's what we suppose her to be," Betty carried on the chatter. "We found a note addressed to that mysterious 'Mike' under a stone at the ruins. Of course, we put it back. Just a folded slip of paper, signed 'Emily.'"

"Making an appointment for after dark, this evening, at the Round House," came Helen's thrilling whisper.

"And we are going to be there; we feel we must; feel we've a right to be there," said Polly. "We can do it, too, Dolly, with your help."

"Bekas—"

"Come away," Dolly checked them all with ill-concealed agitation. "And not a word to Auntie Ada, if you see her. Oh, girls, you—you go on to school and I'll follow."

"But, Dolly—"

"I've my bike; you're all on foot," she argued wildly. "Besides, I—I have things to see to. Please, please!"

They looked at one another, quite unable to fathom the reason for such agitation, the pallor in her cheeks.

"Oh, all right!" Betty said at last. "See you later, Dolly."

"Yes. I'll catch you up."

They turned back then to go out by the way they had come in. It meant a short cut to the road, and they were giving Aunt Ada's "a miss."

As for Dolly, the troubled heart of Morcove's day girl was beating fast as she watched her chums until they were out of sight. Her dear chums of Morcove, but oh, what a menace they had become! And only because of their zeal, where Morcove was concerned.

\* \* \* \* \*

"DOLLY, WHY aren't you off to school yet?"

"All right, auntie, I'm just going to get my bike now."

First, however, she had to contrive to slip round to where she could speak with Mike again. He had come away from the shed after Betty and the others had gone.

"You heard, Mike?"

He nodded, and there was such a look of tragedy as she would never have wished to see in a grown man's eyes, let alone a boy's.

"I don't blame them," he muttered, "for finding the note and reading it. The robbery entitled them to follow things up, and after all, the school is still poorer for the loss of the collection money. But if those girls turn up there, as they talk of doing, it will be fatal. She will almost die of shame."

"She?" Dolly echoed questioningly.

"My sister. Yes," he said, turning fiery eyes upon his staggered listener, "and now you know that much, anyhow."

"Your sister!" gasped Dolly. "Oh! Oh, Mike!" Impulsively a hand went to his shoulders pityingly. "And did you get back the gold coins from her?"

"I did."

There was another of those awful pauses between boy and girl.

"But she wasn't the thief, any more than I was," he added passionately. "You've got to believe that, or else—"

"I believe it, Mike, and I—I will help you. Now I can help you!" Morcove's day girl said fervently. "Prevent those school chums of mine from going there at the appointed time; prevent them from finding out anything more, ever."

He swung towards her as if he would like to take her by the hand.

"You're a pal," he said. "Do that, Dolly! Oh, if only you can, when it's a thing I can't do myself! But can you? How?"

"I don't know," she panted. "But I must—I must!"

"Here, though," broke from him next moment, "you mustn't fall out with your friends over me. Dolly, wait—listen!"

But she was gone, however, running to get her bicycle and be off to afternoon school.

END OF THIS WEEK'S STORY.



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