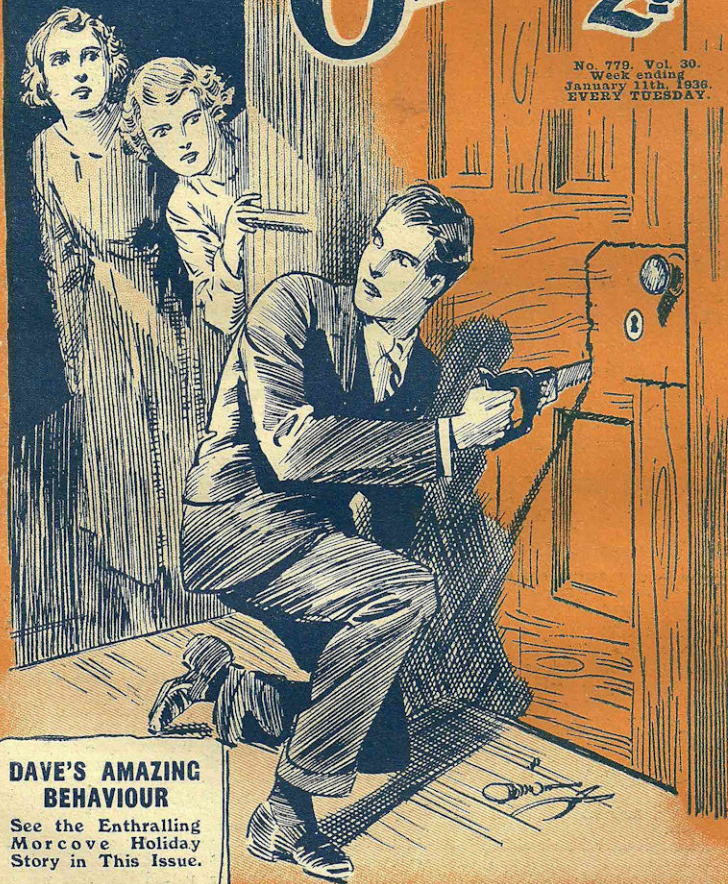


Meet HER HARUM-SCARUM HIGHNESS in This Issue

The SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN 2d

No. 779. Vol. 30.
Week ending
January 11th, 1936.
EVERY TUESDAY.



DAVE'S AMAZING BEHAVIOUR

See the Enthralling
Morcove Holiday
Story in This Issue.

There Are FIVE ENTHRALLING STORIES Inside



MORCOVE'S TRAP

By Marjorie Stanton

ILLUSTRATED BY L. SHIELDS

"Explain or—Go!"

"Polly, you and I are wanted."
 "Wanted! Sounds like term-time again at Morcove, Betty—and a row on!"
 "It does rather, doesn't it? Well, it's Mrs. Cardew who wants us. As for rows—I hope there isn't going to be one."

"About last night, Betty?"

"Yes—that strange business."

Betty Barton, on holiday with Polly Linton and other school chums at lonely Priors Wold, had come seeking only Polly in the bed-room which they shared.

"We're to go down to the morning-room, Polly. I think Judy Cardew will be there—and Dave."

"Right!"

And in a moment both girls were hurrying downstairs.

The huge country house, although it still harboured numerous guests who had been here over Christmas, was more than quiet at present. A heavy silence brooded over the place which, to Betty and Polly, was dramatically significant.

They were not forgetting that Priors Wold was now left with only a single servant, so that the

usual stir caused by mid-morning activities was not to be expected.

They knew, too, that most of their fellow guests had gone out after breakfast.

All who could be spared were "scouting around," hoping to run to earth that mysterious unknown—the Black Rider—who had so terrified the district of late.

Betty tapped at the morning-room door and entered with Polly. Instantly they had the sense of taking their places upon a stage set for a big scene.

Beautiful Mrs. Cardew, the young widowed mother of Judy and Dave, was here, in a seat by the fire. Her Morcove daughter and Grange-moor son were with her—standing together over by the window.

"Sorry, girls," she greeted them. "Your holiday visit to Priors Wold should not have let you in for the trouble we are having to cope with."

Trouble and—mystery! Come in," she added, as the door was tapped again, and now she got up.

A girl of about nineteen, in the morning uniform of a housemaid, entered. She was the one servant, out of all who had been in Mrs. Cardew's employ up till yesterday, who had not thrown up her situation.

"Now, Maisie Turner," the hostess of Priors Wold at once began in no unkind tone. "Miss Darrington is not here for the moment, but we need not stay for her. I told her—half-past ten."

The tiny clock on the high shelf of the carved mantelpiece was at five-and-twenty past. Maisie Turner, whilst inclining her head to her mistress in a mute "Yes, ma'am!" glanced at the clock.

She was deadly pale—looked as if she had not slept a wink during the night.

"I am sure you realise, Maisie, I must inquire into what took place last evening, when I and the rest of the grown-ups were away at Yewleigh Court for the party there. You gave out that you were going up to bed very early. There was nothing in that, as you had worked extra-hard all day. But you did not go to bed. You did not even keep to your room?"

Maisie Turner nodded that that was so; she could not deny it.

"Instead, Maisie, you crept down to my bedroom. By chance, Miss Bella Darrington—that young lady to whom I had accorded hospitality,

**Magnificent LONG COMPLETE
New Year Holiday story of Mor-
cove Girls and Grangemoor Boys,
in which, mainly thanks to Betty
Barton and Co., an astounding
mystery is solved at last.**

as she found herself in such a predicament at Christmas-time—

"Yes, ma'am—"

"She discovered you were in my room. She came down to ask my daughter here about it. Judy and Dave then went upstairs, and Polly and Betty went with them, taking Miss Darrington. They did not come upon you in the room, and at first everything seemed all right. Then Judy found that a big bunch of keys had gone from a drawer of my dressing-table. She had just made this discovery, when Miss Darrington took it into her head to open the hanging-cupboard. And you, Maisie—you were in there, keeping quite still. You had hoped you would not be found."

glances to pass between the juniors. As for Bella Darrington, pausing in the act of lighting a match for her everlasting cigarette, she treated the housemaid to a look which plainly meant:

"No, I don't suppose you can!"

"Maisie," frowned Mrs. Cardew, "you must explain—must clear yourself. I have to consider Miss Darrington, here—the very serious thing it might have been for her, if you had not been caught in the act last night."

A little laugh came from Bella Darrington.

"Dear Mrs. Cardew, you may wish to consider me, but I don't suppose this girl cares a hang about that side of it all! It isn't to be expected!"

"Oh, I can't stand by and hear you say a thing like that," Judy Cardew quietly interposed. "Maisie took things to heart enough last night. I was with her after you had said such things to her—hurtful things—"

"Anything I said then, I was bound to say!" Bella protested, turning appealing eyes to Judy's mother. "The girl was upset—of course she was, after being caught in the act! But wasn't it natural for me to be upset, too?"

She spoke on vehemently:

"Supposing this girl had not been caught with the keys upon her! Supposing she had used the keys during the night to commit a theft? Would

for the PHANTOM

"It is all perfectly true, ma'am. I— It was just as has been said."

"And that is not all, Maisie. You had that missing bunch of keys upon you!"

"I—I know I had, ma'am."

"Well? The time has now come, Maisie, for you to clear yourself."

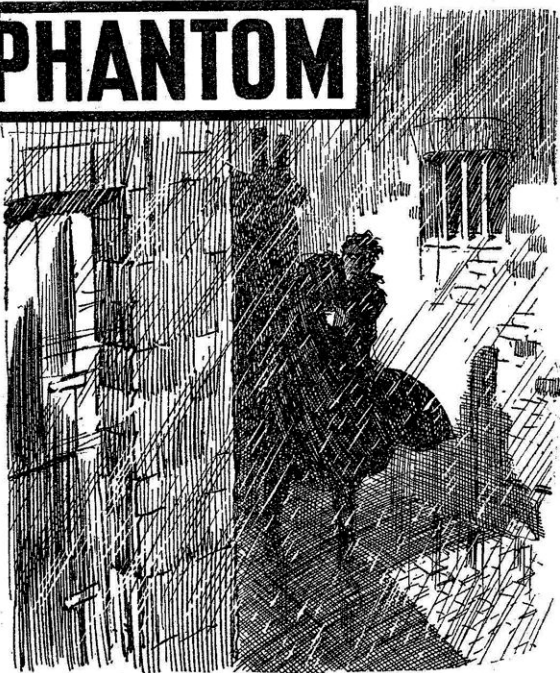
A silence followed, and suddenly the door opened—untapped—and Bella Darrington sauntered in. The clock struck the half-hour, and somehow such punctuality to the second seemed to be traceable to this young lady's desire to make an impression.

"Oh, am I late?" she purred, knowing very well that she was not. "So sorry, dear Mrs. Cardew!"

"That's quite all right, Bella. You are just in time to hear Maisie give account of herself."

"I'm sorry, ma'am; I can't do that."

The faltered words caused an exchange of dismayed



she have been suspected—a servant with a good character? Or would I—the girl who was only taken in on trust at Christmas, a complete stranger, with only her own word for it that she was in an awkward fix; out of ready money, and nowhere to go?"

Mrs. Cardew gave an appeasing gesture, then spoke again to the housemaid.

"Maisie, this scene is not to be prolonged. Miss Darrington has the right to feel that she has narrowly escaped undeserved disgrace. What is your explanation of your behaviour?"

"I told these young people, ma'am. I meant no harm—"

"And that answer is not good enough! You must give some better explanation than that, or else—"

"If she meant no harm," Bella Darrington put in scornfully, "then how is it that she is the only servant who has not run away from Priors Wold because of its being 'haunted,' as they say, by the Black Rider? 'Haunted'—ha, ha, ha! But that's what I want to know—why she was so willing to stay on!"

"And I am not going to say."

There was a sudden look of defiance in Maisie Turner's face as she voiced those words.

"But, ma'am," she spoke on in great agitation, "I do hope—oh, I beg and pray that you won't order me out of the house! Please, please—although I know things look black against me—"

"Surely you don't expect me to be content with no better answer than that you 'meant no harm!'—why, it is preposterous. Goodness knows, when your being dismissed will leave me without the least bit of paid help, I would be glad enough to overlook the affair if I could. And I just cannot! Before the day is out—"

"Mother—no!"

This time it was Judy. But she had no sooner given that pleading cry than her two Morcove chums took it up.

"No—please!" Betty entreated, whilst Polly said earnestly:

"Mrs. Cardew—you must not!"

Between the Laughs!

FOR a moment or two after that sudden outcry from all the girls there was dead silence.

Then Mrs. Cardew, as she glanced from one to another of the juniors—Dave included—lost her shocked expression. She even smiled.

"Oh, I can't be annoyed with you for wanting to beg Maisie off. You are young, and it is right that your hearts should be ruling your heads!"

Dave went to take a look out of window, then turned.

"There's a thaw setting in. It's going to be a terrible sloop, mother. To compel Maisie to travel to-day—"

"My dear boy," his mother smiled on. "there is no need to talk like that! I think I might be trusted not to turn Maisie out of doors, to tramp miles through slush to the station. You and these girls want me to keep Maisie on; to overlook what happened. Very well, simply because you have all begged me to give her another chance, I will do that."

The relenting words would have left all three girls speaking as with one voice, in their gladness; but they saw Maisie Turner going away to the door hastily—as if to get outside the room before she broke down.

Impulsively, the girls were going after her, for

their hearts were wrung; but a sudden haughty remark from Bella Darrington stayed them.

"Er—Mrs. Cardew! The thaw need not hinder my going! If you feel—"

"There is no need to suggest such a thing, Bella Darrington," said the large-hearted hostess of Priors Wold. "All this unpleasantness—let it be forgotten now!"

"But I should be so sorry to outstay my welcome! It was awfully good of you to take me in over Christmas, when I had absolutely nowhere else to go! I don't believe in abusing kindness. Besides, I dare say these girls—and Dave—"

She paused, looking particularly at Dave, who at once said:

"Mother—you don't want me any longer?"

"No, my dear; you and the girls can all go now. I had you here in case Maisie should wish to dispute your version of what happened last night. And it has simply resulted in your all getting round me!"

But her smile made it abundantly clear that she was glad they had got round her.

They fled from the room and Polly said, with a frown:

"That Darrington girl—ugh! Butter won't melt in her mouth!"

"It's rather trying for mother," Judy murmured: "to be still saddled with her."

Dave smiled. "Don't worry," he said. "Mother may know more than you think."

"Anyway," Betty thankfully exclaimed, "it was fine of Mrs. Cardew to let Maisie off. Just think how black things were against that girl! I trembled for her."

"I expected we'd have to plead twice as hard as we did!" Polly confessed.

"We ought to get a word with her," was Betty's pitying murmur. "Let's see if she's in the kitchen."

So the three girls parted from Dave and hurried through to the kitchen regions; but Maisie was not in evidence. They only came upon a couple of their chums, Madge Minden and Pam Willoughby, looking thorough little housewives.

For, servants or no servants, meal-times would come round, and to-day, again, it was a case of "Morcove to the rescue!"

Remembering yesterday's chaotic conditions when Naomer and Bunny Trevor had done the work, Betty and Polly and Judy burst out laughing at sight of such serene efficiency.

"What, Pam—pastry?"

"I thought I would have a try," was the answer of Morcove's "little lady of Swanlake," who was even then wielding the rolling-pin.

"We thought Maisie Turner might be here," Betty remarked, and during the next few minutes Madge and Pam were told of what had taken place just now in the morning room.

There was just time for some sympathetic comments by the listeners, and then—there could be no mistaking who was coming through to the kitchen from a back way in.

"Bekas," came the familiar accents of Morcove's dusky and ever-hungry scholar, "any chance of a snack? What ze diggings, I seem to have been out for hours!"

"Nothing doing, kid," Polly grimly answered, and snatched up the now discarded rolling-pin. "Don't you show your face here, or—"

"Zen give me something to be going on with! Bekas, I can't hold out until lunch-time—what ze diggings, I am starving!"

"Here you are," Polly said, hastily putting some "clippings" of raw pastry on a piece of paper. "Have that, kid, and be thankful! Take it on the mat—but wait whilst I find a bone for Tubby."

"Ah, bah, you girls can laugh now!" Naomer shrilly protested. "But I shall be tremendously surprised if to-day's lunch is anything like yesterday's!"

"We shall all be surprised—very," Polly sweetly retorted. "Yesterday's lunch—well, the less said the better! But to-day," and the madcap smacked her lips. "Hot soup! Then fish, then jugged hare or roast beef—whichever you like—"

At this moment Judy, unnoticed by the others, slipped away to go, and seek Maisie Turner elsewhere.

Nor would Betty have felt like hanging about in the kitchen, only she wanted to take Naomer with her. And Naomer was now making for the larder, to find something really tasty in the way of a mid-morning snack.

"Hi—Tubby!" was the hailing cry which brought Naomer's favourite Grange-moorian rolling upon the scene, smiling fatly. "Bekas," said Naomer, emerging from the pantry with four mince-pies and a lump of cake, "zis is better!"

"As if," Polly interposed, "Tubby has come here to get anything—except more coals! Here you are, Tubby," offering him the nearly empty scuttle. "And then chop some wood, and after you've done that, a bit of pumping for exercise, and after that—"

"Sweendle!" Naomer objected. "Don't you take orders from Polly, Tubby! Bekas, anyway, zis is our day off! I'm not having a single thing to do with ze cooking—"

"Then come on out of here, kid," Betty laughed, "and not be in the way of those who are."

But Madge and Pam were not to be left to themselves again as speedily as this. Tubby, for one, might have effaced himself; but, even as he most willingly turned to go away with the coal-scuttle, he came into collision with some fresh intruder.

"Oh, sorry!" panted Bunny Trevor, for she it was whose excited dashing upon the scene had caused the coal-scuttle to fly out of Tubby's hand.

"Girls!" Bunny gasped on, stepping over the scuttle. "The Black Rider—we have seen him again!"

"What!"

"Tom and I—and here is Tom," she panted on, as her jolly-looking brother now came to her side in the kitchen doorway. "We saw him again just now!"

"Saw him?" cried Polly. "Then why—why didn't you catch him!"



No sooner had Bella Darrington entered the room than Polly closed the door behind her. Bella whirled round in amazement, and she must have realised that she was trapped—that the game was up!

"Bekas, what ze diggings—in daylight—"

"Oh, yes, I dare say!" Bunny cut Naomer short. "If it had been you and Tubby—"

"But tell us!" Betty clamoured. "Where—where was this?"

"Oh, away on the hills, a good couple of miles from here," Tom puffed. "And, look here, the chap's a lunatic—that's what it means! He's potty."

"He must be, you know," Bunny backed up her brother's definite assertion.

"Was he on horseback?" Polly jerked.

"Oh, rather, and galloping about like—well, as we say, like a lunatic!"

"We really had a good view of him at last," Tom rattled on. "Broad daylight, and he wasn't in any hurry to get away out of sight, either."

"Then he knew you could see him?"

"Knew?" Why," Bunny answered Pam's eager question, "for five minutes Tom and I were chasing him, on foot, across the open snowfield. And there he was, even letting us catch up with him a bit, now and then; holding the horse in check and sitting round in the saddle, to wave—"

"That highwayman's hat of his—the looney," Tom put in. "Who but a madman would wear a cloak and a three-cornered hat?"

"Somehow," Betty frowned, "it doesn't sound so daft. To me, it sounds more like—"

And there she broke off, hearing her own name being called anxiously by Judy Cardew, who came running back to the thronged kitchen.

"It's about Maisie Turner," said Judy, to account for the alarm in her looks. "Do you know, I believe she has gone!"

"Gone?" echoed Betty and others. "Gone?" "She was not in her own room when I went up there to see. I've since looked everywhere—and Dave has searched as well. No sign of her."

"But," Polly exploded, "what's become of her, then? Has she packed up and cleared out although your mother said she might stay on in her job?"

"That's all I can think."

"Impossible!" Betty cried.

Yet it soon appeared to be the actual explanation.

In the next half-hour, Maisie Turner was sought everywhere about the place, inside and out. The numbers searching for her increased as various members of the house-party came back from their excursions out of doors and joined in the quest.

But Maisie Turner was not found, whereas a closer inspection of her own room revealed a significant state of things. Although belongings of hers still remained, she had certainly packed absolute necessities in great haste.

In spite of the clemency shown by her mistress, the unhappy housemaid must have felt that she had better be off—"whilst the going was good," as some of the boys put it.

A guilty state of mind, after all? What else but that could even the girls suppose?

"And yet," Betty pondered aloud, now that the search was ended and it was a case of voicing regrettable conclusions, "we heard her begging Mrs. Cardew not to order her out of the house!"

"She changed her mind—that's all it means," Madge Minden murmured. "The few minutes would be quite enough for her to do that, if she were really at her wits' end to know quite what to do."

"Oh, certainly," Betty nodded, "if she really had been guilty of something and was feeling jumpy. Perhaps, after all, she is not the girl we took her to be."

"Bai Jove, pwetty wemawkable!" came Paula Creel's contribution to the puzzled talk. "She impressed me as being such a thorough good sort—yes, wather!"

"I would have said she was the perfect servant," Pam gently remarked. "From the very hour we got here, just before Christmas, she showed herself to be so willing, good-tempered—"

"Not a fault to find with her," Judy agreed emphatically. "That was mother's opinion of Maisie Turner."

"Only, you know," Bunny reluctantly reminded previous speakers, "there have been some queer goings-on by Maisie. That time we went to explore that empty house—Medcombe Manor—hoping to find that the Black Rider was lying up there; and, instead—we heard Maisie's voice!"

"We did!" Betty exclaimed excitedly. "We may not have seen her at that tumbledown place, but it was her voice all right."

"And then that evening when one of the first scares occurred, over the Black Rider," Bunny went on. "Maisie Turner fainted."

"It's a lick, and no mistake," Polly grimaced. "I don't know what Dave thinks of it all—by now! Oh," she added, with a sudden roguish look as Dave suddenly approached them all, "here he is—if some of you like to try pumping him! I shan't!"

They had to laugh. It was so amusing—the sudden edge to the madcap's voice, the gleam in her pretty eyes, all due to her sense of Dave's being a "rival investigator."

He sauntered up to the grouped girls in a most casual manner; might, by the look of him, have intended only to stand by and hear them go on talking, offering no comments himself—not he!

And then, to their surprise, he drew from a jacket pocket—a bunch of many keys.

"Judy," he said to his sister, tending her the bunch, "what about these?"

One Key Missing!

"THESE, Dave?" His sister, having taken the bunch of keys held out to her, was looking amazed at his wanting to know anything about them.

"They are the keys, of course, Dave, that Maisie Turner took from mother's dressing-table drawer last night. We took them from her—"

"And you kept charge of them until mother came home from the Yewleigh Court party—"

"Yes—well?" "Would you say, Judy, that all the keys that were on the ring then are still there?"

With her chums standing mute and still, newly thrilled, Judy took another good look at the bunch.

"I can't see any difference, Dave. But I wouldn't be sure. See what a lot of keys there are, and some so small!"

"Mother has just noticed that a biggish key is gone from the bunch."

"Really?" Judy stared. "Well, as to biggish keys—I can be positive that all are here that were on the bunch when I took charge of it, last evening! Oh, yes, as to that—I'm certain!"

Dave nodded a "Thanks!" as if that were all he wanted to know, and took back the bunch. Then—he was even going to saunter away again, but Polly could not stand that!

"Oh!", Polly raged. "Ugh! All right—you can go," she said furiously, as Dave turned round. "I can guess! I don't need to be a Dave Cardew to see what you mean about the missing key. Maisie Turner has it!"

"Bravo, Polly!" gurgled Bunny. "That's got him—ha, ha, ha! Go on, dear; say some more!"

"It's as plain as my face," Polly said, keeping her eyes upon Dave in a way that compelled him to smile. "Maisie Turner had just time enough, last night, to slip the one key she wanted off the bunch. She has had it ever since—and that's why she has flitted. For some reason or other, that key is all she was after!"

"I don't like that 'some reason or other,'" Bunny mirthfully demurred.

"Then you jolly well do your own thinking!" Polly exploded irritably. "All of you—think out the rest for yourselves, for I have had about enough of the whole dashed mystery, I have!"

And away she went, leaving Betty and the rest more amused than ever. How often had they known impatient Polly to be like this, at Morcové! Unless they were greatly mistaken, she would go on for a bit as if she really were done with puzzling about everything. Try being just her madcap, self again and "let who would be clever!"

It was soon noticed that there was a revived jollity amongst all the guests, old and young alike, which Mrs. Cardew was glad enough to observe.

She, the hostess of Priors Wold, felt that one thing and another had done its best to cause a "flop"—and now there was the thaw!

In spite of all, however, her friends had enjoyed themselves greatly, and were still doing so. After lunch to-day a number would be leaving, but these departures would have nothing to do with all the strange occurrences which had rendered the last few days so chaotic.

If so many of the guests were to be gone ere another winter's night came to Priors Wold, all alone in this stark hill-country, that was only because engagements elsewhere had to be fulfilled. Business called some of the men folk back to town. Mr. and Mrs. Wiloughby were bound to return to Swanlake now, taking Pam with them.

Nor was Pam the only Morcove girl who must say regretful good-byes presently. Madge also was having to go with her father; Helen Craig would be in London by eight o'clock! Tess Tre-lawney was yet another whom those staying on were going to miss.

Conditions were so bad that it was impossible to go out after lunch. It was one of those violent thaws which bring up a howling gale from the south-west, with pelting rain to help the snow melt as one watched it.

"And I wonder!" Betty murmured, taking a look out of a window that afternoon, with Pam at her elbow. "I wonder how that mystery-man—whoever he is, and wherever he may be at this moment—likes being the Black Rider now!"

More Thrills.

DARK night had closed over lonely Priors Wold. The wind howled about the rambling old house.

There was far more noise outside than within, at this moment when Betty and Polly were alone together in the library, dashing off some letters.

Whilst the gale raged and thudded and moaned, there were the most mournful noises of mingled rain and melted snow, gurgling in the guttering, sobbing in the downpours.

But indoors there was, at present, one of those little lulls which will come between one spell of

gaiety and another, when a house-party has dwindled to half its original size.

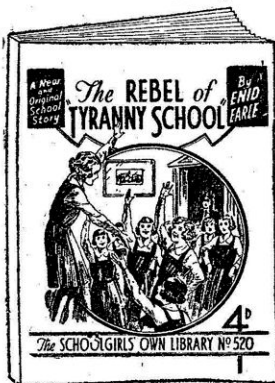
On opposite sides of the library table, Betty and Polly were racing their pens as if this were an evening at Morcove School in Study No. 12, and they were hurrying to knock off prep.

Letters they were that simply must be written now, returning thanks for presents received days ago. Another twenty minutes, the two girls reckoned, and they would be free.

Suddenly Betty stopped writing.

(Continued on the next page.)

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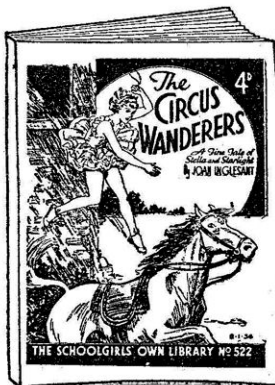


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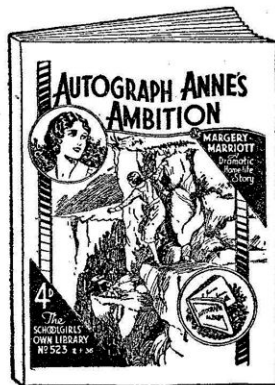


No. 521

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No. 522



No. 523

"I keep on hearing a sound, Polly—a queer noise!"

"I was just going to say the very same!" exclaimed the madcap, casting down her pen. "Listen!"

Keeping to their chairs, they sat with heads reared attentively. From the drawing-room came the very faint murmur of desultory talk; and there were some of the girls and boys sitting round the hall fire, making this first hour after tea only a quiet one.

Just lazy conversation, and merely fleeting smiles at witticisms, instead of the usual peals of laughter; that was how it appeared to be out there in the hall.

But now, Betty and Polly heard again the sound that had fidgeted them. It seemed to come from a remote part of the ground-floor—at the end of what was known as the billiards-room passage. A kind of gnawing sound it was, and after listening for a few moments longer, Polly declared:

"Oh, it's a rat in the wainscot; that's all it is!"

"Not so sure, dear!"

And Betty, hitching back her chair, rose to go to the door. Up jumped Polly, to receive a cautioning sign from her chum.

Betty had the door wide open and was ready to make tiptoeing movements herself when Polly got to her.

The curious noise, now more like that of a fret-saw, was going on again after a pause. Exchanging wondering glances, the two chums stole along the billiards-room passage, which was only dimly lighted.

The sound seemed to be coming round to them, now, from a lobby opposite the billiards-room doorway. They excitedly nudged each other that it must be someone busy about some strange task or other in the lobby.

Then, with only a step each to go before being able to peep round the angle of the wall into the lobby, Polly put her lips close to Betty's left ear. "Not the Black Rider, is it?" the madcap whispered. "But supposing it is!" she added tersely.

"Why—it's Dave!" gasped Betty next second, having ventured a first peep. "Great goodness, Dave—"

"Yes, what on earth!"

He looked round at them, without straightening himself out of a bent position due to the work he was engaged upon.

"Hallo," he said tersely. "Now I suppose you'll want to stay around?"

"You don't want us?" Polly snorted.

"I don't want a crowd, that's all. Have the others heard me?"

"Don't suppose so, Dave," whispered Betty. "Polly and I were in the lobe, which is quite close by. But what's the idea? Using a keyhole-saw to cut all round the lock!"

"The key that would work this lock happens to be the one that is missing," Dave responded, working the tiny saw afresh. "At least, that's what I imagine."

"I don't suppose you are wrong," Polly mumbled. "What room is this, Dave? None of us have seen inside it."

"No, it's too hopelessly damp and dingy to be used. We are rather in a bad way in just this part of the house—a cold, sunless corner, and below the outside level. Mother has simply kept the room shut up, so far."

"Unused, is it—empty?" Betty inferred.

"Then why, Dave—why are you going in now? What will there be to see?"

"Well, if you care to stay, you may soon see for yourselves!"

What an answer, that—when the still unsolved mystery of the Black Rider was in the minds of Betty and Polly at this very moment!

Dave went on with his fine sawing, and they stood by, their eyes getting accustomed to the semi-darkness of the lobby, so that they could watch the thin blade fretting away. He was nearly right round the lock now, and they fell into a tremble of excitement.

"How about a light, though?" Betty felt bound to inquire. "That room isn't wired perhaps?"

"No, it isn't. But I've a torch."

He drew the keyhole-saw out of the door, fiddled with the detached portion which contained the lock, and got it away without making a noise.

Then, in the same instant that he sent the door wide open, he whipped a torch from his jacket pocket and thumbed it on.

Betty and Polly seemed to hear each other's hearts thumping.

Now!

Shining the light before him, Dave calmly walked into the room, and the two girls followed.

The air smelt of damp. There were damp discolourations upon the partly panelled walls, and the old oak floor was mildewed.

No furniture was here, and to the girls the first moment of eager gazing around was one of anti-climax.

Nobody here, and the room as bare as could be—except that in one corner lay a strange medley of implements, as if left behind by some forgetful plumber back in the past.

Betty and Polly saw Dave take notice of those things in the corner with a kind of understanding smile.

"We'll close the door," he remarked, turning back to do so. "And now—you two, you won't shout, will you?"

Their wondering eyes followed him as he came away from the closed door, crossing the room to stand in front of cupboard doors that matched the panelling.

It flashed upon Betty and Polly then that someone was in the cupboard. The Black Rider himself!

Dave rapped upon one of the cupboard doors with his knuckles, then spoke with gentle firmness:

"Maisie Turner, come out of there, please. Maisie Turner—we are all friends who want to help you."

Who Wouldn't Pity Her!

MAISIE TURNER!

Not the Black Rider, as Betty and Polly had so wildly guessed, but—Maisie, the parlourmaid who had vanished just before mid-day!

It was so. She had not fled the house after all, but was still beneath its roof—was even now emerging from the cupboard in this dingy, unused room!

Agape with blank amazement were the two schoolgirls now that one cupboard door had been pushed open, to let Maisie stand forth. It was as if Dave had conjured her to appear by speaking magic words.

He realised instantly that the electric torch

was playing too strongly upon her white face, dazzling her, and he diverted it slightly.

"Now, Maisie," Dave said, firmly yet gently, "this night, you know, must end the whole business."

"I meant it to," she blurted emotionally. "It's my one reason for—being here! He is certain to come to-night, and I—I was going to lie in wait for him. And then—then—"

She chafed her hands together as if they were icy cold.

"I would have raised an alarm," she whispered on. "Oh, I declare to you, I would not have kept silent, even though it meant his being caught at last and—sent to prison!"

"The Black Rider?" Polly jerked. "But, Maisie! What is he to you, then?"

at last in that level voice of his, "to turn him from what he wanted to do—here at Priors Wold, in this very room?"

"Yes! Oh, how I have begged and prayed him not to do it!" Maisie wept. "At first, I hoped that my refusal to help him, as a confederate inside the house, would compel him to abandon his wicked plan. But he found other aid. Then, I—I—"

"You had at least one interview with him; I know," Dave nodded. "At Medcombe Manor. And still he refused. He reckoned that even if you would not help him, you would not get him run in for doing it. But—"

The two girls found Dave turning to say the next words to them.

"You see what a fine girl Maisie is? Even



Relief filled Betty as she saw that Jimmy had a firm hold of the drowning man. Without thought of her own safety, she started to wade to his assistance.

"Steady," Dave quickly interposed. "Give her time. You are asking the question, Polly, that I might have asked days ago, only—I felt so sorry for her—"

Maisie's eyes were suddenly tearful as she looked fixedly at him.

"You—you had suspected as much as that, even?" she gasped.

"I figured it out; could see no other explanation. The Black Rider is someone near and dear to you."

The unhappy girl drooped her head.

"You were right, too," she sobbed. "He is my own brother."

Her brother!

Betty and Polly seemed to be granted several moments of dramatic silence, during which their minds could take in this sensational disclosure. The Black Rider—Maisie's own brother!

"And you have been trying," Dave resumed

though he is her brother, she is determined not to let my mother be robbed."

"Robbed?" echoed both girls, as with one voice.

Dave shone the torch upon the implements lying in that far corner.

"This room is next to the library, and mother's safe is in the library—a big safe that she took over with the house. It stands against the parti-wall between the library and this room. The Black Rider was going to get at the safe's contents."

"But," Polly burst out, "surely! By stealing the key of the safe itself—"

"Mother always has that key on her. It's a small one, and the lock is a combination lock. So his plan was to cut through the parti-wall, and then burn out the back of the safe with an oxy-acetylene flame. Everything for the job is there—in the corner."

A heartbroken sob from Maisie drew their eyes back to her. She was crying into her hands.

"I've destroyed the stuff that works the

burner," she moaned. "But all that you have said is true! Only, I would never have let my brother do it. It's why I hid myself—to confront him in this room, by-and-by. It's why I took the key, last night!"

"So that someone else should not take it instead—on his account?" Dave suggested. "I know."

Betty and Polly looked at each other again. "And now we are in this fix," Dave said to the two girls. "How to deal with Maisie's brother and yet save Maisie herself from all the disgrace. It isn't what mother will do; it's what the police will do—what the whole world will know, unless

"Oh," Betty exclaimed anxiously, "but it must be possible for us to—manage somehow!"

"If only we could get hold of him!" Polly panted. "He will know, then—"

"Oh, we are going to get hold of him," Dave calmly stated. "And it looks as if we shall have to do it by first getting hold of—Bella Darrington."

"That girl!"

"His confederate in the house," Betty and Polly were coolly answered. "Isn't that so, Maisie?"

"It is—it is," she said lumpily. "When I refused to help him, he got hold of her. It's all a fraud, the story she pitched when she turned up here before Christmas. I guessed she was hand-in-glove with Fred, and I longed to tell Mrs. Cardew, but—but—it meant denouncing my own brother as well!"

"But why did he dress up and try to frighten everyone?" Polly struck in bewilderedly. "Why has he been doing that? What connection—"

"With the intended robbery?" Dave caught her up. "Simply that he hoped, by creating a bad scare, to empty Priors Wold. He did succeed, too, in causing all mother's servants to leave. It must have stalled him, when he found that we all stayed on—"

"Yet why did he need the house to be empty?"

"A noisy job, and a long one—that's why," Dave shrugged. "It could be done, with people still about the place, but it was going to be fifty times better for him—easier—if he did not have to fear making the least noise, and if he could take his time."

Maisie nodded tragically.

"He is right again," she whispered. "Only, Fred—my brother—has got tired of waiting. I know that, and I know that he has made up his mind to try to-night—if he gets a signal."

For the first time Dave frowned.

"The signal! That's where we're whacked! If we knew the signal—it would be half the battle now! As it is, we shall simply have to get hold of Bella Darrington and see if we can compel her to—"

He broke off, aware of Maisie's waiting to speak.

"Yes, what, Maisie?"

"I—I believe I know the signal."

"You do!"

"Oh!" gasped Betty and Polly. "Splendid!" "I believe Bella Darrington makes the signal at her bed-room window. A handkerchief—waved up and down, means 'Come on'; to right and left—'Keep away.' It is only my suspicion—"

"We'll try it and see how it works," Dave briskly declared. "Now, Maisie, trust us—"

"I do—oh, I do!"

"Then will you stay here—ready to dodge back into the cupboard at any moment. We're going

to leave you to yourself, for we must get back to our chums and explain a bit. But first—you go, Betty, and see if you can find what Bella Darrington is doing."

Betty was off both quickly and quietly. She returned within the minute—came tiptoeing back to report in a whisper.

"She is in the drawing-room, chatting with Mrs. Cardew and others."

"Right!" said Dave. "Then this is where Morcove comes in handy!"

The Signal!

PRESENTLY four girls went on tiptoe along the first-floor corridor, which led to, amongst other bed-rooms, Bella Darrington's.

Betty, Polly, Bunny, Judy—they were the four who, a few moments later, swarmed into the bedroom. The last to whisk in flashed about and softly closed the door.

There was a fire in the grate, causing a fitful illumination which the girls had to bear in mind, their purpose being—what it was! The window curtains were drawn together; but even firelight may cast tell-tale shadows upon drawn curtains, liable to be observed from outside.

So they all took care to keep away from the window, against which heavy rain was being flung by the rough wind.

Betty, having made sure that it was safe for her to do so, clicked on a light.

"Now, girls," she whispered, "you know what you are here for! Whilst I try making a signal, you keep over this side, well out of sight of anybody watching the window. I'll have to part the curtains."

Judy nodded. As for Polly and Bunny they both took their stand close to the wall, on the hinge-side of the door.

"That's the idea," Betty said. "If the door comes open to let anybody in, it will hide you as it swings round. Where will you be, Judy?"

"Under the bed."

Betty took Bella Darrington's dressing-gown from its hook and put it on. She parted the curtains, and the hurly-burly of the wild night was instantly louder in the room. The glass pattered as if handfuls of gravel were being cast at it; the wind boomed and shrieked, and there was a noise of water cataracting out of stopped gutters.

Standing in front of the window, Betty used a shaken-out handkerchief to make the experimental signal.

Up and down she waved it; again and again—up and down!

Suddenly she paused, and Polly and Bunny saw her peering with increased intensity through the rain-whipped glass.

"Anything, Betty?"

"Yes—a light! I can't believe it is only the glimmer of someone's cycle-lamp. There is no road where I can see the light, and it goes up and down— Ah, now it has gone out!"

"An answering signal right enough," Polly breathed in great excitement. "He's there, then—"

"St!" Betty gestured.

She had detected a significant footfall in the corridor. As it came on, all four girls heard its owner whistling a dance tune.

Then—the door opened and Bella Darrington would have come striding in, but she found the light on and saw Betty, over by the window.

"What's this, Betty Barton! How dare you—"

"Oh, I am going to explain," was the smiled response which caused haughty Bella to advance further into the room.

The held-open door had been screening Polly and Bunny. And Judy was safely out of sight under the bed. But now, quick as a flash, Polly closed the door behind Bella Darrington.

That girl turned round sharply, to see both Bunny and Polly with their backs to the door. They smiled at her. Then she faced Betty again.

"Is this one of your stupid country-house games? If so—"

"No," Betty cut her short, in a changed tone. "It is part of the game you have been playing, Bella Darrington—a game that's up."

"Oh, I think you're mad! All three of you—"

"Four," Betty corrected. "Judy dear, come along out of there!"

And out crawled Judy from beneath the bed.

"We came to this room to give the signal," Betty said, taking off the borrowed dressing-gown.

"I wore this, in case the Black Rider could see well enough, from out there, to know if it was not you. He has seen the signal—answered it, too."

The calmly spoken words seem to strike Bella back a step or so.

"And it means," Betty went on, "you must stay here—"

"Do what! I never did hear of such impudence! How dare you insult me like this! I don't know what you mean by it! I certainly won't—"

"You will—or we send for the police!"

"Oh, shut up! Dash you, have your own way, then! You clever young monkeys! You wonderful detectives—ha, ha, ha! But you just wait until—"

Betty would stay to hear no more.

"See after her, girls," she said, and was next moment outside the room, Bunny and Polly having opened the door just wide enough for her to slip past.

She ran to the back staircase which was the staff's direct way down to the kitchen quarters.

Half-way down, she was met by Dave and Jack, who were obviously coming up because they had begun to feel anxious as to how things were going.

"Quick!" Betty whispered, and signed to them to turn and descend with her. "It's O.K. about the signal. The Black Rider answered it!"

"He did?" Jack chuckled. "Oh, boy! Now for a scrum, then! Fall in, the Die-Hards!"

And he was licking his finger-tips as, with Dave, he hurried with Betty down to the ground floor.

A Life in the Balance!

THEY emerged upon a dim-lit passage serving the kitchen. As all the servants except Maisie had left, the juniors had this part of the house to themselves at this critical time.

Darting through the unlighted kitchen, they came upon Tom and Jimmy, waiting in the scullery.

The outer door was shut, with the sound of lashing rain upon the pavement outside.

"What a night," muttered Jimmy.

"Yep," Jack chuckled, "and he'll be all the gladder to get in out of the wet. He's out there, Betty says. So now, fellows, stand-to for action!"

Dave turned to Betty.

"You'd better go away, Betty."

But she shook her head.

"I can't, so it's no use asking me! I simply must see you do the trick!"

Jack was taking charge. At signs from him, his three schoolmates took up positions on either side of the outer door. Betty withdrew to the kitchen, posting herself where she could peer out into the scullery.

The Black Rider, when he came sneaking in, thinking that the outer door had been opened to him by his confederate, was to be taken completely by surprise.

Four stalwart Grangemoorians would be upon him before one could say "knife!"

Jack now went to the outer door and unfastened it. The bolts had been shot at nightfall, as usual.

From her watchpoint, at the kitchen doorway, Betty could see Polly's brother standing the



"Quick!" Betty whispered and signed to the others to turn and descend with her. "It's O.K. about the signal. The Black Rider answered it!" The boys were thrilled. Now to catch the phantom horseman!

scullery door slightly ajar, without letting himself be seen by the lurker outside.

She saw Jack put himself close to Jimmy, on one side of the half-open door.

Then—they all waited.

The suspense was rendered all the greater by the noises of the rough night. Their straining ears had to try to pick up any faint sound by which the Black Rider might give warning of his coming, whilst the gale roared in the darkness and the rain hissed down.

Suddenly, the unexpected happened.

To the consternation of all who were lying in wait, they heard a crash of breaking glass, and then—even as splintered fragments tinkled upon rain-washed flagstones—a piercing cry mingled with all the uproar of the storm.

"Freddie! Freddie—go back!"

BELLA DARRINGTON—her voice, crying its warning to him from the smashed window of her bed-room!

It was a cry that went unrepeatd. Betty and the boys, down here, could imagine how the girls upstairs had instantly flung themselves upon Bella and dragged her away from the window. But what if that one warning cry had served the purpose?

The boys came away from their lurking places, and so Betty returned to the scullery. She saw them bunched together at the half-open door—peering out into the rainy darkness.

"Confound!" she heard Jack rage. "It's turned him back! Yes, look—"

Jimmy's voice interrupted:

"He's off!"

"Come on, then, boys—after him!"

That was Jack, as he became the first to rush out, bareheaded, into the rain.

Another moment and his three schoolmates were with him in the open, dashing across the house-yard. And Betty followed.

Without a thought for the soaking it was bound to mean, she rushed out to take part in the desperate pursuit.

Nor was there a moment to be wasted in any hesitation, if she was to keep with the boys. Already they were darting round to the back of some outbuildings, and what with the darkness and the teaming rain, she stood a good chance of losing them.

She overtook only Jimmy, half a minute later. This did not mean that he had got left behind; he panted the remark that they had scattered, and his job was to keep more around the outbuildings, in case their man should be skulking amongst them.

Jack, Dave and Tom were farther off, each taking a different direction.

"Then you've lost him?" Betty dismayedly inferred.

"For the moment—"

Suddenly there came a half-stifed shout, charged with such a note of terror that it made Betty's blood run cold.

"Jimmy, did you hear that?"

He let action answer Betty's awed exclamation, starting to run his hardest in the direction from which the wild cry had come.

Again Betty followed, and she was hard upon Jimmy's heels when he suddenly checked—stopped dead, yelling to her to keep back.

"Pond here, Betty—look out! It's like a flood—deep enough to drown you!"

Even as that warning came to her, she was aware of a tiny white patch showing, ghost-like,

upon the surface of the black waters. A man's face!

"Oh, look, Jimmy—look! There he is!"

"Yes!"

Their wanted man—the Black Rider himself—and he was clearly drowning before their very eyes!

The white patch vanished. He had gone under. They knew afterwards that it was his gumbots, filling with water, that had helped to weight him down. Melted snow and torrential rain had made the pond ten feet deep to-night.

Betty, in this dreadful moment when the impulse was upon her to go in, at the risk of her own life, to try and save the man, was aware of Jimmy's intention to forestall her.

And instantly—splish! splish!—he went wading out, then started to swim.

She saw him striking out to the middle of the pond; saw the white patch that was the man's face appear again—and vanish again.

Then she saw plucky Jimmy diving about, so that for one or two moments of unforgettable horror his face was gone below the dark waters.

But his head came up again. Had he done any good?

Yes! He had got a saving hold of the drowning man, who was now, perhaps, insensible.

"Oh, Jimmy—let me help you!"

She started to wade in, to meet him as he came swimming back to that side of the pond, bringing the rescued man with him. Then a reaching hand seized her detainingly.

"I'll go, Betty! You keep out!"

It was Tom. He had rushed up in the darkness. She let him have his way, and was no sooner clear of the water than Jack and Dave appeared. They had heard the recent outcry.

"He was in the pond—drowning," she gasped at these newcomers. "But Jimmy's got him—see!"

"Good old Jimmy!" shouted Jack, wading in to be of use if wanted. "That's the stuff, boys!"

An eager, questioning cry from Dave caused Betty some amazement.

"What's he wearing?"

"Does it matter, Dave?"

"Matter? It matters all the world," Dave said, and went on peering at the sodden, lifeless burden which was being brought to land. "I'm thinking of Maizie, his sister—"

"Oh! You mean, if he is wearing his highwayman's disguise, then we can't hope to hush things up now? But," Betty joyfully cried out—"he isn't!"

"Run, Betty," Dave calmly ordered her, now that the other boys, between them, were getting the rescued man clear of the water. "To the house—for a hot drink to give him. We've got to give him first aid here, not take him indoors at once. He's not far gone. He'll soon come round."

She understood and flashed away.

The boys carried the man into a cart-shed, to be out of the drenching rain. When Betty rejoined them there, she saw that the victim of the accident had already come round.

Dave helped him to the hot drink Betty had brought, and this hastened recovery. After some further gasping and writhing where he had been laid out on the shed floor, he suddenly struggled into a sitting posture and spoke with all his wits about him.

"Which of you," he rasped, "is the one that saved my life?"

His eyes became fixed upon Jimmy as that lad was indicated.

"You, was it? Well, young 'un—thanks! That's all I want to say. It's a cop, this is, and so now—what are you going to do with me?"

"We're going to do," Dave answered, "just what's best for your sister."

"Mum's the Word!"

BETTY saw the wretched man, in his drenched state, give a convulsive start.

"Eh, what!" he jerked. "My sister? You know, then—"

"Everything," Dave nodded. "But there are only a few of us who do know. You're the Black Rider—"

"That's it." And he gave a queer laugh that was mirthless. "I suppose, too, it's no use my trying to make out that I've only been doing it for fun—riding about like that, to scare the natives! You've got me, and you know everything, you say. 'Phone for the cops, then—and serve me right! Only thing, now—when I do come out of prison, go as straight as any man can go!"

"You mean that?" cried Jack.

"No, it's just my artfulness to get round you," came with another bitter, despairing little laugh. "Or, say, it won't last with me—this feeling that I owe my life to one of you boys, and—and—"

"He does mean it!" Betty interposed eagerly. "Oh, Dave—all of you! Can't you tell? Whilst he was drowning—"

"Missy, you've said a mouthful," the Black Rider husked at her. "And, as true as it is that my life has been saved to-night, I do mean it about going straight after this. Only, prison first—oh, I must make up my mind to that!"

"He means it," Dave voiced steadily, "and on that—now what do we do? He's not in his disguise—just ordinary clothes. Unless we tell, who is to guess that he is the Black Rider? He can be taken indoors as a stranger who fell into our horse pond in the dark—that's all."

"A night like this," Jimmy commented, "good enough explanation."

"You're all forgetting," the man said. "How about Bella Darrington? What's to be done about her?"

"I haven't been forgetting that girl," Dave answered, with the old supreme composure. "Betty, you come with me at once, and we'll soon make it all right about her."

THEY found Bella Darrington still in that room of hers upstairs. Even if she had wanted to go downstairs, Polly and Judy and Bunny would have prevented her.

They had remained, and Betty was later told that the "prisoner" had been quite passive after her sudden smashing of the window to convey that warning.

"We've brought a man into the house who was drowning in the horse pond," Dave said to the haggard-looking girl. "He's in the kitchen, and I expect Maisie will soon be with him. You can let it be known that he is the Black Rider, but if you do—you will go to prison with him, for a cert."

"Get that?" Polly put in, smiling grimly.

"If you're wise," Dave went on, "you'll not know anything about him—and in the morning you'll clear out. That is all I'm going to say to you."

And it sufficed. Bella, next morning, said to Mrs. Cardew very sweetly that she thought she ought to be going now. Everybody had been so kind, it was not fair to wear out the welcome which had been given her as the "uninvited guest!"

She went. And, although the kind hostess of Priors Wold was by no means ignorant of happenings over-night, that lady owed none of her information to Bella.

Judy and Dave had, of course, let their mother into the inner history of the whole affair, easily obtaining her promise to keep everything hushed up.

If only for Maisie's sake, Mrs. Cardew was quite content to let the Black Rider remain an unsolved mystery to police and public alike.

But, as Betty said in a letter which she wrote to Pam, a couple of days later, the guilty man's own genuine contrition was an extra reason for showing clemency.

"He really is a changed man now," Betty raved on with the letter that was to go to Pam at Swanlake. "And Mrs. Cardew is even thinking of giving him a job about the place, so that he will have his sister to help him go straight."

"Maisie herself is to have a rise. Mrs. Cardew says she deserves it. We all think so, too—don't you?"

"One thing, Pam dear. The Black Rider's horse has been found straying on the hills, and Mrs. Cardew has been able to buy him, to be kept at Priors Wold."

"And that, Pam, is really the end of it all—such a happy ending for all concerned, even the horse!"

"Those of us who are still here go up to Town on Monday, which, as Naomer says, will be 'Gorjus!' We are so looking forward now to being all together again—and what a lovely change Town will be after the country!"

"Must close now, as Polly and Bunny and the boys have just come in, and it's another riot!"

"They all send their love. There has just been a hand-round of hot drinks, and I can hear them singing: 'Here's to the next time—and a merry meeting!'"

"And that is what it is going to be, I'm quite sure. We had a glorious time at Priors Wold, didn't we? But now I seem to hear, as I expect you do, too, Pam darling—LONDON CALLING MORCOVE!"

[END OF THIS WEEK'S STORY.]

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