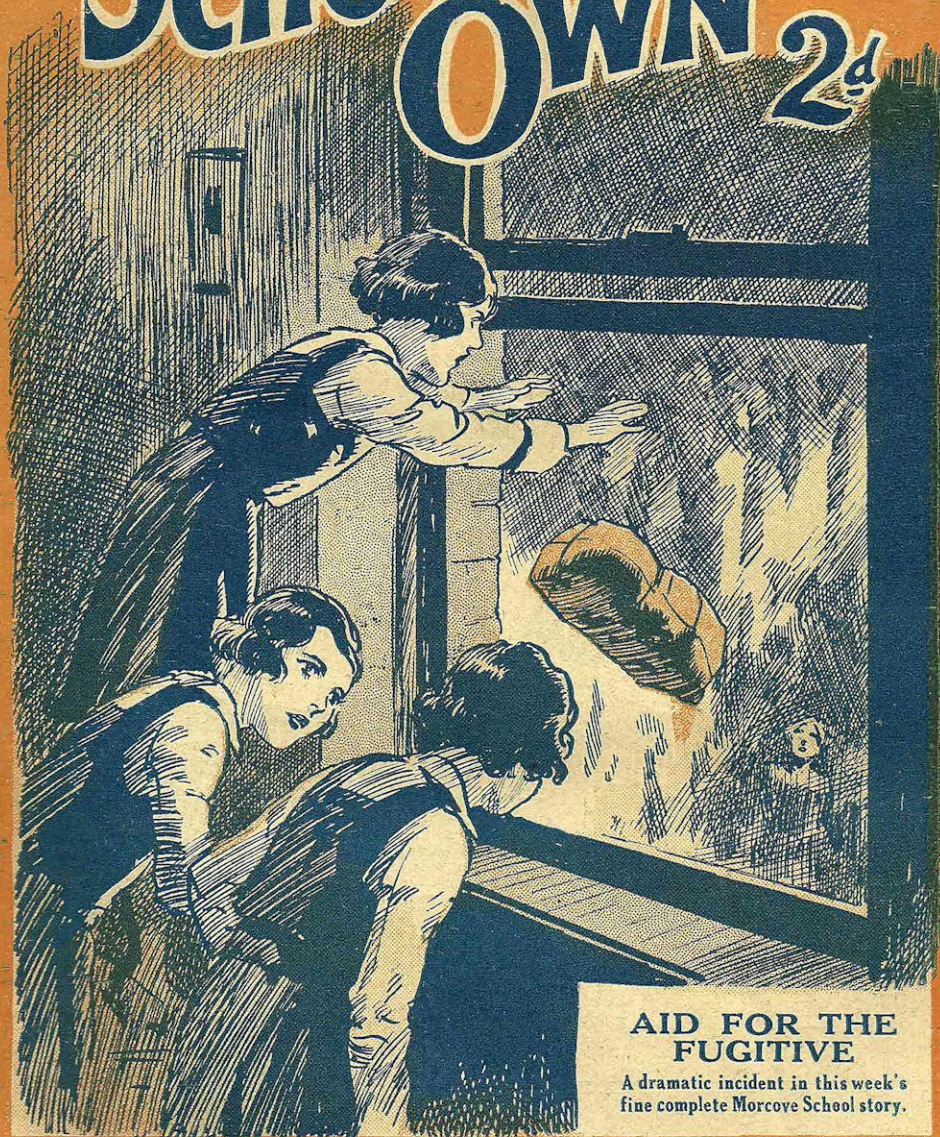


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DRAMATIC LONG COMPLETE MORCOVE SCHOOL STORY, FEATURING
BETTY BARTON AND CO.

FOUND OUT BY THE FOURTH



ONCE again it falls to the chums of Study 12 to be the leading spirits in an amazing drama. And although they are completely baffled at every turn, there is to be no thought of abandoning their enquiries. They have resolved to fathom the mystery that clings about Mabel Stoddart, and they are ready to go to any trouble to achieve their object.

After Lock-up

DARK night had been upon the lonely district of Morcove this last half-hour.

Yet here were two members of the famous school, and juniors at that, ringing for admittance at the main door.

They were breathless after recent haste, and their whispers were charged with a note of agitation.

"Miss Everard will be cross, Polly."

"Let her. We've got our explanation, Betty."

"Oh, yes. But the fact remains, we did let the time go by in Barncombe," was the further murmur from Form-captain Betty Barton. "We've been taking a great deal upon ourselves, Polly."

Madcap Polly Linton smiled grimly.

"Leave Miss Everard to say that, Betty. Hark. Here comes somebody to let us in."

The great front door came open, and lamp-light from the large entrance-hall silhouetted the tall, graceful figure of the Fourth Form's youthful mistress.

"Betty! And you as well, Polly. What does this mean?"

"Can you give us five minutes, please, Miss Everard?"

"I was going to order you straight to my room. It is a nice thing," Miss Everard added, as they stepped in out of the darkness, "when the captain does this sort of thing. Quite by chance I dis-

covered that you were absent after hours, and I have been waiting for you both."

She flourished them across to the stairs, her private room being on the first floor. More in sorrow than in anger she preceded them up the couple of flights and then along a short passage to that cosy room of hers, where a fire blazed cheerily in an antique hob grate.

Polly, entering last of the three, closed the door and came across to stand to attention with Betty, and then the mistress resumed, sternly:

"Well, what is the excuse, if excuse there can be?"

"Polly and I had to go into Barncombe after tea, Miss Everard. We—we were detained—"

"You should not have let yourselves be detained. At this time of year you know very well that you must be in to the minute. I would like to know what detained you."

"I'm afraid—at least, I won't say I can't tell you, Miss Everard. But I'd rather not," said the captain steadily.

"And I am afraid, Betty, you must tell me."

"But," Betty skirished with a smile, "that wouldn't account for our being altogether as late as we are. Miss Everard, you know that a guest

By MARJORIE STANTON

at the Headland Hotel was robbed of money and jewels on Sunday evening?"

"Yes; Ada Sharrow's mother. But I don't see that that can have anything to do with this."

"Oh, but it has!"

"Just a little," sparkled Polly.

"The fact being," Betty smiled on, at the same time producing a loosely wrapped-up package, "we have just found the stolen jewels."

"What!"

"They're here, Miss Everard."

The captain was stripping away some brown paper to let the monogrammed lid of a leather-covered case fly open at the touch of a thumbnail.

"There!"

The Fourth Form mistress almost staggered as her eyes caught the blaze of diamonds from the silk-lined case.

"Good gracious!" she gasped. "Amazing! But how—Where—"

"On the moor just now, not far off the road," Betty hurried into the explanation. "Polly and I were riding back hard from the town, and between here and the Headland Hotel we noticed somebody going out on to the moor in a way that seemed mysterious. For reasons of our own, Miss Everard, we decided to hop down from our bikes, leave them, and go after the person."

"And then?"

"She must have glimpsed us, and guessing that we were following, must have been seized with panic. She ran for it. We chased after her. Then in her hurry and haste she stumbled on the rough ground out there and dropped this little parcel."

"She was so afraid of our catching up with her she left off searching to find where the parcel had got to in the heather," Polly carried on the thrilling narrative. "Her one thought was not to be caught or even be seen well enough to be recognised again."

"And then what must Polly do whilst we were both running but stumble upon the parcel. We picked it up, of course, forgot all about the run-away for the moment, and then she'd vanished in the darkness," Betty said breathlessly. "Altogether, we felt entitled to open the parcel, and as soon as we did that—well, we knew. Mrs. Sharrow's stolen jewels."

"Astounding!" was Miss Everard's comment, whilst her eyes went again to the shimmering jewels as Betty, not without a pardonable smile of pride, laid the open case upon the table. "It looks as if the thief had intended hiding them on the moor for the time being. But what was that person like, girls? Man or woman—which?"

"Why, she seemed to us to be a—rather young girl."

"A girl. Oh, but, of course, it was quite a young chambermaid who vanished from the hotel after stealing the valuables. That girl, Esther Hope, who fled to London last Sunday night—it is certain she was the thief."

"Yes," Betty said, with a sudden heaviness that caused Miss Everard to eye her sharply. "I suppose it is certain—now."

"Why do you speak like that, Betty? Did you think otherwise?"

"I and my chums, we felt we must have faith in that young chambermaid," Betty spoke out sadly. "You know that two or three of us met Esther Hope for a few minutes, and we thought her a nice girl."

"I myself met her at the same time, come to that," Miss Everard nodded. "It was last

Sunday evening, only an hour or so before she must have caught the last train up to London. I felt favourably impressed, it is true. But there she was, out on the moor at that time, and now it is quite evident she was up to something in connection with the robbery even then."

The Form-mistress stepped to the table to close the jewel-case as she finished speaking, and so she did not see the look that passed between Betty and Polly.

Both juniors seemed to be thinking: "If only we could still have faith in that girl. But how can we now!"

"In the circumstances, you two, I must hold you excused," Miss Everard resumed next moment. "You may be sent for by the headmistress, for I must go to her about it all at once. Probably she will ring up Mrs. Sharrow at the hotel, to let her know the jewels are here."

"And what about Ada Sharrow, please?" asked Polly. "Can we tell her?"

"We pass her study on the way to our own," Betty remarked.

"By all means tell her," nodded the mistress. "It is good news that should do a lot to cheer up that new girl of ours. She is sulky enough, I feel."

A dismissing nod followed this, and then as Betty and Polly smiled themselves away to the door the remark came:

"Study 12's doing, as usual. It would be," laughed Miss Everard, "Study 12."

To which there came some responsive tittering from captain and madcap alike as they made their hurried exit from the room.

Surprised in the Studies

"SO that's that, Polly."

"Did you ever see anyone more surprised?" chuckled the madcap, hastening along to the stairs with Betty. "Lovely! And now to see how Ada takes it all."

"Yes. For once," smiled the captain, "I feel quite anxious to have a word with Ada Sharrow. She shouldn't snap our heads off this time, anyhow."

They reached the Fourth Form corridor, and there were a few girls standing about in talk who remarked, more or less in a scandalised tone: "Disgraceful, you two! Expulsion!"

"Think so?" Polly sauced back. "We don't. Oh, but we can't stop to explain now. Ha, ha, ha!"

So those who had been pretending to be shocked were left in a genuine state of mystification. Betty and Polly were at the closed door of that study which Ada Sharrow shared with one other junior. Tap, tap! And there was Ada's sullen voice crying:

"Come in!"

They went in. Ada was alone, sitting at her side of the study table. Some books were spread in front of her, but she had not been at work; the visitors felt sure of that, when the interruption occurred. She appeared to have been simply sitting idle in one of her fits of moodiness.

"Ada."

"Oh, if it's about games or something I don't want to be pestered now."

"But it isn't," smiled Betty. "It's about your mother's stolen jewels. We've got them back for her, if we haven't got the money."

Ada Sharrow lurched up from her chair, gripping the table edge to keep herself steady on her feet.

"You!" she gasped.

Both Study 12 girls bowed playfully.

"You would rather it had been somebody else?" rippled Betty. "Sorry, Ada. Had we known that the thief this evening was going to be seen sneaking out to the moor to find a hiding-place for the jewels, we might have let you know."

"Oh, don't be funny."

"Then don't you be so grumpy," fired up Polly.

"Surely you can be a bit decent towards us for once, Ada. Or would you rather the jewels had remained lost?"

"I'd like to know how it is that you girls can be out and about as much as you like, after dark, too, whilst I—"

"Oh, it has all been explained to Miss Everard," said Betty blandly. "Now we're going along to do some work. We do have to work, you know, like the rest of the Form. We just thought we'd drop in to tell you the news."

"All right—thanks," Ada mumbled belatedly. "I—I— I'm sorry, but this about the jewels, it has sort of upset me."

"Should have thought it would have done you good," Polly spoke back over a shoulder as she followed Betty out of the study. "But you're a funny girl, Ada."

Nor could Polly deny herself the pleasure of closing that door behind her with a mild slam.

"Extraordinary girl I call her," Betty muttered gravely. "No pleasing her."

"Detestable! It makes you just long to get back to the others."

They were there in Study 12 awaiting the errant pair; all those good chums who, unlike Morcove's new girl, were the right sort.

Paula Creel and Naomer Nakara were here, of course, for they were cotenants of Study 12 along with Betty and Polly. Then there were Madge Minden and Tess Trelawney, their "prep" behind them no doubt. There were tall Pam Willoughby and Helen Craig in from "next door," and there was quiet Judy Cardew and also happy Helen Craig.

"Hooray!" dusky Naomer led the cheering, as captain and madcap sailed in. "Pipooray, bekas we thought you were getting expelled."

"Not yet," said Polly. "Due notice will be given so that you can put up for the captaincy. Something to drink, please."

"What ze diggings have you two been doing, any old how?" Naomer retorted.

"We," smiled Betty, "have been recovering Mrs. Sharrow's stolen jewels."

There was a general long-drawn-out:

"Wha-a-at!"

"Miss Everard has them now—"

"Bai Jove! Weall, I nevah!"

"Wonderful!" cried Helen. "But how on earth did you?"

"Yes, you say, queek!" shrilled Naomer, whose excitement was such that she forgot to go to the corner cupboard to produce Polly's thirst-quencher and one for herself.

As quickly as possible Betty and Polly gratified the eager curiosity at the same time imparting certain details that had been tactfully withheld from the Form-mistress.

"You see, girls, we didn't want to tell Miss



The great front door opened, and lamplight flooded upon the juniors. "Betty! And you, Polly! Why are you so late?" the Form Mistress demanded sternly.

Everard that we know, the girl on the moor to have been Esther Hope, the ex-chambermaid, or rather," Betty added, "Mabel Stoddart, to give her her rightful name. But that is the sad part about it all. That girl, call her by whichever name you like, must have been the thief after all."

A glum silence followed this. Not one girl in the study but had clung to faith in Mabel Stoddart, alias Esther Hope, in spite of the belief in the minds of police and public alike that she was the culprit.

"Sickener," grimaced Polly, plumping down into a chair. "So much for our resolve to befriend that girl, believing that she was not getting fair play from the Sharrowes. Ada Sharrow and her mother, they little dreamed that the hotel thief was no other than the girl who

lives at their home up in London. But it was so—must have been.”

“Then she came down in secret to Morocco, to get a job as chambermaid at the hotel under an assumed name, simply to rob Mrs. Sharrow?” said Judy incredulously.

Betty was about to answer, but she checked herself, and after glancing towards the closed door, turned again to her chums dubiously.

“Somebody outside? I thought I heard—”

“Open and see, Betty.”

Being nearest to the door she could do that instantly. A short stride and a wrench at the doorknob and open came the door, offering the girls a view of Ada Sharrow in a flustered, hesitant state.

“Well?” Betty asked blackly. “What do you want?”

“Only just to ask you something, Betty. Er—”

“Then why didn’t you come in, not hang about outside.” This was unusual ill-temper on the part of Betty; but she felt very annoyed. “Well, what?”

“Er—did you say that Miss Everard was letting my mother know about the—er—the jewels being found?”

“We didn’t mention it. Sorry, but you weren’t particularly amiable, were you?” Betty submitted, with returning good humour. “Of course your mother is being informed—over the phone. Anything else?”

“Er—no.”

And Ada shambled away.

Closing the door Betty faced round to her chums. Polly’s mouth was a firm line. Others looked very stern.

“Listening at the keyhole, was she?” Betty wondered aloud. “I want to be fair, but I seemed to catch her just straightening up.”

Polly jumped to her feet and walked about furiously.

“That girl would do anything!” she burst out fiercely. “And that’s why it’s so maddening to have to give up all faith in Mabel Stoddart. We all felt that there it was; a clear case of Mabel Stoddart not getting a square deal at the hands of the Sharrows. The mere fact that Ada Sharrow had come out in such a detestable light at the school—”

“That’s so; it made one want to feel that Mabel Stoddart deserved our friendship,” put in Madge earnestly. “But after what has occurred this evening; with you two girls so certain that it was Mabel Stoddart running away from you on the moor—”

“And so it was,” Polly insisted regretfully. “It was just her size, for one thing. Besides, we know that although Mrs. Sharrow ordered her to catch the ten-fifty to London this morning the girl didn’t catch that train after all.”

“We rang up the house in town,” Betty reiterated, “at a little after five. It was why Polly and I went into Barncombe, as you know; to phone to London. And a servant at the Sharrows’ house told me over the wire that Mabel Stoddart had telegraphed, ‘Not returning to-night.’”

“Bai Jove, then wheah is the girl?” Paula sat up in her easy chair to ask. “I mean to say, gails; she isn’t staying at the hotel down here, and she hasn’t returned home to London.”

“We don’t know where she is, and I don’t know that we ought to care now,” sighed Betty. “She is old enough to take care of herself. What’s

bothering me is, whether we ought to let the Sharrows know that the thief was Mabel Stoddart.”

“I wouldn’t; no, I wouldn’t!” Polly exclaimed. “Leave the Sharrows to find that out for themselves. After all, they have got the jewels back.”

“But not the money,” Betty struck in. “And supposing the girl chooses to commit another theft, not having been caught out over the hotel robbery? Remember, she is under the Sharrow roof in London at all ordinary times.”

“Oh, bother!” Polly exploded. “Give it a rest, I say. Sorry, girls, but I feel fed up.”

“Here you are; ze special patent clove-corjool, as a reward for finding ze jewels,” Naomer said comfortingly.

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Not the only reward you two will get, let’s hope,” laughed Helen. “Although I wouldn’t be too sure. Mrs. Sharrow—”

“Perhaps she will ask you two to dine with her at the hotel,” Pam smiled.

“I can see myself going to dine with her,” Polly grimaced, over a raised tumbler. “With Ada as well to talk to! No, thanks!”

Those who did not belong to this study drifted away so as to give Betty and Polly a chance to concentrate upon their evening work.

But presently came a message from downstairs. Betty Barton and Polly Linton to go to the headmistress at once.

“Never mind, you two,” said the dusky one. “Even if they do eggspot you—”

“Yeowp!” yelped Paula, as a rolled up duster clipped past her ear.

“Sorry,” apologised Polly sweetly. “I meant it for the kid. You wait till I come back, Naomer.”

“Perhaps you won’t come back. Hi, though! Bekas you are not a bad sort, Polly. Have another clove corjool and a cake, just to put some stuffing into you. Bekas you never know.”

Slam, went the door as Polly’s playfully ill-mannered answer, after she had followed Betty out.

Blithely they went up the corridor together, and then in a moment came an encounter with—Mrs. Sharrow.

That lady, having come across from the hotel to have the jewels restored to her at the hands of the headmistress, had now come upstairs alone, to look in on her daughter, as Betty and Polly instantly divined.

Sourly she glanced at the Study 12 pair whilst sweeping past them. And yet she must have been told that they were the couple to whom she owed the return of the stolen jewels.

Not so much as a grateful look, let alone a word of thanks. She stalked by them, silent and sullen.

“And just as well, Polly?”

“Just as well,” said the madeap with her very grimmest look.

Guilty—

TWO moments after passing Betty and Polly in the Fourth Form corridor Mrs. Sharrow entered her daughter’s study.

She clapped shut the door, then glared at Ada who was alone.

“You little fool, Ada!”

“But, mother—”

“No excuses!” the angry voice hissed on. “You have let me down badly. What’s the use of you, Ada; what use my confiding in you as I did

when you only go and—and make such a muddle of things."

"But, mother, do listen!" was the imploring whisper. "How could I help what happened. There I was, expecting to do everything that you wanted, and suddenly those two girls were after me."

"Those two girls!" raged Mrs. Sharrow. "I'd like to have the thrashing of them!"

"You see, mother, they—they could run faster than I can. And it was just awful, out there on the dark moor, the ground all so rough. You might have done just the same and dropped the jewels if you had had to run as I had to. Every other step I was stumbling—"

"You should not have let yourself be seen in the first instance," snapped Mrs. Sharrow. "But there, I suppose I must be thankful that they didn't get close enough to recognise you before finding the jewels."

"Yes, that would have been a thousand times worse, wouldn't it?" Ada hastily asserted. "For then they would have understood at once; you gave me the jewels to take care of."

Mrs. Sharrow received this with a scowl. She hated any mention of the swindling deception to which she had finally made her own daughter a party. But it was done now.

"You have blundered once, Ada. Take care not to blunder again," she muttered. "I hesitated about taking you into my confidence; but after all, you are my daughter and you were so close at hand at this school. I had the jewels on my hands and had to get them out of the way without doing anything myself that would give rise to suspicion. I had a feeling that I was being watched."

She paused, then resumed moodily.

"I shall not get the insurance value of the jewels now. They have been restored to me, so the insurance people don't have to pay."

"But, mother, if you are hard up, why not sell the jewels?" whispered Ada.

"If you had done better," snapped her mother, "I would have had the insurance money and have yet been able to sell the jewels—by-and-bye. I am hard up—very. Or I would not have stooped to all this."

Ada looked utterly depressed now. She was not the sort of girl to rise spiritedly to face straitened circumstances, any more than her mother was.

"There's one thing, mother," the girl exclaimed softly at last, "those Study 12 girls think it was Esther Hope, the runaway chambermaid, who had the jewels with her this evening."

"They do. That's a blessing, anyhow," was the relieved murmur. "Suspicion can't fall too heavily upon that girl, from our point of view. I know it sounds terrible for me to say that, but it will be all the more terrible, Ada, if ever it is proved that there was no robbery after all, and that I only made out that I had been robbed."

"But there is something else, mother, that I—I overheard just now. It seems that the Study 12 girls believe Esther Hope to have been Mabel Stoddart."

"What!"

"In disguise," Ada nodded, on speaking very guardedly. "I have done a bit of listening outside their door. They have somehow formed the belief that Mabel Stoddart came down in secret from London to get a job as chambermaid at the hotel under an assumed name."

"Our Mabel did that? Never!"

"It staggered me, but they seem to have plenty of reason for thinking so," Ada murmured. "Somehow they've been keen to get to know Mabel. I don't know why."

"Then that explains the note that Betty Barton left at my hotel this morning addressed to Mabel. Luckily it came into my hands, and you remember, Ada."

"Yes. It said that Betty wanted to prove a friend to Mabel."

Mrs. Sharrow paced to and fro, deep in thought.

"Impossible that Mabel could have been Esther Hope the chambermaid. Yet that chambermaid was a Londoner by looks and speech. Ada, those girls may be right. But in that case, why—why did Mabel do it?"

"Was it so that she could spy upon you down here, mother?"

Mrs. Sharrow gave a guilty start.

"Ah! You mean she had formed some idea about a fortune being hers that she had never been told about?" And after another pause, due to great agitation: "To be a chambermaid at the hotel where I was going to stay for weeks—it might seem to give her a chance."

"And then, too, mother, she knew that I was at this school, close to your hotel."



Mrs. Sharrow paused to gush: "I think you're the two girls who found my jewels, this evening? It was clever of you, and I'm so grateful!"

"Yes. She may have guessed that you would often be looking across, and that there would be a chance for her to glean something. If you and I talked in private in my room at the hotel. Oh," Mrs. Sharrow broke off, looking panicky, "this is dreadful, Ada! Even if Mabel has only a slight suspicion that a fortune is due to her—"

"But does it matter so much after all, mother, if she gets to know in the end? I hate the idea of her coming into the money, just when we're on the rocks. Still—"

"It matters—everything, Ada. I didn't want her to have the fortune yet. I—I— But there, I can't explain."

Mrs. Sharrow, however, suddenly found her daughter's eyes staring at her with a kind of horror, due to understanding.

"You mean, mother, you—you have broken into Mabel's money?"

"Don't ask me!" was the significantly evasive response. "Whatever I have done, Ada, it's as much for your sake and your brother's as my own. I must go now. Back to the hotel for another sleepless night."

She turned to the study door, then paused. "Now I shall feel that Mabel is still down here, haunting me."

"I don't believe she went back to London, mother, to-day."

Again the wretched woman started violently. "What!"

"Betty Barton rang up our house in London; I overheard her saying so. She was told that Mabel had wired to our old Jane: 'Not returning to-night.'"

For a long moment Mrs. Sharrow stood there with a terrified expression on her white face. The daughter's last remark had dealt the mother one terrible shock on top of all the other unnerveing blows.

"I see. But what can I do?" Mrs. Sharrow asked herself drearily. "What can we both do now? Mabel hanging about this district in secret."

"Mother."

"Well?"

"How would it be to—get Mabel taken up for the supposed robbery, after all? I mean, tell the police down here that it was Mabel Stoddart in disguise as a chambermaid; that she must have come down here on purpose to get money by stealing."

"Ah! Then it would have to be made public that the thief was somebody belonging to my own household in London. But does that matter?" Mrs. Sharrow pondered aloud. "No, why should it. After all, Mabel Stoddart is only Mabel Stoddart."

"That is just what I was thinking, mother. And we—we do need to save ourselves, don't we? And not be poor if we can help it," Ada added abjectly.

There was no response from her mother, who opened the door and passed out, deep in thought again.

The Fourth Form corridor held numerous batches of juniors standing about talking now that "prep" was over. They eyed Mrs. Sharrow interestedly as she went by, for it was well over the school by now that her jewels had been recovered. But she had neither word nor look for any of the girls.

Half-way downstairs, however, she encountered Betty and Polly coming up, and this time she surprised them by stopping to exclaim gushingly:

"I think I'm right; you are the two girls who recovered my stolen jewels this evening? It was clever of you, and I am so grateful."

"Oh, that's all right, Mrs. Sharrow."

"But I shall have to do something about it," the crafty woman gushed on. "Even though the jewels were insured against theft, I would much rather have had them back than be paid for the loss of them. I hope your headmistress has praised you for your smartness?"

"Miss Somerfield has given us far more praise than we would ever have wanted," Betty said uncomfortably. "And so—"

"I wonder, you two, if you would like me to give you a little treat at the Headland Hotel? I must try to arrange it for you," Mrs. Sharrow said with a rather ghastly smile. "Good-night now, and thank you again ever so much."

"Good-night, Mrs. Sharrow." And as she passed on downstairs Betty and Polly went scampering up flight after flight to return to Study 12.

"Well, what about eet?" Naomer asked saucily as the pair romped in. "Have you got ze sack from Morcove?"

"Not yet," said the madcap gaily.

"Pipooray, gorjus! And eef you ask me," cried Naomer, whipping about to get to the corner cupboard, "I zink we ought to cellerbrate. Bekas Paula and I have been fearing zat we would have to be in Study 12 all by ourselves."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"A catastrophe," said Paula, shaking up a cushion, "too tewwible to contemplate!"

Envied by the Form

MOST of the chums of Study 12 were getting a before-school practice game next morning when Dolly Delane, Morcove's only day-girl, came rushing at them in great excitement.

"News, girls—news!"

"Oh!" And the little white ball on the grass was suddenly forgotten. "What about, Dot?"

"That hotel robbery. It's known that the thief, that chambermaid who vanished, was somebody from Mrs. Sharrow's own home in London."

Study 12 felt inclined to say in chorus: "We could have told Mrs. Sharrow that yesterday." But the chums thought it best to look as amazed as were other juniors.

"Mrs. Sharrow has been able to inform the police down here; it's a girl named Mabel Stoddart," Dolly panted on. "It is supposed that the girl came down to this district and got taken on as a chambermaid at the Headland, simply to be able to steal. Just fancy, and she is a girl who has been sort of brought up by Mrs. Sharrow, too."

"Then she must be an awful girl," was the prompt comment of one junior who did not belong to the chummy. "Doesn't Mrs. Sharrow feel terrible about it all?"

"Fancy bringing up a girl, only to have her turning out like that," said another member of the Fourth Form.

"And what will Ada say!" cried yet another. "Ada must have had a lot to do with her. Where is Ada now?"

"Coming," remarked Polly grimly. "Well, let's get on with the game, I say."

But Ada's sauntering up, just after such sensational news, proved too much for the majority. Five seconds later Ada was the centre of an eager little mob whose clamorous cries seemed to please her greatly, judging by her self-important smile.

"So you've heard, have you? True? Of course it's true!" she said loudly. "Do you girls think my mother would make up a thing like that for fun? It is a thing she would a thousand times rather not have had to say, but she was bound to tell the police. It's their job to catch the thief, never mind who it may have been, and it was mother's part to give them all possible information."

"Yes, we quite understand that, Ada."

"Well then."

"But, Ada," the clamour continued, "about this Stoddart girl. She lived at home with you?"

"Mother was kind enough to support her. It has been mistaken charity, as it has turned out. The girl is—well, I suppose thieving is in her blood."

"Shocking!" exclaimed several listeners. "She was a bit older than you, of course?"

"Oh, several years! But I'd rather not talk about the girl," said Ada virtuously. "She's nothing to me."

Betty nudged Polly to come away with her and others. At one moment it had seemed as if the madcap would "go" for the new girl.

"How I hate to hear her slanging the Stoddart girl," Polly fumed, when she had only her chums around her. "We may have been altogether mistaken about Mabel Stoddart. In fact, we were. But I should imagine that she is more to be pitied than condemned after living with those Sharrows."

"And having their charity thrown up at her every day, yes, wather!" Paula rejoined.

"Time to go in," the captain remarked.

"What ze diggings! Bekas eet seems nothing but school, school, school zis term!" grumbled Naomer.

"With intervals for meals," added Polly.

"Eef you can call zem meals."

But the madcap would not allow that.

"Shame! How dare you, kid!" she playfully rounded upon the ever-hungry one. "Rolls of it!" seizing Naomer by a plump arm. "And she talks as if she were starved."

"Zat is muscle, bekas I keep myself fit."

"Haw, haw, haw!" chortled Paula, forgetting that she was in dangerous proximity to the dusky one. "That's vewy wich, that is, bai Jove! Muscle! Ow, owch!"

"So eet is muscle, and now you know eet!"

"Yarrogh, grooph-owp! Betty deah, speak to Naomer!"

But Betty had sprinted in advance to the school-house, and as Polly and others were teasingly indifferent to what happened to Paula at the hands of "muscular" Naomer, the long-suffering duffer was to reach the porch in a very dishevelled state.

Meantime Betty, indoors, was approached by parlourmaid Ellen.

"A note for you, miss."

"For me, Ellen? I thought I had had all my letters. Oh, but this has come by hand!" was Betty's further cry of astonishment as she took the proffered note.

"Yes, miss. A messenger from the Headland Hotel brought it just now."

Ellen effaced herself, whilst Betty, after reading only two or three lines on the hotel letter-paper, almost shouted:

"Polly!"

"Here I am, Betty."

"Do look at this, Polly. From Mrs. Sharrow, inviting us to dinner at the hotel to-morrow evening."

"Never!" the madcap gasped.

"Do we want to go, Polly?"

"No. At least— Oh, I don't know," the madcap fluctuated. "Will her daughter be there?"

"Will make it much better if she isn't," grinned Betty. "Mrs. Sharrow herself is no great catch. But I suppose she means it nicely."

"And I tell you what," Polly exclaimed softly. "It might lead to your hearing more about the Stoddart girl. Somehow, Betty, I find myself fidgeting about that girl."

"So do I. Look here, for what it's worth—we'll go," the captain decided with a little laugh. "That is, if Miss Everard gives permish."

"She's bound to do that," Polly predicted.

Sure enough the Form-mistress was all amiable approval.

By the time the school came out for "break" that morning the news had spread. Betty and Polly were given to understand by some Form-mates that they were envied their luck. Other juniors playfully boo'd captain and madcap.

"Another let-off from prep. Booh!"

But Naomer up in Study 12 was the genuinely aggrieved party.

"Bekas I am disgusted. Bekas he will be a grand dinner at that hotel, a gorjus dinner. Zey give you horsed duffers to begin with—"

"Give you what?"

"Horsed duffers," Naomer repeated her rendering of *hors d'oeuvres*. "And soup and fish and chicken and roast beef, and an ice to finish up with—sweendle!"

"But I don't see any swindle in that!" cried Polly.

"Eet is, for zose who are not going to get it!"

"Naomer," said Betty, "if you are very good, Polly and I will tell you all about it afterwards, what we had to eat and everything."

"Meantime," said Polly, putting on a grand air for fun, "I must think what I am to wear. That blue party frock suits my style of beauty very well; but it's crumpled."

"Cwumpled, bai Jove!" sighed Paula, putting herself to rights after the recent mangling. "Look at my fwock, geals."

"Almost I am inclined to go into Barncombe after tea," Betty announced, "to get myself something special for the occasion."

The idea, at first put forward in fun, was one that Betty began to toy with seriously. Yes, it would be nice to get something quite new in ready-mades. But the going into town after tea yesterday had led to all that excitement. So Miss Everard had better be consulted perhaps.

Miss Everard proved to be not at all inclined to let any girls have leave that would keep them out up to the last minute.

She could understand Betty's wish to buy a frock for to-morrow night. The best thing, therefore, said the Form-mistress, would be for Betty to go into Barncombe before tea this afternoon.

"There'll be time for you to get a cup of tea at the Creamery, Betty, and still be back well before dusk. Go in directly after school, and the light will be better for choosing a colour."

"Thanks, Miss Everard. And may I take—"

"Oh, take your chums by all means."

Naomer "went whoopee" when she heard about this. The next best thing to dining out at the new hotel was to have tea at the Barncombe Creamery.

"One of our jolly old spreads. Pipooray!"

Unfortunately just before afternoon school Naomer became involved in a terrible row with

Ada Sharrow. It all began when Ada accused Naomer of pushing, the dusky one indignantly denying that she had pushed.

"Because I wouldn't touch you with a pitchfork!"

There was some verbal warfare, and then both girls lost their tempers, and Miss Everard was upon the scene, having to part the squabblers before Betty and others knew anything about it.

Ada accused Naomer of beginning it, whereupon Naomer did for herself in the eyes of the Form-mistress by flying at the new girl again.

"Naomer, when I have said that you are to—"
"I don't care a hoot what anybody has said. Bekas—"

"You will be made to care about what I say. Now you will stay in after school and do a hundred lines."

"No, bekas I am going into Barncombe with—"

"You will not go. Understand that."

This upset, which appeared to leave Ada Sharrow tongue-in-cheek, had to result in other members of the "chummery" staying behind at the school for tea to console Naomer with their company.

Paula very "brickishly" offered to forego the run into town, so did Madge, Helen and Judy. Tess had not intended to go in any case, so she made another. Betty, Polly and Pam, they became the only girls to get their bicycles out and pedal away. Betty had wanted Pam to help choose the frock. Pam had wonderful taste.

They saw about the thrilling purchase first, then adjourned to the Creamery, where a good many other Morcovians were in evidence at the tea-tables.

At the table nearest to the chums sat somebody who was a complete stranger to them, or so they imagined. She was a girl past school age, almost old enough to be termed a young lady.

Inevitably the Study 12 three gave her a glance or so as she sat turning the pages of an illustrated weekly, and they set her down as being a girl staying in Barncombe for a change of air.

The comely waitress, a favourite with Morcovite patrons of the teashop, came along with the pot of tea and all else, smiling pleasantly.

"Great excitement there's been, young ladies, over that robbery affair at the new hotel," she commented, clacking down the crockery. "They haven't caught her yet, either."

"Caught—"

"The girl who did it; Mabel Stoddart, isn't her name? Although she took the name of Esther Hope whilst serving as a chambermaid. We had the police in here this morning."

"Oh, did you!"

"Yes. Asking us to keep a look out for her. But I expect she has vanished from the district a second time by now."

The waitress was too well trained to linger, forcing conversation upon the scholars. She drifted away with her empty tray.

"And I for one hope somehow that the girl has vanished again and that she does escape the police," Polly exclaimed. "I don't know. But I shall always feel that she is not so black as she has been painted. Cake, Pam? And what'll you have, Betty?"

"Oh, just a scone and butter, thanks," said the captain, pouring out. "Yes. If the Sharrows had been nicer people, then perhaps one would have not felt like this about the Stoddart girl."

"People say that first impressions are everything," Pam remarked quietly. "And the girl, as

Esther Hope, did impress us favourably, didn't she?"

"She did!" from Betty and Polly with emphasis.

Then the talk changed.

"Rough on Naomer that she couldn't come in with us," Betty deplored. "But we'll take back something nice from the counter."

"Including a special box of chocs., for herself," Pam nodded. "She's so excitable, or she might have seen that Ada Sharrow was seizing the chance to get her worked up."

"It's a wonder I haven't had a set-to with Ada before this," Polly said grimly. "And to think that very likely she'll sit down with us to-morrow evening at the hotel."

"Can't say I'm looking forward to it," laughed Betty.

"Never mind," said Pam. "You've got that new frock to wear. I think you did best, Betty, to make it the pale cream after all."

"It was your choosing, Pam."

"Yes, well, the apple-green was nice, but green can go funny in some lights."

Cups were replenished pretty quickly, the trio being determined to get back in good time. When the waitress flitted to the adjoining table, where the solitary girl had signalled for her ticket, Betty gestured that she and her chums would also like their ticket now.

But the youthful stranger left the shop a couple of minutes in advance of our trio, whose departure was hindered by a call at the tempting counters.

"Yes, well, we're all right for daylight," Pam serenely commented, as she and her two chums stood tying various cardboard cartons to the handlebars of their machines at the kerb.

"Heaps of time!" was Polly's opinion. "But we'll scoot along, girls, to get back to—"

As abruptly as that she broke off, sharing Betty and Pam's surprise at an entreating whisper from somebody who had silently drawn close to all three of them.

"Pardon?" said Betty.

It was the solitary girl who a few moments ago had been having some tea at the table next to theirs.

"I—I am sure it is safe to tell you," the girl whispered agitatedly. "I am Mabel Stoddart."

At Last

MABEL STODDART!

The girl, here on the pavement of Barncombe's high street.

Face to face with them, confessing her identity, here in the heart of the very town where the police were most vigilant in their eagerness to take her up.

Seldom, if ever, had these three juniors been more staggered. Even Pam's usual serenity was lost utterly in a moment.

"I heard you talking in the teashop as if—as if you could hardly believe it was true what they are saying about me," the girl added quickly and softly.

"But," Betty gasped at last—"but you shouldn't be here. The police, the whole town—"

"I know. But I would do worse by trying to get away. I'm wearing different clothes from those in the description of me, and so far I have escaped suspicion. But I fear that all lodging-houses will be visited. Perhaps my nerve is going, but I feel afraid to go back to the room I

took. "I—I am not accustomed to being hunted like a thief," she finished distressfully.

The three Morcovians had been staring hard at her.

"You didn't take the jewels?" Betty whispered.

"I know nothing about the robbery," came the low-spoken vehement response. "It is just my cruel luck that there was a robbery at that hotel before I fled to London on Sunday night."

"You want us to do something for you?" Pam inferred softly.

"No. I hardly know why I spoke to you, except that I had heard you speaking kindly about me at a time when everyone seems against me. You may understand; I felt I must let you know, anyhow, that Mabel Stoddart is not a thief."

"But we must help you," Polly burst out. "Although we can't talk here. We're going back to the school now. Could you—"

"It won't be twilight for a little while yet,"

"I never received it."
"There!" Polly burst out. "Intercepted—by Mrs. Sharrow, of course. Oh, now we begin to—"

"But tell me," clamoured Mabel Stoddart, "did you find my bundle of Morcove clothing in the hollies?"

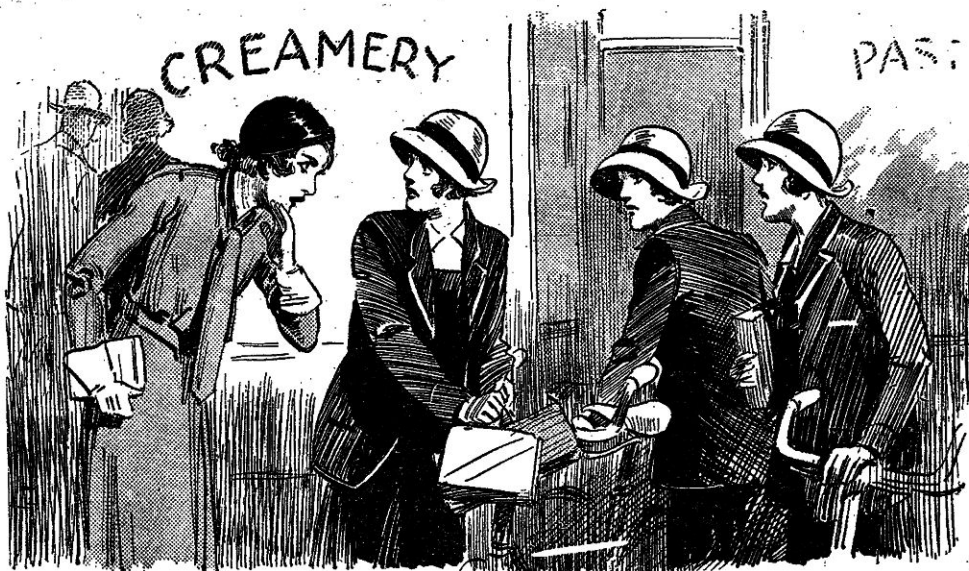
"We did," said Betty. "And there's a locket also, a locket with 'Mabel Stoddart' engraved inside. Polly here has it at the school."

"But don't let's hang about here," Betty suddenly counselled. "It's risky. Can you manage to be at the hollies presently, Mabel?"

"Oh, yes—yes, I must get a proper talk with you," was the last whisper that passed before the scholars remounted and rode on.

Not until they were clear of the town did any of them have a word to say. Then the bottled-up excitement exploded.

"Girls, can you beat it!"



Betty, Polly and Pam were suddenly confronted by the strange girl. "I'm sure it's safe to tell you," she whispered. "I am—Mabel Stoddart!"

Betty struck in eagerly. "If you could get ahead of us and meet us again on the Morcove road. Yet the road will be hardly safe enough."

"On the moor," Pam hastily suggested. "Where can we make it? Not too far away from the road, because of our bikes."

"Look here," Betty said to Mabel Stoddart, "you know the clump of hollies where you hid your bundle of Morcove clothes. Could you be there presently?"

The girl did not answer.

"The same clump of hollies," Betty added tensely, "that I mentioned in my note to you at the hotel."

"Note to me at the hotel?" Mabel Stoddart echoed blankly. "I got no note from you."

"We heard that you were bringing a package of papers down from London, urgent, for Mrs. Sharrow, and so a note was left by me," Betty explained, "at the hotel against your arrival."

"Amazing?" Betty followed on Polly's outburst. "And such a nice girl," said Pam. "Just what we took her to be, meeting for those few minutes as Esther Hope, the chambermaid, last Sunday night."

"Come on," Polly seethed, pedalling faster than ever. "Get close to the school, hide the bikes, and then lie up for her near the hollies."

"That's the plan, yes," Betty nodded.

And in a trifle over the half-hour the plan had been carried out.

At last Mabel Stoddart came to them very cautiously, where they were waiting in concealment near the hollies.

"Is it all right?" was their first whispered question.

"I hope so, for your sakes," she whispered back. "No one has noticed me, I'm sure. Now tell me—oh, please! How did you get to know about me?"

"You were the Phantom Schoolgirl," Betty said with a feeble smile. "From the hotel, where you were posing as Esther Hope, the chambermaid, you used to steal across and creep about the schoolhouse, disguised as a scholar."

"Wearing a mask," Polly added. "A silvery-white mask that you dropped out here on the moor last Sunday night in the fog."

Mabel Stoddart was more distressed now than nervous.

"It is true," she admitted. "I did masquerade like that. But I had a very important reason for doing so, an honest reason, too. I'm sorry if I scared any of your girls at different times, but—"

"Oh, that's all right," Betty gave the hasty assurance. "We didn't mind; thought it rather a scream in fact. All the same, it was a mystery that puzzled us greatly."

"I'm going to confide in you," Mabel quavered huskily. "A little while back I realised that I would have to do something about finding out whether or not I was being cruelly deceived—cheated, in fact, by Mrs. Sharrow. I was not in a position to challenge her until I had obtained evidence—proof."

"Of what?" jerked out Polly.

"Of my being entitled to a fortune, left to me by an uncle, about which not a word has ever been said by the Sharrows. A dear old servant at the house up in London was continually hinting things. Then the time came for Ada Sharrow to come down here to Morcove School. Mrs. Sharrow also left London to stay at the new hotel. I made up my mind suddenly—"

Pausing, Mabel Stoddart glanced around to make sure that she and her listeners were still safe from interruption. Reassured, she continued:

"I had to keep watch upon mother and daughter both. It seemed to me that by coming down here in disguise I might get a splendid chance. I concluded that mother and daughter would be often together and that when together they would talk about me. So I decided to be a chambermaid at the hotel, so as to have a roof over my head and to be close to Mrs. Sharrow. At the same time I hoped I could do some good by shadowing Ada Sharrow. She has a brother at Grangemoor School, and I guessed that he would often be over to see her. I bought myself the Morcove dress, a senior's size, at the outfitter's in Barncombe, and I crept into the schoolhouse more than once."

"Wearing the mask so that your features could not be seen if anyone ran into you?" Betty rejoined. "It's what we had concluded."

"My purpose was to keep after Ada, and if we had blundered into each other—well! But, although her brother came over several times to Morcove, I didn't seem to be getting much opportunity. Then suddenly a great chance came. Last Sunday evening I learned that Mrs. Sharrow was going to visit Ada at the school. It was my evening off duty at the hotel. I disguised myself out here on the moor and crept into the schoolhouse once more."

Mabel Stoddart's low voice became very tense as she felt the excitement all over again.

"I hoped to be able to listen, as I felt entitled to do, to any talk between mother and daughter in the study. At one moment I was actually in the corridor of studies—"

"And that was when Madge saw you and came rushing to us in Study 12," broke in Polly. "She had seen the Phantom Schoolgirl. Then the lights went out—"

"Yes. I turned off the switch on the landing so as to be able to get away in sudden darkness. When I got outside there was a thick fog, and what with one thing and another I lost my way and very nearly lost my head. But there was a worse scare than that in store for me. When I got back to the hotel at last I discovered that Mrs. Sharrow intended to go up to London first thing in the morning."

"So you had to be off on the instant, so as to be there in London before her? And after all she didn't go to London on the Monday morning," Betty added. "I suppose she had to change her plans because she found she had been robbed."

"It may have been that," Mabel nodded. "Or it may have been that she changed her mind and decided to have a package that she wanted sent down to her from town. She wired to me, never dreaming that I had been down here at the hotel acting as her own chambermaid. I came down with the package. It is one endorsed 'M. S.' on the cover. My initials."

"You couldn't look inside the package?" Polly asked.

"It was sealed up. But now if only I had a chance I would look—yes, I would!" the hard-driven girl said desperately. "I'm certain papers in that envelope would set my mind at rest."

"Listen to this," Betty whispered. "To-morrow night Polly and I go to dine with Mrs. Sharrow at the hotel. It's her way of rewarding us for having got back the jewels when we chased someone last evening—"

"And we thought it was you, Mabel Stoddart," Polly said ruefully. "The person looked just about your size, and—"

"Oh, I'm not surprised you suspected me," came the quick assurance. "But I tell you again, on my word of honour I know nothing about those jewels."

"Then who on earth was it?" Betty wondered blankly. "Until that is known, Mabel, you'll be liable to be arrested. But I was going to say, if Polly and I to-morrow night at the hotel could get a chance to look at that packet of papers. Quite likely Mrs. Sharrow will take us up to her room before we go into the restaurant. Or after dinner—"

"St!"

Polly, in sudden alarm, had thrown up a finger for dead silence.

"Someone about, so keep down," she breathed. "I hope you haven't been followed after all on suspicion, Mabel."

Their hearts were beating rapidly as they all four crouched lower in the friendly shelter of brambles and other moorland growth.

After a few moments, having heard nothing, Polly raised her head just high enough to peep around warily.

Then she ducked down her head again.

"Keep still!" she implored in a deep whisper.

"I could see Ada Sharrow."

"That girl!" gasped Betty. "Where? How far away?"

"Only a short distance," Polly whispered. "More towards where we picked up the jewel-case last evening. And, girls, she's not prowling about after us, I am certain. She seems to be looking for something."

"Close to where we found the jewel-case?" Betty muttered. "But that's strange."

Silence had to follow this. It was no time for excitable chatter. For fully ten minutes they had to lie low whilst Ada Sharrow, as some peeping

now and then assured them, still searched about in the rank growth of the moor.

Then she went away, and as they watched her receding figure they felt certain that she was very dejected.

"We must go, too," Betty gravely realised. "It will never do for us to turn up at the school after lock-up time again. What about you, Mabel? Isn't there something we can do for you?"

"Nothing, girls, thank you. I wouldn't let you—"

"But here you'd better have some of these cakes and the chocs., in case of need," Polly counselled. "We brought them along with us, thinking you might be glad of them."

"And another thing, Pam chimed in softly. "That Morocco dress. It's still in Study 12, isn't it?"

"Here, I know what," Polly rushed on. "We'll drop it out of the study window for you presently, Mabel. Don't look like that. It makes a splendid disguise, that dress."

"You had better have it," Betty urged. "Be under our study window about eight this evening and we'll drop the parcel down to you. And we won't forget what you have told us about that packet of papers which Mrs. Sharrow has. Perhaps to-morrow night—"

The earnest voice died away. All three girls felt lumpy in the throat as they realised that Mabel Stoddart was crying silently. Their befriending offers had caused her to break down like that.

But when there had been time for her to control her emotions the juniors asserted their desire to help her all the more. Nor did they part from her without having made arrangements that took many girls into account.

"Poor girl," murmured Betty, hastening away with Polly and Pam to where the bicycles could be recovered. "Terrible for her whole future to be so in the balance, as it is."

"Entitled to be rich," muttered Polly fiercely, "and yet they have tricked her. Worse. They have ended by denouncing her as a thief."

"Mrs. Sharrow can't honestly believe that the girl was the one who stole—Hallo, though!"

And Pam, pulling up sharply during their wading through the heather, first looked down to the ground, then pounced to pick up something.

"I say, here's a girl's shoe."

"What? And it was near here that Ada Sharrow was searching about just now," Polly recollected. "Would it be her shoe then?"

"It's a girl's size. I—Yes, what, Betty?"

"Now I'm thinking wildly," Betty confessed. "But it does seem to—account for a lot. If it was Ada Sharrow whom we chased last evening out here, and if she lost a shoe whilst running?"

"You mean, that was what she stopped to try and find, and had to go on without it after all?" Polly questioned.

"I don't mean that at all," Betty answered tremulously. "I mean that Ada had the jewels and dropped them as well as losing a shoe in the heather at the same time."

"Ada had the jewels? Goodness!" Polly gasped. "Her mother had given them to her to take care of or hide? Ada was across to the hotel last evening seeing her mother. But at that rate there never was any robbery."

"There was no robbery," Betty declared with slow emphasis. "Mrs. Sharrow has only been making out that she was robbed. It was Ada Sharrow with the jewel-case last evening. It

looked to us to be someone bigger, but figures do look larger than they really are by night."

"Any rate," Polly said, "here's a girl's shoe, and it was Ada looking for something here just now. Oh, come along back to school, girls. Prove that, and what it will mean for Mabel."

"I know how we'll work it, too, if only we are right about Ada. It has come to me in a flash," Betty murmured—"an idea."

Back at school just in time to escape censure, they made it their immediate task to follow up this clue of the lost shoe. And success was theirs.

Within half an hour of getting indoors they had satisfied themselves that Ada Sharrow was one shoe short in her stock of footwear.

Nothing was said to her about it then. Betty's idea, to meet with success, decreed "Not a word!" for the time being.

The shoe itself went with Betty and Polly finally to Study 12 to form an "exhibit" if and when required. But before the captain and the madcap saw fit to tell their chums the very latest they afforded Naomer an opportunity of enjoying a fancied grievance.

"Bekas you might have had ze decency to bring back more zan zis from ze Creamery," was the dusky one's grumble. "Ah, bah, I am disgusted!"

"Very sorry, kid."

"I wonder you aren't ashamed! Bekas what is ze use of one box of chocolates? I could eat them all straight away."

"Then eat them," laughed the madcap. "They're for you."

"No, I refuse to eat zem—at present, any old how. I shall only have one now, just for a taster." The lid came off. "A measly half-pound box!" said Naomer.

"Now we'll tell you something," said Betty blithely. "We really bought quite a lot of stuff at the Creamery counter, only we parted with most of it on the way back."

"You did. What ze diggings, bekas I'd like to know who deserved eet more than I did, after being kept in and lined."

"You shall know," smiled Betty.

And she and Polly between them imparted the very latest to a batch of chums who listened, from first to last agape.

"Bai Jove!" said Paula, sinking at the end of the thrilling story into a collapsed state. "You two geals—the evudition!"

"Why, you deserve ze medal!" piped in Naomer. "And now I could kick myself."

"Owp, ow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

For Naomer, instead of kicking herself, had somehow come down upon Paula after an excitable jump.

"Never mind medals," chuckled Polly. "We're going to get something better than medals out of it all. Only wait till to-morrow evening, girls."

"Oho!" said Helen. "Are you looking forward to going across to the hotel, after all?"

"We are," sparkled Betty. "Very much indeed now—"

Meanwhile a little matter of routing out a certain bundle of schoolgirl attire had to be attended to.

More than that, Betty had a little note to write to be included in the bundle. In due course that bundle was wrapped up in stout brown-paper and tied about with strong string.

"And now, allez, some of you," requested Polly. "For it's time Betty and I looked at prep. In

any case, the next performance is not until eight, pronto."

"After which," Naomer proclaimed, "zere will be an extra special hand-round to cellerbrate."

So for the present those who did not work in this study made themselves scarce. But they were back well before Morcove's own pretty chimes were beating out eight o'clock in the darkness of the autumn night.

"Now then," said Betty, taking up the parcel to carry it to the study window.

The blind was down. Polly let it go up by a tug at the cord working the spring attachment. Then she softly raised the lower sash.

"Sh! Let's have the light out, girls," Betty suddenly decided.

One of the others darted across to the switch just inside the doorway. Click, and the study was in darkness, except for some faint moonlight.

"Ooo!" Naomer breathed. "Bekas zis reminds me of ze last time ze Phantom Schoolgirl was seen—when all ze lights went out."

"The Phantom Schoolgirl is down there in the grounds now!" Betty remarked softly. "And here goes the parcel for her."

She let it drop from hands that were holding it beyond the window-sill.

"She was there, almost underneath the window," Polly joyfully reasoned. "Lights up. Close the window, girls. No more to-night."

"Eggscept, don't forget—ze grand cellerbration."

The Hour Comes

HALF-PAST six the following evening found most of the Fourth Form at Morcove School indulging in an unofficial and entirely mirthful muster.

At any moment now three girls were expecting to show themselves on the way downstairs, dressed for an evening out at the new hotel.

Betty Barton and Polly Linton, needless to say, were two of the more or less envied girls. The third was Ada Sharrow. It had been known since first thing this morning in the Form that Ada also would be sitting down to dinner at the Headland along with her mother's invitees.

"Here they come!"

"At last."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Give them a cheer, girls. Stand back, please. Don't push there!"

But this particular protest, as it mingled with so many other jocular remarks, only resulted in all the more pushing. It became a pretended frenzy to get close enough to see the three in all their glory.

Then suddenly all the frolicsome behaviour of the crowd on the landing changed to amazement. Betty and Polly had appeared upon the scene. But where was Ada Sharrow?

It became a general cry for the Study 12 pair to answer.

"Where's Ada then?"

"She's not going."

"What!" greeted Betty's quiet answer. "Not going? Why not?"

"Oh, we can't tell you why," smiled Betty. "And you had better not worry her, please. She's gone to the dormitory to be by herself."

"Not well, is that it?" came in another chorus from the crowd.

"We advised her not to come," said Betty simply.

"And," Polly rejoined, "she took the advice."

This sufficed in regard to Ada Sharrow, for she was not so popular in the Form as to become an object of sympathetic concern. Remained for the Fourth Form to escort its captain and its madcap most boisterously down to the front door. Miss Somerfield's car, appointed to run the invitees to the hotel, was waiting at the schoolhouse porch. "Betty's frock," repeated sundry members of the attendant mob, unable to get over the effect of it. "I say!"

"Bekas—gorjus! How much was he, Betty? Bekas I must have one like him."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Girls, girls, all this noise! all this nonsense!" remonstrated Miss Everard, suddenly appearing upon the scene. "Hush!"

"Pipooray! Bekas—"

"Naomer, do you want to be sent to bed?"

"No, plis, bekas I want to sit up to-night until zey both come back."

More peals of laughter.

"Well, Betty—Polly," the Form-mistress said to them, trying to keep a straight face. "Yes, you look quite all right. Pretty frock, Betty, very. But where is Ada Sharrow?" Miss Everard now asked in surprise. "She was going with you."

"She doesn't want to go now," the captain explained briefly. "Doesn't feel that it would be any enjoyment."

"Indeed? Oh, well! Be off then, you two, and I hope you have a nice time. The car, remember, fetches you at nine-thirty."

"Hi! So mind you feenish dinner by zen, you two. Best of luck, and mind you show ze good appertite."

To the accompaniment of more laughter and playful cheering Betty and Polly passed out to the waiting car.

The car purred away in the night. A whizz round at the gateway and it was speeding the short distance to Morcove's new hotel de luxe.

"Thanks, Jennings," they said, as the chauffeur opened one of the car's doors to let them alight.

Another moment and they could have been passing through the revolving doors of the hotel, out of the chilly night into all the warmth and glamour of the lounges. But both girls lingered, whilst the chauffeur returned to his seat at the wheel and instantly drove away.

"Now!" Betty whispered her chum. "I wonder if it's all right. Will you wait while I slip along and see?"

"My goodness, if there's a hitch!" panted Polly. "But surely she's been able to act on the note you put in the parcel last night."

Betty fluttered away, and for fully five minutes Polly was alone, just outside the main entrance to the hotel. Very much on the fidget, she stepped to and fro, to and fro.

Then ending the suspense Betty came running back with a light step.

"It's all right, Polly."

"It is? Oh, good! Come on in then."

And the glass doors went round and round at last, letting through the Form captain and her chum-in-chief.

Waiting for—Somebody

AS many guests as ever were in residence at Morcove's new hotel.

Betty and Polly entered just at that time when fashionable ladies and their menfolk were trooping down dressed for the evening.

Large fires were blazing on the lounge hearths.

Jolly batches of people were grouped here and there, telling one another what they had been doing during the day and happily assured of a very enjoyable evening—a good dinner with a fine band; music afterwards in the lounges, a dance to wind up with.

The same hotel porter who had attended to Betty on her flying visit to the hotel the other morning marched up to her and Polly.

"Good-evening, young ladies. Mrs. Sharrow's party?"

"That's right," they smiled.

"She isn't down yet. Would you please take a seat—anywhere you like."

"Somewhere out of other people's way," Polly murmured. "That corner over there, Betty."

"That should do nicely. We can see the entrance doors from there."

So they sauntered across the vast lounge to that particular corner and sat down to wait. Some guffaws of laughter over a very funny story being told by a white-moustached, military-looking gentleman amused Betty and Polly. But it amused them still more in secret to catch snatches of grave talk about the recent "robbery."

"No, they haven't arrested the girl even now."

"H'm! I'm afraid these local police—"

"Quite! All right for traffic duty, but when it comes to detective work—"

Suddenly all comment on the affair ceased, and next moment Betty and Polly understood why. Mrs. Sharrow was coming out of the lift that had brought her down from the second floor.

Although she noticed her two invitees at once waiting apart in that corner she only leisurely drifted across to them.

"So there you are, girls," she smiled carelessly when within speaking distance. "Ada coming on after you?"

Both girls had risen.

"No, Mrs. Sharrow. Ada won't be here."

"She won't? Why not?"

Betty, to whom the question was chiefly directed, shrugged.

"We advised her not to come, that's why."

"You advised her?" stared Mrs. Sharrow. "I'd like to know what on earth you mean, both of you."

"Oh, you will not be long in knowing," Morcove's Fourth Form captain replied. "It is merely a case of asking you to wait a few minutes, even less perhaps."

Again a shock went through Mrs. Sharrow. Then she forced a laugh.

"Upon my word, you're very mysterious, you two!"

"Say, candid," Betty suggested calmly. "The time for mystery is at an end, Mrs. Sharrow."

"I don't understand you, girl. All this it appears to me is studied impudence, at a time when I have been kind enough to invite you to enjoy a little treat at my expense."

"We want nothing at your expense, thank you," Polly now spoke. "Don't imagine that we're going to sit down to dinner with you, because we are not."

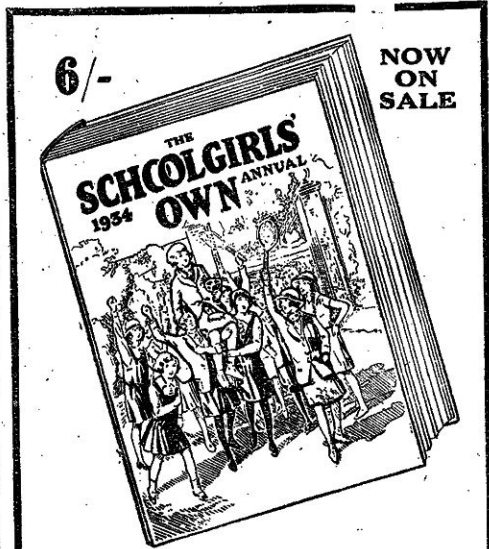
"We are only here to make the affair less awkward for you than it might easily have been," Betty added.

Mrs. Sharrow's hard mouth sagged at either corner.

"Affair?" she echoed. "What affair?"

"Oh, the affair of the robbery. I should say

(Continued on the next page.)



THE SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN ANNUAL will appeal to every lover of Marjorie Stanton's Morcove School stories, for it contains two complete tales about the Study 12 'coterie,' as well as a charming play featuring Betty Barton and Co. A host of other fine stories, and a variety of articles complete a magnificent volume. Fully illustrated throughout.

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the bogus robbery," Betty corrected in a lowered tone. "The affair of Mabel Stoddart—who will be here at any minute now."

Mrs. Sharrow swayed slightly under the shock of that last announcement.

"Yes," Polly nodded blandly. "We're only waiting for Mabel."

"She will come in, dressed more or less as a Morcove girl—a senior," Betty continued. "So nobody apart from ourselves is going to suspect that it is Mabel Stoddart, alias Esther Hope."

"So," Mrs. Sharrow said under her breath at last, "you girls have got into touch with Mabel Stoddart, have you? The crafty young minx in her desperate need to escape the police has resorted to you scholars for help? But if you think you are going to be able to sort of intercede for her you are mistaken. I will have her arrested. The moment she sets foot inside that doorway over there she shall be taken up. I will tell the porter now to phone for the police."

"Mrs. Sharrow, you had better not; you had better wait," Betty said, stepping after the woman, who turned round, her hard eyes dilating more than ever.

"We've spared your daughter a good deal of shame and disgrace," Betty resumed steadily. "We're wanting to do the same for you. But you'd better be careful. If you are going to send for the police then Polly and I are going to tell everybody in this hotel straight away the truth about the 'robbery.'"

Mrs. Sharrow stood very still then.

The lounge was emptying. Guests were drifting towards the grand restaurant, jovial as ever. The band had started to play, and the music was in the air faintly out here in the lounge.

"Look," Polly said suddenly.

The revolving doors were turning, to let in Mabel Stoddart—disguised as a Morcove girl.

The Triumph of Study 12

DRAMATIC moment that it was.

Once again Mabel Stoddart was under this roof.

She, the very girl who, in service as a chambermaid under the assumed name of Esther Hope, had been on the pay-roll of this hotel; she, the wanted "thief," and yet she had now walked in like that.

Stepping spiritedly, she came across the half-empty lounge to that corner where Betty and Polly stood with Mrs. Sharrow. And the music in the air was like the slow music to the big scene in a melodrama.

"Good-evening," Mabel bowed to Mrs. Sharrow calmly.

"Mabel," came the hissing whisper, "I am done with you. I have not the slightest intention of getting you lot off."

"Let off for what?" returned the newcomer. "For a robbery that was never committed?"

"Mrs. Sharrow," said Betty, "you may want to be done with Mabel here and done with me and Polly, too. But we can't be done with you for a bit. It's like this—if you'll oblige by listening."

"I've a good mind to have all three of you turned out of the hotel."

"Then we would go across to the school to find the headmistress, and she would bring us back with the police," Betty promptly smiled. "Upstairs in your room, Mrs. Sharrow, you have a packet of papers with 'M. S.' on the cover."

The woman's silence was as good as a vocal "Yes."

"Will you let Mabel go up to your room, bring down the packet and examine the papers in your presence?"

"No, I will not. You—you impertinent little—"

"Then it must be the other thing," Betty exclaimed regretfully. "And it must be made public that you were never robbed that night. You pretended there had been a theft. The jewels were never out of your possession until you gave them to Ada to take care of—to hide for you."

"Are you mad—" gasped Mrs. Sharrow.

"No, only telling you—"

"It's a lie!"

"It can't be," Betty quietly insisted. "Your own daughter has admitted it. We have proved it, and there is Ada's own admission."

"It was Ada whom we were chasing when the jewel-case was dropped—by her," Polly carried on the annihilating statement. "It was Ada who lost a shoe in the heather at the same time. We've got that shoe."

Mabel Stoddart was keeping silent, gazing at the woman who had tricked her.

"Mrs. Sharrow, you'd better be careful," Betty pleaded earnestly. "Polly and I had a talk with Ada just before dressing to come here. She went to pieces and owned up to it all."

"The fool! The little fool!" stamped Ada's mother.

"Don't say that," urged Polly. "We think it was wise of her, considering. And look here, it's not a bad offer, is it? If you have nothing to fear from Mabel's seeing what is inside that package, then you have all to gain and nothing to lose. We won't give you away unless—unless you refuse to let her see those papers."

For a few moments Mrs. Sharrow moved about in a tigerish way. Then she stood still.

"Mabel, go up to my room on the second floor, you know the number, of course. The papers are in the drawer of the writing-table. You may bring them down."

"Thank you."

It was a smiling murmur that fetched from the beaten woman a long, hard sigh. Swiftly Mabel Stoddart crossed to the lift which was available for instant use. Betty and Polly saw it whirl her aloft. The lounge, except for the two of them and Mrs. Sharrow, was now deserted. And now whilst they waited the music ended.

Presently the lattice gates to the lift clashed back and Mabel Stoddart stepped out. She came across the lounge with the fateful packet.

For the first time she spoke to Mrs. Sharrow about the papers.

"I want you to understand," she said steadily, "I could have opened this packet in London at the time you wired to me to send it down to you. I was strongly tempted to break the seals and look inside, but it went against the grain with me to do that. Now I claim the right to examine the papers."

Betty and Polly could not bear to look at Mrs. Sharrow at this dramatic moment. They had seen how terror-stricken she had become whilst waiting.

Mabel Stoddart drew out all the folded papers from the linen-lined envelope. At first she merely glanced at one document and another. Then she began upon one parchmenty paper that was to keep her reading for several minutes on end.

At the finish she put all the papers together again and returned them to the envelope.

"I came into twenty thousand pounds under the will of an old uncle of mine, more than a year ago, and you have never told me," she said sternly to Mrs. Sharrow. "If anything, you have been constantly making out that I was a burden upon you. But that is not all. Some of these papers tells me that just lately you have been converting part of my inherited fortune to your own use. There are stockbrokers' contract notes, as I think they call them, for securities that you have sold. And you have had the money."

"Will you go?" Mrs. Sharrow panted fiercely. "I don't want to talk to you. I'm done with you!"

Mabel laughed.

"Oh, and I'm done with you, I hope. I will go, and these papers will go with me. You must let the police know that you withdraw the charge of theft against me. The truth about the bogus robbery is to be hushed up, for your sake and Ada's. I suppose people will still imagine things about me; but I don't mind what strangers think. These girls and their chums could have faith in me, and so I hope other people will—people whose opinion is worth while."

"Mabel, you had better come back with me and Polly to Morcove straight away," Betty suggested. "We can walk. We'll take you to the Head and she'll see about sleeping you at the school. She'll probably get her own lawyer to go into your affairs."

"Shall I do that?" Mabel exclaimed with an eager look. "There is nothing I'd like better."

"Do—do!" Polly pleaded.

"I will!" came the happy decision. "After all, I owe an explanation to your headmistress. I feel I'd like to tell her everything; but I know I shan't be able to tell her that part of the story which would get Ada sent away from the school."

"And neither shall we," declared Betty promptly. "Do you hear that, Mrs. Sharrow?"

There was no response. Mrs. Sharrow, after a desperate pulling-together effort, was walking away. She had been due to take two girls into dinner in the restaurant. But instead she went across to the lift and was taken up to her room. "Good-night," Betty said to the hall-porter as he stared in astonishment when the three of them were making for the open air.

"What, young ladies—going?"

"Yes," smiled Polly. "The dinner party is off."

"Keeping It Dark"

"NOW zen, Paula, do you know ze time?"
"What, what? Bai Jove, is it as late as all that!"

The Morcove chimes had ding-dong'd, and now the hour bell was beating out nine o'clock.



"Ada won't be here," Betty answered Mrs. Sharrow's question. "We advised her not to come." The crafty woman did her best to keep calm. "Upon my word, you're very mysterious," she said.

"Howwows, Naomer, and I have never even looked at my pwep!"

"Eef you will go to sleep in ze armchair—"

"Not asleep, Naomer—no, no! Merely westing quietly; wecuperating, yes, wather! And I must say," beamed the lover-of peace and quietude, "you have been extremely good, Naomer. Hawdly cweating one disturbance all the time we have been by ourselves."

"Bekas I am too disgusted to feel like doing anyzingk," Naomer said plaintively. "Ah, bah, eet is a jolly old sweendle, say what you like. Bekas by now Betty and Polly will have got over ze grand dinner at ze hotel, and will be having something in ze lounge before zey come away."

"On the contwawy, Naomer—"

"Don't contrajick, me bekas I am not in ze mood!"

"But you must wealise— Hallo, geals!" Paula broke off to greet Pam Willoughby and others as they now came filing in. "Welcome, yes, wather!"

"All finished prep, of course?" Pam inferred.

"Er—er—as wegawds pwep, geals—er, no—"

"Not ze bit of eet, and who cares, bekas I don't!" was Naomer's reckless cry. "I feel so fed up I couldn't even look at a cream-bun, never mind work."

"Sad, very sad," said Helen, finding a chair for herself. "And Betty and Polly are not back yet. I hope it doesn't mean a hitch."

"Not ze bit of eet," shrilled Naomer, who did

not know as much as others about a certain coup that had been planned for this evening. Bekas zey wouldn't feenish dinner until past eight, and zey zere would be coffee in ze lounge and something else before coming away."

Unnoticed by the dusky one, there was an exchanging of sundry winks and amused smiles.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But hark!" cried Madge, throwing up a warning finger. "I do believe—yes, it is. Here come Betty and Polly."

"Bai Jove!"

"Ooo! Queek, queek!" yelled Naomer, whipping open the study door. "Yes, pipooray! Now to hear all about ect."

And she volleyed an eager inquiry even as the captain and the madcap jauntily marched in, still in their party frocks.

"Hi, Betty—Polly! What was he like—ze dinner? Gorjus?"

"We didn't get any dinner," was Polly's calm announcement, causing Naomer to fall back upon Paula in a collapse due to surprise.

"Owp—"

"What ze diggings!" shrieked the dusky one. "No dinner after all?"

"Not a bite."

"Ooo, you poor zings, bekas you must be starving, like I am. Queek, queek, let me get you something!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, there's no hurry," said Polly. "We have had something far, far better than a late dinner."

"A success?" hazarded Pam.

"Quite a success," nodded Betty. "Mrs. Sharrow has been bowled out over Mabel Stoddart."

"In fact, caught in the slips, stumped, and anything else in cricket," cried the madcap, "that means an end to the innings."

"Bai Jove! This, geals, is extwemely gwatifying, what?"

"Ra—ther!" was the chorus.

"We walked back to the school with Mabel," Betty said of herself and Polly. "Mabel is with Miss Somerfield now."

"Morcove is going to put her up for the night? Good!" Pam commented. "And she is all right about the future?"

"Should be," grinned the madcap, "considering she finds herself entitled to twenty thousand pounds under an uncle's will, and only a thousand or so has been—h'm—borrowed."

"From now onwards," of course," Betty supplemented blithely, "Mabel's affairs will be looked after by a lawyer or somebody like that."

"Yes, well—and Ada Sharrow?" asked Pam. "What about Ada?"

There were shrugs from Betty and Polly.

"Ada, we suppose, will go on at Morcove School," the Form-captain grimaced. "In any case, you don't expel a girl for something her mother has done. As a matter of fact, Miss Somerfield may never know how Ada was mixed up in it all. We haven't said anything this evening, and neither has Mabel."

"Bai Jove, vewy sporting of you, yes, wather!" beamed Paula. "The twaditional Study 12 spiwit once again. One wather wondahs, bai Jove, if Ada herself will appreciate it."

"I don't wonder," Polly laughed shortly. "I'm absolutely certain she won't. But that need not trouble us. We— Whew!" the madcap broke off, for suddenly the door had flown open, revealing Ada Sharrow.

She was a quivering figure at the threshold of the thronged study with a wild glare in her eyes. "You're talking about me, are you?" she panted. "You're crowing about it all, are you?"

"Ada," said the captain calmly, "if you care to behave decently after this there'll never be another word from any of us."

"I don't believe you," the new girl hissed savagely. "And I don't want to have anything to say to you, except one thing. Just you wait, all of you! Some day I'll pay you out for this—I will! I hate the lot of you!"

She backed into the corridor, drawing the door round to close it with a furious slam.

"Oh, well," Betty said with that habitual forbearance which made her so good a captain. "We must allow for her feelings. I say, Naomer, that looks a nice cake."

"Wait ze bit, bekas we may as well make ect a proper cellerbration whilst we are about it," was Naomer's joyous suggestion, as she skipped back to the corner cupboard. "Bekas"—returning—"here we are, ze famous clove corjooll. Aha," said Naomer, banging down the bottle, "zey don't give you zat at ze Headland Hotel. No, bekas zey don't know how to make him."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was laughter that came in for a sharp check as the door opened again. The chums thought it must be Ada Sharrow again with more angry abuse to hurl at them. But it proved to be Mabel Stoddart.

"Oh, come in, Mabel, yes," the chorus of welcome went up, whilst madcap Polly became highly dramatic.

"Sh, girls—'sh! Lights out. Enter the Phantom Schoolgirl."

And when Morcove's madcap had said that there came such a ringing cheer in Study 12 as was heard throughout the school.

END OF THIS WEEK'S STORY.

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A GREAT TREAT

Next Tuesday's long complete Morcove School story is the first of a brilliant new series featuring Betty Barton & Co. and introducing the seniors. The title will be:

Loaned to the Sixth



BY MARJORIE STANTON